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REVIEW

## Review of Lyndon K. Gill, *Erotic Islands: Art and Activism in the Queer Caribbean*

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Review of Lyndon K. Gill, *Erotic Islands: Art and Activism in the Queer Caribbean*. Duke UP, 2018. 267 pages.

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*In Erotic Islands: Art and Activism in the Queer Caribbean*, Lyndon K. Gill offers a beautifully written ethnography of same gender desiring artists and activists in Trinidad and Tobago. Drawing on the work of Audre Lorde, he argues for the centrality of the erotic in interpreting queer Trinbagonian art and activism. In so doing, he pushes for a reconceptualization of the erotic as a “perspectival trinity that holds together the political-sensual-spiritual at their most abstract; in other words, “the erotic” describes various formal and informal power hierarchies (the political), sexual as well as non-sexual intimacies (the sensual), and sacred metaphysics (the spiritual)” (10). Gill contends that the erotic presents both challenges and opportunities that queer Trinbagonian artists and activists are compelled to navigate as they seek to make space and build communities with each other. He explores the erotic through three socio-cultural institutions that he maps onto different modes of sensory perception. As carnival performance is made to index the visual and calypso music is made to stand in for the sonic, HIV/AIDS activism is sutured to the sense of touch. *Erotic Islands* thus approaches the art and activism of queer Trinbagonians through a simultaneously political, sensual, and spiritual analysis that maps the visual, vibrational, and sensational modes of human experience.

The book is organized into an introduction, three chapter-pairs, four interludes, and a conclusion. The introductory section not only sketches Gill’s theoretical intervention and the contours of the book but also draws reader’s attention to the way that desire structures the production of the Caribbean as an object of knowledge. If Europeans first interpreted the region as fantasy and projected cannibalism onto its indigenous people, Gill asks how the Trinbagonian queer mythic figure of the soucouyant reconfigures these colonial desires. What would it mean to approach the Caribbean not through the fantasies and consumptive desires of the North Atlantic but through the vantage point of the soucouyant who feasts on these erstwhile dreamers as they sleep? Here Gill not only reorients the study of queerness in the region through Caribbean ways of being and knowing, but also highlights the dialectical relationship between consumer and consumed. The subsequent three-chapter pairs highlight erotic desire and historical consciousness as the two central themes of *Erotic Islands*. Gill’s analyses of carnival legend Peter Minshall, famous calypsonian Linda McCartha Lewis (Calypso Rose), and the gay HIV/AIDS activist organization Friends for Life are accompanied by detailed historical treatments of race parody in Trinidad’s carnival, gender play in calypso, and the emergence of HIV/AIDS. The book’s four interludes, constructed as a “queer travelogue,” reveal Gill’s use of the erotic not only as an interpretive intervention but also as a methodological proposition. These interludes are excerpts of Gill’s fieldnotes and as creative experiments in form, they foreground the intimacies, anxieties, euphoric thrills, and dangers of trafficking in the erotic as a mode of ethnographic inquiry. Finally, *Erotic Islands’* concluding chapter introduces readers to renowned Afro-Trinidadian lesbian activist Jacquelyn Fields, to foreground the practice of listening to black queer subjects as an indispensable method for Black Diasporic Queer Studies.

*Erotic Islands* intervenes in the fields of Black Queer Studies, Caribbean Studies, and Anthropology in two ways. First, the queer travelogue offers a model of constructing an erotic ethnographic self through writing. These interludes materialize Gill as both author and subject of the text. Though Gill initially positions his travelogue interludes as a “sister archive” to the chapters of the monograph, at the end he “challenges the reader to imagine an alternative perspective that positions the queer travelogue as the central focus, jointed by interstitial chapters” (214). This alternative perspective not only highlights the centrality of the simultaneously political, sensual, and spiritual dimensions of fieldwork but also the centrality of making this erotic labor visible in the anthropological monographic itself. The queer travelogue thus breaks the taboo of speaking about one’s sexual subjectivity in ethnographic fieldwork, a move made significant by the fact that Caribbean people’s intimate lives are often spectacularized and subject to critical scrutiny in social scientific research. Both anthropologist and his interlocutors are desiring subjects making their way through mundane, sometimes joyous, occasionally sublime, and at times dangerous and fraught experiences.

Second, *Erotic Islands* offers a meditation on Edouard Glissant’s (1990) insistence on Caribbean people’s entitlement to opacity, or that which cannot be reduced. Even as Gill firmly situates his project within Black Queer Diaspora Studies, the text itself refuses to limit the possibilities that Blackness and queerness may encompass. *Erotic Islands* does not take Blackness, queerness, or Black queerness for granted but instead wrestles with what these words mean in the lives of its interlocutors, even as it mobilizes these terms as concepts. The monograph’s third travelogue interlude notes an exchange between Kojo and Gill in which the former sets up Gill to ask him if he is gay. Gill’s fieldnote reports:

I am old enough now to know that sexuality is never as obvious as it appears. Still, hardly one to upset a good performance, I do ask him if he is gay...He says “somewhat” or something equally vague, which means “Yes, but now how you think” or “Yes, but not really tonight” or “Yes, but I don’t want anyone to know that” or “Yes, but...” Such is the language of this place – a double speak, a way of saying two seemingly contradictory things at once without either one mocking the other. (131)

Even as the chapters of the text mobilize categories of “queer” “gay” “lesbian” “same sex desire,” Gill’s fieldnotes highlight the ultimate indeterminacy of eroticism, desire, and intimacy as they materialize in inter-subjective exchanges.

It is also significant that as a decidedly Black Queer Diasporic project, *Erotic Islands* celebrates the work of “Carnival’s most beloved bête blanche,” Peter Minshall. Gill notes that “Minshall is a white Caribbean, but this adjective has a rich palimpsestuous quality to it; ‘white’ does not simply modify ‘Caribbean,’ the former also holds a place – among others – within the later” (41). By situating Minshall as an icon of queer Trinidadian artistry, Gill suggests that cultural analysis in the Caribbean attend to the “contextualization, contact, and unavoidable concomitance of cultural influences across any seemingly discrete racial categories” (40). While racial relations in the republic most often call to mind the landscape of exchange, conflict, and accommodation between Afro- and Indo-Trinbagonians, *Erotic Islands* focus on Minshall highlights the significance of attending to racial groups in the numerical minority across the region. Small numbers do not automatically correlate with political, economic, or socio-cultural significance. Gill reminds us that Black erotic subjectivities take shape in relation to other racialized groups and that the processes of Trinbagonian queer cultural production unfold across as much as in-between racial lines.

*Erotic Island* complicates the narratives of death and despair that take center stage in discussions of queerness in the Caribbean. While the text in no way denies the realities of queer violence in Trinidad and Tobago, it shows how such an exclusive focus has the effect of “blind[ing] us to the various kinds of queer embeddedness” across the region (1). Ultimately, Gill highlights the challenges and joys that queer Trinbagonian artists and activists experience in the political-sensual-sacred navigation of individual and collective lives. It is a welcome addition to field of Caribbean Studies, deftly and through sumptuous language charting the terrain on which to narrate the complex realities of queer subjects in the region.

## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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