

The Virgin Islands Consortium

Opinion | There Are Many Imports From The U.S., But Gayness Is Not One Of Them

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This piece is not about the “legitimacy” or “sinfulness” of gayness as based on or against any sacred text (there are whole books that refute such arguments). This is about the politics of sexuality as it exists in the Caribbean and as it collides with geopolitics as well as conceptions of islandness and island culture. Now that that’s out of the way, let’s talk about it. Let’s talk about the “G” word—and all the other abbreviations that may accompany it. As a Caribbean American woman, coming from the literal in-between space of a U.S. territory in the Caribbean, I’ve had my share of encounters with homophobia at home and abroad. In the Caribbean, anti-gayness is evident in our music, our sermons, our dominoes-table gossip, even under the shanties of our fish markets. And since the passing of gay-friendly legislation throughout the continental U.S.,

conversations around queerness seem to come up at any given opportunity in black spaces here and away. These conversations are both indicative of anxieties around sexuality and sexual expression as well as those around gentrification and U.S. imperialism.

It is no secret that Caribbean people have strong (and contradicting) politics around sexuality. We are the same people who hold month-long celebrations just to revel in sexual freedom and self-expression and yet impose draconian school policies requiring our young girls to measure their uniform skirts by the length of their middle fingers and their earrings by the size of a quarter. Indeed, we are the people who cut our eyes at the young woman wearing a back-out or midriff top and still expect our boys to know how to “card gyurls” and “buss a stiff wuk up.” Our sexual politics are complicated, so much so that we have developed anxieties around them because we know the damage they can and have caused. We know the realities of rape culture as many of us identify as or know survivors of sexual abuse. We know the damages to teenage development caused by austere measures around dress and behavior. Yet, rather than contend with these issues as they exist, we project our problems unto non-normative ways of sexual expression.

Living throughout the US Virgin Islands, I’ve seen very well the ways in which our politics as a people has been fraught with confusion, contention, and disagreement—for decades. Being “America’s Paradise” comes with a host of issues that confound our relationship to the continental United States as well as to the rest of the Caribbean. Are we American or are we Caribbean? Can we be both? Do we want to be both? The fact that we are not an official member of Caricom (basically the Caribbean version of the European Union) is testament to tensions around our identity.

Related to this identity crisis, is the lived reality of island-style gentrification. On one island alone, over 60% of the land belongs to the National Park and the only option for secondary schooling is private. Land is unaffordable and families have been continuously bought out of their ancestral properties by multinational resort corporations. On another, a ravenous appetite for “paradise” has led to urban congestion. And on the other, a historical rejection of co-optation has led to massive neglect and divestment. For all, the residues of tropical disaster have left the entire territory prey to continental opportunists, hoping to buy up land abandoned by hurricane refugees. The economic and political circumstances of the island are dismal, to say the least.

This is the very context within which we must interrogate [the resistance](#) to Pride Parade in Frederiksted, St. Croix. How can we hold these two truths--that US imperialism is real and that homophobia is rampant--without collapsing the one into the other? To do so, would require that we respect the ways in which critiques of cultural imperialism in the Caribbean are well-founded while also calling attention to disgusting and irrational practices of homophobia.

We enact violence upon the number of Caribbean persons who identify as gay, lesbian and/or queer when we pretend as though gayness/queerness, too, is a U.S. import or some legacy of U.S. imperialism and colonialism. There is a way for us to talk about U.S. hegemony without conflating it with our sexual politics. There are many US imports but gayness is NOT one of them. And the thing of the matter is that we know this. We know this because we ALL know someone who is queer. Whether we’ve chosen to acknowledge them or name their identity, or whether or not they’ve chosen to be named.

They are our family, friends, and colleagues. We've grown up in housing projects with them. Went to school with them. Played mass with them. Attended church with them. Elected them to public office. They've been there. They didn't appear with the colonists, they preceded them. And to tell ourselves any other story is to participate in erasure and selective amnesia.

And still, we have to talk about what one brilliant colleague, Carla Moore, terms "homo-hegemony," the overpowering way in which white, male-led LGBTQI movements throughout the Global North (the continental US in particular) propagate their own particular brand of queerness as the only way to be queer. This project is dangerous because it reduces sexuality and sexual expression to explicit forms of expression and demonizes those that do not view visibility as the only or even superior mode of existing queerly. The Pride Parade could be one such example of this homo-hegemony -- just because a place may host Pride Parades does not necessarily make that place queer-friendly and vice versa. However, it was evident by many of the protesting in Frederiksted that such a critique as this one was far from their agenda.

The truth is, for many locals participating in Pride, the Parade may have been the first time they could publicly stake claim to queerness at home, rather than having to do so only when abroad for fear of (potentially fatal) backlash. At the end of the day, the decision to have a Pride Parade should be left to those locals who identify with the LGBTQI community. If, in fact, such a demonstration is reflective of their own desires and politics and not simply another manifestation of US imperialism, then more power to them. And if other local Frederiksted residents are fearful of their community being overtaken by arrogant and entitled continental Americans, there are many other ways to fight that fight. Holding up a "Burn Out Batty-Boys" sign ain't one of them.

Gayness is not a contagion. You can't just catch it. And even if you could, it'd be too late for Virgin Islanders since we been gay. We been had gay and queer people all up and through our communities with or without US imperialism. So, let's all stop flexing.

Submitted on Friday by: *Jessica S. Samuel*