

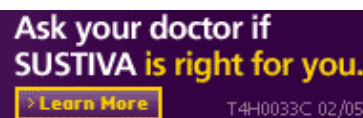


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Identity

Caribbean LGBT Writers Discuss Their Craft

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On April 16, writers and artists of Caribbean origin descended on the University of Chicago campus for a symposium hosted by the Lesbian and Gay Studies Project (LGSP). Interactive panel discussions and some spoken-word performances organized under the title “Queer Islands?: Caribbean LGBT Writers & Community” delighted a diverse audience. A reading by some of the presenters had also taken place at Women & Children First Bookstore the preceding evening.

After opening remarks by LGSP Director George Chauncey, Symposium Chair Natasha Tinsley explained how queer Caribbean culture was born in the gender-segregated cargo holds of slave ships on the long voyage from Africa to America. She then spoke of the central role of storytellers and how their aural teachings were passed on from one generation to the next.

“Acting Gay: Performance and Popular Culture” was the topic of a session presented by Iya Ta’Shia Asanti and David Murray. Asanti, author of *The Sacred Door*, is a priestess in the African Yemoja tradition and co-founder of the Karade Institute for Ifa & Comparative Studies. She also lectures at UCLA, and in 2004 took part in *Mad Mad House*, a SCI FI Channel reality series on spirituality.

While she was raised a Christian, Asanti later became disillusioned with a monotheist Church that does not embrace diversity nor treat all as equal individuals. She turned to the traditional beliefs of her ancestors and in 2003 founded the Denver Temple of the Mystic Path where she teaches about the divinities and religions of the African Diaspora. The Temple conducts primary initiations, naming ceremonies, lectures, workshops, and retreats.

Asanti said that in ancient times, those who possessed dual male and

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female spirits were considered enlightened and their counsel was sought. "Same-gender-loving people have always existed," she declared before adding that King James (of the King James Bible) was himself a homosexual.

Murray, a University of Toronto anthropologist specializing in issues of national and sexual identity, presented his research on the meaning and evolution of cross-dressing in the Caribbean region. Having done extensive field work in Martinique on cultural politics, race, gender, and homosexuality in the early '90s, Murray commented on carnival parades and the concept of fluidity. He observed that just as cross-dressing men transformed themselves into glamorous women, the boundary between marchers and spectators also appeared porous.

But while the friendly, mutual teasing might suggest popular acceptance, Murray reported that, as expected, further investigation revealed a more complex situation. Some men living as women refused to participate and found the carnival experience deeply disturbing because of the way it made fun of their everyday life.

At the other end of the spectrum, most of the men he interviewed who did engage in the public ritual of street performance did not self-identify as homosexual. These last findings were supported by a member of the audience who claimed that in Puerto Rico, Cuba, and the Dominican Republic, the typical homosexual man is married. This sparked a general debate on the degree of gay visibility in the different Caribbean cultures.

Murray then contrasted the Martinique situation with his experience on the wealthy west coast of Barbados in 2004. There he followed a group of three drag queens who regularly perform in tourist clubs. Even though they have been shot at and called sinners by strangers, the extravagant queens are not shying away and continue to cross-dress out on the street. Murray posited that "the colorful appearance of drag queens interrupts accepted behaviors of masculinity." According to him, this explains in part why Barbados (which still has sodomy laws) is seeing an increasing amount of public discussion around homosexuality.

Other reasons he cited include recent developments in communications technology that have allowed progressive groups to set up Web sites and publish position papers on the decriminalization of same-gender sexual practices. The popularity of often anti-gay dance-hall music has also kept the topic in the global headlines.

In closing, Murray warned against the common superficial judgment that Caribbean nations are homophobic. "This is problematic," he insisted, encouraging instead a more inquisitive approach that takes into account current efforts by fledgling gay rights groups.

At an afternoon panel on "The Words for It: Queer Identity, History, and Language; Art and Activism," poets and authors read from their work and spoke on the concepts of dual national allegiances and gay identity. From Trinidad and New York, Cheryl Boyce Taylor, slam

poetry artist and author of two collections of poems, presented the dialect poetry style. She likened it to the seductive and spontaneous aspects of Calypso music and praised the colloquial, expressive nature of native dialects.

She recounted how, as a young woman, she did not recognize herself in the words of the colonists' writers and poets who described such foreign things as palaces, snow, and maidens with long, blond hair. She underlined the importance of writing in a way "that informs about pain, survival, the ingredients of a people." Referring to Caribbean songs and steel pan music, she declared, "Carnival is history."

Speaking of her experience as a poet who sometimes writes about her love of women, Taylor mentioned the ambiguity of her own mother being welcoming toward her lover while at the same time never wanting to talk about the fact that her daughter is in a lesbian relationship. Taylor said she had waited a full year after her latest book of poems had been published before showing it to her mother.

Spanglish spoken-word artist Emanuel Xavier of Puerto Rico and New York read two original compositions. His new collection of 35 poems, *Americano*, has just been published and he now appears on HBO's *Russell Simmons Presents Def Poetry*. He expanded on the mixed identity theme, explaining how he is constantly negotiating being part of two minorities as a young Latino gay man. Moreover, he said, "People always assume I am Mexican."

Both Taylor and Xavier insisted on the need for minority writers and artists not to wait for mainstream publishers and producers to discover them. They related their respective experiences with self-publishing and recommended not altering one's message simply to fit into a commercial slot. To this, Asanti pointed out that while distribution through BET and other larger channels may ensure a wider audience, packaging imperatives can also affect the integrity of one's creative work.

All presenters agreed that transitioning back and forth between multiple sets of identities and cultural groups requires extra energy. Through their art, they are hoping both to promote their distinct heritage and to facilitate a better understanding among the diverse communities they represent.



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