Over the last ten years the field of Caribbean Studies has seen a precipitous expansion of work on sexualities, as recent review essays by Jenny Sharpe and Samantha Pinto (2006) and Kamala Kempadoo (2009) have observed. The three books under review here, all based on dissertation research and all published in 2009, make important contributions to this growing literature. While each one approaches sexual politics from a distinctive disciplinary, geographic, and theoretical vantage point, all three ask readers to take seriously the central place that sexual desires and practices occupy in the lives of Caribbean people, both at home and in the diaspora. Caribbean sexuality studies are still sometimes thought of as belonging to a domain outside of, or auxiliary to “real” politics, but these studies demonstrate without hesitation how sexuality functions as an important prism through which we might understand broader debates about ethics, politics, and economics in the region. Building from the insights of feminist theorists who connect the “private” realm to community, national, and global geopolitics, they show that sex is intimately connected to certain freedoms – be they market, corporeal, or political – as well as to their consequences. Taken together, they consider
sexual subjectivity, political economy, and cultural production in unexpected ways and point to exciting new directions for the scholarship on sexuality and sexual politics in the region.

In *Pleasures and Perils: Girls’ Sexuality in a Caribbean Consumer Culture*, anthropologist Debra Curtis writes about the coming-of-age process for girls on Nevis and asks how their desires are influenced by the island’s rapidly globalizing political (and cultural) economy. Using a Foucauldian lens to understand the productive nature of power in relation to these girls’ sexual subjectivities, she notes that her “theoretical understanding of sexuality involves exploring the complex relationship between sexual practices (what people do); the effects of sexual discourse (how people recognize a repertoire of sexual acts, as well as a set of rules and expectations surrounding those acts); and social and economic structures (what kind of world they inhabit)” (p. 8). Thus, she documents the rise of the (small) tourist industry on the island alongside a careful analysis of patterns of both individual and state-level spending and consumption, gathering data on topics as seemingly diverse as consumer loans, television-watching, and erotic ideals in order to explain the confluence of conditions critical to understanding contemporary sexual cultures on Nevis. While keen to document changes in residents’ lives arising from the more recent effects of globalization (particularly since the 1980s), Curtis is also very attentive to continuities and grounds her study in a long view of Nevis’s social and economic context. She explores “the way public policy regulates intimate pleasures and how consumer culture ... compete[s] with the state’s efforts to regulate sexuality” (p. 1), and insists that we need to understand girls’ sexual agency as “constituted along two axes: first, one that foregrounds the negative and constraining aspects of sexuality ... and second, one that recognizes the creative and positive possibilities of sexuality despite the seemingly overwhelming obstacles that Nevisian girls face” (p. 29). With this tension in mind, she asks important questions about the conflict between state public health campaigns and traditional sexual norms, about the relationship between religiosity in the public sphere and sexual permissiveness in the private, and about the normalization of sexual coercion and violence in Nevisian society.

Unlike other studies of “sexuality” writ large, Curtis also pays careful attention to same-sex intimacies, both describing and theorizing the practices of physical closeness that mark the relationships between the girls with whom she works, and for whom early fluidity about “bodily practices ... [means that] they are not [always] regarded as sexual” (p. 149). She mines the data from her focus groups and surveys to mark “the shift away from polymorphous pleasure to a more heteronormative model as the girls mature” (p. 155), and uses girls’ stories to fill in the gaps in her survey material, pointing toward the intimate detail that quantitative instruments cannot capture. For Curtis, her study’s aim is to “reveal both the activities of self-constitution and
experimentation in which Nevisian girls engage as well as the constraints of a larger, dynamic cultural system, [because] what the girls’ lives make clear is that to emphasize one without the other misses the point entirely” (p. 175).

At the heart of Curtis’s book is a rich analysis of the various discourses and sources of sexual knowledge that are operative on the island. In chapters entitled “Competing Discourses and Moralities at Play,” “Consuming Global Scripts,” and “The State and Sexualities,” she shows how the dominant discourse is produced in various webs of opposition and conformity and highlights the contradictions that emerge as maturing girls attempt to make their way through a complicated morass of prescriptions and prohibitions. Her nuanced analysis of selected vignettes from her fieldwork “illustrates the dominant sexual patterns circulating on Nevis that compete with religious notions of morality that constitute girls’ sexualities” (p. 62), shows how “as a result of high-speed global linkages – including technologies that exchange bodies and information – new sexual scripts, practices, and repertoires are proliferating on Nevis” (p. 71), and reveals the failures of state-sponsored campaigns to conclusively manage girls’ sexual practices. Engaging with girls and their families across the social spectrum, as well as working professionals, returning nationals, and government officials, her study documents the various stakeholders who produce the dominant discourse on the island.

In a chapter on “globally mediated sexual scripts” (p. 71), Curtis considers the impact that pornography, romantic novels, and television networks like BET have on the kinds of subjectivities that Nevisian girls develop, particularly as access to these images has expanded over the past twenty years. Refusing to join a condemnatory chorus that sees only negative influence in the influx of U.S. American images, she argues that pornography and explicit music videos both “provide a graphic demonstration of sexual variety, and ... provide a resource for self-production” for the girls who consume them (p. 77). In a masterful analysis of a state-sponsored teen talk show produced to support the government’s public health aims, she plumbs Nevisian “society’s general ambivalence about sexual matters [and explores how] on the one hand, Nevisians talked openly and joked freely about sex; [while] on the other hand, there was reluctance for cross-generational talk” (p. 95). This simultaneous openness and prudery forms the backdrop for the interviews that she recounts with Nevisian girls, who reveal themselves to be alternately well-versed in and bewildered by their sexuality. Thus, she is able to “look at the ways sexuality is a domain of multiple contradictions: a locus of power and powerlessness, of self-determination and cultural control” (p. 5).

Making a deft theoretical intervention into analyses of sexual pleasure, Curtis redeploy and builds upon Louisa Schein’s concept of “commodity erotics,” defining it as “the collapsing of sexual desire with commodity desire or conflating sexual pleasure with pleasure received from commodities” (p. 182). Through analyses of Nevisian girls’ interests in cell phones,
cars, expensive clothes, and other markers of consumption, she describes the relationship of eroticism to objects, goods, and services. She moves beyond an instrumental interpretation of the relationship between sex and money, and shows “how specific goods become infused with erotic significance, that desire for commodities can be erotic, and finally, that the erotic association between commodities and those who provide them affects sexual practices and desires” (p. 136). In this unique way she demonstrates how sexuality is embedded in economic systems (p. 9) and points her readers toward moments when Nevisian girls’ self-fashioning and identity production intersect through commodity and sexual desire. For Curtis, commodity erotics are “a dominating structure affecting the personal agency of girls” (p. 138), and she returns time and again to the question of sexual agency and its limits, describing what she sees as conditions of “diminished,” “relative,” or “eroded” agency for the girls in her study, their freedoms critically “contingent upon [the broader society’s] options and opportunities” (pp. 143-144). To understand that agency she pays close attention to girls’ practices, particularly as they trade sex for material goods, but she also attends to the ideologies that motivate their desires, and the kinds of constraints that impact the development of their sexual selves. These constraints include sexual coercion and violence, and Curtis sensitively documents how “the threat of violence, as well as its naturalization, is a consistent thread running throughout [girls’] stories” (p. 111). A chapter called “Theorizing Sexual Pleasure” also tackles the issue of sexual pain and forces readers to look, time and again, at the naturalization of coercive and non-reciprocal sexual acts in the girls’ experiences. Curtis argues that sexual violence also shapes girls’ subjectivities, leading to a “cultural expectation that [such] violence is unavoidable” (p. 114) and “to conditions in which the girls themselves are unable to recognize the extent of their social suffering” (p. 112).

Overall, Pleasures and Perils is an accessible yet theoretically astute introduction to theories of sexual subjectivity, discourse, and mediation. It is also a compellingly written story about an island in transition and about the girls who are coming to adulthood as these shifts take place.

In Economies of Desire: Sex and Tourism in Cuba and the Dominican Republic, sociologist Amalia Cabezas undertakes a comparative analysis of sexual formations in two Caribbean tourist zones to demonstrate the ways that sexual and affective relationships are intimately linked to political economy. She begins with the proposition that “money runs through all affective relationships” (p. 12) and shows how ordinary people negotiate this convergence, which she maintains is at the heart of the tourism industry. Instead of focusing solely on the obvious place where these transactions take place – in sex work – Cabezas asks how we might understand the complexities of more ambiguous “relationships that combine pleasure, intimacy, and monetary support” and cautions against “privileging the sexual component as the most
important aspect of interpersonal relations” (p. 20). As such, she keeps her focus on the more generalized phenomenon of what she calls “tactical sex” (p. 4), defined as “part of a complex circulation of sex and affect to cultivate social relations with foreigners ... [that] speaks more to a flexible, contingent activity that ... uses sexuality as a stepping stone, a bridge, to permanent romantic attachments, economic support, and, at times, international migration” (p. 120). Like Curtis, Cabezas argues that “demarcations between the lives of people who sell sex, those who do not, and what exactly they are selling are not easy to categorize” (p. 83) and therefore she foregrounds questions of material interest alongside her analyses of local people’s affective investment in their relationships with tourists. Through her strong engagement with labor theory and with the scholarship on care-work, she argues that involvement in these informal affective relationships allows those locals who participate in them to resist the homogenizing and stratifying demands of the transnational, capitalist tourist industry, even if only briefly. Thus “intimacy functions as a countereconomy” (p. 17) on the islands, and becomes a means by which local people gain access to the goods, services, and opportunities that might improve the quality of their lives. Cautioning against an easy reading of all sexual-affective relationships as either crassly utilitarian or dreamy yet hopeless, she maintains that “the general tendency in the scholarship to assume that participants in these relationships misrecognize their roles or are deluded about their actions misreads intentionality and the ways in which people negotiate and express desire with economic exigencies” (p. 22).

Cabezas’s first chapters offer an historical and structural analysis of the tourism industry on both islands. She highlights the dominance of multinational firms in the Dominican Republic, and shows how their control over the island’s economy has resulted in the island’s “fragile sovereignty” (p. 39), a phenomenon that, given recent sociopolitical shifts, is increasingly true in Cuba. This is the primary justification for her comparative study and is a convincing reason to think about these two cases side by side, particularly as Cuba transitions into an economic structure that brings it closer in line with its neighbors in the Caribbean basin. On both islands, Cabezas asks whether policy (i.e. tax concessions and legislative incentives) makes this kind of corporate dominance possible, and emphasizes that the tourist industry shuts locals out of the benefits of this commerce. She draws an historical through-line between early patterns of production in the region – founded upon economic disenfranchisement in the service of foreign profit – and current models for enclave tourism. Further, Cabezas describes how government money is funneled into the promotion of these industries. Ultimately, though, she is most interested in what anthropologist Dana-Ain Davis has called “how people live policy” (Davis 2006) and throughout her study foregrounds the fact that her interlocutors rework, sidestep, and fashion livable lives in the material world that is conditioned by these policies. Thus, she highlights the way
“local populations look toward foreigners as a way to resist their exclusion” (p. 53) and demonstrates that “through traffic in emotions and sentiment, local populations can access some of the wealth that tourism can potentially impart” (p. 52). She sees the economic conditions of each island and the responses of people in and around the tourist industry as fertile ground for the emergence of new sexual subjectivities that “challenge these conditions even while reinscribing old modes of oppression” (p. 84).

The strongest chapter in Cabezas’s study is her ethnography of an all-inclusive resort in Varadero, a town on Cuba’s northern coast. Her analysis reveals the complicated terrain that hotel workers tread on, caught as they are among the expectations of their foreign bosses, government suspicions about their interactions with guests, and the challenge of meeting their own survival needs. While corporate managers insist that workers sell the vacation experience to hotel visitors and encourage the exploitation of affect to craft a fantasy experience for guests, government representatives warn workers not to be overly friendly, for fear that those relationships will compromise their revolutionary principles (p. 93). Within this matrix, though, “workers ... use their graces and charm to befriend tourists for their own aims” (p. 89), beyond the profit-motive of the companies for which they work. Cabezas explores poignantly how “relationships with tourists, [her]self included, were always ambiguous, intertwining opportunity and gain with genuine affection and care” (p. 109). In the stories that her interlocutors tell about their long(er) term relationships with guests, “aspects of money and friendship were connected in complicated ways” (p. 104), so that when one worker describes a friendship with a guest from the United States, it is clear that in addition to appreciating their conversations he also hopes that commitment to their relationship will eventually provide him with a ticket to visit. As such, Cabezas “emphasize[s] the thin line between manufactured intimacy, as suggested by management, and the ways in which hospitality workers use sentiment to break down boundaries between themselves and customers” (p. 109). In the same chapter Cabezas also tackles the racial structure of these corporate ventures, and argues that “in hiring and designation of job duties European and Cuban notions of white supremacy collude to articulate the reproduction of white supremacy” (p. 101). Not only do the resorts function as “deterritorialized spaces” (p. 90), kept so by the rigorous profiling of who is and is not allowed to enter, but they also reproduce racially based divisions of labor, where black Cubans are more likely to be found participating in heritage shows or low-level service work and white Cubans are more often determined to have the “presence” necessary to advance to leadership roles in the corporate structure.

In this slender volume Cabezas sometimes struggles to meet the ambitious goals that she sets out for herself. Even so, the most convincing analyses come from her material on Cuba, which sits at the forefront of the book’s various narratives, and she makes an important case for trying to put both Cuba and the Dominican Republic in the same frame.
Cultural studies scholar Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes writes back to the traditional literature on Puerto Rican migration in *Queer Ricans: Cultures and Sexualities in the Diaspora*, challenging a migration studies framework that “systematically exclude(s) concerns about nontraditional or divergent gender expressions and sexualities” from its purview (p. xii). He focuses explicitly on cultural workers and artists – an archive apart from statistical, demographic, and sociological approaches, but one that allows him to engage with “intersections of migration, culture, and sexuality” (p. xiii) from a perspective that foregrounds the way sexuality shapes and conditions the experiences of Puerto Rican migrants to the United States (p. ix). Marshalling examples from fiction, poetry, and film, he also taps his readers into dance and theater productions to which we might never have had access, describing otherwise unrecorded performances and thereby creating a unique archive of this literary and cultural field. Through a careful reading of historical, anthropological, and sociological material, he offers these cultural products important groundings in their varied contexts and demonstrates the wider implications of their creation, including their resonance with broader lived experiences. His close attention to language alongside his careful discourse analyses defy studies in thrall to statistics and quantification – rather than replicating those concerns, La Fountain-Stokes focuses on the affective experiences that accompany transgressive expressions of gender and sexuality, using this work to define “queer Rican culture [as] ... a daily, lived practice as much as the production of objects for consumption or collection” (p. xxii).

*Queer Ricans* begins with a chapter entitled “The Persecution of Difference” and a parable that offers an explanation for why migration from Puerto Rico might not only be desirable for same-sex-desiring and gender-transgressing people, but sometimes also a matter of life and death. Elaborating on Doris Sommer’s theorization of “foundational fictions” (1993), La Fountain-Stokes analyzes a short story by Luis Rafael Sanchez entitled “¡Jum!” and its evocation of “the desire to escape from persecution juxtaposed to ultimate annihilation” (p. 18). Sanchez’s protagonist, known in the story only as el hijo de Trinidad, is the target of vicious gossip in the small town where he lives. He is identified only by his family name – an important referent on the island – and as he packs his bags to leave home, presumably for the U.S. mainland, his community joins together to kill him. Plumbing the meaning of silence, voice, and violence in the narrative, La Fountain-Stokes shows how “¡Jum!” captures the delicate negotiation of a community’s tolerance of transgressive practices that stand as “open secrets” and shows how quickly the “symbolic violence of words” (p. 11) can turn into the actual violence of a community incensed by the violation of its norms. La Fountain-Stokes argues that “male-to-female transvestites, masculine women, and effeminate men are ubiquitous in all Puerto Rican towns and diasporic neighborhoods, yet they are also the frequent object of
derision and even attacks. Prescriptions against male effeminacy and female masculinity do not work to simply eliminate gender-variance or trans practices and identities, but rather stigmatize that behavior and give it a specific meaning” (p. 1). In “¡Jum!” that specific meaning reflects an uneasy combination of ambivalence and repulsion that leads readers to understand why Puerto Ricans who are the target of those sentiments might feel compelled to migrate. While La Fountain-Stokes is careful to note that Sanchez’s protagonist cannot stand as the representation of the experiences of all queer subjects on the island, his focus on migration leads him to center those who (try to) leave, often bearing the scars of “home.” His analysis reminds us that in migration, the politics of place are equally about those who do not (or cannot) move and about how their lives are imagined from afar. This perspective highlights the “importance of location” (p. 46) and sets his diasporic analysis in critical conversation with the evolving politics of the Caribbean region.

By carefully considering both the authors’ own biographies and the various cultural products themselves, La Fountain-Stokes makes a claim about the kinds of projections that authors enact in their own work. Throughout the book he considers moments of “slippage between narrator/character and author” (p. 58), and he is consistently attentive to what he calls “the intersection of autobiography and narrative” (p. 102). This is most apparent in chapters on “autobiographical writing and shifting migrant experience” and on queer women’s filmmaking and writing. For example, in an analysis of Frances Negron-Muntaner’s Brincando el charco: Portrait of a Puerto Rican (1995), a film about queer sexuality, Puerto Rican community values, and migration, La Fountain-Stokes weaves together analyses of the film’s images and narrative with Negron-Muntaner’s own migration story, while at the same time he engages with her scholarly work on the intersection of cultural politics and the politics of sovereignty on the island (Negrón-Muntaner 2007). Throughout Queer Ricans, La Fountain-Stokes makes a powerful case for the transformative potential of these cultural productions, and ends his book with a particularly compelling chapter on the radical potential of performances by Elizabeth Marrero and Arthur Avilés, Bronx-based performance artists. In “Nuyorico and the Utopias of the Everyday,” he analyzes their queer retellings, first of the classic Wizard tale in Mavé de Oz (1997) and then of Cinder- (which in their hands becomes Artur-) -ella (1996). He offers careful, exhaustive, and gripping descriptions of their stage performances, transporting readers to the open air theaters and community centers in New York where they were first launched. La Fountain-Stokes shines in this chapter, as he considers theories of queer potentiality and connects hopefulness to the imaginative practices of diasporic cultural workers. In his attention to performance and literature, he insists on the importance of stories, and shows how they can serve alternately as beacons, as “foundational fictions,” and as life-affirming projects for both their producers and consumers.
Because it is pitched to readers already familiar with the island’s geopolitics and with waves of Puerto Rican migration to the United States, *Queer Ricans* would fit well in a syllabus alongside a more staid sociohistorical or demographic migration narrative. It reveals the limits of those approaches while opening up the conversation to new questions about Puerto Rican identification and community in diaspora.

In his landmark 1974 volume *Caribbean Transformations*, Sidney Mintz contended that to understand the Caribbean, scholars undertaking analyses of particular places in the region have to pay close attention to U.S. influence and power bases. Each of the authors under review here seems to have taken that invocation seriously, from Curtis’s analysis of the influence of U.S.-based media (like BET) in girls’ lives on Nevis, to Cabezas’s deconstruction of U.S.-based corporate interest in the tourist industry, to La Fountain-Stokes’s work on the fraught differences between the way Puerto Rico and the United States are imagined in queer Rican cultural projects. More tricky, perhaps, are the other referents that we might consider to be important in developing studies of sexuality in the region. Along similar lines, Clifford Geertz famously called for social analysts to engage in thick description, a kind of iterative injunction to contextualize our objects of study as fully as possible (Geertz 1973, see pp. 3-30). In the Caribbean this kind of thick contextualization has presented a particular challenge, as the reality of life in the basin requires scholars to work across multiple languages (English, French, Spanish, Dutch, and a variety of Creoles), through various disciplines, to orient their studies toward various regions (the Caribbean, the Americas, Europe, and diasporas), and to engage with the scholarship from multiple academies.

All three of the authors under review faced the difficult challenge of situating their studies within these multiple literatures. Both La Fountain-Stokes and Cabezas argue for what La Fountain-Stokes calls “the particularities of the Hispanic Caribbean ... bond” (p. 61) and Cabezas draws on theories of “historical continuity” between islands colonized by Spain to justify her comparative focus on the Dominican Republic and Cuba (p. 4). Cabezas’s study is steadily informed by the literature on Latin America and the Hispanophone Caribbean, but she pays little sustained attention to work on the Anglophone or Francophone parts of the region, and though she and Curtis tackle some of the same questions about the relationship between sexuality and political economy, they draw on very different archives in order to situate their inquiry. Cabezas notes that people on the ground in her field sites pushed her to think comparatively (p. 6), but even if her interlocutors failed to see the thematic connections that might have been made with non-Hispanophone islands, Cabezas’s asides to Caribbean connection deserved further exploration (p. 35).

Engaging the politics of citation in a different way, Curtis explicitly refutes a call by historian Evelyn Hammonds for more black women to do work on black women’s sexuality (p. 28). Curtis and I differ on our inter-
pretation (and appreciation) of this plea because of what I understand to have been Hammonds’s implicit (albeit, essentialist) assumption that black women who do work on the region will honor and engage with traditions of black feminist scholarship (Hammonds 1997). While Curtis’s study is challenging and beautifully crafted, she writes about sexual subjectivity in the Anglophone Caribbean without engaging with certain seminal black feminists who have done work on the region. Particularly striking is the way she elides Audre Lorde’s theorization of “the uses of the erotic” (1984), which she might have brought into useful dialogue with her own concept of “commodity erotics.” By contrast, La Fountain-Stokes connects the material in Queer Ricans in productive and challenging ways not only to U.S. and Latin American literary canons, but also to the burgeoning field of work on queer diaspora and to the women of color feminisms to which those analyses are indebted (p. 41). However, like Cabezas, his citations are largely limited to the Hispanophone canon of the region.

Even given these limits, all three books considered here work to contextualize interpersonal relationships and cultural projects within the specific histories and social dynamics of particular Caribbean places and of the communities that inhabit them. They are strongly researched studies of sexual cultures that stake a convincing claim for future work on sexuality in the region. Early in her dissertation research Curtis was challenged by a senior colleague to justify why a study like hers might be important. In partial response she replied, “Sex matters because questions of sex and sexuality lie at the core of a number of important social issues, such as the nature and role of ‘family life,’ HIV prevention, family planning, and teenage pregnancy. Sex and sexuality are also political concerns in the sense that bodies, lifestyles, and public health policy become the grounds on which these social issues are contested. And finally, sex and sexuality are economic concerns because they involve the allocation and distribution of state, federal, and international moneys” (p. 24). Sex matters too, as La Fountain-Stokes reminds us, because the choices we make and their repercussions are both broadly political and deeply intimate, tied in important ways to what we choose to represent of our lives and to our imaginings for the future.

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