

"I should like to explain

that Amelia George's first name
is not on record. I have searched everywhere
in Georgetown as well as the British Museum
without being able to trace it.
'Amelia' is therefore my own invention.

The portrait I have painted of her, too,
is purely imaginary,

as nothing can be discovered about
the sort of person she was.

FICTIONS OF FEMININE CITIZENSHIP

SEXUALITY AND THE NATION IN
CONTEMPORARY CARIBBEAN LITERATURE

DONETTE FRANCIS

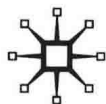


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CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	vii
Introduction	1
1 Re-charting Atlantic Modernities' Desire Lines	23
2 Postcards of Occupation: American Exceptionalism and the Politics of Form	49
3 Reconstituting Female Subjects in Haiti and the Diaspora	77
4 The Romance of Independence	95
5 Love in the Age of Globalized Sex Work, Secrets, and Depression	115
Coda	141
Notes	147
Bibliography	173
Index	187

INTRODUCTION

Silence and fear are not beyond interrogation.

—Sybille Fischer, *Modernity Disavowed*

IN 1802, TWO FRENCH GENERALS CAPTURED TOUSSAINT Louverture, the black slave turned revolutionary leader, and made a significant archival discovery: they found among his belongings a box with a “false bottom,” which included “locks of hair of all colors, rings, golden hearts punctured with arrows, little keys,” along with an “infinity of sweet notes.” The discovery of these keepsakes left no doubt in the generals’ minds about “the success the old Toussaint Louverture had achieved in love!” Anxious to banish any notion of the possibility of sexual liaisons between black men and white women on the island, “before looking too closely at what they had found,” they chose to destroy by burning and throwing into the ocean “every trace of these shameful memories.” After all, as ruler of the French republic and its colonial outposts, Napoleon Bonaparte had instructed his generals in Haiti to deport back to France all white women who had “prostituted themselves to negros.”¹

But rather than lament this archival loss as the inability to know “the meaning of the items in Toussaint’s archival box,” this destroyed archive underscores the centrality of sexual intimacy and the private sphere for conceptualizations and practices of citizenship. Like the various slave and postemancipation laws and social policies that prescribed “who could be intimate with whom—and in what way,”² these destroyed archival contents reveal Napoleon Bonaparte’s active fear of this particular interracial coupling. That the patriotic generals felt the need to disobey Bonaparte’s mandate reflects their greater white masculinist desire to preserve white women’s honor. This militarized regulation of white female desire for black men suggests that the citizenship rights of a white French woman to settle in a colonial outpost could be compromised based on the race of her selected sexual partner.³ While this purposeful “disappearing act” echoes today as an unfortunate silence within the historiography and inhibits the making of academic history, it nonetheless speaks volumes about the political significance of the intimate sphere as a cornerstone of imperialists’ and nationalists’ projects and thus the private sphere’s importance to understandings of

colonial and postcolonial subjectivity and citizenship. Taking into account the intimate archive that Louverture concealed and the military patriots destroyed illustrates the political valence of what Ann Stoler calls the "intimate domain," by which she means a studied analysis of the regulation of sex, sentiment, domestic arrangements, and childrearing.⁴

Regulating intimacy was not just an imperial occupation; it was a concern also shared by the newly forming postcolonial state. Consider, for example, that when Jean-Jacques Dessalines, as the first emperor of the Haitian republic, writes the 1805 constitution, he includes a proviso that naturalizes white women and "their present or future children" into the nascent republic.⁵ Historical records show that not only did white women enter the Caribbean region as indentured servants and work alongside black enslaved women during the early colonial period but they also formed sexual relations with black men in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.⁶ However, across the region, as slave societies matured and the plantocracy consolidated its power, interracial unions between white women and black men were heavily policed and "ceased to appear in the official records," which leaves us with discursive representations in which white colonial desire is presumably always gendered as male.⁷ Discourses produced around sexual irregularities, like consensual interracial desire between black men and white women, sought its prohibition and control. But where Bonaparte and his patriotic generals actively suppress the possibility of white women—rather than white men—as the progenitors of interracial families, Dessalines' legislative act to naturalize white women and their progeny into citizenship installs the black patriarch as the symbolic father of the multiracial nation.⁸ More than mere racial reversal, with this legislative maneuver—which remains in the Haitian constitution in some form until 1918—Dessalines usurps a story about white, female, colonial desire that the colonial archives tried to suppress and acknowledges instead both the possibility and existence of this particular interracial union *and* its reproductive outcome.⁹ These examples reveal the charged meanings invested in the intimate domain—both at the level of archival production and sociocultural regulations. Unraveling the politics of intimacy, how it is narrated, and what it can reveal about the social history of the Caribbean are the guiding concerns of this book.

Fictions of Feminine Citizenship: Sexuality and the Nation in Contemporary Caribbean Literature argues that the sexual lives of Caribbean people have been matters of imperial and national state interests and central to colonial and postcolonial articulations of citizenship. Because regulations of Caribbean intimacy are often violently enacted upon the bodies of Caribbean women and girls, the book asserts that writing such violence—both in terms of social practices as well as physical acts of sexual

violence—has become the grounds for an emergent Caribbean feminist poetics. The book studies five novels written in English and published between 1994 and 2002 by a diasporic grouping of contemporary pan-Caribbean women writers. The analysis explicitly brings worlds made by multiple imperialisms into one conceptual field in order to examine representations of the sexual realities of women and girls within specific historical periods and national contexts: Patricia Powell's *The Pagoda* depicts Jamaica during its indentureship period (1860–1898); Nelly Rosario's *Song of the Water Saints* represents the Dominican Republic under United States military occupation and beyond (1916–1987); Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory* renders Haiti under the Duvalier regime (1957–1986); Elizabeth Nunez' *Bruised Hibiscus* portrays Trinidad on the eve of national independence (1920–1950s); and Angie Cruz' *Soledad* captures the contemporary United States and the impact of globalization on Caribbean immigrants (1990s to present).

In bringing these five novels together, *Fictions of Feminine Citizenship* charts a postemancipation genealogy of the region that disrupts a teleological march from slavery to independence marked by epochal moments of revolution and resistance embodied most often by the accompanying male heroic figure.¹⁰ By beginning alternatively with emancipation and indentureship as representative of the persistent failure of females' sexual citizenship, I show the continuities between slavery and emancipation by foregrounding the centrality of sexual intimacy and its attendant violence to the very project of managing Caribbean freedom.¹¹ The five historical signposts signaled by each text mark symbolic moments of expanded rights given the discourses of freedom at emancipation, U.S. military interventions in different national theaters, countries on the eve of self-rule, or individual migrations to the global north. Yet, a sustained focus on how ordinary women and girls grapple with the conflicting meanings of freedom as it is exercised through various institutional reforms meant to regulate their sexed bodies reveals a picture of the narrowing of rights rather than their expansion.

NARRATING CARIBBEAN HISTORIES THROUGH SEXUAL CITIZENSHIP AND ANTIROMANCE

Fictions of Feminine Citizenship rethinks definitions of modern citizenship that center on an abstract public sphere and an “abstracted, contractual, self-possessive and autonomous” male citizen, who has political, civic, and social rights, responsibilities, and privileges.¹² The project draws on insights of postcolonial feminist and queer theorists whose work critiques how the very idea of citizenship weds political belonging to heterosexual

bodies and reproduction through, for example, birth or marriage.¹³ In 1993, David Evans coined the term “sexual citizenship” to stress that “citizens have genders, sexualities, and bodies that matter in politics.”¹⁴ Evans pays particular attention to the regulation of homosexual bodies, and I extend the term to underscore how these bodily regulations also apply to different racial and gender configurations and to examine how the intimate domain reveals the concealed sexual qualifications of political rights for all citizens.

My use of sexual citizenship incorporates practices of sociocultural belonging alongside the more conventional politico-juridical contract to study how subjects are formed by, governed within, and react against multiple institutions from the state, law, media, church, and family. I specifically demonstrate how Caribbean females experience sexual citizenship, which includes sexual practices such as the freedom to choose to reproduce or not, the liberty of sexual expression and association, as well as the more conventional articulation of protection from sexual violence. Reformulating citizenship to center the sexed body and sexual practices as targets of colonial, national, and neoimperial power also reveals many of the specific problems faced by subaltern women within the region and Caribbean immigrant females abroad attempting to secure citizenship rights.¹⁵ Sexual citizenship disrupts the boundaries between the public and the private while also unsettling the borders between nation and diaspora. Connecting female sexual citizenship both inside and outside the region challenges the dichotomy that posits diaspora as an empowering “elsewhere” of sexual liberation versus home as space of sexual oppression. Attention to sexual citizenship reveals, first, that for Caribbean women and girls, both places are fraught with losses and gains, openings and closures; and, further, that in our increasingly globalized world, the two locations are intimately linked and in many respects mutually constitutive. In distinction to public discourse that frames female citizenship in terms of civic participation through educational achievement and employment,¹⁶ sexual citizenship illuminates the subtle ways in which sexual violence, for example, becomes normalized through rites of passage or dismissed as unnoteworthy, quotidian occurrences. In this way, everyday practices of belonging in the intimate sphere marginalize, violate, and often disempower Caribbean females. Attention to sexual citizenship thus opens a window into sexuality as a crucial yet underexamined aspect of female subjectivity and citizenship both inside and outside the nation.

In positing sexual citizenship as the defining thematic of an emergent Caribbean feminist poetics, I argue that this feature is executed through the mode of the “antiromance.” At its core, the romance genre masks

coercion as consent, since its very structure centers a heterosexual love plot and charts the heroine's liberation from oppressive circumstances and the resolution of difference with a move into domesticity. Therefore, this genre historically has been well suited to plot stories of Anglo-male adventure in and conquest of colonized lands and native female bodies.¹⁷ Regardless of whether these romances portrayed French, Spanish, British, or American imperialism, they categorically disavowed the horrors of slavery, specifically sexual violence, choosing instead to represent love stories centered around the benign project of civilizing African and other natives, which then provided the ideological logic for various imperial expansionist projects.

If imperial romances—through novels, travel writings, diaries, postcards, and so on—framed the region as the “Caribbean picturesque,”¹⁸ then one could argue that anticolonial writers scripted their own revisionist—even redemptive—versions of nationalist romances, which now give way to the antiromances of this late postcolonial period. Several critics engage the romance genre's ideological link to various colonial and national projects. Doris Sommer, for example, studies nineteenth-century Latin American novels to show the interconnections between fiction and the history of nation building as she identifies foundational fictions as those novels that ground nonviolent consolidation through the heterosexual love plot. Sommer argues further that the writers in the Latin American context of the Boom Generation of the 1960s rewrite foundational fictions as the failure of romance, where foundational love affairs are “revealed as rapes, or power plays that traffic in women.”¹⁹ In many ways, this revisionist turn in the 1960s finds its parallel in the Caribbean diasporic writers studied here. Belinda Edmondson extends Sommer's “foundational fictions” to critique Caribbean discourse more broadly; and she asserts that the very paradigmatic tropes used to characterize modern Caribbean societies—multiracialism, mimicry, and *mestizaje*—are themselves romances depicting “idealized representations of Caribbean society” in which “ideological-political issues are mystified into regional symbols divorced from their ideological context.”²⁰ These static key words, she insists, do not capture changing geopolitical realities; instead, they continue to cover over ethnic, class, and gender disparities as well as the tensions between Caribbean people situated at home versus those abroad. Working explicitly on the French Caribbean, Doris Garraway interrogates one such key word—“creolization”—as she rereads the familiar romance in eighteenth and nineteenth-century European colonial discourse in which the consolidation of white male power benignly occurs through the control of colored women's sexuality. Rather than reading

this sexual encounter through the lens of "seduction and romance," she foregrounds "violence and domination."²¹ By underscoring how pivotal sexual violence was to the reproductive logic and hence racial formation of new world societies, Garraway presents a sustained critique of the nonviolent rationale often celebrated in discourses of Caribbean creolization.²² Together these scholarly interventions from the Spanish-, English-, and French-speaking Caribbean point to the inability of conventional romance formulas to adequately capture Caribbean realities.

Drawing on the aforementioned literary critics, *Fictions of Feminine Citizenship* offers antiromance as a template for reading the novelistic output of contemporary Caribbean women writers. These Caribbean antiromances engage three major themes: rewriting the heterosexual love plot through an adult-narrated *bildungsroman*, rethinking alternative ways of belonging to the nation by shifting the focus to the sexual complexities of dwelling at home and abroad, and, finally, resisting canonical historical representations by creating counterarchival sources to replot history. Defying the developmental logic of the *bildungsroman*, these coming-of-age depictions of Caribbean girlhood into womanhood portray girlhood from an adult perspective without any hint of sentimentality or romanticization. Instead these representations of unsuccessful adventure quests spotlight the interior lives of Caribbean women and girls to connect pivotal scenes of subjection to subject formation. Because this narrative strategy relies on the insights of an adult narrator, it discourages any attempt to discount childhood memories or understanding even as it points to the importance of such shaping, childhood scenes. Antiromances refuse any integrity of wholeness, insisting that there is no properly realized nation to come-of-age to and no idealized domestic or "home" space to reclaim. Accordingly, they offer no normative coupling, and coercion is vividly marked as violence and sexual abuse.

These five antiromances reconceive master narratives, whether they be imperial, national, or diasporic, to imagine a different sense of belonging. This different belonging highlights the inability of these female characters to dwell comfortably or safely in any domicile whether at home or abroad. Thus neither familial home, national homeland, nor immigrant nation functions as a site of belonging free from anxieties; female characters therefore often dwell in liminal spaces of vulnerability. This tenuous belonging simultaneously acknowledges both failures and possibilities, as these novelists present conjunctive scenarios that builds limits within the very frame of narration—readers are presented with transracial possibilities with challenges; cross-gender negotiations with confines, regionalist imaginary with restrictions, migratory movement with boundaries, and

family ties with failures. Antiromance therefore does not simply upend one master trope for another. While it points to possibilities, it also suggests the contingencies and contradictions both embedded and revealed in narratives that acknowledge of the failures of sexual citizenship as a point of departure. The end result is that antiromance forces a more complex discussion of agency, which I will discuss in the following section.

Insofar as a defining feature of the conventional romance is its preoccupation with recreating a historical period, then the five antiromances studied here share a similar concern. Yet, this historical turn distinguishes itself from Edouard Glissant's "passion for memory" that characterizes the attempt by contemporary Caribbean male writers to engage the landscape as an "unconquerable character" to recuperate local histories. Addressing this gendered use of landscape, literary critic and creative writer Miriam Chancy points out that male writers often use female characters as metaphors for the landscape, a usage that leads to "a textual romantization of Caribbean women, which denies them a sense of identity separate from that of island-nations" and which further serves to "sublimate and deny the violence perpetrated against women in both 'public' and 'private' spheres."²³ For the women writers studied within this book, representing the landscape has different stakes: their historical preoccupations offer an antinostalgic depiction of home where even the landscape is in an abused and desolate condition. Such depictions make it impossible to romanticize women's experiences both in the public and private spheres. Furthermore, in centering the quotidian experiences of Caribbean females in various historical contexts, the novels bring to light the obscured trajectories of minor racial and ethnic actors. The novels then draw attention to conditions of instability as these characters act within such moments. In the world of the novels, these female characters are shaped by their sexual pasts, and, despite their best efforts, they cannot simply leave the past behind to chart new futures. Antiromances do not present a model of diaspora that longs for one's past life in the homeland; but, neither does it suggest that the mere act of migration equals greater freedom. Prior experience shadows, and even haunts, female migrants across geographical landmasses. In many cases, while characters must return to the past, these journeys of return serve as cautionary and even instructive tales but, significantly, without definitive, concluding answers. Nonetheless, by rechronicling and reconstructing the past, these novelists explore the sociocultural mechanisms of daily life responsible for females' apparent defeat, especially in the realm of sexual expressions. The use of "transgenerational time" as a narrative strategy demonstrates how current and future generations learn the defeats of their elders through oral

storytelling and other practices of remembering in an attempt to possibly chart better futures.²⁴ In spite of the bleakness of their current circumstances, there are second chances, and if not for the present generation, then for the next. Antiromance discourages idealizing the past or future, and it leaves open ended the possibilities of charting alternative futures, even in the wake of violent pasts and presents, and even in the midst of recurring disappointments.

The historical trajectory charted from emancipation to independence asserts that females had already experienced the failure of colonial and independent nation-states to deliver happy endings to all their constituents. And centering on the sexed, female body, these novels demonstrate that, from their very inception, Caribbean states have exhausted whatever emancipatory promises they imagined, given not only the constraints of globalized labor demands but their own naked violence. As such, for many female citizens, the goal has been crafting forms of survival given life's many contingencies and serial setbacks. These antiromances of apparent defeat serve as productive counterpoints to, on the one hand, totalizing narratives of revolution and liberation made popular in the region and, on the other, contemporary critical sentiments marking a resigned post-colonial failure.²⁵

The value of antiromance, then, is its reluctance to offer grand narrative closure, settlement, or any satisfaction derived from other genres such as tragedy's "catharsis" or romance's joy of witnessing eventual agonistic triumph. Antiromance defies reconciliation: it yields no catharsis, no enlightenment, no surety of the path forward. By contrast, it exposes the folly of believing that somehow the national, the diasporic, or the intimate sphere are privileged spaces for the reconciliation of otherwise impossible differences. Contemporary Caribbean women writers return to the very private lives of Caribbean people that historically have been surveilled through legal and cultural discourses to suggest that a sustained self-examination of the intimate sphere is necessary to build better futures, especially in our present postcolonial moment marked by nation-states weakened by the pressures of globalization. But rather than a moment of tragedy, exhaustion, or nightmare, theirs is a moment of hyperconscious awareness that makes use of past failures to build usable futures. My readings throughout demonstrate that as a contaminated, even exaggerated, genre of excessive sexual violence and defeat, antiromance captures the instability, and even disintegration, of narrative form when trying to tell stories of Caribbean intimacy.

ON AGENCY AND ARCHIVAL SILENCES

Dominant representations of Caribbean womanhood often emphasize tropes of aberrant or absent sexuality, which effectively silences the sexual complexities of the interior lives of women and girls. Yet such maneuvers of active silencing, as Michel-Rolph Trouillot demonstrates, occur at the making of sources, archives, narratives, and, ultimately, history. In addition to this attention to the microphysics of power in the making of history, Trouillot offers "unthinkability" as a way of explaining the possibility of the Haitian Revolution, since within its historical moment the ruling elites could not imagine a scenario in which black slave actors would revolt for their liberty. "If some events cannot be accepted even as they occur, how can they be assessed later?" Trouillot asks. "Can historical narratives convey plots that are unthinkable in the world within which these narratives take place? How does one write a history of the impossible?"²⁶ In the case of Caribbean women's sexuality, it is not, for example, that interracial unions between black men and white women have been historically unthinkable, but rather that they have actively been rendered unnarratable. Because such unions threatened to destabilize an established white masculinist racial hierarchy, they have been largely unnarrated in colonial and postcolonial national literatures depicting the earlier colonial periods.²⁷ Where liaisons between white women and black men have appeared, such women were often rendered insane and/or cast to the margins of both the island and the text.²⁸ Alternately, where such interracial intimacies have been central to many twentieth-century, anticolonial narratives of male writers such as George Lamming, V. S. Naipaul, and Dany LaFeriere, these portrayals have been largely masculinist, nationalist romances in which redemptive scripts require black male sexual prowess and sexual conquest of the white female body to prove not only the virility but the viability of black men's sociopolitical power.

Foregrounding the politics of which stories have been rendered unnarratable captures those actively silenced histories, which not only implicates professional historians but also illustrates that "most often, someone else has already entered the scene and set the cycle of silences."²⁹ Thinking about such archival scenes of history making encourages the reading of archives themselves as subject—to consider which documents get preserved in the first place and under what categories as well as discerning what kinds of documents are omitted. *Fictions of Feminine Citizenship* maintains it is not just that certain stories are not told but that they have been willfully suppressed and made absent from national archives, histories, and literatures. Tracing cycles of sexual silences, it asks who and what has been silenced and why to hone in on the workings of power in

the production of storytelling and canon formation.³⁰ Like the actively discarded contents of Toussaint's false-bottomed box, many intimate histories are often invisible to conventional archives and methodologies. It is here where these contemporary Caribbean women writers engage the problems of archival silences. Patricia Powell's treatment of queer sexuality in nineteenth-century Jamaica, Elizabeth Nunez's staging of early twentieth-century consensual sexual unions between black men and white women, and her representation of homosexual liaisons between white and East Indian men are examples of unnarrated Caribbean histories. Yet, such absences suggest that it is less that these bodies, practices, and histories are unthinkable but, rather, that they were actively rendered unnarratable by dominant imperial and national regimes.

These five novelists share an archival skepticism, and their novels attempt to plot a new past—given their quarrel with the colonial archives and Caribbean historiography.³¹ Through what I term “archives of intimacy,” these five novelists address the active suppression of history through destroyed and fragmented documents. Their writings invent a new archive—using letters that would not count as credible evidence, challenging the assumptions of colonial postcard making and national cover stories, and, finally, offering women's bodies and their mode of storytelling as archival sources and therefore as a legitimate means of replotting our Caribbean past. Reading cultural forms such as folklore, media, postcards, and the law as everyday archival sites where sexual ideologies are created and disseminated, these novelists illustrate that embedded within these cultural forms are modes of concealment that erase traces of their violent regulating processes. The writers then transform these very forms by making innovative use of letters, diaries, journals, and postcards in order to narrate the seemingly unnarratable, since intimate histories are often revealed within those sources not meant for public consumption, and these are the very sources feminist historians turn to when trying to recuperate women's history.³² The stories that unfold in the following pages are often hidden, made absent, or destroyed from familial, national, and imperial histories; and, drawing from “archives of intimacy” these literary texts enable the speculative recovery of missing or hidden histories of forbidden intimate desire as well as legacies of intimate violence against Caribbean females. Many of the novels under examination spawn from archival fragments and contain archival moments in which the protagonists discover documents that become transformative vehicles for them to confront and/or reconstruct their past. I explore the politics behind those intimate histories concealed from view to reveal the cultural mechanisms utilized to hide these often violent practices by casting them as