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Social Erotics: The Fluidity of Love, Desire and Friendship for Same-Sex Loving Women in Trinidad

By Krystal Ghisyawan¹

Abstract

Love takes many forms and can serve different functions in a person's life. Some forms, such as romantic love, familial love, and love within friendship, while sometimes distinct, at other times cannot be separated. This paper discusses love and friendship for same-sex loving women in Trinidad, exploring this mutability of love, the functions of love and intimacy in these women's lives, the role of social media and social circles for finding love, all while considering the notion that love amongst same-sex loving women is an act of resistance. Forty same-sex loving women were individually interviewed, and this paper is written using excerpts from their narratives, their poetry and short stories, along with personal reflections and discussions of previous literature. This delivery style is meant to mimic the multivalent nature of love that is being discussed.

Keywords: same-sex love, erotic agency, women in Trinidad, love as resistance

Introduction

Caribbean feminist scholars have been troubling dominant notions pertaining to the concepts of love, desire and friendship, particularly showing their messiness in the lived experiences of same-sex loving women in the Caribbean. Paraphrasing Michelle Cliff, Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley asked, "what does it mean for a brown woman to love another woman in the Caribbean, when both the verb love and the noun woman have been such volatile, policed concepts in the ships, cane, and beds of the region's history?" (Tinsley 2010:14) What does their love mean today given the illegality of its sexual expressions across the region? This paper dissects the concept of love and its functions in the intimate lives of same-sex loving women in Trinidad. My analytical group "same-sex loving women" is in itself an indication of how this argument is formed. In that title, "loving" refers to romantic love, making love, having sex, forming bonds of friendship, and creating kin. By looking at the numerous types of loving relationships enjoyed by these women, I discuss the fluidity of "love", the blurring of perceived boundaries between sexual desire, love and friendship, arguing that love amongst same-sex loving women embodies acts of resistance to hegemonic constructions of "respectable" gender and sexual norms.

For this discussion, I use the word "love" to refer to affect and romantic emotional attachment, and "desire" to refer to sexual attraction and arousal, although sex is not devoid of emotion. Emotions "work, in concrete and particular ways, to mediate the relationship between the psychic and the social, and between the individual and the collective" (Ahmed 2004:119). So while emotions (both love and sexual desire) are psychological dispositions, they are also socially informed. Research in psychology, animal behaviour and neurobiology, has been finding that

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romantic love and sexual desire are governed by different parts of the brain with different neurochemical substrates (Diamond 2004:116), showing that sexual desire can occur without feelings of love and attachment. The opposite is also true, as romantic asexuals experience feelings of love without feelings of sexual desire (Diamond 2004:118).

Emotions and sexual mores are not universal but socially constructed. Cultural upbringing trains one in the norms for interpreting feelings and for associating the appropriate acts to express those feelings. These mores can be situated in relation to culture and power. "Sexuality in a particular setting is something that people shape collectively on the basis of their cultural archives and changing political and economic circumstances" (Wekker 2006:67). These sexual ideals are often entwined in constructions of gender, such as "the cult of true oomanhood" (how 'womanhood' is pronounced colloquially in the Anglophone Caribbean) described by Rosamond King (2015). "The cult of true oomanhood" emphasised piety, sexual purity, reproductive heterosexuality and domesticity as the gender and sexual ideal for women (King 2015:125). King (2015) draws on concepts of erotic resistance and erotic autonomy to describe how women's sexual agency challenges these ideologies by transgressing cultural expectations. Gloria Wekker (2006) documented *mati*, the transgressions of same-sex loving Afro-Surinamese working-class women who "enjoyed and celebrated each other openly, in which they helped each other cope with daily living, sharing hardships and pleasure, and in which there was a lot of sleeping around and teasing" (Wekker 2006:28). Juxtaposing *mati* practices and "true oomanhood" highlights the importance of social and economic class in determining acceptable sexual behaviours and relationships in the region.

Hegemonic notions of ideal gender and sexuality have been filtered into laws in the Caribbean criminalising those transgressing these norms. For example, Trinidad's Sexual Offences Act (2000) Chapter 11:28, Clause 16, lists serious indecency as "an act, other than sexual intercourse (whether natural or unnatural), by a person involving the use of the genital organ for the purpose of arousing or gratifying sexual desire". "If committed on or towards a person sixteen years of age or more", serious indecency carries a sentence of five years. Married couples and heterosexual couples over the age of sixteen are exempt from this law if the act is consensually committed in private, but if committed in private by same-sex couples, the law can still be applied. Although there is a moratorium on the law and its applicability hinges on consent, for some women in this study, the law represents a sleeping giant that can be used at anytime to criminalise their behaviour. In this paper, I consider how same-sex loving women in Trinidad have shaped their loving relationships and experience love, sexuality and friendship, because of and despite these legal and socio-cultural constraints.

Sample data and Methodology

The data used in this discussion was collected through my doctoral research (December 2012-May 2014), where I sought "same-sex loving women in Trinidad", loosely defined so as to encourage participation of women who sexually self-identified in various ways or not at all. I felt this was necessary as "sexual identity" is not regarded as an applicable framework in the Caribbean region (Wekker 2006, Kempadoo 2009). Using a term like "lesbian" or "gay" would have narrowed the pool of participants to persons who identified in those specific ways. I sought to open a conversation about the relationship between identity and praxis, especially in response to the growing sexual advocacy movements across the region. By recruiting mainly through Facebook and word-of-mouth, members of my sample shared many characteristics and social circles. They

were mainly women of either middle-class or working-class backgrounds, and most had some amount of post-secondary education, from associate degrees to doctorates. They trusted the research process, and with my increased participation in social justice movements (around issues of sexual rights) and the local same-sex loving community, they grew to trust me as well.

Wanting to capture the relatively understudied experiences of same-sex loving women, I utilised a combination of qualitative research methods including participant observation, semi-structured interviews and subjective mapping exercises, each privileging the subjective voice of the participants and offering a different approach to data collection. Interviews can be more rigid than participant-observation, where there is less chance of misreporting and the opportunity to witness events as they unfold. But interviews offered more opportunity for in-depth discussion of individuals' experiences and opinions. Testimony of small groups and individuals are integral for fracturing hegemonic truths that capture top-down experiences and silence voices of the less privileged in society. First-hand accounts highlight the multiple subject positions people occupy, the multiplicity of "truth", and support the social responsibility and social justice stance that a lot of contemporary ethnographic studies work towards (Madden 2010).

The narratives shared here were acquired particularly through one-on-one semi-structured interviews conducted with forty same-sex loving women in Trinidad. As part of the interview, participants were asked to draw subjective maps responding to the question, "where do you feel safe to be yourself/express your sexuality". A number of participants indicated that writing short stories and poems was a 'safe space'. While I do not address the maps, I utilise the narratives elicited from the women's creation of these subjective maps, alongside excerpts from two of these creative pieces, a short story entitled "Kyrie comes out to her mother", written by Jaya, and a poem called "The Little Local Revolution" written by Alexi. All names have been changed to protect the identities of contributors to this research, and the creative pieces are being used with the permission of the authors.

Contextualising "Love", "desire" and "Friendship" in scholarship: A selective literature review

This selective literature review will look at themes related to love, desire and friendship that were addressed in Gloria Wekker's ethnography of *mati wroko* in Suriname, Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley's and Rosamond King's literary analyses, Audre Lorde's essays and biomythography². These themes include jealousy and monogamy, friend groups as potential lovers, friendships as kin, and these relationships as spaces for reciprocity and resistance against heteropatriarchal norms.

In Wekker's study of "mati wroko" or "mati work", she connects Afro-Surinamese working-class women's sexual practices to their following of Winti, a West African-derived tradition. According to Wekker, the women believe that, "everything that has to do with love is good, no matter in what form it comes" (2006: 186) referring to the sex of their partner as women who practice *mati* may have sex with men and women, even engaging in multiple sexual relationships at a given time. Yet they see love and sex as two separate things; you can love one person and have sex with others (Wekker 2006: 77, 222). For these women, relationships are about "responsibility to support and take care of one another; to be there in matters of love, life, and

² Coined by Audre Lorde, the term "biomythography" referred to her fictionalized memoir, utilising non-linear chronology and blurring the lines between fact and fiction. This type of writing breaks from traditional forms of autobiography, allowing people outside hegemonic statuses to share their own voice (automythography).

death; to nurture and to make positive contributions to each other's lives" (Wekker 2006: 33). Wekker's gatekeeper Juliette describes having female partners but wanting to give it up in order to have children. Juliette said that "it is true that she [a woman] can give me money too, she can give me a dress, she can love me. But I wanted the children, they take care of you in your older years" (Wekker 2006: 30). Juliette would not settle down with a man because she felt they tended to want to control her movements and her sexuality, but other options for having children, such as artificial insemination, were unavailable to her due to her economic class and lack of resources.

In *Zami, A New Spelling of my Name*, Audre Lorde describes "zami" as "a Carriacou name for women who work together as friends and lovers" (1982: 255), similar to mati in that it is also an economic coping mechanism among working-class women, and neither are identity categories. King argues that the women (and men) addressed in her text *Island Bodies*, are also not concerned with identity but with desire, "not only sexual desire but also a desire to become, to imagine, and to live a life beyond that proscribed for them by their society and culture" (2015: 11). In *Zami*, Lorde described her own becoming, through the various relationships in her life where she learned about love, sex and friendship. She recalled her first orgasm while pounding garlic in her parents' kitchen, her early friendships and courtships, women she dated, loved and lived with, struggled and identified with, as she came to know herself as a Black lesbian woman-identified woman (1982: 225) living in New York city in the 1950s, especially given the scarcity of Black women in the scene. Lorde recognised the political relevance of these women's sociality:

"So far as I could see, gay-girls were the only Black and [white] women who were even talking to each other in this country in the 1950s, outside of the empty rhetoric of patriotism and political movements. Black or white, Ky-Ky, butch, or femme, the only thing we shared, often, and in varying proportions, was that we dared for connection in the name of woman, and saw that as our power, rather than our problem." (Lorde, 1982: 225)

Jennifer Nash (2011:14) refers to this as "a radical ethic of care" involving labour towards the building of self and the healing of community. In Lorde's experience, the 'gay-girls' community to which she belonged were always taking care of each other, sharing food, alcohol, marijuana, even opening the sexual space to other women. Lorde mentions not knowing how common that type of relationship was (what we now call 'polyamory' and open relationships), as no one made mention of it, nor had she read about it in any book (1982: 213), saying that "we had no patterns to follow, except our own needs and our own unthought-out dreams" (Lorde 1982: 210). Lorde describes discussions between her and her partner Muriel, to bring their friend Lynn into their relationship. "I always used to say that I believed in sleeping with my friends. Well, here was a chance to put theory into practice" (1982: 212). *Zami* has other stories like this which show that desire, love and friendship are not separate emotions and drives, but are fluid and flow into each other, sometimes very messily, as with the Audre-Muriel-Lynn relationship, and other plural lover relationships described to Gloria Wekker by Juliette. Some of these relationships were consensual or willingly ignored, while others were considered as infidelity and stirred up conflict among the women (Wekker 2006: 43, 48).

These relationships were often fostered by women's homosocial proximities. As Lorde described in the quote above, the women's same-sex love and desire, their shared occupation of subaltern spaces, their kin practices and camaraderie, bound them to each other. In his work on queer friendship, Giancarlo Cornejo (2014: 363) says that it is commonly assumed that lesbian,

gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex communities (LGBTQI, acronym used by Cornejo) can only mimic heterosexual kinship models, but as the narratives of Wekker and Lorde assert, these friendships among same-sex loving women created new possibilities for family, intimacy and understanding their pleasures and bodies.

Social Anthropologist Shaka McGlotten defines intimacy as a structure of feelings. It includes the feeling of being more or less connected (McGlotten 2012: 9, Ahmed 2004:119) and having a sense of belonging; embodied and carnal sensuality (meaning sex); and an assemblage of ideologies “that exert normative pressure on large and small bodies, lives and worlds” (McGlotten 2012: 1). In other words, while intimacy is personally defined, the social groups one belongs to employ hegemonic ideologies of family, love, desire, and friendship to instruct on the “right” ways to experience and express intimacy. It is important to recognise the role played by virtual technologies for expanding the opportunities for forming friendships and seeking love, romance, or sex, and also to learn new scripts of behaviours. McGlotten designates the internet as a “queer spaces” or spaces where the normal rules of social intercourse are suspended (2012: 4), and thus holds the potential for diversifying scripts of acceptable homosocial and erotic interactions, even inspiring changes in the form and formation of social relationships.

This paper builds on the abovementioned texts, drawing on the narratives of same-sex loving women as they discuss their exploration and understanding of their own intimate practices.

Making Love and Friendship in Women’s Creative Praxis

I love Radha.

“Kyrie,” my mother said, a kind frown knitting between her eyebrows, her feet stilling in the middle of their parang patterns. “I know that, honey.”

I felt myself shaking my head, with all the desperation of a small child who resorts to jerking, panicked body motions when it feels certain that words aren’t working. I couldn’t make my words work. I could barely summon them to rise forth from my chest.

“No,” I helplessly whispered. “No, Ma. Not... not like that. Yes, like that, but...”

“Kyrie comes out to her mother”, Jaya

“Love” and friendship: Turning friends into lovers

In the excerpt above, Kyrie is at a Christmas party with her mother. Amid the melodies of a live parang band, she confesses that she loves Radha “like that”, meaning as friends, but also in other ways that ‘love’ can be interpreted. Jaya, a 26-year old Indo-Trinidadian woman, based this story on her own coming out, not defining her sexuality using any identity term but instead by articulating her desires and emotions. Wekker famously quotes Tina Turner, asking, “What’s love got to do with it?” (2006: 73), referring to the separation of love and desire for women who practice mati. But respondents in my study do not make the same distinctions. For example, when asked about if and how she sexually self-identifies, Neena, said “Nope, I’m just me. ‘Love is love’, is my motto”. While ‘love’ can be a euphemism for ‘sex’, like Jaya, Neena is not separating the emotional work from the physical act, instead using “love is love” to refer to both, while at the same time rejecting the need to define or label herself and her behaviours in order to fit with social norms. The sense of love and affect that one feels towards people in their lives, such as their family, partner(s), community or nation are expected to be distinct and accompanied by appropriate behaviours. Issues arise when a certain kind of love and affection is attached to the

'wrong' object as defined by societal norms and values. For instance, what is a friend? What kinds of love are appropriate for friendships?

Jaya/Kyrie's relationship with Radha appeared to Jaya/Kyrie's mother to be one of friendship until it was otherwise specified. Women's homosocial interactions are expected to be platonic, and often when it is revealed to be otherwise, "either the woman's same-sex desire or her gender non-conformity is apparent" (Allen 11, cited in King 2015: 99), they may be treated differently for it, punished, sanctioned, or driven out of view. In this way, the possibility of women's same-sex interactions being erotic is kept 'near-invisible', "invisibility, even in the presence of actual people or other evidence to the contrary" (King 2012: 102). Non-erotic access that women have to each other's bodies is maintained as the norm of female friendship. Twenty-year old, mixed race Alexi, whose poem will be featured later, is also polyamorous and identifies as 'queer'.

"I have a boyfriend but we are non-monogamous at the moment. I am actually going on a date with a girl next week, she's so cute. And she's sort of a friend as well. We've been friends for a while and neither of us told the other that we were into girls and now we're going on a date. We'll see how that goes." (Alexi, personal interview, 10 October 2013)

Alexi was pleased to find out that her friend who she was interested in was also interested in her. Their assumed straightness had to be debunked in order for them to see each other as sexual options, again returning to the assumption of heterosexuality and the idea that friendships do not feature sexual desire or tension.

The diversity of relationships experienced by same-sex loving women however shows that these scripts can be challenged and unlearned. For instance, "passionate friendships" have the emotional intensity of romantic relationships but lacking explicit sexual interest, sexual activity, or both, challenging the norms that position romantic love and friendship as distinct. Lisa Diamond (2000:191) and Linda Chupkowski (2007: 7) have listed other terms that have been used to study these relationships in various cultures: *romantic friendships* in the United States; *smashes* in 19th century New England; *Tom-Dee* relationships in Thailand; *bond friendships* in Tilkopia; *camaradia*; *mummy-baby* friendships in Lesotho. Diamond defines these friendships with the following criteria: inseparability, jealousy, cuddling, preoccupation with each other, separation distress, and/or fascination with one another, the intensity of which transforms the friendship in spite of it not having a sexual component (192).

Sandy described having a very intense friendship as an adolescent with a heterosexual girl, Renee. As teenager, Sandy considered herself to be heterosexual, and was first drawn to Renee because of their shared religious drive. As her parents' marriage was falling apart, Sandy sought support in Renee. Sandy described meeting Renee at about age fifteen through another friend, Melissa, who was mentoring Sandy:

"But then Renee started to get jealous that she was losing Melissa to me, so she became my friend. Women have this way that they like to toss and pull at each other, where you want to have a hold on Sandy so Melissa could want you more, and it's not a lesbian thing. It's just about friendship. People like to be wanted so this girl became my best friend... We became very close, so close that I used to live with her". (Sandy, personal interview, 3 October 2013)

Her parents' break-up was turning violent and was affecting Sandy's ability to perform well at school, so she moved in with Renee, but as their emotional intimacy grew, other features of their relationship were also changing.

“We would sleep in the same bed, she would hug me and fondle me and stuff but it wasn't to me sexual. It was two friends who really like each other and she was comforting me, 'cause I would come home and cry. I started crying ever so often, 'cause I like this thing, getting comforted... I was really shattered, rightfully so, and this girl was there. She used to pray plenty; she was a real Pentecostal, so in this sick way, the reasons for fondling Sandy was to comfort her and pray for her. It confusing right? And I enjoyed the pleasure of this interaction and she did too but she wouldn't say because that is spiritually wrong and against the word.”
(Sandy, personal interview, 3 October 2013)

Sandy said that they would talk to each other on the phone and online into the middle of the night. She felt like she never wanted a boyfriend, because by the time she was seventeen, she was in love and was having her sexual needs catered to. They were filling a void in each other's lives. Renee's parents didn't give her much attention, and neither did boys as she was underdeveloped in comparison to other girls her age. The girls were able to make each other feel loved, compensating for absent families and other romantic interests.

This all ended when Renee went to college in the States, “and she literally tried to forget everything about Trinidad, who she knew and who she was. It's like she went over there and found herself. And with that, she cut me out”. Sandy was confused, not knowing what she had done, why Renee wanted to abandon their history. “I was going through a trauma, because this person who had been there since I was a child until I was a young adult, who is everything to me, who was the air I breathed... is now gone. And I was shattered. I was heartbroken”. Sandy maintains though that her love grew not from sexual desire but within a friendship that later became a sexual relationship, and the loss of that one relationship was like the end of multiple – a romantic relationship as well as a friendship.

Sandy never got answers from Renee about why she distanced herself from their relationship, but noted the hesitance to identify or name their sexual desires. Sandy has since struggled to understand and accept her sexuality, feeling at odds with her roles as a daughter, as a Roman Catholic, and as a public figure. She described it as “a two-person thing”, being someone in private and then having to put up a facade when in public. “It's a horrible struggle,” she said, even identifying herself as “lesbian”, “bisexual” and “gay” in different conversations over a few months. “The other day I was in tears; I don't want to be gay. The thing is, I'm not attracted to women. I'm attracted to a woman.” She has sought counselling to cope with her love for this woman, but recognises the paradox of her denial. “How do you stay away from somebody who in your heart you feel you really love and you could be with, you enjoy being with?” she asked. “I am united with this individual in that particular way. And yes there is a lot of sex involved, but it's more than sex. If it was just about sex, I would have lost interest already 'cause I am not sexually driven, but I have a strong needing to be with her all the time”. The hardest thing for Sandy was juggling the public-private image and expectations for her as held by parents, friends and colleagues. Her same-sex desire was part of her private life, and as it burgeoned, she felt it jeopardised her public identities.

Making Communities

The women described their communities of friends to be insular and incestuous, noting that there were few degrees of separation between them, past partners and potential mates. Jaya describes it as a soap opera “everyone with everyone else and then you trade off” or “Like a small bag of marbles that you shake up and see who ends up with whom”. She claims that this is inevitable given the size of the community, but still recognises the role played by the community for those who feel isolated in their other circles. Jaya believed that friends can be like family, noting that for many people they are synonymous, “You can choose your friends, but you can’t really choose, you know like your dad for example. They are the people who make up your platonic kind of family.”

A number of respondents point out that this trading off occurs usually in the form of serial monogamy or infidelity. Only Jaya and Alexi reference polyamory as a style of relationship, which I believe is just a matter of vocabulary or having the word as Lorde pointed out to identify the type of loving relationship you want to engage in.

“I have a hard time buying into monogamy...it’s a workable idea for some people. Not for me; it doesn’t seem plausible... What would my ideal romantic life resemble? It is not that Dick and Jane sort of image. It probably involves one primary romantic partner who is open to the possibility of a secondary partner.”
(Jaya, personal interview, 10 May 2013)

Jaya goes on to say that her mother now associates her non-monogamy with her bisexuality. Biphobic attitudes often accuse bisexuals of being over-sexed and incapable of fidelity (Israel and Mohr 124-127), but polyamory does not appear typical amongst women in my sample who experience attraction to men and women. Instead, being in an exclusive monogamous relationship regardless of the sex of one’s partner seems to be a personal choice. The choice to be monogamous (or not) was discussed among all parties involved in the given relationship.

Within the region, men are given licence to engage in multiple relationships at once, even fathering children with multiple women (Kamugisha 2012: 51). Women are not given that same freedom and are slandered if they do. Within the working class context it is more accepted however, as these relationships come to represent a possible source of income. Within Wekker’s work, transactional sex is called “karma prikti” (2006: 36) and includes the sexual obligations towards one’s steady partner, be it male or female, in return for the goods, services, or care that that person bestows. Various studies across the Caribbean, including Wekker’s work, Horst and Miller’s study of cell-phone use as facilitating friendships based on sharing and reciprocity (sometimes involving sexual favours) among the Jamaican working class, and King’s tracking of “true oomanhood”, demonstrate the acceptability of transactional sex as coping mechanisms in situations of need. This excludes middle and upper class women from having these types of relationships without being scrutinised and berated for their promiscuity. As a discourse, “polyamory” is attractive for use among such women, whose respectability and ideal “oomanhood” do not permit them to have multiple partners.

While some find solace in friend circles, Aditi, a 32-year old Indo-Trinidadian from south Trinidad, found the community meddlesome, saying “our own gay society here loves that horning culture and envies each other's successes”, adding that she would keep her partner away from the group in order to protect her relationship (similarly described by Chupkowski 2007). Another

interviewee, twenty-two year old Afro-Trinidadian Teila, who identifies as pansexual, blames desperation and the need to feel loved as a reason for someone to turn to the group and the first gay person that they meet and say, “You’re gay and I’m gay, we’re in the same room, so let’s hook up and date, and tomorrow we’re in love.” She says:

“I think Trinidad itself is too small and everybody knows everybody and everybody dates everybody. And gay communities tend to be very clique-ish. You know like in *L-Word* [TV show] there was a cloud, and you can type one name in and all the partners they’ve had and their relationships would come up and it would be like a constellation... that’s the gay community. The smaller the country, the more insular the gay community is. Like you go to a gay event and everyone sees you, everyone knows you, and everyone knows who you’re with”. (Teila, personal interview, 10 October 2013)

The local community of same-sex loving women have a few meeting points and events, such as Studio Rumours, all-girl parties, private events in people’s homes and limes/hangouts organised especially for same-sex loving women at the beach or public parks. My dissertation study revealed the finding of safe spaces and spaces for socialisation within and against normative spaces, such as at the University of the West Indies campus, at hikes and beaches, not just places that were designated as “queer” or “gay” (Ghisyan 2013). Women also highlighted safe spaces regionally and internationally, such as Barbados, Dominica, and some cities in the USA. Even being able to access the community online, through groups and social media such as Facebook, can help with feelings of isolation and despondency, encouraging connections even between people who have never met in the offline world. At the very least, online sociality makes community members visible to each other in a context that has sought to keep them ‘near-invisible’ (McGlotten 2013, King 2015). Online spaces, such as Facebook, allowed same-sex loving women to find each other and be able to chat and share in relative safety away from public scrutiny (Ghisyan 2013). Facebook came up among my sample as a “safe enough” private space for socialisation, chatting, sharing pictures and stories, for meeting potential one-time hook-ups and long-term partners.

Adding “friends” to Facebook could expand one’s social networks, but as Miller suggests, it might also be seen as threatening monogamous relationships (10). Within the Trinidad context, the word “friend” is a colloquial euphemism for having a sexual relationship, whether courting or having an affair. “Friend” becomes a position that holds sexual potential but primarily if the persons are of the opposite sex. In the past, particularly in rural areas, it was not uncommon to hear that people were “frennin” (friending). The Facebook friend is another type of friend or friendship that covers a wide range of possibilities, such as ‘regular platonic friend’, ‘friend who’s not too close’, ‘friend with benefits’ or ‘sex-friend’, ‘secret friend’, ‘best friend’, all with the potential to become a sexual and/or romantic relationship, threatening monogamous pairing. This inclusion of sexual partners in the friend circle, also allows for the exploration of one’s sexual desires and behaviours.

Sexual Desires and Behaviours

I fell in with the women of the little local revolution/ Who presented themselves like drink-soaked sailors/ On a ship grated across shallow, incestuous pools of

*shared love/ Who snatched at sickly corners of the drove—like the proudest of
wolves—/ I gazed at them in wonder from across a room; in the arms of men with
plaid moustaches,/ They who wept like holy mothers of Olympus, offspring
swallowed whole before them/ Who bled at the knuckles to expel the fire in their
chests, and left cherry fingerprints on doorways/ I was lost in the arms of men
with unspecific faces and cocks/ The sameness of which I cannot over-emphasise/
And the little local revolution went on outside and inside me, so many years late.*

“The Little Local Revolution”, Alexi

This is the opening stanza of Alexi’s poem about awakening and entering the local community of same-sex desiring women who “shared love” with each other. She describes them as wolves, like a pack somewhat predatory toying with the stragglers, the alone or the less aggressive women around them. She falls in love with these women, their brazen behaviour and freedom, “like drink-soaked sailors” and envied them. Being with men felt monotonous and repetitive, but coming to know women’s love and bodies triggered a revolution “outside and inside” her. It was a revolution that changed the ways in which she thought about pleasure and desire. She says:

“I met this girl... and I was like “waw, she’s so cool. I wanna be around her all the time, I want her approval” and I was like, why am I worrying myself about it, why am I so upset about it. And I really had to work through that, because it was very confusing. Because I was just like, is she just a really cool person or is this something else? And I was very confused about that for a while. It took me a long time to come out to myself... I don’t want to say “admit” because it suggests I knew all along, but more... figure it out.” (Alexi, personal interview, 10 October 2013)

While learning to process her desires and her attraction to men and women, Alexi thought it might be a phase. But then she had “one or two moments when I realised like, yea this is for real... you can’t fake feelings like that. You can’t lie to yourself so much that you manufacture feelings like that”. Alexi wasn’t just referring to her sexual desire but also the feelings of love and affection, attachment and anxieties that were connected to the women she desired. She was learning how different it was to experience a woman’s love and the potential for pleasure through that love.

As Jaya described, “It seems like there is a manual somewhere that people read and believe all these assumptions and stereotypes of female pleasure, especially straight male-identified persons who believe that they know women’s pleasure better than women do themselves”. She believes this aggressive kind of sexual policing is typical of Caribbean men, though she does not place the burden of this on individual men, but rather “Caribbean culture” which socialises men and women to subordinate women’s sexual pleasure. Women’s expression of sexual pleasure in public is prohibited and they risk being shamed if they do, while in private their pleasure may be ignored or dictated for them, as Jaya suggested.

Another research participant Reagan (early twenties, Afro-Trinidadian) described the phallogocentric ideas of sex that permeate experiences of sex, even between women:

“I’m pretty stone. So I don’t like people touching me all that much. I don’t have to be the instigator but I do like touching the other person, primarily. Some times when I can tell the person really wants to and I’m up for it I let them touch me more than normally. But I always have to let it be known that I will more than likely not be getting off... I’m only now figuring out what I actually like as opposed to what I’ve always assumed I should like. And stopping myself from thinking that an entire experience was a waste because they didn’t orgasm or I didn’t orgasm.” (Reagan, personal interview, 29 August 2013)

Arguing that sexual discourses are used to maintain men’s control of women’s bodies and sexual pleasure, Elizabeth Lloyd (2005) posited the emphasis on vaginal orgasm, pleasure through penetration, and an evolutionary purpose for the female orgasm all served to reinforce reproductive heterosexuality. This emphasis puts pressure on women who never attained orgasm through vaginal penetration to feel as though something was wrong with their bodies (Nicholson and Burr 2003), which Reagan echoed when she admitted to considering a sexual encounter to be wasted if she or her partner didn’t orgasm. Crawford (2012) considered this to be part of Caribbean hegemonic masculinity’s cultural domination of discourse, stressing the need to separate female sexuality from reproductive heterosexuality, and to recognise female pleasure apart from vaginal penetration (Lloyd 2015). This would allow women to be more open about the varied ways they engage with and experience sexual pleasure even within heterosexual relationships (Nicholson and Burr 2003, Crawford 2012, Lloyd 2015), but also over her lifetime.

A woman’s sexual behaviours vary, often depending on their partner, their mood and the setting they are in, evolving with time and experience. Rachael, who identifies as lesbian and is in a monogamous long term relationship with Anna, both Afro-Trinidadian women in their mid-thirties, says:

“I’m usually the instigator. I am versatile so my performance depends on my partner. With femmes I am the aggressor, with butches I can be more femme. But it all depends on my partner’s style, I adapt accordingly. I like anything that provides or brings pleasure within reason. I try to communicate my likes and dislikes before the initial act. With Anna it varied. She is not very sexual though and she does not consider herself butch.” (Rachael, personal interview, 3 September 2013)

A particular sexual or gender orientation does not equate to a particular kind of sexual expression, especially as all of these are fluid and flexible. This fluidity in the lives of same-sex loving women makes the overlaps of love, desire and friendship more apparent, revealing how assemblages of emotions and behaviours can cause tiny shifts in the understanding and experience of relationships. Although we see evidence of love beyond the scripts of heteropatriarchal relationships, in the works of Caribbean scholars like Wekker and Lorde, and in the narratives above, these representations are near-invisible in social life and scholarship. This deliberate disappearing of sexual diversity supports the perpetuation of the myth of compulsory heterosexuality and the subordination of female pleasure. These women’s assertion of their sexual pleasure on their own terms and flexibility of their relationships and sexual practices can all be read as resistance since they challenge the norms, laws and assumptions about respectable

“Caribbean sexuality”. Yet at the same time, these practices appear as part of the Caribbean cultural landscape, as experiences of love and desire shared among same-sex loving women.

Conclusion: Love is resistance; love is a revolution

Alright. Okay. Yeah. Maybe when she said it then, she thought, “Lord, it will never be alright again.” She knew, like I did, that it was one thing to have brought me up in frank admiration of women, and another to be partnered to a woman in Trinilandia, where we gyrate near-nude, glitter-plastered, for two sunscorched days of bacchanal-flavoured excess, then spend much of the rest of the year denying that we've even got private parts.

“Kyrie comes out to her mother”, Jaya

As Chela Sandoval examines in her book, *Methodologies of the Oppressed*, love can be viewed as a political apparatus/technology for social transformation (136). She calls this mode of analysis “love in the postmodern world”, where she uses the lessons of U.S. women-of-colour feminisms, focusing on international solidarity and alliance building while resisting racism, class bias, and homophobia. Sandoval suggests that separation is a political tool; the separation of groups, the fragmenting of knowledges and solidarities make people feel disconnected from each other. But love as an analytical tool can show how connected knowledges and processes of knowledge creation really are. The erotic is one such source of knowledge (Lorde 1984: 53).

The body is the medium through which we come to learn about the world and ourselves. Instead of separating the erotic from every-day life, Lorde suggests that connecting to it would make one more powerful. Understanding the erotic also reveals the layers of norms and laws that police it, and living out one's eroticism can potentially unravel them (Alexander 2005). Erotic autonomy is in a sense a trademark of the undisciplined body because it does not follow the rules, and through its nonconformity can be revolutionary, not just by challenging notions of citizenship but by redefining it. Same-sex loving women's practices of family formation and friendship persist in spite of laws that restrict them, criminalise their sexuality, and deny them protection from discrimination. There was a contradictory tension among the women in my sample. Some women felt being middle-class, their sexuality was under scrutiny. While other women of the middle-class, demonstrated that their access to money, resources and temporary migration, allowed them a kind of global citizenship, where they could travel to marry their partners abroad, have private shared homes here in Trinidad, socialise in controlled environments and not expose themselves to public scrutiny. Four women had been in heterosexual relationships and had children, while one respondent and her partner were seeking in-vitro fertilisation in Barbados. Rachael said that same-sex loving women in working-class settings were expected to be loud, aggressive and mannish, and so to be in that setting and be private and quiet, made her feel hyper visible.

The growth of the global economy has facilitated a reimagining of sexual citizenship and of sexual cultures, as ideas and people cross boundaries more quickly than before, and in so doing redefine these boundaries. This is not necessarily bringing new practices into the region but rather new ways of looking, defining, and engaging with that we already do. The claim that “long time, there were no lesbians in the Caribbean”, is true, because same-sex loving women would not have used that word to name themselves. Identity frameworks and the recruiting of terms to name themselves as same-sex desiring persons, like lesbian, queer, bisexual and others, have shifted

focus from sexuality being something that one does (like mati work), to sexuality being part of who one is. This has also changed the reception of same-sex loving persons, from just being “funny” because they didn’t quite fit in with everyone else, to now a named deviant, whose difference is rooted in who they are. Yet these categories allow for connecting to larger communities of same-sex loving persons, for solidarity and for seeking political recognition and protections locally. Increasingly, same-sex loving persons are becoming visible as couples, families and communities, and not just “funny” individual people.

Even with laws in the region targeting same-sex acts, women are finding ways to share their love. Global market expansion and new communication technologies allow for these women to strengthen the bonds of community, friendship, family and romantic relationships, by finding alternative spaces as well as subverting the norms within heteropatriarchal spaces. In the excerpt above Kyrie references Carnival, the “two sun-scorched days of bacchanal-flavoured excess” when sexuality in all its colours is visible everywhere, while the rest of the year conservative cultural norms in the Caribbean, and the policing of each other’s bodies, forces sexuality back into the private sphere, so much so that even conversations about sexuality seem taboo. The off-the-script fantasies of the loves that one wants in life which take place in the virtual space, whether online or in the imagination, find their way into ‘real’ space as new possibilities undermine the hegemonic scripts of heteronormative love and romance.

Although ‘love’, ‘friendship’ and ‘desire’ were separated in order to speak about their distinctions, their intersections are central to this paper, illustrating how each is constituted through interaction with the others. I started by defining “love” as affect and romantic emotion, but by the end of this paper, “love” has come to be so much more. Love unfolds as we think and write about and express it: Love is caring for others and being in their presence. Love is sharing our bodies, our words, our lives whether in joyous or difficult times. Love is family and community. Love is trust and support. Love is possibility. It is wanting to be –to be more, to be together, to be with, to be full and whole, to be part of something. Love is being oneself. And love is a revolution.

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