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CARIBBEAN SEXUALITY: MAPPING THE FIELD¹

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Abstract

Caribbean sexuality is both hypervisible and obscured. That is, it is celebrated in popular culture as an important ingredient in Caribbean social life and flaunted to attract tourists to the region, yet is shrouded in double entendre, secrecy and shame. In this article, I present a review of the main trends in studies of Caribbean sexuality, arguing that while there are few exclusive studies on the subject there is much we can draw upon for insights into Caribbean sexual relations, sexual expressions and sexual identities. Drawing from published as well as “grey” materials, this article points out that Caribbean sexuality is often perceived and analysed as linked to force and (domestic) violence against women and children, sexually transmitted infections (i.e. HIV and AIDS), and economic imperatives. It is also widely accepted as attached to heterosexuality and gendered imbalances of power, as well as to men’s sexual agency. Studies of same-sex relations, transactional sex, prostitution and sex tourism suggest, however, a far greater complexity, which demands more elaborate and complicated understandings of sexuality. Moreover, given the range of sexual practices and relations that appear in the studies, we argue here for a conceptualization of sexuality as semi-autonomous from gender, and begin to map the contours of a specific area that can be designated as Caribbean sexuality studies.

¹ This is an updated version of an article published in *OSO: Tijdschrift voor Surinamistiek en het Caraïbisch Gebied* (April 2008), 28-51.

Introduction

This article is part of the outcome of a study that was aimed to assist UNIFEM and its partners to “better understand and therefore address how gender and sexuality are related to risk and vulnerability” in the Caribbean.²

A primary focus here is on how sexuality is expressed or practised, not the way in which sexed bodies or sexualities are constituted or determined. *Sexual praxis* is used here then to capture the way in which sexuality is made visible through behaviours, activities and interactions between people, in relations, and in the ways in which desires are actualized. The focus on praxis rather than identity is for two main reasons: a) sexuality does not form a primary basis for social identification in the Caribbean, consequently sexual behaviours, activities and relations have become the central focus for analyses of sexuality in the region; and b) the specification of sexual identity groups often elides the very varied sexual arrangements in the region, and can work to hinder broader understandings of how Caribbean peoples relate sexually.

Trends in sexual praxis

Despite the mountain of *grey* documents that include some mention of sexual praxis (reports, conference papers, theses, and policy briefings) and the growing number of more accessible documents (published journal articles, electronic articles, chapters in books, media reports and books), there is little consistency in existing studies, thus little basis for comparison cross-ethnically, cross-nationally, or regionally. Repetition of ideas through multiple reviews of studies and several small-scale qualitative research efforts that are not replicable is also apparent. Yet, while many of the studies tend to repeat broad generalities, they also contain specific details and important nuggets of information about localized, class and ethnic-specific sexual expressions.³

The most common aspects of sexual praxis we identified in the literature are elaborated below. These involve violence against women, sexual-economic exchange, same-sex relations, adolescent sexual activity, population mobility, and multiple partnering. Incest, women’s sexual agency and expressions of sexual desire, and bisexual behaviour are repeatedly signalled yet are not well-researched themes in this body of literature. And while male (hetero)sexual pleasure and agency is taken in many instances to be a natural state of affairs and appears as an underlying assumption in many studies, the significance of notions of virility, fertility, sexual prowess and violence to constructions of masculinity remains under-interrogated and obscured.

² The study was commissioned by UNIFEM-Caribbean Office, the Barbados National HIV/AIDS Commission, and the Canadian International Development Research Centre (IDRC). See Kempadoo with Taitt (2006) at: http://www.unifemcar.org/pr_.cfm?ID=10&Sec_=Programmes.

³ The review of Caribbean sexuality literature published in the U.S. women’s journal *SIGNS* by Jenny Sharpe and Samantha Pinto takes up studies that are published and available internationally. The authors however miss much of the research that has been produced locally and regionally, thus privileging the work of researchers who have access to the global academic publishing industry.

Violence against women

The issue of sex-as-violence to women is a main theme in the literature, related primarily to the lives of adult women. It is reflected in a large number of reports on, laws against, shelters for, and public discussions about domestic and gender-based violence. One of the first exclusive studies on domestic violence in the region was undertaken in Guyana in the 1980s by Basmati Shiw Parsad (1989; Danns and Shiw Parsad 1989). In the two decades since then, a number of other significant studies on domestic and gender-based violence have been conducted.⁴ A recently published annotated bibliography on gender-based violence in the Caribbean lists 388 reports, articles and studies that deal with the subject (Quamina-Aiyejina and Brathwaite 2005).

While these studies document violence against women, it is not always easy to discern the extent of sexual violence as there is little distinction made between sexual and other types of domestic or gender-based violence and few explorations into meanings of the violence. From research in the 1990s it is also claimed that there is little difference in rates of violence in intimate or domestic settings between Indian and African ethnic groups, or for women in different classes (Gopaul and Cain 1996; Peake and Trotz 1999), although a more recent or sustained comparison has not been made. The concept of sexual violence, especially within domestic violence studies, remains then, vague and obscured, and is barely specified by ethnicity/race, or class.

Nevertheless, data from 15 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean show rates of physical abuse by a partner ranging up to 69% of all women, with 47% of all women reporting being victims of sexual assault during their lifetime (Morrisson, Ellsberg and Bott 2005). Such data support the argument that even though the statistics on rape are unreliable indicators of the incidence of gender violence, they demonstrate the pervasiveness and social acceptability of violence against women throughout the region (Clarke 1998). The general conclusion in such studies is that the problem of gender-based violence, which includes sexual violence, “is serious, growing, and probably quite widespread” (LeFranc and Rock 2002).

Violence to women is continually raised as a way in which Caribbean men seek to maintain patriarchal power, and sex becomes a primary means available to Caribbean men to exert control over and to inflict physical harm on women, Indian and African alike. “Stabbing”, “nailing”, and “slamming” are common metaphors for male sexual acts, seen to represent acts of violence (Chevannes 2001). The issue of forced sex stresses men’s actions upon the bodies and psyches of Caribbean women, and women are overwhelmingly positioned as victims in the studies. Sexuality in this way is revealed as a site of conflict and harm, firmly attached to abusive gendered relations of power. Violence is considered a regular or normal part of male sexual expressions and identity. However, the embeddedness of sexual violence in masculinity, as well as the coupling of sexual violence to everyday social and political violence or to the normalized expressions of affection and love by both men and women, is underexplored in the literature.

Sexual-economic exchanges

⁴ See, for example, Haniff (1995), Gopaul and Cain (1996), Clarke (1998), Red Thread and Peake (1999), Robinson (2000), LeFranc (2001), Arscott-Mills (2001), Lazarus-Black (2003).

Sexual praxis is also highlighted in studies of the exchange of sexual acts or services for money, material goods, or security. This involves arrangements that have been described in three main ways.

i) Prostitution, sex work or “commercial sex work”. This is the most immediately identifiable form of sexual-economic exchange, and includes the sale of sexual labour from the street, brothels, bars, clubs, hotels, mining camps, and so on, as well as exotic dancing, stripping, and escorting.⁵

ii) “Romance” with tourists, or “tourist-oriented prostitution”. Here Caribbean men and women are engaged in sexual-economic/material exchanges with vacationers predominantly from North America and Europe—both men and women—that cover a range of practices from brief “sex on the sand” encounters, to steady, longer-term partnerships.⁶

iii) “Transactional sex”. This refers to relationships that involve a deliberate exchange of sex for some form of “betterment”—material goods, clothes, accommodation, social status, and so forth—but are not viewed by the people involved as prostitution, and are not typically based on notions of romance or love. These usually involve young women with older men, but include teenage boys with older women.⁷

The extent and range of sexual-economic relations in the region are not easily determined, for they encompass a wide variety of activities and exchanges and, due to their illegal and stigmatized character, are not widely acknowledged. Despite the lack of visibility of the arrangements, they are most commonly identified as heterosexual although they are also signalled in studies of same-sex relations. In such studies, a notion of sexual intercourse as “work” appears regularly, leading to conceptualizations of the exploitation, trade, or sale of sexual labour. It is also here that female (hetero)sexual agency appears, most commonly coupled to poor women’s strategies to “make do.” However, Amalia L. Cabezas, in a study of Cuba and the Dominican Republic, argues that “the exchange of goods and money for sexual services is not an unambiguous commercial endeavor but a discursive construction that is contested and in motion, changing across time and space” (2009, 4). Amongst hospitality workers in all-inclusive resorts in Cuba, she found that there is a “use of affect and sexuality to cultivate friendships, romance, and other exchanges” which ultimately benefits and improves the workers’ lives (2009, 109). Amongst women without connections to the tourist economy and who lacked relatives abroad who could remit money “relationships with foreigners,

⁵ See, for example, studies by O’Carroll-Barahona et al. (1994), Kempadoo (1996, 2004), de Moya and Garcia (1999), Campbell and Campbell (2001), Red Thread (2002), CAREC/PAHO and Maxi Linder (2006), Adomakoh (2007), Bombereau and Allen (2008), Braithwaite and Team (2008), Schmeitz et al. (2009).

⁶ See for example Pruitt and LaFont (1995), O’Connell Davidson (1996), de Albuquerque (1999, 2000), Kempadoo (1999), Phillips (2002), Sanchez Taylor (2001, 2002), Brennan (2004a, 2004b), Padilla (2007) Padilla et al., (2006), Cabezas (2004, 2006).

⁷ See de Zalduondo and Bernard (1995), Chevannes (2001), Dunn (2001), Kempadoo and Dunn (2001), Ahmed (2003), Kempadoo (2004), Barrow (2005, 2009), Figueroa (2006), Hawkins et al. (2007), Rolfe et al. (2007), Cabezas (2009).

whether they include sex or not, often provide unmatched economic returns. Monetary considerations are important, but...so are affective and spiritual ones” (2009, 117). *Tactical sex* is the concept Cabezas opts for to capture this complexity of affective-sexual relations that allows for the heterogeneity of relationships that can be found today in the Caribbean tourism industry. The notion of tactical sex closely approximates what has been described above as transactional sex, even while the definitions of both remain fuzzy.

Sexual-(affective)-economic activities are lodged in needs and desires for comfort and security— such as material things, some of which may be “basic” (groceries, housing, electricity, clothes) or immediate needs such as lunch-money—while others are related to long-term residential, educational, economic, or emotional security. Yet, due to gendered asymmetries in social and economic benefits, women and girls most commonly hold the weaker negotiating positions. Moreover, notions of “prostitution”, “transactional sex” or “sexual-economic relations” carry a sense of moral opprobrium, particularly for young women, as it is associated with “promiscuity” or undisciplined sexuality (“looseness” or “slackness”) in hegemonic discourse. The stigmas, moral disapproval and discrimination against persons—particularly women—who are engaged in sex work and other forms of sexual economic exchange, are maintained in most Caribbean countries by legislation that criminalizes the commercialization of sex (i.e. prostitution) and by policies and international campaigns to combat the trafficking of persons, and are subject to ongoing scrutiny.

Same-sex relations

Despite the claim that homosexuality is unnatural to the Caribbean, same-sex relations have been noted in anthropological studies since the 1930s. In the past two decades a number of studies have appeared that foreground these relations. For “women-who-love-women” the main studies are by M. Jaqui Alexander (1991, 1997 2005), Makeda Silvera (1992), Gloria Wekker (1993, 1994, 1999, 2006), Joan French and Michelle Cave (1995), Joceline Clemencia (1996), Rosamund Elwin (1997), and Rosamund King (2008).⁸ About men, the prominent work on the Caribbean is by E. Antonio de Moya and Rafael Garcia (1996, 1999), David Murray (2000, 2009), Thomas Glave (2000, 2005, 2008), Robert Carr (2003, 2005), Wesley Crichlow (2004), Andil Gosine (2005, 2009a, 2009b), and Mark Padilla (2006, 2007).

Aside from establishing that same-sex relations exist in Suriname, Jamaica, Trinidad, Curacao, Martinique, the Dominican Republic, and Barbados, these studies note a flexibility in the naming of these relations in the region. The range of terms represents in turn a great heterogeneity in the practices, desires, self-identifications and external views of people who have sexual intercourse with, or who sexually desire, persons of the same sex or gender. In many of these studies same-sex relations are not in the first instance claimed as identity but rather as activity, as people disclose information about their practice without identifying or viewing themselves as homosexual, queer, gay, lesbian, or transgender. The studies have also brought to the fore a commonality of bisexual behaviour. According to most of the research on Caribbean men-who-have-sex-with-

⁸ For reviews of many of these studies, see Kempadoo (2004), Calixte (2005), Sharpe and Pinto (2006).

men, many also have sex with women. Wekker makes similar claims for Mati in Suriname—that women-who-love-women often engage in heterosexual relations through marriage, for childbearing purposes, or to avoid attention or stigma.

An important focus in the literature on same-sex relations is on ideologies (heterosexism and homophobia) and discriminations and violence against groups of people whose sexual practices transgress the dominant norm of heterosexuality. While religion may be offered as a main basis for the intense expressions of homophobia that have been recorded in the Caribbean, other factors are seen to underpin the intense homophobia found in the region, such as definitions of masculinity that “emphasize sexual prowess with women and eschew ‘softness’ in a man” (White and Carr 2005, 8). Due to the silencing, stigma, and discriminations that same-sex relations and behaviours face, public self-identification as “gay”, “lesbian” or “queer” is not common, although this has not prevented the emergence of organizations such as the Jamaica Forum for Lesbians, All-sexuals and Gays (J-FLAG), the United Gay and Lesbian Association of Barbados (UGLAB) and the Society Against Sexual Discrimination in Guyana (SASOD). Moreover, despite the ongoing public assaults on gay, lesbian and transgender persons, there is some acknowledgement of positive shifts in attitudes, thought to be the result of increased exposure to gay images on television, and the frequency of reporting on homosexual behaviour in the media (White and Carr 2005).

The issue of homosexuality has been taken up in studies for HIV and AIDS prevention and programming, which by and large tend to highlight the behavioural aspect of men’s lives, under the banner of “Men who have Sex with Men” (MSM).⁹ The general assumption in this literature is that this group poses a particular health risk to the rest of the population, and acts as a “bridge” in transmitting the disease since the men who fall into this category are believed to be basically heterosexuals who have sex with homosexual men at times. Mark Padilla (2007) argues that this approach is faulty in that it assumes that bisexual behaviour is incidental and episodic—thus not a structural part of social behaviour—and implies that men who “deviate” from normal heterosexuality are responsible for spreading disease into the rest of the population. Moreover, in this discourse, as Andil Gosine argues, “MSM” often becomes a euphemism for “gay”, which works to neglect the large number of men who do not identify as such (2005). Gosine also notes, “in dominant HIV and AIDS analyses and policies in the Anglo-Caribbean, MSM is primarily intended to facilitate, rather than challenge, heteronationalism...[it] constructs men engaged in homosexual acts as infecting agents who threaten the welfare of communities, states, peoples” (2009a, 97).¹⁰ The focus in such studies is commonly on behaviour change among the MSM community, emphasizing condom use, single partners and other safe sex practices. Far less attention is paid to stigma and discrimination that the men face and which prevent them from accessing services. Unlike the men, “women who have sex with women” do not appear prominently in studies or interventions with an epidemiological or medical approach, due to a perception that they are a “low risk” population (Gosine 2005). Nevertheless, stigmas and discriminations against all homosexual acts, gays, lesbians, transgenders and “all sexuals” in Caribbean

⁹ See also the reports on MSM and HIV by Russell-Brown and Sealy (1998/2000), Royes (2003), CAREC/PAHO and Maxi Linder Foundation (2005).

¹⁰ See also Murray (2009).

societies are propped up by legislation that outlaws “sodomy” and other forms of same-sex intercourse (Robinson 2007, 2009). Efforts to decriminalize same-sex relations are often met with vehement public opposition, and to date no part of CARICOM has been successful in removing the laws. Instead, “there remains an insistence on unnaturalness, on discourses of ‘we’ versus ‘them’ that preserve the myth of a stable and authentic society” (Smith 2000, viii).

Adolescent sexuality

With the incidence of HIV and AIDS through heterosexual transmission on the increase since the 1980s and settling primarily among the 15–45 age group, concerns have arisen over the sexuality of young people. Sexual expressions as well as the sexual and reproductive health of adolescents, youth, and children have therefore become an area for public scrutiny.¹¹ The studies primarily concern young African Caribbean people in low-income and poor communities. In particular, first ages of sexual activity, condom use and young people’s knowledge about sexually transmitted infections and safe sex practices are highlighted. Christine Barrow’s in-depth study amongst “at-risk” adolescent girls— young women “whose lifestyles, sub-cultural norms and socio-economic environments are neither safe nor secure”—confirms earlier arguments about young women and transactional sexual relations in the region and again places adolescent sexuality in an HIV/public health context (2005, 17). Aside from the studies of HIV and AIDS, adolescent sexual expressions are also taken up in the studies of prostitution or transactional sex amongst young people under the age of 18, with a focus on girls. In a few studies of child labour, sexuality is also examined, mostly in the context of prostitution or transactional sex.¹² In such studies, the majority of the incidences of sexual activity involve some form of transactional sex, with young women partnering with older men for a variety of reasons, including school fees, money, and to acquire sneakers.

The overriding trend in studies of adolescent sex is the uncritical problematization of young people’s sexual praxis, accompanied by a search for methods to curb or end youthful sexual expressions through ABC campaigns and religious, parental, or school instruction. Nevertheless, sexual rights have been a focus of various reports regarding adolescent or youth sexuality and health, and children’s rights; it is in this body of literature that a conception of young people’s sexual agency begins to emerge.¹³

Population mobility

Activities of persons who move around the world and within the Caribbean also contribute to an understanding of Caribbean sexual praxis. Studies of sex tourism, for example, illuminate sexual practices of tourists while in the Caribbean.¹⁴ The international tourism industry brings an estimated 10 million visitors a year to the region,

¹¹ See Eggleton, Jackson and Hardee (1999), Chevannes and Gayle (2000), Christie et al. (2001), de Bruin (2001, 2004), LeFranc and Lord (2004), Barrow (2005, 2009).

¹² Dunn (2002a, 2002b, 2002c), Danns (2002), Hunte and Lewis (2002), and Young (2003).

¹³ See UNFPA (1999), Barrow (2001), Kempadoo & Dunn (2001), Clarke (2004), LeFranc & Lord (2004), Barrow (2009).

¹⁴ See also O’Connell Davidson (1996), Kempadoo (1999), Sanchez Taylor (2001), Brennan (2004a, 2004b), Padilla (2007), Cabezas (2009).

and is seen to provide “opportunities for new sexual encounters including casual sex” (Figueroa 2006, 2). It is also in the context of sex tourism that the intersection of race and sexuality is analysed. Julia O’Connell Davidson and Jaqueline Sanchez Taylor (1999), for example, argue that Caribbean men and women are constructed in tourist imaginations as racialized-sexual subjects/objects—the hypersexual “black male stud” and the “hot” mulatto or black woman—whose main roles are to serve and please the visitor. Global and local tourism industries and governments feed this imagination by marketing the Caribbean as a sexual paradise, exoticizing the region and its people in the search for profit.¹⁵

The majority of the studies of sex tourism concern North American and Western European vacationers. Sexual practices of persons who travel to the Caribbean in other capacities, especially as visitors from Caribbean diasporas in Europe and North America, as well as of Caribbean persons who travel internationally for business, pleasure, or for family reasons, have not been the focus of attention, although a large body of literature on Caribbean migration exists, as well as a growing number of studies on return migration. While sex tourism is commonly believed to corrupt and debase local populations, particularly Caribbean womanhood, a counter-trend in the studies is to situate the arrangements within the context of a dependency of the Caribbean region on tourism within the larger global economy, making sexuality a resource that is, on the one hand exploited by national governments, the international tourism industry and tourists for their own benefit and profit, and on the other, is used by local populations in order to participate in g/local development and transnational flows.

Apart from people who move around for leisure and pleasure, sexual praxis is also highlighted in discussions of regional labour migration. As Caroline Allen remarks:

Population mobility...increases the number of sexual partnerships as well as contacts with high-risk groups such as sex workers. Loneliness, insecurity, and freedom from social norms provide an impetus to risky sexual behaviour; these are compounded by economic hardship that may force people to trade sex for money or favours (Allen 2004,1).

In the context of studies of the HIV and AIDS epidemic, mobile labour populations are commonly identified as vectors of disease. Migrant sex workers who work in territories other than their own have traditionally been analysed as such, or more recently as “bridges” of sexually transmitted disease, likewise their sexual practices.¹⁶ Analyses of sexual relations of other types of labour migrants, such as Haitians who work in the sugar-cane plantations in the Dominican Republic, are not as common but also exist (Brewer, Hasburn et al. 1998). Nonetheless, the larger story of the impact of population mobility—whether in the form of tourism, labour and return migration, or annual family visiting—on Caribbean sexual praxis, is still to be fully explored.

¹⁵ See also Sheller (2003).

¹⁶ See, for example, Persaud (1998), Samiel (2001), Adomakoh (2007), Joseph and Faura (2008), COIN (2008).

Multiple partnering and sexual networks

Informal polygamy and multiple partnering are commonly signalled in studies of family, masculinity, and HIV and AIDS. Such arrangements are usually associated with men and considered to be an accepted part of (African) Caribbean masculine social life. For example, Barrington Chevannes concludes that “becoming an African Caribbean man privileges one to engage in all...forms of sexual relations, from the promiscuous and casual to multiple partnerships (which in effect is unrecognized polygamy)...A man is not a real man unless he is sexually active” (2001, 217). Others concur. Masculinity “is often viewed by men in terms of how many women or baby mothers they have. It is clear that the practice of men having an ‘outside woman,’ that is one outside his main partnership, is a deeply ingrained cultural practice” (Figueroa 2006, 3). Although not as frequently mentioned, multiple partnering for women occurs, particularly amongst young women. For Barbados, it is observed that “the contemporary literature reports patterns of aggressive sexual initiation, infidelity and concurrent multiple partnering among adolescent girls” (Barrow 2005, 14), while in Jamaica “30–40 percent of [young] women may be having multiple sexual partners in the past year” (Figueroa 2006, 3). While not considered appropriate conduct for a woman, multiple partnering is culturally accepted if it is believed to be for economic reasons (Senior 1991, Chevannes 2001).

When multiple partnering crosses into same-sex relations and presents itself as bisexual behaviour, it is more likely discussed as deviant or abnormal behaviour. The wide-scale practice of multiple partnering, along with the condemnation of same-sex relations has, moreover, focussed attention on the “wrong” behaviour of “some” men (and women), and removes attention from the more socially accepted practice amongst the wider population. Thus, it is homosexuals, prostitutes, migrant workers and “promiscuous” adolescents who are linked to sexual networks or to multiple sexual partners, and in HIV and AIDS discourses, are then blamed for transmitting disease into the general population.

Heteronormativity

Common to many of the studies is that sexual practices and arrangements are held to be operational around a gender binary that firmly attaches the biological to the social, and where heterosexuality is seen as the only form of legitimate sexuality. The collapse of sex and gender in everyday and academic discourse often elides the existence of persons whose social identities, sexual practices or physical bodies do not adhere or conform to these categories. Caribbean sexuality then regularly appears as rigidly heterosexual and intolerant of sexual difference. Sex folds into gender, and masculinity and femininity are viewed as complements to each other: two parts of a whole. Moreover, heterosexual gender identities are rigidly defined. The common characterization of men in Caribbean social studies literature and fiction is of someone who is “powerful, exceedingly promiscuous, derelict in his parental duties, often absent from the household, and, if present, unwilling to undertake his share of domestic responsibilities” (Lewis 2003, 107). “Promiscuity” with multiple women is often emphasized, and links between sex and male virility or fertility commonly made. Deriving pleasure, power and freedom from sexual performance appears critical to Caribbean masculinity, and is sometimes assumed to be biologically determined.

Regarding women, studies continue to find that heterosexual activity is a common signifier of maturity, which is still often perceived by girls and women as attached to fertility, through which one becomes a “real” Caribbean woman.¹⁷ (Young) women continue to face many social pressures to have children, to confirm their identity as women, and to prove they are “not a mule (Eggleton, Jackson and Hardee 1999, 82). Sexual activity is thus attached not only to biology, but to social identity: sex and gender are deeply intertwined. And despite the claim that ethnicity is believed to be important in shaping sexual behaviours, it has been found to not significantly alter the idea that “the majority of young women think that children satisfy the most important goal of womanhood and are women’s greatest (and lasting) contribution” (Hosein 2004, 552). The dominant, almost unquestioned, links between sexuality and gender are lodged in a norm of heterosexuality as natural. As Jacqui Alexander pointed out in the early 1990s, heterosexuality is paramount in the region, and as described above, the dominance of a heterosexual orientation for African Caribbean men and women is repeatedly corroborated. Likewise, for Indian Caribbean men it has been noted that “the Indo-Caribbean subject of jahaji bhai culture is not only always-already gendered, but also always-already sexualized...the Indo-Caribbean masculine subject is indeed heterosexual” (Lokaisingh-Meighoo 2000, 86). Heterosexuality is reinforced by education, social studies, and the media, or as “the norm as ordained by God” (Holder 2003; Genrich and Braithwaite 2005).

Conceptions of heterosexuality as “the norm” in Caribbean societies have, nevertheless, been rigorously interrogated and critiqued in recent years. Such critiques acknowledge complexities in masculinity and changes in femininity that also trouble hegemonic constructions of sex and gender.¹⁸ And even though much of the literature concerns African Caribbean people, studies of Indian women’s cultural practices in the *matikor* tradition and *chutney* music contribute to the critique.¹⁹ It is in these studies that femininity is linked to sexual agency and freedom, as well as to the contestation of heteropatriarchy. Questioning normative heterosexuality in Caribbean social and gender studies becomes critical not just for acknowledging same-sex relations and changes in definitions of masculinity and femininity, but also for conceptualizing sexuality itself. Wekker, for example, argues for a distinction between concepts of gender and sexuality. Women who express desire and passion through sexual relationships with other women and who transgress boundaries of existing gendered categories thus require a separate conceptual category. Likewise, Alexander argues that the impetus to distinguish between sexuality and gender does not simply rest in everyday social practice, but is deeply embedded in state discourses and laws, visible through the criminalization of particular types of sexual expressions. People who engage in same-sex relations and those who sell

¹⁷ See for example, Mohammed and Perkins (1999), Peake and Trotz (1999), Clarke (2004), Barrow (2009).

¹⁸ In two recent collections on Caribbean gender, sexuality and HIV, several of the authors explore constructions of heteronormativity. See Barrow, de Bruin and Carr (2009), Roberts et al. (2009)

¹⁹ The terms “maticore” (or *matikor*) and “chutney” (or *chatney*) refer respectively to “the female celebration of female sexuality which takes place on the eve of a Hindu wedding” and the “grassroots Indo-Caribbean singing and dancing with topical lyrics and sensuous rhythm” that originates in the wedding celebration” (Kanhai 1999, Introduction and Glossary). See also Niranjana (1997), Baksh-Soodeen (1999), Puri (2004), and Mehta (2004).

sex are two categories that are defined and treated differently in many Caribbean laws, on the basis of sexual practice. National governments therefore codify sexual behaviour, and expressions of erotic desire, differently from gender. Indeed, as studies in Cuba and the Dominican Republic demonstrate, while many men who have sex with men socially identify as masculine, it is their sexual activities and desires, not their gender identification that sets them apart from other men in state policies, laws, and everyday practices. Discrimination on the basis of gender is codified in most national laws as unjust and a violation of civil or human rights, yet discrimination on the basis of sexual expressions and identities is still possible in many countries due to laws that criminalize anal sex, prostitution and same-sex activities. Sexual difference is thus firmly etched into Caribbean society as semiautonomous and distinct from gender.

Sexual agency, pleasure and desire

The review of literature found that the expression of female sexual desire and sexual agency is not a prominent theme: the studies are primarily male-centred in this respect. As one author notes about the silence on the subject in Caribbean discourses: “how men manage to explore their sexuality while women remain marginally involved remains a perennial mystery to the casual observer” (Lewis 2003, 7). The silence may well have to do with the general difficulty of broaching the subject in Caribbean societies and communities, particularly for and by women, as “cultural and moral taboos about sex are very deep...young girls are not provided the information, services, skills and resources necessary for safer sex...no one talks to them about sex and sexuality except in religious/moral terms of disapproval or, at the most extreme, disparagingly, with lewd overtones” (CARICOM 1999, 7). In literature on gender-based and domestic violence, sexual desire is elided for women and girls, and female agency appears mainly in the context of self-defence, including the battering or killing of husbands or children by women.²⁰ The silence about sex within families and communities in the Caribbean also combines with reductionist biases in HIV and AIDS work which foreground sexual behaviour for purposes of survival, reproduction and fulfilment of needs, relegating “complex negotiations about matters of heart and body” to invisibility (Gosine 2005, 62). Studies of prostitution, sex work and transactional sex that highlight sexual agency for women and girls lend support to ideas that women’s sexual agency is tied to economic concerns. Love, sexual desire and sexual passion are rarely broached in these studies, although increasingly, the importance of emotions that accompany sexual expressions, such as feelings of intimacy, trust, sharing and respect, is being recognized by researchers in the field. The studies by Sobo (1993), Chevannes (2001), Murray (2002) and Wekker (2006) are some of the few recent ethnographic accounts where African-Caribbean sexual desire and agency are explored in any depth. In studies of Indian-Caribbean populations, the majority of the focus is on history, when indentureship produced new sexual freedoms for women, with colonialism and patriarchy working to curb and confine their expressions of sexual desire (Shepherd 2002; Mohammed 2002). Overwhelmingly, discussions of female sexual agency and desire—Indian- and African-Caribbean—appear in analyses of music, dance and performance.²¹ Here, for example, the coupling of sex with violence may be questioned. “Stabbing” in dancehall songs is then read as a referent

²⁰ Shiw Parsad (1989), Binda (2001), Robinson (2000).

²¹ See for example, Cooper (1995), Ramnarine (2001), Hope (2006).

to “the intense pleasure of vigorous, not violent sex”, whereby the penis becomes “a metaphorical dagger stabbing pleasure into and out of the woman” (Cooper 2004, 13). Alternatively, sexuality is taken as a simultaneous site of pleasure and danger for women. The double entendre found in chutney-soca performed by women allows lyrics to be read as depicting both the pleasures of oral sex for women and sexual violence against women (Puri 2004). Importantly, such cultural studies create possibilities for more complicated analyses of women’s sexuality.

The domain of Caribbean sexuality studies

The studies reviewed indicate that Caribbean sexual praxis is produced by and through a variety of factors, although it is clear that not all factors are fully captured or explored in the literature, nor of equal significance. However, the recurring aspects in the literature draw the general contours of Caribbean sexuality. It is characterized by patriarchal heteronormativity yet includes bisexual and same-sex relations. It is powerful or violent, frequently acts as an economic resource, sustains polygamy, multiple partnering and polyamory, and is mediated by constructions of race, ethnicity and racism.

The conceptual and legal distinction between sexuality and gender that is made in some studies, and which we highlight here—of sexuality as semi-autonomous from gender—is important to this mapping and allows us to capture the specificities and variety of Caribbean sexual praxis. Taking sexuality and gender as overlapping yet distinct terrains means that we can examine sexuality not simply as a derivative of gender relations and identities but as constituting a distinct culture and set of social relations and identities that interact with, yet can be studied separately from, gender. The focus enables an examination of the ways in which sexual arrangements are attached to racialized relations of power, particularly within tourism-oriented prostitution and transactional sex settings, where constructions of race and ethnicity structure possibilities for young women and men in different ways, and mediate and transform traditional gender relations of power. It allows for studies of the ways in which sexuality is reconfigured through new technological innovations and new imperialisms, and for examinations of the production of new identities, expressions and transactions, and new sexual arrangements that may or may not be attached to a gendered binary. The focus on sexuality also supports continuing explorations into the commodification and exploitation of Caribbean sex within local and global economies, and into questions about ways in which the economic infuses specific meaning into racialized gendered constructions of sexuality. The significance of sexuality to development policies and strategies for the region is also of significance.²²

However, for sexuality to be a vantage point for Caribbean research and study, the current complexities need to be acknowledged, and the intricacies of a range of sexual arrangements and practices appreciated. And it is perhaps through untangling the knot of power and violence, pleasure and desire, and intersections of gender, race and economics,

²² See Adams and Pigg (2005), Gosine (2005) and the March 2009 issue of the *Journal of Development* that focuses exclusively on sexuality: <http://www.palgrave-journals.com/development/journal/v52/n1/index.html#>

in the context of 21st century global development, that the map can be filled in or redrawn. Caribbean sexuality might then find the space and respect it deserves.

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