

Postprint

Sounding Caribbean Literary Queerness

Alison Donnell, *Creolized Sexualities: Undoing Heteronormativity in the Literary Imagination of the Anglo-Caribbean* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2021); 191 pages; ISBN 978-1978818118 (paperback)

[sx salon 42](http://smallaxe.net/sxsalon/), february 2023 : Review available here :

<http://smallaxe.net/sxsalon/reviews/sounding-caribbean-literary-queerness>

The Caribbean region is “a constitutively queer place” (1). Alison Donnell’s challenging statement in *Creolized Sexualities* not only targets the long-lasting violence against Caribbean nonheterosexual/non-cisgender subjects and practices but indeed complexifies the Western depiction of the Caribbean region as a homophobic/transphobic space per se by revealing its local erotic agencies and literary resistances to (hetero)norms. While it is commonly acknowledged that Caribbean societies defy easy definitions of cultural, ethnic, and national categories, the possibilities of sexual subjectivities that depart from heteronormativity keep being socially disavowed and repressed. Shedding light on this paradox, *Creolized Sexualities* innovatively foregrounds the overlooked junctions between the concept of *creolization* and the *queer* dismantling of heteronormativity.

Queerness turns out to describe with fine accuracy the substance of creolized sexualities. Far from formulating universalizing comments, Donnell pays acute attention to local epistemologies, insisting on the importance of engaging with contextual specificities. While the term *queer* could be considered to be epistemologically suspicious for originating in the global North, the author demonstrates queerness as a Caribbean *practice*. In addition, rather than thinking the queer Caribbean through a linear understanding of progress, Donnell invokes the methodological position of “feeling sideways,” a methodology that allows a horizontal, dehierarchized understanding of sexual subjectivities whose multiple shapes can be described in their own terms (12).

In the dense introduction, Donnell articulates her argument around an impressive range of thinkers, scholars, and “artists,” such as Ronald Cummings, Faizal Deen, Nadia Ellis, Lyndon Gill, Thomas Glave, Rosamond S. King, Audre Lorde, Kei Miller, Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley, Keja Valens, and Gloria Wekker. The creative corpus that is addressed covers several decades, from 1960 to the present, shifting between Jamaica, the Dominican Republic, Trinidad and Tobago, and their diasporas. By drawing attention to the literary presence of sexual identities and practices that undo the heteronormative system, the book’s wide scope directly objects to the so-called unnaturalness, inauthenticity, and supposed importation of queerness in the Caribbean.

The first chapter begins with a discussion of the presence of Caribbean resistance to rigid categorization. Relying on works by Kamau Brathwaite, Édouard Glissant, George Lamming, Orlando Patterson, Derek Walcott, and Sylvia Wynter (along with others), Donnell highlights how these writings reflect fluidity and multiplicity, thereby destabilizing the colonial order and its coercive fixedness. She unexpectedly focuses on

V. S. Naipaul, and more specifically on Leonard Side, a minor character in the controversial writer's *A Way in the World*.¹ By reading “sideways”—that is, by unveiling an unsuspected Naipaulian queerness—Donnell provides an innovative insight into how the author, through his nonnormative figure, may express a form of Caribbean belonging that is shaped by unfixedness and fluidity.

“Creolizing Heterosexuality,” the second chapter, explores Curdella Forbes’s “A Permanent Freedom” and Shani Mootoo’s *Valmiki’s Daughter* through a queer lens that discloses the “sometimes porous, queer arrangement” of heterosexuality (74).² Whereas Forbes’s short story queers the notions of marriage and kinship, Mootoo’s novel disrupts the straight/queer binary through the characters’ desires, affects, and trajectories. Donnell’s compelling analysis of the ways “nonheterosexual” characters sometimes reinforce heteronormative thinking more so than their “heterosexual” counterparts (who *can* actively subvert heteronormativity) is groundbreaking.

The third chapter, “Caribbean Freedoms and Queering Homonormativity,” shifts further back in time with Andrew Salkey’s *Escape to an Autumn Pavement*, a novel first published in 1960.³ Alluding to the 1957 Wolfenden Report, Salkey’s narrative is read as a critical echo to the emerging homonormative turn at the time in Great Britain.⁴ Jamaican Johnnie Sobert, the main character, refuses to respond to strict sexual categorizations and prefers to inhabit a fluid and creolized self-understanding that simultaneously defies hetero- and homonormative coercion of self-definition.

“Queering Caribbean Homophobia,” the fourth chapter, is a tour de force. By bridging Caribbean hypermasculinity and queerness, Donnell underlines in an original way how this “oxymoronic entanglement” can undo heteronormativity too (102). From the Jamaican gangs and transnational characters of Marlon James’s *A Brief History of Seven Killings* to Dominican *machismo* and failed virility in Junot Díaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, the simultaneous stigmatization *and* performance of nonheteronormative intimacies come to be exerted by the same personae.⁵ Looking at these masculinities in their contradictions, nonheteronormative hard-core and fractured masculinities can also paradoxically produce creolized queer meanings.

“Imagining Impossible Possibilities,” the final chapter of *Creolized Sexualities*, starts with an enlightening analysis of Mootoo’s *Moving Forward Sideways Like a Crab*.⁶ As Donnell suggests, the storytelling narrative and its decelerating pace reflect the incompatibility of narrow understandings of identity and complex ways of doing and being. The transfiguration of boundaries is further examined in Thomas Glave’s speculative short story “He Who Would Have Become ‘Joshua,’ 1791” and in his reflections in “Whose Caribbean? An Allegory, in Part” and “Jamaican, Octopus.”⁷ Diving into Glave’s watery re-imaginings of the nonheteronormative worlds that critically break up with colonial sexual and capitalist bodily constraints, Donnell astutely sheds light on the transformative power of literary works—that is, on their ability to reimagine realities and to envision the queer potentialities of the nonfictional world.

Donnell’s *Creolized Sexualities* is a remarkable breakthrough within the growing body of works dealing with Caribbean nonnormative genders and sexualities, and it portrays

with great insight the Anglo-Caribbean critical and literary queer constellation.⁸ Even though the selected corpus might be said to contain more representations of queer masculinities than of femininities, Donnell's analyses highlight unexplored dimensions of the spectrum of Caribbean queerness. Two striking instances of this are her examination of the troubling connections between homophobia and homoeroticism in James's novel and her discussion of the nonbinary and almost utopian imagery in Glave's short stories. Concluding her work with an analysis of poems by the late Trinbagonian "artist" Colin Robinson, Donnell also localizes the Caribbean queerness in embodied resistances and activist organizations such as J-FLAG and CAISO.⁹

Creolized Sexualities is not only meant for a readership specializing in Caribbean, literary, and queer studies. Importantly, this forceful text has the potential to alter rigid perspectives at large: those that keep considering Caribbeanness and queerness as mutually exclusive, those whose universalizing approaches to queerness occlude localized specificities and epistemologies, and, of course, all those in between.

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[1] See V. S. Naipaul, *A Way in the World* (London: Minerva, 1994).

[2] Curdella Forbes, "A Permanent Freedom," in *A Permanent Freedom* (Leeds: Peepal Tree, 2008); Shani Mootoo, *Valmiki's Daughter* (Toronto: Anansi, 2008).

[3] Andrew Salkey, *Escape to an Autumn Pavement* (1960; Leeds: Peepal Tree, 2009).

[4] The Wolfenden Report paved the way for the decriminalization of homosexual acts in the United Kingdom. If the report could be perceived as reflecting a "growing" tolerance toward nonheterosexual citizens, it nevertheless configured which specific forms of homosexuality were deemed morally acceptable and which were not.

[5] Marlon James, *A Brief History of Seven Killings* (New York: Riverhead, 2014); Junot Díaz, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (New York: Riverhead, 2007).

[6] Shani Mootoo, *Moving Forward Sideways Like a Crab* (Toronto: Doubleday Canada, 2014).

[7] Thomas Glave, "He Who Would Have Become 'Joshua,' 1791" *Callaloo* 30, no. 2 (2007): 420–38; "Whose Caribbean? An Allegory, in Part," in Thomas Glave, ed., *Our Caribbean: A Gathering of Lesbian and Gay Writing from the Antilles* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), originally published in *Callaloo* 27, no. 3 (2004): 671–81; and "Jamaican, Octopus," *Callaloo* 35, no. 2 (2012): 368–75.

[8] See, for instance, Krystal Nandini Ghisyawan's recent publication *Erotic Cartographies: Decolonization and the Queer Caribbean Imagination* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2022).

[9] J-FLAG, which stands for Jamaica Forum for Lesbians, All-Sexuals, and Gays, was cofounded in 1998 by Glave (see <https://www.equalityjamaica.org/about-j-flag/>). Colin Robinson was the president of CAISO (Coalition Advocating for the Inclusion of Sexual Orientation), founded in 2009 (see <https://caisott.org/what-we-do>). Both organizations, which are globally recognized, work actively in the field of gender and sexual justice in the Caribbean.