Elina Valovirta, *Sexual Feelings: Reading Anglophone Caribbean Women’s Writing through Affect* (Cross/Cultures 174, Rodopi, 2014)

The trope of rape is a common one in postcolonial literature, by women in the Caribbean as elsewhere. It serves as a metaphor for the abuse and exploitation of the colonial subject as well as the legacy of sexism and extreme violence against women still present in many postcolonial societies (India is one example that comes to mind).

In this study, the Finnish scholar Elina Valovirta focuses not exclusively on rape, but on sexuality in general (the expectation of virginity for girls, the double standard for adultery, alternative sexualities and so on). Valovirta offers thorough and sensitive readings of the primary Caribbean texts she has selected (*Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home*, *Sleeping’s Beauty and the Prince Charming* and *Louisiana* by Erna Brodber, *Buxton Spice* by Oonya Kempadoo, *Breath, Eyes, Memory* by Edwidge Danticat, *It Begins with Tears* by Opal Palmer Adisa and *Cereus Blooms at Night* by Shani Mootoo).

The book is divided into seven parts. The first consists of a general discussion in which the author explains her choice of texts and describes the theoretical approach she favours, which may perhaps best be described in her own words as ‘an affective phenomenology of reading tak[ing] into account the role of emotions in meaning-production’ (Valovirta, 187).

Barthes, Bakhtin, Cixous, Foucault, Irigaray and Co. are given the requisite nods, but the theoretical foundation supporting Valovirta’s analysis is vaster still, based on works by Sara Ahmed, Sue Campbell, Evelyn O’Callaghan, Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert, Lynne Pearce and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, to name only a few. Extensive quotation and paraphrasing of these writers unfortunately hampers the fluency of Valovirta’s own text, which is otherwise clear and insightful.

The second section, titled ‘Reading the Ambivalence of Sexuality in Transition’, discusses the work of Brodber and Kempadoo and focuses on the secrecy, isolation and shame often accompanying the change from girlhood to womanhood (for example, sexual awakening, menarche).

Valovirta discusses Brodber’s symbol of the *kumbla* – a protective and sheltering physical space or mental state – at great length; it is here that young Nellie of *Jane and Louisa* retreats in her confusion ‘in order to escape what she experiences as the threatening nature of sexuality’ (Valovirta, 52). The shelter offered by the *kumbla* is ambivalent; by ‘dwelling in it for too long, Nellie becomes its victim and her health begins to crumble’ (53). The discussion is genuinely interesting, but authorial explanations occasionally stumble under the weight of their own wordiness: ‘Erna Brodber’s *Jane and Louisa*, with its notoriously difficult and elusive kumbla figure, shows us how the reader becomes positioned by its polysemy into a world of ambivalences where negotiations of new meanings and understandings of sexuality and emotions are negotiated’ (Valovirta, 71).

In *Buxton Spice*, set in Guyana, young Lula and her friends attempt to educate themselves by inspecting a sleeping man’s penis, reading *Man and Woman* in secret and making their first exploratory forays into the world of masturbation. Actual coitus between Judy, a white girl of Portuguese descent, and a black man considered her social inferior leads to scandal within the community, so that the themes of race, class and gender intertwine.

The third section of the study treats ‘Ways of Reading Sexual Shame, Violence and Pain’. Valovirta focuses on three key incidents in which female sexuality is associated with shame, destruction and pain. In the first, Sophie, a young Haitian girl in Danticat’s *Breath, Eyes and Memory*, takes her own virginity with a pestle in order to liberate herself from her mother’s ‘testing’ ritual (insertion of a finger to ascertain that the hymen is still intact). In the second incident, set in
rural Jamaica, Monica, a prostitute in Opal Palmer Adisa’s *It Begins with Tears* who is having an affair with a neighbour’s husband, is subjected to revenge by ‘peppering’ in which hot peppers are inserted into all her bodily orifices by a group of livid women. The third incident is taken from Brodber’s story entitled ‘Sleeping’s Beauty’ and deals with the shame of menstruation. Because Charming cannot come to terms with Sleeping’s menstrual cramps, he leaves her suffering and unable to put body and soul together, simultaneously rendering it impossible for them to realise their original plan to repatriate their people to Africa.

The fourth part of the study, ‘Communities That Heal: Reading Sexual Healing’ deals with the same works as above. Women who have been traumatised in some way (by the ritual of ‘testing’ or peppering, for example) must come to terms with their legacy of pain, name their violators and prepare to end the cycle of violence, rebuilding their own lives with the help of caring members of the community.

The fifth part of the study describes the role of those men who support the female characters and help them to overcome sexual trauma in various ways. In contrast to the usual cast of abusive or absentee husbands, these men are healers, caregivers and nurturers. Tyler, the narrator-protagonist of *Cereus Blooms at Night*, stands out most prominently as he is a male-to-female transsexual – a sexual hybrid who breaks down binary oppositions and helps readers to ‘envisage alliances and belongingness across non-normative identities’ (Valovirta, 161).

The sixth section of the study examines the hypersexual and the asexual woman, in the characters of the uninhibitedly lusty former prostitute Monica (from Adisa’s *It Begins With Tears*) and Ella from Brodber’s *Louisiana*. Though the two women may at first glance seem to be located on different ends of the spectrum, both characters pose a challenge to the traditional and/or patriarchal views of what constitutes acceptable female sexuality: just as Monica’s untamed erotic energy can be read as ‘empowering and exemplary’ (Valovirta, 171), Ella’s lack of sexual interest may be considered liberating in a phallocentric society.

The final section contains a short summary and an outlook.

The reasons why the author chose to structure her book as she did are clear, but what is equally obvious is that the structure is not without its flaws. As she discusses many of the novels more than once, examining different but related aspects, Valovirta ends up repeating herself frequently, at times word for word (see 76 and 164), and citing the very same passages from the texts that she has already quoted elsewhere in her analysis (see 96 and 127). Had she chosen to include a wider range of texts, the problem of redundancy might have been avoided. Even brief, parenthetical references to other primary works might have lent the study additional breadth (for example, a reference to Grace Nichols’ poem *Sugar Cane* when the use of sugar cane as a sexual symbol in *Jane and Louisa* is discussed on page 111; a note on the sexual trauma experienced by the young heroine in Joan Riley’s *The Unbelonging*, or an allusion to Jamaica Kincaid’s *Girl* with its instructions on how ‘nice’ girls are expected to behave or to Dionne Brand’s contrasting depictions of homosexual and heterosexual relations in her novel *In Another Place, Not Here* (to name just a few possibilities).

Occasionally, completely unnecessary questions are raised and answered, as when the author comments that ‘narratorial exclusion does not rule out readerly participation. Thus, the inability to see oneself as black when reading Brodber does not amount to an inability to feel, much less an inability to feel responsively in a generous manner’ (139).

On a more positive note, the author does make occasional references to black American literature as well as to Australian literature, references which serve to expand the readers’ horizons, as good criticism should.
Valovirta’s stated goal is to ‘clarify the complexity, polysemy and fluidity of feelings in the text-reader relationship’ (38). This goal is achieved, and despite some lingering scepticism regarding the usefulness of the theoretical approach chosen, the author may be commended for having made a unique and interesting contribution to the study of Anglophone Caribbean women’s writing.

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