

Introduction

The Spring of Her Look

If you are from a country, if you're born there, a natal native as they say: well then, you have it in your eyes, your skin, your hands, with the flowing hair of the trees, the flesh of its earth, the bones of its rocks, the blood of its rivers, its skin, its taste, its men and women: it is a presence in your heart, indelible, like a girl you love, you know the spring of her look, the fruit of her mouth, the hills of her breasts, her hands which protect then give in, her knees without mysteries, her strength and weakness, her voice and silence.

— Jacques Roumain, *Gouverneurs de la rosée*

I want to show homosexuality or lesbianism or gayness, whatever you want to call it, as a whole identity, not just a sexual preference. . . . What would it mean for a woman to love another woman in the Caribbean?

— Michelle Cliff in Judith Raiskin, "The Art of History"

Grace. Is grace, yes. And I take it quiet, quiet, like thieving sugar.

— Dionne Brand, *In Another Place, Not Here*

If, on a spring morning that begins with what the Martinican poet Lucie Thésée calls a sea sky and an earth like sea floor,¹ you have found this book on the bookstore shelf . . . if you have opened its cover, run your fingers and eyes over the title and subtitle, flipped past the table of contents to see the opening epigraphs . . . you may come to this first paragraph with two questions. First, you may wonder along with the Jamaican lesbian novelist Michelle Cliff: what does it mean for a woman to love another woman in the Caribbean? Having stumbingly asked this question of women, rivers, sea floors, dreams, drums, and books from Suriname to the Seine and Brooklyn to Blanchisseuse, I have listened well enough to offer no transparent answer. Instead, this exploratory study puts into conversation West Indian poets and novelists who answer Cliff's question in slippery, opaque, indeterminate, and metaphoric ways by imagining desire between women moving obliquely – riverinely – through the uneven geographic and cultural landscapes of the Caribbean. Looking at texts from Suriname, Jamaica, Haiti, Martinique, and Trinidad, this book engages dance, songs, poems, and novels in which women writers reclaim and rework traditional landscape metaphors like Jacques Roumain offered as one of the epigraphs here.² As they take rushing springs and breast-hills into their own mouths, these authors perform what Jean Franco calls “struggles for interpretive power . . . incandescent moments when different configurations of gender and knowledge are briefly illuminated.”³ These electric struggles are initiated here with a question: What happens when the beloved/landscape and the poet/lover are both women? While Franco's influential study plotted women in the history of Mexico, *Thieving Sugar* traces women's complex material and symbolic relationships with the plots of land on which they live, work, play, garden, talk politics, and engage in relationships with other women. Most simply, I engage those “incandescent moments” at which their queering of a Caribbean landscape charts a poetics and politics of decolonization. That is, I stop to look where texts take tropes like women-as-flowers, women-as-water, women-as-sugar cane, invented to justify keeping Caribbean women and territories in someone else's control, and redeploy these same tropes to imagine a landscape belonging to Caribbean women and Caribbean women belonging to each other. In this, these writers' working and reworking of intimate landscapes constitute black feminist imaginations that complicate, dismantle, and reconfigure the interlocking fictions of power that shadow the region.

You may wonder, too, at the title: what does it mean to *thief sugar*? Those words come from the graceful opening sentences of Dionne Brand's novel

In *Another Place, Not Here*, and they ground the metaphor that the cane cutter Elizete uses to describe her first encounter with her lover Verlia. A woman loving a woman, she imagines, is like a cane cutter stealing sugar. Beckoned by this rich image, I chose my title because I see each of the women's texts I read here as "stealing sugar" in a number of ways. The sugar they reclaim for their own use is the syrup of figurative language – the long-standing colonial tropes of Caribbean women as sugar, water, and flowers that these authors take up for their own poetic and political uses. It is the cane stock of their geographic and cultural landscape, the sugar plantations, gardens, and rivers that they reclaim as a space in which (post)colonial women can move in creative ways. And it is, of course, their sexuality, the sweetness of eroticism. The metaphoric phrase *stealing sugar* calls up the contested space of the cane field: a site of sexual violence and exploited labor, a Caribbean landscape that was never a natural topos but one constructed for colonial purposes. A central undertaking of my book is to draw parallels between women of color's sexuality and this manipulated cane-landscape. Slavery's writs restrained Afro-Caribbean women's ability to dispose of the sugar and the sexuality that their laboring bodies produced with equal brutality. France's Code Noir made it illegal on pain of whipping for slaves to sell sugar "for any reason or occasion whatsoever, even with their masters' permission," while the code's declaration of slaves' status as movable property made it legal for women's bodies – along with their productive, reproductive, and sexual labor – to be sold, inherited, and traded from before they were born until they died.⁴ If these are the orders of slavery, then how can an imagination of emancipation not include many ways of stealing sugar?

Placing my work under this title, I want to open a space to think of creative ways for envisioning both female sexuality, which is not a natural "orientation" but a historically constructed understanding of women's bodies, and landscape, which is not trees, rivers, or flowers but an imagined relationship between all these as something other than already formed entities. Instead, both sexuality and landscape emerge as ongoing processes that can be interrupted and redirected. Like cane fields, they are sites of continuing work that Caribbean women poets and novelists engage in complex ways. Recognizing their literary cane-work, I argue, stands to intervene incisively in several fields of contemporary scholarship. Plotting the sugar stealing of Caribbean women who love women means opening discursive space for sexuality studies to engage historically specific, previously unmapped erotic geographies, looking for what resistant sexualities mean outside the metropole and in the (cane) field.

At the same time, it means imagining space for postcolonial studies to map the material and symbolic contributions of historically unseen, feminized, and sexualized bodies to decolonizing nations, looking for resistance in muscles tensed in Lordean revolutionary eroticism as well as Fanonian revolutionary violence.⁵ Perhaps most resonantly, though, listening for stolen sugar means opening a call-and-response within black feminism: asking for dialogue that speaks with and beyond African North America's cotton-field languages, with and beyond Caribbean feminism's plotting of male-female cane field alliances, to imagine brown women keeping sweetness among themselves.

Thieving sugar has never been easy – sharp cane stalk can cut cane cutters – and so the work that follows is neither straightforward nor simple. Moving as precariously and carefully as bench trails between critical stylistics, history, anthropology, linguistics, black feminist theory, queer theory, and postcolonial studies,⁶ my readings explore the intersections of women's erotic love for women with issues of gender, colonialism, migration, labor history, violence, and revolutionary politics implicated in the literary topoi these texts reimagine. The texts' linguistic span reaches across Dutch-, English-, and French-language regions, and their time span reaches across the past century. When I began this project, I imagined working mostly with contemporary texts that spoke to current issues. In fact, however, what held my attention were their ancestors, “recovered” texts from the first half of the twentieth century. While much queer scholarship on the Global South begins by speaking about the present, I find it impossible to fully engage that present without taking stock of the erased stories of where heterogeneous sexual formations came from. With this in mind, I begin at the opening of the twentieth century, examining the period considered by most historians as that in which the modern lesbian subject emerged, and runs through its final decade to current debates on international gay and lesbian rights.

As I have conceptualized it, the book is divided into two sections. The first focuses on how recovering women-loving women's voices complicates received pictures of postcolonial cultural landscapes. Chapter 1, “Rose is my mama, stan-faste is my papa,” analyzes the performances of Surinamese women in turn-of-the-century Paramaribo, where working-class communities normalized sexual partnerships between women, and – never hidden or marginalized – *mati* (“girlfriends”) sang to female lovers in the town square on Sundays. Chapter 2, “Darkening the Lily,” turns to *Luminous Isle* (1934), an autobiographical novel by Jean Rhys's friend, the white Jamaican Eliot Bliss, and explores how

its representations of interracial same-sex desire “mix up” colonial geographies of whiteness. “Blue Countries, Dark Beauty,” chapter 3, excavates long-buried erotic poems to women written in the 1920s by Ida Faubert, the daughter of a Haitian president, and considers why, instead of the Paris Lesbos where she lived, she chose a Haiti of her imagination as the “natural” space to sketch desire between women. The second half focuses on how centering islanders’ expressions of desire disrupts the worldview of Eurocentric queer theories. “At the River of Washerwomen,” my chapter 4, opens queer readings of waterside love scenes in Mayotte Capécia’s *I Am a Martinican Woman* (1948), a novel made infamous by Frantz Fanon’s shredding criticism of its sexual politics, to show how material, historical circumstances complicate universalizing theories of the emancipatory value of sexual fluidity. Chapter 5, “Transforming Sugar, Transitioning Revolution,” looks at riverine intersections of race and gender in Michelle Cliff’s *No Telephone to Heaven* (1987), looking at how the mixed-race, gender-complex, male lesbian protagonist models expansive imaginations of decolonization. Finally, “Breaking Hard against Things,” chapter 6, examines how Dionne Brand maps a seaside confluence of anticolonial and sexual revolutions in her groundbreaking collection *No Language Is Neutral* (1990), reclaiming the beaches of Trinidad and Grenada as sites of embodied resistance.

I want to be clear, though: these are neither the only nor the “best” texts that speak of desire between Caribbean women. My choice of texts is based not solely on the commonality that each features same-sex desire but also on the key interventions that their poetics of decolonization stands to make in Caribbean, black feminist, queer, and postcolonial studies. As a case study of specific texts, this book is also a case study of the possibility of reconfiguring how we gender history and historicize sexuality: thievery and sweetness here fill in absences associated with “the Caribbean” and “woman” to imagine both differently – not as isolated islands in a sea but as a fiery sea of islands where cane and bodies burn insistently.⁷

Whatever You Want to Call It: A Working Vocabulary for Desire

Recognizing how Cliff’s question echoes like a refrain for me through the geographies and desires traced in these texts, I want to return to its specifics. For a woman to love another woman in the Caribbean: what would it mean, who

would it mean, and how would it mean in this sea of islands in which names and histories multiply volcanically? Every phrase of Cliff's comment and question reverberates with the difficulties of language for African diaspora sexuality studies. Homosexuality or lesbianism or gayness – what to call it? In the past fifteen years, *queer* has gained solid theoretical preference over *gay/lesbian* among Euro-American scholars. Teresa de Lauretis made the first high-profile use of *queer theory* in her introduction to an issue of *differences* in 1991 titled "Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities," in which she explained that the term's importance lay in its broadening of the conventional meanings of *gay* and *lesbian* and that the theory's queerness should be understood not as a consideration of same-sex desire but as the disruption of normative gender, sexuality, and relationships: "The term 'queer,' juxtaposed to the 'lesbian and gay' of the subtitle, is intended to mark a certain critical distance from the latter, by now established and often convenient formula. . . . the term 'Queer Theory' was arrived at in the effort to avoid all of these fine distinctions in our discursive protocols, not to adhere to any one of these terms, not to assume their ideological liabilities, but instead both to transgress and to transcend them – or at the very least problematize them."⁸ But in gender and sexuality studies *queer* itself has now become an established and convenient term from which scholars might mark critical distance. Emerging work on Global South sexual formations like Martin Manalansan's *Global Divas*, Megan Sinnott's *Toms and Dees*, Gayatri Gopinath's *Impossible Desires*, and Joseph Massad's *Desiring Arabs* challenges northern theorists to recognize why, in addition to positing that *queer* means many things, they must take seriously that *queer* is only one construction of nonheteronormative sexuality among many – and that listening to other languages, and others' historically specific sexual self-understandings, is crucial to broadening the field.⁹

So can a woman be *queer* in Patwa or Kreyòl or Sranan, and should she want to be? What vocabulary works for African diaspora grammars of gender and sexuality in the English-, French- and Dutch-based creoles that spread rhizomatically through the Americas' (former) slave societies? Scholars of black American sexualities have suggested many answers to this question over the past decade. In Kingston the Jamaican Forum of Lesbians, All Sexuals, and Gays (JFLAG) opts for *lesbian and gay*, and the organization's cofounder, the fiction writer and essayist Thomas Glave, notes that while he favors *queer*, this is not a term that people use for themselves in Jamaica or elsewhere in the Anglophone Caribbean.¹⁰ Speaking from a similar situation in African North

America, E. Patrick Johnson calls for the development of “quare studies”: *quare* being the black southern vernacular for *queer*, so that *quare* studies would be to *queer* studies what *womanist* is to *feminist* and what “reading is to throwing shade.”¹¹ But while the Caribbean women’s texts I look at do speak African pan-American languages, *quare* is not in them, and though some writers identify as *lesbian*, many do not. Sappho’s birth island only became the spatial signifier for female same-sex sexuality in 1870 and in Europe; and in the current-crossing archipelago of Caribbean islands, other histories and words circulated before and after the invention of that noun.¹²

Like Trinidad’s *jamettes*, Jamaica’s *man royals*, Haiti’s *madivines*, and Barbados’s *wicca*, many involved in same-sex relationships here have done so openly in the context of working-class Afro-Caribbean traditions called *mati* in Suriname, *zanmi* in Grenada, and *kambrada* in Curaçao. These last terms can refer without distinction to female friends or lovers: *mi mati* is like *my girl* in African American English, maybe *my friend* or maybe *my lover*. *Mati* and *zanmi* particularly are used more frequently in verbal constructions than in nominal ones. Women do *mati* work or make *zanmi*, verbalizing sexuality not as identity but as praxis, something constantly constructed and reconstructed through daily actions. As the doubly signifying Creole vocabulary for these practices suggests, *mati* love women in a language and culture that at once leave this eroticism unnamed or undifferentiated from other sharings between women and bend to communicate it without separating doing *mati* work from other aspects of their lives and languages in Caribbean working-class communities. *Lesbian* markedly comes from a Mediterranean island, Lesbos; but east and south of there and sinking deeper, *mati* comes from the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. Derived from the Dutch *maat* or *mate*, *mati* also means “mate” as in “shipmate”: she who survived the Middle Passage with me.¹³ On these crossings captive African women created erotic bonds with other women in the sex-segregated holds, resisting the commodification of their bought and sold bodies by *feeling* and *feeling* for their co-occupants on these ships. Once arrived in the New World, women in some parts of the Caribbean continued relationships with *mati* in female friendship and kinship networks. As early as 1793 Bryan Edwards remarks: “This is a striking circumstance; the term *shipmate* is understood among [West Indian slaves] as signifying a relationship of the most endearing nature; perhaps as recalling the time when the sufferers were cut off together from their common country and kindred, and awakening reciprocal sympathy from the remembrance of mutual affliction.”¹⁴ Two hundred years later, the anthro-

polologist Gloria Wekker traced linkages between these shipmate relationships that exist throughout the African diaspora and the sociosexual practice of *mati* in twentieth-century working-class Creole communities. And, she concludes, “slave women in other parts of the Caribbean developed comparable forms of relating to each other, pointing to the resiliency of West African cultural heritage.”¹⁵

At the turn of the twenty-first century, *lesbian* had entered Caribbean languages as a noun, but it was not the only word and history women could call on to speak desire for females. The adoption of gay and lesbian identity and human rights vocabulary strategically links JFLAG to well-known, well-funded groups like the International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (IGLHRC). At the same time, it makes the Jamaican organization vulnerable to imperialist rhetoric that sees Caribbean lesbians as passive victims of the Global South’s “underdevelopment” of sexual identity who need assistance from more advanced northern sisters. The answer to this conundrum, of course, is not to crown any one noun or adjective “most” emancipatory but to maintain productive tensions between them, and the vocabularies of the texts examined here speak to this. Some of the writers I read use European lexicons of same-sex sexuality while others use Afro-Caribbean ones; some interweave the two while others reject both. Dancing with these mobile terms and taking a cue from Creoles’ verbal constructions of sexuality (that you “make” rather than “are” *zanmi*), I avoid the culturally specific nouns *lesbian*, *dyke*, *zanmi*, *madivine*, and *sodomite* to designate same-sex sexuality in general in the Caribbean and opt for a verb phrase – *women who love women* – that aims to reach beyond shortcomings of either-or identity politics.¹⁶ To put Caribbean writers’ work in conversation as the expressions of *women who love women* means imagining a space in which *mati* and lesbianism enter into multilingual, multigenerational dialogue that, beginning in a volcanic global Southern archipelago, destabilizes the current cultural balance of power in queer/quare theory and LGBT activism. Like Cliff’s phrase “homosexuality or lesbianism or gayness, whatever you want to call it,” the many vocabularies possible under the umbrella “women who love women” work to dismantle the closet by decentering it, by positioning this trope in a spectrum of constructions of sexuality in which *mati*, *zanmi*, *bull dagger*, or *lesbian* all carry their own cultural and historical weight. In so doing, they leave conceptual room for what Rinaldo Walcott calls the “whatever” of black diaspora studies: the whatever, where “the uncertainties and commonalities of blacknesses might be formulated in the face of some room

for surprise, disappointment, and pleasure without recourse to disciplinary and punishing measures . . . a whatever that can tolerate the whatever of blackness without knowing meaning – black meaning, that is – in advance of its various utterances.”¹⁷ Black meaning, or Kreyòl meaning, or queer meaning, or *mati* meaning.

Still, a noun persists both in my verb phrase and in Cliff’s question: women who love women, a woman to love another woman – the problematic noun *woman* returns. It is both an easily available and uncomfortable word; I myself identify as *femme* rather than *woman*, for what I think are good reasons. Creating *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler famously demonstrates why *woman* is a heteropatriarchal invention that feminists should no longer naively, unproblematically organize around.¹⁸ But years before this foundational queer theory text, black feminist scholars already powerfully showed the limits of “*woman*” as a universal subject by arguing that slavery in fact systematically *ungendered* African females. Not only is no one born a *woman*, they documented, but for centuries enslaved Africans were prevented from becoming such a thing in the discursive and material universe of their captors. In this work “*woman*” emerges not as a universal signifier for a feminine female – *obinrin* is not the “same” as *woman*, as Oyèrónke Oyèwùmí, insightfully argues in her work on Yoruba gender – but as the name given to an exclusive, policed, and specifically European gender formation.¹⁹ Hortense Spillers’s chillingly insightful “*Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book*” (1987) and Rhoda Reddock’s precise, pioneering “*Women and Slavery in the Caribbean: A Feminist Perspective*” (1985) set the standard on blacks’ unwomaning in African North America and the Caribbean, respectively. Perhaps because of this history and as an example of a Caribbean “grammar book,” Creole languages speak gender in the region as more complex than any naturalized masculine-feminine duality. The absence of grammatical gender for Creole nouns (Sranan *wan* instead of Spanish *uno/una*) and pronouns (Haitian *li* instead of French *il/elle*) suggests a culturally specific grammar of gender that differs from Europe’s compulsory binary. This absence is accompanied by rich vocabulary to express female masculinity and male femininity. *Mannengre meid*, *man royal*, *masisi*, *makoumè* name masculine females and feminine males, and all – like *fanm* (*woman*) or *man* – are spoken of in the third person using gender-neutral pronouns *li* and *im*.²⁰ Yet despite these Creole gender complexities – though not all the authors I engage with call themselves *lesbian* or *mati* and though some might also call themselves *mannengre meid* or *man royal* – all identify as *women*. Indeed, part of what en-

gages me in their work is an ongoing wrestling with and refusal to release this word that is, like the continual revision of *shipmate*, a legacy of slavery and resistance.

To make historical sense of these writers' continual struggle with womanhood, consider more closely how unwomaning did and did not work under chattel slavery. Slave ships and cane fields, Spillers and Reddock document, constituted critical sites in which colonial machinery systematized Africans' violent ungendering in the eyes of their captors. Plans for slave galleys calculated the difference between kidnapped females and males only as one of volume occupied onboard: five females were allotted the same cargo area as four males. From this chilling detail, Spillers underscores how the passage's radical "unmaking" of identities – names, nationalities, religions, languages – also included forced gender undifferentiation, so that "the slave ship, its crew, and its human-as-cargo stand for a wild and unclaimed richness of possibility that is not interrupted, not 'counted'/'accounted' or differentiated, until its movement gains the land thousands of miles away from the point of departure. Under these conditions, one is neither female, nor male, as both subjects are taken into 'account' as quantities. The female in 'Middle Passage,' as the apparently smaller physical mass, occupies 'less room' in a directly translatable money economy. But she is, nevertheless, quantifiable by the same rules of accounting as her male counterpart."²¹ Once ships landed in the Caribbean, cane fields continued the dehumanization and/as unwomaning begun at sea. Caribbean plantations, Reddock details, leveled labor distinctions between the sexes even more severely than those in North America. For one, females were employed in cane gangs in equal or higher numbers than males, performing the same tasks but living up to five years longer. But West Indian planters' strategy of "buying rather than breeding" – working slaves to death and replacing them with new kidnapes rather than allowing slowed work for gestation, birth, or breast-feeding – also meant that pregnant workers received no differential treatment, and slave motherhood was not (as Spillers finds in North America) a way for females to become women. Conscripted to cut cane even in the ninth month of pregnancy, more than half of enslaved females never gave birth at all due to miscarriages, amenorrhea, and abortions.²² To justify this treatment of kidnapped Africans as neuter work units, imperial narratives insisted that ungendering preceded slavery and that, in fact, no significant markers ever distinguished black females from males – that something in the race's physical makeup made its members' animal sexual differences incapable

of adding up to desirable, recognizable femininity. Traveling to West Africa in 1555, William Towerson proclaimed that “men and women go so alike that one cannot know a man from a woman but by their breasts which in the most part be very foule and long, hanging down low like the udder of a goat”; Richard Burton saw African females not only as beasts but as beasts of burden, noting that their “masculine physique” matched males’ in “enduring toil, hardships, and privations” – proving the sexes equally fit for slavery.²³

While this machinery of violent unwomaning was never abandoned, it became increasingly insufficient to regulate power spirals between capitalism, slavery, sexuality, and reproduction as both the plantation system and organized slave resistance expanded in the eighteenth century. Their plantations ringed by waves of maroon wars and rebellions, colonizers experimented with promoting the birth of Creole blacks, whom they assumed less likely than Africans to revolt. So colonizers legislated social distinctions not only between males and females but also between females who participated in reproductive heterosexuality and those who did not. Tobago laws of 1798, for example, awarded the former a house, livestock, and clothing when married, spared them from five weeks’ work after childbirth, and granted total work exemption to mothers of six children.²⁴ But this push to gender through reproduction fell flat in the cane. Not only did the enslaved continue to resist bearing new chattel for their owners, so that birth rates never significantly increased, planters also vociferously refused to obey the laws, loudly arguing that the masculine, aggressive, and unruly nature of black females made any concessions to them unnecessary, foolish, and dangerous. When Britain outlawed whipping female slaves (a frequent cause of miscarriage), Mr. Hamden proclaimed to the Barbados legislature: “Our black ladies have rather a tendency to the Amazonian cast of character; and I believe that their husbands would be very sorry to hear that they were placed beyond the reach of chastisement.”²⁵ Ridiculing the feminine gender “black ladies,” Hamden’s counterassertion of “a tendency to the Amazonian” suggests more than it admits about the complex workings of gender, sexuality, and resistance that planters were attempting and failing to control. By the eighteenth century, *Amazonian* connoted female masculinity, female same-sex sexuality, and female warriors; and in an era that resented female slaves both as failed heterosexual reproducers and as potential rebels, this adjective intimates that planters saw black females’ resistant genders and sexualities, their stubborn unwifeness, enmeshed with the armed resistance threatening plantations, their stubborn enslavement.²⁶ Hamden’s statement

also insinuates that Caribbean planters' supposed solution to dangerous Amazonianness was not *compulsory motherhood*, as in North America, but *compulsory heterosexuality*: slave husbands, without actual patriarchal power, are evoked less as real people than as symbols of a heterosexual domination that could keep enslaved females properly docile. Caribbean slavery would compel black females to become women not so that they could be bred, but so that they could be hetero-fucked.

And they were, often by white men. In this archipelago where few European women settled, the presence of housekeepers, *ménagères* or *huishoudsters* — females of color in ongoing relationships with white males — at once institutionalized interracial heterosexuality and domesticized slavery's social imbalances, embedding them in the realm of the intimate in ways that partnerships between slaves could not. But these relationships also caught planters in a bind: the forced unwomaning of African females that had migrated so supply from slave ship to cane field stumbled when invited into the bedroom. White males sharing beds with brown females did not want to see their sexual consorts as almost-men, making their sex sodomy; nor did they want to equate them absolutely with animals, which would make their encounters bestiality. To navigate this bind, especially in cases of long-term concubines, colonial imaginations experimented with the idea that some females of African descent could be humanized and so feminized by relationships with white men. Exceptional specimens could become dark versions of women, that is, legitimate objects of white male heterosexual desire. This idea informs the imagination of Isaac Teale's famous "Sable Venus," which exclaims:

O sable queen! Thy mild domain
I seek, and court thy gentle reign
So soothing, soft and sweet;
Where mounting love, sincere delight
Fond pleasure, ready joys invite
And unbought raptures meet.²⁷

What makes sable beauties into women is how naturally, how sincerely they express interracial heterosexual desire, "mounting love" and "unbought raptures" for European male partners. Such love, planters rationalized, not only elevated interracial sex above the bestial but also mitigated slavery's inhumanity. "Love," writes M. de Chanvalon of Martinique, "the child of nature . . . inspires and invigorates all the thoughts and purposes of the Negro, and

lightens the yoke of . . . slavery.”²⁸ Increasingly, though, this love slipped from the yoke of slavery altogether, as housekeepers and their progeny were among those most frequently manumitted. Brown women first gendered, then freed through hetero-sex became increasingly visible presences in Caribbean colonies: Haiti’s free colored population skyrocketed from 500 in 1700 to 28,000 in 1789, and Cuba’s increased from 36,000 in 1774 to 153,000 in 1841.²⁹ On many islands free women of color quickly outnumbered white men, white women, and free men of color, standing Amazonianly as heads of their own households.

So how to manage this treacherous heterosexualization, which both justified keeping women of color under white men and emancipated them from the cane fields’ ungendering and unfreedom? Colonists responded by putting pen furiously to paper, writing checks on women of color’s freedom as well as on their womanness. Legal strictures – which, unlike laws favoring slave pregnancies, planters upheld – mounted a backlash against Afro-Creoles. Trinidad, Suriname, and Haiti were among the colonies to pass laws that limited mulattos’ right to own property and testify, and – in an attempt to limit dark beauties’ “refinements of voluptuousness” and “their influence over the men, and the fortunes lavished on them,” as the contemporary visitor Leonora Sansay writes of Haiti – forbade mulattas to be called *madame*, wear silks or jewelry, or appear in public with uncovered hair.³⁰ These sex-specific strictures not only aimed to keep women of color from being classed too closely to white ladies but also legally restricted their ability to be gendered like them, ensuring that the latter’s femininity never looked or sounded like the former’s (even if they attracted the same sexual partners). Colonial chronicles bolstered this unwomaning by imagining new paths to old stereotypes. They carefully mythologized a split between the luminous attraction of white ladyhood’s receptive femininity and the glittering seduction of brown womanhood’s aggressive voluptuousness – which, by ensnaring partners indiscriminately, proved a kind of forceful masculine libido in drag. Edwards cites Teale’s and Chanvalon’s assessments of sable Venuses’ prodigious love and then goes on to strongly object to any possible humanization or distinction of the female through eroticism. Noting the “licentious and dissolute manners” of both sexes of “Negroes in the West Indies,” he retorts: “That passion therefore to which (dignified by the name of Love) is ascribed the power of softening all the miseries of slavery, is mere animal desire. . . . This the Negroes, without doubt, possess in common with the rest of the animal creation, and they indulge it, as inclination prompts, in an almost promiscuous intercourse with the other sex.”³¹ Under patriarchs’

pens, a *so very feeling*, Oshun-like eroticism was at once an avenue to the female of color's humanization and proof of its impossibility; it at once promised to elevate her to womanness and returned her to unevolved femaleness.³²

And so Cliff's question continues to echo louder and louder for me: what does it mean for a brown woman to love another woman in the Caribbean, when both the verb *love* and the noun *woman* have been such volatile, policed concepts in the ships, cane, and beds of the region's history? Slavery's overlapping, conflicting, violent mythologies trace historically specific reasons why heterosexuality becomes a dense site of power transfer in the Afro-Caribbean, as well as what remains at stake in resisting its compulsions. They also trace why womanness is such fraught, contested terrain in the archipelago: volcanic terrain whose destructive potential does not—especially in the years just after emancipation—dissuade Caribbeans from claiming their right to inhabit it, asserting their need to decolonize it. Tracing the poetics of this Amazonian decolonization, I insistently background the copious imperial writs that hypersexualized and unwomaned females of African descent and instead foreground imaginary landscapes in which the enslaved and their descendants gender and eroticize their own kind: an imagination that often survives, as Brand writes, in fire-ravaged “triangles, scraps, prisons of purpled cloth” asking to be read with special care.³³ Such scraps insist that while conscription into white womanhood was always already a trap, the legal denial of brown womanness was always already part of material bondage; so for writers to proclaim that females did not have to become women would not be new in the African Americas, would not be in and of itself emancipatory. In using the phrase *women who love women*, then, and in respecting that the masculine, feminine, and androgynous cultural workers whose texts I analyze all return to this term, I remain painfully attuned to the historical reverberations of a contested noun, a problematic marker of humanity.

At the same time—just as to assume that *mati* means the same thing as *mate* would be to miss Creolization altogether—to assume that calling oneself woman, *uma*, or *fanm* means accepting colonial masculine-feminine, human-animal divisions is also to miss the difference that Creolization makes. Not despite but partly because of histories of enslavement, the Afro-Caribbean woman seems poised to be rescripted as what we might in another language call black queer or quare gender. Exclusionary, “pure” womanness was as much an invention of white supremacy as of heteropatriarchy; and to undercut the power of this invention, Caribbeans stretched, hybridized, recolored, reshaped,

redressed and reformulated this category so that it no longer remains the same flattening, oppressive one that queer theorists critique. Systematically denied slaves in the cane fields, it is sugar that they continuously thieved, broke, melted, burned, fermented, and reconstituted to meet their needs: insisting on being both/and, either/neither, endlessly shifting combinations of black ladies and Amazons, women and not-women, *obinrin* and *machas*,³⁴ making this strategically unstable composite mean *otherly* than what colonists ever imagined. Like the fair-skinned, haloed images of Santa Barbara that Cubans and Brazilians transculturated into representations of the Yoruba *orishá Shango* (Kawo Kabiosile)—Shango, the protector of female masculinity and female same-sex desire; Shango, energy of revolution and social justice—*woman*, *uma*, and *fanm* will be transculturated to mean radically, explosively, electrically differently.³⁵ When a woman loves a woman in the Caribbean, none of these words will mean the same as they do in the Global North.

The Spring of Her Look:
Landscapes of Work, Landscapes of Desire

“What would it mean for a woman to love another woman in the Caribbean?,” Cliff asks, then going on to clarify, “not in a room in the Mediterranean, not in a Paris bar, not on an estate in England.”³⁶ And the specificity of place, in the Caribbean, is much more than a backdrop for eroticism in the texts of Caribbean women who love women. Like the African bodies claimed and altered by colonialism, the region’s waterways, flora, and earth constitute concrete, contested sites whose manipulated materiality matters complexly. Sugar islands, islands planted with tamarind, mangoes, star apples, bougainvillea, breadfruit, and palm trees, full of aluminum mines, oil fields, resorts, communal yards, and *hounforts*:³⁷ if anything in the archipelago has been as constantly, systematically transformed, exploited, contested, and subverted as the colonial invention called Caribbean womanhood, it is the colonial invention called Caribbean landscape. Since shortly after Columbus’s arrival, Europeans have worked to “fix” this topos for cultivation and exploitation. Beginning in the sixteenth century, ships transplanted African, Asian, and Pacific cash crop (sugar cane) and food (breadfruit) plants in the same vessels that carried slaves and indentured laborers; and—in a constant war with rain forests’ unruly, unprofitable biodiversity—planters conscripted those workers to create monocul-

tural plantations that would fulfill European nations' capitalist and imperial desires. Since Columbus's very logbooks, European observers have also worked to fix this topos on paper, simultaneously recording and inventing West Indian "nature" through obsessive travelers' descriptions, landscape painting, and encyclopedic natural histories (including those of Bryan Edwards). In these texts, colonialist logic—the logic that drives enterprises from the plantation to the free-trade zone or the all-inclusive hotel—imagines the landscape in which enslaved, indentured, or underpaid laborers work as a natural given, a passive, preexisting totality that the plantation owner charts and "develops." But landscape—which is not trees, rivers, or flowers, but an *imaginary way of organizing these into a "whole"*—in fact appears not as a preexisting entity but as a continual practice: one that, like the invention of womanhood, proves subject to constant disruption and rerouting.

One early European landscape artist who covertly experimented with such rerouting was Agostino Brunias. Commissioned to paint for the colonial elite, Brunias produced very few "pure" landscapes. Instead, he peopled idealized outdoor scenes with colorful, active figures—notably women of color of various skin tones and occupations—dancing, smoking, returning from market, washing, selling fruit, or enjoying the smell of flowers. One such humanized landscape, *Three Caribbean Washerwomen by a River* (c. 1770–80), features two mulattas and a black woman literally in the landscape, submerged to the ankles in a stream bordered by a cliff and hanging foliage while gracefully wringing, beating, and laying out white clothes and talking to each other (figure 1). In the painting's interweaving of blues, greens, and browns, the diversity of the Caribbean landscape appears not as a space of feminized passivity but as a space of active, ongoing work—and in fact, active women's work. Not only the site of work, landscape also constitutes work here. *Three Caribbean Washerwomen* traces parallels between the women's work in the landscape (ordered, we imagine, by colonial planters) and Brunias's work in producing landscapes (contracted, in fact, by colonial planters). The clothing wrung by the central mulatta recreates the curving form of the vines hanging above her, while the cloth beaten by the black woman carves an outline similar to the mountains over her shoulder. These visual echoes remind us that Brunias's hand shaped these supposedly natural features in the same way that the washerwomen's hands shape clothes. It also emphasizes that creating a stylized relationship between supposedly empty, passive land forms and savage, self-offering tropical flora that colonists could justify exploiting is intellectual labor that, like the manual labor of



Agostino Brunias, *Three Caribbean Washerwomen by a River*.
Painting, oil on canvas, 30.5 × 22.9 cm, c. 1770–80

bleaching stains on white clothing, erases much to produce the desired effect. The whiteness of the clothes also recall the painter's blank canvas, intimating that the conceptual work of producing landscape is not a flat reproduction but, like the working over of that other cloth, a process of manipulating, twisting, bleaching, and reshaping material to suit colonialists' needs.

While landscaping, like laundry, is ostensibly done here in the service of local whites, that women of color are performing work paralleling the painter's also has another implication. Washing out the Caribbean, reshaping its landscape, is the kind of work that women of color have always done and can, in fact, do on their own account. Or, as Jill Cassid puts it in her fine study of colonial landscaping: "'Landscape' [should] be understood not merely as a European genre of painting and gardening or technique for the production of imperial power but also as a vital but overlooked medium and ground of contention for countercolonial strategies."³⁸ Working not only as physical laborers on Caribbean lands, female field hands and their descendants also took on that other intellectual land work of inventing landscape. Washerwomen and their *zanmi* continually imagined their own, anticolonial topographies, talking out relationships to surrounding rivers, mountains, and trees over laundry and leisure. In this book, I seek out the submerged epistemologies plotted in their fields. The Caribbean reinvented in these women's landscapes will be an interactive ecology in which the colonized struggle for interpretive power by asserting the right to imagine a geography in which they can live, wash, talk, work, and rest safely. Like the women themselves, roses, everlasting, jasmine, oranges, and cane—all transplanted to the region by European colonists—perform another move to enter this ecology. They travel from the position of commodity to that of living being and interlocutor, talking to the women as the once thingified women talk to each other in the river. This move is not simply a "cultural difference" in viewing landscape but a challenge to the empiricism of empire. As these imaginary mappings refuse the passivity and stasis of *nature morte* (still life) and *nature à l'état brut* ("unimproved" nature), they—like the constant migration of rivers—reshape land that conquistadors hoped would stand still under their feet. At the same time, they question whether any of the living matter that the colonizer's model of the world posited as (socially) dead and empty—brute nature or brute humans in need of civilization—really were such. They assert, instead, that vines and waters, mountains and trees, women and slaves interact in complex ecological systems in which their agency is continually both undercut and reestablished, drowned and dredged up.

If landscape and work run together in *Three Caribbean Washerwomen*, so do work and sexuality. These water-soaked women's poses evoke a brown female sexual availability that washes through the West Indian terrain as "naturally" as their riverine work—whose nature, as seen in the manipulated shapes of laundry and land, is figured as ongoing artifice that female artisans stand to intervene in. All three women are beautiful and bare-chested in the river, breasts thrust together by the work of washing. The standing mulatta wears a tellingly scarlet cloth tied loosely around her waist to reveal the length of her left thigh, whose fullness seems at once a product of hard work and a promise of abundant sexuality. From breasts to thighs, the suggestive ways in which work and eroticism intermingle in these laundresses' bodies intimate how inextricably sexual and manual labor were woven together in slavery. They trace how, like harvesting cane or washing clothes, sexual activity formed part of the unpaid work slaves were legally bound to perform for owners—work they performed so regularly that their sexualization became a standard element of Caribbean tableaux. Since Brunias's paintings were sold to male owners of great houses and mansions, this brown female sexuality initially seems to run as effortlessly as the river toward white masculine viewers who could enjoyably fantasize about claiming heterosexual connections with the same entitlement with which they claimed Caribbean lands, and vice versa.

But these round-thighed brown women crouching before one another, standing open-legged toward each other, suggest another possible "natural" direction for Caribbean female eroticism in these constantly replanted, reconfigured tropics. The subjects are actually not looking out at the (putatively white male) viewer at all. Instead, the washerwomen gaze intently at each other; and their pleasurable engagement, their graceful leaning together at once humanize their work and homo-eroticize their lovely coworkers. This electric shared gaze turns the washerwomen's river into a space that (reappropriating Roumain's phrase) I call "the spring of her look": somewhere women keep fresh water and fresh eyes for each other, refusing to imagine them as commodifiable natural resources for someone else to survey or claim. The painting's most intriguing figure is, for me, the seated mulatta whose back faces us. This washerwoman has completely stopped working—and completely turned her bare breasts and (laughing, I imagine) eyes away from viewers, toward the black and brown laundresses in front of her. An alternative landscape and womanscape could be gathering in these eyes: the spring of her look, which contemplates river, trees, mountains, breasts, thighs, and open mouths in ways that cannot be

intercepted by the landowner who buys this Brunias landscape and its cleverly posed washerwomen. The imaginary space of the mulatta's gaze, working over three Caribbean women by a river, suggests to me one of the most important connections between land and female beloved that I explore. Like landscape, female sexuality has never been passive ground for fulfilling imperial desires, but rather, as Arjun Appadurai writes of the former, "an organised field of 'social practices,' a form of work . . . and a form of negotiation between sites of agency" that women of African descent have always taken on for themselves.³⁹ Just as they reorganized the field of social practices that created landscape, so too did women of color workers reorganize those that invented female sexuality, carving out creative space to imagine eroticism working for them. Recent studies, including Hilary McD. Beckles's *Centering Woman*, illustrate how housekeepers used sex with white landowners to receive benefits ranging from manumission to cash with which to buy property.⁴⁰ In this project, I focus on how enslaved women and their descendants used *sex with each other* to effect a different kind of erotic autonomy, on how same-sex eroticism enters into the history of sexual labor in the Caribbean as a practice by which women take control of sexuality as a resource they share with each other.

What does it mean not only for women to love women in the Caribbean but also for us to engage these lovers as activists in their erotic and sexual practices? The following chapters chart women's reclaiming of eroticism as a wellspring of resistance to colonial symbolic and economic orders. I mean this term in the sense explored by Audre Lorde in her landmark essay "The Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power": as a sharing of deep, possibly but not necessarily sexual feeling that emerges as a resource with the power to motivate individual and collective change.⁴¹ The chapters also trace an intersecting stream of resistance that runs through taking back sexuality as a powerful "commodity" (to rework a phrase from Luce Irigaray) that women keep for themselves.⁴² Some recent queer scholarship has chosen to downplay the centrality of same-sex sexual activity as a category of analysis, privileging myriad forms of queering gender and sexual norms including erotic friendships, spinsterhood, and masturbation. However, I maintain that both the erotic and the specifically sexual reclaiming of women of color's bodies remain crucial points of consideration in a West Indian context. It examines the importance of women of color's mutual sharing of eroticism – their shipmate-like *feeling for each other* when, as (possible descendants of) reified, enslaved, *unwomanly* workers, they were not supposed to feel. But it also highlights the importance of their mutual sharing

of sexuality—their *feeling* each other’s breasts, thighs, and waists when their (ancestresses’) bodies, as working and sexual commodities, were supposed to be the exclusive property of white men.

In Haiti, *tè* (land) is another word for vagina; in Trinidad, *wuk* (work) is another word for sex.⁴³ My interest concerns how women of color reclaim *tè* and *wuk* for themselves—in both senses of both words—and how this reappropriation works and falls short as a strategy for resisting the imperial logic that naturalizes the exploitation of territories and bodies alike. The reclaiming of sexuality as alienated labor emerges most clearly in chapter 1’s discussion of the practice of *matiwroko* (or *mati* work) in Suriname, where Creole women engage in a system of relationships that views sexuality neither as a natural given nor as an identificatory marking. Instead, like other work, it emerges as a series of activities that these women can perform or refuse, accept or transform, enact or rescript. The linkage of sexuality and work continues in chapter 2, where a white woman’s refusal to embrace the roles of wife and mother is simultaneously imagined as a sexual and a career choice—a decision to love women and to pursue a career she loves. In chapters 4 and 6, the site of work is consistently imagined as the site of same-sex eroticism in the texts of Capécia and Brand, whose characters’ working and sexual bodies are reclaimed through parallel reimaginings. Moreover, providing a counterpoint, it is the lack of working bodies in chapter 3 that ultimately emerges as one of the chief rifts in the utopian gynoerotic vision of Faubert’s poetry. In the geographies and sexualities of these texts, the link between woman-to-woman eroticism and landscape is not simply that both are (mistakenly) assumed as natural, but that the cultural production of both depends on their erased connection to a third term, work. After all, nothing is natural in the fabricated tropical paradise of the West Indies because it has always already been under workers’ hands.

Patronized by planters and governors, Brunias’s insufficiently colonial landscapes were quickly reappropriated by the enslaved and their allies. In campaigns for emancipation mounted during eighteenth-century revolutions, abolitionists used these paintings as propaganda to prove the humanity of the Africans that slave owners had likened to apes and tropical fruit.⁴⁴ Toussaint L’Ouverture, the brilliant leader of the Haitian revolution that toppled slavery in the region’s richest colony in 1791, wore a coat decorated with buttons featuring miniature Brunias landscapes. One on display at the Smithsonian Institution sports sumptuously dressed mulatta and black women standing tall in a landscape of beautiful palm trees. For Toussaint, too, these images of ennobled

black women in dignified landscapes must have looked like freedom. What might the revolutionary impact of such humanized land and woman images be, then, when the work of revisioning the social construction of Caribbean terrains and bodies is taken on by women of color themselves? What would it mean to the postcolonial Caribbean imagination if Brunias's washerwomen could describe the building of landscape and desire in their own terms? In the following chapters, I answer these questions by turning, literally, to texts penned by Caribbean washerwomen. Their writings, along with those of Afro-Creole domestic workers, brown ladies of leisure, and female revolutionaries, paint a "spring of her look" that washes out, blurs, mourns, electrifies, and sweetens the imperial lay of Caribbean lands in unscripted ways. When the washerwoman turns to face us, flora and female sexuality cease to lie still like *so many things* and begin to turn insistently like *so many actions*—like ongoing choreography that can always be interrupted and redirected.

Like Thieving Sugar: (Mati) Working Creole Metaphorics

One of these dance-like actions will be putting together sentences, the daily, lifelong reworking of words and images. Something as simple as a figurative phrase—like *thieving sugar*—can mean a lot, poetically and politically. In an archipelago in which what empire charted as "physical reality"—flowers, trees, land forms, sexed bodies, sexual natures—has been constantly, tactically remade by both colonialists and countercolonialists, the elasticity of figurative language becomes a vital tool for reconfiguring those fields of social practice that make Caribbean and woman what they "are." As Alejo Carpentier famously put it, a "return to the real" cannot be sufficient to challenge the empiricism of empire: for "what is the history of America if not a chronicle of the marvelous in the real?"⁴⁵ Challenges to the linearity of the literal punctuate Caribbean literary and oral cultures, in which a command of Anansi stories, proverbs, extended metaphors, and double-entendres flourishingly prove speakerly skill. Certainly, this "feeling for language, for imagery, and for the expression of abstract ideas through compressed and allusive phraseology" is, as the Jamaican linguist Velma Pollard notes, a West African inheritance.⁴⁶ But just as certainly this language play constitutes a practice that, like imaginations of Oshun and Shango, Creoles transculturated to serve their countercolonial conceptual needs in the Americas.

In Suriname, for example, the enslaved crafted *odo*—(traditionally) women’s sayings or proverbs—that voiced their understanding of the power of feminine gender and sexuality as work, not as artless nature. “Ya na wan uma: yu pata smara, ma yu safu ala meti!” (You’re a woman: you have a small pot, but you soften all meat!), quips one, speaking the feminized labor of cooking and “giving sweetness” as something far from subjection.⁴⁷ And what may be the nation’s most popular *odo* imagines tropical flora and women sharing an ability to take strength from adversity rather than succumbing passively to outside pressure. “Mi na banabon, a moro doti y’e trowe, a moro mi tya’ bana” (I’m a banana tree: the more dirt you throw on me, the more bananas I bear), women say, multiplying sweetness under duress.⁴⁸ These metaphors refuse the pseudo-science of colonial chronicles that chart the properties of banana trees and black females in very different ways. Their figures of comparison (metaphor, simile, analogy) speak back to an imperial obsession with separation and categorization that divides human from slave, female from woman, man from nature. Instead, they *make sense through connection*—through a constant negotiation between “unlike” terms in which only relationality can make meaning happen. From its title onward, then, *Thieving Sugar* centers on metaphors of landscape and sexuality because these have long proven central to Caribbean women’s poetics of erotic decolonization. I approach their metaphors not as rarified literary tropes but as *everyday praxes of black feminism*.

I engage these imaginative comparisons because such metaphors make relational, black feminist sense of a history in which sugar, water, womanness, sex have been contested, explosive terrains. At the same time, it makes just that kind of sense to read their metaphors as points for opening dialogue not only with complex history making but with contemporary theory making. The intellectual work of enunciating regionality and sexuality (perhaps) no longer passes through travelogues or planter-commissioned landscape paintings. But it does, often, still pass through mappings of imaginative geographies, as writers and scholars speak back to imperial and heteropatriarchal world orders by contesting their lay of the land. As far-reaching as their banana trees, the metaphoric lands and waters of Caribbean women who love women stand to revise these recent theoretical landscapes in provocative ways. Not unlike the poems and novels of Surinamese *mati* and Jamaican lesbians, Caribbean and queer theories are saturated with spatial metaphors. Unlike these, however, such theory often misses intersections between nationality, race, gender, and sexuality also in need of decolonization. In the case of West Indian scholar-

ship, spatial figures are drawn largely from the so-called natural world, which, writers contend, is not a passive thing but a crucial actor in regional histories and imaginations. Beginning with the groundbreaking work of Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau, and Raphaël Confiant, Caribbean theorists of *créolité* moved from a search for African “roots” to the imagination of “mangroves of virtualities,” an image that employs the rhizomatic mangrove swamp as a standard vehicle for conceiving the Caribbean as a space of constant cultural intergrowth and interaction between blacks, browns, yellows, and whites.⁴⁹ Another influential work, Édouard Glissant’s *Caribbean Discourse*, explores the abyss of the sea as a metaphor for the turbulence and opacity of Caribbean histories.⁵⁰ Yet neither the *créolistes* nor Glissant address these landscapes’ gendering. Does the mangrove retain the swamp’s dangerous, sticky femininity? Does Glissant’s frightening sea keep its conventional motherliness? Nor do the *créolistes* move to imagine interlocking mangrove vines as a space for viewing a multiplicity of desires like those that crisscross in the spring of her look, any more than Glissant makes account for the sexual and gender fluidity of the watery Martinican folkloric figure *manman dlo* or the Cuban ocean *orishá Olokun*.

While Glissant’s *Poetics of Relation* includes a diatribe against feminism, the surface gender blindness of Bernabé et al’s *In Praise of Creoleness* poses its own problems.⁵¹ Take, for example, the passage in which the now famous mangrove metaphor first appears: “Creoleness is our primitive soup and our continuation, our primeval chaos and our mangrove swamp of virtualities. We bend toward it [*vers elle*], enriched by all kinds of mistakes and confident in the necessity of accepting ourselves as complex.”⁵² The authors’ commitment to a poetics of complexity finds expression in the initial metaphors, whose vehicles – from the biological diversity of primitive soup to that of the mangrove – express *créolité*’s irreducible multiplicity. Ostensibly, this praise of the fantastically, diversely (re)productive landscape remains gender neutral. Nonetheless, the grammatical gender of the invented noun *créolité* enables a persistent, conventional feminization of the fertile topoi associated with it: the moist, evergrowing mangrove swamp, the primitive soup that images primal birth and, in the double meaning of soup, women’s reproductive labor of cooking. This feminization is heightened by the immediately following reference to *créolité* as *elle* (she). In this reference, gendering quickly blends into sexualization and heterosexualization as the male poets imagine themselves leaning into this *elle*. On the one hand, gender and sexuality problematically remain nonissues here in that they are not addressed. The passage goes on to enumerate cultural ex-

pressions that the authors feel *créolité* should embrace – architecture, culinary arts, painting, economics – but it never brings up (un)gender, (coerced) sexuality, or even family.⁵³ Yet on the other hand, gender and sexuality remain fundamental issues in the authors’ imagination of *créolité* in that the feminization of Caribbean topoi (echoing the colonial vision of Brunias’s era of landscape portraiture) is coded as so natural that they see no need to render it explicit or problematic. Nor do they see a need to explicate or problematize their male desire for these feminized topoi, which also appears so natural as to be beyond bearing note. In short, the most renowned theorists of inclusive Creoleness often do not recognize how their very neocolonial rootedness in binary gender and sexual identities undercuts the complexity that they express as fundamental to their project. Countering these blocks to a would-be porous regional imagination, in this work I ask: How might the flowers coloring the songs of Surinamese *mati* fit into *créolité*’s mangrove of virtualities, and are the seas where Cliff’s or Brand’s female characters embrace women related to Glissant’s somber waters? How does reading these *mati*-worked metaphors reformulate Caribbeanness as a space that diffracts and recomposes both race and ethnicity as well as gender and sexuality?

The metaphorical ground for women who love women in the Global South is no more decolonized in canonical queer theory. While postcolonial queer theorists like Manalansan, Sinott, and Gopinath have recently and crucially pushed for new queer cartographies, this push comes in response to sexuality studies’ longtime provincialism. Also emerging in the past century’s final decade, queer studies’ foundational spatial metaphors were set up to map the (generally urban) contours of the Global North – a geographic bias that helps explain why black queer studies can quite acceptably take African North America as its ground zero. Inspired by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s landmark study *The Epistemology of the Closet*, too many northern studies of same-sex sexuality stay out of springs or swamps and close to bedrooms.⁵⁴ Their cartographies often rely on standard metaphors of interior and exterior space, of the closet and of “coming out.” This division reflects an Enlightenment-inspired bifurcation between the invisible and the visible, between private and public expressions of desire in which invisibility and privacy are linked to oppression, while access to visibility and publicity is aligned with empowerment.⁵⁵

Never questioning the colonial implications of this Enlightenment vision – which relegated entire continents to darkness and subhumanity – Sedgwick synthesizes the near universality soon ascribed to this visible-invisible binary

as she explains: “A lot of the energy of attention and demarcation that has swirled around issues of homosexuality since the beginning of the nineteenth century, in Europe and the United States, has been impelled by the distinctively indicative relation of homosexuality to wider mappings of secrecy and disclosure, and of the private and the public . . . oppressively, durably condensed in certain figures of homosexuality. ‘The closet’ and ‘coming out,’ now verging on all-purpose phrases for the potent crossing and recrossing of almost any politically charged lines of representation, have been the gravest and most magnetic of those figures. The closet is the defining structure for gay oppression in this century.”⁵⁶ The passage’s too-smooth move from the specific to the totalizing draws a queer map in which, once again, Europe and North America occupy center stage, generating the “rule” to which all other geographies can only provide proof or exception. Initially, Sedgwick proposes to discuss the closet as the figure of a particular time and place, nineteenth- and twentieth-century Europe and North America. But by the end of the paragraph, this northern block has once again come to stand for the universal as its spatial signifier of queer sexuality—the closet—is named “the defining structure for gay oppression in this century,” a claim whose validity is bounded by no geographic markers. As with the heterosexualization of the mangrove, the universalization of the Euro-American closet appears so natural as to need no explanation.

In fact, “the closet” seems to work not (only) as the space that confines queers but also as the space that confines queer studies, whose closed-off perspective—closed off, too often, to the world outside the Global North—speaks to the field’s early myopia. Since Sedgwick’s landmark text, several queer of color writers have wisely seen fit to signify on the closet, drawing attention to what it would mean to map other culturally specific sexual formations. Jason King’s consideration of black and Latino MSMS (Men who have Sex with Men) and homothugs in “Remixing the Closet: The Down-Low Way of Knowledge” is one of the most often cited of these.⁵⁷ Reclassed and recolored, though, closets and other queer mappings often continue to take Global Northernness for granted. Stuck between the closet and its remixes, canonical and queer of color theorists alike can fail to open ground to consider how an obsession with inside versus outside, closet versus street, is or is not relevant to field and yard cultures like those of the Caribbean, where home life is generally lived outdoors and the division between interior and exterior space does not hold the same cultural anxiety. Is being “out”/doors a mark of privilege for cane field workers

or washerwomen? And for how many Caribbeans is a closet a standard feature of houses?⁵⁸ Unintentionally and unfortunately, theorists of the closet keep their interior doors closed to the erotic geographies of these “outside” African diaspora cultures – to thievable cane fields, washerwomen’s unruly rivers, and insistent banana trees, among other possibilities. The work of this book is thus also to ask: Can Bliss’s mountain or Faubert’s tropical garden join and challenge the closet as a culturally specific imagination of same-gender loving space? How can mapping othered, postcolonial spaces not only queer but fundamentally destabilize emerging geographies of sexuality? In reading their landscapes this way, we position ourselves to see not only that Caribbean women have long imagined ground on which to challenge colonialism and heterocentrism but also that their texts provide ground from which to challenge narrow conceptions of Caribbean and queer studies.

To plot these landscapes and their ramifications, I read the texts of Caribbean women who love women closely – intimately, in my way – taking time and care with their nouns, verbs, metaphors, and images. I consider this critical praxis part of the African diaspora epistemology that the texts enter into, a recognition of what *orishá* devotees call *ofo ashe*: the power of every word uttered or traced to reshape the “real” world. I also consider it a strategy for leveling the academic field, giving women of color’s words the weight usually reserved for literary and theoretical masters. For despite my critique of some foundational assumptions of Caribbean and queer theory, I am hopeful for the dynamism of both fields. In the twenty years since the work of Butler and Sedgwick put gender studies on the academic map, queer theory has found itself increasingly faced with an impetus to change still imperial assumptions about the superior advances of Euro-American thinking on gender and sexuality. At the same time, African diaspora and Caribbean studies are faced with an imperative to recognize sexuality as a crucial category of analysis. The joyous and energetic scholarship gathered by E. Patrick Johnson and Mae Henderson in the groundbreaking *Black Queer Studies* makes this lightning clear.⁵⁹ The question that looms is not if queer and African diaspora scholarship will be diversified, but how: which voices will be called on and/or tokenized to join the most prominent scholars in the field? Or, to paraphrase the Trinidadian writer-activist Colin Robinson: the challenge is not simply to imagine the same-sex loving Caribbean but to *imagine it imaginatively*.⁶⁰

This book stems from the belief that literature – with its room for ambiguity, for the creative redrawing of slave ships, cane fields, and “the spring of

her look” – remains particularly fertile territory for such imaginative imagination. Choosing to engage women’s work of (re)plotting landscape as theorizing and countertheorizing, I look to rigorously apply the reading methodology outlined by the black feminist critic Barbara Christian. In her watershed “The Race for Theory,” Christian forcefully argues that in the writings of people of color, “theory” may not be a discrete genre. Rather, it emerges as a way of knowing and illuminating configurations of race, class, gender, and sexuality that is inscribed in literary texts themselves.⁶¹ As I consider the women whose words I study not only as literary figures but as theorists of race, gender, and sexuality, dissolving divides between theorizing and imagining becomes one of the chief interventions my work looks to offer postcolonial and queer studies. While it is of paramount importance that we have theorists who engage with, deconstruct, and reconstruct now canonical cultural and gender theory, a real restructuring of postcolonial and sexuality studies will only take place when the academy listens to *other kinds of theorists*. In establishing space for Caribbean woman-loving theory in particular and global queer theories in general, we must search for foundations not only in the work of theorists like the *créolistes* or Sedgwick but also in the subversive and silenced ways of knowing gender and sexuality embedded in colonial subjects’ texts. It is by dialoguing with concepts of decolonization, queerness, and theory in this way that queer and postcolonial theory will not only come in different colors and genders but will also come to be decolonized; that we will see not only different flora planted here but also a different organization to the field.

What would it mean for a woman to love another woman in the Caribbean, and to plot her bodily and imaginative work of womanness, eroticism, and decolonization nowhere stable, nowhere fixed, nowhere conventional . . . but in the malleable, explosive, volcanic force of the so often buried words she puts together to speak her body, her desires, her work, her island?