David A.B. Murray

Flaming Souls: Homosexuality, Homophobia and Social Change in Barbados.

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David Murray’s *Flaming Souls: Homosexuality, Homophobia and Social Change in Barbados*, which examines contemporary Bajan gender and sexual identities through interviews, participant observation, and media analysis, joins a growing literature on queer Caribbean life. Organized into nine short chapters (including the introduction and conclusion), it attempts to provide a complex rendering of Bajan gay life attentive to the historical, social, economic, and political factors that contribute to what he claims is an inverted reflection of North American queer activism and communities—the relative invisibility of gays and lesbians and the relative acceptance and visibility of transgender people. Murray’s project is not interested in lesbians nor does it explore the similarities between queer people of color living in North America and queen and gay Bajans. Instead it focuses on the differences between Barbadian and “Euro-American” conceptions of gender and sexuality. However, in his precise, albeit narrow, definition of “gay” as a gender normative sexual orientation in “Euro-American” culture, Murray fails to include discussion of the way such a definition was consolidated in a post-Stonewall era of queer political realignment in the United States.

The first half of *Flaming Souls* takes up key discursive modalities that produce and circulate the concept of the homosexual in Barbados and its diaspora. Whether in an analysis of Barbadian “feedback media” (Chapter 1), HIV/AIDS policy and governmental initiatives (Chapter 2), or the circulation of human and sexual rights discourses in everyday conversations and newspapers (Chapter 3), Murray carefully explores how the rights and risks of homosexuality inflect public debates about Barbadian national citizenship. He maintains that antigay sentiments aired in the press should not be read as indicative of national homophobia; rather, those who express these views “are unhappy with the current socioeconomic situation and strive to return to a mythic past of a communal, heterosexual, and homogenous Christian nation” (p. 27). In other words, homosexuality has acquired an emblematic status in public discourse, representing contemporary social instability and national immorality.

The balance of the text focuses on the lives of queens (transgender and gender nonconforming individuals) and gay men in Barbados in an effort to compensate for “a paucity of research on the lived effects of negative public representations of the homosexual” (p. 54). Chapter 4 hinges on the story of Edward (a pseudonym), a bed-and-breakfast owner who publicizes his business through publications geared toward gay European and American tourists.
In keeping with literature on gay tourism in the Caribbean and Central and South America, Murray describes how neocolonial logics undergird gay tourist industries in Barbados, ensuring lines of separation between the mostly gay white visitors and Afro-Caribbean inhabitants. Chapters 5 and 6 are explanations of Murray’s fieldwork with Bajan queens, while the seventh chapter includes brief biographies of three gay-identified men in Barbados with little analysis.

Murray’s discussion of the connections between commercial communicative technologies and Afro-Caribbean gay life makes a useful contribution to the literature on mobile telephony and intimacy in the Caribbean. As he follows a series of romantic relationships between Bajan queens and their Jamaican boyfriends, Murray is able to provide compelling evidence for the way the proliferation of cell phones, with affordable text plans and chat room features, has contributed to a lively gay social scene in Jamaica. On the other hand, his explications of the multiple terms used to describe Barbadian queer people—queen, butch queen, posh queen, thug, down low, and gay—seem not to reflect the connections between such terms and African American vernacular, particularly in ballroom culture, where terms like butch and femme queen have been in circulation for several decades. Or with terms like “down low” and “thug,” which hold resonance with an ongoing media spectacle in the United States. Rather than contextualizing his informants’ descriptions of the terminological terrain in light of the way HIV/AIDS discourses, the exponential growth of evangelical churches, and rapid communicative technologies have necessitated new modes of confession, Murray attempts to make sense of his data by measuring it against a reified notion of “gay” that fails to see how such terms might operate colloquially to refer to nonheteronormativity.

As Murray crafts an ethnography toggling between local, national, and transnational scales to render the lives of his subjects, his work prompts questions that I hope will be examined in future research. His argument about the polyvalent nature of “reputation” and “respect” in Barbadian daily life, for example, would benefit from including more voices, since both concepts imply a level of social participation beyond self-perception. As a reader, one wonders how a complex Barbadian sexual landscape might be explored if lesbians and heterosexual-identified people were included as key informants.

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