Book review


Keith McNeal

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Weaving together auto-ethnography, artist catalog-type retrospective and queer Caribbean studies, *Nature’s Wild* is a fresh, thoughtful, compellingly written intervention that brings the Indian diaspora fully within the purview of the Black Atlantic not only in order to queer the postcolonial but also seek to decolonize the queer. Synthesizing contemporary thought from multiple disciplines and drawing special inspiration from the work of Sylvia Wynter, Andil Gosine mounts a rigorous critique of animalization as an underlying tropological lynchpin in processes of racist subordination in the colonial making of the modern world, ideological dynamics that have been reproduced through reiteration within the postcolonial condition globally and which therefore continue to bedevil efforts to achieve a more intersectionally just and equitable world. Gosine has gradually claimed his inner animal by using his own artistic praxis as a critical methodology for charting a path out of the racialized quagmire otherwise known as modern society, and he has now done so in his scholarship as well. Claiming animality refuses the ideologically impossible injunction that subaltern peoples prove their humanity by playing the perversely racialized neocolonial game of respectability politics in late-modern liberal-bourgeois quasi-democratic polities.
The ‘nature’s wild’ phraseology is borrowed from the title of a stunning piece of work by Indo-Guadeloupean artist Kelly Sinnapah Mary, which graces the book’s cover, and its multiple connotations congeal the ideological transformations Gosine pursues in his own work. The book’s subtitle is curious in that there isn’t all that much love within these pages, except as a synonym for sex, or perhaps eroticism more generally. Yet there is a lot of gender along with sex here. And while law is abidingly relevant and therefore present throughout in terms of contextualizing the politics of domination and resistance, this is primarily not an intervention in legal studies, per se. The subtitle also situates the book in the Caribbean, but it must be mentioned that Gosine is primarily concerned here with the Anglophone Caribbean, and specifically Trinidad and Tobago (hereafter TT), the twin-island land of his birth where he spent his childhood growing up in a rural Indian village in south Trinidad before his family emigrated to Canada as a teenager. Indeed, there is more of Canada here than the non-Anglophone Caribbean, except for the Francophone region in the chapter exploring the brilliant work of Sinnapah Mary.

*Nature’s Wild* is composed of a tight academic introduction that launches from the personal and then expands over five substantive chapters. Chapter One – ‘*Puhngah!*’ – begins with a brief survey of pubertal-age heterosexist-yet-homoerotic male antics that animated early teenage life in a prestigious all-boys secondary school in south Trinidad that Gosine attended for a time, such as boys ganging up and aggressively ‘poling’ their chosen victims, anal ‘rose’ poking through each other’s pants, and the one-on-one ritual combat called ‘puhnga’ in which two boys face off and fight to the ground using only their hips, with the winner being whoever comes out on top. Gosine sees in this nexus of early teenage praxis an allegory for post-colonial moral politics and the complex ambivalence of power relations. He reads sodomy as a key cipher managing the ideological divide between ‘human’ and ‘animal’ in the colonial history of the Americas. Seen as animalistic and primitive, sodomy was often
invoked as an assumed behavioural proclivity of non-White peoples, thereby dehumanizing them in order to rationalize colonization, subjugation and genocide. For example, so-called Island ‘Caribs’ were infamously seen as primitive sodomites – in addition to cannibals – and therefore in need of discipline and deserving of domination. The ostensible animality of anal sex was made explicit in British law in the 19th century by being linked with bestiality in the sets of criminal code regarding ‘offences against the person’ and ‘sexual offences’ that proliferated throughout the colonial Commonwealth. Tellingly, this move from general anti-sodomy sentiment to formal legal prohibition transpired after emancipation as a mechanism of colonial Victorian biopolitics. Such reiterating policies in changing colonial societies were premised upon a racist heteropatriarchal paradigm for which respectability functioned as a sort of debt payment for ‘rescue’ from their savagery. All of which has been transposed into postcolonial heteronationalisms in the form of new-old laws against sodomy and related behaviour that have been among the most tenacious sets of legal code in the Caribbean. ‘Animality’ emerges in this chapter as a trope for the free, unregulated expression and exercise of sexual desire.

Chapter Two – ‘Clothes Makes the Man’ – extends the ground covered in the first chapter by interrogating the disciplinary effects of clothing vis-à-vis conventional gender norms, which align with and bolster the regulation of bodies and sexuality. Gosine reflects upon his positive developmental experiences growing up in a rural Indian community in south Trinidad – especially nurtured by his proto-feminist aunties – where he was able to be an expressive young queer boy with a flair for colour and fashion without overt gender policing in line with the reigning post(neo)colonial heteronormative paradigm obsessed with proper gender performance. Gosine discloses the deeply racialized politics of nakedness and clothing in the making of the modern colonial world, which continue to condition and impact everyday life in the postcolony. Clothing praxis and sartorial discipline are a critical site for scrutinizing intersections of
race, class, gender and sexuality in the management of the human–animal distinction. He surveys the conservative political economy of dress codes in contemporary TT, such as in schools, parks and government offices. Gosine also examines the horrific arrests of seven Guyanese in 2008 for cross-dressing and the saga of their 2010 lawsuit against the government that eventually made its way to the Caribbean Court of Justice, where they fortunately found vindication by the highest appellate court in the region in 2018.

‘The Father, a Godfather, and the Specter of Beasts Old and New’ (Chapter Three) compares and contrasts the visionary nationalist projects of Eric Williams – the leader of TT’s mid-20th-century decolonization movement and the country’s first Prime Minister – and the late Colin Robinson (who died at 60 years of age in 2021) – the brilliant, eloquent Trinbagonian queer activist who returned to TT in the early 21st century after two decades in the USA and spearheaded the formation of the country’s most high-profile LGBT advocacy organization, CAISO. Gosine emphasizes the respectability-oriented character of Williams’s nation-building project, whose watchwords were discipline, tolerance and production. This decolonizing nationalism evinced an underlying liberal-bourgeois class orientation that projected an idealized multiracial paradigm belied by the realpolitik of Williams’s anti-Indian animus. In other words, Williams continued drinking the colonial kool-aid by being so invested in proving to the world that Trinbagonians were human and not animal. This nationalist dispensation was heteronormative in its continuation of anti-sodomy and related laws, making erotic autonomy and full sexual citizenship for queer and trans Trinbagonian citizens a difficult and challenging matter in the postcolonial era – all of which is further complicated by recent realignments in the global geopolitics of homosexuality that resignify the Global South as ‘savage’ not as a repository for perverse sexuality that needs to be tamed and civilized, but now as essentially a homophobically backward space from which people flee as asylum seekers. In its latest version of
self-appointed enlightenment, the Global North has repackaged itself as the beacon of gay acceptance and sexual freedom. As a queer nationalist, Robinson articulated a robust critique of such homonationalism and CAISO has pursued a range of advocacy and organizational efforts geared towards fostering organic societal change premised upon sex-gender justice and human rights. The organization embodies an intersectional politics that actively resists an overly ‘homophobic’ framing of the Caribbean. In this regard, Robinson’s nationalist vision – as compared with that of Williams – was not preoccupied by a neocolonial respectability politics premised upon the injunction that Caribbean peoples prove themselves civilized.

Chapter Four – ‘Désir Cannibale’ – returns to the ideological specter of cannibalistic Indigenous Americans as rationalization for colonization and exploitation, when in reality it is more accurate to see the colonizers themselves as cannibals given their violent, bloodthirsty, consuming interest in subjugating the lives of others for their own pursuits, interests and pleasures. In this regard, we may see the colonial obsession with the cannibalism – as well as sodomy – of others as an anxious disavowal and projection of their own selves. Interrogating and playing with this imagery was the guiding provocation for a Guadeloupean art exhibition in mid-2018 that featured the work of Kelly Sinnapah Mary, the focus of this chapter. Her conceptually astonishing and visually stunning art probes the ambivalences of creolization and layered politics of Indianness in the Caribbean through fascinating zoanthropomorphic imagery in vividly caricatured Caribbean scenes and counter-scenes mining the ambiguities and juxtapositions of modern French West Indian life. The significance of this work for Gosine is that it simultaneously rejects the animal–human divide and underlines the instinctive animality of humans in relation to a deep colonial history of racializing animalization of Black and Brown peoples. Her imagery foregrounds human animality without either glorifying or villainizing nature. Rather than aesthetic
expression preoccupied by indentureship and the specificity of Indo-Caribbean history, Sinnapah Mary’s ‘art after indentureship’ comments upon and interrogates the human condition in general by refusing a politics of respectability that demands that colonized peoples prove their humanity by showing they’re not animals.

In the fifth and final chapter – ‘Nature’s Wild’ – Gosine turns the lens back onto himself by focusing upon the evolution and significance of his own artistic praxis. Armed with an understanding of artistic creativity and aesthetic production as vehicles for expressing unconscious dynamics, as well as tools for critical analysis, he situates his oeuvre in light of having grown up in a nurturing and accepting rural Indo-Trinidadian community, his family’s migration to Canada when he was 14 years old, and the rude awakenings of racism, classism and homophobia in the Global North. All of these experiences find their way into Gosine’s cutting-edge work in a range of artistic media over a decade of evolution, troubling a series of dominant and highly problematic geopolitical binarisms concerning Whiteness and non-Whiteness, urban and rural, North and South, homonationalism and homophobia. His discussion is illuminating and vulnerable. Gosine concludes with a passionate call for embracing animality as a necessary refusal of continuing interpellation by the dominant colonial-modern shitstem.

This delightful, erudite, interdisciplinary excursion is a deeply personal contribution to queer Caribbean studies and Indo-Caribbean art history. After reading Nature’s Wild, I couldn’t help wondering if perhaps the ‘love’ of the subtitle speaks more to the author’s diasporic love of his homeland and love for his craft as compared with his abiding preoccupation with sex, gender and animality throughout. Whatever the case, my primary reservation with Gosine’s analysis concerns his conceptualization of animality as essentially a cipher for the free, unbridled expression of desire, and especially sexual desire in particular: ‘the very raucousness of sexual desire injects – perhaps demands – a confrontation with
the truth of nature’s wildness’ (p. 68). He sees sex as the most charged and anxiously problematic site of the human–animal distinction (as compared with something like language, for example). Eroticism operates here as a primitive, id-like, precultural, individualistic drive: the uninterpellated inner core of self that is the source of desire, which always and forever subtends and overflows normative strictures. This formulation sounds suspiciously akin to dominant Western ethnopsychology and echoes a series of neoprimitivist rhetorical moves within the (internal Western) Romantic response to (colonial-modern) Enlightenment ideology since the late 18th century. Moreover, despite the overarching appeal to animality, Gosine’s anthropology is anthropocentric: there are no other animals here aside from the ‘animality’ of humans. ‘We are animal’, he writes, ‘So what?’ But can the master’s tools dismantle the master’s house? And also, what next?