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Keja L. Valens. *Desire between Women in Caribbean Literature*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. vii + 214 pp.

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Abstract

Book Review of Keja L. Valens. *Desire between Women in Caribbean Literature*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. vii + 214 pp.

Keywords

Women, Caribbean Literature, Francophone Literature, Hispanophone Literature, Anglophone Literature

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Valens' comparative study on the complex relationships between women in hispanophone, francophone, and anglophone literature of the Caribbean explores desire, love, pleasure, and knowledge beyond traditional heteronormative and binary constructions. In framing her study with the "epistemology of the mangrove," she explains that the entwined roots of this plant that lie in the liminal space between land and water are both an abstract symbol and a model for the specificities of the multiple representations of physical, spiritual, and emotional ties that connect women. Drawing on theoretical approaches from Caribbean and queer theories, the book is divided into six chapters of equal length (plus an introduction and a conclusion). The first three chapters examine books whose stories take place during earlier periods of colonization, while the last three focus on a later and second period and form of colonization, which takes place after national independence to a certain degree.

Chapter one, "José Martí's Foundational Failure," examines the fissures, flaws, and failures of the heterosexual model of marriage, as well as the national romance, and questions the genre of the novel itself in *Amistad Funesta/Lucía Jerez* (*Fateful Friendship/Lucía Jerez*). The protagonists' tragic end opens new possibilities for examining desire between women outside a rigid, patriarchal, national structure and encourages a "more mobile, multiple, eroding and re-rooting mangled love in the lives of both of its protagonists" (20). Chapter two, "Lost Idyll: Mayotte Capécia's *Je suis martiniquaise*" (*I am a Martinican Woman*, 1948), analyzes the novel through a postcolonial, feminist perspective. It was the first book published in France by a woman of African descent and was well received. Valens' analysis offers a new way of reading the text beyond Frantz Fanon's majestic condemnation of the novel "as evidence of black women's desire for 'lactification'" (45), which subsequently caused it to be out-of-print. Valens focuses on the relationships of Capécia's heroine (also named Mayotte), whose childhood loves include the empowering Loulouze, black Martinican boys, and the moon. She grows up to have a passionate liaison and a child with a white French army officer, who subsequently abandons her and their child. Mayotte's lack of satisfaction stems from reaching beyond her colonially-imposed and internalized desires, and she could have been better fulfilled had she clung to her girlhood loves and desires. Chapter three, "Replaces Origins: Maryse Condé's *Moi, Tituba Sorcière . . . Noire de Salem*" (*I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem*), focuses on the erotic and spiritual interaction between Nathaniel Hawthorne's Hester Prynne from *The Scarlet Letter* and Tituba as it rewrites the story of both women and imagines their erotic yet doomed relationship in prison. Hester dreams of a lesbian utopia and Tituba of a relationship with Hester and John Indian. In reclaiming desire between the two

women as history, their yearnings for each other and longings for a different life question and reposition gender, racial connections, and the historical and literary canon.

Chapter four addresses the short story collection “Plotting Desire between Girls: Jamaica Kincaid’s *At the Bottom of the River*” (1983) and examines the coming-of-age narratives, emphasizing the love girls have for each other and their desires to marry women when they grow up. While the apparent simplicity of the girls’ wishes and statements seems to indicate a progression from childhood to adulthood, upon further analysis, the narrated desires are subverted and appear mangled, revealing a complex rendering of women’s sexualities. Chapter five, “Sexual Alternatives in Patricia Powell’s *Me Dying Trial*,” studies the contrast between the heteronormative and homophobic discourses in both the historical and the novel’s Jamaica, and the relationships between the characters, which shatter the stereotypical and traditional ideas about other sexualities and sexual preferences. The metaphor of the mangle symbolizes the complex, individual reactions to deviations from heteronormativity as the characters explore themselves and those close to them who exemplify “relational and sexual alternatives” (21). Chapter six, “The Love of Neighbors: Rosario Ferré’s *Eccentric Neighborhoods/Vecindarios exétricos*,” explores Ferré’s oft-told variation on the theme of Puerto Rico’s “traditional plantation elite,” especially women, who face the territory’s twentieth century economic and social changes as they deal with the many societal conflicts between tradition and modernity, as well as personal struggles specific to them. In disrupting heteronormative paradigms (which can symbolize political paradigms), the text suggests that women in an idealized nation-state can have relationships with each other, independent of those they have with men. The power of the mangle is therefore representative of the conditions that point to new possibilities for relationships and sexualities in the social and political spheres.

In drawing on both classical and lesser-known theorists, Valens’s engrossing, convincing, and eminently readable study repositions the Caribbean literary texts she analyses in new, uncharted directions. As she explores both traditional and innovative territory for women’s desires, relationships, and positions, she forges new ground beyond heteronormative discourses and readings, allowing for anyone interested in gender studies, the Caribbean, and postcolonialism to gain new perspectives and engaging insights into these texts.

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