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On Caribbean Masculinities

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OPENING QUESTION

Michael, yours is probably the most recent intervention into “this quarrel” through the lens of masculinity studies. I am particularly struck that in doing so, you find yourself calling into question “reggae’s radical limits regarding issues of gender and sexuality.” First, can you tell us how and why you came to Caribbean masculinity studies? What was it about your moment and the existing criticism that lead you to this area as a necessary intervention? What is at stake in pointing to the limits in revising gender norms—and to take on a cultural form like reggae? Does your position as a male critic working within the region matter to this critique—that is how is heard, and received?

MB: My genealogy of interest in gender studies:

Your question makes me want to trace, if you may, my genealogy of interest in gender studies. I remember having to think about gender at age 7 when, as a very emotional child, I was constantly being told that “men don’t cry”! It was a puzzle to me and I thought then if I am biologically a man and I cry, why did that disqualify me from wearing the label: “man”? Now, I have language to explain that; then, I was beginning to understand that Jamaican masculinity is matter of social construction and not biological determination. Later, at age 20, I am teaching a group of boys at St. George’s College the 6th Form literature syllabus and I have chosen the contemporary paper because that is the only paper that has a Caribbean writer (who was Walcott, but it also had Alice Walker); and with Alice Walker, I was formally introduced to feminism as a critical lens. When I tried it out with the boys, they immediately tried to re-contain any gender revolution by claiming that I was teaching a new method to attract girls: “Sir,” Charlie said to me, “are you just trying out this ‘sensitive to women’s feelings thing’ as a new strategy to get more girls.” He smirked and produced a verbal high-five. I also remember that as an undergraduate student, I wrote my first gender essay on “Black Masculinities and Sexualities in James Baldwin’s *Go Tell It on the Mountain*” and later in grad school, Canadian scholar Daniel Coleman pushed me further into gender studies when he sent me his chapter on Austin Clarke which was part of his Ph.D thesis, so that he could have a Caribbean perspective on his work. He had identified a “performance” lens for reading Caribbean/Canadian masculinity and it resonated with some of things I had been thinking about Jamaican masculinity and so I have continued work on Austin Clarke, masculinity and performance studies—which emerged in the first paper done at the West Indian Literature conference in Trinidad in the late nighties.

But Carolyn Cooper is to be blamed for my published intervention in field. In 1998 when I returned to Mona to take up a tenure-track job, she asked me to take a class for her when she was going off to a conference. She said thanks to me

by bringing back a copy of Colin Channer's *Waiting in Vain*. It was supposed to have been a pleasure-read for me—one of those books I was reading not for any kind of scholarly work—but for the sheer pleasure of reading. I found it a very intriguing read: male writer from the Caribbean writing a romance, then a book that was being marketed as carrying within it a “reggae aesthetic” and I was fascinated by the gender politics of the novel. I was both troubled by some of the maneuvers and intrigued at the same time. Since I have been uncomfortable with gender constructions and limitations since childhood, I was very intrigued by Colin's attempt to challenge and change some of these stereotypes, but equally conscious (since Charlie's statement in 6th Form) that we men are often guilty of re-containing any gender revolution by a re-inscription of patriarchy. I had not set out to challenge reggae's radical limits, but in conversation with Faith Smith, yourself Donette (Francis), Sandra Pouchet-Paquet and Patricia Saunders at various conferences—I remember one in Barbados—I had to consider the claims being made for reggae by Kwame Dawes in his provocative book *Reggae Aesthetics* and Colin in his framing of his novel as a kind of “reggae romance,” my words, not his; I wanted to push those limits. So it was the alignment of certain publications and authorial claims and my own critical sensitivity that led to that “what **you** call” my intervention. My current work is engaging with David Scott's idea about the value of popular culture for imagining a future for Jamaica. If one should identify dancehall aesthetics, I think there might be less of a quarrel in saying that there are ways in which the arena both reinforces and challenges gender constructions—if we look beyond anti-gay lyrics to dance hall fashion and even what is permitted for different genders to engage in as dance, for example. So some of the debates I have engaged with are concerned with hegemonic constructions of Caribbean masculinity, the real question of the power of the popular for revolution of gender norms and even the limits of male critics like myself who, in spite of head knowledge, work in ways that are still patriarchal and limiting.

I have always felt that Mona was place of real freedom to explore some things. Maybe that sense of struggle was already won by those who went before us (Ramchand in his advocacy for the centrality of West Indian Literature, Eddie (Edward Baugh) in respect to teaching critical theory), Gordon Rohlehr and Carolyn Cooper with their own interventions in the field of popular culture.) But I came back to place which I found, despite its limited financial resources, was a place of intellectual rigour and critical innovation: it was wonderful to join a faculty with the greats of Baugh, Morris, Warner-Lewis and Cooper with her pioneering critical spirit and the younger faculty of Norval Edwards and Curdella Forbes, but also the wider intellectual community fostered by these conferences--those of you in the diaspora whose perspectives and critical judgements were

always available. These conferences have made the Caribbean critical space a much larger world where those at home and those away could always meet.

QUARRELS OF LOCATION

MB: I hoped that my Ph.D thesis established that there was a category of writers that could be named as Caribbean/Canadian as a proper field of literary study in its own right—might even be problematically--a sub-field that could be subsumed under other umbrellas (ethnic literature minority literature) and a cross-cultural, cross-national and cross-border field that was opening and challenging ideas of home versus diaspora. The study was called “Postcolonial Crosses: Body-memory and Internationalism in Caribbean/Canadian Writing.” The special issue of the *Journal of West Indian Literature* in 2005 was also to re-visit those debates and to consolidate what Curdella Forbes described in her work *From Nation to Diaspora* as a move that complicates critical discussions pivoted on the nation. However, I would not want to become too complacent about notions of being settled with this debate, in the sense that we have to be vigilant that globalization conceptions in all their manifestations are being evaluated and critically engaged.

Space of Publications—the question of where you publish has been a very self-conscious consideration for all of you. Can you discuss some of those choices and their importance to the development of the field? Does location matter, and in what ways? And what are the challenges working within the region to publish abroad? And how do we deal the issues of audience?

MB: There is no doubt that limited publishing opportunities in the Caribbean force most of us to publish outside. Distribution and the wide ventilation of our critical voices are important to the field. Yet, I think if our work is based on Caribbean societies and issues, then our local population also needs to hear our voices. Where there are electronic platforms for these voices then, both those at home and abroad will have some access. (I must note how pleased I am with seeing Giselle Rampaul’s (and those at St. Augustine doing their) podcasts with writers—the blogs and electronic platforms of people such as Nicholas Laughlin, Annie Paul, Geoffrey Philp, Carolyn Cooper and Kei Miller, more and more journals having an on-line presence: *Small Axe*, *JWIL* etc). It would be great to see a study about who gains access to these new forms of ventilation and what is the impact of them in changing views and influencing the discussions that take place.)

What might be crucial for us to consider is what type of audience gets access to our critical interventions? Are we continuing to speak to that small critical university audience (a kind of secret society conversation?) What role can

engagement in more popular and less jargon-filled platforms afford us? What are the dangers and limitations of such platforms as well? I think of something such as Cooper's weekly columns? What is the value to an academic to have a column such as that? How can it provide an outlet for the debates that engage the nation? I ask myself: what I can learn through engagement with popular culture about modes of engagement with a wider public?

I can see more engagement with post-structuralist ideas, more interdisciplinary work—cultural studies, psychoanalysis/healing strategies and eco-critical frames of analyses in the current and future work. One challenge is for us to consider the extent to which we allow other forms of knowledge gathering to inform our work in the humanities that has been so text based: interviews, questionnaires of the social scientist, statistical analyses—are those opening up our field—are we embracing quantitative as much as we zero in on qualitative analysis?