The Sexual Politics of Empire: Postcolonial Homophobia in Haiti.
Erin L. Durban
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In *The Sexual Politics of Empire: Postcolonial Homophobia in Haiti,* Erin L. Durban explores how the violent "flare-ups" of homophobic violence in Haiti following the 2010 earthquake fit within a longer history of colonial and imperial intervention. Through fieldwork conducted in Haiti between 2008 and 2016, archival materials, and case studies, Durban critiques how Western discourse frames Haiti as *inherently* homophobic while it ignores imperial and colonial legacies that inform homophobic violence. This framing perpetuates colonial dynamics in which the West, which positions itself as "progressive" and civilized," is responsible for "rescuing" Haiti from itself. Durban theorizes postcolonial homophobia as a framework that challenges homophobia as natural, instead situating it within longer histories of colonialism and imperialism.

Durban offers a queer postcolonial critique of how the U.S.-centric frameworks for gender and sexuality often erase the cultural specificity of Haitian experience and identity and perpetuate imperialist logics. Many Haitians resist the term "queer" because of their imperial legacies, identifying instead with the Kreyòl terms *masisi* (male same-sex desire and male effeminacy) and *madivin* (female same-sex desire). By honoring the terms with which their interviewees self-identify, Durban models the queer postcolonial critique they are advancing in their work.

The book's first section is a queer transnational history of European colonialism and U.S. imperialism in Haiti, which shaped contemporary politics on sexuality and gender. In Chapter 1, Durban illustrates how Euro-U.S. imperialist discourses pervert the figure of the *zonbi* (zombie in English) to depict Haiti as a deviant nation. The zonbi originates in Haitian Vodou, an African diasporic religion, as a symbol for the embodied experience of enslavement; a state of being neither alive nor dead, neither human nor nonhuman, queering the Western life/death binary. In Western discourse, the zonbi is often deliberately misinterpreted to portray Haiti as a "premodern land of voodoo/vaudaux," rendering it "abnormal, freakish, and queer" to justify foreign intervention such as the U.S. occupation of Haiti in 1915 (Durban, 24). Since Vodou not only accepts same-sex desire but honors it, these transnational imperial discourses construct Haitian Vodou as a site of moral corruption and sexual depravity, in which the zombie becomes a symbol of Haiti's supposed failings.

Chapter 2 extends the analysis to consider how religious discourses work alongside discourses about Haiti as the premodern land of voodoo/vaudaux to produce postcolonial homophobia. Since Vodou

honors (same-sex) sexuality, homophobia is intimately tied to European colonialism and U.S. imperialism. One of Durban's most insightful arguments demonstrates how Catholic and Protestant homophobia in Haiti manifests differently: Catholicism (introduced during French colonization) enforced a regime of discretion, where same-sex desire and gender creativity could exist as long as it remained hidden. In contrast, Protestantism (introduced after the U.S. occupation in 1915) intensified homophobia by focusing on public condemnation, framing it as a moral sin for which one must publicly atone. Durban notes that this Protestant attitude of condemnation resulted in many same-sex-desiring and gender-creative Haitians being violently expelled from their homes or facing public harassment. Chapters 3 and 4 address the "flare-ups" of homophobic violence in 2008, when Michèle Duvivier Pierre-Louis was nominated for the position of prime minister. Pierre-Louis was accused of being *madivin*, a woman who loves women. She never publicly denied it, but Durban argues that she performed heterosexuality through references to heterosexual reproduction (mentioning children and grandchildren) as well as through her professional relationship with the president, a well-respected older man. Pierre-Louis' public address of the "slander" about her sexuality served two purposes: first, it satisfied critics' needs to speculate about her sexuality, and second, the *lack of denial* served as "'fleeting evidence' of queer possibility" to same-sex-desiring and gender-creative Haitians (Durban, 103).

In Chapter 4, Durban centers Haitian resistance to postcolonial homophobia. She interprets the troupe Lakou's performance "Zonbi, Zonbi" as a "queer act of intervention against postcolonial homophobia in Haiti" (Durban, 105). Lakou reclaimed the figure of the zonbi to critique the long history of colonial and imperialist intervention that has shaped the material realities for same-sex-desiring and gender-creative Haitians. Rather than leaning into a politics of respectability, Lakou embraced Vodou as a "site of Black Haitian resistance," showing how every Haitian's liberation is "bound up with same-sex-desiring people and that they – everyone in Haiti – are rendered queer in relationship to foreign domination" (Durban, 125).

Chapter 5 critiques the "politics of rescue" enacted by global LGBTQI rights organizations after the 2010 earthquake. These organizations, often from the U.S., positioned themselves as saviors of queer Haitians, drawing on the transnational imperialist discourse discussed in Chapters 1 and 2 to frame Haitian culture as *inherently* homophobic. Durban argues that "LGBTQI liberalism" perpetuates colonial and imperialist dynamics and frames Haiti as backwards and in need of rescue by the West, obscuring how "contemporary homophobic sexual politics in Haiti are largely a product of U.S. imperialism in Haiti" (Durban, 155).

Chapter 6 examines the clash between the transnational evangelical Christian movements and LGBTQI rights organizations in Haiti in 2013. This "flare-up" of postcolonial homophobia, Durban explains, was inspired by the anti-gay-marriage protests in the U.S. and France as protests against same-sex marriage erupted in Haiti's capital Port-

au-Prince. This intensified an already-existent divide between Kouraj, an activist organization developed after the 2010 earthquake, and the health organization SEROvie, which had existed since the 1990s. While Kouraj defined itself as working for the Haitian "M community" – "*masisi, madivin, makomer, miks"* –, SEROvie worked for the "LGBT community" in Haiti, adopting U.S. terminology to constitute a queer community in Haiti and to widen their scope and opportunities for international collaborations (Durban, 161). Durban argues that both movements – evangelical Christians and global human rights organizations – were enabled by U.S. imperialism and that their interactions with each other "exacerbate[d] the deteriorating material conditions for same-sex-desiring Haitians" (Durban, 161).

The Sexual Politics of Empire presents a compelling and nuanced tale of how histories of European colonialism and U.S. imperialism shape homophobia in Haiti and the material realities of same-sex-desiring and gender-creative Haitians. Durban's postcolonial homophobia framework is primarily intended to "enact reparative work" in transnational queer studies, but the interdisciplinary nature of the book makes it well-suited for postcolonial scholars interested in studying gender and sexuality. Durban's analysis draws attention to the larger entanglement of colonialism and imperialism with both religious and liberal discourses that enable postcolonial homophobia in Haiti (11). Durban's rigorous attention to the transnational dimensions of U.S. imperialism in Haiti, and to its influences on frameworks for examining sexuality and gender, nuances our understanding of their intersections and highlights the importance of cultural and historical specificity. This resists collapsing all expressions of gender and sexuality into "queer" frameworks that perpetuate colonial dynamics. In the epilogue, Durban suggests paths for future research by reading the Black Lives Matter movement alongside the rise in violent postcolonial homophobia in Haiti, emphasizing how imperial ideologies continue to fuel the systemic, racialized violence that Black and other people of color face in the U.S. Durban's postcolonial homophobia framework situates colonialism and imperialism at the center of sexual and gender politics. I highly recommend this book to scholars interested in studying gender and sexuality in a post-colonial world.