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a Review Essay

Isenia, W.J.

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Studies on Trans* and Same-Sex Loving People in Curaçao: a Review Essay

Wigbertson Julian Isenia

Abstract

This contribution reviews available research on trans* and same-sex loving people in the Dutch Caribbean, focusing on five areas: female same-sex sexuality as a research focus that emerged in Dutch Caribbean studies in the 1950s; cultural practices such as academic works discussing novels, performances, clothing and religious practices; medical research on STDS, HIV and AIDS; sexual minority rights and activist movements from the 1970s onward; and the social and legal developments around trans* and same-sex cultures after the 2010 constitutional reforms. It aims to show how we can use a decolonial contextualizing approach to gain insight into sources marred by their colonial and heteronormative biases and to identify areas in need of further research.

Keywords

sexuality studies – constitutional reforms – social movements – medical research – performances – religion

When researching trans* and same-sex cultures in the Caribbean islands, researchers often point out that little or no research has been done on the Dutch Caribbean islands. This is partly true because, although there are some sporadic references to trans* and same-sex loving people in academic research, there are hardly any comprehensive studies on these topics. However, we can draw on several foundational texts on Curaçao, which I discuss in the present contribution.¹ It is important to note that the island of Curaçao dominates these studies in the Dutch Caribbean islands and that the studies were mainly

1 For a detailed engagement with these texts, see my doctoral dissertation: Isenia, “Queer Sovereignties: Cultural Practices of Sexual Citizenship in the Dutch Caribbean,” 2022.

conducted in lesbian, gay and bisexual communities. More studies need to be conducted on the other five islands of the kingdom and trans* communities.

This present contribution discusses five research foci in the existing literature. First, it examines how female same-sex sexuality emerged as a research category in the 1950s in Dutch Caribbean studies, and how colonial archives might be read against the grain. The second area of interest is research on cultural practices, such as novels, clothing and religious practices. Third, I will examine medical research on sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), HIV and AIDS. Fourth, I will focus on sexual minority rights activist movements from the 1970s onward. Finally, I look at the social and legal developments around trans* and same-sex cultures after the constitutional reforms of 2010.

1 From Sociological Attention to Sexual “Deviance” to Reading Colonial Archives against the Grain

Sociologists such as Harry Hoetink, Arnaud Marks and René Römer explain the emergence of female *kambrada* relations as a product of social and economic development.² *Kambrada*, a term that denotes friendship and companionship as well as a female homoerotic relationship suggests an understanding of sexuality as relational practice rather than fixed identity.³ Hoetink, Marks and Römer view *kambrada* relationships as a result of the social mixing of women from different social classes and the isolation of Protestant female elites from their peers.⁴ The social isolation of these Protestant women and the contacts the women sought with black personnel, Hoetink explains, did not always have a positive impact on Protestant women.⁵ One such impact, according to him, was the *kambrada* relationship. Hoetink’s understanding of *kambrada* relationships implies that they were a practice of the lower social classes that became adopted by upper-class women resulting from interracial

2 Hoetink, *Het patroon van de oude Curaçaosche samenleving: Een sociologische studie* [The pattern of old Curaçaoan society: A sociological study], 1958, pp. 54–55; Marks, *Male and Female in the Afro-Curaçaoan Household*, 1976, pp. 92, 332; Römer, *De Curaçaose samenleving* [The Curaçaoan society], 1998.

3 Isenia, “Looking for Kambrada: Sexuality and Social Anxieties in the Dutch Colonial Archive, 1882–1923,” 2019, pp. 125–43; Isenia, “Queer Sovereignties,” 2022.

4 Hoetink, *Het patroon van de oude Curaçaosche samenleving*, 1958; Marks, *Male and Female in the Afro-Curaçaoan Household*, 1976; Römer, *Un pueblo na kaminda: Een sociologisch historische studie van de Curaçaose samenleving* [A people on the move: A sociological and historical study of Curaçaoan society], 1979.

5 Hoetink, *Het patroon van de oude Curaçaosche samenleving*, 1958, p. 54.

and interclass relationships. These descriptions suggest that cross-race and cross-class relationships between the (formerly) enslaved and their descendants and Protestants were, in fact, commonplace in the domestic sphere in Curaçao.

These sociologists also explain the existence of *kambrada* relations as ensuing from the gender imbalance that resulted from the mass emigration of men to neighboring countries in search of work in the early twentieth century.⁶ They concluded that female same-sex relationships on the islands flourished because of the absence of men. These early sociological accounts of female same-sex sexuality thus often adopted a patriarchal and heteronormative point of view, regarding it as a deviation from the “normal” due to socioeconomic reasons. This view is clear in the claim that the lack of men causes supposedly “unfavorable” social and sexual practices.⁷ It is a conceptualization of female same-sex relationships that effectively centers men. These sociologists fail to recognize how *kambrada* relationships were not opposed to but existed in continuum with heterosexual relationships.⁸ Critiquing the unspoken assumptions underlying these interpretations of women’s sexuality is helpful in thinking about how, on the one hand, women entered into relationships with each other without the intervention of men, and how, on the other hand, the demand for male labor elsewhere facilitated and catapulted the emergence of creative and radical modes and networks of interdependence. Poor economic conditions enabled the development of practices that lay outside the normative framework. In this sense, we can include a material analysis without reducing the conditions to male absence.⁹

In my doctoral research, I examined a travelog, an ethnography and a novel from the 1880s to the 1920s, the first known sources to mention *kambrada* relations in the Dutch Caribbean.¹⁰ Besides the negatively connoted

6 Marks, *Male and Female in the Afro-Curaçaoan Household*, 1976; Römer, *De Curaçaoese samenleving*, 1998; Lier, *Tropische tribaden. Een verhandeling over homosexualiteit en homoseksuele vrouwen in Suriname* [Tropical tribulations. A treatise on homosexuality and homosexual women in Suriname], 1986.

7 Marks, *Male and Female in the Afro-Curaçaoan Household*, 1976, p. 92; Lier, *Tropische tribaden*, 1986, pp. 23–24.

8 Few scholarly works criticize the assumed linkage between *kambrada* relationships and the migration-related shortage of men. However, see Broek, “A Paragraph in the Unwritten History of Lesbian Love in the Caribbean: Amor di kambrada,” 1992, p. 56. Or, for the Surinamese context, see, Wekker, “What’s Identity Got to Do with It?: Rethinking Identity in Light of the Mati Work in Suriname,” 2009, p. 437. Editors’ note: see contribution by Broek in this section.

9 Isenia, “Queer Sovereignities,” 2022, pp. 84–89.

10 Isenia, “Looking for Kambrada,” 2019.

colonial accounts of *kambrada* relations, some of which are mentioned in the sociological texts above, I was interested in knowing how to encounter historical subjects who cannot speak back from the colonial archives given the latter's predominantly racist and sexist modes of organization. These sources articulate patriarchal and racist domination and anxiety. Rather than concrete truths, we might find traces, nuances and representations of power relations in these accounts. *Kambrada* relations can be hierarchical, asymmetrical, both class- and race-based and even explicitly transactional.¹¹ Analyzing these historical works shows how important it was for women to not name a feeling or relationship and to see sexuality not as an identity but as belonging to the realm of social practice.¹²

2 Language, Cultural Practices and *Montamentu*

The second area of research in the existing scholarship on sexualities in Curaçao is that of literary and cultural practice. Literary scholar Aart Broek analyzed Willem Kroon's serial novel from 1923, *E no por casa* (She cannot marry), in which the protagonist, an older woman, wants to enter into a *kambrada* relationship with a younger woman who refuses her advances.¹³ The Papiamentu-language novel, which appeared in weekly installments in the Roman Catholic *La Cruz* magazine, is part of a body of work from the 1920s and 1930s that accompanied the significant social changes after the introduction of the Shell oil refinery in Curaçao.¹⁴ The transformation from a small agricultural and trading society during the slavery era to a capitalist and industrial country improved the island's socioeconomic conditions and social mobility. According to Broek, these novels, written exclusively by male authors close to the Roman Catholic Church, served to warn its readers, mainly formerly enslaved Afro-Curaçaoans, of the "dangers of modern life," stemming from the influx of immigrants of other faiths from other Caribbean islands, and to educate them about their religious duties.¹⁵ In my doctoral research, I propose that the

11 This reading enabled me to contrast *kambrada* and Surinamese *mati* to identify the similarities and differences between these practices. See, for example, Wekker, *The Politics of Passion: Women's Sexual Culture in the Afro-Surinamese Diaspora*, 2006.

12 Isenia, "Queer Sovereignities," 2021, pp. 274–82.

13 Broek, "A Paragraph in the Unwritten History of Lesbian Love in the Caribbean: Amor di kambrada," 1992.

14 The novel was later published as a book in 1927.

15 *Ibid.*, p. 54.

novel can be read as psychologizing and pathologizing nonnormative sexual practices.¹⁶

Language is another central question in Dutch Caribbean scholarship on sexuality. In discussions of Kroon's novel, it has been noted how the term *kambrada* is used in an elastic manner, as a slur, as a reference to a nonsexual relationship between women and as an expression of unfulfilled female same-sex desire. Joceline Clemencia questions the verbal naming of female same-sex relations in terms of sexual identities.¹⁷ Clemencia proposes that language pertaining to sexuality ought to enable fluidity, not define and pigeonhole anyone and bring about transformation and liberation. Rejecting the term "lesbian" as patriarchal and stigmatizing, she speaks of "women who love other women."¹⁸ She also criticizes Spanish-derived words in Papiamentu such as *kachapera*, *kambrada*, *machoro* and *repera* because these words are pejorative and refer to female same-sex love relationships as a disease and an insult to nature.¹⁹ Clemencia uses oral histories to show various facets of female same-sex loving traditions, which have often been met with acceptance and approval, such as the cohabitation of women, the wearing of twin or matching clothing at parties and on special occasions, such as at *tambú* drum dances, the Misa di Aurora,²⁰ the San Antoni mass,²¹ and the *belorio* funeral vigils. Clemencia asks: why would we want to name that verbally? It is important to note that, despite her criticism of existing words that refer to female same-sex relationships, she believes that language can still have a crucial function in sexual emancipation. She concludes by saying that if same-sex desiring women were to shed the terms smudged with negative connotations, to "break the silence" and shatter the taboo of same-sex desire, in time "a new language would grow."²² This is also reflected in the subtitle of her article, "from 'cachapera' to open throats," implying that new and more appealing terminology will emanate from these open throats. Clemencia calls for a new vocabulary that does not necessarily reclaim pejorative words nor is tainted with guilt and shame that prevent

16 Isenia, "Queer Sovereignties," 2022, p. 75.

17 Clemencia, "Women Who Love Women in Curaçao: From 'Cachapera' to Open Throats: A Commentary in Collage," 1996. Editors' note: this text by Clemencia has been included in this section. See also contribution by Römer on the politics of language around sexual practices.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 81.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 85.

20 Aurora masses are the Catholic masses held at dawn for the course of nine days before Christmas.

21 A celebration of the syncretic religious practice of *montamentu*.

22 *Ibid.*

someone from expressing themselves but allows them to speak openly and publicly about same-sex sexuality.

Frieda Bernadina's dissertation is a third study in this area, which examines the syncretic Afro-religious practice of *montamentu*, wherein women and effeminate queer men from a lower social class play a prominent role. Bernadina's study investigates how the status and prestige these communities enjoy in the sphere of *montamentu* contrasts with the day-to-day discrimination they face.²³

This work has begun to understand and theorize the cultural practices of same-sex loving cultures in Curaçao. Although many areas need further research and others need to be reexamined, these studies show how sexuality is practiced in different ways. This analysis can then allow for comparisons beyond the island.

3 Medical Research on STDs, HIV and AIDS

In the 1970s and 1990s, two major medical health studies took place in Curaçao. Although they focused mainly on advancing medical policy, they offer insights into sociocultural elements that are important to the humanities and social sciences.

Between May 1965 and May 1966, a survey was conducted among gay men and mainly female sex workers for Tjeerd de Reus's dissertation on the prevalence of STDs in Curaçao. De Reus identified sex work and homosexuality as the leading causes of STDs in Curaçao. He found the male subjects among 2,087 recruits tested for military service. Eighty-nine young men were found to have STDs due to homosexual contact.

The high incidence of STDs in young men was explained in the study by the fact that "marriage is associated with the virginity complex (the man is expected to marry a virgin), while great sexual freedom is granted to the man before marriage, who depends on a sex worker in this mindset and social structure."²⁴ The broader understanding of sexuality as a practice rather than an identity, as previously discussed in the female *kambrada* relationships

23 Bernadina, "Montamentoe, een beschrijvende en analyserenne studie van een Afro-Amerikaanse godsdienst op Curaçao" [Montamentu, a descriptive and analytical study of an Afro-American religion in Curaçao], 1981, pp. 109–10.

24 Reus, *Geslachtsziekten op Curaçao: Een onderzoek naar het voorkomen en de verspreiding van geslachtsziekten op Curaçao door middel van een enquête onder artsen, met daarop aansluitend contactonderzoek in de periode tussen 1 mei 1965 en 1 mei 1966* [Venereal diseases in Curaçao: An investigation into the occurrence and spread of venereal diseases in

of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, was also considered in the spread of STDs among so-called heterosexual men. De Reus explains that self-proclaimed heterosexual men did not mind having sex with other men as long as they took the “active” role and penetrated the other man. In this way, their penetrative masculine role remains intact, and the gender of their sexual partner does not matter. De Reus recommends men who have sex with men to test their blood regularly for syphilis (two to three times a year) as they have an increased risk of contracting an STD due to frequently changing sexual contacts.²⁵ This study is important for the humanities and social sciences because it represents an archive of comprehensive descriptions and various quotes from men who had sex with men in the 1970s that has not been archived in other ways.

In her 1992 study, Tineke Alberts distinguishes between homosexual behavior and homosexual identity and lifestyle.²⁶ Six years after the first cases of HIV and AIDS were discovered in Curaçao in 1986, a large-scale study took place on the island based on a survey of 432 men and women and 18 interviews with 18 people. Previously, a study on HIV and AIDS was conducted in 1987 and 1991.²⁷

This study was necessary to obtain better information about AIDS prevention measures. The rationale behind the study was that an effective HIV and AIDS prevention campaign must fit the population’s norms, values and culture. According to Alberts, these cultural characteristics include that non-monogamy is widespread on the island, and heterosexual transmission plays a significant role in the region.²⁸ The ratio of men to women in the Dutch Caribbean in 1991 was 1.6: 1, while, in the Netherlands and the United States in the same year, it was 13.1: 1 and 8:1, respectively.²⁹

Alberts concludes that homosexual risk behavior does not seem to play as prominent a role in the number of AIDS patients in the Netherlands and the

Curaçao by means of a survey among doctors, with subsequent contact research in the period between May 1, 1965 and May 1, 1966], 1970, p. 5. Author’s translation.

25 Ibid., p. 134.

26 Alberts, *Je lust en je leven: Een inventariserend onderzoek naar relatievorming, seksueel gedrag en de preventie van aids op Curaçao* [Your lust and your life: An inventory study of relationship formation, sexual behaviour and the prevention of AIDS in Curaçao], 1992, p. 21.

27 Central Bureau of Statistics Curaçao, *Rapportage resultaten AIDS-enquête Curaçao* [Report results AIDS survey Curaçao], 1987; Alberts, “Evaluatie aidsvoorlichting Curaçao: Evaluatie-onderzoek naar de effectiviteit van de voorlichting rondom aids op Curaçao” [Evaluation AIDS information Curaçao. Evaluation research on the effectiveness of information on AIDS in Curaçao], 1991.

28 Alberts, “Evaluatie aidsvoorlichting Curaçao,” 1991; Alberts, *Je lust en je leven*, 1992.

29 Alberts, *Je lust en je leven*, 1992, p. 5.

United States. Apart from the fact that women also predominate in infection rates on the islands, the men who are prevalent in the rates do not identify as homosexual. However, these “heterosexual” men have had sex with men. Alberts argues that male identity derives from fulfilling an active, dominant role, not from the gender of the partner. This is reflected in the Papiamentu terminology, where active and passive male partners are called *mariku kwedo* and *mariku wantadó* respectively. The “man” thus always takes an active role.³⁰ This *mariku kwedo* has relationships with women and sometimes long-term and occasional relationships with men but does not identify with a homosexual or bisexual identity and lifestyle.³¹

Since then, no large-scale research on HIV and AIDS has been conducted in Curaçao. Future research could focus on government and NGO campaigns to combat HIV and AIDS since the 1980s, including the use of visuals and ways to combat stigma. It should also examine how HIV- and AIDS-infected people are cared for in informal ways, such as by family and friends, and how the many who have died are remembered.

4 Activist Movements from the 1970s Onward

After the May 30, 1969, workers’ strike, conversations about decolonization and a positive reevaluation of Dutch Caribbean culture and recognition of the Papiamentu language also led to groups advocating for sexual liberation especially for same-sex loving communities. Chelsea Schields analyzed how leftist groups in the Antilles, both in Curaçao and in the Dutch diaspora, viewed sexual liberation as an essential rather than an auxiliary endeavor to achieve self-determination.³² *Vitó*, a newspaper published in 1966 by a group of recent graduates in Curaçao, wrote about reproductive politics, women’s rights and, in 1969, the integration and emancipation of homosexual men in the community.³³ The group commented on the social isolation and victimization of same-sex desiring men.³⁴ *Kontakto Antiyano*, a newspaper of a left-wing Antillean group in the Netherlands, also reported on the founding of *Sociedad homosexual Antillano Biba larga biba* (Society for Antillean homosexuals

30 Ibid., p. 22.

31 Ibid., p. 55.

32 Schields, “Insurgent Intimacies: Sex, Socialism, and Black Power in the Dutch Atlantic,” 2020.

33 Ibid., p. 105.

34 Schields, “Eros against Empire: Visions of Erotic Freedom in Archives of Decolonisation,” 2019.

live and let live, SHA) in 1971 and questioned how a homosexual organization could change the outdated colonial and capitalist structures in the Dutch Caribbean.³⁵

In my dissertation, I analyze SHA and the Grupo Homofilia Antiyano (Antillean Homophile Group, GHA) in Curaçao, founded in 1979.³⁶ I discuss two aspects of these groups' attitudes toward the *mariku* and the global and Dutch gay movements. Through their letters to the editor in the newspaper, I analyze the respectability politics of the SHA and the GHA, and how they portrayed themselves in newspaper articles as "proper" in contrast to the "messy queens" or the *marikunan* (a slur for trans* women, drag queens and effeminate men) who appeared in public in "women's clothes and wigs." SHA's and GHA's politics were groundbreaking but exclusive. Their politics against the so-called queens, femmes and trans* persons is evident in their newspaper articles. In both groups, a particular respectability politics can be observed, often at the expense of the *mariku*. These discussions reflect the current tensions between trans* politics and broader sexual minority politics, which puts pressure on coalition building and raises questions about the role of language in LGBTQ+ politics. The groups maintained relations with the press and with governmental and international groups in different ways: from literally copying texts of Dutch gay magazines for national magazines, as GHA has done, to receiving support from the Dutch House of Representatives in disputes with the government of Curaçao or getting government-allotted spaces for community activities.

The challenge is not to downplay the benefits these groups derive from these collaborations but to see these relationships as worth analyzing and how these actors claim self-determination through and despite these restricted spaces within the postcolonial situation of the Dutch Caribbean. In addition, this analysis can be used to further draw parallels with LGBTQ+ groups with Dutch Caribbean members in the Dutch diaspora to see what different or similar strategies they had, how they financed themselves and their relationship with the white LGBTQ+ community.³⁷

35 Schields, "Insurgent Intimacies," 2020, p. 106.

36 Isenia, "Queer Sovereignities," 2022, pp. 181–218.

37 El-Tayeb, *European Others: Queering Ethnicity in Postnational Europe*, 2011; Colpani and Isenia, "Strange Fruits: The Intellectual Labor of Queers of Color in the Netherlands in the 1980s and 1990s," 2018; Colpani, Isenia, and Pieter, "Archiving Queer of Colour Politics in the Netherlands: A Roundtable Discussion," 2019.

5 LGBTQ+ Activism after the Post-2010 Constitutional Changes

Schiels also examined how the Dutch legalized same-sex marriage in 2012 in the special municipalities (Bonaire, St. Eustatius and Saba) in the Dutch Caribbean.³⁸ Like the French overseas departments in the Caribbean, these islands occupy a unique position in the region in terms of sexual rights.³⁹ Their postcolonial, non-sovereign status means that they operate under a European legal system that promotes the protection of LGBTQ+ rights while simultaneously being subject to certain legal exceptions under Dutch jurisdiction. For example, as Schiels argues, the Dutch government has introduced same-sex marriage on these islands, along with laws on abortion and euthanasia, while circumventing similar “European” laws such as social benefits.⁴⁰

Some activists in Bonaire hoped for a further improvement in the situation of LGBTQ+ people on the BES islands as the islands would now be further integrated into the Netherlands.⁴¹ Other activists, such as Mario Kleinmoedig in Curaçao, did not perceive the unilateral introduction of same-sex marriage as neocolonial, as Schiels describes in her dissertation, but felt that the colonial history and nonindependent structure of the Dutch Caribbean forced activists to rely on Dutch metropolitan leadership and legislation to advance sexual rights.⁴²

Other legal advances are gradually taking place. For example, the autonomous islands within the kingdom—Aruba, Curaçao and St. Maarten—continue to fight for same-sex marriage, registered partnership and adoption of children by gay couples as well as trans* people’s rights, such as the right to officially change birth names and gender, the right to medical care and the possibility of gender-affirming surgery. However, most antidiscrimination laws (such as antidiscrimination laws in the workplace) were aligned with the laws in the Netherlands in 2011.

38 Schiels, “Intimacy and Integration: The Ambivalent Achievement of Marriage Equality in the Dutch Caribbean, 2007–2012,” 2018. Editors’ note: an edited version of this text by Schiels is included in this volume.

39 For the French departments, see Agard-Jones, “Le jeu de qui? Sexual Politics at Play in the French Caribbean,” 2009.

40 Schiels, “Intimacy and Integration: The Ambivalent Achievement of Marriage Equality in the Dutch Caribbean, 2007–2012,” 2018.

41 Schiels, “Closer Ties: The Dutch Caribbean and the Aftermath of Empire, 1942–2012,” 2017, p. 186.

42 *Ibid.*, pp. 186–7. Editors’ note: see contributions by Kleinmoedig and Sleebe in this section.

6 Conclusion

Although this review summarizes existing research on trans* and same-sex loving people in the Dutch Caribbean, there are many gaps that can be filled by future research. Future research could look more closely at the role of religion and religious practices, including those outside Christianity, on the island. An important contribution to knowledge would be to explore the changing views on LGBTQ+ issues among youth and how new technology platforms such as social media influence discussions on sexuality.⁴³ The role of social media would also be crucial for a comprehensive study of contemporary ideas in general and arguments about LGBTQ+ issues. Although my dissertation began with how trans* and same-sex desiring people are represented in performances,⁴⁴ a broad study of how sexual and gender minorities are represented in different art forms and how artists who identify as LGBTQ+ incorporate specific issues of same-sex sexuality, trans* rights, oppression or agency into their work is needed. More research should be done on trans* communities, especially on the provision of care and gender-affirming surgery. In addition, research on HIV and AIDS should go beyond the medical perspective to explore the social and economic barriers, and research should take a historical perspective by looking at HIV and AIDS initiatives over the years since the 1970s. More research could be done on masculinity, butch and lesbian subcultures and, finally, the history of queer places (such as queer bars) since the 1970s.

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43 Isenia, "Queer Sovereignities," 2022, pp. 255–8.

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