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Introduction: Women and Gender: Looking Toward “Caribbeanness”

By Diana J. Fox¹ and Allyson Ferrante²

In this special issue of the JIWS, fourteen authors explore varying iterations of “Caribbeanness” and what it means to identify its specific cultural unity through diversity in literature, various forms of activism, and constructions of feminism, identity, femininity, masculinity, and sexuality. In the closing essay of his seminal *Caribbean Discourse*, Édouard Glissant distinguishes between the identification of Caribbeanness as both a dream and a reality; “The notion of *antillanité*, or Caribbeanness, emerges from a reality that we will have to question, but also corresponds to a dream that we must clarify and whose legitimacy must be demonstrated” (Glissant 221). As the just late Jamaican poet, novelist, and essayist Michelle Cliff, who lived in Jamaica and the US wrote, “Caribbeanness as a concept cannot be narrowed down to a particular space” and thus any clarification of the term must move beyond the physical geography of the region into the diaspora (Ramajeyalakshmi web <https://sites.google.com/site/jeltals/archive/3-1/5-a-black-diasporic-identity-in-paule-marshall-s-brown-girl-brownstones-and-the-fisher-king--k-ramajeyalakshmi>, accessed 6/18/16). Therefore our multidisciplinary contributors’ work demonstrates examples of Caribbeanness that traverse geography, gender, race, socio-economic status, and language to offer a wide array of Caribbean realities. Glissant argues that while the reality of Caribbeanness cannot be denied, it is fragile and continuously threatened by a history of imperial European ideologies, “a dream, forever denied, often deferred...vital but not obvious” (Glissant 221). While capable of empowering Caribbean people to “possess their world and their lived experience” despite the remaining post-colonial divisions that continue to plague the region, Caribbeanness must be made tangible and necessitates multiple examples in order to make it an accessible tool for all people and not simply the region’s intellectuals; it must make the transition from “shared experience to conscious expression” (Glissant 224; 222). Therefore this issue put forth

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a call for papers “Looking Towards ‘Caribbeanness’” to exemplify and study how it moves, what it threatens and protects, and how it exists in multiplicity.

The articles herein embrace Glissant’s cross-cultural spirit, keenly aware of the syncretic complexity of Caribbeanness, articulating an ongoing, hopeful, sometimes existential, and perhaps more than expected realized quest to interpret and actuate Caribbean experiences of a possessed world. Rather than succumb to a fruitless striving for what can never be attained, (i.e. Western hegemonic conceptions of legitimacy forced on the region by European imperialism) Glissant’s Caribbeanness argues for a self-determining cross-cultural “poetics of lived rhythms” that eschew totalizing efforts in favor of what he calls “dense accretions” producing a “symbolic notation of a seldom-seen side of reality”, allowing that reality to come “all at once, in a massive accumulation.” Such efforts encourage a spirit of experimentation “conducting simultaneously as personal ethnography, history, linguistics, and architecture” that surface “beliefs hidden deep in the collective past”, producing a sustained, unceasing and deliberate speech, establishing something new at every turn.” Such an aesthetic is, as LeBlanc argues, “both non-essentialist and non-universalizing, attending to Caribbean particularity but refusing to be limited by it” (qtd in Le Blanc, 174-5, 1993). In so doing, the articles in this issue ground the multiplicity of historical and contemporary Caribbean lived experiences explored within, via fiction and reality, moving Caribbeanness from the intangible, superficial and bounded into the realm of multiple, porous, shared and liberating dimensions through struggle, power dynamics and feminist reinterpretations of self, other and history. Vibrant contestation and debates around meanings and expressions of gender and sexuality are not anchors to powerlessness or hegemony, but rather indications of Glissant’s “dense accretions” of multiple worlds. Continued division and exclusion by way of language, race, class, gender, sexuality, and nation remain, but do not go unchallenged, unexamined, subverted.

The JIWS embraces writing as a form of scholar-activism; as such, the authors in these pieces tackle the intersecting oppressions of their protagonists, both fictional and real. Likewise, Glissant calls upon intellectuals to exercise their “responsibility to raise their voices for the benefit of those who cannot see the Caribbean world in its diversity or hear the word sung right there, just beside them” and we certainly practice our responsibility here (Glissant 225). These articles explicate and interpret their characters’ pathways as articulations of Caribbeanness itself, materializing as anti-structure rather than reduced simply as new structures of exclusion and hierarchy. We hope you enjoy this collection, which has been a pleasure to collect and edit. We invite readers to respond to individual articles or the issue as a whole: do you agree with us that the pieces individually and collectively demonstrate *the process* of Caribbeanness unfolding, via non-essentialist and non-universalizing attention to Caribbean particularity, while simultaneously refusing to be limited by such specificity? Do you agree that the issue’s articles represent Caribbeanness made tangible following Glissant’s aesthetic: “dense accretions” of “massive articulation”? What are your own thoughts about the status of Caribbeanness and how any of the articles take on the theme? We will publish your responses and reflections in the January issue 2017, under the subheading: *Responses to Caribbeanness*.

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