

Turning to the Self: Self-Regard and Disorderly Being as Strategies of Survival

Isabella Kalte

International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture (Giessen)

isabella.kalte@gcsc.uni-giessen.de; <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2569-2133>

Abstract:

A Regarded Self: Caribbean Womanhood and the Ethics of Disorderly Being by Kaiama L. Glover places five female characters of anglophone and francophone Caribbean literature center stage and defines the specific ways in which these women regard themselves as a practice of freedom and as their forming of an ethics of disorderly being that is necessary for survival. It is a thoughtful consideration of female subjectivity in a (post)colonial world that meaningfully subverts and unsettles ideological perspectives and academic discourses.

Im Angesicht des Selbst: Selbstbetrachtung und ungezügelttes Wesen als Überlebensstrategien

German Abstract:

In *A Regarded Self: Caribbean Womanhood and the Ethics of Disorderly Being* stellt Kaiama L. Glover fünf weibliche Charaktere der englisch- und französischsprachigen karibischen Literatur in den Mittelpunkt und definiert die Art und Weise, wie diese Frauen sich selbst betrachten als eine Praxis der Freiheit und als ihre Formulierung einer Ethik des ungezügeltten Wesens, die es ihnen ermöglicht zu überleben. Grovers Studie ist eine einfühlsame Betrachtung von weiblicher Subjektivität in einer (post)kolonialen Welt, die ideologische Perspektiven und akademische Diskurse aufrüttelt und untergräbt.

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Isabella Kalte

International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture (Giessen)

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Under which circumstances can it become an ethical practice to be disorderly? How to regard yourself when you are disregarded by others? Subjected to slavery and its legacies, how can you be(come) free? In her insightful book, *A Regarded Self: Caribbean Womanhood and the Ethics of Disorderly Being*, Kaiama L. Glover places five female characters of anglophone and francophone Caribbean literature center stage and defines the specific ways in which these women regard themselves as a practice of freedom and as their forming of an ethics of disorderly being that is necessary for survival. Thus, her study is a consideration of Caribbean womanhood that seriously takes into account and questions the cultural and social obligations that are often imposed on women for the sake of the nation and their communities in Caribbean literature but also in literary criticism.

In one way or another, all of the women that Glover considers are perceived as disorderly by their textual communities because, as Glover argues, they “defy rather than defer to communities that will not have them or will not love them as they are” (p. 6). She further asserts that “each of these women is an audaciously disordering force within, and on the margins of, her social world. Her defiance of gendered expectations subtends what is ultimately a wide-ranging discourse of dissent” (ibid.). Accordingly, at the heart of Glover’s examination of these disorderly women are the concepts of community and freedom and their connections to self-regard. As Glover elaborates in the introduction, in the geocultural space of the Caribbean, freedom and community have become tightly connected with the struggle for national independence as the forming of a Caribbean community was regarded as a counterpractice to Western colonial forces. Thus, a “communal connectedness as an ethical ideal” (p. 1) has become formative both in literary as well as in theoretical writings of that

region. Glover's analysis is in critical conversation with the masculinist national discourse that has come to uphold "a certain communal imperative" (p. 3) in the postcolonial Caribbean world as well as with "womanist conceptions of intergenerational cultural connections" (p. 4) that stress the importance of female solidarity. As she points out such privileging of the community leaves little room for "individualism as an ethical subject position" (p. 3) and risks disregarding the ways in which communal values can become oppressive for the individual and in particular for women. With her study, Glover therefore posits self-regard as an ethical practice to escape and defend one's self against coercive communities.

The works that Glover considers are all well-known novels and part of the Caribbean literary canon: *I, Tituba, Black Witch of Salem* (*Moi, Tituba ... sorcière noire*, 1986) by Maryse Condé, *Hadriana in All My Dreams* (*Hadriana dans tous mes rêves*, 1988) by René Depestre, *Daughter of Haiti* (*Fille d'Haïti*, 1954) by Marie Chauvet, *The Autobiography of My Mother* (1996) by Jamaica Kincaid, and *The Book of Night Women* (2009) by Marlon James. Each chapter of Glover's study is dedicated to one of the female protagonists and her specific form of engagement with her self as indicated by the chapter titles: "Self-love | Tituba;" "Self-possession | Hadriana;" "Self-defense | Lotus;" "Self-preservation: Xuela;" and "Self-regard | Lilith." Glover defines the different forms of engagement with the self in a glossary that precedes the introduction and the chapters. These "Terms of Engagement" — as the glossary is titled — form the premise of Glover's discussion of the disorderly women. Moreover, her analysis exceeds the textual as she also regards the extra-textual context of the novels. In particular, she examines the reception of the authors of the discussed novels who, themselves, have been perceived as disordering by readers and literary scholars alike. In combining the textual with extra-textual analysis, Glover astutely works out the reasons why these texts disorder scholarly and readerly expectations and thereby "proposes an interrogation of our reading practices" (p. 5) which "hold[s] up a mirror to a broader critical community of readers that, with all the best intentions, implicitly demands allegiance to its moral principles and politicized practices" (p. 2).

In chapter one, "Self-love | Tituba," Glover discusses Maryse Condé's much-analyzed novel in relation to the female slave narrative and highlights how Tituba's sustained love for herself,

that she enacts both morally and physically, subverts the tropes of this literary tradition. Furthermore, the sexualized female selfhood that Tituba embodies and her commitment to (self-)love as a guiding principle for which she even sacrifices her own freedom conflict not only with 17th century American Puritanism but also with 19th and 20th century anti-racist, nationalist, postcolonial and feminist ideologies.

Chapter two looks at René Depestre's award-winning but strongly criticized novel, *Hadriana in All My Dreams* by closely considering and unpacking the discomfort that Caribbean scholars have expressed for its depiction of Haiti as a hypersexualized place, the fetishization of Whiteness and practices of Vodou. Glover does not deny the legitimacy of this critique but points to Caribbean idiosyncrasies in relation to cultural practices, the erotic and race implicit in the criticism of Depestre's novel. She highlights the overlooked subversive aspects of Hadriana's journey to self-possession through her assertion of sexual agency and refusal to belong to a community that demands the sacrifice of her individual liberty.

Similarly to Depestre, Marie Chauvet has also created a heroine whose actions unsettle the order of the Haitian literary canon and who reveals the constraints placed on women within the context of radicalized, masculinist politics of nation-building. Although *Fille d'Haïti* is foremost "the story of [Lotus'] self-effacement," Glover argues that "Lotus nevertheless proposes her story as a modest act of self-defense" (p. 143).

Chapter four presents an intertextual analysis of Jamaica Kincaid's *The Autobiography of my Mother* that traces the ways in which the text answers to Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and its postcolonial rewritings. As an Afro-Carib woman Xuela's position in postcolonial society is one of extreme marginalization — so marginal, in fact, that it has more often than not been completely effaced from colonial but also from postcolonial narratives. Thus, living in a world that constantly threatens her very existence, Xuela turns inward as the only chance for self-preservation. By making use of Sylvia Wynter's theoretical tools provided in her formative essay "Beyond Miranda's Meanings" (in Carole Boyce Davies & Elaine Savory Fido (eds.): *Out of the Kumbla: Caribbean Women and Literature*, Trenton, 1990, p. 355–370), Glover regards Xuela's antisocial behavior as Kincaid's "commitment to exposing intramural conflicts among nonwhite peoples of the American postcolony" (p. 36).

The final chapter of the book then discusses Marlon James' *The Book of Night Women* and makes the case that Lilith's stubborn self-regard provides her with some degree of agency to define herself and the world around her. For Glover, James' portrayal of Lilith as a mostly selfish and disagreeable person as well as his unflinching depiction of excessive violence complicates the conventional modes of story-telling about the past of slavery and the people subjected to it.

In conclusion, Kaiama L. Glover's *A Regarded Self* is a thought-provoking and innovative contribution to Caribbean literary criticism as it subversively engages with Caribbean ideological idiosyncrasies and self-reflexively unsettles established academic positions. It proposes self-regard as a theoretical framework as well as an analytical lens and thereby delineates a way to "opening up to reading old stories in new ways" (p. 37). Its combination of textual and extra-textual analysis provides a comprehensive insight into anglophone and francophone Caribbean literature, culture and scholarship.