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'Languaged by Sex': Articulating Complex Caribbean Subjectivities in *Sex and the Citizen*

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Faith Smith, editor, *Sex and the Citizen: Interrogating the Caribbean*. (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 2011), 292 pp.

Sex and the Citizen: Interrogating the Caribbean succeeds because it develops two narratives that have integrally shaped discourses of Caribbean citizenships and identities. First, as Faith Smith asserts, “events across the Caribbean and discussions about them [...] have been ‘languaged by sex’ [in] public discussions about political and cultural sovereignty [...] around the issue of ‘legitimate’ sexualities”; she continues, “who Caribbean people are and who they can be” has been informed by “the flow of goods and ideas [...] that are associated with globalization” (1). The volume takes on both impulses—identities “languaged by sex [and globalization]”—by invoking a deliberate interdisciplinarity and a pan-Caribbean scope. Exploring Caribbeanness, sexualities, citizenship, and diasporas through literary, legal, lyrical, poetic, visual, and performance modes, *Sex and the Citizen* presents a languaging of its own, one that captures the complexities of individual, national, and global Caribbean identities and that takes a renewed look at the limits and possibilities of colonial and postcolonial critical inheritances.

This collection significantly contributes to extant discourses of Caribbean identities using varied disciplinary lenses and myriad Caribbean locations. Its methodological and thematic approaches to citizenships and sexualities allow us to critique Enlightenment “binarisms and roots” while we consider how “discourses of creolization and hybridity [...] can enshrine notions of inside and outside and of who is authentically Caribbean and who is not” (5). In each discipline employed, Caribbean nation-state evoked, in every ethnic and racial group represented, in every social class examined, and—most significantly—in the diverse and conflicting desires that compose a continuum of Caribbean sexualities, *Sex and the Citizen* “suggests that the truth is intelligible only through the muddle of all the tellers’ various versions” (59).

Each chapter in this volume adds to this identity “muddle” by thinking and re-thinking

the intimate, integral role of sexualities in understanding Caribbean identities locally, and in relation to existing global realities. Eschewing binaries that evolved out of colonial relations, and challenging heterosexual and gendered fixities within discourses of hybridity and creolization, contributions to *Sex and the Citizen* think differently about—but, significantly, do not prescribe or proscribe—who can and cannot be considered “appropriate” Caribbean citizens. This collection, by questioning narrow identity paradigms, calls for us to attend “to [...] incoherence and instability rather than simply condemning or ignoring [them]” so that we might get “closer to a more thoroughgoing examination and ultimately liberation of all constituencies touching on and touched by the Caribbean” (14). As Smith suggests in her introduction, groundbreaking analyses can result from vetting truths of an unstable, incoherent Caribbean subject-citizen: “this might show us that regional conversations [that affirm] all sorts of desires predate our present moment” (14). Chapters that identify nineteenth-century languages, narratives, and performances of same-sex desire and “new” sexual and political identities compliment and contextualize chapters that describe twentieth- and twenty-first-century Caribbean identities, and vice versa. By unsettling normalized representations of Caribbean citizenships, *Sex and the Citizen* reveals the limits of heteronormative discourses about these subjectivities. The resultant exchange produces a polyglot that voices a range of local and global perspectives on who Caribbean peoples are, and can be.

This volume engages discourses of Caribbean citizenship by “speaking” from a range of disciplines, time periods, and locations. The collection speaks, too, by orchestrating conversations between chapters. For example, both Antonia MacDonald-Smythe and Omise’ eke Natasha Tinsley’s chapters (pages 224 and 241, respectively) theorize Caribbean sexualities from local and specific contexts. Rosamond King (214) and Tracy Robinson (201) both consider the possibilities of imagined and/or temporarily performed identities with regard to the lived reality of complicated Caribbean subjectivities. Patricia Saunders (21) and Carmen R. Gillespie (37) document how citizens in Jamaica and Barbados, respectively, transform identity codes composed in, and projected by the West into the Caribbean. Finally, performance artist Susan Dayal (136) and writer Michelle Cliff (251) use their respective creative forms to consider multiple facets of Caribbean sexualities and citizenships. In these ways, *Sex and the Citizen* re-languages previous discourses of Caribbean selves and citizenships.

Each chapter in *Sex and the Citizen* lends unique insight into the question of who

Caribbean citizens are; however, when considered together, they virtually re-conceptualize the question itself. Through its range of emphases, locations, places, and times, this collection does not merely ask who Caribbean citizens are or can be, but also who, where, and when they can be and for how long. These nuanced queries encourage readers to consider, too, how differing, flexible, and overlapping realities manifest when constituting “Caribbean citizens.” The following discussion of selected chapters efficiently brings this idea home.

Rosamond King provocatively interprets nineteenth-century Trinidadian carnival masquerades performed by newly freed Africans. In “New Citizens, New Sexualities: Nineteenth-Century *Jamettes*,” she measures her claims about the revolutionary potential of jamettes’ public performances, yet this narrative control enlightens by locating disruptions to “the gendered and raced social, political, and economic hierarchy of Trinidad” (221) in the period immediately following Emancipation. Jamettes, so called because these Afro-Creole men and women were believed to be “below the ‘diameter’ of respectable society” (214), took advantage of their putative freedom by challenging dominant, Victorian-based narratives of citizenship and sexuality. Though their public performances did not radically revise their social status, King effectively demonstrates how jamettes “getting on bad” manifested their contributions to their society, their deliberate sense of themselves as freed men and women, and the power inherent in these knowledges. Drawing on nineteenth-century articles and editorials in colonial newspapers and colonial laws intended to curb jamette behavior (*ibid.*), King attests to the power of Afro-Creoles’ public performances precisely because Trinidad’s dominant white minority strove to police jamettes’ public conduct. Attention to this poor, formerly enslaved segment of society is enormously significant, King argues, because “black Creole Trinidadians’ citizenship was necessarily different [...] from their own previous status on the island [as property] and from the European minority’s citizenship” (*ibid.*). Jamettes played on these differences by using carnival mas’ to foreground the “constructedness” of “the white male body and its socially granted subjectivity and power over their own lack of power—while also shocking the elite with the titillating and/or horrifying revelation of their own black women’s bodies” (219). That formerly enslaved people, recently considered chattel, publically asserted their own bodily choices (black men performing as women, black women performing as white men), reflected their unique status as citizens and subjects while “also [creating] the possibility of choosing alternative human and social arrangements—including new sexualities” (221).

Though ruled by “the heterosexual patriarchal colonial order” (223), these recently freed citizens made choices: “with the limited amount of freedom and citizenship available to them, they chose their sexual partners, family structures, and modes of self-preservation” (222). Finally, King’s study of jamenttes’ cultural and political performances reconceptualizes how people “below the diameter of society” receive dictates from those above the diameter. King’s attention to post-Emancipation carnival performances highlight the fact of formerly enslaved Trinidadian peoples’ new identity formations, thereby reminding twenty-first-century readers of the possibility of new and renewed constructions of identity.

Subjects of Donette Francis’ analysis, literary and extra-literary sex workers, face more limited possibilities, yet potential for flexible identities exists. In “Novel Insights: Sex, Work, Secrets, and Depression in Angie Cruz’s *Soledad*,” Francis explores how literary genres figure in analyses of Caribbean women’s identities, both within and outside the region. To foreground the “slippery-ness” that attends to trans-disciplinary explorations of these identities, Francis invokes recurrent themes in “*antiromance*, [a form that] writes beyond the conciliatory happy ending by foregrounding the intimate lives of Caribbean women and girls to underscore that neither familial home, national homeland, nor immigrant nation functions as [...] safe [spaces] of belonging” (53). As an “affective” lens, antiromances highlight how Caribbean women’s sexed bodies are impacted by states’ nationalist and anti-colonial aspirations. If transnational feminist discourse on women’s sex work—labor exchanged for “first-world visa[s] or currency”—understands this work as “the modern-day extension of slavery” (victimization) or as “a space where laborers can sell their service for meaningful financial gain and [...] empowerment in the global marketplace” (agency) (56), this chapter’s critical engagement with Angie Cruz’s novel *Soledad* (2000) troubles these and other either/or conclusions. Instead, Francis’ critique puts “agency and resistance alongside personal and psychological pain [to foreground] the limits of both articulating and protecting women’s rights” in the context of “citizenship in an era of globalization, taking into account one [fictionalized character’s] intimate life in relationship to two states, the United States and the Dominican Republic” (57). In exploring the lessons Olivia (*Soledad*’s protagonist) learns about sexual exchange and citizenship—through her father’s attempt to arrange her marriage for a US visa and her “escape” to a sex town where local women cater to foreign and Dominican men—Francis traces Olivia’s psychic pain through her move to New York and into her daughter, Soledad. By documenting these fictionalized migrations

(Olivia's physical and psychic ones), "Novel Insights" adds "affective nuances" (71) to discourses that merely interpret Caribbean women's bodies as either victimized or empowered by their sexual labor. The nuances in Francis' literature-based investigation speak to similarly complex resonances in other chapters in *Sex and the Citizen*.

Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley uses "Sranan, [a] Surinamese Creole," as a "vehicle of subordinated knowledge" (242) in "What is a *Uma?*: Women Performing Gender and Sexuality in Paramaribo, Suriname." The author joins Caribbeanists who have identified regional Creole languages as indigenous means of speaking language to power. But instead of using Sranan to say things that have been said before (241-242), Tinsley foregrounds vocabularies of and themes in this Creole (a Surinamese language under-represented in critical explorations of Caribbean Creoles) to theorize same-sex desire from a decidedly local perspective. Specifically, this chapter reads gender and sexuality as distinct parts of working class Surinamese women's "epistemology of sexuality" (242). Tinsley argues that "Creole women who love women say they engage in *mati wroko*, literally, the 'work' (*wroko*) of 'friends' (*mati*)" (ibid). A way of speaking and understanding that knows "sexuality not as identity but as praxis and performance, something constantly constructed and reconstructed through daily actions [...] This performative construction of sexuality was not abstract theorizing; it was a communal way of knowing, built into the Creole language itself" (243), *Mati wroko* occurs in communal yards (*dyari*), but also in public vocal performances that commemorate birthdays and love relationships (*lobisingi*) (243-244). In *lobisingi* ("musical compositions [that] acted as a form of social criticism [...] leveled against mati who violated communally established codes of behavior between lovers" [244]), "Creole women understand themselves as negotiating not only between [...] Euro- and Afro-Surinamese gender ideals, but also between [...] feminine and masculine instantiations of their always plural 'selves'" (247). Tinsley persuasively conveys this plurality in her exegesis of a *kot'singi*—a "shorter, more fixed [text lobisingi] whose words the lead singer would alter slightly between choruses to speak to the wronged lover's situation" (244)—that is, metaphorically, about flowers. The song invokes both the European-representative rosebud and the tropical-identified *stanfaste*. In the "Afro-Caribbean grammar of gender" that this *kot'singi* depicts, the singer occupies an intersection of male and female, Afro-Caribbean and European: "It's two flowers that made me./Rosebud is my mama,/Stanfaste is my papa" (245). "In singing that she is part rose, part stanfaste," Tinsley writes, "a mati recognizes that in a plural society not

only are women made rather than born but their gendered as well as their racial identities are produced through negotiation among flowers, among models of womanhood” (246-247). In this chapter’s analysis of Surinamese language and performance, Tinsley “speaks” Afro-Creole, working class, and female identities that complicate local and intra-regional notions of the Caribbean subject, while amplifying global possibilities for the region’s citizens.

Citing Timothy Taylor’s *Global Pop* (1997), Carmen Gillespie understands “popular music” as a form that helps to “raise [...] [transnational] theoretical issues better than other musics, even better, perhaps, than any other cultural form” (39). By attending to the form and lyrics of “Bill” (an R&B song recorded in the US by African American singer Peggy Scott-Adams), Gillespie demonstrates that in 1997 Barbados, locals dynamically—rather than passively—received this social/cultural product from the US. Barbadian response to “Bill’s” lyrics and theme exposed “some of the extant tensions on the island with respect to [...] sexualities and national identity *and* became an unexpected [...] tool in [...] the complicated narrative relationships between Barbados and the [US]” (38, emphasis added). Thus, in its consideration of the impact of a song about a wife’s discovery of her husband’s affair with a man, “‘Nobody Ent Billing Me’: A US/Caribbean Intertextual, Intercultural Call-and-Response” reveals imbricated conceptions of the popular, sexualities, political economies, nation-states, and Bajan identities. In tracing the title and theme of the R&B song into common parlance in Barbados, Gillespie connects an inter-national discourse of sexuality, local identity constructs and concerns with global economies, and national/nationalist anxieties.¹ Early “reviews” of “Bill” (in the form of women commiserating with the song’s protagonist in calls to radio stations) were interpreted as critiques of Bajan manhood (43-44). Gillespie nicely moves from anxieties about failed Barbadian masculinities into a related critique of the status of Barbados in the global arena. The logic of a threatened Bajan masculinity quickly points to the citizen-as-heterosexual-male and then, to the hetero-normative male as representative of the nation, thus *billing* became a “threat to the efforts [...] of a marginalized group, culture, or nation to establish self-determination” (44). US and Bajan songs, sometimes considered mere forms of entertainment, in Gillespie’s hands converse, communicating who Barbadian people are, but also how they resonate on a global stage.

¹ “The word *bill* gained vernacular currency and usage as a pejorative term of reference for homosexuals and homosexuality in Barbados” and “the U.S. president Bill Clinton’s visit to the island in May 1997 [...] amplified the political significance of the Bajan song [“In De Tail” by Red Plastic Bag] and the applications of the word *bill*” (40).

These four chapters offer a sampling of *Sex and the Citizen's* disciplinary range and relevance. The thread connecting them to one another, as well as to the other chapters in the anthology, is the flexibility and nuance that necessarily defines Caribbean subjectivities over time and space/place. In the face of rigidly gendered, raced, classed, and located Caribbean identities, *Sex and the Citizen: Interrogating the Caribbean* not only challenges these fixities, but in doing so, it advocates for a trans- and multi-disciplinary “languaging” that refuses to foreclose how we understand Caribbean citizenships.