Beyond Homophobia and Binary Gender

The Case of Jamaican Men

Rosamond S. King
English Department, Brooklyn College, Brooklyn NY, U.S.A.
RKing@brooklyn.cuny.edu


These two books represent both the cutting edge of Caribbean sexuality studies and some of its persistent shortcomings, particularly the lack of analysis of trans people, women, and people not of African descent.

One of their greatest problems is an outsized focus on Jamaica. After the first three chapters of Gender Variances establish the historical, sociological, and sociobiological underpinnings of Caribbean gender and sexuality studies, four of the remaining five chapters focus on Jamaica, and about a third of Beyond Homophobia’s pieces do the same. This lopsided coverage encourages readers to assume that Jamaica is representative of the entire region. The editors of Beyond Homophobia acknowledge that “This is a limitation ... that reflects the disproportionate influence of Jamaica within the Caribbean, as well as the location of the conference” where the pieces originated (p. 13).

Notwithstanding the missed opportunity to showcase the similarities and differences of gender and sexual identities, experiences, and cultures across the
region, the focus on Jamaica means that the books provide accumulated insight into the evolving attitudes toward gender and sexuality in the most populous Anglophone Caribbean territory. The predominant emphasis of the essays on Jamaica largely concerns two topics—dancehall and Christian cultures. This is not surprising, since both institutions are highlighted by those outside the region who still consider the Caribbean (as a 2006 article in *Time* magazine put it) “the most homophobic place on earth” and the primary and worst enforcer of heterosexism. What readers will learn about Jamaica in these two collections is that hegemonic gender and homophobia there are grounded in religion, education, and popular culture—and that change in these areas is not only possible, but is already happening.

Anna Kasafi Perkins is the only scholar who contributed to both books. *Beyond Homophobia* includes her analysis of religious homophobia in John Crow’s *Devil*, providing a generous, detailed analysis of both the obvious and the more layered critique of Christianity in this debut novel by Marlon James, who has written that “thinking is anathema to religion.” Perkins’s essay in *Gender Variances* uses public statements by religious leaders, surveys of general “attitudes toward same-sex relationships” in Jamaica, and Biblical exegesis to explore and poke some provocative holes in Jamaican Christian investment in heterosexuality and binary gender (p. 63).

The four essays on dancehall in the two books collectively contradict the belief that it is uniformly and thoroughly homophobic. Multiple authors point out that dancehall both continues to be a site of hegemonic masculinity and heterosexuality and is a space where the range of what constitutes acceptable male behavior has been shifting in ways that might have been unimaginable in the twentieth century. In particular, Carla Moore’s analysis of “the (Im)Possibilities of a Straight Dancehall” in *Beyond Homophobia*, and Donna P. Hope’s examination of the performer Shebada in *Gender Variances* reveal the complications and ambiguities of dancehall genders and sexualities. Moore answers the question “How do queerness and the dancehall (not so) secretly meet and shape each other?” through the results of her “intellectual ethnography” of the culture (p. 167). Her interviewees explain how powerful men who have sex with men (MSM) in dancehall culture—including prominent dancers—have been shifting the male dancehall aesthetic toward styles until recently considered feminine, such as tight-fitting clothing and the use of bleaching cream and makeup. (None of the essays in either book address female aesthetics.) Moore writes that such changes in style make the dancehall space more “accessible” to gender nonconforming people, and the interviewees “all agree that there has been an increase in the number of MSM men in the space since the changes” (p. 176).
While Moore argues that these subversions of heteronormativity point to the power of queer dancehall men, she and her interviewees take pains to point out that “While the dancehall space has begun to look more queer, [its] ritualized performance of homophobia has retained its salience” (p. 179). She and her research participants acknowledge these contradictions and complexities when some of the MSM who frequent dancehalls feel the need to confirm their heterosexuality in other ways. Describing similar phenomena, the interlocutors quoted in Moji Anderson’s essay on gender and sexuality passing indicate that one way MSM can portray heterosexuality is through harassing or even beating other nonhegemonic men.

The complexities of gender in Jamaican popular culture are also evident in Hope’s “The Impact of Jamaican Popular Culture in Shaping Normative Conceptions of Gender and Sexuality.” Although her chapter includes a particularly interesting deconstruction of Jamaican slang, it is her analysis of performer Keith Ramsay’s character Shebada—who could certainly be the subject of an entire book—that is the most compelling. Shebada, Hope explains, self-describes as “pon dl borderline” of being a man and a woman (p. 147). Not only has “borderline” since become Jamaican slang for a “questionable or homosexual identity,” but so has the comedian’s very name taken on a broader meaning (p. 148). Hope writes that “a ‘Shebada’ is [now] another term used for a man whose sexuality is suspect or, alternatively, for a woman who behaves ‘like a skettel’” (p. 151). (She writes that Jamaicans define a skettel as “a loose and vulgar woman, usually dressed in erotic, revealing clothes” [p. 145].) It is important to note both that the term is used elsewhere in the Caribbean, and that it often has a class dimension, typically referring to women who are poor or working class—and/or who reject traditional middle-class values. So, as a slur, Shebada is a term that refers to stigmatized gender and sexual difference for men, and to stigmatized sexual morality and class for women, though for the latter that difference remains within the “borderlines” of heterosexuality.

The attention to Shebada in Gender Variances is also notable because it highlights an unsettling paradox in these books: while “gender variance,” in particular nonhegemonic masculinity, is described and analyzed in detail throughout the two collections, trans identities and experiences are rarely mentioned as such, or only in passing. And in the sole instance when Moore names the entertainer’s gender performance—pointing to “Shebada’s uncanny ability to perform a transgendered identity”—although the praise seems genuine, it uses outdated terminology. (“Transgendered” is largely considered an outdated if not offensive term, implying that something has happened to—or has been done to—trans people to alter their “normal” gender, the one assigned at birth.) While not everyone who is gender variant identifies as trans, some certainly
do self-identify as trans or gender nonconforming, or as dressup girls, macóm-mères, or locas. That so few essays explicitly address these lives and experiences is especially surprising given the popular attention given to the historic 2018 ruling by the Caribbean Court of Justice that struck down a Guyanese anti-cross-dressing law (and acknowledged trans identities and experiences). But neither this lawsuit nor Guyana are featured in either book.

Cross-dressing is, however, central to Nick Marsellas’s chapter (in Gender Variances), which focuses on “Bonn,” the main character in the novel Kingston by Starlight, by Christopher John Farley. Since he uses male pronouns, we might include this depiction as a still-too-rare analysis of a Caribbean male-identified trans experience. Identified as female at birth, Bonn presents as, and eventually identifies as, male in order to travel as a sailor and pirate, which a seventeenth-century woman would not have been able to do. Marsellas notes that the character “use[s] gender to escape misogyny” (p. 131). The essay addresses Bonn’s “cross-dressing, gender ambiguity, sexual fluidity, and border crossing” as metaphors for both the sea/ocean and for a general Jamaican identity, describing how Farley “disrupts common conceptions of the sea as female, and in doing so, also disrupts scholars’ usual writing off of the sea as passive” (p. 127). Ultimately, Marsellas argues that Farley is “not fabricating a new history to further a supposed gay agenda; he’s rewriting history to show how much of it is fiction in the first place” (p. 131).

If the essays by Hope and Marsellas point to the “borderlines” of gender, only “‘Bring It Cross?’: Sexuality and ‘Passing’ in Jamaica,” by Moji Anderson (in Beyond Homophobia) actually prioritizes self-identified trans people. Anderson argues that Jamaican trans people and gay men who attempt to pass “are not necessarily hapless victims of structure, but agents with potentially subversive agendas within it.” (p. 114). The width and placement of the line between passing and transgression seems continuously in flux, particularly as masculine dancehall aesthetics evolve, partly due to the influence of nonhegemonic men and trans people that Anderson and Moore describe. Anderson also highlights interviewees’ descriptions of how they and others they know find “safe spaces in the ghettos,” providing crucial evidence that people expressing nonhegemonic genders and sexualities do exist and sometimes thrive as part of Jamaican inner-city communities.

The omission of trans people and experiences, despite the exceptions discussed here, is both surprising and disappointing for books focused on LGBTQ

---

communities and gender variant experiences. A similar critique must be leveled regarding the overwhelming absence of the experiences of women, including lesbians. Remarkably, there are only three essays out of 23 in these books that significantly address women's experiences. Perhaps more disturbing is the fact that this dearth is not remarked upon in the editors’ introductions, normalizing the focus on men’s experiences. Similarly, many authors do not bother to note or explain their exclusive consideration and analysis of men’s lives, which can lead to problematic presumptions and conclusions.

Of the two essays in these books that focus on women who have sex with women, one is Lyndon K. Gill’s essay, centered on legendary Tobagonian singer Calypso Rose (in Beyond Homophobia). The other, “The Myth of the ‘Free Pass’ in Jamaica: An Assessment of the Representation of Women Who Love Women in the Media,” explores the architecture of lesbian-specific homophobia in Jamaica. The essay by “Gemma D.” (in Gender Variances notably, the author felt the need to write under a pseudonym) is successful in many respects. She attacks the common perception that while Caribbean men who have sex with men are subject to constant, violent homophobia, Caribbean women who have sex with women are subject to less harassment and are fully integrated and accepted into Jamaican society, and their relationships are socially acknowledged as valid. It is a myth that appears in both collections reviewed here.

In Beyond Homophobia, the “free pass” myth appears in research cited by Keith McNeal. In that research, one of the reasons given for Trinidad and Tobago’s relative lack of homophobia is that “Gay men have it worse than lesbians” (p. 69). And in her Gender Variances chapter, Hope writes that in contrast to dancehall’s “marked hostility” toward male homosexuality, “female homosexuality is often a non-issue” (p. 140), though this statement is undermined later on the same page when she acknowledges that the song “Chi Chi Crew” “suggests that the conscious fraternizing with known or reputedly gay men (and women) is taboo” (p. 140). The author’s parentheses imply that the taboo against gay women is less than, or less significant than, that against men. Other mentions of lesbians are also made in passing, with little explication or context.2

“The Myth of the ‘Free Pass’” identifies the sources of this belief and the harm that it does. “Gemma D.” argues that violence against Jamaican lesbians, like most violence against Jamaican women, is less visible because it often takes place in private and is both under-recognized and under-reported. In addition, “Gemma D.” explains that harassment that seems benign to some, such as men

---

2 See, for instance, Chapters 3 and 12 of Beyond Homophobia.
asking to watch lesbian sex, and sensationalist newspaper articles, are actually alternate forms of policing. Finally, the essay is impressive because her analysis refuses a hierarchy of oppression—with gay men at one far end of the spectrum—commonly articulated throughout the region and its diaspora. Nor does she try to reverse the hierarchy; instead she describes how homophobia and violence against men and women is articulated differently but toward similar goals.

The near-absence of lesbians in these anthologies is profoundly disappointing after so many years of Caribbean lesbians lamenting our invisibility in scholarship and elsewhere. It is a trope so common I prefer to call it an enforced disappearing. As Anderson puts it in her chapter: “The ‘L’ in ‘LGBTQ’ has been virtually ignored: research on lesbians in Jamaica [and throughout the Caribbean] is well overdue” (p. 115).

Even if we see it as a shortcoming, readers can respect the editors’ explicit decision to confine their books to the Anglophone Caribbean. However, stating that the books are inclusive of lesbian and trans experiences while keeping that inclusion at the barest minimum does a disservice to these communities, as well as to readers, especially students and those new to the field. Furthermore, the near-absence of lesbians, trans people, and people of Indian descent, and the under-representation of non-Jamaicans in these books diminishes the good work that the collections do include and reveals who is considered worthy of inclusion in the “LGBTQ Caribbean” or in the “diverse Caribbean genders and sexualities” noted in the titles.

In his essay in Beyond Homophobia about Jamaican photographer Archie Lindo’s erotic photos of Black men, O’Neil Lawrence writes that “There are clearly many unresolved tensions within Lindo’s work: some are specific to him, but they also deepen our understanding of the tensions and contradictions in the work of the nationalist generation in Jamaica, which, while charting new ground and breaking taboos, was at the same time replicating colonial social hierarchies” (p. 164). This statement can also be applied to both of the anthologies reviewed here. Both collections deepen our understanding of nonhegemonic Caribbean genders and sexualities. And both books display unresolved tensions and replicate biases and problematics that have persisted for decades, and indeed generations.

3 Of particular note are Marjande Bruin’s chapter in Gender Variances, which outlines the history of gender studies in the region, and the essay on methodology and ethical research by Nikoli Attai, K. Nandini Ghisyawan, Rajanie Preity Kumar & Carla Moore in Beyond Homophobia.
I know that the Caribbean Sexuality Studies research being conducted today is more diverse than what is represented in *Gender Variances* and *Beyond Homophobia*. In fact, we need look no further than other scholarship by some of the authors within these same volumes, such as K. Nandini Ghisyawan’s forthcoming monograph *Erotic Cartographies: Decolonization and the Queer Caribbean Imagination*, which focuses on Caribbean same-sex-loving women.

David Plummer’s conclusion in *Gender Variances* (“Taboo and Obligation: Normative Pressures on Sexuality and Gender in the Caribbean and the Rise of Hard Masculinity”) is worth repeating; he writes that “when there is a divided society with deep intolerance, everyone loses” (p. 94). I both hope and fully expect that future anthologies and monographs will work to avoid the division and biases we have not, as scholars or as people, yet escaped.