Panel Proposal: Re-imagining National, Gendered, and Migratory Spaces in the Caribbean Consciousness

This panel will engage the social, political, and psychic spaces of nationalism, gender and sexuality, and diasporic identity re-imagined in the works of Caribbean and Caribbean diasporan writers.

**Reclaiming Sexual Identities in Patricia Powell’s *A Small Gathering of Bones* and Curdella Forbes’s “A Permanent Freedom.”**

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In this paper, I examine Powell’s *A Small Gathering of Bones* and Forbes’s “A Permanent Freedom,” two texts separated by fourteen years during which several significant social and legal changes as well as attitudinal shifts regarding alternative gay identities have occurred. Social activism regarding the topic of gay rights within the region has been dynamic and has inaugurated various organizations and forums around the issue of sexual orientation. Powell’s novel, set in “one of the most socially turbulent periods in [Jamaica’s] modern history” when the scourge of HIV/AIDS was just emerging on the national and international scene, and when a majority of the population subscribed to “deeply conservative religious/homophobic beliefs” (Glave vii), highlights the challenges of non-normative sexual identities and homosexual unions within such a context. Forbes’s “A Permanent Freedom” explores possibilities for reconciliation between the two diametric and frequently polarized concepts/consciousnesses of heterosexuality and homosexuality, and thus presents alternatives to hegemonic antagonisms often portrayed in fictional works on the subject. In my analysis of these texts, I engage an eclectic theoretical approach, using formulations of multiplicity that fracture binaries, and allow the reading of multi-voiced texts. I deploy Gloria Anzaldúa’s border theory, Nourbese Philip’s concept of “Voiced/Silence,” and Mikhail Bakhtin’s heteroglossia which together represent the multiple interpretive frames needed to examine *Small Gathering* and “Permanent Freedom.” These formulations help to reveal the ruptures in normativized heterosexuality and the ways in which the narratives suggest a “deep yearning for wholeness…and belong[ing] that is both material and existential, both physical and psychic” (Alexander *Pedagogies* 281) to heal the dismemberment wrought by social exclusion and ostracism.

**BIO**

Marie Sairsingh-Mills holds a Bachelor’s degree from the University of Miami, a Master’s degree in Education from University of Southern Mississippi, and is a Ph.D. student in the Department of English at Howard University. She is currently on study leave from The College of The Bahamas, where she is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English. Her research interests include Caribbean Literature, gender and cultural studies and African American literature.
In Edwidge Danticat’s *Breath, Eyes, Memory* (1994) the female body is a contestatory space where the female subject’s struggle for self-possession largely resides in her control over her sexuality, but that sexuality is patriarchally inscribed. Danticat explores this problematic through her use of “doubling.” Doubling is the ability to disengage from the self spatially and temporally, virtually becoming two persons at the same time. To escape the trauma inflicted upon her by her mother’s virginity “tests,” the novel’s protagonist, Sophie Caco, doubles—becomes (dis)embodied. Doubling creates an interstitial space that allows Sophie to read/write her own narrative in-between the words of the patriarchal narrative being inscribed in her body, signified by the virginity tests. In her rendering of what Sophie suggests is a “virginity cult” (199), Danticat explores how patriarchal strictures govern the lives of Haitian women, even in matrifocal families where men are noticeably absent. The novel depicts Haiti during the Duvalier dictatorship and illustrates how women’s bodies become the locus for asserting male power through the violent policing of their sexuality, rape, and silencing. Such violations raise existential and epistemological questions about whether there are “safe” spaces for the female body to inhabit and about how the female subject reads/writes her own body. Using M. Nourbese Philip’s theory of the “space between”—a space that is inscribed with the language of fear and silence but is also a space from which women can speak—I suggest that Danticat’s deployment of doubling signifies a paradoxical space of (dis)embodiment (it is both a space of loss and of recovery) that gestures toward re-readings of the female body that interrogates patriarchal inscriptions.
Although Caribbean migration is by no means a recent phenomenon, the idea of a Caribbean Diaspora, versus the idea of Caribbean expatriates or exiles, is a relatively new socio-political distinction. With this distinction come several considerations concerning, particularly, the expansion of theories formed by the Caribbean experience to the inheritors of said experience in a new hybridizing space. Of the multitude of theories put forth by Caribbean intellectuals Wilson Harris’ theories of *limbo* and *the phantom limb* come readily to mind as easily expandable theories, a useful tool to investigate Caribbean Diasporic literature produced about the Caribbean and the Caribbean experience. Through the imagery of the limbo dance, Harris theorizes that the limbo was created in the holds of the slave ships in the “limbo gateway between Africa and the Caribbean” (157). Further, *limbo* also refers to the in-between space, the uncertainty of separation from a cultural base. Punning on *limbo*, Harris also uses the metaphor of *the phantom limb*. The imagery of the cramped limbs in limbo or the hyper-extended limbs of stilt-walkers suggest to Harris a people/culture compensating for a legacy amputated by (forced) migration and the subsequent metamorphoses of elements of the Old World cultures in a new environment. This paper proposes that Harris’ theories of *limbo* and *the phantom limb* are not limited to the forced migration of enslaved Africans, indentured Asians, or poor Europeans but are also applicable to the “voluntary” migration of Caribbean nationals to the United States, Canada, Britain, and Europe. Through an examination of two Caribbean Diasporic texts, Edwidge Danticat’s *Brother, I’m Dying* (2007), and Lorna Goodison’s *From Harvey River: A memoir of My Mother and Her Island* (2007) this paper will explore the complex relationship Caribbean Diasporic writers share with the Caribbean as a source of inspiration, cultural influence, and history.
Configuring a Third Space: Beka Lamb’s Formulation of an Autonomous Identity in the Socio-Cultural and Political Matrices of Pre-Independent Belize

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NourbeSe Philip’s theoretical construct of the “space between,” as explicited in A Genealogy of Resistance (1997), is predicated on her argument that the implications of the geopolitical space the Caribbean occupies resonate with the historical implications of the “space between the legs” of the black woman’s body. Philip argues that while the “space between / inbetweenity” denotes a site of silence, resistance is paradoxically inherent in this very space. I will employ Philip’s theoretical construct of the “space between” as a lens to read Zee Edgell’s Beka Lamb (1982), specifically Beka’s identity that parallels that of her country, Belize, as well as Beka’s socio-cultural and political position within Belize. The Belize of Edgell’s representation inhabits a “space between” the hegemonic centers of Britain, Spain, and Spain’s daughter-colony, Guatemala. Zee Edgell’s protagonist, Beka Lamb, not only emerges out of the “space between” that Belize occupies, but caught in the crossfire of her grandmother’s and her father’s values that are paradoxically both reactionary and progressive, and being at the nexus of the past and present, traditions and changes, Beka inhabits a comparable “space between.” However, Beka’s “inbetweenity” creates a third space that enables her to understand Belize’s socio-political movement from a colonial status to a state of independence. Likewise, her “inbetweenity” is the very space that allows her to amalgamate the polemics of her father’s and grandmother’s values, the past/present, traditions/changes, in deciding her independence of self. Therefore, in this paper, I will argue that Beka’s “space between” is the space that inhibits autonomy, but, paradoxically, it is also the space that recasts/reconfigures a clearing for Beka to articulate, actualize and [re]invent her identity.

BIO
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