

Book Review

The Sexual Politics of the Empire: Postcolonial Homophobia in Haiti

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The 2010 earthquake in Haiti attracted the world's attention to the devastating impact of a natural disaster on the people of Haiti. While on the one hand the indigenous population had to cope with the aftermath of the ensuing tsunami, loss of habitation, lives and livelihoods, they also had to deal with the evangelising missionaries who descended on Haiti with their own interpretation of why the catastrophe took place. Erin L. Durban's book, *The Sexual Politics of the Empire: Post Colonial Homophobia in Haiti* explores the conflicting responses of the evangelising missionaries and the international LGBTI+ activists to a beleaguered nation concentrating particularly on the ensuing homophobia on the same-sex desiring and gender creative Haitians. Arguing that the intervention of foreign agencies in Haiti started long before the natural calamity struck, Durban claims that Haiti has been a 'laboratory' for the US empire not only to increase its imperial desires, but also because it fulfils a strategic military outpost for the presence of the US military, to position itself in the Caribbean. She points out that the US government has always had an eye on the island, and the earthquake became an excuse for US imperial plans for an ongoing militarisation in the region. In order to justify its occupation of Haiti, an imperialist narrative is articulated and critiqued in the research, attributing its problems to its African/Black roots and the attendant indigenous cultures.

Durban cites the feminist sociologist, Ashley Currier's theorisation of political homophobia in Namibia in particular and Africa in general, in which she draws attention to the continuity of colonial apartheid and postcolonial homophobia stating that this was used as a tool by the nationalists to entrench the masculinist notions of superiority and liberate the country from colonial rule.

Also, she posits that postcolonial homophobia is the result of 'historical and contemporary' Western imperialists bio-political intervention to 'regulate/manage/govern/liberate gender and sexuality' (p. 10). Her book, therefore, presents an interdisciplinary inquiry into the individual and collective experiences of homophobia post 2011. Describing her research as a 'decolonial turn away from sites' (p. 13) towards a more inclusive and comprehensive analysis of the connections amongst various sites, she focusses her attention on Queer Haiti, represented by the 'same-sex desiring and gender creative' people located there. She problematises the definition of Queer itself since it is a term relatively unknown in Haiti and also because it carries multiple meanings for academics in the USA. Preferring to use the phrase 'same-sex desiring and gender-creative' for LGBTQI+ her book is a culmination of her research practice in Haiti where she conducted interviews, focus groups discussions, and data collection over a ten year period. She has also included creative works by same sex desiring and gender creative groups in Haiti with official documents, public records, newsletters, newspaper articles, magazines, social

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media posts and other anthropological research. She claims that the US imperialist state ‘othered’ Haiti, constructing the island as this dark and dangerous land of ‘voodoo/*vaudou*’ which had to be protected from itself, therefore recolonisation was warranted. She traces the growth of the concept of ‘*zombi*’ (zombie) over five historical periods of Haiti. The zombie is perceived as a horrific and disgusting figure which symbolically belongs neither to the world of the living nor to the world of the dead, and is directly linked to homosexuality in the Christian church. This loathsome figure was used as an excuse by the US imperialists to move into Haiti; but it was later reclaimed by the same sex desiring and gender creative Haitians to protest and perform anti-colonial queer critiques of homophobia.

Durban describes in detail how the Christian missionaries from US relocated into Haiti to ‘save’ the Haitians. According to her, there were two waves of missionaries who came to Haiti. The first were the Roman Catholics who landed when France colonised Haiti in the 1400s and the second group were the Protestant missionaries who came to help Haiti after the earthquake in 2011. Both Christian groups’ proselytisation resulted in homophobia which negatively affected the same sex desiring and gender creative groups in Haiti. But their approaches were different: whilst the Roman Catholics believed in silence and not acknowledging the existence of same sex desiring and gender creative people, the Protestant enforced public annunciation and denunciation of such groups.

In the following section of the book, Durban elaborates on the Pierre Louis controversy, when President Rene Preval appointed ‘educator, economist, and human development leader’ (p. 88) Michèle Duviviere Pierre-Louis as his prime minister. She was subsequently removed from office because she was suspected of being a lesbian even though she acknowledged the presence of her daughter and a grandson in her acceptance speech, presumably as a way of appearing heteronormative. Durban states that according to feminist organisations in Haiti, this was used to prevent women from occupying leadership positions. Durban cites Susanne Parr (1997) who calls this ‘lesbian-baiting’, which is an effective tool to destabilise women, since there is no defence against this kind of accusation. Lynda Hart (1994) explains that kind of behaviour can be called ‘heteropatriarchy’ in which sexism is used to generate hatred of homosexuals leading to gender asymmetry because it is the women who are targeted the most.

Next, Durban turns her attention to the performance of ‘Zonbi, Zonbi’ at the 2009 Ghetto Biennale in Port au Prince. She gives the example of a cultural group called Lakou and argues that performance represents a resistance and challenge to enforced, Christian homophobia in the country and is a form of protest to provide a safe, secure place for same sex desiring and gender creative people to contest heteronormativity. The Biennale itself has become very popular over time and is well attended by people from different parts of the world. Particularly, people of the diaspora make use of this opportunity to connect with their cultural roots. Referring to different studies on queer practices by several scholars, Durban explores Frankétienne’s novel, *Defazè* (1975), which is this first novel ever written in Haitian Kreyol. According to Durban, *Defazè* is an allegory of life under the tyrannical rule of Duvalier and is symbolic of the *Zonbi* anti-hero who is physically present but lacks soul, a revolting creature which links in with performances by cultural groups like Lakou. In other words, Durban asserts that queerness is represented culturally in several forms whether it is a public performance or in creative writing providing a space for the *masisi* (a Kreyol term for same sex desiring person, mostly men), *madivin* (a Kreyol term for same sex desiring person, mostly women) and others to dwell peacefully.

In the final section, Durban traces the emergence of the social movement against homophobia linking it to the many activist human rights organisations that moved into Haiti to develop transnational movements to combat this problem. She asserts that any conversation about Haiti and homophobia has to include the element of race and that any queer anti-imperialist activism towards a vision for revolutionary change is impossible in the NGO laboratories. It is really these Haitians who keep this struggle for acceptance of the same sex desiring and gender creative people alive in the national consciousness.

Durban’s book presents a penetrating analysis of homophobia in Haiti and links it to an ongoing imperial agenda of the US government. Her insight into the nature of same sex desiring and gender creative people and the challenges they face in a society fraught with interference from different religious sects as well as international LGBTQI+ organisations is not only masterly, but she is able to make an incisive argument for the need to look beyond superficial reasons of race and gender. What is most impressive about her book is her ability to weave together a narrative from anthropological standards to literary and cultural examples to make her argument comprehensive. Her ability to make connections across historical, political, religious, sociological and other fields, makes this a book of interest for any scholar researching these areas. Her writing is academic, but not dense and incomprehensible for any reader with an interest in non-fiction and abstract ideas. She gives many examples to illustrate her arguments about the assertion of same sex desiring and gender creative people’s identities, thus making it a thought provoking and compelling book to read.

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