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SITUATING BLACK, SITUATING QUEER: BLACK QUEER DIASPORA STUDIES AND THE ART OF EMBODIED LISTENING¹

Abstract

This article elaborates one Black queer subject's sense of self and gestures toward the potential theoretical intervention this subjectivity poses. However, it begins by situating Black queerness in conceptual and geographic space. It proposes the usefulness of an anthropologically informed embodied listening practice for Black Queer Studies and foregrounds situated, speaking Black queer subjects in the articulation of a Black Queer Diaspora Studies. Finally, it approaches a wider geo-conceptual metaphor for the transdisciplinarity required if we are to take seriously the seductive invitation to speculate Black and queer at once. [Black, queer, Caribbean, diaspora, Trinidad and Tobago]

Maps are such subjective things, borders move all the time. There are encroachments and retreats. A map ... can only describe the will of estate owners and governors. Or perhaps their hopes. This map cannot note the great fluidity of maps, which is like the fluidity of air. Paper rarely contains—even its latitudinal and longitudinal lines gesture continuations. Paper does not halt land any more than it can halt thoughts. Or rain showers, for that matter. The best cartographer is only trying to hold water, to draw approximations of rocks, inclines, bays, depths, plains ... That is where a map succumbs to anarchy. Maps' inadequacies give out here. A map of this island of Trinidad is more and more like a map of the ocean then.

—Dionne Brand²

On 16th October 2007, I stepped away from Harlem, USA for the longest stint of fieldwork I embarked on in the four years I had been conducting formal research in the Republic of Trinidad & Tobago (T&T), each stay hungrily extending itself into the next—a few weeks, a month, six months, ten. Turning away from one island, I set my sights

upon another. Lowlands, Tobago is where I would begin the vertigo of living on two islands at once—back and forth between Trinidad and its smaller sister isle—collecting stories, watching closely, getting lost and being found. A little over a month after my arrival in T&T, at the 106th annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association, Shaka McGlotten convened the panel “Speculating Black, Speculating Queer: Toward a Black Queer Anthropology.” I had eagerly planned to be a part of that groundbreaking panel, but “the field” had other plans for me; I was not able to return to the US for that conversation. I must admit here that it is my longing that in large part compels the following contribution to the speculative possibilities of that missed moment. In short, I offer here a map, a map that reaches from that moment to this one.

In the topography that follows, I begin by situating Black queer subjects in conceptual and geographic space. I then foreground the situated, speaking presence of these subjects in the articulation of a Black *queer* diaspora studies. After sketching that Black queer terrain, I elaborate on a particular site within it by attending closely to one Black queer subject's sense of self and gesturing more broadly toward the potential theoretical intervention this subjectivity poses. Finally, I end by briefly offering a geo-conceptual metaphor for the trans-disciplinarity required if we are to take seriously the seductive invitation to speculate Black and queer at once. However, this quickly sketched map of the way ahead is necessarily inadequate and imaginative like all maps, as Brand reminds us in the epigraph. We are making the way together by walking.

SITUATING BLACK, SITUATING QUEER, SITUATING DIASPORA

To say that Black queerness is inconceivable without a recognizable Black queer subject is not to say that Black queerness—and correlatively queer Blackness—appears everywhere always identical.³ Perhaps by now, social constructivist interventions

into cross-disciplinary speculation about race and (sexual/gender) norms have sufficiently transfigured Blackness and queerness so as to warrant a healthy suspicion of ontological presumptions about either. However, if it tentatively goes without saying that Black queerness is socially constructed—though no less impactful upon material circumstances for it—the constitutive influence of socio-cultural context begs mentioning. Blackness and queerness are articulated differently depending upon the sites and meaning systems within which they appear. And each contributes its turbulent dynamism to the conjunction of Black queerness. This is the very tack literary scholar Omise'eke Tinsley takes when she pushes off from the shore into a Black queer cross-current with her query: “What would it mean for both queer and African diaspora studies to take seriously the possibility that, as forcefully as the Atlantic and the Caribbean flow together, so too do the turbulent fluidities of Blackness and queerness?” (Tinsley 2008:193). Never—and yet always—everywhere the same, these two bodies of water embrace and erupt into each other at a frothy site that floats one of the most poetic visions of Black queer mutuality.

If variously constituted Black queer subjects come to understand themselves and the world in which they live through some form of Black queer subject position, then Black queerness is an epistemic location—a location in perpetual flux, a location that resembles the sea perhaps as closely as it resembles diaspora. When viewed from a widened perspective, Blackness and queerness hold within and share between them a fundamentally ambivalent relationship to the interrelated tropes of sameness and difference: the coherence of each is contingent upon a deep investment in sameness even in spite of a broad range of differences. These differences might be transcontinental, transnational, translocal, transcommunal or even transitional, but the perpetual challenge they pose to these categories does not prevent their coherence. This seemingly counterintuitive dialectic between sameness and difference is precisely what preserves the fertility of diaspora—the agricultural metaphor within which various dispersed peoples have planted their narratives of belonging and their politics of collectivity. In other words, diasporic sameness persists (among followers of Judaism, peoples of African descent or global LGBT communities) even despite differences as stark as location or as subtle as lexicon. The present analysis is an attempt to draw attention to both a particular site and a particular subject across which the Black

and queer diasporas (among others, certainly) overlap.

LISTENING FOR A BLACK QUEER PRESENCE

If a Black queer diasporic consciousness encourages the kinds of perspectival shifts that permit different visions of queer possibility to emerge from the impermanent places Black queer people inhabit and the fertile impermanence that inhabits Black queerness, then it must not be satisfied with discursive treatments of Black queer subjects, Black queer subjectivity or even the juridical, moral and theoretical contexts in which Black queers find themselves. Black queer diaspora studies remains incomplete without the appearance of Black queers not simply as representational abstractions, but as situated, speaking subjects.⁴ This praxis of Black queer presence is intended to insistently foreground the material reality, quotidian experiences and cultural products of Black queer peoples. Anthropologist Gloria Wekker has offered her work as a call for rooted, context-conscious analyses of Black diasporic same-sex community (as well as sexual practices) that do not trample blossoming specificities in the haste to cultivate a haphazard global same-sex sexuality. And this call is at once part of a delicate symbiosis between a critique of transnational sexuality studies and a desire to elaborate a very specifically situated sexual subjectivity. As Wekker explains, attending to this subjecthood demands that one listen closely:

One possible fruitful way to open windows to local conceptions of personhood is to listen carefully to what people have to say about themselves and what terms they use to make these statements. Collecting and studying a contextualized lexicon of the self can provide an understanding of the ways subjectivity is locally conceptualized.

[Wekker 1997:333]

Wekker describes what might seem like quite an intuitive way to assess contextualized subjectivity; yet this methodology has proven still rare and exotic in assessments of Black queer lifeways in general and the Black queer Caribbean in particular. Pushing Wekker's proposition even further, I contend that her “contextualized lexicon of self” extends even beyond that which is spoken in language to include that which is spoken in excess of language. Learning the vocabulary of actions—a

kinesthetic literacy—is a form of interpretive artistry cultivated within the discipline of anthropology.⁵

This artful listening practice as ethnographic method and as theoretical starting point is the principal contribution of an anthropology transformed by the interventions of Black feminist studies and queer studies. Black feminist anthropology promotes this listening practice as part of an elaborate strategy for interrupting certain forms of biased knowledge (re)production in the service of a holistic praxis of social transformation (McClaurin 2001:2,16).⁶ Embracing an interdisciplinary richness at the same time that it foregrounds particularly situated lived experience, Black feminist anthropology has pushed the discipline to listen beyond its disciplinary borders while hearing the cross-influences of race, gender and place on the lives of various subjects (McClaurin 2001:9,14–15,57). On the other hand, queer anthropology—the conditions of its possibility having been laid by the anthropology of gender and by the institutional space cleared by pioneering lesbian anthropologists of gender—has insisted upon the inclusion of sexuality as a category of analysis in any fully embodied listening praxis (Weston 1998:149–150; Boellstorff 2007:19, 26–27). Setting the discipline against hegemonic ideologies in an effort to denaturalize taken for granted conceptions of sex, gender and sexuality (among other categories) primarily through reworking conventional approaches to bodies, desire, performance and power, queer anthropology has seduced the discipline into listening beyond (sex-gender-sexuality) norms (Weston 1998:159,175). Taken together then, Black feminist and queer anthropology have made of the house of anthropology a kind of home in which embodied listening as method and as theoretical foundation hears the reverberations of race, gender, sexuality and place (at the very least) in the song of subjecthood. Thus, Black feminist and queer anthropology must inform the anthropologically informed listening practice I propose for Black queer studies.⁷

It is important to emphasize, however, that this call for an anthropologically informed Black queer studies is absolutely not a mandate to turn away from queerness in African American communities. Rather, I offer here an invitation to apply certain of anthropology's principles in those communities—as part of the African Diaspora—while simultaneously conscious of other cultural sites of Black queerness within the United States and

beyond it that are distinct though not altogether unrelated to US-American Black queer worlds. A “not-here”—if you will—a space beyond here that is no less present. Principal among these anthropological methods is an attentiveness to socio-cultural particularities achieved primarily through participant observation. This discipline defining method is largely a means by which to cultivate a fully embodied listening technique. An immersion-based praxis, participant observation is a disciplining technique intended to sharpen one's ability to hear what people say about themselves, their communities, and their world by listening to their words and beyond them. And although (post)modern anthropology no longer requires a transnational or even transcultural journey, it still requires us to listen—closely, fully—to people, to space, and to context in much the same imperfect way that it always has. This methodological seed is planted in the rich soil of specificity, so it is to particularities I now turn to ground much of the previous discussion.

JACQUELYN FIELDS: PLACING THE MYTHIC REAL

The southernmost island of the Caribbean's Lesser Antilles, Trinidad lies just about seven miles northeast of Venezuela. The “twin-island” Republic of Trinidad & Tobago is actually an archipelagic nation composed of 22 islands, but named for its two most heavily populated sister isles.⁸ Contemporarily, one of the most culturally diverse islands of the Caribbean region, Trinidad often serves as a synecdoche for the Caribbean's particular cultural complexity. Including significant populations of African, Indian, European, Chinese, Middle Eastern and Native American ancestry (as well as of various mixes of these), Trinidadian culture has long been and continues to be multiple even within its littoral confines. With its long history of cultural overlay and its multi-racial flesh, Trinidad is a cultural and racial palimpsest of a place.⁹ It is in this context that I now turn to a particular Black queer diasporic subject to specify an earlier obliquely referenced Black queer subjectivity. This particular Black queer subject also serves as a fleshy invocation of a Black queer presence that has been largely vanished in scholarly discourse and the popular imagination: Afro-Caribbean lesbians.¹⁰

If she is invisible, she is the wind. From breath to gale, knowable first in the rising chest, the rippling sea, the bowing frond, an entire season watching the sky for the first sign of wingless

things taking flight. She is an imposing presence. Wise in the meteorology of an island people among whom she has lived for six decades, Jacquelyn Fields is elemental. Refined tomboy, self-trained biblical scholar, retired police officer, HIV/AIDS awareness advocate, bold-faced 60 year old, Afro-Trinidadian lesbian, Fields swiftly gathers up her face in incredulity when I ask about her race; she tenderly chastises me: *Hello?! African to the bone ... you'd have to say I'm African ... that's who I am. I'm of African descent* (Fields 2008). In a post-colony overlaid with centuries of arrivals and cultural transfigurations, holding Africa at the center is a political and ideological gesture that conceives a racial identity category (Blackness) in the womb of an identification with the African continent; this type of fervent Africa-centered consciousness is perhaps understandable when one considers that Fields came of age right alongside Trinidad's Black Power movement in the late 1960s to early 1970s. For Fields, her Blackness is contingent upon her "Africanness." Her race, which roots/routes her back across the Atlantic, is to some degree taken for granted. She refuses a dichotomy between Africa and her place in the diaspora. However, if this geo-racial identification seems to go without saying or at least proves redundant when remarked upon, Fields' emphasis on the intertwining of the political, sensual and spiritual in her conceptualization of self and society begs persistent repetition.

EROTIC SUBJECTIVITY: AN EPISTEMOLOGICAL PROPOSITION

The interrelation among the political, the sensual the spiritual is central to my elaboration of what I (among others¹¹) have termed "erotic subjectivity." However, my usage of "erotic subjectivity" is as a decidedly epistemological proposition. I am curious to explore the potential of reading Fields' particularly placed subjectivity as a challenge to apolitical, passionless, and secular interpretations of how we come to know what we know about subjectivity itself. I propose this interlinked political-sensual-spiritual (erotic) subjectivity not necessarily in an effort to replace one type of "universal" subjectivity with another, but rather to expand the conceptualization of subjectivity so that it perhaps comes to resemble diaspora—its coherence only intelligible through an assemblage of differences.

As an interpretive frame, erotic subjectivity is indebted to Caribbean-American lesbian feminist Audre Lorde's framing of the erotic in her 1978

speech "Uses of the Erotic: the Erotic as Power."¹² In it, Lorde insists that:

The dichotomy between the spiritual and the political is ... false, resulting from an incomplete attention to our erotic knowledge. For the bridge which connects them is formed by the erotic—sensual—those physical, emotional, and psychic expressions of what is deepest and strongest and richest within each of us, being shared: the passion of love in its deepest meanings.

[Lorde 1984(1978)]

Following from this reconceptualization and encouraged by Lorde's gesture toward reading the erotic through sensuality (even in its broadest sense as revelry in the senses) to a wider range of interpretive possibilities, I propose that the meaning of the erotic can be stretched. Informed by Lorde, my articulation of the erotic expands beyond being mere euphemism for sexual desire and reaches simultaneously toward a political attentiveness and a spiritual consciousness. This tripartite political-sensual-spiritual awareness makes possible and desirable a more broadly and deeply conceived articulation of love. And it is this love that so often provides much of the motivation for political action, sensual intimacy and spiritual hunger—together constitutive elements of an erotic subjecthood.

Erotic subjectivity is at once an interpretive perspective and a mode of consciousness; it is both a way of *reading* and a way of *being* in the world. This analytic frame encourages a recognition of the fact that systems of colonial (as well as neo-colonial/imperial) domination depend in part upon a tripartite strategy of coercion based upon a politics of ontological racial difference, a hierarchy of spiritual rectitude, and a Victorian sense of (sexual) respectability—erotic *subjugation*, if you will. Erotic subjectivity is tasked with providing a post-colonial theoretical response to this mechanism of subjugation. This expanded political-sensual-spiritual perspective on the production of hierarchies of difference—the very alterity used to justify exploitation from the top down—begins to shed light on the incompleteness of official post-colonial movements (and their long range postcolonial ideological projects) in the Caribbean region, which largely continue to imagine the political, sensual and spiritual as mutually exclusive realms of concern. The inability to think the political/sensual/spiritual together threatens to obscure even

the clearest of postcolonial visions. This particular attentiveness to—in their most abstract rendering—power hierarchies (the political), sensory intimacy (the sensual), and sacred metaphysics (the spiritual) is central to the theoretical infrastructure of the larger book manuscript from which this analysis comes, so I cannot hope to fully elaborate it here.¹³ However, perhaps the best way to approach a fleshier understanding of erotic subjectivity may be through Jacquelyn Fields' own sense of herself and her community.

AS A BODY: JACQUELYN FIELDS' POLITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

It is a balmy June evening in 2004 and Trinidad & Tobago is celebrating its 10th annual Gay Pride Week. In the few frenzied days of activity, an evening has been set aside for a special gathering—an inaugural event—convened in Trinidad's most well-known (though still de facto) Black gay community and performance space, which has been affectionately known as “Bohemia” since at least the 1980s. In the theatre that has been made of the yard behind a private home cum informal LGBT boarding house, on an unassuming if perhaps a bit infamous street in Woodbrook—an early suburb just outside of the nation's capital city Port-of-Spain—Jacquelyn Fields stands casually before her attentive audience and delivers a call to action:

Gay women must wake up. It's time we get [together] as a body. Gay women in Trinidad and Tobago are nobody, you know? ... We follow the men. We have enough intelligent women in the community and it's time we do something about it: form ourselves into ... some group, do something, have some union ... we could even assist those of us that have HIV/AIDS. Some of us do, you know? Don't fool yourself because some of us nice and fat and round ... As ladies, I think we should all get together and do something for the community because it's time. [Fields 2004a]

Having spearheaded and now hosting the very first Lesbian Pride night in the recent history of T&T Pride Week, Fields clears space for same-sex desiring women in the usually male dominated celebrations of Gay Pride on the island.¹⁴ And she uses her position center stage to gesture toward an organized movement among the mostly Trinbagonian women who crowd the audience. Field's assessment of the political potential of gay Trinba-

gonian women demands a response. It is only in cohering as some form of politicized entity that same-sex desiring women will appear as a metaphorical body, a thinking, acting, speaking, demanding, assisting body—a body that *does* something and thus exists. Fields extends this corporeal metaphor as a discursive organizing strategy; to enter into the body politic, same-sex desiring women must form a body of their own. If it is that this “body politic” signifies multiply as the Hobbesian body of the state overlaid upon the older body of the sovereign (as avatar of the state), then proposing a metaphorical politicized lesbian body intervening into (penetrating) this body with its own, instantiates an orgiastic analogy for political inclusion.

In fact, Fields' political call receives its organized response in the form of a weekly discussion group for same-sex desiring women, which Fields herself was instrumental in initiating in the weeks following her call for political community. Functioning initially as support group for same-sex desiring women infused with an HIV/AIDS awareness message—on the model of a similar weekly discussion group for same-sex desiring men¹⁵—the “Lesbian Chatroom” has seemingly disappeared. Or perhaps it might be more appropriate to suggest that the group has become an apparition, coming to view and slipping away just as startlingly, depending on whom you ask. When last I inquired about the state of this group¹⁶—or perhaps its body, if you will—I was informed sometimes virtually in the same breath that the group did not meet anymore, but if it did (and it might), nobody knew where those meetings took place. So, perhaps the group meets or perhaps it does not or perhaps it meets and does not meet simultaneously in that it has resisted the politicizing impulse that was its impetus and resolved to disappear metaphorically into a social organization of same-sex desiring women who are satisfied being “nobody” to the body politic and using this ephemeral presence as a position that offers a different kind of power: the power of the unseen. In any instance, even if it is the case that some-bodies know exactly where to find that vanishing presence, my body—same-sex desiring, yes, but very much male—was decidedly not included in that immaterial body (nor should I have been).

If I am to extend the corporeal metaphor in Field's remarks to its limit, it is almost a matter of course that her warning about HIV/AIDS infection among same-sex desiring women might be

read as a symbolic critique of a community that she lovingly yet firmly chastises through out her “sermon”—the metaphorical lesbian body fighting against itself. However, if this body is a metaphor, it is also necessarily a synecdoche representing at once a symbolic corpus at the same time that it calls into question various material lesbian bodies, living with HIV, living with AIDS, vulnerable to both largely by virtue of being sexual bodies (*we could even assist those of us that have HIV/AIDS. Some of us do, you know? Don't fool yourself because some of us nice and fat and round.*). The vulnerability of these sexual bodies must not be taken lightly, especially in the Caribbean region where rates of HIV infection are secondly only to Sub-Saharan Africa. And yet, Fields does not disparage these sexual bodies.

MAKING LOVE TO A WOMAN: JACQUELYN FIELDS' SENSE OF THE SENSUAL

Jacqui Fields is quite outspoken about her sexual desires. In fact, she is quick to assert a surety about sexuality and an adept handling of sensuality are crucial for lesbian women. During an impromptu interview I conducted with her following the successful inauguration of her Lesbian Night program, Fields affirms:

I am free. And I'm proud to be lesbian ... I know I would prefer making love to a woman, rather than a man. As a matter of fact, I can't relate to men. I don't how to start to make love to a man ...

She continues:

It's no good pretending to be lesbian because if you're a woman and you're being touched by another woman and she is a lesbian, then you're in trouble. Because there is no way a man will give you that same pleasure or that same feeling. So, your life will be miserable and confused. Don't worry to try it; it's nothing to try.
[Fields 2004a]

For Fields, lesbianism is about cultivating pleasure between women. *It is in the touch.* A woman knowledgeable of the intimate touch of another, experienced in making love to another is a seductive sensual force. Undoubtedly, there is a moan of lesbian sexual bravado in Field's description of a troublesome lesbian sensuality powerful enough to indoctrinate (or at least confuse the sexual orientation of) heterosexual

women, but braggadocio aside, Field's attention to an affective communion shared by lesbians is most instructive.

Fields' unabashed use of and identification with the term “lesbian” encourages here brief attention to the shifting terrain of terminology and the tensions it shakes up between Fields and other same-sex desiring Trinbagonian women. In her 2004 Lesbian Night remarks and our subsequent interview, Fields not only unapologetically describes herself as a “lesbian,” but she is rather aggressive about policing the borders of “true” lesbianism, explicitly excluding bisexual women or women who may be questioning their sexual orientation. However, during our follow-up conversation in 2008, Fields had this to say about the term “lesbian”:

... the word “lesbian.” It came from so far ... Some people when you call them a lesbian—they are lesbians—but the word it does something to them. So I thought I would move away from this lesbian thing and put “same-gender-lovers” So it was a nice fresh something and people would be comfortable being called a “same-gender-lover”—which is a nice long phrase that says the same thing ... The word “lesbian” does something to lesbians ... So, if you're not using that word, I wanted to substitute something for that term ... The women's community embraced the term, so we started calling ourselves “same-gender-lovers.”
[Fields 2008]

Although Fields continues to refer to herself as a “lesbian” and believes that same-sex desiring women are *really* lesbians when fancy phraseology is stripped bare, one does note a shift in her relationship to Trinbagonian women's relationship to the term. Instead of simply chastising same-sex desiring women for refusing the term “lesbian” and by that refusal, summarily refusing their “true” selves and its constitutive desire, Fields has to some degree acquiesced to the prevailing semantic politics that positions “lesbian” as a “foreign” term (*... from so far.*) and requires Fields to coin a new term “same-gender-lover.” This term (and its acronym SGL) is familiar in a US American context as a highly politicized referent used primarily by a sizeable segment of the African American community (especially in particularly Afrocentric circles) since the early 1990s to describe same-sex desire without recourse to terms like “gay” or “lesbian,” which are thought to be highly white-identified. Fields did

not indicate that she was aware of this usage of her newly minted term and it is not inconceivable that Fields had never heard the term before she used it (I did not mention the US American usage to Fields during or after our interview). The Black queer diasporic currency of SGL might prove a valuable thought investment.

HE MADE ME SO: JACQUELYN FIELDS' SACRED SELF

Whatever the identificatory terms settled upon, desire (a potent sensuality) is—for Fields—an intimate part of subjectivity for same-sex desiring women. And it is vital to recognize that for Fields, as for many same-sex desiring Trinbagonian (and men), this corporeal sensuousness is not at all removed from a spiritual consciousness. We complete the political-sensual-spiritual trinity that erotic subjectivity proposes by beginning, in fact, at the beginning. Fields starts her speech to the women gathered at the Lesbian Night program with her Creator:

I am so gay so long that I believe in the Creator. And I believe he made me so. And I believe none of you; none of you has anything to do with it. I love me. God loves me. And I'm walking proud, so I'll always preach God. Is not no Sodom, it's no Gomorrah thing with me, ya know, that have nothing to do with it. Sodom and Gomorrah—He didn't destroy [those cities] because of no sodomy and all that. Don't study them old people, you know. He destroyed them because He couldn't even find three that was righteous. Let me tell allyuh something: it had nothing to do with the bullers [a term—either derogatory or familiar depending on the user and the context—to describe gay men in Trinidad and Tobago] and it had nothing to do with the lesbians.

[And yet] *It had to do with all the bullers and all the lesbians still, you know why? We forgot God; we forgot our Creator. And without Him you could do nothing ... So, I'm admonishing you all [to] remember your higher power. There is where you get all your substance, all your knowledge and all your power from. And you all would be surprised at how much power you have. Power as lesbians and power as people serving a higher Creator ... Ladies, the candle that you have inside you ... it out too long.* [Fields 2004a]

Fields understands her spiritual consciousness as intimately connected to her sexuality. In fact, she comes to know her higher power not in spite of her lesbianism, but rather through it. She begins her remarks with an invocation of homosexuality sanctioned by a metaphysical being precisely because it is that being who she believes created the homosexual. Fields is preaching a sermon: *I am so gay so long that I believe in the Creator. And I believe he made me so.* The immediate logic of this opening line might seem elusive, but it is in direct response to those who would presume homosexuality in opposition to spiritual faith and Christian doctrine in particular. Fields wastes not a word entering into a ideological battle with the seeming impossibility of a gay—but especially lesbian—metaphysical consciousness.

Sodom and Gomorrah—the razed twin cities of iniquity, which like specters seem to bedevil the faith of homosexual Christians on the island in a metonymic representation of the biblical condemnation of homosexuality—are recontextualized and redeployed in Fields' telling of the troped biblical tale. The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah remains a warning, in Fields' telling, but the warning is not one against homosexuality, but rather one against a lost spirituality, an extinguished metaphorical flame Fields deplores her fellow lesbians to re-ignite as part of a spiritually informed project of empowerment. This power is an epistemological force, compelling these women to know themselves and their world through a subjectivity imbued with the sacred.

Born and bred in Trinidad, Fields is the consummate Trinidadian—which is to say the inheritor of a confounding mixture of cultural and even religious traditions. Fields was raised Anglican under the watchful eye and swift wrist of a Barbadian immigrant mother; her Seventh-day Adventist father, though Trinidadian, was a seaman and her memory of him ebbs and flows with his going and coming home again hungry for his island's mangoes. Fields began an Anglican; her mother would have it no the way and it was this iron will of a woman from “little England” that also made church and the library unavoidable for even the most tomboyish young lady. However, early the obstinate intellectual, an adolescent Fields would summarily refuse to be Confirmed in the church until the rite could be grounded in the Bible; it was in the wake of this refusal that Fields became a Seventh-day Adventist, following her father and learning a respect for her Saturday Sabbath, which she keeps to this day.

Later in life, Fields recounts, a gay male friend of hers would introduce her to the Spiritual Baptist faith into which she would be baptized only to return through re-baptism to the Seventh-day Adventist church out of respect for the wishes of her ailing mother, upon whose death Fields would shear her dreadlocks.¹⁷ These journeys between the different provinces of Christianity served only at every re-baptism to rejuvenate Fields' faith, to re-affirm a spiritual consciousness that she admits remains unbounded by any particular religious doctrine:

Remember it's not to be "religious" as much as it is to be spiritual. Spirituality is much more than religion ... I don't want to tell people which religion to join because I'm not into religion. But they could read for themselves. Whatever book! Whether it's the Koran or the Bible or whatever book because basically all the books have the same thing in it ... once you could relate to a God of your understanding—that's it.

[Fields 2008]

It is this search for the "God of your understanding" that Fields admonishes same-sex desiring men and women in Trinidad to pursue with a ravenous urgency, an intellectual curiosity, an holistic passion. In both the follow-up conversation I had with her following that 2004 Lesbian night and in our follow-up interview four years later, Fields remains adamant about their existing no conflict between her proud lesbianism and her steady spiritual moorings:

Too bad for pastors. I say too bad for you, pastors ... I'll tell you what, you're not God. You try to pretend you're God. God will take care of us. He made us and He loves us all.

[Fields 2004b]

God made me who I am. So, I have no problem with the world. I'm not going to prove to the world otherwise. I am going to stay focused on who I am. I talk to God and say, 'God, if you want me to be different, then you change me' [she smiles an easy smile] I'm still waiting for the change, so I guess God wants me to be who I am.

[Fields 2008]

Fields' logic is based upon unyielding faith in the idea that if her God had intended her to be anything but a lesbian, then she would have been

created otherwise or perhaps changed subsequently. Since neither has happened, she refuses to accept any argument that proposes to use the God of her understanding to denounce homosexuality.

In fact, Fields insists upon the mindfulness of spiritual consciousness that transnational feminist theorist M. Jacqui Alexander argues is indispensable in transnational discussions of peoples' lifeways:

... it remains the case that the majority of people in the world—that is, the majority of women in the world—cannot make sense of themselves without it [the Sacred]. We would all need to engage the Sacred as an ever-changing yet permanent condition of the universe, and not as an embarrassingly unfortunate by-product of tradition in which women are disproportionately caught ... [Alexander 2005:15]

Those who would characterize this world of the postmodern and the identities of its inhabitants as absent of this essence or core [Spirit] would seem to be at odds with the thought systems of a great number of people in the world who live the belief that their lives are intimately and tangibly paired to the world of the invisible.

[Alexander 2005:327]

If the sacred is understood to be ontologically relevant, then this ontology is one perpetually troubled by what Alexander calls "the dialectic of permanent impermanence" (Alexander 2005:327); she thus challenges an investment in the presumed fixity of essence to propose a spiritual core that is defined by a necessary dynamism that she proposes better enables an understanding of peoples' relationships—across the globe—to that which they cannot see. In other words, perhaps it is not "essentialism" or ontology that must be re-thought, but the way in which essence and core are conceived. This is a provocative proposition that creates the preconditions necessary for Alexander's epistemology of the sacred, a way of knowing, being, interpreting that is informed by a metaphysical consciousness. Fields' understanding of subjectivity is, in part, based upon this type of sacred knowing. And yet, she defies the presumption that this metaphysical awareness is somehow removed from corporeal desire or political consciousness. For Fields, the political, the sensual and the spiritual must be through together. Hers is an erotic subjectivity.

ON THE USES OF BLACK QUEER DIASPORA

Admittedly, I offer here a highly specific introduction to erotic subjectivity, but it is through this very specificity that I intend to offer some sense of the concept while modeling the kind of (Black feminist/queer) anthropology informed Black queer analytic that I earlier outlined. Jacquelyn Fields' singular experience and beliefs as an Afro-Trinidadian lesbian—even as social “mother” of a community of Trinbagonian same-sex desiring women—is not intended here to stand in for the African Diaspora, but rather to foreground a subject and a site still too often overlooked in considerations of Black queer lives. Attention to Fields and to Black queer communities in Trinidad & Tobago is intended to disrupt the very representational sedimentation of Black queerness that threatens to truncate an emergent Black queer studies project. A part of and yet also a challenge to this project, Black queer *diaspora* studies resists the reduction of Black queer intelligibility to an elaboration of and theorization through the life-ways of any particular group of queer Black subjects (most often US American, gay and male). Instead, it requires a diasporic consciousness attentive to the various specific socio-cultural locations Black queer folks inhabit within the geopolitical boundaries of the United States, across the reach of a hemispheric America (extending from Canada to Chile) and beyond the Americas. Again, literary theorist Omise'eke Tinsley takes us to the water:

When Black becomes only African American, Black queer theory becomes insular; as the crosscurrent between Atlantic and Caribbean, Atlantic and Mediterranean, Atlantic and Indian Ocean are richest in marine life, so they will be richest in the depth of theorizing. Most simply, our challenge is to be like the ocean: spreading outward, running through bays and fingers, while remaining heavy, stinging, a force against our hands.

[Tinsley 2008:212]

Attending to this churning challenge is no easy task, but part of anchoring Black queer studies within a larger Black queer diaspora studies project is about turning to the latter as a means by which to extend the reach and vitality of the former throughout the African Diaspora. A Black queer diaspora analytic has the potential to push African Diaspora studies beyond its sexual boundaries, to push queer studies beyond its racial

boundaries, and to push Black queer studies beyond its geographic boundaries while holding fast to a very particular experience-centered, norm-challenging methodological legacy inherited from Black feminist and queer anthropology.

Canadian Cultural Studies scholar Rinaldo Walcott has been one of the most vocal recent harbingers of this Black queer diasporic turn not simply as an explicit challenge to Black Diaspora Studies—though certainly interrupting that project's (hetero)normativity is a crucial intervention—but also as an implicit challenge to a US American-centric Black queer studies. Walcott's pivotal essay “Outside in Black Studies: Reading from a Queer Place in the Diaspora” (Walcott 2005) offers a place-specific rupture in the US American discursive fantasy of Black queerness. This rupture is not intended to undermine a Black queer coherence, but rather to strengthen it by drawing attention specifically to a Black queer Canadian context while also gesturing beyond that context toward Black queer diasporic potentiality:

I investigate what might be at stake when the Black studies project, diaspora studies, and queer studies collide in our reading practices. I argue for what I call a diaspora reading practice, which can disrupt the centrality of nationalist discourses within the Black studies project and thereby also allow for an elaboration of a Black queer diaspora project ... politically the invocation of the diaspora requires us to think in ways that simultaneously recognize the national spaces from which we speak and gesture to more than those spaces. In fact, sometimes it might require a subversion or at least an undermining of the national space.

[Walcott 2005:90,96]

Walcott's Black queer diasporic reading practice interprets a script that is always contextual and even though his contextual referent is primarily the nation-state, he is willing to speculate about the space beyond the nationalist text where other categories overwrite nation to such an extent that it is rendered barely legible. His tentative willingness to read beyond the nation-state represents a definitive step toward a Black Queer Diaspora cohered by sites of elaboration not necessarily confined by geopolitical boundaries. And the argument might be made that Walcott's abiding commitment to a Black queer *Canadian* subjectivity and cultural production is perhaps explained, in part, as a reaction to the pervasive foregrounding of US American

Black queer artistry and subjectivity in Black queer studies and Black studies more generally.

However, M. Jacqui Alexander, in a panel presentation at the *Black Nations/Queer Nations? Lesbian and Gay Sexualities in the African Diaspora* conference held in New York City in 1995, voices a resounding warning against taking uncritical comfort in nationalisms:

Admittedly there are different kinds of nationalisms. In fact, it is pretty difficult to imagine anti-colonial struggle without nationalism—in Latin America, the Caribbean, Asia, Africa in the 1950s and 60s. But as we know dominant nationalism has always been heterosexual and misogynist; women have always been viewed as the cultural transmitters. So, I am discomforted by the nation and I am perennially suspect of it. Whether it is Queer Nation, lesbian nation, white American imperial nation, or Black middleclass nation. It poses a big problem. [Frilot 1995]

Alexander's suspicion is not ignorant of the various uses to which nationalisms have historically been put, but this recognition does not prevent her from keeping a critical distance even from post-colonial nationalisms—and especially from them in most of her scholarly work. Imbedded in Alexander's refusal of nationalisms is an important reminder that nationalism extends beyond the purview of the nation-state; she aggressively questions both its literal and figurative deployment, its imperial and anti-colonial uses, its organizing and exclusionary strategies. Alexander's critical discomfort is instructive in that it provides a model for an ideological orientation toward not only various iterations of nationalism, but also toward disciplining projects like Black Diaspora studies or even Black queer studies. Taken together, the productively discomforting work of Black Queer Diaspora scholars like Mercer (1994), Alexander (2005), Wekker (1997, 2006), Walcott (2005), Tinsley (2008, 2010), and Allen (2011)—of course among others—have been and continue to do the challenging work of Black Queer Diaspora studies, making the path by walking it.

It is to this work—the graceful stride—that I hope to contribute through the present engagement with Jacquelyn Fields. Each of us, scholars of Black Queer Diasporic lifeways, attends to the specificities of place while also gesturing toward each other. Each of us is able to hold a mindfulness of the African diaspora central in our work

while respecting the elaboration of place, the privileges and problems of distinct diasporic spaces. A Black Queer Diaspora consciousness is much more sophisticated than an always hurried, always incomplete attempt to include as much of the African Diaspora in any one analytical endeavor. Rather than an additive notion of diaspora studies that seeks to crowd in as many sites as possible into the articulation of transnational collectivity, the consciousness I foreground here provides a frame of reference that is no less an intervention if the specific location from which or through which it is articulated is singular: be it Canada, Suriname, Britain, Cuba, Trinidad & Tobago or even US America. After all, a close attentiveness to Black queerness in the United States remains incomplete if we dare turn our backs on the rest of the Black Queer Diaspora. Incomplete, in large part, because for so long so much of that diaspora has lived right alongside African American queer communities snugly within the geo-political confines of the United States. Black queer scholarship in US America (as well as in various other sites of the African Diaspora, including crucial sites on the African continent) must be called upon to look inward and outward at once.¹⁸ The cultivation of this Black queer double vision is intended to challenge the absolute materiality of the dividing line between queer African America and the rest of the Black queer world without completely effacing the significant distinctions of location. This double vision—possible only from a particularly marked vantage point—encourages the kinds of perspectival shifts that permit scholars to recognize the circulation of new possibilities. Erotic subjectivity is merely one of many such possibilities, but it is the principal one with which the present engagement is wedded.

CONCLUSION: THE EROTICS OF SPECULATION AND A MAP FOR THE JOURNEY AHEAD

I offer erotic subjectivity—its sutured political-sensual-spiritual consciousness—as a speculative epistemology weaned on a praxis of embodied listening. Speculation marks this theoretical proposition as a conjectural gesture, but it also calls attention to the possible workings of the political, sensual and spiritual in the act of speculation itself. What political project does speculation serve? What desires does it fulfill? What metaphysical offerings does it make? What if speculating Blackness and queerness is about recognizing each as political, sensual and spiritual categories? What if that speculation is about recognizing the

overlapping erotic subjectivity of Black queerness? Ultimately, the present speculation about the convergence of Blackness and queerness in the shifting conceptual space of the African Diaspora is less concerned with defining (and thus delimiting perhaps?) what Black queer anthropology might be and much more concerned with what anthropology—informed by Black feminist and queer methodological and theoretical interventions in the discipline—might *do* for Black queer analysis primarily through a deep and broad listening practice, how it might shape an emergent scholarly insistence on diasporic presence in the ever expanding house of Black queer studies.

Instead of determining the boundaries of Black queer anthropology—an important terrain to survey and indeed profitable real estate for theoretical and transdisciplinary speculation even if not my primary focus right here, right now—my topography takes a much wider perspective in an effort to map the ebb and flow that connects Black Diaspora studies, queer studies and anthropology as part of the living map of Black Queer Diaspora studies. This watery way between remains for now perhaps only a speculative bridge—as material and impactful as a steady sea breeze across a rippling interdisciplinary praxis. My oceanography charts the unifying tide that washes upon the shores of these mythic islands of inquiry—anthropology, queer studies, Black Diaspora Studies. The seeming insularity of these areas of inquiry—these supposed islands of analysis—closely resembles the chain of islands that constitute the Antilles. Caribbean islands that perhaps seem quite separate on the surface (that is, above the crashing waves), but islands that hide a secret. These islands are also a mountain range—a half-submerged landscape—that despite what we think we see, still share common ground beneath the breathing tides. Black Diaspora studies ... queer studies ... anthropology ... may be islands each in the expansive region of Black Queer Diaspora studies. But they are islands that have been an archipelago all along.

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NOTES

1. I must first thank Shaka McGlotten for inviting me in 2007 to join the conversation that

inspired this article and for being the first editor of this piece. I am also grateful to the anonymous reviewers, whose precise critique and generous suggestions have transformed the text for the better. A public talk I delivered in the spring of 2011 at Princeton University during my tenure as a post-doctoral fellow at the Center for African American Studies also helped me to clarify many of the ideas in this text. Finally, I am grateful beyond measure to Dana-Ain Davis for her patience and consideration.

2. An Afro-Trinidadian lesbian poet, novelist and activist born in the Caribbean and living in Toronto, Canada, Dionne Brand is the perfect person with whom to begin this speculative topography of Black Queer Diaspora. Brand's meditation on mapping here is gifted from her second novel *At the Full and Change of the Moon* [Brand 1999:52–53].

3. Throughout this analysis, the term “Black” refers to a racial, cultural, historical and imaginative collectivity shared by peoples of African descent. And the term “queer” signifies doubly as both an umbrella term for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) communities and as a descriptor for an anti-normative posture characteristic of communities or individuals who may or may not live beneath the LGBT umbrella. My usage of “queer” foregrounds LGBT communities, but remains mindful of a seductive (hetero) normativity even among same-sex desiring and gender non-conforming peoples.

4. Several of the most important and expertly crafted texts in an emergent Black Queer Diaspora Studies would do well to attend more closely to the quotidian experiences and voiced opinions of Black queer subjects in various locations throughout the Black Diaspora. The scholarship of Jacqui Alexander and Rinaldo Walcott stands out in this regard, but certainly does not stand alone. Attention to situated Black queer speaking/acting subjects not only instantiates an individualized Black queer presence that is as important as the presence of institutions/ideologies confining or challenging Black queerness in abstract, but this Black queer articulation also calls attention to the various means by which these subjects negotiate institutional and ideological obstacles as part of everyday life.

5. The apt phrase “kinesthetic literacy” comes courtesy of an anonymous reviewer. And another anonymous reviewer suggests quite insightfully that listening to the dynamic voices (and unvoiced actions) across the Black queer diaspora in fact

enables and cultivates the very Black Queer Diaspora consciousness that seeks these subjects in the first place. This “ethnographic listening practice” reveals that diaspora—like sound—reverberates across space and responds to its own echo.

6. See especially the work of Rodriguez (1995), Mullings (1997), Davis (2006), and Cox (2009).

7. It is important to note that there is a small cadre of scholars whose work brings an anthropologically informed listening practice to their engagement with Black queer lifeways. Some among them are anthropologists (Wekker 2006; Dankwa 2009; Agard-Jones 2011[2009], Allen 2011) and some are not (Riggs 1989; Pettway 1996; Johnson 2008). I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer for encouraging this roll call.

8. My attention to Trinidad in this analysis ought not to be interpreted as a deliberate attempt to elide Tobago – as is unfortunately so often the case in scholarly treatments of the sister isles. Having conducted ethnographic research on both islands, I am aware of the many distinct and nuanced cultural and racial particularities characteristic of each island even in spite of significant traffic between them.

9. The contemporary complexity of Trinbagonian culture is best understood alongside a more detailed treatment of Trinbagonian colonial history than I am able to offer here. For perhaps still the most impressive narration of that history, see Bridget Brereton’s *A History of Modern Trinidad, 1783–1962* (Brereton 1981). And for one of the most recent engagements with the various influences on Trinidad’s modern cultural landscape, see Harvey Neptune’s *Caliban and the Yankees: Trinidad and the United States Occupation* (Neptune 2007).

10. Makeda Silvera, in her now classic essay “Man Royals and Sodomites: Some Thoughts on the Invisibility of Afro-Caribbean Lesbians” (Silvera 2008[1992]) and Rosamond King in her response “More notes on the invisibility of Caribbean lesbians” (King 2008[2005]) mark this “disappeared” Caribbean lesbian presence. However, Rosamund Elwin’s diasporic anthology *Tongues on Fire: Caribbean Lesbian Lives and Stories* (Elwin 1997) listens closely for the voices of these seemingly vanished queer Caribbean women.

11. For perhaps the most recent engagement with eros and subjectivity in same-sex desiring communities in the African Diaspora, see anthropologist Jafari Allen’s *Venceremos?: the Erotics of Black Self-Making in Cuba* [Allen 2011].

12. The text of this speech delivered on August 25, 1978 has been most notably published

in Audre Lorde’s seminal collection *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Lorde 1984[1978]).

13. Provisionally titled *Transfiguring Trinidad & Tobago: the Erotics of a Queer Caribbean Culture*, the book manuscript analyzes same-sex desiring communities and artistry in the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago. In it, Carnival masquerade, Calypso music and HIV/AIDS activism provide the interlinked terrain upon which to propose a novel theoretical framework for the study of subjectivity.

14. The vast majority of Gay Pride Week events occur in Trinidad, usually in or near Port-of-Spain. However, in recent years, there have been formal and informal Pride events orchestrated in Tobago, usually some variation of a Pride *fête* and usually on the western tip of the island.

15. The “Community Chatroom Experience” (or the “Chatroom”) is a weekly discussion and support group for same-sex desiring Trinbagonian men. One of the oldest and most certainly the longest running program for same-sex desiring men in T&T, the Chatroom started in 1994—the year of first Gay Pride celebrations in T&T—as series of HIV/AIDS education and community-building workshops for gay men.

16. I was able to have perhaps the most sustained conversation about this group with seven same-sex desiring women who attended an outing to Las Cuevas beach that I planned in Trinidad in June 2008. Jacquelyn Fields’ generosity with her time and her expansive network absolutely made this group interview possible and for that (among many other things) I am deeply indebted to her.

17. Spiritual Baptism is an Afro-Caribbean syncretic faith.

18. Black feminist anthropology has long encouraged this “transgeographical project” of simultaneously looking outward from and inward at the United States (McClaurin 2001:9).

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