

CENTRE FOR GENDER AND DEVELOPMENT STUDIES
University of the West Indies

Working Paper Series (Cave Hill)

WHEN THE CLOSET IS A REGION

**Homophobia, Heterosexism and Nationalism in the
Commonwealth Caribbean**

© *Tara L. Atluri*

Working Paper No. 5
March 2001

Editorial Committee:

- Dr Eudine Barriteau** - **Director, Centre for Gender and Development Studies,
UWI, Cave Hill Campus**
- Dr Richard Goodridge** - **Department of History, UWI, Cave Hill**
- Ms Tracy Robinson** - **Faculty of Law, UWI, Cave Hill Campus**
- Ms Gemma Tang Nain** - **Deputy Programme Manager, Caribbean Community
Development Women's Affairs CARICOM**
- Ms Carmen Hutchinson Miller** - **Assistant Editor, Centre for Gender and Development
Studies, UWI, Cave Hill Campus**

**ISSN: 0799-0480 ISBN: 976-621-090-X Centre for Gender and Development Studies,
University of the West Indies, Cave Hill Campus**

EDITOR'S NOTE

Working paper number 5 began as a research project by undergraduate exchange student Tara Atluri to satisfy course work requirements for the course AR22B Women's Studies. This is an introductory course offered in semester II of the academic year 1999-2000.

Tara Atluri is presently completing her fourth and final year of undergraduate studies at the University of Toronto, St. George Campus, University College where she is pursuing an Honours Bachelor of Arts degree in the Faculty of Arts and Science.

Tara spent an academic year at the University of the West Indies, Cave Hill Campus, Barbados where she completed various Law, Women's Studies, Political Science and Literature courses. She became interested in the issue of homophobia in the Caribbean after noticing a correlation between attitudes of intolerance towards homosexuals and widely accepted sexual attitudes of intolerance towards women.

She firmly believes that a women's movement that remains unconnected to issues of homophobia is failing to examine the root ideologies upon which patriarchy and sexism are based, and is therefore patching things up without ever challenging the source of the problem.

Tara Atluri's work represents the output of a new generation of budding feminist scholars that the Centre for Gender and Development Studies at Cave Hill is committed to supporting.

KEY WORDS

Homophobia, sexism, heterosexism, nationalism, gender relations.

WHEN THE CLOSET IS A REGION

Homophobia, Heterosexism and Nationalism in the Commonwealth Caribbean

The DJ is spinning. It's a song about killing batty-men. And I watch all the men in the fete go wild. They bang on the walls and raise hands in the air as if they are protesting, or maybe worshipping something. I hate when this song plays. I hate it because my body is no longer my body-it is theirs. Breast and hip and leg turn from flesh into target with just one new track. Every man must find a woman to dance with. To hold so tightly that his fingers leave an imprint on my skin. Fingerprints that sometimes feel as if they will stay forever.

So here I am. And here he is breathing rum and cigarette down the back of my neck. While one hand inches up my skirt, the other is an imaginary gun shooting the imaginary batty men, who don't live here but yet, are everywhere. And in this moment it all feels like the same thing. As one hand squeezes my thigh so tightly the other squeezes the trigger and obliterates a man who deserved to die for acting like a woman. As the DJ shouts that homosexuals must burn, to the crowds delight, a man whispers what he'd like to do to me in my ear and my skin feels like fire, raw and blistered by all these names he marks me with.

The next day men will tell me how they are sure there were batty men at the fete. For some their homophobic paranoia will have swelled into rage and they will have cuts and bruises from a fear driven brawl. They will say that men were looking at them. That they think a few might have even brushed up against them on purpose. They will be disgusted and angry. They will tell me how

wrong it is that they have to deal with anything like this. They will tell me that that is what women are for.

Introduction: Hypothesis and Method:

Attempting to address homosexuality, homophobia and heterosexism in the Caribbean has been one of my most confounding experiences to date. Attitudes towards homosexuality range from vehement hatred complete with death threats¹ to a maddening silence, which is in itself a disavowal of sexual difference. What is equally disconcerting is the lack of information that has been produced in relation to homosexuality and homophobia in the Caribbean context.

I feel that there is a strong correlation between homophobia, heterosexism and sexism. From popular culture to constitutional inequity, homosexuality is dismissed, loathed and ignored by mainstream Caribbean culture. I feel that this fear of homosexuality keeps gender roles sharply intact, thereby normalising sexism. Furthermore I feel that homophobia and heterosexism are reinforced by Caribbean nation states, based on a discriminatory nationalism that uses both religious conformity and conformity to capitalist patriarchy as a basis for inclusion. I will explore the relations between homophobia, heterosexism, and nationalism as relations of power that 'sex the nation' in highly discriminatory terms.

¹ Lawson Williams, "Homophobia and Gay Rights Activism in Jamaica," unpublished article., JFLAG, 2000: 3. Williams states that when the Jamaica Forum of Lesbians All-sexuals and Gays (JFLAG) was launched in December of 1998 they received a death threat.