



#CaribbeanStrong

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Rosamond S King explodes words on a page

Today, Bookends presents the third of a series of conversations #CaribbeanStrong between Jacqueline Bishop and writers from around the region. The featured writer, representing the English-speaking Caribbean is Rosamond S King, a critical and creative writer and artist. Her groundbreaking book *Island Bodies: Transgressive Sexualities in the Caribbean Imagination* won the 2015 Caribbean Studies Association Gordon K and Sybil Lewis Prize for the best Caribbean Studies Book. Her scholarship has also appeared in several journals, including *Callaloo*, *The Journal of West Indian Literature*, *Women and Performance and Thought & Action*, the journal of the NEA. King is also a poet, artist and performer. Her poetry has appeared in more than two dozen journals and anthologies, and she has performed widely at spaces such as *Poets House*, the *African Performance Art Biennale* and the *Encuentro Performance Festival*. She is the recipient of numerous fellowships, awards and creative residencies.

ROSAMOND, congratulations on your collection of poems *Rock | Salt | Stone*. I'm delighted for this opportunity to interview you and to find out more about you and your work. I guess the thing that stands

out the most for me about this collection of poems is your engagement with the folklore of Trinidad. Douens, Lajablasses and soucouyants abound in the work. Can you tell me about these characters and why you are so fascinated by them? While doing so, can you explain the title of your collection?

Thank you so much, Jacqueline! I appreciate those kind words from an accomplished writer such as yourself!

The title, *Rock | Salt | Stone*, comes from the fact that "rock" and "stone" are sometimes used as synonyms and sometimes thought of as very different. Rocks and stones have been used as anchors, game pieces, weapons, jewellery, and spice – an incredible range. I am fascinated by the ways that we use these words. For instance, we "stone" someone to death, but we do not "rock" someone to death. To geologists, the difference is that a stone has been manipulated by humans, whereas a rock is completely natural. And of course, Caribbean people sometimes use the term "rockstone." Salt is a rock, but it's a special rock; it can preserve or flavour food, it can make wounds feel worse while helping them heal – and "sucking salt" has been both a reality for poor people and a metaphor for what we sometimes have to do to survive.

I am also, as you noted, fascinated by folklore. Lajablesse comes from the French for "devil woman." In folklore in Trinidad and some other Caribbean countries, she is a beautiful woman who seduces men and then kills them. You can identify her because her long dress hides a cloven hoof. And the soucouyant is usually portrayed as an old woman thought to shed her skin at night, fly through the sky as a ball of flames, and suck the blood of small children. Thinking about the lajablesse and other female folk characters who are dangerous or even murderous, I began to wonder about how these characters came to be – and then, of course, I decided to write my own origin story of lajablesse. In my poem, she is a survivor of abuse, an outcast in her community who has to figure out ways to survive. Sou, short for soucouyant, is also mentioned in the poem.



Rosamond S King (Photo: Iryna Federovska)



Yes, it is certainly easier now to write about, and to be published and read as Caribbean sexual minorities. It's certainly easier than it was 100 years ago when Jamaican Claude McKay was writing, or 60 years ago when Andrew Salkey was writing, or even 25 years ago when Patricia Powell's *A Small Gathering of Bones*, her powerful novel about AIDS in Jamaica, was published.

I want to say that there is definitely homophobia in the Caribbean, and sometimes it is violent and deadly. But I don't think the region as a whole is more homophobic than, say, Russia, or even certain parts of the USA. And I do think that getting work out into the world that expresses sexual minorities' experiences is getting easier. This is partly because of the willingness of so many authors to be public about their own lives, as well as that of their characters – Powell, Caribbean-American author A Naomi Jackson, Guyanese poet Faizal Deen, Trinidadian poet and activist Colin Robinson... This year is actually the 20th anniversary of both the anthology *Our Caribbean: A Gathering of Lesbian and Gay Writing from the Antilles*, and "Back Chat," a reading I organised with Colin in New York that turns out to have been the first public reading by self-identified Caribbean LGBTQI people. Now such an event would be notable, but not so shocking. The shifts in societal views are also due to the work of many activists within the region and the diaspora through organisations such as J-FLAG in Jamaica, SASOD in

Guyana, and CAISO in Trinidad. And the accessibility of writing by Caribbean sexual minorities has a lot to do with the Internet, where people can post their own writing pretty easily, and where people can read writing they are interested in privately, without having to come face to face with a librarian or bookseller. (People can see some of this work at <http://www.caribbeansexualities.org/>) I discuss Caribbean sexualities and homophobia in detail in my non-fiction book *Island Bodies: Transgressive Sexualities in the Caribbean Imagination*.

"Old Head" is not a specifically lesbian poem, but it is a really powerful poem. How did you come about writing it and what were you trying to get across?

Excerpt from "LAJABLESSE IN OAKLAND"

BY ROSAMOND S KING

is not a cloven hoof
is a club foot.

Dat piece o ting
call heself a man
one night I holdin me face
an de fire in me head
come out through me mouth –
I cuss he slow, an when I finish
I say I gwine leave he.
He stan up watchin me
an when I finish he turn roun
an slash wit de machete.
Leave? He lean into me face.
Laughin. Leave now.

I had to bind me own foot.



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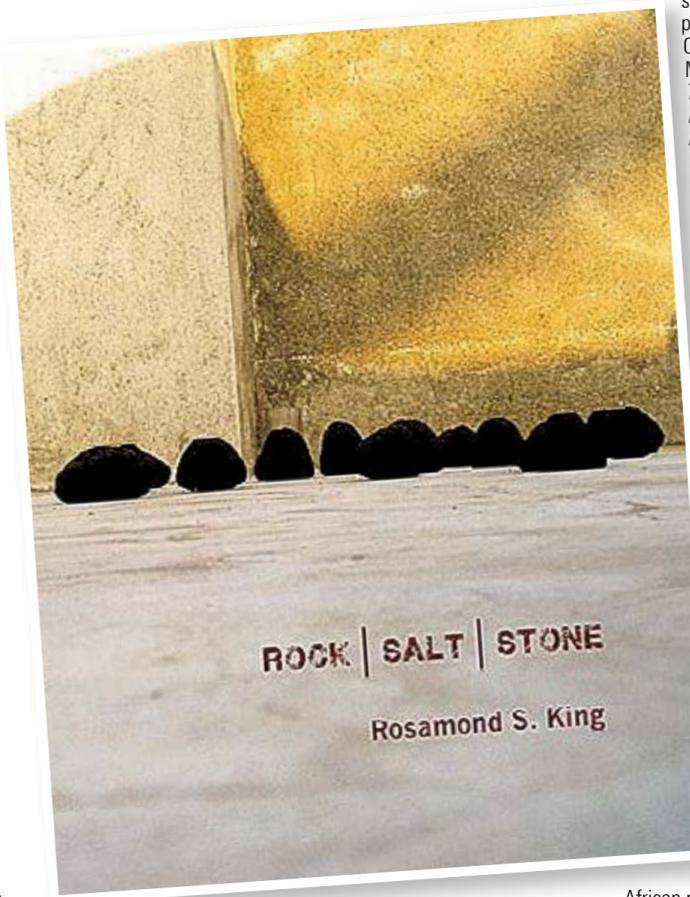
Why did you feel it necessary to fuse the female body with the Trinidadian landscape in that poem, which is something you do in several other poems as well?

Like my poem on the lajablesse, with "Old Head" I was interested in exploring how an old, solitary woman might have come to be that person. It is one of those pieces that came out of me almost fully formed, as though a force outside of me – or very deep within me – had taken control of my pen. I want people to feel immersed in the piece, and to question the stereotypes we hold of others, especially women. I also, of course, wanted to address partner violence in the piece. I deliberately did not make the landscape specific – you read it as Trinidadian; it can be read as almost anywhere in the Caribbean, as set on the coast of Africa, or as anywhere that has a beach. (I'll also note that plums grow in the Caribbean, but peaches, also mentioned in "Old Head," do not!) By leaving the markers vague, readers can interpret the poem as relevant to whatever coastal or tropical place they are familiar with.

Now, let's step back for a moment. Tell us a little bit about where you were born, what your childhood was like, and what your early and later educational experiences were like. How and when did you decide to become a scholar? What is your scholarship about? At what point did you know that you were a creative writer in addition to being a scholar?

I prefer to focus on my poems – I think they are much more interesting than my personal biography! I will say that my family is from Trinidad and Tobago and from The Gambia (West Africa), so though I was raised in the USA, I grew up around those cultures and their languages. I was also fortunate that in my family poetry – and fiction, and art, and dance – were normal activities, so while I was expected to get an education and a conventional job, I never felt I had to choose not to also write poetry.

Instead of recounting my life story, I'll share the beginning of



sexuality, carnival, and performance in the Caribbean and Africa. My book *Island Bodies: Transgressive Sexualities in the Caribbean Imagination* collects some of this work. I'm proud to say that it won the "best book" award from the Caribbean Studies Association, and that people at UWI and other universities are teaching it!

One of the things that stood out in the collection is that, despite the fact that you live in New York and you are a professor in New York, your life in New York does not really show up in these poems. Why is this so?

Although there are no specific landmarks from New York City in the book, my New York life is certainly there. Like many people, I live and work in New York, but my New York is largely a place of Caribbean and

African people. And like many writers and scholars, a lot of my life is lived in my head, which is able to travel even more often and farther than my body can!

One of the strongest poems in the collection, for me, is "Lajablesse in Oakland." What was so fascinating for me about this poem is that you read her cloven hoof as the result of gender-based violence. Throughout the collection there

is a preoccupation with this kind of violence. Explain the source of this preoccupation for you, and why you felt it necessary to conflate it with the folklore of the island of Trinidad. Interestingly enough, this gender-based violence follows the woman from Trinidad to the United States.

I don't think of the poem as "conflating" violence with Trinidadian folklore. The violence is already there; so many of our female Caribbean folk characters are negative predators who target men and children. I want to give a different perspective on these characters, and on violence in general. Thinking about lajablesse and other female folk characters who are dangerous or even murderous, I began to wonder about how these characters came to be – and then, of course, I decided to write my own origin story of lajablesse. In my poem, she is a survivor of abuse, an outcast in her community who has to figure out ways to survive. It's important that lajablesse travels for several reasons: many Caribbean people, of course, travel and immigrate outside of the region. But I also wanted to emphasize that gender-based violence is not at all specific to the Caribbean.

Another poem of yours that really resonated with me is "Tambourine." Can you talk about the genesis of this poem and what you hope the reader takes away from it?

"Tambourine" is also a poem about violence – but there I write about child abuse. Some people who are cruel to children know exactly what they are doing. Others think that they are showing the child discipline or love, especially people who were themselves abused as children. This short poem is meant to peek inside the mind of one abuser and portray her perspective without minimising or sugar-coating the violence she inflicts on her child.

In one of the untitled poems (pg 37), a character cannot hula hoop anymore because, the poem seems to suggest, the very fruits and flowers of the islands are burdensome to being female. Can you expand upon what you feel some of the limitations of being female are in Caribbean spaces like Trinidad?

Too often, Caribbean girls are still expected to be less active, less in public space, than boys

Turn to KING on Page 4



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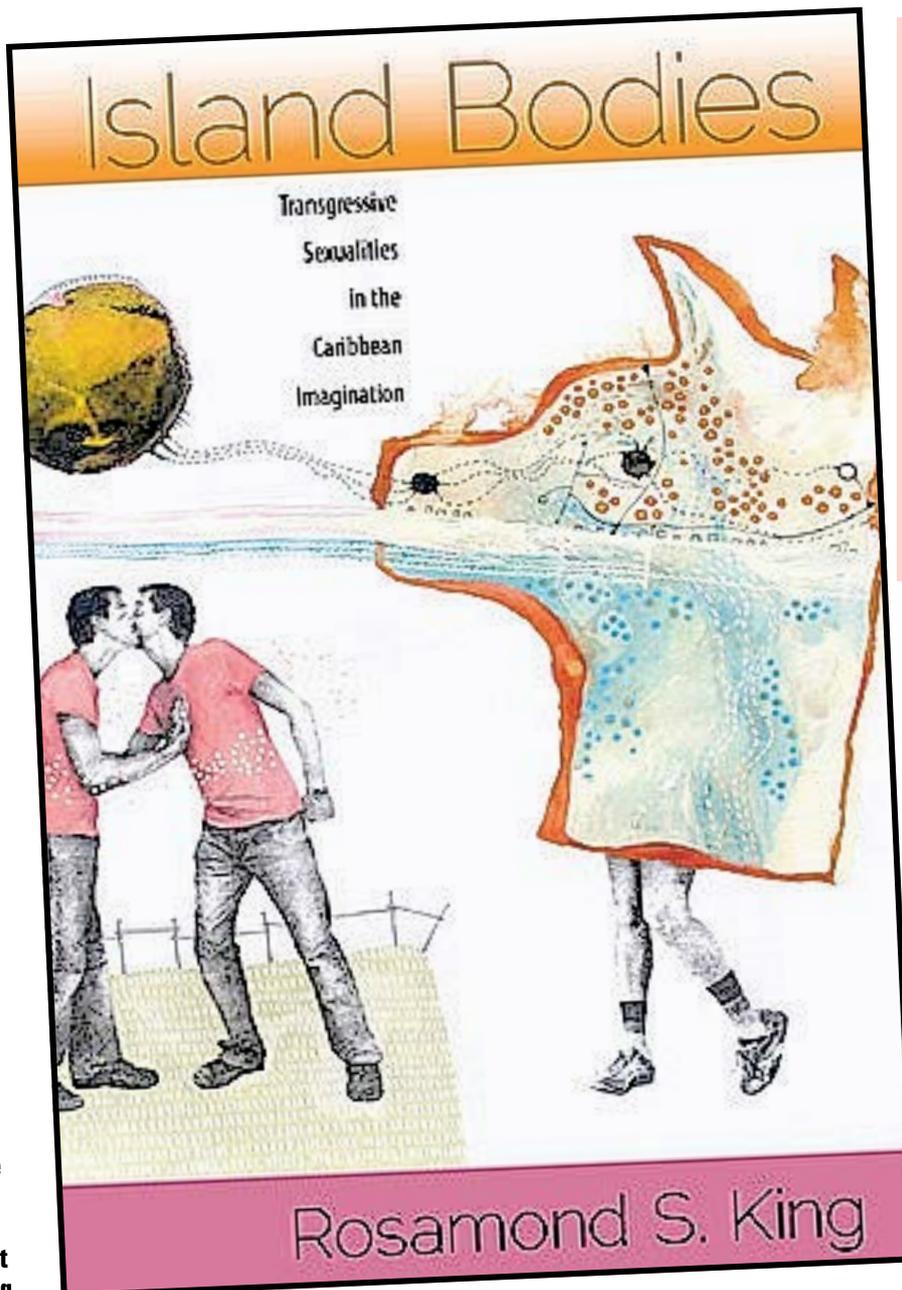
KING from Page 3

and young men. Too often, we are associated with fruit – in Trinidad, a girl acting like a woman is said to be “force-ripe,” like a fruit forced to ripen early. And it’s interesting that you use the word space in your question, because Caribbean spaces also exist in the diaspora, where these attitudes often continue to be passed down to our children. The result is that, although Caribbean women are stereotyped as loud and aggressive, that behavior is often seen as low-class and unseemly. Again, these constraints are perpetuated in other regions as well, but loving criticism should start at home!

Time and time again the speaking ‘I’ in these poems searches for a word to name her lesbian identity. Indeed, in an untitled poem on page 57 of the book, the narrator sexualises the market woman and the fruits that the market woman sells, but there is a sense in the poem that there is a wall separating the speaker and someone like a market woman from consummating their relationship, no matter how lush and sensual the transactions between them may be. What is the nature of the separation? Is the speaker suggesting that someone like a market woman could not herself have lesbian desires?

This poem is actually based on a true story. As I see it, the separation is mostly one of age. The market woman recognises the speaker’s desire, and may even both be flattered and reciprocate it. It’s important that her response to the younger woman is not to curse or scorn her. She sucks her teeth and dismisses her, but in a kind, amused way, because she isn’t interested. This sensuous market woman probably already has a woman or man at home!

The ability to speak and to have language and especially for individuals to speak the same language is a running theme throughout the book. There are so many moments of trying to name and of seeking to reclaim and take on a name in the book. Why



is the act of naming and renaming and getting names correctly (call me by my rightful name) so very important to you as a writer?

A central focus of *Rock | Salt | Stone* is not only naming and misnaming, but also the difficulty of communication. This is most obvious in poems such as “In Search of a Word” and “I appreciate your work,” but it is present in many works in which what a speaker means is not what other people hear. Especially for people who do not have a lot of power in the world – women, children, sexual minorities – the right to name ourselves is a simple but profound way to have control over how we are seen in the world.

I also gesture towards this idea through the book’s dedication, which is to “those told not to write, expected to suck salt, left to die alone on a rock or under a stone.” The notion of suffering as “sucking salt” when you have nothing to eat is very Caribbean, as is my reference to stoning, a method of killing still sometimes

used in the Caribbean. Of course, marginalized people everywhere are told not to tell our stories, especially in a form so permanent as writing. And isolation (being left “alone on a rock”) and murder are common beyond the Caribbean as well.

As I read your book, and knowing of your background as a literary critic as well, I wondered, Rosamond, how you juggled both identities in the writing of this book? Did your critical lens, for example, inform the subjects that you chose to write about? How did you keep, or did you keep, the theoretical writings and the words of other writers in your head as you wrote or you sought to get them out? In other words, could you turn the critical discourse off as you wrote these poems?

A student once asked me, “What do you do when your research cannot say what you feel urgently needs to be said to make an intervention in the world?” For me, the answer to that question is easy: I write poems and I

I FELL IN LOVE WITH THE MARKET WOMAN BY ROSAMOND S KING

I fell in love with the market woman
when I was supposed to be feeling tomatoes
I smelled the green pepper sweat of her flesh
leaning into the christophine I searched
for the salt fish scent in her lap.
As I waited fingers weighed me, fingers dropped me
together in pieces – rough, but not too
rough. I reach out with the money and I’m
vortexed into her young-old, old-young
eyes thinking, today she will pull me into
her narrows that widen and widen, but she just says
“go long gyal.”

make art. The poems that I write and my scholarship are actually at their core part of the same project, revealing some of the inequalities of our world and how people live within established boundaries, as well as how people refuse and transgress those boundaries, whether of gender, race, sexuality, immigration status, or other divisions.

And finally, Rosamond, what are you working on these days?

Right now, I’m working on a series of poems called “Living in the Abattoir.” The series responds to the condition of black people in the USA, again paying attention to the abjectness and violence that we are subject to, but also portraying how we survive and enjoy life. It’s the first time I have a large project focused in America. I do this through the extended metaphor of the abattoir; what does it mean to live in a place in which there is constant killing and constant blood? The series will be part of a collection tentatively titled *All the Rage*, which will also include images of my performance art. I’m planning to have the entire book completed within the next two years.

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An associate professor at New York University, Jacqueline Bishop is also a visual artist and writer. She is the author of, among others, such books as *My Mother Who Is Me: Life Stories from Jamaican Women in New York* and *Writers Who Paint/Painters Who Write: Three Jamaican Artists, and The Gymnast & Other Positions*, the 2016 OCM Bocas Award in Non-Fiction. Her latest art exhibition, “By the Rivers of Babylon”, recently concluded in New York.

