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The Politics of Intimacy in Caribbean Women's Fiction

April Shemak, Sam Houston State University

Donette Francis, *Fictions of Feminine Citizenship: Sexuality and the Nation in Contemporary Caribbean Literature*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 191 pp.

Donette Francis' *Fictions of Feminine Citizenship: Sexuality and the Nation in Contemporary Caribbean Literature* joins a growing body of scholarship that examines the complex intersections between sexuality, gender, and the nation in the Caribbean. Recent works such as Brinda Mehta's *Diasporic Dis(locations): Indo-Caribbean Women Writers Negotiate the 'Kala Pani'*, Helen Scott's *Caribbean Women Writers and Globalization: Fictions of Independence* and Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley's *Thieving Sugar: Eroticism Between Women in Caribbean Literature* have focused on ways in which Caribbean women's literature foregrounds female sexuality as a contested site through which nation-building, migration, and globalization are imagined. From a variety of approaches, these studies have sought to assert Caribbean women's subjectivities where they have often been erased through monolithic paradigms of race, gender, ethnicity, and sexuality, which have plagued national, regional, and diasporic imaginaries and have often been perpetuated within scholarship.

Francis' critical intervention focuses specifically on the connections between sexual intimacy, violence, and citizenship. In her analysis of five novels—Patricia Powell's *The Pagoda*, Nelly Rosario's *Song of the Water Saints*, Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Elizabeth Nunez's *Bruised Hibiscus*, and Angie Cruz's *Soledad*—Francis powerfully demonstrates how pervasively issues of sexual unions have been subject to the biopolitical ordering of the modern Caribbean. In doing so, she argues that we must rethink notions of freedom and citizenship in the Caribbean, especially for women who have never fully gained freedom. Francis delves into what she terms the “archives of intimacy” (10), to consider how these writers critique existing epistemologies that have excluded women's voices—and points to the “centrality of sexual intimacy and the private sphere for conceptualizations and practices of citizenship” (1). She critiques not only how the colonizer regulated the intimate sphere as a means of continuously asserting colonial power, but also nationalists' obfuscation of gender and

sexuality in facilitating the efforts of male-centered nation-building. As such, she considers how these five contemporary women writers write the “politics of intimacy” via a “Caribbean feminist poetics” that depicts the sexual violence enacted upon Caribbean women’s bodies. In generating multilayered close readings of the novels, she engages with postcolonial feminism, queer theory, and Caribbean historiography, while also critically examining national archives and photography. Through this interdisciplinary approach, she considers how this violence has been very much a part of “managing Caribbean freedom” (3).

By focusing on novels from different countries in the region—Jamaica, the Dominican Republic, Haiti, and Trinidad—Francis considers the connections between French, Spanish, British and American imperial projects. This comparative effort joins that of other literary scholars such as Michael Dash, whom she mentions, who have moved to make hemispheric links in their work, but Francis is at the forefront in considering literature that writes the hemispheric reverberations of sexual violence against Caribbean women. She delineates “antiromance” as a primary mode of Caribbean feminist poetics deployed by the writers in her study. Antiromances refute the narrative of domestic bliss at home and at the level of the nation, especially when legal systems do not protect women and girls from sexual violence. As Francis articulates, writing antiromance challenges the silencing of Caribbean women’s sexuality by dominant discourses and entails myriad forms of textually witnessing women’s experiences (e.g., diaries, letters, photographs, and keepsakes). Romance is revealed as a genre that enacts violence by leaving women and girls vulnerable to patriarchal power both within the home nation and in the diaspora. Chapter 5’s discussion of Angie Cruz’s *Soledad* proves illustrative in its analysis of the novel’s protagonist Olivia, who experiences a psychic break when she engages in a romantic narrative of marriage in exchange for a fake US passport only to live a life of domestic abuse upon arrival in the United States. Francis asserts that it is only when Olivia’s daughter, the eponymous Soledad, takes an antiromantic stance, confronting her mother’s experiences as a sex worker in the Dominican Republic, and her own unknown paternal heritage, that Olivia begins to reclaim her voice.

By examining works that span the nineteenth century through the late twentieth century, beginning and ending with transnational migration, Francis takes a broad view of the sexual economy of women’s bodies in relation to the colonial and postcolonial state. She challenges contemporary accounts of transnationalism and diaspora that emphasize migration and mobility

as freedom from the strictures of the local, and instead considers how women often become even more susceptible to violation in transnational spaces. For example, her analysis of Patricia Powell's novel *The Pagoda* examines the portrayal of gender, queerness, and sexual vulnerability through the protagonist A-yin, a Chinese woman who passes as male in order to make the sea voyage to Jamaica, only to arrive in Jamaica pregnant, the result of repeated rapes by the white shipmaster after he discovers her sex. Critiquing theorists such as Paul Gilroy and Marcus Rediker for their celebration of sea travel as liberatory, Francis argues that the ship is a space of ultra-vulnerability where the welfare of a Chinese woman depends upon her invisibility. Francis traces A-yin's navigation of sexual, gendered, and racial identities in nineteenth-century Jamaica as she passes as a Chinese male shopkeeper, "Mr. Lowe," and maintains an intimate relationship with Miss Sylvie. This narrative reflects, in part, what Francis terms a "queer genealogy of Caribbean modernity" (25), which challenges conventional patriarchal, heteronormative histories.

The contemporary crisis of transnational sex trafficking of Dominican women portrayed in *Soledad* is preceded with the early twentieth-century trafficking of sexually explicit postcards of Dominicans depicted in Nelly Rosario's *Song of the Water Saints*, the focus of chapter 2. Francis analyzes Rosario's use of these visual texts as evidence of the impact of the US military occupation of the Dominican Republic (1916-24), the setting of the novel. She uncovers the "archives of intimacy" contained in US military documents regarding the regulation of sexual relations between US soldiers and Dominican women and effectively juxtaposes these archival traces with the novel's portrayal of the imperial scopic regimes that sexualize Dominican bodies in postcards that are consumed by European and American men during the time of the occupation.

Francis' readings in chapters 3 and 4, reveal how Danticat and Nunez dismantle nationalist romance narratives of the Haitian and Trinidadian states. Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory* portrays the state-sanctioned rape of Martine by tonton macoutes and the sexual violence that she enacts upon her daughter Sophie, who was born of the rape, by routinely "testing" her to ensure that she remains a virgin until marriage. That Martine's rape occurs in Haiti and her daughter's "testing" takes place in the immigrant space in New York suggests how trauma travels—across spaces and through generations of women. Through Francis' readings of the legacy of sexual violation in this novel, as well as in Powell's and Cruz's, one begins to see

that unlike nationalist narratives that often idealize women as those who reproduce citizens for the nation, there is no such possibility for sexually violated and violently conceived women. Instead, their political membership is curtailed through trauma and silencing. Often, it is up to daughters to confront these “traumatic heirlooms” (85) in order to resurrect female agency in the texts, an act which, for Danticat’s and Cruz’s characters, involves return to the nation of origin as the initial site of trauma.

Chapter 4 demonstrates that it is not only dictatorships that can prove oppressive to women’s sexuality, but also those nations that put forth progressive narratives, which ostensibly embrace their creolized populations in an effort to unite the people. Francis finds that Nunez’s *Bruised Hibiscus* critiques such romanticized notions by portraying the sexual violence enacted in some interracial unions, reminding us that despite the rhetoric of cultural and racial mixing as that which binds the nation, such national narratives continue to privilege white or light-skinned bodies. Francis asserts that the novel “writes violence” as a means of laying bare how sexual violence is a “staggering national problem” (97), with the “bruised hibiscus” of the title dismantling the romance to reveal a “battered people” (100).

Recalling the ways in which some of the works examined in the book invoke the modes of voyeuristic exploitation of Caribbean women’s bodies, the coda to *Fictions of Feminine Citizenship* examines the Caribbean feminist visual poetics of Roshini Kempadoo’s *Virtual Exiles: From the Edge (1)* that is featured on the book’s cover. Through a meticulous reading of the photographic image, Francis traces how “Kempadoo reconstructs Caribbean women’s presence in the face of archival absence” (141). For example, by pointing to the photograph’s staging of a mixed race female subject “Amelia,” who, clad in a tank top and military fatigues, stands next to a blackboard which textually records her erasure, Francis discusses how the juxtaposition of images recalls the ways in which institutional forms of power—the military and schools—have repressed Caribbean women’s subjectivities. Francis suggests that the image simultaneously asserts female agency through a recoding of oppressive signifiers and thus, challenges the exploitation of Caribbean women’s bodies. This image serves as a framing device for the book, with its inclusion on the book’s cover and Francis’ discussion of it in the coda, thereby foregrounding the possibilities of Caribbean artistic feminist poetics.

Francis concludes by offering an alternative perspective to anthropologist David Scott’s assertion that the romance of anticolonialism has been replaced by tragedy as the defining

narrative mode of the contemporary Caribbean, given the breakdown of anticolonial aspirations of the region. Francis contends that such a conceptualization perpetuates the exclusion of women's subjectivities, which as she demonstrates throughout the book, were never central to anticolonial struggles to begin with. Instead of tragedy, Francis asserts that the response to romantic narratives must be antiromantic practices that voice Caribbean women's experiences with intimacy, in ways that assert women's agency as citizens. The challenges of defining a Caribbean feminist poetics are the very complexities of race, nation, sexuality, language, ethnicity, geography, and socio-economics that make up the range of Caribbean women's experiences. *Fictions of Feminine Citizenship* offers a compelling argument for considering how contemporary Caribbean women writers create a feminist poetics that expands our understanding of the complex terrain of sexual and racial politics in the region and in the diaspora, demonstrating that imagining citizenship entails bringing to light how the archives of intimacy profoundly shape political membership.