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Gender, Biopolitics and Caribbean Feminisms: Blending Flesh with Beloved Clay

Abstract

The sub-title for this issue, “Blending Flesh with Beloved Clay”, comes from Dominican writer and politician Phyllis Allfrey’s poem, “Love for An Island”.¹ The poem speaks to the essays, creative works and reflections contributed here by scholars, artists, poets, students and activists. Its ironic voice critiques romantic and nationalist visions of the Caribbean and its history, but empathy nonetheless quietly emerges from within its scathing lines. The lingering image is one of people’s attempts to define their relationship to a space and, at times, to define the space itself. While in Allfrey’s verse, nationalists’ “legendary politics decay” and ultimate belonging only comes with death, the piece opens questions about the other ways that more ordinary women and men establish their relationship to their homes. Beyond the ways that they seek identities, attachments and symbols of power, it positions the impact of the Caribbean landscape on bodies, lives and desires.

Introduction

Using approaches ranging from visual analysis and literary critique to ethnography and in-depth interviews, the essays in this issue interrogate how gender shapes women's and men's relationships with various manifestations of Caribbean history, schooling, geography, art, music, dance, migration and organisational politics. Complementing them, the poems, personal reflection, public lecture and essay under the section "Gender Dialogues" introduce readers to the diverse ways that individuals are conceptualising womanhood, manhood and feminist politics for themselves. Similar themes weave through the interview and tribute under "The Making of Caribbean Feminisms", and the special collection profile in the section on "Research in Action". These diverse writings reflect a fluidity in the ways that we live, negotiate and think about gender, and they all offer different perspectives on Caribbean feminism.

The connections across sections are important for continuing Caribbean feminists' challenge to the ways that scholarship, activism, institution-building, personal reflection and life histories have often been cast as disconnected forms of knowledge production. Consistent with the aims of the journal, this issue comprises conventional, blind peer-reviewed, academic essays as well as a range of discourses and devices of the written, oral and visual. These latter speak more directly to how gender is lived among real people and how Caribbean gender studies and activism are constantly being forged, not as separate entities, but in tandem and conversation with each other. The *CRGS* sets rigorous editorial standards while encouraging theorising that is open to forms and languages beyond the academic. As a woman, poet and politician, Allfrey also drew her understanding from flesh, script, clay, action and imagination.

The photo-essays, especially, invite readers along this path. Like the book review, they make women and their realities more visible and affirm their public significance. While both women and men are equally gendered, and the study of masculinity is an area of growing importance, this feminist commitment to women's stories continues to define the space offered by the *Caribbean Review of Gender Studies*. The videos, in their unique way, bring another perspective to the interrelated ways that ideologies, institutions, bodies, feminisms, and women's and men's experiences take on nuanced meanings.

The contributions in this issue read gender through insights into Caribbean realities and come to terms with the Caribbean through an exploration of how notions of womanhood and manhood have been and continue to be lived. While they centre the region, they also offer significant insights for scholars of colonial history, women's writing, performance, education, masculinity and social movements. These are common themes across different contexts. In this way, the journal joins global conversations, offering a source for comparative work or theoretical insights that go beyond area studies.

Given its history of slavery, indentureship and migration, the Caribbean has always been a place where bodies matter. As a mirror to this, sexual politics and the ways they have been negotiated have always influenced conceptions of the Caribbean itself. How women and men negotiate bodily identity is not so different from the ways they engage public power. As the articles show, the ways that artists mark ethnic difference among colonized

women or the ways that boys define their identities amidst US-dominated globalisation are not separate from beliefs about what values should shape “respectability” or from the ways that poverty is negotiated using transactional sex.

Used here as a metaphor, Allfrey’s whole phrase, “beloved clay”, highlights the extent to which coming to terms with who one is, as a Chutney dancer, Jamaican returnee or Haitian community activist, also involves investing meaning in the surrounding context, whether this is a diasporic understanding of dance forms, a particular part of the Jamaican landscape or a local discourse about NGOs and aid. Similarly, the investments made by Elsa Leo-Rhynie, Clotil Walcott and other women to whom we are indebted were not just about changing gendered realities or women’s rights, but were also engagements redefining the signposts of Caribbean educational, occupational and family life. Even without the “sternest passion” of politicians, as myths, images, relationships, identities, culture and lives are built, so too are distinctly Caribbean landscapes, experiences and discourses of power. Simply put, this is one way that biopolitics works.

Biopolitics

Biopolitics refers to the ways that power is wielded through the production and regulation of bodies and sexualities. This Foucauldian concept interprets how states and other sovereign powers discipline individuals and populations using techniques of surveillance and governance that impose norms of human conduct, myths of contamination and impurity, and stereotypes about different groups’ distinct physical and psychological features on (subjugated) women and men. Generally, the literature on biopolitics looks at the collection of census data, control of sewage systems, illness and health, sexuality, cultural “traditions”, colonial policies, notions of respectability and shame, and other forms of social/biological control.

Biopolitics legitimises the centrality of the body in understanding the maintenance of hierarchical social orders, gendered discourses of self-control, and the range of ways that women and men negotiate identity, belonging, citizenship, culture, rights and authority. After comparing the essays, videos, poems and reflections, it occurred to me that this concept provided a framework for linking these seemingly disparate contributions.

As this is a general issue open to a variety of foci, other pieces shed a more focused light on Caribbean feminisms, placing them in historical and contemporary context. They remind us of the link between the study of gender and a commitment to action in feminist praxis. Together, the issue’s contents draw on enduring concerns, established lenses and emerging debates, signalling many ways that ideas are brought to life.

Flesh

Jaime Lee Loy’s video, *Unease*, the front cover of this issue, highlights the contradictory messages regarding motherhood, beauty and marriage that young women continue to confront. These messages stick to the skin, choke like a noose, trap like a glass cage and create a cacophony of questions and answers that end up as noise. Lee Loy created this two-minute adaptation specifically for the *Caribbean Review of Gender Studies*. As the issue’s front cover, it establishes both the embodied and performative aspects of gender,

as well as the dilemmas of challenging the social order. The link for *Unease* appears again under “Video Essays” and allows it to be viewed in full-screen format.

Amar Wahab brings visual representations to the fore, reading painted imagery, sketches, photographs and lithographs to examine how East Indian women were exoticized and disciplined as specific kinds of labourers and cultural others within colonial, Creole social hierarchy. His visual analysis throws light on the colonial marriage compact that idealised them as dependent housewives and child bearers under the patriarchal control of Indian men, and the ways that they were set apart from African, Coloured and White women. This had an overall effect of reinforcing indentured women’s double marginalization as a feminised underclass of labourers, justifying the civilising mission claimed by colonial powers, and inventing a specifically Caribbean Orientalist discourse.

Sara Bergman’s work shows the value of having lived and worked in Trinidad for over a year, bringing bodily knowledge to the fore through her participation in dance. Her research uses performance to investigate and interpret how Indian women in Trinidad negotiate conceptions of modern and traditional Indian femininity. She examines how classical forms, Bollywood influences and locally grown styles associated with Chutney music physically enable both reproduction of and resistance to cultural values. Her essay illuminates the specific meanings that dance has taken on in Trinidad, its association with femininity and, perhaps because of this, the personal and political successes it has enabled women to claim in the public sphere.

Heather Horst’s ethnographic picture of Mandeville highlights the significance of notions of respectability to Jamaican returnees’ identities, and in this sense takes a different approach to a colonial discourse also interrogated by Wahab and Bergman. Horst shows how gendered experiences of migration, and the cultivation of family life, homes and landscapes create shifting juxtapositions between respectability and reputation, blackness and whiteness, being English and being Jamaican. For Jamaican women returning home after decades in England, getting their colour back in the sun is a rejection of symbols of respectability associated with Whiteness. Even as they reject these meanings, however, other symbols associated with house, land and area of residence impose a tyranny of respectability much harder to ignore.

Returning to Trinidad and Tobago, Camille Hernandez-Ramdwar argues that childhood sexual abuse is one troubling basis for transactional sexual practices, violence, crime, addictive behaviours and rates of HIV infection in a Caribbean region long marked by the sexualization and commodification of bodies. In contrast to previous articles’ emphases on images, dance and domesticity, Hernandez-Ramdwar uses soca music to show how young women and men invest in “rank”, “reputation” and social status derived from being sexually and street savvy. Exploring the lyrics of Trinidadian performer Bunji Garlin, she highlights how music can both expose young people’s realities and offer cathartic release. However, it can also celebrate a materialistic bling culture, teach violence and glorify death, and perpetuate problematic sexual scripts that add to the physical risks young people face.

Further exploring the pull of discourses of “reputation”, David Plummer, Arden McLean and Joel Simpson situate homophobia at the centre of boys’ views and experiences of schooling. They argue that education no longer offers opportunities for establishing a heterosexual masculine identity. Instead, boys have turned to hard physicality, the outdoors and sexual prowess. Peer culture especially ensures conformity to elaborate codes and styles that encourage boys to resist adult authority and to earn status by taking risks. In this light, schooling loses status. Ultimately, gender, sexuality, adolescent discourses of masculine reputation and peer group dynamics result in boys being more likely to engage in violence and crime, become less prepared for the labour market and higher education, and be more vulnerable to HIV/AIDS.

Relying on a literary lens, Michael Niblett uses Jamaican author Erna Brodber’s 1980 novel, *Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home*, to dissect the uneven and precocious way that modernity is articulated in the region. His essay shows the parallel between narrative modes that include African oral traditions and defy the bounds of European convention, and the social significance of the female, vulgar and reputable, body in the larger body politic. Brodber’s emphasis on the female body as integral to reconfiguring self and society enables her to incorporate the “communal body” of popular knowledge and experience into the novel’s form and narrative. In Niblett’s view, it therefore offers opportunities for rearticulating gender, ethnicity and modernity in Caribbean literature and life.

In the final essay in this section, Mark Schuller compares the ways that two Haitian women’s NGOs relate both to GAD approaches and to the aid recipients and clients they serve. One organisation operates democratically, creating horizontal, egalitarian, agenda-setting practices while the other “imports” leaders into a hierarchical and alienating structure that heightens local inequalities. Schuller’s ethnographic research suggests that funding for activities to combat HIV/AIDS can easily displace a more holistic and empowering emphasis on women’s collective mobilisation. Additionally, the clientelism that characterises donors’ approaches in Haiti can fail to meaningfully involve communities in combating economic hardship and HIV/AIDS, and ends up wasting the scarce resource that women greatly need.

Under the link, “Gender Dialogues”, Kavita Vidya Ganness’ poems “Tigress” and “Water Sister” again turn our gaze to the body and emotions as a basis for conceptualising identity, community and belonging. Ganness writes of her own stealth and incremental steps to freedom, calling on all women to flex their power and walk unafraid. Identify with her, she says, “A Tigress Lives Inside Me”. Her second piece takes aspects of corporality associated with abjection and release, such as tears, ashes and blood, and makes them the basis for the highest kind of communion among women. Both her poems claim a feminine essence emerging from shared experiences of the female body.

From his own perspective as a young man, Anan Smith reflects on how his politics changed after taking a course offered by the Centre for Gender and Development Studies, St. Augustine. Narrating his discussions with male peers about pornography and his own

negotiations with naturalised symbols of male privilege, Smith's quiet rethinking of masculinity provides a glance at how young men may be defining their own gender consciousness and (pro-) feminist politics amidst the masculinism of everyday life. His words provide honest, challenging reading for those facilitating discussions about men and masculinities, and represent one of the few writings by young men about manhood in the region

Roots

The following writings focus less on issues of biopolitics than the earlier essays, and take readers into a panoramic look at Caribbean feminism. Patricia Mohammed's public lecture, given in Dominica earlier this year, suggests that we open the aperture through which we view feminism and gender in the region. The questions of the past are different from those of the future and yet, ultimately, basic human desires for love, respect, dignity of labour, family survival and leisure remain much the same. Mohammed draws on the complex and inspiring history of women's writings, and struggles and solidarities across the sexes, to show us that change in its myriad forms has always been possible. For her, women's experiences and rights as productive workers, including domestic workers, and men's experiences and paternity rights as they take on more work in the home are challenges we need to face with continued optimism.

Beverly Shirley's challenge to Caribbean feminisms marks the extent to which the movement has come of age. The paths cut by women building NGOs, UN and state machineries and academic centres are now propelling a contemporary generation of feminist scholars to assess the gains made and to chart future directions. Noting the successes of almost a century of Jamaican women's organising and feminist activism, Shirley nonetheless asks about the extent to which working class women's lives have changed. She compels us to look "from below" at the personal politics among women and in feminist organisations, and to honestly pursue the egalitarianism feminists say we aim to achieve.

Under the sub-theme, "The Making of Caribbean Feminisms", June Ann Castello's interview with Elsa Leo-Rhynie, past Principal of the University of the West Indies, Mona, is valuable reading for feminist academics and activists looking critically and constructively at the institutionalisation of Gender Studies in the Anglophone region. In the interview, Leo-Rhynie reflects on academic feminism, the relationship between academia and grassroots activism, the impact of "male marginalization" discourses, the transition to another generation of feminists both inside and outside the academy, and her own sense of priorities for the immediate future.

Rhoda Reddock's eulogy of labour activist and mother Clotil Walcott complements the interview by bringing into focus another tier of feminist history. In 1974, Clotil Walcott founded and led the National Union of Domestic Employees. This was one more important step in her tireless struggle for the rights of women workers and domestic workers, and for recognition of women's unwaged domestic labour. Reddock conveys the extraordinary example that Clotil set and her successes along the way. Her story inspires,

but also cautions. The struggle for significant improvements in working-class women's lives must continue.

Under the "Research in Action" link, the *CRGS* features Carmen Hutchinson Miller's profile of the Nita Barrow Specialist Collection at the Centre for Gender and Development Studies, Cave Hill, Barbados. Thus far, the collection houses archive materials from the lives of Dame Eugenia Charles, Prime Minister of Dominica from 1980–1995, and Dame Nita Barrow, Governor General of Barbados from 1990–1995. Hutchinson Miller's review highlights the CGDS' ongoing Caribbean Women Catalysts for Change (CWCC) project. Its objective is to document outstanding examples of women's leadership in the Caribbean in areas ranging from political participation and trade unionism to education and agriculture.

In two of the journal's final sections, we maximise the technologies now available for online publishing. We are pleased to feature Gabrielle Le Roux's exhibition of portraits of Dominican centenarians. Her photo-essay, "Living Ancestors", documents the process of creating these images and the lessons to be learned from these ordinary, yet amazing, women. While her exhibit continues to travel around the world, Ma Pampo has since passed away. Le Roux's paintings indeed mark a precious moment in her life, showing that even when living flesh returns to sacred clay, legacies live on. Le Roux's exhibit is currently being shown at the NiNsee Institute on Slavery in Amsterdam.

Closer to home, Jaime Lee Loy's photo-essay, consisting of clips from her exhibit "War in the Home", domesticates flowers while using forks, knives and plates as tools to express danger, violence and pain. She unsettles romanticised notions of the home, love and relationships and correlates everyday implements defining women's lives with unwanted things such as roaches and slow, but steady, decay. Both photo-essays continue a rich tradition of feminist art that visualises women as subjects of their own lives and that gives form to the intimate ways women experience and resist negation. They enable us to upload representations of womanhood from the Caribbean to wherever people are in the online world.

My own video essay introduces a new link for the *CRGS* and I hope this will be the first of many issues featuring videos accompanied by critical and accessible narratives. *Speak Out* uses music, photos, text and interviews to document feminist activism among first-year students in an Introduction to Women's Studies course at the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine. Going behind the scenes presented, the essay also reflects on the challenges of teaching Women's Studies and confronting masculinism, and considerations that arose when editing and screening the video. It provides questions and suggestions that facilitators in gender consciousness-raising and feminist movement-building workshops can use to stimulate discussion, debate and feminist action.

In the journal's final section, Diana Thorburn reviews Jamaican Rosie Stone's book, *No Stone Unturned*, and charts the stories, emotions, fears, hurts and courageous struggle for survival that defined Rosie's life after being diagnosed with HIV/AIDS.

Together these contributions by well-known and emerging writers and artists present a panoramic view spanning Trinidad and Tobago, Barbados, Dominica, Jamaica and Haiti. Future issues of the journal aim to expand beyond these to include the French and Spanish Caribbean, and the Caribbean diaspora. The final section of note is one for our readers. Using the possibilities offered by technology, the *CRGS* now has a link, titled “Critical Engagements”, where readers can leave comments and questions and engage with those posts made by others.

More than Words

Though fledgling, the *Caribbean Review of Gender Studies* continues to hold fast to internationally observed standards for journal publication. All the essays in this issue were blind reviewed by two reviewers who deserve much thanks for their invaluable assistance, and for being part of the widely dispersed community of academics brought together by this journal. The future will bring both Special Issues, which call for papers on specific themes, and general issues, such as this one, which throw out a wide net and pull to shore unexpected foci, writings, images and theoretical conundrums. No doubt, our reviewers near and far will continue to hear from us regularly as each issue draws on their support.

Where needed, the *CRGS* Editorial Board and Advisory Board also offered sage advice on questions related to the look, form and rules, those standards that make up the journal’s head cornerstone. Finally, I thank the contributors for sharing their thought-provoking work and for their patient support of this issue despite its delays. Future issues will hopefully widen the networks of both the Centre and the journal, and bring in new voices from within and beyond the region.

Closer to home, there are greater thanks to give. Professor Patricia Mohammed, in her role as Executive Editor, provided continual guidance and feedback as I encountered challenges and opportunities for learning at every step. The issue benefited from many of her emails sent at two o’clock in the morning, an hour when it seems only mothers are awake, offering soothing words. June Ann Castello, my counterpart at CGDS in Mona, Jamaica, made crucial contributions at different stages. As Assistant Guest Editor, she collaborated with me to choose the essays that define this issue. Although these were brief steps together for us, they continue a tradition of cooperation and support among the three units of the CGDS at the University of the West Indies. Based in Trinidad and Tobago, Elizabeth Walcott-Hackshaw also offered valuable support as Book Review Editor.

From our staff at the *CRGS*, Jewel Fraser deserves special recognition for her unrelenting Copy-Editor’s eye. Jewel’s timely and thorough reading of the contributions to the journal created its polished feel and both Donna Drayton, the Editorial Assistant, and I were frequently more than grateful for her reliable professionalism. Daren Dhoray was our much-needed IT expert on campus here at UWI, St. Augustine, and if all the journal’s links work as you read this issue, Daren is the one that we thank for it. Finally, Donna Drayton, in her role as Editorial Assistant, competently, calmly and generously followed (and followed up on) every step. It is with great sincerity that I thank Donna for the

myriad ways that she continues to manage and improve this space for Caribbean scholarship. A commitment to supporting and furthering the body of work on gender, women, men, feminism and social change, as it emerges in established and experimental forms is, for both of us, a passion also for centering the Caribbean at home and in the world.

This issue goes global at the same time as the Centre for Gender and Development Studies, celebrates its 15th anniversary. The *CRGS* is a testament to new paths for its institutional home as well as for academic feminism and gender theorising. Hopefully, this issue maps a small piece of the excitingly vast and “beloved” terrain, of both clay and flesh, that remains to be charted.

Gabrielle Jamela Hosein
Guest Editor

ⁱ Allfrey, Phyllis. 1990. "Love for An Island" in *Creation Fire: A CAFRA Anthology of Caribbean Women's Poetry*, edited by Ramabai Espinet. Toronto, Ontario: Sister Vision and Tunapuna, Trinidad: CAFRA, 226.