

Methodologies in Caribbean Research on Gender and Sexuality, edited by Kamala Kempadoo and Halimah A.F. DeShong. Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 2020.

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This compendium is a breath of fresh air for those frustrated with dominant narratives that feed into the (neo)colonial, Eurocentric and hetero-patriarchal projects. The authors engage in counter readings of conventional archives and produce knowledge from unconventional sources. What better way to decolonize knowledge production than theorizing gender and sexuality “from the bottom up” and approaching history “from the inside out”? Largely, but not exclusively, the focus is the Anglophone Caribbean experience, but its basic rationale and principles certainly hold useful lessons for all marginalized communities “othered” by dominant Western perspectives.

The 29 chapters are organized into seven thematic sections, extending from “History” to “Researching Gender and Sexualities”, to “Reflections on Positionality – Lessons from the Field.” Together, these provide a useful one-stop reference of Caribbean feminist research practices and methodologies spanning approximately 50 years. Only nine of the chapters are original texts, the rest being reprints that document historical depths and temporal shifts in methodological approaches. The editors seem to have decided to focus on methodology, acknowledging that some of the content of the older reprints tends to reinforce essentialist notions of gender identity and sexuality.

Overall, the collection is a treasure trove, organizing into a coherent whole the scattered jigsaw pieces of Caribbean studies of gender and sexuality. The resource is an inspiration for anyone beyond the Caribbean islands interested in critical epistemic principles that disrupt dominant knowledge systems. The key threads running through most chapters include feminist methodologies, gendered relations of power, multi/interdisciplinarity, and anti-colonial/inclusive approaches. Research approaches based on the mainstream principles of “objectivity” and “neutrality” are mostly dismissed.

The section “History and Historiography” makes a compelling case for adopting non-Eurocentric approaches to researching feminist history. It opens with Lucille Mathurin Mair’s reflections on her unconventional data sources in researching women

and gender relations in the 1960s. She urges us never to shy away from revealing fragmented histories (*herstories*) simply because of the lack of a written or digitized record. Histories can be excavated with the creative and nuanced application of multidisciplinary tools embracing literature, linguistics, ethnography, archaeology, sociology, and anthropology. Mary Chamberlain's essay pitches the complex depths of oral sources through her research on women who migrated from Barbados to Britain. Her captivating insights are derived from listening to her respondents "in stereo" and analysing their "para-language" (or sub-text) channelled from subjective memory. Bridget Breton's chapter comprises of a comprehensive review of feminist approaches to gender history in Anglo-Caribbean countries, showing how their differing focus from the traditional reconstructs historical narratives.

No feminist organizing for social transformation can succeed without being informed by a process known as "action research." This methodology is imperative for heightening feminist consciousness and bridging the gap between theory and practice. The next section of the volume fleshes this out through various case studies that exemplify research praxis as employed by various local feminist organizations in Haiti, Guyana, Cuba, Jamaica, and the Dominican Republic, and the Pan-Caribbean Association of Feminist Research and Action. These studies illuminate the link between macro-structures and the micro life experiences of women. The essays in this section also highlight key concepts in feminist research such as intersectionality, praxis, and reflexivity.

The next conceptual knot weaves through the different approaches deployed in researching gender and sexuality in the Caribbean. As per the editors, the pieces "provide key methodological insights for the production of both single and multi-method research on Caribbean gender relations" (Kempadoo and DeShong, 2020: 12) Their value lies in articulating intricate methodological processes of feminist knowledge production ranging from ethnography to life histories, to participatory rural appraisal, to survey research. Again, an emphasis is placed on multi- and interdisciplinary approaches, using multi-methods to understand gender and sexuality fully. Linda Peake makes a case for feminist quantitative research, arguing that not only does it yield measurable results demanded by most funding agencies, but that no method is inherently feminist.

Perhaps the most captivating section of the volume deals directly with sexualities research. The authors of the five chapters therein share the commitment of "locating 'embodied' research relationships as key sites of analysis for the production

of knowledge” (15). Angelique Nixon and Rosamond King provide an overview of “feminist theories at the core of feminist methodologies” in sexuality research and tease out the politics, contradictions, and colonial legacies in the Caribbean sexual landscape (269). Gloria Wekker’s fascinating chapter touches on methodological issues regarding woman-to-woman desire, ageism, and identity, narrating the erotic life story of the amazing 80-something-year-old Afro-Surinamese, Misi Juliette Cummings. Her complex, multi-layered and malleable bonds with women would reductively be identified as lesbianism in the West but are distinctively referred to as *mati* in Suriname. Wekker further addresses the ethical dilemmas involved in the researcher’s developing an intimate relationship with informant Cummings during the study. Kamala Kempadoo highlights the methodological clarity for studying the often taboo and under-researched topic of transactional sex. Her qualitative studies yield new insights and theoretical formulations in the area of sexual labour. On his part, Murray unpacks the specific “operation of identity politics in Barbados against a backdrop of the dominance of a global North nomenclature and conceptualization of sexual politics” (17). In the final chapter, Ghisyawan introduces us to the fascinating technique of subjective mapping as a research tool for studying same-sex-loving women in Trinidad and Tobago.

The section on “Researching the Visual and Cultural” focuses on decolonial feminist methodologies for producing and analysing technologies of vision such as films, photographs, and paintings. Authors address questions such as, how do we produce knowledge from photographic representations of women (Roshini Kempadoo)? How can a film be gender-analysed through visual ethnography (Deborah Thomas)? And what methodological relevance do concepts such as space and time hold to the production and reception of visual images (Patricia Mohammed)? The three chapters usefully offer epistemological transformation of knowledge production in an area largely still in its infancy in the Global South. Yet another section is devoted to “methods for making visible unnamed voices, subjectivities, and materialities through analysis of discourses, represented especially by talk, speech, and written scripts” (19). The methodologies foregrounded by the authors here are closely linked to the previous section on “Researching the Visual and Cultural”, as well as Chamberlain’s study on oral sources in Chapter Three. Michelle Rowley uses the term “voicing” to analyse different levels of articulated consciousness, alienation, action, and inaction of Tobagonian mothers (matrifolk). She aims to construct a bridge between theory and method through “the *talk* of the

narrative” which signals different worldviews (415). Latoya Lazarus directs readers to the discourses of conservative and evangelical Christians on the “controversial” topics of homosexuality and sexual and reproductive rights, combining the “Caribbean feminist standpoint” methodology with elements of social constructivism. Also, using the tools of discourse analysis (419), Halimah DeShong adopts a decolonial feminist stance to “read” talk and text on gender-based violence among Caribbean heterosexual unions in the final chapter of the section.

The volume concludes with a reflexive section where five authors reflect on the methodological positionality of the “native anthropologist” in ethnographic research. They consider statuses such as race, ethnicity, class, and returnee to reflect upon their insider/outsider positions and their influence on knowledge production. They further examine how the theoretical frameworks they adopt, their choice of research topics, and the selection of data-collecting methods influence power relations (between the researcher and the researched) and their findings.

After turning the final page of this monumental 540-page anthology, I was struck by the conspicuous gap between Caribbean and African feminist scholarship. It is ironic that colonialism and coloniality have somehow succeeded in alienating diasporic African scholars from the scholarship emanating from their ancestral homeland. Most references outside the Caribbean made in the book originated from the Global North. There is hardly any review or acknowledgment of the existing anti-colonial/decolonial literature on gender and sexuality from Africa. This largely inward-looking Caribbean approach to the issues denies a transnational sensitivity that would emphasize Pan-African connections and solidarity in the struggle for transformational decolonization. To cite but a few examples: Kempadoo’s chapter on “Researching Caribbean Sexual Labour” could have usefully drawn parallels from Chi Mgbako’s *To Live Freely in This World: Sex Worker Activism in Africa* (2016); Honor Ford Smith’s analysis of rape could have dovetailed with earlier in-depth analyses by African scholars such as Pumla Dineo Gqola’s *Rape: A South African Nightmare* (2015); and for understanding the queer geographies of Trinidad and Tobago, Ghisyawan could have referenced African activist-scholars like Zethu Matebeni who have written extensively about the intriguing method of mapping in sexuality research. For an otherwise excellent anthology, the African “blind-spot” in the book is regrettable as it emphasizes the spatial and political separation of the island nations from their ancestral continent.

References

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