

CQV  
Caribbean  
Queer  
Visualities

A Small Axe Project

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# Caribbean Queer Visualities

*David Scott*

One of the most remarkable developments in the Caribbean and its diaspora over the past two decades or so is the emergence of a generation of young visual artists working in various media (paint, film, performance) who have been transforming Caribbean visual practice, perhaps even something larger like Caribbean visual culture. A significant part of the veritable explosion of contemporary Caribbean art is owed to this generation. Undoubtedly, the increasing visibility of Caribbean art is also connected to other significant developments—for example, the fracturing of modernity’s hierarchies, the transformation of mobilities (the literal and digital movement of ideas and people in new ways across the globe), and a decentering of the evaluative and temporal assumptions of modernism that secured the privilege of a certain aesthetic norm. The significance of this generation is their attunement to these shifts and their capacity to translate them through a local visual idiom.

Therefore, part of what is important to note is the *location* of this younger generation in a new *conjuncture* of Caribbean life. This is a generation that is not shaped by the cultural-political questions—or by the ethos that framed and animated the cultural-political questions—of earlier generations of the postcolonial Caribbean. This younger generation came of age in a context of world-transforming dislocations at national, regional, and global levels. They did not grow up in the “aftermaths of sovereignty” so much as in the aftermaths of sovereignty’s aftermaths—in the context, in other words, of the exhaustion of the great narratives of collective social and political change of the latter half of the twentieth century, the great collective narratives of decolonization, postcolonial nationhood, black power, and socialism, that gave point to their parents’ lives.

Or to put this more precisely, this generation grew up in a context in which these narratives, once oppositional, once open to the adventure of a future-to-come, have congealed and ossified, and as a consequence the narratives have become rationalizations for modes of exclusion, marginalization, repression, and intolerance directed at their own citizens. Almost as soon as the old antisystemic movements for social and political change were installed in institutionalized power in the new sovereign states of the region, they began to stultify into new modes of orthodoxy, into their own terrified normativities, anxiously policing the boundaries of identity and community, seeking to contain expressions of personhood and belonging, and of sex and pleasure.

Not surprisingly, then, the artistic preoccupations of this younger generation are not organized by the same ethos of artistic value as their nationalist elders; their visual aesthetic of dissent does not gravitate, for example, toward class or race or nation, or anyway not in the same modernist, centered, earnest, aspirational way of older generations. Take Jamaica, for instance, and think of Barrington Watson's evocation of the maternal dignity of familial black womanhood in a work such as *Mother and Child* (1959); and think of the dread displacements of this sentimental ethos of nationalist self-respect performed by Karl Parboosingh in a work such as *Jamaican Gothic* (1968), darker, grittier, more unforgiving; and then think of the displacements of this cultural nationalist aesthetic performed by Dawn Scott's social realist critique of the structural violence embodied in the Jamaican political rationality in *A Cultural Object* (1985). For all their profound differences, these artists nevertheless share the horizon of a progressive collective futurity in whose name they can enact their quarrel with the terms *nationhood* and *collective belonging*. Now, true, it's not exactly that the symbolic universe inhabited by this older generation of Jamaican artists doesn't persist in the work of a younger generation, born from around 1980 onward. Think of Khary Darby's sublime meditations on the intimacies of subjugation in *The Birth of Tragedy* (2002) or the figurative minimalism of Oneika Russell's *A Natural History* series (2012) or the mannered voluptuousness—even *jouissance*—of Phillip Thomas's *Carousel* (2009). None of these artists disavows the demand for an engaged intelligence. But none of them sees this in relation to modernist categories of social change enacted by previous generations.

What has opened here in the contemporary Caribbean, I believe, is a space (undoubtedly a very embattled, uneven, and conflicted space) in which new questions about subjectivity and identity, powers and subjugations, have emerged, questions that are less about ideologies than about *embodiments*, less about representations than about *performativities*, less about utopias than about *instantiations*, less about belongings than about *lovings*, less about stabilities than about *displacements*, less about sexualities than about *desires*. Powers of conformity are now as much inside as outside—inside the nation, inside the community, inside the family, inside the self. This adds dimensions to subjugations that are *affective* as much as cognitive, *unconscious* as much as conscious, *invisible* as much as visible. And, therefore, questions of dissidence—and indeed the very *languages* of dissidence—have to be learned all over again.

This is the aesthetic-political space in which our Small Axe project “Caribbean Queer Visualities” emerges. We aim to inquire into the relation between queer sensibilities and visual art practice in the Caribbean and among artists of Caribbean descent in the Caribbean diaspora. How have Caribbean artists responded to the ideological and sometimes legal constraints around sexual identity and sexual practice? How have they responded to the conformist state and to community practices concerning modes of family, kinship, and belonging? Can one read dissenting engagements with sexual identity in the practice of Caribbean visual practitioners? In what ways? Indeed, can one speak broadly of a “queer visibility” in the Caribbean? What, in short, are the dimensions of Caribbean queer aesthetics, and

what might some of the implications be for a queer perspective on Caribbean contemporary art practice?

Our aim in this initiative has been to construct a discursive context—a forum—in which to engage these questions in an open, thought-provoking way. We do not expect final answers. We are happy if we can redescribe the problem-space in productive ways that make possible further dialogue. We are hoping for a polysemic dialogue that both redescribes our political and aesthetic pasts (giving us a different set of starting and transition points for the narrative of what we are and how we became who we are) and reorients our concerns with the political and aesthetic present by offering us a different concatenation of possibilities.

“Caribbean Queer Visualities” is the third in a series of *Small Axe* visual projects—all of them supported by the generosity of the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, New York. It may be helpful, therefore, to say a little about what it is we are after here in our engagement with visual art, which is long-standing, even inaugural. What is art doing in a journal of criticism? For us, simply put, art is a mode of engaged intelligence with a potential to be a mode of *dissenting* intelligence, a way of resisting conformity, of making us see in ways we hadn’t before the subjugations and outrages that define our worlds. Though we have been interested in showing the existing and emerging work of artists, we have become more and more interested in constructing thematically driven projects and to invite the participation of artists. For us artists are—or should be—part of the larger critical conversation. But needless to say, these projects are also aimed at stimulating and encouraging an art critical and an art historical sensibility among young scholars. We want to encourage posing questions such as the following: What kinds of critical tools are important for thinking through Caribbean art practices? What is the idea of the visual and visuality? What dimensions of history and what approaches to the past are important to the exploration of traditions of Caribbean art practice and art appreciation? What are the key conjunctures in the making of Caribbean art practice? How are we to think about the relation between the colonial and the modern, the modern and the national, the national-modern and the contemporary, the high and the popular, questions of politics and identity and ethnicity, and so on, in these practices of making visual work and in the practices of thinking about them?

The first project we initiated was called “Caribbean Visual Memory” (2009). As ever we were animated by questions we didn’t know exactly how to answer. We sought

to ask, How does Caribbean art remember? Or again, what is the memory-politics of Caribbean visual practice? How does the past figure in the present of Caribbean visual work? What are the objects, thematics, figurations, technologies, textures, gestures—what, in effect, is the aesthetic grammar—through which the past is constituted as a site of incitement and engagement for various generations of Caribbean colonial and postcolonial artists? How is the notion of memory figured and refigured through visual representation? In the wake of this first project, it soon became clear that the question of memory had not been exhausted and needed perhaps to be re-posed. The idea for the second project, “The Visual Life of Catastrophic History” (2011–13), emerged in the immediate aftermath of the terrible earthquake in Haiti in January 2010. Catastrophe—natural, political—is a major theme in the creative Caribbean imagination. Again we posed a number of questions: How has visual practice in the Caribbean sought to engage our catastrophic history? Might the visual enable a distinctive hermeneutic register for evoking and interpreting catastrophe? Is there something distinctly hypervisual about catastrophe?

“Caribbean Queer Visualities” aims to push the envelope established by these projects, both in terms of *theme* as well as in terms of *programmatic* concerns. Thematically, in some sense, the earlier projects were conceived within a conventional (or anyway familiar) framework. Here, however, we conceived a break, an attempt to pry open fresh cognitive-aesthetic space, less to deepen or

expand, perhaps, than to *change* our lenses of perception and appreciation. Programmatically, we sought to construct a dialogue between artists and writers. To realize this, we organized two meetings: the first at Yale University, 14–15 November 2014; and the second at Columbia University, 2–3 April 2015. These dialogues turned out to be enormously fruitful inasmuch as they generated a surprisingly open and frank discussion about personal identity and art making in Caribbean cultural-political spaces. Note that what we aimed at was an engagement between visual artists and art writers. Given our preoccupations in *Small Axe*, this is a relation we aim to cultivate and shelter. True, we are driven by the visual work, but we do not mean to suggest a merely derivative role for writers. The artist extracts that accompany the artwork in this catalogue—snippets of intimate conversations—grow out of this dialogue.

“Caribbean Queer Visualities” exemplifies something at the heart of the Small Axe Project, namely, the commitment to an experimental platform for reflexively thinking aloud about the cultural, political, sexual, aesthetic worlds in and through which we live and work. It’s what we’ve been about for twenty years.

[Adapted from “Caribbean Queer Visualities: A Small Axe Project Statement,” *Small Axe*, no. 46 (March 2015): 118–22]

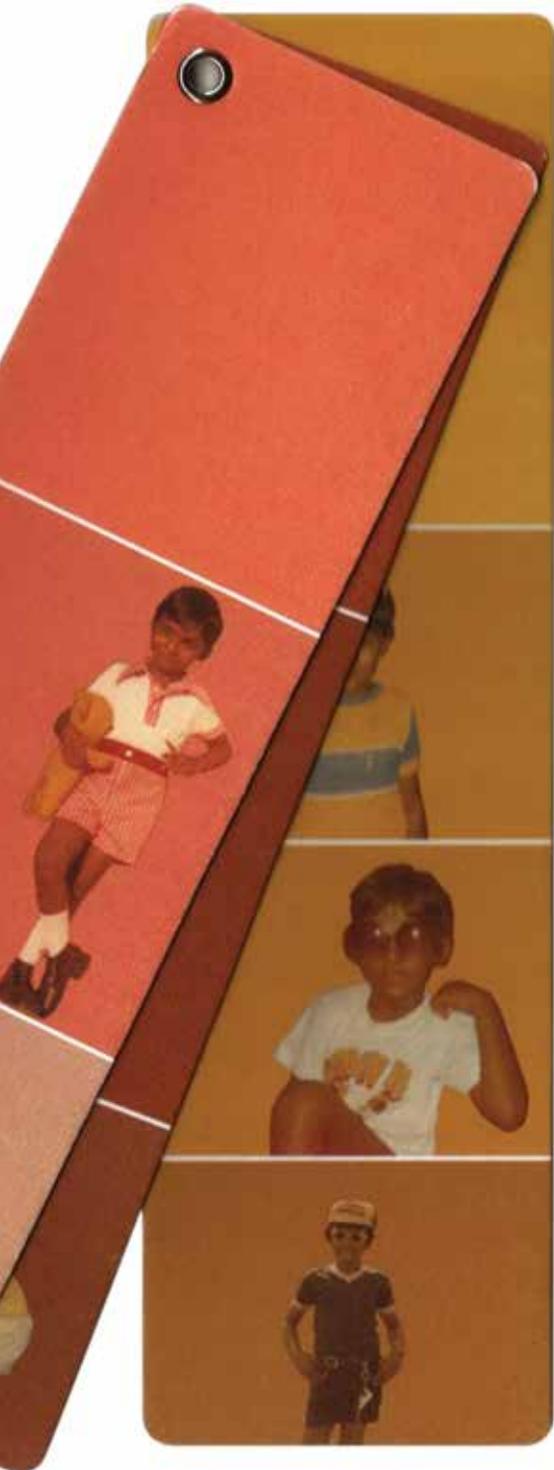
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TRINIDAD/CANADA

**Coolie Colors**, 2016

Images courtesy of the artist.





# Where Trauma Resides

*Vanessa Agard-Jones*

*Where is your love?  
Where do you miss?  
Where did your heart skip a beat?  
Where have you hurt?  
Where is home?*

Meditating on these five questions, Andil Gosine produced *Wardrobes* (2011–13), an experimental process of object- and performance-creation focused on love, loss, and dislocation in Indo-Caribbean diasporas. Inspired at once by his indentured laborer ancestors' experiences of transport to Trinidadian sugar plantations in the nineteenth century as well as by the ending of his own transnational relationship in 2009, Gosine asked in these projects how we might process grief across time and space. The performances pushed audiences to think about where—in what places, at what sites, and in whose bodies—traumas make their home. While the story that drives *Wardrobes* is one of movement (from rural Trinidad to Toronto to Paris to New York) as well as one of time travel (from the nineteenth to the twenty-first centuries), Gosine's project is propelled by the settling, the resting, and the taking up residence of grief.

In this case, as in so many others, it begins with heartbreak. How to apprehend the scale, the depth, the endurance of something as banal yet so life changing as a broken heart? How to grieve? Framing this “Caribbean Queer Visualities” project, David Scott asked us to consider “to

what harms a mode of critique responds,” and *Wardrobes*, not unlike many of the other projects that we consider here, seeks to document and offer critical perspective on conditions of woundedness—its experience and its resurfacing—across generations. Gosine calls his project “both a private and public interrogation of desire, and its relationship to social trauma.”<sup>1</sup> Cycling between inaugural macroviolences, at the scale of populations (such as Indo-Trinidadian indenture), to ongoing microviolences, at the scale of individual bodies (such as loves lost and kinships compromised), *Wardrobes* asks us to consider where trauma resides in queer Caribbean histories. The project is a particularly live example of what M. Jacqui Alexander, borrowing from Ella Shohat, has called a dwelling in “palimpsestic time,” a strategy that might offer renewed models for understanding harm (and, too, for forging healing) in the contemporary Caribbean.<sup>2</sup>

This conventional definition for *palimpsest*—“something reused or altered but still bearing visible traces of its earlier form”—is but one dimension of the mode of temporality that Alexander seeks to uncover with palimpsestic time.<sup>3</sup> In her formulation, it is time that is “neither vertically accumulated nor horizontally teleological”—it is time of a telos unregulated by the conventions of European sci-

entism; it is time that bends, that loops, and that sometimes breaks.<sup>4</sup> Those palimpsests of yore—the papyrus and vellum written upon, subject to “imperfect erasure,” and written upon again—are replaced in her example with time itself, with seconds, minutes, and hours bearing the traces of what has come before.<sup>5</sup> Alexander’s analytic of the palimpsest comes to denote instead of a thing a quality (in its transition from noun, *palimpsest*, to adjective, *palimpsestic*), broadening the optic to include objects that we can apprehend not only visually and haptically but also experientially.

Alexander’s iconic essay in the field of queer Caribbean studies, “Not Just Any (Body) Can Be a Citizen,” is a reading of palimpsests: Trinidad and Tobago’s 1986 Sexual Offences Act and the Bahamas’ 1989 Sexual Offenses and Domestic Violence Act, legal orders that bore partial markers of, and resemblances to, Britain’s 1861 Offences Against the Person Act.<sup>6</sup> But as Alexander scales outward from those documents to analyze the ways the “new” world order of the late twentieth century not only resembles but *is* the old world order of previous centuries, she extends our understanding of the palimpsest to a formulation in which time too is subject to the palimpsest’s material remixings. Riffing off of Alexander, Deborah A. Thomas urges us to understand multiple sovereignties in the hemispheric Americas not as additive but as palimpsestic—to see older forms of sovereignty (“templates,” she names them) as they underlay, and may be glimpsed beneath, newer ones.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Jovan Scott Lewis offers a reading of “a plantation cosmology . . . replicated in contemporary condition[s]” in Jamaica via palimpsestic time—re-marking on the overlain, partially erased but reconstituted ideas about ways of being in the world that continue to bear slavery’s mark.<sup>8</sup> For Thomas and Lewis, as for Alexander, palimpsestic time orients us toward the thickness of social contexts marked by enduring coloniality.

But the palimpsestic time at work in Gosine’s *Wardrobes* is not just about coloniality; it is also about a broken heart, a despair that he equates with trauma. Scott’s opening query about the constitution of harm is crucial here: Gosine, in his focus on the multiscalar dimensions of grief, joins a coterie of scholars who have been shifting our understandings of trauma away from the exceptional and the massive—the so-called singular event—and toward the conditions of the everyday.<sup>9</sup> Rather than understand catastrophes, massacres, genocide, and war solely as the sites for the generation of trauma, we are pushed to apprehend harm as it is made manifest in the mundane, to pain that is no less immediate for its landing at a smaller, more intimate scale. Gosine’s interest in trauma’s trans-generational transmission trains our attention on the project’s fourth guiding question: “Where have you hurt?” The hurt that Gosine diagnoses is not only the grief of a single subject but a mapping of that grief across bodies, communities, generations. Time bends around this grief. It carries this grief through decades, centuries.<sup>10</sup>

Perspectives brought to bear in psychosomatic and biomedical studies of posttraumatic stress have generated a vibrant set of inquiries about the *stuff* of trauma, about its materiality and about its manifestation in the body. These studies have focused attention on what Masud Khan calls “cumulative traumas” and on Bessel van der Kolk’s later contention that traumas are stored, and later transmitted, in somatic memory.<sup>11</sup> *Wardrobes* takes broken-heartedness, both at the scene of diasporic migration and at the scene of love’s ending, and calls it all trauma. Gosine asks that we consider how pain—major or minor, proximate or distant—courses through our lives in similar registers. Van der Kolk argues that “the body keeps the score,” that “the memory of trauma is encoded in the viscera, in the heartbreaking and gut-wrenching emotions, in autoimmune disorders and skeletal/muscular problems.”<sup>12</sup> Trauma, then, not only takes up residence in the psyche but also has physical effects. It resides in the body that is subject to harm at whatever scale it is experienced, but it also resides in the bodies of those descended from them. *Wardrobes* is inspired by just such a pair:

In 1845 Savitri leaves Calcutta for Trinidad. She boards the *Fath Al Razack*, and is ordered to change into the stockings, woolen trousers, shoes and a petticoat provided. In 2009 Jimmy leaves Paris with a broken heart and four suitcases of couture. Jimmy meets Savitri in Trinidad, New York, and Toronto in 2017. *WARDROBES* happens in palimpsestic time. Savitri and her descendant meet in Toronto, on the 100th anniversary of the end of the British system of indentureship that had brought Savitri and others to Trinidad and elsewhere in the Caribbean.<sup>13</sup>

Savitri and Jimmy meet across time and in diasporic space, sharing not only a bloodline but also an association of displacement with sartorial change. Savitri, whose presence reverberates throughout *Wardrobes*, is the namesake of a series of fabled

women, all distinguished by their deep romantic attachments and their sacrifices in the face of love's loss. The epic Mahabharata's tale of Savitri and Satyavan, which has itself been retold countless times across media as varied as opera and film, offers us a Savitri who sacrifices—food, wealth, and freedom—for the life of her husband.<sup>14</sup> Gosine's Savitri reveals less of her own story, but she too is subject to sacrifice, as she boards the *Fath al Razack* (or *Fatel Razack*), the first ship to carry indentured laborers from India to Trinidad, and is transformed by the *kala pani* (dark waters) and by her induction into the Caribbean's labor regime.<sup>15</sup> Jimmy is the inheritor of Savitri's woe, but he carries his own too: a broken heart, unhealed by a suitcase of couture. Of their baggage, Gosine says, "Savitri's new wardrobe turned her into an Indenture [*sic*]. Jimmy will have new wardrobes, but that does not mean he will stop being clothed in hers."<sup>16</sup> Swathed in these garments of grief, many layers deep, Jimmy's traumas are not only his own; they are also those that once belonged to Savitri. Touching through time, the traumas emanate from Savitri's nineteenth-century dislocation to Jimmy's own at the dawn of the twenty-first.<sup>17</sup>

Gosine offers some insight into his relationship to these figures, and into his avatar-like connection to Jimmy and his broken heart:

WARDROBES did not begin with Savitri. I was simply heartbroken, devastated by the sudden end of a decade-long relationship with my first love. To live, I followed a passion for Yoko Ono's art and Rei Kawakubo to New York, with a plan to figure out my sense of a connection between and my lust for Ono's cut piece [*sic*] and contemporary Japanese couture. . . but the project would become an insufficient vehicle for processing grief. I wanted my own wardrobe.<sup>18</sup>

The wardrobe that Gosine ultimately produced contains four objects: a white-gold brooch forged in the shape of a cutlass, a bag designed to carry both rum and roti, a lace and cotton *ohrni* headscarf embroidered with a gold image of an anchor (resembling his grandmother's tattoo), and a set of cotton doctor's scrubs, screen printed with a repeating image of his parents from the early years of their courtship. Each item for his wardrobe was inspired by kinship, not only the blood-relation between Savitri and Jimmy, or Gosine's own family ties, but also in reference to the biological and nonbiological kinship ties forged—and rended—by experiences of diaspora. Each object is also a palimpsest that makes traumatic inheritances visible, though only partially so. The cutlass, for example, calls up immediate references to the machete that indentures used to cut cane on Caribbean plantations. But the object carries another layer of meaning for Gosine: he reflects on his association of the object with his childhood in rural Trinidad and with the "entwinement of pleasure with violence." He tells the story of the cutlass: "My grandmother Ramadai used her cutlass to carve sugarcane treats for me, but it was the same instrument used in the murder of her mother, and that my Uncle used to kill a boa constrictor that almost killed me."<sup>19</sup> Ramadai's cutlass may have been forged of carbon steel, but Gosine transforms his own into a luxury

item. Fashioned in gold, it retains but reworks the violence embedded in the commodity form, referencing the histories of divining and assigning value produced by the colonial project. Gosine's cutlass is a decorative object, an accessory for everyday wear, and its innocuous pinning to a lapel, scarf, or collar belies the layers of meaning of which it is made and to which it refers.

In addition to creating the cutlass, bag, *ohrni*, and scrubs for his wardrobe, Gosine also used each object as a launching point for a collaboration and public performance. He called these partially scripted but mostly improvisational endeavors "previews," honoring a final aim to join all four in later incarnations into a single staged opera. He understood each gathering as part of the drafting process for this final performance, and as such they relied heavily on audience participation, serving to dialogically refine the questions that guided his endeavor.

For the first preview, *Made in Love*, Gosine made the scrubs printed with the photograph of his parents. Then, at the Indo-Caribbean Alliance gala in Queens, New York, he set up a photo studio in front of an image of sugar cane and "people waited long queues to get their photos taken, all the while reminiscing about the collections of studio images in their own family albums." Wearing his scrubs, Gosine asked participants to pose for portraits with their kin, the sugar-cane evoking at once nostalgia for tropical landscapes and the brutality of the plantation. The second preview, *Cutlass*, further centered the interface among pain, inheritance, and intimacy. Gosine opened that gathering with an offering to five generations of Indian women who faced violence, before bringing to the stage his collaborator, Haitian Canadian Parisian singer-songwriter Mélissa Laveaux, who played music referencing their shared ties to the region. For this preview Gosine issued "an invitation to the audience to try

to drown their grief by dumping paper boats into a pool of water; [noting that] the boats, of course, usually stayed afloat for a long time.”<sup>20</sup> In the third preview, *Rum and Roti*, the audience watched the premiere of Richard Fung’s 2012 film *Dal puri Diaspora* and then entered a reception by passing through a structure Gosine built to resemble a conjoined hut/coffin/boat, after which they exchanged paper boats for *rotis*. Participants were invited one by one to a therapy exercise, and seated on a couch in front of an image of crowds at a point of embarkment, Gosine posed the project’s five guiding questions: *Where is your love? Where do you miss? Where did your heart skip a beat? Where have you hurt? Where is home?*

Finally, with the preview *Ohrni*, Gosine enlisted Gaiutra Bahadur, author of *Coolie Woman: The Odyssey of Indenture*, as his collaborator, reflecting that

*Coolie Woman* shows the deep scars of indenture-ship and colonial violence, and also the post-Indenture reassertion of patriarchy in Indo-Caribbean communities in particular. The problems of domestic violence and wife murder, alcoholism, high suicide rates in Guyana and Trinidad and Tobago have long stories, and are wrapped up in both the systemic dehumanization of those who would be Indentures [sic], anxieties about their bodies and “barbaric” sexual and cultural practices, as well as in the post-Indenture effort to “belong” again. To reclaim humanity, to belong again ethnically, nationally, women were called to submit their agency, queers to bury their desires, to weigh ourselves, again, against Oppressors, be they British or Indian, rules of civility.<sup>21</sup>

Dwelling on points of anchorage and the makings of home,

with *Ohrni* Gosine brought the twinned figures of Savitri and Jimmy to the fore. To accompany the ohrni headscarf—the garment that most powerfully calls on associations not only with Savitri but also with his own grandmother as well as with generations of Indo-Trinidadian women—Gosine also produced Jimmy’s new garment: a T-shirt with the word *Parisien* rendered in Hindi and surrounded by the colors of the French national flag. Gosine later remarked that this phase of the project “was a kind of resolution to this search for a new home to replace all the ones [he] lost, especially in love.”<sup>22</sup>

In each iteration of *Wardrobes*, Gosine experimented with the possibilities of the palimpsest: overlaying his own story on Jimmy’s, and Jimmy’s on Savitri’s, he invested each object with their varied experiences of pain. In another version of *Made in Love* he superimposed a picture of himself and a male companion over of the image of his parents—both couples looking knowingly in the other’s direction, standing at the same distance, their bodies melding in and through each other as Gosine’s companion sings a cover of Procul Harum’s “Whiter Shade of Pale.” There is a queer time at work in *Wardrobes*, a living within an echo, a perpetual recurrence. Gosine says that Savitri’s and Jimmy’s stories “keep repeating because of a failure to grieve”: “And all of it that happened before, all that began with this severe dislocation that brought [Jimmy’s] ancestors on ships, that reconfigured them as labourers alone, pulses through Jimmy’s body, in his most intimate contentions with his pleasures and fears, and in his negotiations with the social institutions that still haven’t grieved enough, that still fail to memorialize pain truthfully.”<sup>23</sup> Jimmy is the inheritor of this failure to grieve, but its effects do not travel in a straight line. They reverberate from Savitri to Jimmy, to Gosine, to Ramadai, outward to their kin and back again—a not quite linear, and not quite cyclical, unfolding of pain.

Gosine’s process-oriented concern in *Wardrobes*, the slow accretion of significance to each of its objects, is critical to the ways palimpsestic time emerges in his work. The palimpsest is not just a reference to the cutlass or to the ohrni, nor is it just a reference to the experience generated by each performance; it is also as a reflection upon his art-making practice. The palimpsests at work in *Wardrobes* are at once things, qualities, and method. Gosine’s palimpsest is also a verb.

While *palimpsest* is conventionally employed only in the former two forms—as a noun or as an adjective—Jafari Allen’s “For the Children: Dancing the Beloved Community” offers another turn of the phrase. In a call to make anew the ephemeral archives of Black queer life, Allen writes, “Certainly we must all pick up the weapons and pens and tools and steps of our sisters and brothers. Perhaps to remember is also to spin where s/he shimmied, rewrite, correct, alter, improve—palimpsest.”<sup>24</sup> Here, Allen employs palimpsest as a purposeful action. Rather than observing and analyzing a palimpsest before us or experiencing the enfolding of experiences that might be labeled palimpsestic, Allen calls for the creation of palimpsests as praxis. *Wardrobes* does precisely this work, stepping into a process

for documenting trauma and opening space to mourn as a strategic intervention. Gosine's decision to create a wardrobe was an act of self-care in the interest of social healing, a reminder of the co-implication of both collective and individual memory and collective and individual experience.<sup>25</sup> To palimpsest in this way is a curative undertaking—one that allows the doer to process grief not just as it emerges in the painful events of a single life but as it echoes in the social worlds of a transhistorical and transnational kinship line.

In a project that riffs further on *Wardrobes*, Gosine's *Coolie, coolie, viens pour curry / Le curry est tout fini* (2016) pares down this project to its essence.<sup>26</sup> A diptych study in white on white, every word of the children's taunt—save for “fini”—is rendered so as to be barely perceptible against its background, visible only to the attuned eye or to the viewer willing to move in such a way that the words emerge from their surroundings. It too is a palimpsest, the provocation itself under erasure. It too dwells in palimpsestic time, collapsing mockery from Gosine's own childhood into broader forms of derision of Indo-Caribbean people. And it too is about a praxis oriented toward healing, with “Fini”—“finished”—rendered in gold, not only as a conclusion to a question about the availability of curry but also as a demand, an insistence, that the causes of trauma, both present and past, come to an end.

Gosine's commission for “Caribbean Queer Visualities,” *Coolie Colors (I could have been fabulous/ But then we moved to Canada)* (2016) approaches queer Caribbean childhood from a different vantage. Rather than focus on Trinidad as a site of trauma, here Gosine references the island as a site of gender experimentation and creative intensity. Canada, by contrast, is the place that gives rise to unrealized potential. He infuses this palimpsest with color—a Pantone fan, overlain by childhood photographs of a confidently gender-playful Gosine, is set against a backdrop of deeply saturated proximate shades. The colors are matched by a set of Hindu *jhandi* flags anchored in a clay pot: common markers of Indo-Caribbean homes. Circling back to the relationship between migration and loss that was the focus of *Wardrobes*, *Coolie Colors* returns viewers to the endurance of the indenture-migration experience and to a nostalgia for what might have been. Gosine's protagonist blames emigration for the missed opportunity to be fabulous, inverting the homonationalist trope whereby a queer or trans\*person must leave a “backward” homeland to find their “true” self in the metropole.<sup>27</sup> Gosine's childhood photographs demonstrate that fabulousness is always already available in a space like Trinidad unsettling flattened representations of queer life, stripped of layers of experience and meaning, and makes comprehensible our protagonist's disappointment about having been moved to Canada.

In an essay on palimpsestic time, Marc Singer observes that novelists (I read him to mean artists more generally) have “the potential to rearrange time,” a complicated “freedom” that both affords an opportunity and lays bare a problem: with all of that time to think of and through, the choices that an artist makes to structure a narrative have tremendous consequences.<sup>28</sup> Gosine's rearrangements of time in In-

do-Caribbean diasporas are enormously consequential: they reveal the capacity of wounds to make themselves resound beyond the bodies and sites on which they are first inflicted. Savitri's pain reverberates through Jimmy's body, but that pain also cycles from their invented worlds through Gosine's own, including the artist's experience alongside those of the participants in his *Wardrobe* previews. His temporal rearrangements call for a careful accounting of the distribution of harm, and this is what Gosine's art-making practice offers us. Through creation, collaboration, and public performance, through the making of objects into which he invests multilayered meaning—Gosine's is a strategy for palimpsesting and for documenting where trauma resides, how it accumulates over time, and how it accretes in parchment-like layers, in embodied experiences, across generations.

## Endnotes

- 1 Gosine's reflections on *Wardrobes* are drawn from his 2015 (unpublished) artist's statement as well as from our conversation about the project during the *Small Axe* symposium “Caribbean Queer Visualities I,” held at Yale University, 14–15 November 2014. I thank Gosine for his deep generosity in sharing this work with us.
- 2 See Jacqui M. Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 190. Alexander quotes Ella Shohat, *Taboo Memories, Diasporic Voices* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 15.
- 3 Oxford Dictionaries, s.v. “palimpsest,” [www.oxforddictionaries.com](http://www.oxforddictionaries.com).
- 4 Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing*, 190.
- 5 On time's enfoldings, memory written into the fabric of the world, and the ghosts to which we are accountable, see Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007).

- 6 Jacqui M. Alexander, "Not Just (Any) Body Can Be a Citizen: The Politics of Law, Sexuality, and Postcoloniality in Trinidad and Tobago and the Bahamas," *Feminist Review*, no. 48 (1994): 5–23.
- 7 Deborah A. Thomas, "The Problem with Violence: Exceptionality and Sovereignty in the New World," *Journal of Transnational American Studies* 5, no. 1 (2013): 7, 12.
- 8 Jovan Scott Lewis, "A So Black People Stay: Bad-Mind, Sufferation, and Discourses of Race and Unity in a Jamaican Craft Market," *Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology* 20, no. 2 (2015): 339.
- 9 I am thinking here of Thomas, both in her *Exceptional Violence: Embodied Citizenship in Transnational Jamaica* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011) and in more recent interventions about "what sovereignty feels like" in her 2013 *Tivoli Stories* project; Veena Das, who in *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007) writes about the ways everyday life absorbs traumatic collective violence but also asks us to think critically about mobilizing patho logical frameworks, like trauma, to apprehend experiences of violence; Ann Cvetkovich, whose *Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003) reworks current and historical conceptualizations of trauma from the vantage point of lesbian countercultural formations; Rob Nixon and his *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011), in which he asks that we consider violence as chronic and incremental rather than only spectacular and immediate; and Saidiya Hartman and her ever-challenging theorizations about the "afterlives" of traumatic events, as explored in, for example, her *Lose Your Mother: A Journey along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2007).
- 10 The transgenerational transmission of trauma is compellingly charted in Marianne Hirsch's work on "postmemory" and the Holocaust. See, for example, Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Post-memory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).
- 11 See Masud M. Khan, "The Concept of Cumulative Trauma," *Psychoanalytic Study of the Child* 18 (1963): 286–306; and Bessel A. van der Kolk, "The Body Keeps the Score: Memory and the Evolving Psychobiology of Posttraumatic Stress," *Harvard Review of Psychiatry* 1, no. 5 (1994): 253–65. In my own scholarship, I have been reworking the toxicological term "body burden" to account for the varied scales and forms of toxicity with which a body must contend.
- 12 Bessel A. van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (New York: Viking, 2014), 86.
- 13 Andil Gosine, artist's statement, *Wardrobes*, 2015.
- 14 These Savitris include the protagonist of the 1933 popular film *Savitri*, directed by Chittajallu Pallaiah (East India Film Company), and the more recent 2016 film of the same name, directed by Pavan Sadineni (Vision Filmmakers). Both are inspired by the Savitri and Satyavan story.
- 15 On the *Fatel Razack*, see Kalpana Kannabiran, "Mapping Migration, Gender, Culture, and Politics in the Indian Diaspora: Commemorating Indian Arrival in Trinidad," *Economic and Political Weekly*, 31 October 1998, WS53–WS57; and on the *kala pani*, see Aisha Khan, *Callaloo Nation: Metaphors of Race and Religious Identity among South Asians in Trinidad* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 123.
- 16 Gosine, artist's statement.
- 17 On "touching through time," see Mathias Danbolt, "Touching History: Archival Relations in Queer Art and Theory," in Jane Rowley, Louise Wolthers, and Mathias Danbolt, eds., *Lost and Found: Queering the Archive* (Copenhagen: Nikolaj, Copenhagen Center of Contemporary Art and Bildmuseet Umeå University, 2010).
- 18 Gosine, artist's statement.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Gosine, CQVI conversation.
- 21 Gosine, artist's statement.
- 22 Gosine, CQVI Conversation.
- 23 Gosine, artist's statement.
- 24 Jafari Sinclair Allen, "For 'the Children': Dancing the Beloved Community," *Souls* 11, no. 3 (2009): 321.
- 25 On transgenerational memory, across collectivities, see Michael Haworth, "Bernard Stiegler on Transgenerational Memory and the Dual Origin of the Human," *Theory, Culture, and Society* 33, no. 3 (2015): 151–73.
- 26 One translation of the children's taunt might be "Coolie, Coolie, comes for curry / The curry is all gone." For Gosine's purposes, "the curry is finished" is more apropos.
- 27 On this dynamic, particularly narratives of teleological development and their associated liberal rights paradigms, see Vanessa Agard-Jones, "Le Jeu de Qui? Sexual Politics at Play in the French Caribbean," *Caribbean Review of Gender Studies* (2009).
- 28 Marc Singer, "A 'Slightly Different Sense of Time': Palimpsestic Time in *Invisible Man*," *Twentieth Century Literature* 49, no. 3 (2003): 388.

# ebony G. PATTERSON

## JAMAICA

Left top: *between the leaves and in the bed*, 2015

Mixed-media collage on paper, 44in x 66in.

Collection of the Kentucky Museum of Art and Craft, Louisville, KY.

Left bottom: *in a field of butterflies*, 2015

Mixed-media digital print with hand-cut elements on watercolor paper, 71.25in x 93in.

Private collection, Aventura, FL.

Right top: *laying in a bush of things*, 2015

Mixed-media digital print on watercolor paper, 58.5in x 87.75in.

Private collection, New York, NY.

Right bottom: *from the corner of your eye*, 2015

Digital print on aluminum, 20in x 30in. Edition of five, plus two APs.

All images courtesy of the artist and Monique Meloche Gallery, Chicago.





# Obscure; or, The Queer Light of Ebony G. Patterson

*Nadia Ellis*

A couple of decades ago, though it might have been yesterday, Evelyn Hammonds spoke of black holes.<sup>1</sup> She examined the fields of queer studies and black feminist thought, and she saw an absence of ideas about black feminine desire—an absence that was understandable on a number of fronts yet still difficult to take.<sup>2</sup> She surveyed the situation, and then she offered an opening: what if we *worked* with that absence as if it were a black hole?<sup>3</sup> If we did, Hammonds writes, then first we would have to shift our perception of absence to something like complex presence: “The observer outside of the [black] hole sees it as a void, an empty place in space. However, it is not empty; it is a dense and full place in space.”<sup>4</sup> Then we would have to devise clever ways to perceive that fullness. By way of analogy, Hammonds describes what physicists do when they attempt to perceive black holes (emphatically unscientific myself, I have to take her word for it):

Typically, in these systems one finds a visible apparently “normal” star in close orbit with another body such as a black hole, which is not seen optically. The existence of the black hole is inferred from the fact that the visible star is in orbit and its shape is distorted in some way or it is detected by the energy emanating from the region in space around the visible star that could not be produced by the visible star alone. Therefore, the identification of a black hole requires the use of sensitive detectors of energy and distortion.<sup>5</sup>

This principle of relativity—an inference about one element in terms of the perception of another—has lovely resonances. The exempted subject, it is true, will always be seen by the lights of the normative. Yet the proper subject, that ordinary star, bends and yields to the dark presence. The dark presence requires much cleverer tools to be seen and under-

stood—an evolved principle so sophisticated and so difficult that only the most sensitive processes will reveal it. What is there not to admire in such an account, from the perspective of the abjected, invisibilized subject? The black hole’s distorting presence can, in this reading, be seen not as gauche annoyance but as full-on invisible menace, full of dark, complex materials. Who, then, might not desire to be the dark hole, this strong force making itself felt by a subtle pull so magnetizing that it draws and repels simultaneously, reshaping the visible star’s orbit, contours, and status?<sup>6</sup>

And yet. To live in the dark is not always to know one’s power; and to *be* that darkness takes a heavy toll. We are still talking about people here, though I have lingered for a time with Hammonds in the realm of the skies. Some bodies bear this metaphor more heavily than others. And the distance from celestial to terrestrial body can be vast. Hammonds notes this when she remarks on the peculiar pressures on the black female academic body: “Black feminist theorists are . . . engaged in a process of fighting to reclaim the body—the maimed immoral black female body—which can be and still is used by others to discredit them as producers of knowledge and as speaking subjects.”<sup>7</sup> Between the choice of the dark star and the normal star, complex presence and ordinary light, one might well in the end desire the simpler labor of producing knowledge without also needing simultaneously to produce the body, without needing to reproduce this body in various settings to suit various audiences—to make one’s body visible, for a moment, to render it legitimate, however possible, in order for one’s knowledge to be heard. And more, not just to render for others but to know for *oneself* what the body means—how its arrival into symbolic systems is to pass through violence of all sorts, passages that condition the possibilities of thought, making some ideas very easy to access and others seem light years away. The work is to think with the body. But how to bring the body into thought?

I  
*It is the opening of Ebony G. Patterson’s ...when they grow up... at the Studio Museum in Harlem, 23 March 2016. I am inside the work. The installation is scaled, somehow, for a child, but I feel “inside” also because the whole piece exists in a small, low-ceilinged room, the entirety of which is rendered in pink—from ceiling to plush carpet to wall to installation backdrop and theme—making the space the interior of a body. One is invited, then, to regress but also to intrude. One is disembodied, evacuated from the carapace of adulthood, instead remembering one’s own childhood. And one is also entirely surrounded by the body, zero escape. That both/and structure again rearing its head in queer theorizing, feminist experiencing. To be disembodied and embodied simultaneously, to have this proposition induced by a work of diasporic art, is no longer surprising. I think of Vanessa Agard-Jones’s essay “Bodies in the System” and how to have a conversation with an interlocutor about his body: to “scale inwards to his body’s most mundane functions” is also, by proxy, to*

*“[scale] outward to talk about[, say,] farming in Martinique, about public parity in France, and about the circulation of agricultural products in the global economy.”<sup>8</sup> Roland Barthes writes that it is only in the act of being photographed that he experiences himself uncomfortably shifting from subject to object: “I am neither subject nor object but a subject who feels he is becoming an object.”<sup>9</sup> It strikes me that for other types of subject, this scaling effect occurs not just in front of the lens; it might happen in the course of a conversation with a trusted interlocutor. It might happen not only before the capturing filmic apparatus but also inside an art installation.*

This essay considers, in the light of queer theory, several works of Patterson’s across her already prolific career. But its impulse lies most pressingly in an attempt to think with her most recent work, the site-specific exploration of childhood titled *...when they grow up...*, which opened at the Studio Museum in Harlem in March 2016.<sup>10</sup> In this new work is the possibility of considering an obscure rendering of sexuality—the sexuality of the child, formed out of violation, concealing its knowledge and yet inviting the viewer to look. The “productivity” of this invited look—the formulation is Kaja Silverman’s—lies in the possibility of looking at this child and identifying with, rather than phobically disavowing, a connection with her abjected sexuality.<sup>11</sup> Working through this experience of projection that Patterson stages in *...when they grow up...* enables a consideration of her career-long project to think and represent Caribbean sexuality in ways that confront viewers with their most deeply held views and to stir their most repressed understandings about themselves. And it presents the possibility of encountering black sexuality as a black hole—full of queer light requiring the most sensitive of processes to perceive.

The extravagance of the representations in Patterson’s latest work are characteristic. And Patterson’s is a numerate as much as a visual imagination. It is as important the effect of the innumerable in her work (satisfied by the almost impossibly detailed embellish-

ments) as it is the specifically numerable (represented most paradigmatically by her numbering of the dead).<sup>12</sup> In ...*when they grow up...*, we again have many: children are everywhere, pressed into group portraits, adorning the walls, each child his or her own particular compression of experiences, affect, implications, and style. The clothing of each child is of inexhaustible interest. Letters emblazoned on shirts spell things out; carefully arranged details mark bodies meaningfully. The toys, balloons, Nintendo handsets—all the accouterments of childhood—are deliberately chosen (often, indeed, rendered in fabric or other décor) and also apparently carelessly strewn. If one does not step carefully, one encounters a rubber ducky or a doll's hand.

The muchness of Patterson's presentation here, both in the number of children to try and behold and in the vastness of their things, is about superfluity, as Achille Mbembe renders the concept in his writing on Johannesburg.<sup>13</sup> As a racial logic of economic circulation that weds excess to necessity, the superfluity of Johannesburg's black mineworkers "consisted in the vulnerability, debasement, and waste that the black body was subjected to and in the racist assumption that wasting black life was a necessary sacrifice."<sup>14</sup> In Patterson's work, coming from an urban context defined not by apartheid and yet nevertheless subject to racist ideologies, the superfluous creature is not the extractive laborer but the child. Glittery with adornment, surrounded by gadgets and trinkets of all sorts, the black child in ...*when they grow up...* bears the spectacular cultural weight of economic superfluity as "luxury, rarity and vanity, futility and caprice, conspicuous spectacle, and even phantasm."<sup>15</sup> This same child is also a figure bearing the meaning of superfluity as "misery and destitution[,] . . . a mass of human material ready for exploitation."<sup>16</sup> This is because everywhere one looks in Patterson's piece are signs of the wastage to which young black lives are laid. Patterson prepares us for this reading in her description of the piece at the Studio Museum website: "These children are often described as adults. Their blackness overrules their innocence."<sup>17</sup> And she goes on to elaborate in interviews, and the curator's description bears out, that ...*when they grow up...* emerges from reflections on the "violence committed against young people of color . . . and the fears that focus on these same young people, who in the eyes of too many people appear as threats rather than victims."<sup>18</sup>

So the highly decorated space renders both desire and decay, both allure and sacrifice, unaccountable losses borne by families of the dead and unaccountable injury borne by children who must find a way to make their bodies mean in the wake of violation, having been made dark.

## II

Long before two portrait studies from Patterson's *Of 72 Project* turned up on *Empire*, arguably the campiest show currently on television, her work was queer.<sup>19</sup> By which I mean that this most innovative of artists has been exploring gender's iterations from the beginning of her career, with works such as

those from the 2009 series *Gangstas, Disciplez + Doily Boyz* (fig. 1) or those in *Out and Bad* (fig. 2)—all those beautiful young men with their powered, bejeweled faces and their embroidered outfits. What Patterson saw early in her career, and presented with startling clarity and assurance, was the external prettiness of Jamaican male badness; the necessary ablutions of this form of masculine display; the determined labor of its performance; and then, of course, its intense and close relationship to those presentations we call feminine. A hundred years ago the British psychoanalyst Joan Riviere famously asserted, regarding the feminine work of making up, that womanliness was a masquerade.<sup>20</sup> In Patterson's work, in piece after piece coming throughout the 2000s, it is possible to see how the inverse was true—to see just how much of Jamaican *manliness* is masquerade. (Indeed, the rich masquerading traditions of Caribbean performance informs Patterson's use of materials—sequins, glitter, fabrics of all sorts.) If one were searching for exemplification of Judith Butler's gender analysis in the context of Caribbean visual culture (the body as discursive; gender as iterative), then Patterson's work seems to be ready-made. And in light of a Butlerian analysis, Patterson's choice to explore the performativity of gender primarily on figures that appear to be male (at least, so it seems) makes theoretical and political sense. For if cultures inscribe themselves on subjects in a way that, according to Butler, "effects a social space for and of the body within certain regulatory grids of intelligibility," then Patterson's application of the powerful force of her hand on the figure of the masculine body becomes an apt metaphor for the social processes that gender the body in the first place.<sup>21</sup> Embodiment may be discursively feminine, but Patterson's choice to focus on masculinities makes it clear just how violable masculine bodies are, too, simply because to be in ownership of a body is to be subject to its potential incursion. The violations to which bodies are subject are what compel gender masquerades in the first place.



Figure 1. Ebony G. Patterson, detail from *Untitled (Souljah)* from the *Gangstas, Disciplez + Doily Boyz* series, 2009. Mixed-media installation, with toy soldiers and shelves; variable dimensions. Photograph Courtesy of Monique 'Mogi' Gilpin and Monique Meloche Gallery.

Grounding the queerness of Patterson's work in some of the most foundational of queer analyses—Butler's and Riviere's—gestures to the foundational ways her work makes a line of queer Caribbean theorizing possible. But if this is a line of queer theoretical analysis with which Patterson's work is at home—gender constructivism—there is also a different call in some more recent recitations of queer theorizing with which Patterson's work also chimes. I am thinking here of critics doing queer theorizing alongside inquiries into violence—those who detect a necessity to think about how political and environmental disasters unevenly impact queer and raced bodies, even as queer theory has enabled a working through of the power of bodily play, a freedom from normative strictures. Kara



Figure 2. Ebony G. Patterson, *Russian*, from the *Out and Bad* series, 2010-2012. Mixed Tapestry with Objects, Variable Dimensions. Photograph courtesy of Ebony G. Patterson and Monique Meloche Gallery.

Keeling's essay on the disappearance of a central transgender character in the documentary *The Aggressives* is one such example. Keeling reflects on what it can mean to try and make sense of M—'s disappearance in the context of their abrupt departure from the military (and the film), when a larger cultural operation would seek to locate and violently survey them.<sup>22</sup> Positing an ethics of care in the face of trans violence, a violence inextricably linked to the problem of visibility, Keeling asks that we ponder the

difference between *looking for M*— (or other lost queer figures) and *looking after M*—, an elegant formulation that subtly links caretaking to a complex vision of time.<sup>23</sup>

A different account linking queer theorizing and violence, Tavia Nyong'o's recent essay on sovereignty and "queer inhumanism" is nevertheless connected to Keeling's reflections in that Nyong'o also wrestles with how the queer raced body is implicated in the conundrums of state violence.<sup>24</sup> Through a careful reading of the movie *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (filmed, strikingly, in the gulf regions near New Orleans), Nyong'o shows how the film's allure of wildness in the aftermath of environmental collapse draws the black queer(ed) child into an identification with the regenerated extinct beast (here, the iconic aurochs), rendering her complicit with a vision of the postapocalyptic landscape that, ironically, reifies European ideas of human sovereignty.<sup>25</sup>

These are just two recent examples that suggest queer theorizing raises new problems around violence and agency rather than resolving them. Patterson's work is at home with this, and some of her recent pieces—not coincidentally, exhibited in New Orleans—opens up a set of challenging questions about the stakes of queer analysis and violence. At New Orleans's Contemporary Art Center between March and June of 2015, Patterson was part of the show "En Mas': Carnival and Performance Arts of the Caribbean"; she showed *Invisible Presence: Bling Memories*, mixed-media coffins and photographs of their display in a live performance piece staged earlier in Kingston. At the Newcomb Art Gallery at Tulane University, for the New Orleans art biennale Prospect 3 earlier in the year, she showed work from her series *beyond de bladez* (see fig. 3). Both projects demonstrate the way Patterson builds on earlier themes in her work and seeks always to extend and move beyond them. *Invisible Presence: Bling Memories*, for example, riffs on work done in 2011 at the Alice Yard arts center in Trinidad: the piece named *9 of 219*, in which colorfully pattered coffins were paraded down the street to mark a handful of the murders that had been committed while Patterson had been in residence. And *beyond the bladez*, though (in important ways I am about to discuss) a departure from her earlier work, interpolates figures that are by now her signature: powdered faces with jewels and sequins, gesturing to the Caribbean will to adorn.



Figure 3. Ebony G. Patterson, ... and then - *beyond the bladez* (detail), 2014–15. Mixed media on paper. Newcomb Art Gallery, Tulane University, New Orleans. Courtesy of the artist. Photographed by Nadia Ellis.

The line that connects the beautiful boys defining Patterson's early career to the coffins she exhibited in New Orleans in 2015 routes through *Of 72 Project* (2012), pieces in which male adornment and violent death coincide. *Of 72 Project* was a memorial to the victims of the 2010 Tivoli Gardens Incursion. The collection of highly elaborated portraits of men resonant with visuals associated with religious beatification, inspired by mugshots, compressed representations of criminality and innocence, of perpetrators and victims, in a work that complicates the imagery of poor young men in Jamaica as natural born killers.

In *beyond the bladez*, scenes of nature threaten to obscure human figures, forms whose genders are even more in flux than in earlier work. Patterson's characteristic investment in extravagant masquerade and performances of gender are inscribed here on to the natural landscape. Patterson has always been concerned with death, and so the presence of adorned corpse-like figures between the blades of grass in the series is not so unexpected. The surprise, if not the conjoining of delicate and particular beauty with death, is perhaps in the conjunction of the aesthetics Patterson has usually placed within the context of urban practices or scenarios—dancehall cars and party scenes—in the context of the natural landscape instead. Patricia Saunders has recently written of this work that it exemplifies a long tradition in representations of the Caribbean as a tropical inverse idyll: perilous with beauty.<sup>26</sup> Writing of the piece *two birdz*, from the *bladez* series, Saunders explains the profusion of nature and landscape in this stage of Patterson's work as an extension of the artist's thinking about urban violence, in/visibility, and the displacing effect of bling in the Caribbean:

The abundance of grass, plants, and flowers that inhabit Patterson's artwork are decidedly untamed, disorderly, and explosive, all while being remarkably attractive and even inviting to the eye. It should come as no surprise, then, that her evocative visual re-imagining of the Jamaican landscape is paralleled by a discursive urbanization that captures the harsh realities of those who inhabit the ghettos, garrisons, and gullies. Blades, trees, and shrubs are transformed into *bladez*, *treez*, and *shrubz*, reflecting the edgy, precarious existence of the communities who inhabit these seemingly forgotten areas of the country's poor, urban landscapes.<sup>27</sup>

In a conversation I had with Patterson as the work was first being developed three years ago, she described these field-like spaces in which she was presenting her studiously adorned figures variously as suburban places and as borderlands. She was interested precisely, in fact, in the way suburbs function as a borderland in Jamaican urban areas, where sprawling development has meant that the separation between Kingston proper and areas outside merge delicately and often violently. She was interested in the secrets the suburbs keep.

Because of the location of the exhibition of the work, however, a New Orleans-specific moment

that invokes a similarly hybrid and confounding landscape also comes to mind. I am thinking here of the case of Henry Glover, the African American man who was shot to death by police while “looting” in the wake of Katrina and whose body was set alight along with his car and left on the banks of the Mississippi. The huddled form of the car, in the brush alongside the river—not swampland but impossible not to think of that hybrid water-land associated with Louisiana—evokes the enclosure of death within the natural landscape that Patterson has so painstakingly and beautifully replicated.<sup>28</sup> Patterson's recent engagements in (with?) New Orleans suggests the ways black diasporic cities can have claims on each other. But more to my point here, the way she intertwines gestures of gender that masquerade with gestures toward violent ecologies demonstrates how her work tracks both foundational and recent turns in queer theorizing.

### III

In ...*when they grow up*... something else is happening again, building on these considerations. Patterson considers the ubiquity of violence in the formation a Jamaican child's subjectivity and desires, a formation that in some respect queers them, in that it renders these children decidedly unlike the ordinary stars of Evelyn Hammond's account with which I began this essay. But as Maggie Nelson has written, the very ubiquity of violence in sexual formation—particularly the sexual formation of a girl—makes it difficult to imagine what “normal” would be.<sup>29</sup> And so the work tackles the extraordinary position of black children as arbiters for deviance and as capacious holders of our worst fears and memories about our own formations. The fact of their blackness is important for the projections they make possible. As Amber Musser argues in relation to Kara Walker's silhouettes, stylized evocations of blackness in/as the visual field are simultaneously flat and full; skin-deep rehearsals of blackness—particularly black femininity—as always-already, and nothing-but, flesh at the same time they are simultaneously ciphers.<sup>30</sup>

So Patterson scales the portraits and installation of *...when they grow up...* to emphasize the act of looking. She is not just working in a visual register, she is thematizing visibility. It is in the bling of the artifacts adorning each piece and rendering the gallery glaringly resplendent. It is also in the unsettling stares of many of the children, who look out at the viewer as the viewer looks at them. This engagement of the visual field, in contact with a notion of black female sexuality as a celestial black hole, enables a shift in the discourse about Patterson's work from light to dark, from visibility to concealment—a shift that I anchor in the key term *obscurity*. Teju Cole's *New York Times Magazine* essay on photographing black skin offers an explanation of how I am using this term. Writing of the photographer Roy DeCarava's tendency to play with darkness in his portraits of black people, Cole remarks, "Instead of trying to brighten blackness, he went against expectation and darkened it further. What is dark is neither blank nor empty. It is in fact full of wise light which, with patient seeing, can open out into glories."<sup>31</sup> It is important not to misread Cole here—I almost did. I almost read him articulating some sort of teleological hermeneutics of seeing—a movement from darkness *into* light—when in fact he is describing the light that inhabits darkness. Obscurity is a way to think through, to describe, and to make meaning of the creative space in which revelation and concealment are simultaneous.

The dialectic between visibility and invisibility, being seen and being overlooked, has always been a theme in Patterson's work, and the way that the effect of light holds that dialectic in the work is long-standing. Krista Thompson, for instance, has written beautifully about Patterson and light. Thompson's book *Shine* unfolds the meaning of the video light in black diasporic cultures—how the technologies of visibility and shiny presence, as well as the gestures and performances in reaction to these apparatuses, reflect on the long history of photography in black worlds and refract these histories in new ways. Patterson's dancehall aesthetics in works like the *Fambily* series, by Thompson's lights, "negotiate the states of un-visibility, the status of being hypervisible yet unseen by the middle classes, and create spectacular dazzling presences among different communities of dancehall viewers."<sup>32</sup> Reframing and meta-aestheticizing such dancehall practices as skin bleaching and excessive male adornment, Thompson argues that Patterson stages an ongoing engagement with dominant, middle-class discourses around working-class bodies and practices in Jamaica, which are subject to desiring surveillance, identification, misrecognition, and disavowal:

Dancehall culture is constantly subsumed, misrecognized in these discourses. I suggest that this is something Patterson's work foregrounds and enacts. Patterson's photography-based pieces—using models in costumes inspired by dancehall costumes inspired by dancehall fashions or visages from criminal databases—highlight how dancehall participants are often precisely not seen in the public sphere, are disappeared in the discourses of aberrant sexuality (and slackness), homophobia, materialism, violence, and criminality that surrounds them.

Patterson's work underscores this point by representing dancehall subjects through their absence, through an explicitly posed proxy. . . . Patterson's costumed and staged models (who are indeed not dancehall participants) and her use of public domain photographs of criminals enacts a sense of remove, a substitution that underscores how the culture and community of dancehall participants remain allusive subjects in the media and in the public sphere in Jamaica.<sup>33</sup>

*Allusive's* assonance with *elusive* is telling. Dancehall subjects are both utilizable and forever disappearing in dominant constructs of citizenship in Jamaica. And so, Patterson's work seems to be asking, what might it mean to linger with the dark underside their visibility? What happens when we focus that attention on the particular subjectivity of the child?

It is powerful and profound what she wants to have happen with this piece, which is to help us remember that black children can, in fact, be children, against a strong cultural objection that their bodies and their subjectivities must always be read as both grown and as monstrous. The work has another effect: in shining black childhood generally, there are multiple references to the obscure formation of childhood sexuality: a toy machine gun wrapped in bright floral fabric; a girl, not centered in the composition but arresting in her leopard print and bright pink lipstick, whose playful feminine masquerade is punctuated by openings that make her a target (see fig. 4); a different girl, pulling focus because of her direct stare, both frightened and pleading, and her profoundly melancholy and knowing aspect (see fig. 5).

This last girl is surrounded by smiling children, and she is like the one lost soul in paradise. It strikes me as important that *obscurity* and *opacity*, the latter a key term in recent black studies, are not exactly synonymous. *Obscure* has

its roots in *darkness*, as does *opaque*, yes. But *opacity's* relationship to light is troublesome for what Patterson is trying to do here, with her insistence on shine, and for what Teju Cole drew our attention to: the copresence of light and darkness in the photographic image of black skin. *Opacity* is defined by an inability to transmit or reflect light. *Obscurity*, meanwhile, might conceal itself in darkness—but so too might light conceal itself in darkness. To be obscure is also to be *undistinguished, imperceptible, difficult to understand or fathom*—it is like a reference requiring more great research to track down. (Also not unrelated etymologically: *of lowly birth*.) A striking feature of black girlhood, it seems to me, and what I think Patterson has captured in *...when they grow up...*, is the way certain black girls are seen but very little known. I am also suggesting that there is something to be said more generally about a certain kind of telling of black feminine sexuality, that we can learn from the obscure. To tell it straight right now in culture, I suspect, is to be blinded by shine. To stop looking, to overlook, is disaster. But perhaps, something in between.

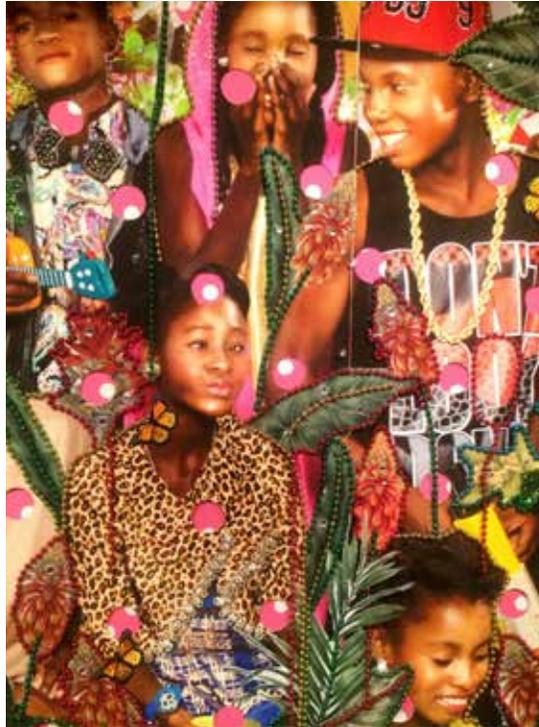


Figure 4. Ebony G. Patterson, *...they were just hanging out...you know... talking about...* (detail), from the *...when they grow up...* series, 2016. Photographed by Nadia Ellis, Studio Museum in Harlem, March 2016.

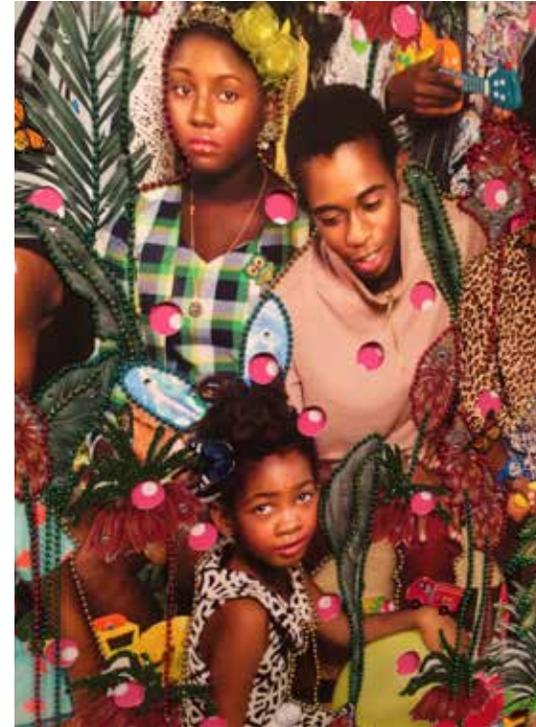


Figure 5. Ebony G. Patterson, *...they were just hanging out...you know... talking about...* (detail), from the *...when they grow up...* series, 2016. Photographed by Nadia Ellis, Studio Museum in Harlem, March 2016.

# Endnotes

- 1 Evelyn Hammonds, "Black (W)Holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality," *differences* 6, nos. 2–3 (1994): 126–45.
- 2 Historical propriety; being barred, de facto, from the realm of the symbolic; the hypervisible/invisible dynamic of racialization; the necessity to create, as a result, spaces of social privacy and psychic autonomy, and so on.
- 3 In fact, it was Michelle Wallace who had originally offered the thought of black holes, in her essay "Variations on Negation." Hammonds, struck by it, lingered. See Michelle Wallace, "Variations on Negation and the Heresy of Black Feminist Creativity," *Heresies* 6, no. 24 (1989): 69–75, reprinted in Michelle Wallace, *Invisibility Blues: From Pop to Theory* (London: Verso, 1990); and Hammonds, "Black (W)Holes," 138.
- 4 Hammonds, "Black (W)Holes," 138
- 5 *Ibid.*, 138–39.
- 6 And the reframing of queerness not just as non-normativity but increasingly as almost anything suggests that this desire for darkness, to be darkness, extends far and wide. See, for instance, Sharon Marcus's review essay "Queer Theory for Everyone": "Despite its political advantages, *queer* has been the victim of its own popularity, proliferating to the point of uselessness as a neologism for the transgression of any norm. . . . If everyone is queer, then no one is—and while that is exactly the point queer theorists want to make, reducing the term's pejorative sting by universalizing the meaning of *queer* also depletes its explanatory power." Sharon Marcus, "Queer Theory for Everyone: A Review Essay," *Signs* 31, no. 1 (2005): 196.
- 7 Hammonds, "Black (W)Holes," 134.
- 8 Vanessa Agard-Jones, "Bodies in the System," *Small Axe*, no. 42 (November 2013): 183.
- 9 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 14.
- 10 [www.studiomuseum.org/exhibition/ebony-g-patterson-when-they-grow](http://www.studiomuseum.org/exhibition/ebony-g-patterson-when-they-grow).
- 11 Silverman argues that Jacques Lacan's account of the look suggests the possibility of what she calls "productive" looking—an activity that is different from the alienating gaze: "The eye which conjures something new into existence operates according to a different set of imperatives. . . . Instead of assimilating what is desirable about the other to the self, and exteriorizing what is despised in the self as the other, the subject whose look I am here describing struggles to see the otherness of the desired self, and the familiarity of the despised other." Kaja Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 170.
- 12 Two of Patterson's works are titled with numbers: *Of 72 Project* (2012) and *9 of 219* (2011), both of which, as I've written previously, do the work of elegy by listing with specificity those lost to violent death, over and against a logic of vast and faceless wastage. Later in this essay I will discuss both these pieces in the context of Patterson's new work. See Nadia Ellis, "Elegies of Diaspora," *Small Axe*, no. 43 (March 2014): 164–72, and the epilogue to her *Territories of the Soul: Queered Belonging in the Black Diaspora* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 177–92.
- 13 "Through the commodification of labor, the superfluity of black life could be manifested. But the same process also transformed the native into something more than they object he or she was, a thing that always seemed slightly human and a human being that seemed slightly thinglike." Achille Mbembe, "Aesthetics of Superfluity," in Sarah Nuttall and Achille Mbembe, eds., *Johannesburg: The Elusive Metropolis* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 44.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 43.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 41; Mbembe cites French historian Fernand Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism: Fifteenth to Eighteenth Centuries*, vol. 1, *The Structures of Everyday Life* (London: Collins, 1981).
- 16 *Ibid.*; Mbembe cites Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, 1966).
- 17 See [www.studiomuseum.org/exhibition/ebony-g-patterson-when-they-grow](http://www.studiomuseum.org/exhibition/ebony-g-patterson-when-they-grow), para. 1.
- 18 [www.studiomuseum.org/exhibition/ebony-g-patterson-when-they-grow](http://www.studiomuseum.org/exhibition/ebony-g-patterson-when-they-grow); Julia Felsenthal, "Ebony G. Patterson Confronts Race and Childhood at the Studio Museum in Harlem," *Vogue*, 5 April 2016, [www.vogue.com/13423538/ebony-g-patterson-studio-museum-harlem](http://www.vogue.com/13423538/ebony-g-patterson-studio-museum-harlem); Lucy McKeon, "What Does Innocence Look Like?," *New Yorker*, 11 April 2016, [www.newyorker.com/culture/photo-booth/what-does-innocence-look-like](http://www.newyorker.com/culture/photo-booth/what-does-innocence-look-like).
- 19 See Stephen Best's hilarious and revelatory essay in the *Public Books* roundtable on *Empire*: "Black Camp," *Public Books*, 23 September 2015, [www.publicbooks.org/artmedia/virtual-roundtable-on-empire](http://www.publicbooks.org/artmedia/virtual-roundtable-on-empire).
- 20 Joan Riviere, "Womanliness as a Masquerade," *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 10 (1929): 303–13.
- 21 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1990), 166.
- 22 See Kara Keeling, "Looking for M—: Queer Temporality, Black Political Possibility, and Poetry from the Future," *GLQ* 15, no. 4 (2009): 575–76. "That *The Aggressives* is offered 'in memory of Sakia Gunn' reminds us that its subjects live, strive, labor, and love within the terms of a world whose regulatory regimes are guaranteed through a generalized, dispersed violence and reinforced via the persistent threat of

physical violence directed at those such regulatory regimes do not work to valorize” (579). I thank Daphne Brooks, who, in a different context, drew my attention to this essay.

- 23 Ibid., 579.
- 24 Tavia Nyong'o, "Little Monsters: Race, Sovereignty, and Queer Inhumanism in *Beasts of the Southern Wild*," *GLQ* 21, nos. 2–3 (2015): 249–72. *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, dir. Benh Zeitlin, Fox Searchlight, 2012.
- 25 One implication of which is the vacating of any narrative or symbolic space for Native sovereignty.
- 26 Patricia Joan Saunders, "Gardening in the Garrisons, You Never Know What You Will Find: (Un) Visibility in the Works of Ebony G. Patterson," *Feminist Studies* 42, no. 1 (2016): 98–137.
- 27 Ibid., 104.
- 28 See "Case 5: Henry Glover," *ProPublica*, [www.propublica.org/nola/case/topic/case-five](http://www.propublica.org/nola/case/topic/case-five).
- 29 "If you're looking for sexual tidbits as a female child, and the only ones that present themselves depict child rape or other violations[,] . . . then your sexuality will form around that fact. There is no control group. I don't even want to talk about 'female sexuality' until there is a control group. And there never will be." Maggie Nelson, *The Argonauts* (Minneapolis: Graywolf, 2015), 66.
- 30 Amber Musser, *Sensational Flesh: Race, Power, and Masochism* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 151–84.
- 31 Teju Cole, "A True Picture of Black Skin," *New York Times Magazine*, 18 February 2015, [www.nytimes.com/2015/02/22/magazine/a-true-picture-of-black-skin.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/22/magazine/a-true-picture-of-black-skin.html?_r=0).
- 32 Krista Thompson, *Shine: The Visual Economy of Life in African Diasporic Aesthetic Practice* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 117.
- 33 Ibid., 163–64.

# jean-ulrick DÉSERT

HAITI/GERMANY

***Neque mittatis margaritas***

***Vestras ante porcos***

***(Do Not Cast Pearls***

***Before Swine)*, 2016**

Installation, five-language set of text-garland elements. Laser-cut plastic and metal, acrylic paint, pearlescent balloons; dimensions variable, depending on site.

Images courtesy of the artist.



# Diasporic Queering and Intimacies of the Creole Being

*Jerry Philogene*

*n the Caribbean we are all performers.  
—Antonio Benítez-Rojo*

In Isabelle Allende's 2010 novel *Island Beneath the Sea*—a tale of love, betrayal, revolution, and slavery set in late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century Haiti (then Saint-Domingue), Cuba, and New Orleans—Tété, an enslaved woman, becomes the lover of an enslaved majordomo named Zacharie, “a very tall, handsome black [man] . . . dressed like a *grand blanc*, as fresh and perfumed as if he had just come from his bath.”<sup>1</sup> Zacharie's elegantly clad black body exuded a liberated, black subjectivity, even though he was enslaved. Coupled with his physical appearance, Zacharie's dignified yet slightly defiant demeanor and his imperturbable self-determination gave him a rebellious swagger. As a self-proclaimed black dandy, Zacharie laid claim to the respectability associated with the white dandy figure of the nineteenth century, an “aesthetic of the self” that was unequivocally denied to black enslaved people. For Zacharie, self-styling was central to fashioning the self; however, his “two greatest sins—visibility and indiscretion”—were major transgressions in a “society where black people had clearly demarcated positions.”<sup>2</sup> Being a black dandy, Zacharie exhibited a clear and direct disregard for his prescribed position in the racial and class hierarchies of late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century Saint-Domingue.

“Two white men, almost as well dressed as Zacharie,” Tété narrates, “looked him up and down with a sardonic expression. One of them spit very close to Zacharie's feet, but he didn't notice, or preferred to ignore it.”<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Zacharie's elegant demeanor and defiance of eighteenth-century racial hegemony was a societal transgression, and, as Allende writes, he was duly punished with a brutal beating at the hands of resentful whites:

[Zacharie] was no longer the handsome man he had been; his face was like a Carnival mask. That was how he'd looked since being attacked. It had been night, and he was beaten unmercifully; he had not seen the men who come at him with clubs, but as they did not steal his money . . . [.] he knew they were no bandits from Le Marais. Tété had warned him more than once that his overly elegant figure and generosity were offensive to some whites.<sup>4</sup>

Unfortunately, in any society that has strict hierarchies, black men who do not conform to their clearly defined positions have been ridiculed and exposed to violence. Monica L. Miller's discussion in *Slaves to Fashion: Black Dandyism and the Styling of Black Diasporic Identity* about the stakes of dandyism well characterizes Zacharie's search for self-actualization and desire to overcome his racially coded position of subjugation. Miller contends that the status of dandyism, "as a ubiquitous, popular performance full of ambivalence[,] . . . should visualize the limitations that black people must negotiate and recombine as part of the art of self-definition." Miller further argues that when the black body is used as "cultural capital and clothing as a necessary but unstable currency of self-worth, a dandy's style reveals the *value* of blackness in which . . . the cost of embodying or performing blackness can be both too cheap and too dear."<sup>5</sup>

Like the dandy, the figure of the flaneur was also interested in a bellicose performativity that imparted a sense of modernity, mobility, oppositionality, and power.<sup>6</sup> The dandy was about public sartorial performance, and, according to Charles Baudelaire, the flaneur embodied a white male presence throughout the nineteenth-century public sphere. What differentiates the flaneur from the dandy is that the flaneur walks through the urban city in his black frock coat and black top hat, signifying the perfect modern, austere, urban bourgeoisie, and he anonymously shuns attention yet observes and comments on his environment; he has spectatorial and sartorial authority.<sup>7</sup> The dandy is unable to be anonymous because of the creative splendor of his dress and carriage; the dandy is the object of the gaze. However, what both characters share is a conscious, corporeal self-presentation and self-identification, an "expressivity" that disrupts social order, conformity, and hierarchies. In this essay I will discuss briefly the well-known public performance *Negerhosen2000* (2000–) by artist Jean-Ulrick Désert, drawing on what E. Patrick Johnson calls a "quare" sensibility, which has race at its core as "historically contingent and socially and culturally constructed/performed" and addresses the "material effects of race in a white supremacist society."<sup>8</sup>

As a series of performances and photographs offered as a creative response to the madness of racial *and* homophobic violence, *Negerhosen2000* deploys an inconspicuous visibility. As a multidisciplinary conceptual artist who works in drawing, sculpture, photography, performance art, and installation-based work, Désert has produced an engaging body of work that focuses on the interplay between culture, history, memory, and language. In part of this essay, I will explore the ways the concepts of the flaneur and the sardonic splendor of the dandy inform *Negerhosen2000*'s "troubling presence" as Désert's black body strolls throughout various European metropolises, decked out in his embellished and stylized white leather lederhosen, which are delicately embroidered. He wears fake, teased blond hair extensions that peek from beneath a grey felt hat adorned with narcissus flowers, and his ensemble is completed by a small Alpine cowbell choker encircling his neck. It is the questioning of the protean nature of black subjectivity and the disruption of social codes that make *Negerhosen2000* a provocative and politicized performance that occurs between racial visibility and sartorial play. By bringing together both extremes—the mobility, modernity, and impervious nature of the flaneur and the resplendent figure of the dandy—Désert uses the destabilizing power embedded in the visual and explores the signifying possibilities that exist in a *polycultural visibility* that resides at "the realm of the hyphen—the place where two [or more] worlds collide or blend together."<sup>9</sup>

Furthermore, I will discuss Désert's "self-portrait" drawing series *L'ABCdaire de ma vie privée* (*The ABCs of My Private Life*; 2005). Like *Negerhosen2000*, *L'ABCdaire* offers an opportunity to explore evocative ideas about intimacy, race, cultural identity, and memory.<sup>10</sup> Four ink drawings on velum, with commingling words and images—each drawing incorporates several childhood portraits of the artist—*L'ABCdaire* allows for the full engagement with what W. J. T. Mitchell calls "metapictures": the visual participates in "a second-order discourse that attempts to reflect on the first-order discourse."<sup>11</sup> An experimentation with form and language (word

play and code switching), the asymmetrically placed images vie for pictorial space, illustrating the autobiographical nature of selfhood. Using four different languages and personal and culturally specific images, these works are reactions to the complexities of living in the Haitian *dyaspora*, living *endezo*, in that “in-between” space of difference: the interstitial space of identity.<sup>12</sup> The provocative deployment of *endezo* offers the opportunity to rethink the ways Haitian diasporic identity is reformulated in contemporary transnational spaces constituted by discursive differences in ethnicity, language, and history. As a critically potential concept, *endezo* creates aesthetic spaces for sexuality and language, blending the two so they accurately reflect the materiality of “collective frameworks of memory” while they are “haunted by images of home and homeland” as they discloses some of the “furtive pleasures of exile.”<sup>13</sup>

“In its most essential form,” Valerie Cassel Oliver writes in *Double Consciousness: Black Conceptual Art since 1970*, “Conceptual Art serves to privilege ‘concept’ over ‘material,’ which is somewhat of a paradox since concept is germane to art making in general. However, the ‘concept’ within Conceptualism is more ideological.” She continues, “By imploding the hierarchy of art, art making, and presentation, the Conceptual Art movement in effect has transformed the visual arts landscape, shifting the paradigm outward from an imperialistic and exclusionary center to embrace divergent and diverse artistic expressions.”<sup>14</sup> In a recent text-based installation *Neque mittatis margaritas vestras ante porcos (Do Not Cast Pearls before Swine; 2016)*, Désert conveys a conceptual intimacy that is found in the familiarity and informality of culture and language, elements that are present in varying degrees in *Negerhosen2000* and *L’ABCdaire de ma vie privée*. His *Neque mittatis margaritas vestras ante porcos* illustrates how we might understand conceptual artistic practices to include the politics of representation as tools for negotiating the experiences and realities of gender transgressing lives in the black diaspora at a moment of extreme violence, issues that have been explored in his

earlier performance *Negerhosen2000*. In *Neque mittatis margaritas vestras ante porcos*, Désert excerpts a Bible passages in Latin, taken from Matthew, one of the Gospels in the New Testament to allude to the regulatory powers of language as it is used to control and normalize sexual orientation and same-sex desire. Désert produces this passage in several different creole languages, including Kreyol (Haiti), patois (Jamaica), Sranan Tongo (Suriname), and Papiamentu (Curaçao). Discussing this artwork allows us to explore the “intimacy” of creole languages, their liberatory practices, and the transgressive possibilities evoked by their use when French, English, Spanish, and Dutch do not operate as the dominate lingua franca during moments of intimacy and resistance. I suggest intimacy here to evoke the power that resides in a shared knowledge, as in the intimacy of knowing and in the intimacy of knowledge making. In its conceptual formulation, *Neque mittatis margaritas vestras ante porcos* seeks to question the regulatory power embedded in religious ideologies as they attempt to disempower queer Caribbean communities. I propose that all three art pieces, in different ways, interrogate the ways the term *queer*, as a Western concept, does not sufficiently capture the lives of those living in and outside the Caribbean whose gender and sexualities do not fall within hermetic concepts fostered by a Western ideology that does not privilege the differences in language, region, and ethnicity. Rather, it is within the exploratory nature of identity, representation, and the performative dimensions of self-representation that I situate these artworks. I contend that these three art pieces employ the creative and performative racialized strategies of *endezo* and Johnson’s reformulation of queer as “quare.” Johnson defines *quare* subjectivity as not only *speaking* across identities but *articulating* identities as well. In Johnson’s black Southern vernacular reformulation, “quareness” considers ways to destabilize notions of identity and “at the same time locate racialized and class knowledges.”<sup>15</sup> For Johnson *queer* does not address the “culture-specific positionality” that is necessary to understand the complexities of and meanings within race, ethnicity, language, and diaspora. As a “disciplinary expansion,” he wishes to “quare” queer so that “ways of knowing are viewed both as discursively mediated and as historically situated and materially conditioned . . . foreground [in] the ways in which lesbians, bisexuals, gays and transgendered people of color come to sexual and racial knowledge.”<sup>16</sup>

I use Johnson’s term to explore the potential for agency and the authority of spaces and histories. Drawing on these works, I ask how might we understand creole within culture, performance, and language as a space that offers the possibilities to illustrate power, subterfuge, and intimacy. How might we employ what Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley calls the “doubly signifying Creole vocabulary” as a key concept that marks contemporary art practices, whereby conceptualizing the Caribbean self as an embodiment of criticality interrogating cultural and linguistic borders?<sup>17</sup> What I would like to consider is how black gender-non-conforming queer Caribbean bodies exist within the intimacy of creole languages.

I began this essay by highlighting several passages from Allende's novel to illustrate subjugated positions and the investigation and function of black subjectivity. Using an embodied utopia and a controlled use of magical realism, the novel allows for a contemplation of a possible future for black selfhood. What we can glean from the performances of *Negerhosen2000* and *L'ABCdaire* is a questioning of the results of migration and the visualization of a racialized subject. In exploring the interplay between self-fashioning, racial looking, and racial being, *Negerhosen2000* considers the uneasy circulation of "blackness" across a variety of European geographical settings while exploring the discomfort produced by black bodies traveling outside their conventional historical and cultural milieu. It is that uneasiness that erupted into violence on the body of Allende's fictional character Zacharie. Conversely, *L'ABCdaire* engages with the troubling realities of foreign mappings and routes. Correspondingly, *Neque mittatis margaritas vestras ante porcos* looks at the ways these migrating bodies are policed by religious fundamentalism and violence because of queer sexualities. In *Negerhosen2000* and *L'ABCdaire* Désert's black body functions as the narrative element in these culturally specific tales of movement, including the haunting effects of rupture caused by migration. In *Neque mittatis margaritas vestras ante porcos* black bodies are absent, yet they are hauntingly present in the intimate spaces that can only be *troubled* by those who do not belong. These aspects often mirror the diasporic postmodern condition, that is, an ontological condition that exists within a *livability* on the margin that combines the slippery and vexed issues of race, language, and sexuality.

### **"Quaring" in the *Dyaspóra*: *Negerhosen2000***

As an enabling framework of postmodernity, performance puts forth varying degrees of positionality, subjectivity, and resistance. Performance becomes a valuable artistic strategy to investigate the discursive use of "blackness" and "queerness" in *Negerhosen2000*.<sup>18</sup> Unlike Claude Baudelaire's and Walter Benjamin's flâneur, who is indubitably articulated as nineteenth-century male, white, and heterosexual, Désert in *Negerhosen2000* is twenty-first-century diasporic, black, and queer, or, perhaps more fruitful to my analysis is E. Patrick Johnson's reformulation of queer as "quare." Johnson defines *quare* subjectivity as not only *speaking* across identities but *articulating* identities as well. In Johnson's reformulation, "quareness" considers ways to destabilize notions of identity and "at the same time locate racialized and class knowledges."<sup>19</sup> Drawing on Johnson's critical use of vocabulary, I would like to cautiously propose the possibilities for words such as *masisi*, *madivine* or *madivinez*, and *makòmè* can offer a contemplative space to think of creative and critical ways for envisioning sexualities identities and difference and ways of living and being that are not constitutive of the foreign but created and grounded in local so that the Euro-American/North American

term such as the theoretical potent and transformed term *queer* can be replaced by culturally specific words that also disruptive normative understandings of same-sex-desiring/-loving and gender-transgressing individuals. Johnson's grandmother's "thick, black, southern dialect" changes the inflection from "queer" to "quare."<sup>20</sup> Conversely, poet and performance artist Lenelle Moïse offers us an equally radical reading of the term *madivinez*:

i keep  
my haitian-kreyol-english  
dictionary  
behind the colored pen-  
cils.  
  
its red cover taunts me,  
daily.  
i am often too afraid  
to open it. i picked it up  
once—  
when i first got it—hungry  
for familiar  
words that could make me  
feel home. i tried  
to look up lesbian  
but the little red book  
denied  
my existence.

i called you, remember?  
mommi, how do you say  
lesbian in kreyol?  
  
oh, you said,  
you say madivinez but  
it's not a positive word.  
it's vulgar.  
no one wants to be  
called madivinez.  
it's like saying dyke.  
  
but how  
can cruelty sound  
so beautiful?  
madivinez  
sounds so glamorous.  
something i want

to be. madivinez.  
my divine?  
sounds so  
holy.  
  
i thank you  
and hang up the phone  
to repeat  
my vulgar  
gift word  
as I write it  
into the dictionary,  
next to ke,  
kreyol  
for heart.  
  
glamorous, holy, haitian dyke heart.  
something i want  
to be.<sup>21</sup>

Moïse's mother's Haitian-accented English brings about the poet's fascination with the fantastic-sounding *madivinez*. Its alluring sound makes it divine; like *quare*, it opens the complex possibilities of women loving women, a tradition in which, Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley reminds us, "captive African women created erotic bonds with other women in the sex-segregated holds." In doing so, they were "resisting the commodification of their bought and sold bodies by *feeling* and *feeling for* their co-occupants on these ships."<sup>22</sup> The beauty of the sound of the word *madivinez*, either in its inflection or in the ways Moïse has imbued it with a certain *quare* beauty, follows the delicate racial public negotiations of *Negerhosen2000* (and in the linguistic empowerment of *Neque mittatis margaritas vestras ante porcos*, discussed later). In her poem, Moïse answers Tinsley's questions—"So can a woman be *queer* in Patwa or Keyròl or Sranan, and should she want to be?"—yes and yes.<sup>23</sup>

The figure of the flâneur appeared in the work of Claude Baudelaire, which he associated with mid-nineteenth-century Paris.<sup>24</sup> Decades later Walter Benjamin, the German Marxist and cofounder of the Frankfurt School, took up the figure of the flâneur in his analysis of Baudelaire.<sup>25</sup> For Baudelaire and Benjamin, Gregory Shaya notes, "the *flâneur* was a . . . figure of the modern artist-poet, a figure keenly aware of the bustle of modern life, an amateur detective and investigator of the city," the *invisible* modern spectator/observer.<sup>26</sup> The flâneur was an artist and a surveyor of the modern(izing) city, a detached observer, an allegorical figure, free to skim across the surface of the city and taste all its pleasure with curiosity and interest. The white maleness of the flâneur allowed him a certain unfettered mobility unhampered by gender, race, and sexual orientation.<sup>27</sup> Appearing in late-eighteenth-century Britain as a well-dressed man about town wandering from cabaret to cabaret elegantly clad and smartly stylish, the dandy was a social experiment.<sup>28</sup> Evoking fin de siècle societal transformations and revolutionary upheavals, dandyism in France was an intellectual and aesthetic movement born out of a particular aesthetic and historical moment to ridicule and expose the pretentiousness of the aristocratic.<sup>29</sup> Positioned at the crossroads between consumption and visibility and employing the "affective power of the circulation of blackness" in his author narrator self, in *Negerhosen2000* Désert offers the sartorial pastiche of the dandy as well as the observant voyeuristic pleasure of the flâneur.<sup>30</sup> As a black flâneur, *Negerhosen2000* is engaged with the visibilities of reality, making visible what has been invisible (history) and documenting what is visible (race). As *Negerhosen2000* walks through European towns, streets, and parks in his embellished form-fitting Lederhosen, interacting with those he meets, he appears to be known, yet his skin color conveys a certain "unknown," a certain "being out of place";<sup>31</sup> what better place for the dandy/flâneur to exist than the liminal space of conspicuous incomprehensibility. What the bold performative strategies share is the perception of a racialized identity based on what is visible and marked on the body. These performance strategies demand a direct engagement with and participation from

those looking and making meaning and show us that skin is a palimpsest through which "race" is both read and misread.

In appropriating a traditional male Bavarian *tracht* typically called lederhosen and ubiquitously understood as singularly German, Désert in *Negerhosen2000* is heir to the "first-world" *observateur* that is Baudelaire's flâneur and Allende's fictitious sartorial splendor characterized by "third-world" Zacharie.<sup>32</sup> As the man who moves about town, chronicling his surroundings, *Negerhosen2000*'s presence, like Zacharie's, is suspect and out of place—because of his skin color as well as for his adornment of a nonblack cultural tradition. Similar to Zacharie, *Negerhosen2000* is engaged in the performative and the power to play with the presentation of self, a machination in the black diaspora that ensures survival in a hostile world. It is Désert's implicit indifference to inquiring stares and his self-fashioning that brings to mind the "urban idler and habitual witness" of the flâneur and his counterpart, the conspicuously attired dandy.<sup>33</sup> *Negerhosen2000*'s *flânerie* becomes an expansive way to express a black, postmodern, and mobile body politics, a body that at one time had been threatened because of its black and queer visibility. Conversely, it is through his mobility that we can understand Désert's postmodern flâneur as a traveling performance of artful representation, contradictions, and demystifying myths.



Left: Figure 1. Jean-Ulrick Désert, from *Negerhosen2000 / The Travel Albums (Venedig)*, 2007. DIN A4 format; unique imaginary postcard digital print and collage with pigmented inks on decorative cut archival paper. Courtesy of the artist and Espace d'Art Contemporain 14°N 61°W Martinique FWI



Right: Figure 2. Jean-Ulrick Désert, from *Negerhosen2000 / The Travel Albums (DocumentaX)*, 2007. DIN A4 format; unique imaginary postcard digital print and collage with pigmented inks on decorative cut archival paper. Courtesy of the artist and Espace d'Art Contemporain 14°N 61°W Martinique FWI

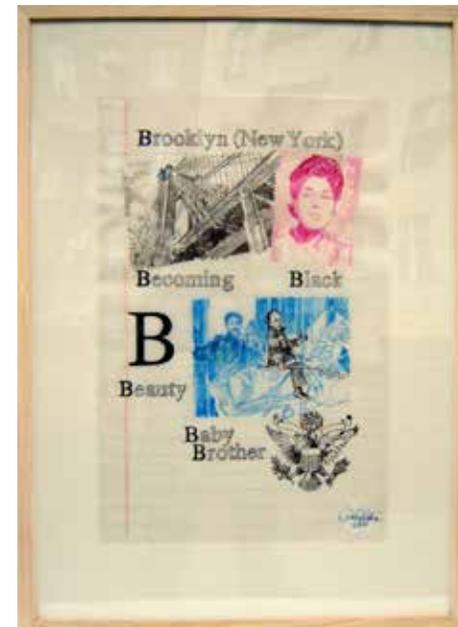
Using quare vernacular aesthetics as a performative stratagem of survival in a charged environment, Désert constitutes *Negerhosen2000* not simply as a dandy or a flaneur but as a black quare dandy/flaneur who in his affected presence does not distance himself from observation or recoil from encounter. In other words, we recognize *Negerhosen2000* as having a quare aesthetic not simply because of his sartorial splendor and spectacularity, but because his subversive black presence inherently destabilizes the social, spatial, and racial matrix that governs specific white European spaces, that is, Germany.<sup>34</sup>

What would it look like if we explore black cultural formations outside and beyond the narrow confines of traditional locations for black people? With her outstanding research on the historical presence of Africans and African Americans in Germany, Tina Campt reminds us that “diaspora cannot be seen as a historically given or universally applicable analytic model for explaining

the cultural and community formations of all black populations.”<sup>35</sup> Moreover, the narrative of the Middle Passage or the triangular slave trade is not the only lens of analysis for a discussion of the formation of black communities outside of Africa. *Désert* allows us to explore the presence of black people, of Caribbean people in nontraditional places of settlement not limited to North American countries and European nations and thus expands our understanding of the African diaspora as not being limited to the United States, France, the United Kingdom, and, most recently, Italy.

### Creole Intimacies: *L'ABCdaire de ma vie privée*

In the ink, watercolor, and pencil drawings of *L'ABCdaire*, historic symbols, personal mementoes, and deft spatial arrangements reflect the historical and cultural relations shared by its occupants. *Désert* constructs these “self-portraits” by combining letters of the alphabet and French, Kreyol, English, and German words that begin with that letter, along with images that have historical and personal significance. While not self-portraits in the conventional sense, which often provide a realistic or idealized image of the artist, these drawings on velum are pregnant with meaning. They address the emotional experiences of migration, belonging, and language through carefully rendered, allegorical images, offering an unconventional way of representing self. As such, these “self-portraits” are snapshots of specific moments of life and cultural circumstances.<sup>36</sup> The effectiveness of the drawings resides in the precise combination and conceptual layering of images, in seemingly random positions, and text that narrates a story of transnationalism and multilingual mappings. The drawings are simultaneously poetic and powerful, uniting the personal and conceptual nature of memory to the visual elements of drawing.



*L'ABCdaire* foregrounds the relationship between simple words and their complex meanings. These relationships are not to be read literally; rather, they function as an intimation to a larger visual narrative that takes shape through fragmented trajectories and compositional space. For Désert, “each plate designates a letter and a series of associative words in the language of ‘home.’”<sup>37</sup> Drawn in a large, bold, black font, the capital letter *A* features the word *arrestation*, alluding to the treatment of opponents of the brutal and heinous presidencies of François Duvalier (1957–71) and Jean-Claude Duvalier (1971–86). The terror of the Duvalier regimes led to complex cultural and familial ruptures, with many seeking the *aéroport* (airport) and eventually *abandonner* (abandonment).<sup>38</sup> Looming monumentally on the horizon next to the image of Désert’s father are the national symbols of anxiety and state power: the Palais Nationale in Port-au-Prince and the Haitian coat of arms (fig. 3).<sup>39</sup> The letter *B* brings us to Brooklyn, one of the largest foreign enclaves for Haitians. This part of Désert’s journey was when he first realized that he had “become black” and “foreign”; he began to contemplate the connotations and perceptions associated with such racial and national labels. Remembering that moment of discovery, he states, “I became *negro* and *colored*, an undesirable trait, redeemed only by my ‘frenchy-ness,’ which rendered me an exotic, like a caged bird. I did not feel oppressed but rather . . . bewildered” (fig. 4).<sup>40</sup> The letter *C* takes us to the *capitale*, Paris. We are privy to an intimate dialogue occurring between the images in soft, simple shades of black, red, and blue, as well as a dialogue between the young Haitian Kreyol military father and the younger Haitian American French transnational son. This is an intimate conversation, possibly spoken in Kreyol under the Eiffel Tower in Paris (fig. 5). With the letter *D*, we arrive in Germany, the current place of Désert’s transnational journey (fig. 6).



Underneath the images, Désert has drawn precisely spaced, fine lines to mimic the rectangular-shaped notebook pages that he used as a child in Haiti. In these drawings, Désert’s meticulous architectural training combines with the measured and systematic language of images. For Désert the series recalls the Dick-and-Jane-like primers with which he was taught to read English when he arrived in New York.<sup>41</sup> While Dick, Jane, Mother, Father, baby sister Sally, and Spot the dog characterize the ideal American nuclear family, these images of whiteness never seemed *real* to Désert. Indeed, growing up in Haiti, people were never that white (Haitian *whiteness* was always touched with *m’palé Kreyòl*), never that pure or pristine, never that ideal, and no one was ever named “Dick” or “Jane.”<sup>42</sup> The French words and fine lines drawn on the rectangular-shaped page, like a map, allow us to follow the experiences that span the fraught yet delicate connections between the pleasures of diaspora and the discontent of migration. Following W. J. T. Mitchell, these images entice the viewer as “metapictures” because of what they tell us about personal history and language. There is palpable electricity between the images and the words, between the feelings evoked by the words and the particular events captured in the drawings. There is also fastidiousness to the composition; it includes telling images and words that reveal, in a singularly beautiful style, an intimate story of diaspora.

Previous Page:

Left: Figure 3. Jean-Ulrick Désert, “A,” *L’ABCdaire de ma vie privée*, 2005. Inks, pencil, and watercolor on vellum paper; DIN A3, 297 x 420 mm. Goldrich Collection, New York. Photograph courtesy of the artist

Previous Page:

Right: Figure 4. Jean-Ulrick Désert, “B,” *L’ABCdaire de ma vie privée*, 2005. Inks, pencil, and watercolor on vellum paper; DIN A3, 297 x 420 mm. Goldrich Collection, New York. Photograph courtesy of the artist

Left: Figure 5. Jean-Ulrick Désert, “C,” *L’ABCdaire de ma vie privée*, 2005. Inks, pencil, and watercolor on vellum paper; DIN A3, 297 x 420 mm. Goldrich Collection, New York. Photograph courtesy of the artist

Right: Figure 6. Jean-Ulrick Désert, “D,” *L’ABCdaire de ma vie privée*, 2005. Inks, pencil, and watercolor on vellum paper; DIN A3, 297 x 420 mm. Goldrich Collection, New York. Photograph courtesy of the artist

Embarking for the first time on autobiographical work and drawing on an archive of personal images and memories, *L'ABCdaire* speaks to the fluidity of diasporic subjects and creates its own lingua franca, a “visual multilingualism,” that blends Kreyol, French, German, and English elements that reveal the centrality of language and visual memory to the formation of cultural identities. *L'ABCdaire* illustrates that for Haitians, living *endezo* requires a strategic negotiation with the powers that reside in language, cultural differences, and rights to residency. We can think of *endezo* as a liminal space, one that transcends the fixed specificity of location; a place created at the interstices of being. It is precisely at the nexus of a protean, transnational diasporic black Caribbean identity—the product of a range of cross-cultural influences and temporalities—that one is able to experience the formidable space of *endezo* and the transformative nature of black queer identity that is shaped by the politics of resistance and matured in the struggle for self and survival. In these works, Désert’s diasporic body “becomes an archive of multiple displacements and colonial histories and migration.”<sup>43</sup> Indeed, Désert’s “self-portraits” are profound musings between the transparent realities that are drawn on the page and the faint shadows that are left in their wake. They are in keeping with the imperceptibility that constitutes, in part, abstract art and non-conventional forms of self-portraiture.

### The Intimacy of the Conceptual

How are the aesthetic and conceptual language of queer bodies lived in ways that create a profound space within the viscosity of the material? How can alternative modes of presentation be transformative in public spaces yet in many ways remain private? What are we to make of the relations between art, religion, and sexual identity?? These are some of the questions his most recent text-based installation, *Neque mittatis margaritas vestras ante porcos* asks. Entering a dimly lit interior space, the viewer is greeted by five garlands of various vibrant colors that hang from the ceiling. Each garland, in one of five different creole languages—Haitian Kreyol, Jamaican patois, Surinamese Sranan Tongo, Curaçaoan Papiamentu, and Dominican Spanish—spells out the biblical passage “*Neque mittatis margaritas vestras ante porcos*,” loosely translated in English as “Do not throw pearls before swine,” taken from the New Testament.<sup>44</sup> In this most recent conceptual art piece, Désert revisits the intimacy of language and what it evokes, a strategy that he had explored in *L'ABCdaire*. Both works demand that we consider, first, the place of the personal and the autobiographical in the production of a queer subjectivity and, second, the specific and the local(e) in this production. In two recent installments of *Neque mittatis margaritas vestras ante porcos*, one in Belfast and the other in Glasgow, colored garlands hang from the gallery ceiling, surrounded by pearlescent balloons attached to the ceiling by silver chains (figs. 7 and 8). The viewer is challenged to contemplate the religiosity emitted by the interplay between text and meaning while consuming the materiality of the work and its conditions of display.

Rather than an overt denunciation of the recently hateful religiosity of the Caribbean on same-sex-loving people and the violence and discrimination faced by these individuals, this installation is undergirded



Figure 7. Jean-Ulrick Désert, *Neque mittatis margaritas vestras ante porcos*, 2016. Installation of laser cut pvc biblical text garlands, acrylic paints, pearlescent balloons, and metal chains; variable dimensions. Transmission Gallery, Glasgow, Scotland, 2017 installation; courtesy of the artist and *Small Axe*, with the support of the British Council and Warhol Foundation grant. Photograph courtesy of the artist

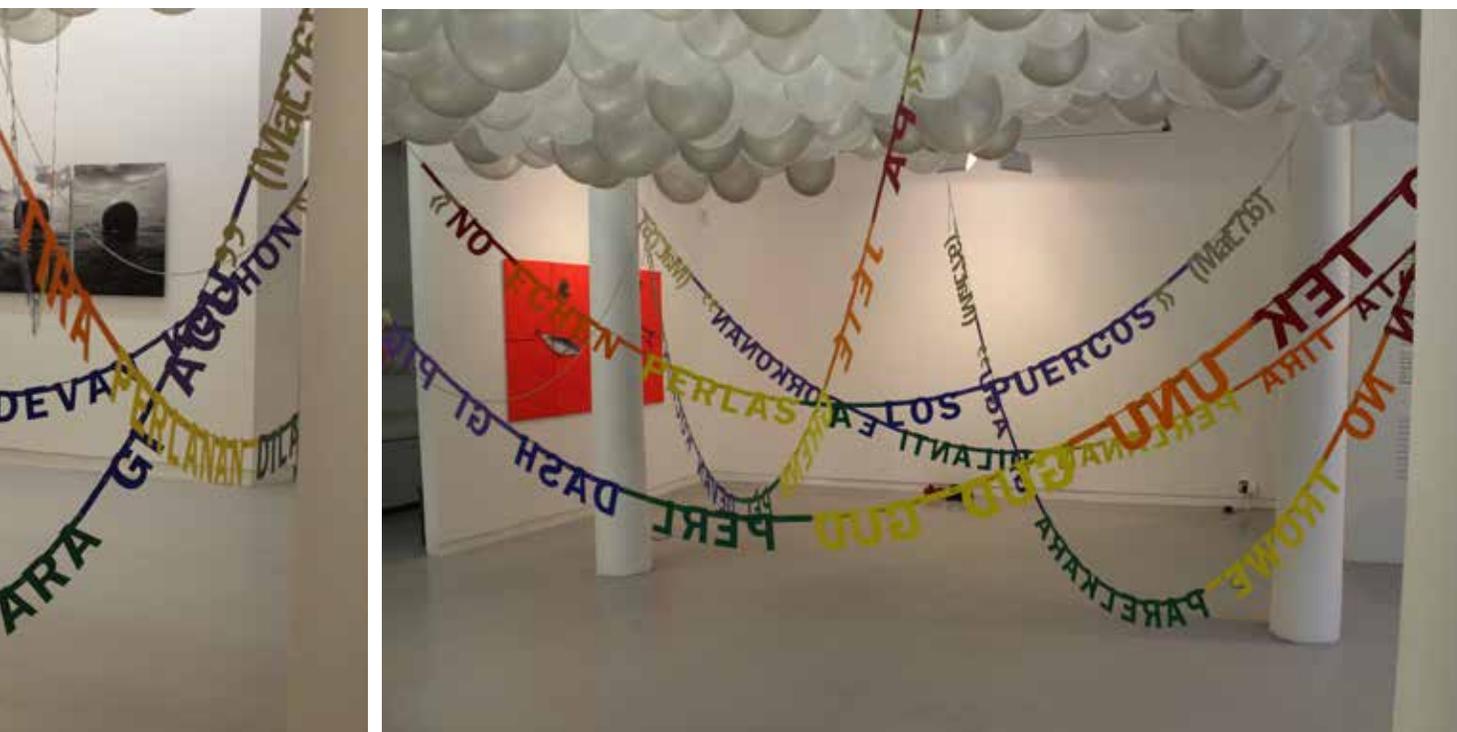


Figure 8. Jean-Ulrick Désert, *Neque mittatis margaritas vestras ante porcos*, 2016. Installation of laser cut pvc biblical text garlands, acrylic paints, pearlescent balloons, and metal chains; variable dimensions. Transmission Gallery, Glasgow, Scotland, 2017 installation; courtesy of the artist and Small Axe, with the support of the British Council and Warhol Foundation grant. Photograph courtesy of the artist

by the possibility that in the intuitiveness of conceptual art—in its ability to be free of and wholly independent on the art object and depending instead on the “objective of the artist who is concerned with conceptual art to make his work mentally interesting to the spectator”<sup>45</sup>—such an exercise gestures toward the textured intimacy of language as it plays an important role in the formation of subjectivity. Using the Bible verse in five creole languages, generously translated by friends who are native speakers, Désert has moved away from the colonized language of French and imbued this festive-looking art piece with the languages of the people (*pèp*), those who struggle every day to challenge the coercion, homophobia, and supremacy of religious fundamentalism that has been plaguing the Caribbean.<sup>46</sup> His employment of creole languages is a “paradigmatic aesthetic,” one that “grapples with the politics of colonization,” “enunciates itself as differen[t]” (yet recognizable), and “gives the word back” to the people, those who claim and embrace a queer local/identity that exists within a nexus of ideas, languages, and performances. “Such an engagement of language” is not an exercise in futility or a “frivolous exhibition”; it is instead “linked to a complicated and undeniable commitment” to subjectivity.<sup>47</sup> For it is not simply the words themselves that challenge but the meanings those words derive and make clear, a fundamental aesthetic tenet of conceptual art.

In *Neque mittatis margaritas vestras ante porcos* we see a consideration of subjectivity, agency, and power. We see the shift in the currency of certain languages as a matter of fact and their manipulation as a matter of self-preservation. Simultaneously, the words evoke the fragility of positions that are seemingly understood as precious but are understood as not being able to be comprehended by everyone. It is in their indecipherability (by some) that we are allowed to see the intimacy that comes from a shared linguistic positionality.

In conceptual art, the idea or concept takes precedence over the material aspect of the art. In his famous essay “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art,” artist Sol LeWitt writes, “In conceptual art, the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work. . . . The idea becomes a machine that makes the art.”<sup>48</sup> It is the idea that drives the final piece; it is the idea that is the art: “By marking a point where the idea becomes the thing of art, conceptual art widen[s] the parameters of what [can] potentially be understood as art.”<sup>49</sup> It also marks a moment that artists can look outside the more formal parameters of the art historical canon to create a radical art moment.<sup>50</sup> While complex in its significance, *Neque mittatis margaritas vestras ante porcós* does not adhere to a particular form and dimension, but is that not the beauty and power of conceptual art? Instead, its formal elements: color, dimension, line, and shape overflow in its complex structuring of language, foregrounding its deeply seductive meaning. Although lacking the performative and visuality of *Negerhosen2000* and *L’ABCdaire de ma vie privée*, Désert’s *Neque mittatis margaritas vestras ante porcós* need not be complex in its form. According to LeWitt, “Most ideas that are successful are ludicrously simple. Successful ideas generally have the appearance of simplicity because they seem inevitable.”<sup>51</sup>

The intimate space of creole, where black and brown queer Caribbean bodies refuse to be *out of place* and refuse to *stay in place*, is a radical moment, producing work that offers conceptual and real resistance to the vulnerabilities of black queer migrating bodies that are often subject to violence, sanctioned by the state or imposed by individuals. Jean-Ulrick Désert’s methodically composed drawings, evocative performative photographic pieces, and photographic performative pieces and installations examine the body (and its conspicuous absence) at the nexus of self-representation. To suggest, for example, that Désert’s aesthetics insights stem simply from his black Caribbean identity would be limiting; it would fall into what Kobena Mercer calls “biographical reductionism.”<sup>52</sup> What might prove to be more fruitful would be to frame Désert’s insights within a larger transnational context and conceptualize his insights as possibilities for translations and transformations of the self while producing alternative cartographies that incorporate the coexistence of multiple languages and convergent histories into the formation of black diasporic identities. Désert’s work offers generative possibilities to engage with the creative strategies of sartorial play and performative black bodies as they reformulate themselves in elegantly drawn images using provocative language while employing strategies of Conceptual art that foregrounds the relations between language and meaning and the dematerialization of the art object.

## Endnotes

- 1 Isabel Allende, *Island beneath the Sea*, trans. Margaret Sayers Peden (Toronto: HarperCollins, 2010), 214.
- 2 Richard J. Powell, *Cutting a Figure: Fashioning Black Portraiture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 63.
- 3 Allende, *Island beneath the Sea*, 343.
- 4 Ibid., 430.
- 5 Monica L. Miller, *Slaves to Fashion: Black Dandyism and the Styling of Black Diasporic Identity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 25 (emphasis mine).
- 6 Powell, *Cutting a Figure*, 120.
- 7 Mary Gluck, “The *Flâneur* and the Aesthetic Appropriation of Urban Culture in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Paris,” *Theory, Culture, and Society* 20, no. 5 (2003): 59–61.
- 8 E. Patrick Johnson, “‘Quare’ Studies, or (Almost) Everything I Know About Queer Studies I Leaned from My Grandmother,” in E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson, eds., *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 135. Johnson’s position of *quare* as oppose to *queer* is one that includes race and class in its analysis and critique and moves it away from a simple sexual definition. Elsewhere, I detail the textual engagement of *Negerhosen2000*, Désert’s ongoing performance piece, which was first presented in 1997 at *documenta X*. See Jerry Philogène, “Meditations on Traveling Diasporically: Jean-Ulrick Désert and *Negerhosen2000*,” *Radical History Review*, no. 115 (Winter 2013): 184–93.
- 9 Julia Alvarez, quoted in Ilan Stavans, “Las Mariposas,” *Nation*, 7 November 1994, 552–56. Alvarez is a Dominican American writer.
- 10 “ABCdaire” is taken from a title of a popular book series of “how-to” guides from the publishing house Flammarion in Paris..
- 11 W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 37.
- 12 Loosely translated from Haitian Kreyol, *endezo* means “in between two waters.” See Andre Juste’s use of the word in discussing the work of Vladimir Cybil: Andre Juste, “Romancing the National: Contextualizing the art of Vladimir Cybil,” December 1999, [www2.webster.edu/~corbetre/haiti-archive/msg01945.html](http://www2.webster.edu/~corbetre/haiti-archive/msg01945.html). On the “in-between,” see Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 2.
- 13 Svetlana Boym, “On Diasporic Intimacy: Ilya Kabakov’s Installations and Immigrant Homes,” *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 2 (1998): 500.
- 14 Valerie Cassel Oliver, “Through the Conceptual Lens: The Rise, Fall, and

- Resurrection of Blackness,” in Valerie Cassel Oliver et al., *Double Consciousness: Black Conceptual Art since 1970* (Houston: Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, 2005), 18.
- 15 Johnson, “‘Quare’ Studies,” 127.
- 16 Ibid., 126, 127.
- 17 Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley, *Thieving Sugar: Eroticism between Women in Caribbean Literature* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 7.
- 18 I utilize performance as a site of political engagement and as site of resistance. Useful in my understanding of performance and subjectivity is José Esteban Muñoz’s *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999) and E. Patrick Johnson’s *Appropriating Blackness: Performance and the Politics of Authenticity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003). I employ *queer* in the way that Johnson does, infusing the term with an African American “twist,” extending and enhancing its political and identitarian resistance strategies and not limiting it to same-sex sexual desires. The quote by Antonio Benítez-Rojo used as an epigraph at the start of this essay is found in Muñoz’s *Disidentifications*, 77.
- 19 Johnson, “‘Quare’ Studies,” 127. Johnson’s conception of *quare* as opposed to *queer* is one that includes race and class in its analysis and critique and moves it away from simply a sexual definition. For a multidimensional discussion of black queer studies, see Johnson and Henderson, *Black Queer Studies*; Johnson, “‘Quare’ Studies”; and Rinaldo Walcott, “Somewhere Out There: The New Black Queer Theory,” in “Blackness and Sexualities,” ed. Michelle M. Wright and Antje Schumann, special issue, *Forum for European Contributions for African American Studies* 16 (2007): 29–40.
- 20 Johnson, “‘Quare’ Studies,” 126.
- 21 Jerry Philogene, “Lenelle Moise: Postscript, Swimming in the Waters of *Endezo*,” in “Haiti in a Globalized Frame,” special issue, *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies* 19, no. 3 (2015): 336.
- 22 Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley, “Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic: Queer Imaginings of the Middle Passage,” *GLQ* 14, nos. 2–3 (2008): 192.
- 23 Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley, *Thieving Sugar: Eroticism between Women in Caribbean Literature* (Durham: Duke University Press) 2010, 6.
- 24 Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life, and Other Essays*, 2nd ed. (London: Phaidon, 1995).
- 25 Benjamin committed suicide before finishing his thirteen-year project, *The Arcades Project*. For a discussion on Benjamin’s notion of the flâneur, see Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991); Sven Birkerts, “Walter Benjamin, *Flâneur*: A *Flânerie*,” *Iowa Review* 13, nos. 3–4 (1983), 164–79; Tom McDonough, “The Crimes of the *Flâneur*,” *October*, no. 102 (Autumn 2002): 101–22; and Anke Gleber, *The Art of Taking a Walk: Flânerie, Literature, and Film in Weimar Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).
- 26 Gregory Shaya, “The *Flâneur*, the *Badaud*, and the Making of a Mass Public in France, circa 1860–1910,” *American Historical Review* 109, no. 1 (2004): 41–77.
- 27 For Baudelaire, this spectator was resolutely male and heterosexual.
- 28 For a discussion of the various racial and sexual manifestations of the dandy, see Richard J. Powell, “Sartor Africanus,” in Susan Fillin-Yeh, ed., *Dandies: Fashion and Finesse in Art and Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 217–42; George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890–1940* (New York: Basic, 1995); Elisa F. Glick, “The Dialectics of Dandyism,” *Cultural Critique*, no. 48 (Spring 2001): 129–63; Monica L. Miller, *Slaves to Fashion: Black Dandyism and the Styling of Black Diasporic Identity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009); Elisa F. Glick, “Harlem’s Queer

Dandy: African American Modernism and the Artifice of Blackness,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 49, no. 3 (2003): 414–42; Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994); and Barbara L. Webb, “The Black Dandyism of George Walker: A Case Study in Genealogical Methods,” *TDR* 45, no. 4 (2001): 7–24. For a discussion on the *flâneuse*, see Elizabeth Wilson, “The Invisible Flâneur,” *New Left Review*, September–October 1992, 90–110; Janet Wolff, “The ‘Invisible’ Flâneuse: Women and the Literature of Modernity,” *Theory, Culture, and Society* 2, no. 3 (1985): 37–48, and “Gender and the Haunting of Cities (or, the Retirement of the Flâneur),” in Aruna d’Souza and Tom McDonough, eds., *The Invisible flâneuse? Gender, Public Space, and Visual Culture in Nineteenth-Century Paris* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), 18–31; and Griselda Pollock, “Modernity and the Spaces of Femininity,” in *Vision and Difference: Feminism, Femininity, and Histories of Art* (London: Routledge, 1988), 70–127.

- 29 Rhonda K. Garelick, *Rising Star: Dandyism, Gender, and Performance in the Fin de Siècle* (Princeton, NC: Princeton University Press, 1998), 1–45.
- 30 Nicole Fleetwood, *Troubling Vision Performance, Visuality, and Blackness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 6. Sadly, the history of brown and black people is rife with stories about physical violence because of race, sexuality, or gender or a combination of all three. We cannot forget the images and stories of Emmett Till (1955), Abner Louima (1997), and James Craig Anderson (2011), as well as, more recently, Trayvon Martin, a black teenager fatally shot in 2012 in Sanford, Florida, by George Zimmerman, a self-described Hispanic American man, because Trayvon “looked suspicious” and was “walking where he did not belong.”
- 31 Sara Ahmed, *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-coloniality*, (London: Routledge, 2000), 21.
- 32 A *tracht* is a culturally specific, traditional apparel. Lederhosen, oftentimes made of suede and worn during physical activities, is an outfit mostly associated with working-class folk culture, as folkswear, in Bavarian culture.
- 33 Powell, *Cutting a Figure*, 72.
- 34 For a comprehensive history of Africans in Germany and Afro-German culture, see Carol Aisha Blackshire-Belay, ed., *The African-German Experience: Critical Essays* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1996); Tina Campt, *Other Germans: Black Germans and the Politics of Race, Gender, and Memory in the Third Reich* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004), and *Image Matters: Archive, Photography, and the African Diaspora in Europe* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012); Sara Friedrichsmeyer, Sara Lennox, and Susanne Zantop, eds., *The Imperialist Imagination: German Colonialism and Its Legacy* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998); Sander L. Gilman, *On Blackness without Blacks: Essays on the Image of the Black in Germany* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1982); Patricia Mazón and Reinhild Steingröver, eds., *Not So Plain as Black and White: Afro-German Culture and History, 1890–2000*, with foreword by Russell Berman (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2005); Michelle M. Wright and Antje Schuhmann, eds., “Blackness and Sexualities,” special issue, *Forum for European Contributions for African American Studies* 16 (2007); Michelle M. Wright, *Becoming Black: Creating Identity in the African Diaspora* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004); *The Imperialist Imagination: German Colonialism and Its Legacy*, edited by Sara Friedrichsmeyer, Sara Lennox, and Susanne Zantop (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998); and *Blackening Europe: The African American Presence* edited by Heike Raphael-Hernandez with a forward by Paul Gilroy, (London and New York: Routledge, 2004).
- 35 Tina M. Campt, “Family Matters: Diaspora, Difference, and the Visual Archives,” *Social Text*, no. 98 (Spring 2009): 87.
- 36 Powell, *Cutting a Figure*, 76.
- 37 Jean-Ulrick Désert, e-mail to the author, 27 August 2006.
- 38 Désert and his parents came to New York in 1968.

- 39 The 12 January 2010 earthquake that devastated Port-au-Prince and its surrounding provinces destroyed the Palais Nationale. At the writing of this essay, a date to rebuild it has not been confirmed.
- 40 Jean-Ulrick Désert, “Queer Space,” in Gordon Brent Ingram, Anne-Marie Bouthillette, and Yolanda Retter, eds., *Queers in Space: Communities, Public Places, Sites of Resistance* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1997), 17–26.
- 41 Here we can draw similarities to an aesthetic literary device used by Toni Morrison in her majestic *The Bluest Eye* (1970). Morrison begins the novel with words from the Dick and Jane elementary school reading primer used in the 1940s. As the story progresses, Morrison repeats the introductory lines from the primer, first without punctuation and capitalization, then without spacing between the words, bleeding them together, with no linguistic alignment, suggesting chaos and dysfunction, which mirrors the story that follows, one of unimaginable sadness, dehumanization, disillusionment, pain, and fear. In addition, *L’ABCdaire* participates in the tradition of artists’ books and photo-text projects that facilitate the exploration of language, history, and cultural memory as instrumental elements in identity formation.
- 42 Loosely translated, *M’palé Kreyòl* means, “I speak Kreyol.”
- 43 Gayatri Gopinath, “Archives, Affect, and the Everyday: Queer Diasporic Re-Visions,” [www.chitraganesh.com/images/press/scholarly/Archive%20Affect%20Everyday.pdf](http://www.chitraganesh.com/images/press/scholarly/Archive%20Affect%20Everyday.pdf), 166.
- 44 Matthew 7:6.
- 45 Sol LeWitt, “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art,” *Artforum* 5, no. 10 (1967): 80.
- 46 The garlands read as follows: “Pa jété grenn pèl devan kochon” (Kreyol); “No tek unu gud gud porl dash gi pig” (patois); “Èn no trowe parekrara gi agu” (Sranan Tongo); “No ta tira perlanan dilanti e porkonan” (Papiamentu); and “No echen perlas a los puercos” (Dominican Spanish). Jean-Ulrick Désert, correspondence with the author, May 2016.
- 47 Kevin Everod Quashie, *Black Women, Identity, and Cultural Theory (Un)Becoming the Subject* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004), 130.
- 48 LeWitt, “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art,” 81.
- 49 Franklin Sirmans, “An American Art Job,” *Double Consciousness: Black Conceptual Art since 1970*, Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston, 2005, Valerie Cassel Oliver, Terry Adkins, and Franklin Sirmans, contributors, 12.
- 50 For example, Marcel Duchamp’s infamous *Fountain*, a pissoir exhibited at the American Society for Independent Artists in 1917. Its cool porcelain presence mounted on a pedestal set the stage for an art practice that opened its doors to the provocation of pastiche and the precarious humor of intimacy as well as the precarious intimacy of sheer ordinariness. Four year before that, Duchamp’s ready-made *Bicycle Wheel* (1913) provoked outrage, creating the space for the radical moment that would usher in this new modernist tradition.
- 51 LeWitt, “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art,” 82.
- 52 Kobena Mercer, “Hew Locke’s Postcolonial Baroque,” *Small Axe*, no. 34 (March 2011): 10.

# jorgePINEDA

DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

***Giguapa***, 2016

Installation; shoes of a man, a woman,  
and children.

Ceramic; variable dimensions,  
approx. 22in x 15in x 5in.

Photographs by Mariano Hernández.

Images courtesy of the artist.





# Jorge Pineda's Queer Visualities? Postcolonial Sexualities and Antinormativity

*Maja Horn*

The question of the usefulness of *queer* for the Caribbean is far from settled, and scholars analyzing Caribbean same-sex desires and non-heteronormative subjects tend to weigh carefully the possibilities and limits of *queer* for apprehending them. For example, Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes, in *Queer Ricans: Cultures and Sexualities in the Diaspora*, employs the term *queer* but also notes how he is “painfully aware of the bind or limitation of using ‘queer’ or LGBT as stand-ins for practices, identities, and experiences that are much more complex and diffuse,” especially since such “vernacular specificities” are “captured in Spanish-language words” but not in English.<sup>1</sup> Rosamund S. King, in *Island Bodies: Transgressive Sexualities in the Caribbean Imagination*, entirely eschews the term *queer* and instead uses *sexual minority* as a term “to refer to those who engage in (or who want to engage in) consensual erotic relationships that are not heterosexual.”<sup>2</sup> In a similar vein, Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley, in *Thieving Sugar: Eroticism between Women in Caribbean Literature*, prefers the phrase “women who love women” (rather than *queer* or *lesbian*); yet at the same time, Tinsley points to the increasingly transnationalized field of queer studies and argues for “dialoguing with concepts of decolonization, queerness, and theory,” so that “queer and postcolonial theory will not only come in different colors and genders but will also come to be decolonized.”<sup>3</sup> I am similarly wary of the uses of the English term *queer* in the Caribbean, perhaps especially so for the nonanglophone Antilles, but, along with Tinsley, I believe there are important and productive dialogues to be had between queer and postcolonial studies for which the project “Caribbean Queer Visualities” offers a useful space and a much-needed opportunity for cross-regional dialogue.

Notably, the meaning of *queer* is hardly settled in the global North either. Recently, the question of the primary impulse of queer studies, specifically its relation to the “anti-normative,” provoked new scholarly debate. In a recent issue of the feminist cultural studies journal *differences*, Robyn Wiegman and Elizabeth A. Wilson describe how “antinormativity reflects a broad understanding that the critical force of queer inquiry lies in its capacity to undermine norms, challenge normativity, and interrupt the processes of normalization,” and they question precisely queer studies’ “primary commitment to antinormativity.”<sup>4</sup> Their attempt to untether the close link between queer and antinormativity was met with a pointedly critical response by Jack Halberstam. For Halberstam, “The answer . . . to the question posed by this volume of *differences* . . . , namely[,] ‘what is queer studies without antinormativity,’ [is that] it is disciplinary, neoliberal, no stakes, straight thinking.”<sup>5</sup> Halberstam outlines here, at least implicitly, a certain normative US landscape (neoliberal, heteronormative, disciplinary, nonchallenging) that *queer* should challenge and resist. I in turn would like to consider how this debate and the critical questions it raises pose themselves in colonial and postcolonial contexts and how they may be (re-)phrased and troubled there. I suggest that histories of colonialism inevitably complicate further the relation between the queer and normativity/antinormativity, given the particularly violent and forceful ways through which colonialism introduced competing forms of normativity and, hence, antinormativity in colonized societies. While every society, including in the global North, has various normative structures, colonialism has undeniably produced a more incisive clash of differing normative systems with profound and lasting consequences.

The relation between postcolonial normative structures and sexualities emerges as one of the thematic threads in Jorge Pineda’s ample body of work. Pineda is one of the most important contemporary Dominican artists—if not *the* most relevant Dominican visual artist—who has for more than two decades creatively addressed the Dominican reality produced by the clashing and knitting together of different normative local and global structures. In fact, Pineda’s work, I contend, is precisely so compelling because of how his oeuvre incisively maps the expected and unexpected intersections of local and globalized normative structures, including those regulating sexuality. Sexuality is broached in Pineda’s artwork—at times directly but often more obliquely—in ways that are missed if one solely were to look for “queer” in the form of explicit representations of same-sex desire. Instead, tracing more broadly the relations between sexuality and differing normative protocols in Pineda’s evocative oeuvre not only better captures his nuanced and multifaceted exploration of Caribbean sexualities but also helps to open new inroads into thinking queer and postcolonial studies together.

Jorge Pineda, born in 1961, was raised and educated in the Dominican Republic. Today he is a nationally and internationally renowned multifaceted visual artist known for his work in print, drawing, and installation. His artwork has been shown in many individual and collective exhibits in the Dominican

Republic since the 1980s, and he has won some of the most important national art prizes. His works also have been exhibited widely internationally in solo exhibits in France, Spain, and the United States and at international art fairs such as ARCO in Madrid, Art Basel in Miami, and the Scope and VOLTA art fairs in New York City, among others. Pineda came of age during the protracted Joaquín Balaguer presidency years (1965–78, 1986–96), a political period that for many Dominicans signifies the disappointment and loss of hope for meaningful political change after the end of the Rafael L. Trujillo dictatorship (1930–61). I will address now at some length the late-twentieth-century Dominican political, social, and economic landscape and its reconfigurations and continuities—these not only were the context from which artists of Pineda’s generation emerged but also were often their artworks’ principal critical concern.

Joaquín Balaguer, the country’s reigning political figure of the late twentieth century, is generally considered as Trujillo’s heir. Especially during Balaguer’s first twelve years in power, from 1966 to 1978, he perpetuated many of the political practices of the *Trujillato* (Trujillo era), including wielding extensive presidential powers while brutally repressing the political opposition. This resulted in what political scientist Jonathan Hartlyn describes as a continued “vacuum of institutions and organizations” that could have challenged the government and the political status quo in the Dominican Republic. The “combination of weak social forces and national institutions” fostered enduring patterns of patrimonialism and a “legacy of conspiratorial, distrustful, and cynical politics” that characterizes the Dominican political landscape even until today.<sup>6</sup> Hence, many of the normative political protocols put in place by the *Trujillato* persisted throughout the *Balaguerato* (Balaguer era) and beyond, even as the broader economic and social circumstances were rapidly changing in the late twentieth century.

The best chance for significant political change came with the 1978 elections and the coming into power of the Partido Revolucionario Dominicano (Dominican Revolutionary Party; PRD). As the Dominican political sociologist Rosario Espinal describes, “Given the PRD’s democratic record and reformist platform, expectations were high that once in power that party would promote the much needed social reforms. But would it? In the 1978 there were signs of hope that it would.” However, the PRD confronted—as did most of the Caribbean at the time—a period of economic crisis and new restrictive cost-cutting agreements with the International Monetary Fund, and so, rather than addressing “problems of social and economic inequality,” the PRD placed “the emphasis . . . on austerity and not on redistribution,” disappointing those who had placed hope in new government.<sup>7</sup> The result of austerity measures, such as rising food prices, created increasing popular discontent and produced a surge of popular and civic movements that made “social protest a key feature of Dominican politics in the 1980s.”<sup>8</sup> In sum, the period of the PRD government saw the emergence of new social actors and forms of political protest and mobilizations from “below”; yet the political response from “above” hardly changed, and the government remained largely unresponsive to popular demands. As Espinal describes, “The absence of an effective government response was a main feature of the policymaking process and the democracy that prevailed in the Dominican Republic in the 1980s.”<sup>9</sup> Hence, the PRD years were ultimately not the kind of political rupture that so many Dominicans had hoped for, and this sense of political stagnancy was cemented with the return of Balaguer to the presidency from 1986 to 1996.

These notable political continuities contrast starkly with the radical changes that Dominican society and the economy were undergoing. As Hartlyn describes, “Changes in international economic conditions and in the policies both of the

country’s major trading partner and of international institutions helped induce dramatic overall transformations in the structure of the Dominican economy and society.” These dramatic changes included Dominicans moving en masse from rural areas to urban ones, so that “by 1990, it was estimated that 60.4 percent of [the Dominican Republic’s] 7.2 million people lived in urban areas.”<sup>10</sup> At the same time Dominicans also began to migrate massively to the United States, and a “complex pattern of flows and counterflows of funds, peoples, goods, and services . . . between the two countries” was established. Nonetheless, Hartlyn concludes that, ultimately, “the country’s dramatic societal transformation did not centrally affect the country’s high level of inequality nor the extent and nature of organization in society.”<sup>11</sup> This continues to hold true today and explains the palpable political cynicism of many Dominicans with regard to politics and their lack of faith in the possibility that it can effect positive change for the majority of the populations, especially for those unaffiliated with the political party in power.

The coexistence of radical economic and social transformation and dogged political persistence in the Dominican Republic is often described simply as “paradoxical.” Indeed, the vocabulary and conceptual apparatus for explaining such patterns of continuity and change—as well as of complicity/resistance or normativity/antinormativity—often obscure rather than illuminate them. Namely, they are often apprehended through too simplistic notions of “tradition” and “modernity,” as well as of the “local” and the “global.” For example, the political reconfiguration of 1978, when Balaguer was forced out and the PRD came into power, is generally thought of as the country’s arrival at full “modern democracy” and the superseding of a longstanding “traditional authoritarian” politics.<sup>12</sup> “Traditional” politics in the Spanish-speaking Americas, including that of the Dominican Republic, are generally associated with strongman politics, sometimes referred to as *caudillismo* (thought to have deep roots in Spanish colonialism); however, along with other scholars, I emphasize that while the Trujillo dictatorship (and the Balaguer sequel) certainly drew from preexisting “traditional” normative political and cultural structures, ultimately it represented a notable break and reconfiguration of Dominican hegemonic power structures, as much in the political as in the social realm, including in gender and sexual norms, that was made possible by US imperialist practices, including the US occupation of the country from 1916 to 1924. Simply put, the Trujillato was neither as “traditional” nor as “local”—and, hence, neither were its political sequels—as generally thought. Indeed, it can be argued that the political change in 1978 represented a *modern* authoritarian structure (partially) giving way to an existing Dominican popular *tradition* of democratizing forces. Ultimately, the shorthand of “tradition” and “modernity” tend to obscure more than reveal changing social and political patterns, as much when it comes to politics as when it comes to gender and sexuality.

These Dominican patterns are rarely approached through the lens of postcoloniality. This may be because, in contrast to the anglophone Caribbean (and other former British colonies), the Dominican Republic's final independence dates much farther back, to the nineteenth century. Yet approaching these through the lens of postcoloniality would help to forestall an all too ready and reductionist evocation of Dominican "tradition" and "traditional politics" and would open up to questioning the horizon and trajectory of the modern in productive ways. For example, Dipesh Chakrabarty, in *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, usefully complicates these vectors by emphasizing that postcolonial collectivities cannot be solely understood or defined by "the rituals of citizenship nor by the nightmare of 'tradition' that 'modernity' creates." Instead of a "summary narrative of transition from premodern stage to modernity," Chakrabarty points to the recognition of forms of "mutual supplementation" and to the "heterotemporality of the modern subject."<sup>13</sup>

There is indeed no better way to describe Pineda's and his generation's approach to late-twentieth- and early-twenty-first-century Dominican society: their artworks explore precisely the fundamental heterotemporality of Dominican society as well as the mutual forms of supplementation of that which are often thought of as incommensurate: tradition/modernity, authoritarianism/democracy, local/global. Their critical departure from previous Dominican artistic tendencies was made possible in part precisely by the hopeful period of the PRD political interlude in the 1980s during which the Dominican cultural landscape, and perhaps especially the visual arts, underwent significant change. While for many Dominican writers and intellectuals the only "secure" form of employment was government-sponsored positions, visual artists had more economic opportunities through new national and international art markets and hence could remain more independent from the Dominican state and its clientelist politics. During this time, as the Dominican art critic and writer Jeannette Miller describes, Dominican art essentially became divided "en complaciente y disidente."<sup>14</sup> "Dissident" expressions of Dominican art are strongly associated with the new generation of the 1980s that emerged with the 1983 collective exhibit "La Generación del 80, sus inicios" ("The 1980s Generation, Its Beginnings"), which also featured Pineda's work.<sup>15</sup>

By all accounts this generation represented a starkly new direction for the Dominican arts scene. Miller describes this time as "un período que trata de romper con lo anterior en todos los planos y niveles."<sup>16</sup> The former director of the Centro Cultural de España in Santo Domingo, Ricardo Ramón Jarne, in *Arte contemporáneo dominicano*, speaks of these new tendencies as "una ruptura ejemplar de la tendencias folkloristas y fácilmente exóticas que acaparan el comercio del arte en La Hispaniola."<sup>17</sup> The important Dominican art critic Marianne de Tolentino similarly notes how, while various different artistic generations (working with "diferentes esquemas, formas y estilos")

coexisted, an incisive reconfiguration was achieved with "las ideas nuevas y los valores comprometidos . . . que se han desarrollado fundamentalmente a partir de los años 80."<sup>18</sup> Many of these artists chose to articulate their ideas and critical commitments through new aesthetic strategies and artistic media, and, though there had been a few precursors, they turned installations into one of the most important contemporary Dominican artistic media.<sup>19</sup>

This novel aesthetic direction in the Dominican visual arts went hand in hand with new critical perspectives on some of the fundamental problems of Dominican society. Many artists foregrounded in their works the new social actors and popular subjects that emerged after the end of the first Balaguer presidency in 1978 and portrayed the growing urbanization and mass migration. Their works thus attest to how new "modern" forces tied to globalizing processes, especially the negative impact of neo-liberalism, erupted in the country. They showed how these changes, rather than empowering Dominican subjects, further constrained them, especially those already marginalized by their class, race, or gender. This artistic generation and their works thus raised new questions about Dominican subjectivities and identity, about power and subjugation, and they offered strong visual challenges to hegemonic social and cultural norms. Tolentino therefore calls these "obras para la consciencia," while Miller describes them as having "una fuerte agresión visual," concluding that "entrando al tercer milenio . . . la conciencia crítica permanece."<sup>20</sup>

I now turn to the critical perspective that Pineda's works bring to bear on Dominican sexualities specifically and on questions of normativity more broadly. To begin with, I turn to one of Pineda's earliest individual exhibits, shown in 1992 in Casa de Teatro in Santo Domingo. The telling title, *Internamiento (Internment)*, alludes to forms of confinement, including of being hospitalized or institutionalized for illness. Indeed, the works, many of them drawings, offer explorations of various and often overlapping structures of confinement in Dominican society, many of which relate to

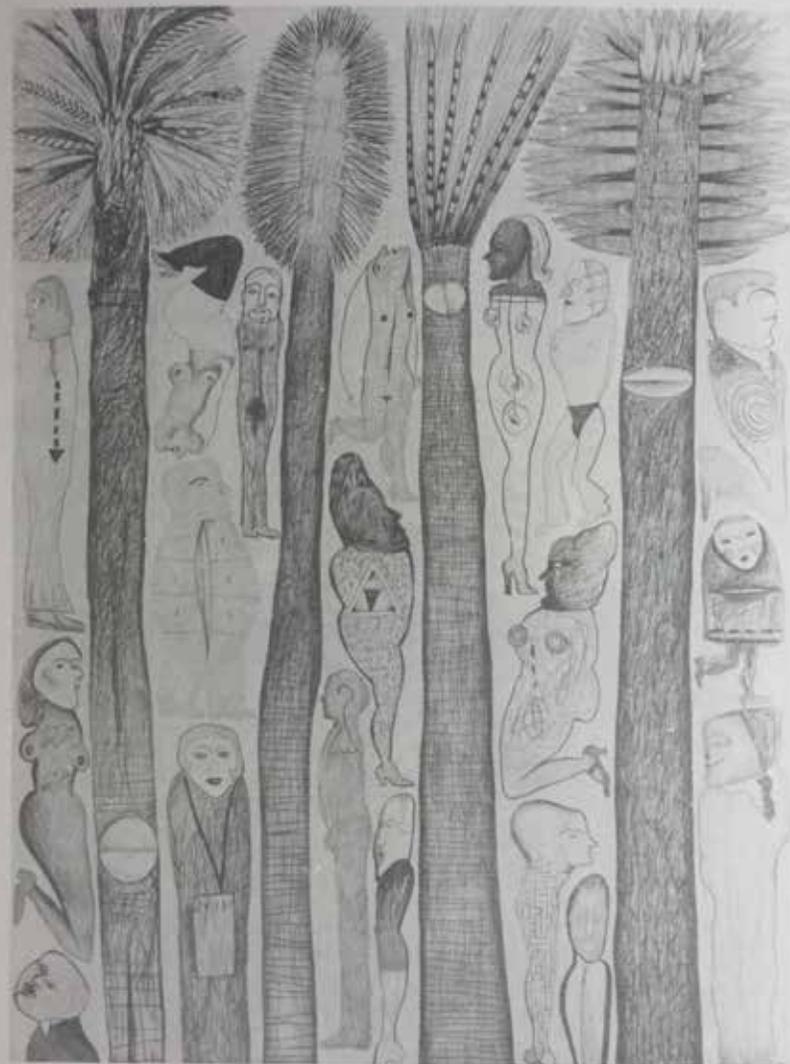
sexuality. In fact, it can be argued, *Internamiento* foregrounds sexuality more insistently than any other later exhibit. The drawing *Del otro lado del paraíso*, for example, speaks of the “other” side of the Caribbean popularly known as a paradisaical place of escape and tropical fantasy (fig. 1). The confining nature of this stereotype is evoked by palm tree trunks that stretch across the entire length of the drawing, hence resembling prison bars rather than evoking a lush tropical life. In between these palm trees there are many differently shaped human figures: women and men of different white, gray, and black coloring, some lighter, some darker, and some with both black and white body parts, who stand, walk, and kneel. While some are dressed, most figures are naked, and their genitals are (re)marked on by dark circles or triangles covering them. Many also have traced on their bodies symbolic elements such as numbers, labyrinths, and arrows. At the same time, many figures lack arms and hands. This work thus suggests how prevalent globalized views of “paradisaical” Caribbean societies are inherently and problematically tied to processes of sexualization of Caribbean subjects—as their genitalia accentuated through their censorship suggests—along with a concomitant lack of agency alluded to by their missing arms and hands.

Other drawings in the exhibit reiterate such representations of constrained and yet highly sexualized subjectivity, including, for example, *Canto de Sirena (Siren's Song)*, *Toda esa gente allí (All Those People There)*, and *Angel que me guarda (Angel Who Guards Me)*. All these drawings show nude subjects with their genitalia emphasized and yet marked with black censoring strips, speaking both to a rampant sexualization *and* to forms of sexual censorship and hence hypocrisy; notably, the few dressed figures

Figure 1. Jorge Pineda, *Del otro lado del paraíso*, 1992. Pencil drawing, 1.20 x 1.50 m. Second page of *Jorge Pineda Dibujos: Internamiento*, catalogue (Santo Domingo: Casa de Teatro, 1992). Courtesy of the author

# Jorge Pineda

## DIBUJOS



Del otro lado del Paraíso. Dibujo Lápiz sobre papel 120 x 150 Cms.

## INTERNAMIENTO

are mostly male and wear suits, alluding to the gendered power differentials in this sexual landscape. Moreover, the figures, though placed in close proximity, generally do not touch or interact with each other, creating a strong sense of individualist isolation despite the crowded surroundings and society that they are embedded in. Hence, this sexual landscape speaks of a sexuality that is not relational, conjugal, or primarily procreative. In this sense, this sexual imaginary diverges (one may say, perhaps, “queerly”) from the normative (Western) heterosexual imaginary structured around couples, family, and having offspring.

An exception to this tendency is the drawing *Casa de citas* (*House of Trysts*), which features three male-female couples in a house that, as the title makes clear, is a brothel (fig. 2). The couples are again shaded in different grays and whites, alluding to their different racial phenotypes. The male figures grip the women and are turned with their faces looking directly at the viewer, suggesting their being in a position of greater power. Moreover, the house is surrounded by numbers, and one of the men’s bodies is marked with numbers as well, evoking the calculating and economic transactions taking place. Importantly, this heterosexual scene is “headed,” under the brothel’s roof, by an upturned and beheaded hog with a bull’s-eye. This animalistic, phallic, and decapitated symbol frames and centers (through the bull’s-eye) the entire scene. The flipped and headless hog evokes a subject that fails in multiple ways to conform to the Enlightenment ideal of the self-determined and conscious (male) subject; and while there are no direct evocations of homoeroticism here, one may think of this as a scene of thwarted “queer” postcolonial masculinity vis-à-vis this normative Western conception of the subject. Pineda’s Caribbean subjects and couplings are critically divergent from Western norms of sexuality and the familial, conjugal, and relational structures these rely on. In this way, these sexual subjects are antinormative in relation to this Western imaginary; however, at the same time these gendered and sexual structures are presented as the predominant, that is normative, reality of the Caribbean society portrayed. Hence, Pineda’s works in *Internamiento* speaks of the multiple ways sexuality in the postcolonial Caribbean is wound up with questions of normativity and how these complicate all-too-neat determinations of what is normative and antinormative at any given moment.

In this exhibit and in other works from the 1990s, Pineda offers portrayals of Dominican postcolonial reality and of how different normative structures promiscuously intermingle. For example, Pineda’s 1994 woodcut *Casta casa* (*Chaste/Caste House*) speaks to the manifold interrelations of different normative systems and how they structure Dominican society (fig. 3). Unlike the series of works discussed above, in this work familial relations are put at the very forefront. *Casta casa* is a black-and-white representation of a house with three levels, and, again, the top part of the house

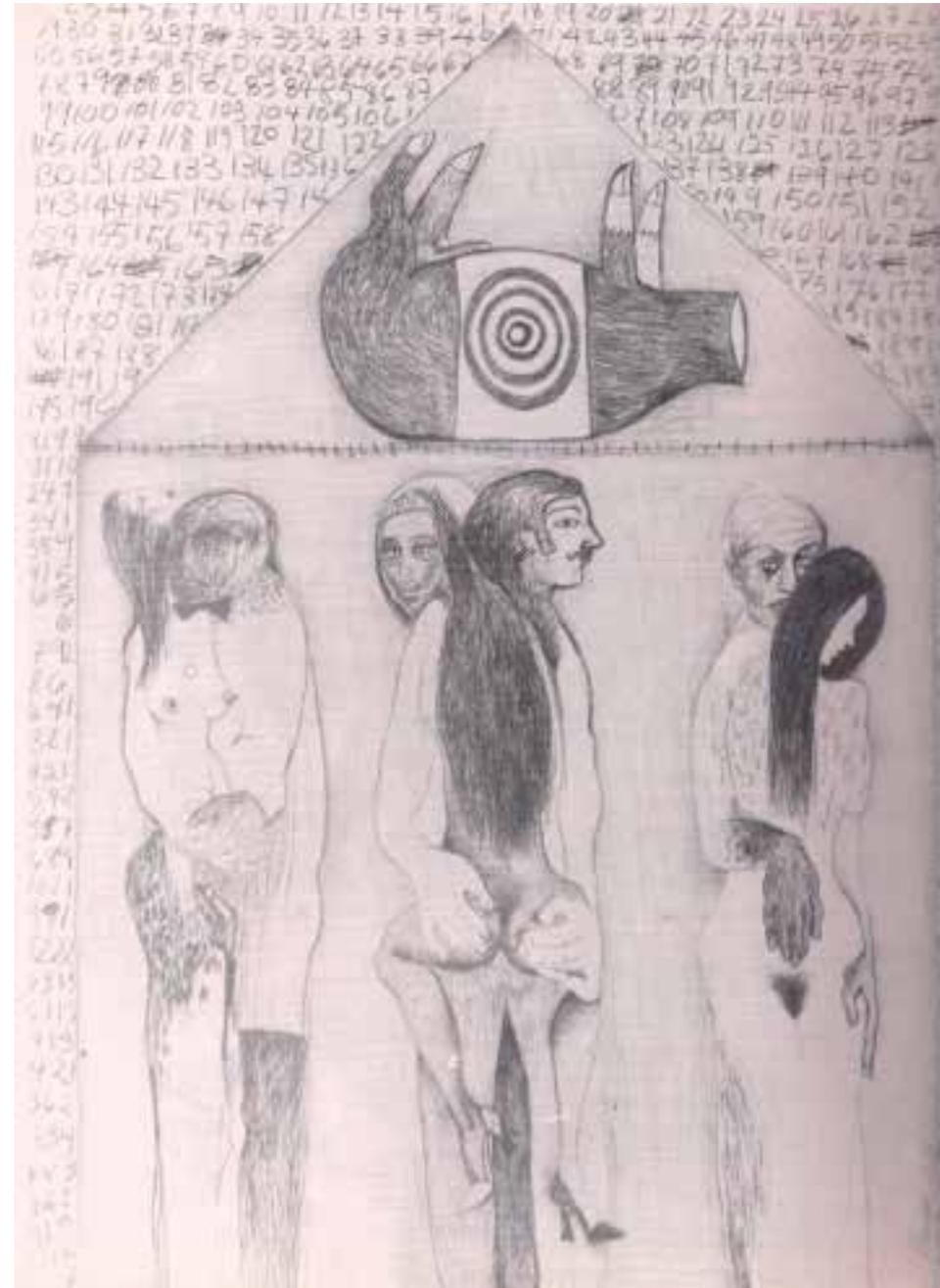


Figure 2. Jorge Pineda, *Casa de citas*, 1992. Pencil drawing, 1.20 x1.50 m. In *Jorge Pineda Dibujos*. Courtesy of the artist

features a strongly gendered and sexualized animal subject: here, two skinny dogs with their tails tucked in. Their disheveled appearance and different colorings—each is part black, part white, and a mix of these two colors in some parts—suggest the ubiquitous Dominican *viralata* (bastard dog). Notably, the genitals of one of the dogs are covered with a small black rectangle, speaking again to a simultaneous hypersexualization and sexual prudishness. The “heading” of these Caribbean houses by these animal subjects evokes the dehumanizing colonial processes through which these societies came into being and highlight their gendered and sexual implications, their effects on masculinity, their conceptions of family lineage (or the lack thereof), and their overall sexualization.

The Caribbean human subjects that populate this postcolonial “house” are also colored in white, black, and various shades in between, as well as covered with graphic symbols (arrows, circles, rectangles), letters, and numbers that point to an almost mechanical process underwriting their couplings and the offspring they have produced. The relations between men and women are characterized either by distance or through aggressive gestures, such as, for example, of men with their tongues stuck out at a woman in sexually suggestive ways. These sexualized and gendered dynamics are also literally



Figure 3. Jorge Pineda, *Casta casa*, 1994. Woodcut print, 3.66 x 1.83 m. Courtesy of the artist

underwritten with racial terms: a banner below each “family” describes with colloquial Dominican expressions their particular racial combination (“Trigueño claro+negro=indio puro” or “Indio Lavado y Mulato Da Blanco”). Yet not all banners refer to racial terms; several evoke color mixings that allude to other identity aspects, particularly those related to class and economic status (“verde” [green] equaling money and “azul” [blue] indicating aristocracy). Pineda’s *Casta casa* is thus a complex portrayal of how racial ideologies and class positions intersect with and suffuse gender and sexual relations in the Dominican Republic. Moreover, the piece, through the apparently rational (racial) equations with their illogical/impossible results, offers a complex indictment of the disavowals and desires that underwrite Dominican racial categories and sexual couplings. Symbolically this is represented also by how between the two *viralatas* there is a bleeding heart with an arrow and small goblet that appears to be gathering the dribbling blood. This iconic image and still life speak to the overall theme of this Dominican house: the bloodletting and lacerating aspects of these couplings as well as their inebriating effects. *Casta casa*, as do the works of *Inter-namiento*, speaks of a rampant sexualization of postcolonial Dominican society, a sexualization that does not coincide with modern Western norms of the bourgeois family, conjugality, and procreation; moreover, this sexuality is neither tied to these subjects’ psychological interiority nor to forms of personal agency or active “choice.” They are “interred” in these structures, structures that are not reducible to either modern Western nor so-called traditional Dominican logics of power but are what Chakrabarty terms “noncommensurable logics of power, both modern,” coexisting coterminously in colonial/postcolonial spaces.<sup>21</sup>

These earlier works, and perhaps Pineda’s earlier oeuvre more generally, offer complex and compelling portrayals of “what is,” of the intermingling of normative systems in postcolonial Dominican society. I want to argue that Pineda’s more recent work, widely shown internationally, especially his installations, offers a different critical angle and engagement

with the question of normative logics. Namely, his newer works tackle certain universalized (and idealized) modern Western concepts, specifically that of childhood, and reveal their “dark” sides; these idealizations with origins in the European Enlightenment were always already deeply embedded in troublesome histories of colonialism and racialization.<sup>22</sup> These works, hence, in Chakrabarty’s famous term, are “provincializing Europe” by showing “the modern as inevitably contested.”<sup>23</sup> Pineda offers in many of his installations powerfully unsettling contestations of the modern category of the child and the notions of innocence and purity associated with it. Ashis Nandy, another important Indian postcolonial theorist, has discussed the key role of childhood in Western thought and its link to colonial projects. Following other scholars, he notes how the “modern concept of childhood” was a “product of seventeenth-century Europe.”<sup>24</sup> This “new concept of childhood bore a direct relation to the doctrine of progress now regnant in the West,” and then “colonialism dutifully picked up these ideas of growth and development.”<sup>25</sup>

Pineda’s figural installations of lifelike children and youth provoke a strong sense of terror and deep unease by creating scenes that tell us something terrible must have taken place. One of his most famous installations, *El sueño de Winnie de Pooh* (*Winnie de Pooh’s Dream*; 2001) is notably featured on the cover of Jarne’s *Arte contemporáneo dominicano*.<sup>26</sup> This work features a fake grass lawn with flowers, under which one can make out the silhouette of a little girl’s body; her legs and feet, with white tights and black shoes, are sticking out from beneath the edge of the lawn (fig. 4). The quaint and homily garden scene, which appears carefully tended too, contrasts and ultimately masks a literally underlying crime: the little girl’s burial beneath it. This powerfully evokes a terrible “underside”—the human cost—underlying the manicured



Figure 4. Jorge Pineda, *El sueño de Winnie de Pooh*, 2001. Plastic lawn with flowers; partially covered child figure. Courtesy of the artist

lawn and the Western conceptions of tamed nature, of bourgeois society and family life, and of civilization it alludes to. A similar critique is made in another installation, *Los santos inocentes* (*The Innocent Saints*; 2004), which features a small child who, standing against a wall, has been wallpapered over; only her lower legs and feet, again in white tights and black shoes, are showing.

While these two works direct a critique at deeply compromising Western sociocultural positions toward femininity in general and girlhood specifically, other works feature young boys. Many of Pineda’s installations feature lifelike figures of children who are turned to a wall, a gesture that starkly suggests that they are being punished for something. The wall itself is covered with large, messy black carbon scribbles that each child seems to have made; however, the truly terrifying aspect of each installation is that the source of these black scribbles appears to be a burned body part of the child. The installation *Me voy* (*I am Leaving*; 2005) features a small boy standing in a corner with two black and burned arm stumps from which a whole series of black scribbles on the wall appear to emerge (fig. 5). The installation *El cuco* (*The Boogey Man*; 2005), even more terrifyingly features only the lower half of a child’s



Figure 5. Jorge Pineda, *Me voy, Sur*, 2006. Life-sized child figure; wall drawing. Courtesy of the artist

body, turned against the wall; the top is burned, the place from which, again, many black scribbles are emerging to cover the wall. Lastly, the installation *El bosque (The Woods; 2004)* features a little girl in a skirt and a hooded sweater with her face to the wall; this time it appears that her face has been burned, since this is where the black scribbles seem to originate from. All these pieces suggest that these children have been cruelly punished for coloring on the wall; yet, at the same time their crippling injuries are the very sources of their childlike expressions of creativity. They are, in their shame, turned toward the wall and away from the world. These installations thus evoke a complex indictment of Western conceptions of the child—the other of the self-possessed Western subject—that inextricably welds the notion of the child to grave forms of wounding. Though Pineda’s critical take on the figure of the child may not readily appear associated with any particular location, his work at least obliquely gestures toward the logics

of colonialism and its teleology of progress, imagined in racialized, gendered, and ageist terms, of bringing the infantilized, effeminate, and dark “other” toward civilization.

In other figural installations, Pineda’s critique is more specifically directed at racial politics and their effects. Indeed, Pineda won first prize in installation in the important national E. León Jiménez art competition in 2006 for a work titled *Afro* (fig. 6). This installation features a standing lifelike figure, facing a wall; the figure is, however, headless, with a large solid carbon circle on the wall in place of the head. The “afro” becomes here a gaping black hole that replaces the human head, the body part most strongly associated with human intelligence. This marker of blackness is both tied to the person’s shaming (being turned against the wall) and “beheads” or derationalizes him. Pineda’s installations thus powerfully unsettle the scaffolding of the modern (male) Western subject, namely, its foundational exclusions: of femininity, of childhood, of racialized others, and of death, as Pineda most recent works with skeletons suggest. His pieces show that the unsettling of this modern Western normative subject—an arguably queer project—is intimately tied up with the unsettling of the assumptions that governed colonialism and that have invariably become part of the post-colonial world. It is in this sense that Pineda challenges us to think the postcolonial and the queer



together as a project that can never forego the question of the antinormative, as Halberstam rightly insists, but for which one must also grapple with the cotemporality of multiple structures of normativity and antinormativity in the postcolonial world and the difficult challenges these raise for projects of social and sexual justice.

Figure 6. Jorge Pineda, *Afro Charlie*, 2009. Life-sized adolescent figure; wall drawing. Courtesy of the artist

# Endnotes

- 1 Lawrence La Fountain-Stokes, *Queer Ricans: Cultures and Sexualities in the Diaspora* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), ix.
- 2 Rosamund S. King, *Island Bodies: Transgressive Sexualities in the Caribbean Imagination* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2014), 213n1.
- 3 Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley, *Thiefing Sugar: Eroticism between Women in Caribbean Literature* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 28. The transnationalization of queer studies has been driven by "postcolonial queer theorists like Manalansan, Sinott, and Gopinath," who "have recently and crucially pushed for new queer cartographies" (25).
- 4 Robyn Wiegman and Elizabeth A. Wilson, "Introduction: Antinormativity's Queer Conventions," in "Queer Theory without Antinormativity," special issue, *differences* 26, no. 1 (2015): 4, 1.
- 5 Jack Halberstam, "Straight Eye for the Queer Theorist—A Review of 'Queer Theory without Antinormativity,'" 12 September 2015, [bullybloggers.wordpress.com/2015/09/12/straight-eye-for-the-queer-theorist-a-review-of-queer-theory-without-antinormativity-by-jack-halberstam](http://bullybloggers.wordpress.com/2015/09/12/straight-eye-for-the-queer-theorist-a-review-of-queer-theory-without-antinormativity-by-jack-halberstam), final para.
- 6 Jonathan Hartlyn, *The Struggle for Democratic Politics in the Dominican Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 101, 32, 101.
- 7 Rosario Espinal, "The Defeat of the Dominican Revolutionary Party in the 1986 Elections: Causes and Implications," *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 9, no.1 (1990): 104, 109.
- 8 Rosario Espinal, "Economic Restructuring, Social Protest, and Democratization in the Dominican Republic," *Latin American Perspectives* 22, no. 3 (1995): 76. These protests culminated most dramatically in "the food riots that ensued in April 1984 when angry crowds broke into stores, burned tyres and confronted security forces. Clashes between the national guard and rioting crowds left more than 100 casualties and hundreds in jails" (Espinal, "The Defeat," 110).
- 9 Espinal, "Economic Restructuring," 77.
- 10 Harlyn, *Struggle for Democratic Politics*, 137.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 138, 143.
- 12 In the late 1970s Balaguer's hold on power was waning as the "unemployment rate remained high," "the distribution of wealth was highly skewed," and "human and civil rights were severely curtailed." Espinal, "The Defeat," 103.
- 13 Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 46, 148, 129, 239.
- 14 "Into complacent and dissident?"; Jeannette Miller, "1980–1990," in Jeannette Miller and María Ugarte, eds., *1844–2000 Arte Dominicano: Pintura, Dibujo, Gráfica y Mural* (Santo Domingo: CODETEL, 2001), 258. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are mine.
- 15 *Ibid.*. This exhibit and the generation of artists associated with it centered on demanding access to important symbolic and representation spaces that they saw as occupied by an older generation of established Dominican artists who excluded them. Ultimately they would prove to be extraordinarily successful in their undertaking, since several members of this collective are now some of the most prominent Dominican artists and "forman parte hoy del mejor arte dominicano" ("are now part of the best Dominican art") (*ibid.*).
- 16 "A period that tries to break with what came before on all levels and by all standards"; *ibid.*, 266.
- 17 "An exemplary rupture with the folklorist and facile exoticist tendencies that monopolize the art business on La Hispaniola"; Ricardo Ramón Jarne, *Arte contemporáneo dominicano* (Madrid: Casa de América, 2002), 20.
- 18 "Different schemes, forms and styles"; "the new ideas and commitments . . . that fundamentally have been developed since the 1980s"; Marianne de Tolentino, "El arte actual en la República dominicana," in Antonio Zaya and María Lluïsa Borràs, eds., *Caribe insular: Exclusión, fragmentación y paraíso* (Badajoz and Madrid: Museo Extremeño e Iberoamericano de Arte Contemporáneo and Casa de América, 1998), 285.
- 19 Historically, painting—"hegemónica en tradición y cantidad" ("hegemonic in tradition and quantity")—has been considered the most important artistic media, perhaps not only in the visual arts but in the arts in general in the Dominican Republic (*ibid.*, 287). As de Tolentino notes, "La pintura ha identificado el arte nacional desde sus inicios" ("Painting has characterized the national arts since the beginning") (291). In contrast, three-dimensional works, and sculpture specifically, is described by de Tolentino as "estancada y conservadora" ("stalled and conservative") in the Dominican Republic (288). In fact, the artists who would turn to installations generally did not emerge from the National Fine Arts School that had played a decisive role for the formation of previous generations of artists. As Jeannette Miller describes, "Los artistas de los últimos 20 años cuentan con una fuerte formación gráfica, la mayoría ha incursionado en dibujo, grabado y diseño y muchos pertenecen al mundo de la publicidad y de la arquitectura"

(“The artists of the last twenty years have a strong training in graphic design, the majority has ventured into drawing, printing, and design and many belong to the world of advertising and architecture”) (*1844–2000: Arte dominicano*, 290). Indeed, incisive for the future developments of the Dominican arts was the opening of the Altos de Chvón School of Art and Design in 1983, associated with the Parsons School in New York.

- 20 “Works of consciousness”; de Tolentino, “El arte actual,” 288. “A strong visual aggression”; “entering the third millennium . . . the critical consciousness remains”; Miller, *1844–2000: Arte dominicano*, 258, 290.
- 21 Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 14.
- 22 “Concepts such as citizenship, the state, civil society, public sphere, human rights, equality before the law, the individual, distinctions between public and private, the idea of the subject, democracy, popular sovereignty, social justice scientific rationality, and so on,” describes Chakrabarty, “all bear the burden of European thought and history” (*ibid.*, 4).
- 23 *Ibid.*, 46.
- 24 Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), 14.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 15.
- 26 Jarné, *Arte contemporáneo dominicano*.

# charLANDVREUGD

SURINAME/NETHERLANDS

**Movt nr. 8: *The quality of 21*, 2016**

Video installation.

Images courtesy of the artist.





# When We Start Thinking: Charl Landvreugd's Multivalent Afropean Aesthetic

*Rosamond S. King*

Elsewhere I have argued that imagination can itself be considered a methodology.<sup>1</sup> This idea might seem obvious in relation to visual art, but it is particularly useful when examining the oeuvre of an artist who is also an intellectual. Charl Landvreugd has been presenting visual art formally since 2006, and his multigenre work includes video, installation, performance, and sculpture. While most of his art eschews narrative, instead embracing spectacle and suggestive abstraction, the artist has some very clear ideas about race and culture.

Landvreugd, who is completing a PhD in curatorial studies at the Royal College of Art in London, was born in Suriname but moved to the Netherlands at a very young age. He is focused on delineating a black Dutch and, more broadly, an Afro-European—or *Afropean*—visual art aesthetic. Landvreugd has a rising profile in the art world, and his work has been shown at venues such as the Dak'Art Biennial, the Trinidad and Tobago Film Festival, the Stedelijk Museum Bureau Amsterdam, and the Marowijne Art Parc. Though several interviews with Landvreugd have been published, and the artist-intellectual is in the process of releasing his own academic research, little criticism exists that addresses the content and structure of his art or his art in relation to his theoretical ideas. This essay traces the aesthetic continuities and major themes of Landvreugd's visual art and also explores how his art and scholarly ideas intersect.

I

Landvreugd's work between 2006 and 2014 includes two major series, the *Anarusha* sculptures (2009–10) and the *Atlantic Transformerz* (2010–14), that will be addressed here; more recent work will be addressed at the end of this essay.

The *Atlantic Transformerz* series is Landvreugd's largest and most widely exhibited work (in part because he repurposes the footage in multiple installations). The series of videos features very-dark-skinned black men, with a focus on their heads and chests; they are mostly in spectacular costumes and most have their skin covered with black pigment. The videos take place in the Netherlands, Suriname, the United States, and Senegal—locales that cover what is known as the black Atlantic. These videos and the performances they capture are nonnarrative; instead of a story, the viewer is confronted with a black man's visage (sometimes Landvreugd himself) against a black background or, in the Senegalese and Surinamese iterations, in specific landscapes. When their faces are visible, the men have either serious expressions or the slightest hint of a smile.

Figure 1. movt nr. 2: Atlantic Transformerz - Amsterdam: Lerone Mask (2010), Digital Print.



By focusing on close-ups of the head and shoulders, Landvreugd contradicts stereotypical ideas and images of the black man as all body (especially sexuality and brute strength) and no head or heart (specifically, intelligence or emotion). Even when an image portray a black man wearing a mask, it is neither ordinary nor expected because the mask used is not “African” but robotic, propelling the black man into the (Afro-)future as opposed to a stereotypically “primitive” or mythic past. In fact, the mask used is modeled on the *Transformers* animated show, specifically on the character Optimus Prime. Landvreugd seems to have been impressed by these characters for years; as a young person he was part of a breakdance crew called the Transformerz.<sup>2</sup> In the *Transformers* cartoon and movie franchise, Optimus Prime is a leader of his kind—beings that can change their shapes between vehicles and robots and who have come to Earth from another planet. Prime, who transforms between a robot and a truck, is distinguished by his extreme intelligence and martial arts fighting skills as well as by his sense of morality and desire to promote the “life and liberty of all sentient species.”<sup>3</sup> Even without this depth of knowledge about the *Transformers* reference, the symbolism is clear: black people, reviled and discriminated against by the majority in the global North, might prove to be intelligent *and* strong and might possess the knowledge and moral character necessary to save the human race. Finally, the “transformerz” of the title could be a metaphor for the ability of everyone—but especially of diasporic blacks, the descendants of people who survived some of history’s greatest atrocities—to transform into anyone or anything they wish.



Above Right:

Figure 2. *movt nr.1: Anaruka 5 (2010)*, Lava, Ceramic, Swarovski, Beads, Sequence, Lace, Felt, Ribbon, Hair, Nails, Paper, Gold leaf.

Opposite Page:

Figure 3. *movt nr.1: Anaruka 5 (2010)*, Lava, Ceramic, Swarovski, Beads, Sequence, Lace, Felt, Ribbon, Hair, Nails, Paper, Gold leaf.

Landvreugd’s other major body of work to date, the *Anarusha* series, also engages unexpected images of blackness. The sculptures, named simply *Anaruka 1*, *Anaruka 2*, and so on, challenge stereotypes by facing head-on, gesturing simultaneously toward the past and toward the future. The *Anarukas*—all made of ceramic covered in black enamel, all adorned with elements such as hair, lace, crystals, sequins, and glass—are figurative but not exactly human. The faces are melted; with no discernible eyes or mouth, they seem disfigured, grotesque. The adornment is also nontraditional: hair often surrounds the base of a bust, while lace might protrude out of the back of the head. These sculptures address the stereotypes of blackness as frightening, even evil, but they do so in a seductive way. The shininess of the enamel, the near-liquid quality of the material, along with the beauty of the adornment, compel you to look, even though the figure as a whole might be repellent. While the existing writing about these pieces has focused on the front and side views of these



striking sculptures, the rear should not be ignored. Other angles feature the glossy “faces” and the incongruity of natural (feathers, hair) materials with seemingly unnatural ones (the sculptures appear to be made of metal). The rear of each figure also displays this juxtaposition, but instead of a focus on the seemingly metallic lacquer, each back features a large natural element—the crystal part of a geode or a large lump of lava or rock salt. These elements are surrounded with more lace, crystals, hair, and other adornment. Without the disturbing faces to contend with, the rear views of these figures are quite beautiful and inviting. Again, the implication is that if we were to look from a different angle, and more closely, at what (or whom) we fear, we would be able to see inherent beauty and value.

Another important element of these sculptures that has gone unnoted is that the artist prefers for them to be displayed on the ground. They range from approximately twenty to thirty inches tall; of the nine sculptures, four are busts, while the others each stand on three short legs. Because of the combined scale and placement of the *Anarusha* sculptures, to see the details viewers must bend over. This dynamic emphasizes that humans are (supposedly) superior to the Anarusha, and that in order for us to truly understand this species, we have to alter our normal way of being. The relevance to twenty-first-century reality is clear: living by the status quo will not change either individuals or the world.

Both *anarusha* and *anaruka* are Kiswahili words; the former means “he who makes fly into the skies,” which the artist translates as “to fly,” while the latter translates as “to jump” or “to propel.”<sup>4</sup> Both words have a sense of traveling forward and into the future, with an emphasis on the volition of the verb’s subject that implies the agency of black people. For stationary sculptures to have such kinetic titles seems contradictory, but it reveals the artist’s intended meaning as more positive than negative. In fact, according to Landvreugd, the title *Anarusha* includes another positive intention: to pay homage to *The Arusha Declaration*, written by Julius Nyerere in 1967 while he was president of Tanzania. This declaration, one of the most important documents of that country’s history, begins by declaring the equality and rights of all human beings, both in absolute terms and in relation to self-expression, economic justice, and other matters.<sup>5</sup> This document also details the then government’s commitment to socialism, and it “resulted in the nationalization of a number of industries and public services.”<sup>6</sup> Although few gallery and museum visitors in the global North are likely to know this reference, it signifies Landvreugd’s own knowledge and priorities and that the *Anarusha* beings seek to propel us not only beyond antiblack racism, stereotypes, and mistreatment but toward a world more fully equitable for all human—and perhaps nonhuman—beings.

A predominant image in Landvreugd’s major body of work is the modified or distorted head and torso. This image traces back to an earlier work, *If I Could Be Anything* (2010), in which black

men's faces are very subtly altered via video editing to remove all footage of them blinking. Body modifications become more pronounced in both the sculpture series *Anarusha* and the *Atlantic Transformerz* performances and videos. In the latter, the transformation occurs through the application of makeup and other adornment, though the individuals remain easily identifiable as people. Ironically, the series with the word *transform* in its name transforms the human body less than the *Anarusha* series, the former leaning more toward modifying the body to make it a spectacle.

In contrast, the heads and shoulders of the *Anarusha* busts are distorted, and often are not even sitting upright but are leaning. Even the figures with legs seem not to have complete bodies, in any recognizable sense. The black lacquer is glossy and inviting, making you want to touch them. But the shapes—which, depending on your perspective, might seem to be slightly more than or slightly less than human—both invite and repel, especially when placed near to the floor. They invite you to come closer and examine them, perhaps to determine whether they are, in fact, human. And when you see that they are not fully or traditionally recognizable, the sculptures become a bit frightening.

In all of Landvreugd's major work before 2014, he used different media to communicate a consistent message, to invite a particular experience, and perhaps to encourage a particular response. Although the actual images are quite different—static, distorted faces; kinetic, adorned faces—the aesthetic of his work contains significant continuities. Together, these series communicate the message that black bodies (for Landvreugd, black male bodies in particular) are always already seen as distorted, difficult, possibly a little less than or a little more than human. Landvreugd's artwork invites and challenges the viewer to acknowledge the persistent stereotypes of black people in both Europe and North America and also to consider other possibilities—the black body as supernatural being, as space alien, as humanoid, as intergalactic traveler. The implicit response is that if we can acknowledge such a range of possibilities for black people, then we must also acknowledge that the centuries-old stereotypes have no basis in truth.

## II

Landvreugd's art is, of course, directly informed by his own experiences, in addition to his formal training in studio art and art history. Born in Suriname but relocated to the Netherlands at the age of three, Landvreugd typically identifies himself as a nonhyphenated Dutch person, which he describes as a “political choice” that emphasizes his right to full Dutch and European citizenship.<sup>7</sup> Though it is not his home, he regularly returns to the Caribbean, and he admits that Surinamese culture, such as the concepts related to the Afro-Surinamese religion Winti, influences his art.<sup>8</sup>

The artist describes one of his earliest major creative influences as *Deep in Vogue* (1989), an extended music video for the song of the same name by Malcolm McLaren and the Bootzilla Orchestra, featuring Lourdes and Willie Ninja. He studied the film and practiced and practiced to emulate the moves and style it portrays, including the voguing of the legendary Ninja.<sup>9</sup> Not long after, the young Land-

vreugd became involved in the local Dutch club scene. “I was twenty-two then,” he says, “and even at that age I was already a curator of sorts, a curator and artist. It was a great period.”<sup>10</sup> He indeed became a curator—not of “fine” art, in the traditional sense, but of DJs, drag queens, and other club performers.





The club influences on his work are enduring, and in a 2015 interview, he acknowledged the primacy of nightlife in the *Atlantic Transformerz* works in particular.<sup>11</sup> In fact, one of his most recent installations, *movt nr. 8: Destination Inner Space* (which includes several of the *Atlantic Transformerz* videos), part of the 2015 Rotterdam *AfroFuturism Now!* exhibit, mimics a nightclub environment.<sup>12</sup> Landvreugd's intention was to have people stand outside behind a velvet rope and be admitted into the gallery for an hour, during which time they would be encouraged to dance within the installation to a DJ spinning live. A review of this work described it as follows: "The original idea was that this space would be most profoundly experienced in a true clubbing setting, with a DJ guiding the multi-sensory experience of the meaning of dislocated connections, but unfortunately, this was not allowed for formal reasons so instead, a minimal, hypnotising trap beat, produced by Landvreugd himself, sampling afro-Caribbean non-verbal sound-language, looped through the speakers."<sup>13</sup>

Landvreugd's art in general, and the *Atlantic Transformerz* series in particular, can be read as within both queer and Caribbean aesthetic traditions. Faces encrusted with crystals, bodies swathed in feathers, stylized poses—all these are part of a broadly queer, and specifically *black and Latino* queer, aesthetic, as seen particularly in ball and voguing culture and drag performances. Landvreugd is well versed in the origins of voguing. He notes of 1930s Harlem: "The 'old style performance' had a heavy showgirl element with feathers and beads, as a picture of elegance and uber-femininity." He adds that in the 1990s voguing "integrate[d] angular and linear body movements, quickly moving from pose to pose."<sup>14</sup> Not only is Landvreugd aware of these cultures and traditions, he is also a participant in them. He organized the first voguing ball in the Netherlands, and he was the "vogue king" of Holland at age nineteen.<sup>15</sup>

Opposite Page:  
Figure 4. *movt nr. 6: Destination Inner Space* (2013), performance 15 minutes.



Figure 5. *movt nr. 2: Atlantic Transformerz*, New York: Nicky (2010), Digital Print

Making reference to a very different black queer influence, Landvreugd notes that he was attracted to Isaac Julien's film *Looking for Langston* in part because Julien "place[d] himself within a history." That history was one that featured another artist who was both black and gay. "As an artist, it is important," Landvreugd explains in the same interview, "that if I am going to speak about the self-evidence of being black, that I relate myself to black artists from the past, to a tradition."<sup>16</sup> He claims as within his tradition Surinamese writer Edgar Cairo, who has been described both as gay and as bisexual. This lineage is significant because neither Julien nor Cairo nor Hughes—giants of the black British, Afro-Surinamese, and African American art worlds, respectively—focused their work on sexuality. Most of the works of these three men focus on race and culture. Thus, though we cannot trace a specific type of artistic expression through Landvreugd's black "queer" lineage, we can notice that his reticence to explicitly include or address sexuality in either his artwork or his scholarship is similar to his chosen forefathers (until 2015's *movt nr. 8: Lobi Singi*, discussed below). His research into a lineage of Afropean artists, writers, and intellectuals is an important connection between his art and his theoretical intellectual work.

The *Atlantic Transformerz* and the *Anarusha* sculptures can also be understood as part of a Caribbean visual aesthetic. While Suriname and the broader Dutch Caribbean do not have a carnival tradition as dominant as that of Trinidad and Tobago, there are numerous popular performance traditions in Suriname, from tourist-oriented “Brazilian-style” carnivals to popular theater, dance, and song, such as the *banya*. *Banya* is a popular theater form that combines music and dance and that can have several topics and purposes.<sup>17</sup> It was first documented in the early eighteenth century.<sup>18</sup> During slavery, the *banya* song “traditionally served the purpose of passing messages that only could be fully understood by” those within the culture.<sup>19</sup> For instance, *banya* was sometimes performed to communicate details about plans for mass escapes from a particular plantation into the country’s interior. The relationship between the *banya* and Landvreugd’s twenty-first-century art is metaphorical rather than literal; some messages within the work are most readily available to people with particular cultural backgrounds or knowledge.

Landvreugd has researched *banya* and in 2012 published the essay “Spirited Gestures: Notes on Life Masquerading as Art,” in which he explicitly links Surinamese *banya* and US American voguing. He states that both traditions belong to “Diaspora performance histories.” In both *banya* and voguing “membership [in] the performing group guarantees a level of escape, liberation, protection, and prestige. Both found a way to experience a sense of freedom and escape from daily life through self-expression by means of performance.”<sup>20</sup> The *Anarusha* and *Atlantic Transformerz* series present alternate realities, avoiding both the banality and (for members of stigmatized groups) the danger of daily life through futuristic distortion and adornment.

Notwithstanding his cosmopolitan education and lifestyle that regularly crosses national and continental boundaries, Landvreugd is rooted primarily in the two cultures he grew up within: the Dutch and the Surinamese diaspora. Neither of these influences is obvious in his artwork, but they are there. The concept of the *Atlantic Transformerz* resonates with both the historical and contemporary experiences of African and Caribbean people who have prolif-

erated into diaspora largely through violent physical or economic coercion. Similarly, Landvreugd is convinced that some viewers of his *Anarusha* sculptures identify them with Caribbean culture, whether with Winti or with obeah. “If you are brought up with the knowledge of our [Surinamese] philosophical system,” says Landvreugd, “then you recognize what you see even though it is not obvious you may feel the intention that was there when the sculptures were made.”<sup>21</sup>

The so-called gay window theory argues that advertisers can appeal to sexual minorities without alienating heterosexuals by placing in their ads queer cues and clues that are recognizable by those who are part of particular queer cultures but not to those outside of them. Following this logic, what you see in Landvreugd’s work depends a great deal on what your experiences are. In fact, also following this logic, not all the artist’s audience will have the context to recognize both—or either—the Caribbean or the queer references. There may be a mosaic through which audiences can consider Landvreugd’s art—a black window, as well as a Caribbean one, one that is specifically Surinamese, and a queer one.

Any engagement with Landvreugd reveals that he has researched individual artists as well as particular performance traditions. It makes sense, then, to consider his scholarly research and how those ideas are connected to (or contradict) his artistic oeuvre.

### III

As any survey of contemporary journalism or social media will reveal, most European countries are struggling with the notion of nonwhite people as *Europeans* rather than only as immigrants, temporary workers, or refugees. Landvreugd, however, is interested in the existence of black Europeans as fact, not as a question or even an identity in formation. He focuses his intellectual work on delineating what comprises the Afro-European experience and what makes the art created from that experience unique. Similarly, Landvreugd argues that the discourse of postcolonial theory “does not always suffice” to analyze the art created by black people who live in the Netherlands or elsewhere in Europe.<sup>22</sup>

It is significant that Landvreugd himself is more interested in a black Dutch and an Afropean aesthetic than in a (black) queer or Caribbean (diasporic or otherwise) aesthetic. As an increasing number of critics have pointed out, most of the “African” artists celebrated in the global North live in Europe, which presents a distorted view of contemporary African art. A similar situation exists for Caribbean art, though it is not as extreme—several celebrated Caribbean artists do actually live within the region. Thus, Landvreugd’s research project, examining the visual strategies of Afro-Dutch artists with a focus on the production of cultural citizenship, is important. He advocates for local European concepts and terms that have the potential to encapsulate the sensibilities of that continent.

While his ideas, building on the growing field of Afro-European studies, are still in formation, Landvreugd is clear about his core concept: he is interested in blackness as “fact,” as “normal space,” as “self-evident” rather than blackness “as referential to whiteness.”<sup>23</sup> Two other interview quotes detail his intellectual focus: “The idea is to move away from a particular idea about blackness rooted in colonial history and to try to reimagine our lives from the point of view of the present and future modes of being on the [European] Continent. The question is, What does it mean to be black—here [in Europe], today”; “a black identity can be a self-referential space, with its own richness, rather than a space for struggle. For me, blackness is simply the lens through which I live as a Continental European. Blackness is me as *fact*.”<sup>24</sup>

Taking blackness—and queerness—for granted, instead of trying to explain or justify them is, for Landvreugd, when we *start* thinking.<sup>25</sup> At the *Small Axe* “Queer Caribbean Visualities” symposium, Landvreugd frequently used the phrase “When we start thinking” as he argued for those present to move beyond what seemed to him to be unnecessary and counterproductive explanation of and justification for the identities Caribbean, black, and queer.

For the years between 2006 and 2014, Landvreugd’s preoccupation with blackness and Afropolitanism as fact appeared in his visual art via the color black. This was an extremely conscious choice, one related to the artist’s interest in exploring the concept of race and the lived experience of Afro-European people. The men’s already dark faces covered with pitch black makeup in the *Atlantic Transformerz* series, the slick lacquer of the *Anarusha* sculptures—all serves to emphasize race, and specifically blackness. Referencing his “black works,” Landvreugd states that he used the color but was “refusing to be black in the understood way.”<sup>26</sup> Until 2014, blackness was “a point of departure” for nearly all his work.<sup>27</sup>

In 2014, Landvreugd’s visualization of “blackness as fact” shifted in a major way. He realized that blackness does not have to be emphasized. Subsequently, in his most recent work, the color black no longer dominates, and race is no longer the primary topic or an explicit focus. However, this should not be seen as a progress narrative. Rather, this shift exhibits a different way of conceptualizing and manifesting the same fundamental idea the artist has been working with for years.

Landvreugd explains that he makes art because he is “trying to understand something,” and the topic he was preoccupied with understanding for years was blackness.<sup>28</sup> Now, as he nears the completion of his doctorate and becomes clearer about his ideas around race, both Landvreugd and his art are trying to understand something else: “At this stage in my career I feel that the Queerness needs more deliberate attention on my part.” He also clarifies that his current research includes an examination of “Queer strategies as tools to re-imagine Blackness in continental Europe.”<sup>29</sup>

Landvreugd has said about sexuality in his work; “It is present when one is looking for it.” While one does not have to look very hard for queerness in the heavy adornment of the *Anarusha* sculptures and the black men’s bodies of the *Atlantic Transformerz* series, in *movt nr. 8: Lobi Singi* queerness cannot be avoided. *Lobi Singi* is Landvreugd’s first artwork to directly address same-sex desire and to include explicitly sexual imagery. Before *Lobi Singi*, Landvreugd had said of his work, “Rather than stating the obvious it is much more compelling to play with the idea of the Caribbean and hide the presence of queerness within the visual.”<sup>30</sup> But now, with this film, queerness is not hidden at all.

The video, just over four minutes long, consists of several layers of footage, predominantly interracial gay pornography overlaid with a white man in a uniform with a gun and with various background images, as well as with audio text of James Baldwin from *Take This Hammer*, a 1964 documentary featuring the author and activist. Landvreugd’s film begins with an eye looking through a hole, marking the audience both the voyeur and the watched. Most of the footage is black and white, which along with the peephole is reminiscent of surveillance video while emphasizing the different skin colors of the sex partners—the white men are always in a “bottom” position. In fact, the multiple layers of footage make the film physically difficult to watch; your eyes do not know what to focus on. *Lobi Singi*, which has only been screened twice, is likely to further unsettle viewers, not because of the explicit gay sex scenes but because the power dynamic in some of the interracial sex scenes is unclear, and because of Landvreugd changing the word *nigger* to *faggot*.



Figure 6. Still from *movt nr. 8: The Quality of 21* (2016).

The text Baldwin speaks in the film is quite well known. He explains to the interviewer that “niggers” are the invention of white people and that such an invention reflects on those same white people. Landvreugd’s changes—bleeping the word *nigger* while simultaneously flashing “\*\*gg\*\*” on the screen—claims Baldwin as someone more open about his homosexuality than he in fact was. It also emphasizes the presence of both race and sexuality in Landvreugd’s oeuvre. While he states that his previous work focused on race to the exclusion of sexuality, I argue that a queer aesthetic has consistently been present. Similarly, with *Lobi Singi*, Landvreugd seems to be focusing on sexuality, but the deliberate choice of interracial sex acts with black “tops,” and of course the use of James Baldwin’s voice and text, mean that race is also very present. The film’s lack of subtlety is one of the reasons that it is the least strong of the works examined here. So much of Landvreugd’s other work is precise and polished; in contrast, the details of *Lobi Singi* seem uneven and rushed. The unnecessary self-censorship of “faggot” to “\*\*gg\*\*” and the sometimes too-easy use of visual text do not stand up to the images and audio that Landvreugd chose. Nevertheless, the video marks an important shift in his work.

The title *Lobi Singi* is Sranan for “love songs.” With nineteenth-century origins in the Surinamese du theatre, which itself is related to the banya form, *lobi singi* are unique because the tradition, which continues today, “sings the praises” of friendships and other relationships between women and because all of the participants in the tradition are women.<sup>31</sup> Although some scholarly work has examined the *lobi singi*, as well as bisexuality, homosexuality, and other practices of Afro-Surinamese *mati*, very little research has been done on male same-sex practices in Suriname or elsewhere in the Dutch Caribbean.<sup>32</sup> Landvreugd’s *Lobi Singi* does not attempt to do that work (though it gestures toward the need for it); rather, the title implies a deep connection to Suriname. As a whole, the video signifies links to three major components of the African diaspora: North America, through Baldwin’s words; Europe, through footage from a Jean Genet film; and the Caribbean, through its title.

*Movmt nr. 7: On Cairo* (2014) is also part of Landvreugd’s shift away from an explicit focus on race in his artwork; this performance’s focus is on culture but in an unexpected way. A three-channel video with English translation of the 1969 Sranan text from *After Temekoe*, by Surinamese author Edgar Cairo, is consistently in the center. To each side is an image of a black man, resonant of the *Atlantic Transformerz* figures, with chest uncovered and lower body covered with a Surinamese cloth. The man on the left has his face and shoulder adorned with crystals, while the man on the right has some body adornment, but his head is covered by the Optimus Prime mask. With the exception of the color of their cloths, the style of adornment, and the mask, the two figures appear to be the same man.

The language, sung by a female chorus interspersed with a male voice reading, addresses topics such as community, ancestors, and the concept of time. The language is full of proverbs and call-and-response practice. According to Landvreugd, during a live performance of *On Cairo* in Holland, many young black Dutch in the audience became frustrated because they could not understand the Sranan text or songs and had to rely on the written Dutch translation. The artist himself struggled reading aloud some of Cairo's text, and he was publicly admonished during the performance by several older Surinamese women. As Landvreugd explains, the performance was "about the tradition, the loss of tradition, and how we reinvent it" in the diaspora.<sup>39</sup> The video supports this message: the text is centered, both visually and aurally, and yet the small size of the text in relation to the images implies that while it is important, even intellectually, emotionally, and culturally central, it is not wholly or exclusively important. The figures—two versions of the same person—represent who the Afro-European is and can become, but there is no option to remain in the center, in the place of the cultural past. While body adornment is present, the overall tone of the piece is quieter than Landvreugd's earlier work, and each man's gaze is less confrontational and more meditative.

Created and exhibited in 2015 in Suriname, *movt nr. 8: Robby* also demonstrates a shift away from race—here, toward interiority. While the *Anarusha* sculptures and the *Atlantic Transformerz* series presented different possibilities for the black subject, they also focused on spectacle. *Robby*, however, shifts to a portrayal of the black man with everyday objects—and even such objects on their own—portraying spaces that are both domestically and emotionally interior. The installation consists of a mirror and five framed photographs hung together. From afar, they make a tableau that could exist in many homes. But a closer look reveals that the installation is not so normal. The mirror is hung too high for the average person to see themselves. Some of the images are crisp, while others are blurry; one is rotated ninety degrees, and another is hung upside down. One image portrays the artist on an outside bench, in a position that could be despair or repose; another shows the artist, pensive, standing in a ramshackle building that is open to the natural world. *Robby* illustrates Landvreugd's concept of blackness as fact by emphasizing that blackness both is



Figure 7. *movt nr. 8: Uitkijk* (2015).

and occupies normal space.<sup>34</sup> Even the title, a simple name, is intimate and straightforward. If his earlier work focused on blackness as a place to start thinking, the newest work emphasizes the black person as thinking and feeling. The installation is all the more poignant because we do not know *what* the subject is thinking or why the setting and objects near him are significant.

While it lacks the flash of earlier pieces, the new work is exciting; its emotion, combined with its inscrutability, invites a longer gaze. After all, while it is true that the majority of the global North struggles to accept the full range of possibilities of what black people are and can be, it is also, unfortunately, true that these discourses are even farther away from understanding the range and depth of what black people *think and feel*.

#### IV

Imagination can be a tool to help us investigate the world we share. And, as Landvreugd points out, “artwork can produce new knowledge.”<sup>35</sup> Yet neither of these obviates the fact that scholarship and criticism are also useful tools. In the end, Landvreugd’s artwork exhibits but does not prioritize a queer Caribbean visuality. Often, both the queerness and the Caribbeanness are visible mostly to those who recognize the cues. And yet one could argue that this very subtlety is one manifestation of a queer Caribbean visuality. Part of multiple communities and diasporas, it makes sense that Landvreugd’s art will be viewed differently by different audiences. After all, notwithstanding Landvreugd’s repeated comments, not all of us “start thinking” in the same place. If we did, we would not need the hashtag BlackLivesMatter, nor would we need to explain the problematics of #JeSuisCharlie. Hopefully, our collective (Afro-)future will continue to include both artwork and scholarship that helps us all to recognize each other’s multivalent human potential.

## Endnotes

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- 9 Charl Landvreugd, Skype interview by the author, 1 April 2015.
- 10 Charl Landvreugd, quoted in Wayne Modest, “On the Self-Evidence of Blackness: An Interview with Charl Landvreugd,” *Small Axe*, no. 45 (November 2014): 125.
- 11 Charl Landvreugd, Skype interview by the author, 1 April 2015.
- 12 According to the artist, “Thematically, all the movements are connected.” His use of numbered “movements” (or, as he writes them, “movt nrs”) corresponds to particular moments in his personal and intellectual life; some overlap, some have ended, and some are ongoing. See Clelia Coussonnet, “Exclusive Interview: Charl Landvreugd—in the Framework of the Exhibition *Who More Sci-Fi than Us*,” *Uprising Art*, 25

- July 2012, [blog.uprising-art.com/en/exclusive-interview-charl-landvreugd-2](http://blog.uprising-art.com/en/exclusive-interview-charl-landvreugd-2).
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- 15 Charl Landvreugd, Skype interview by the author, 1 April 2015.
- 16 Landvreugd, quoted in Modest, "On the Self-Evidence of Blackness," 132.
- 17 Trudi Guda, "Banya, a Surviving Surinamese Slave Play," in Albert James Arnold, ed., *A History of Literature in the Caribbean*, vol. 2, *English- and Dutch-Speaking Regions* (Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2001), 616.
- 18 G. M. Martinus-Guda, "Banya: A Surinamese Slave Play That Survived," in Jay B. Havisser and Kevin C. MacDonald, eds., *African Re-Genesis: Confronting Social Issues in the Diaspora* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast, 2006), 106.
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- 20 Landvreugd, "Spirited Gesture," 1, 3.
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- 25 Interestingly, although Landvreugd's research does not address sexuality, his ideas about it are similar to his thoughts about race: "Queerness is a circumstance, not a badge." Charl Landvreugd, Skype interview by the author, 1 April 2015.
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- 32 See especially the work of Gloria Wekker and Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley.
- 33 Landvreugd, interview by Perrée.
- 34 Modest, "On the Self-Evidence of Blackness," 128.
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TRINIDAD/CANADA

***First Generation***, 2015

Digital photographs.

Images courtesy of the artist.





# Unpretty Disruptions: Listening and Queering the Visual in Richard Fung's Videotapes

*Terri Francis*

The term *unpretty* came up unexpectedly in the course of informal conversation, as insights often do. It was a pithy way to talk about Richard Fung's videomaking aesthetic and its interventions on behalf of critiquing whiteness in its many forms. The unpretty is a queering and querying visuality that thrives in Fung's work in three formulations: his deconstructive approach to generic conventions of experimentalism and pornography; the effects of his do-it-yourself/bricolage aesthetics of appropriated images and the materiality (both visual and economic) of videotape; and his critique of whiteness as a representational regime. Its major terms and frameworks are presented in a dialogue format, reflecting what I consider to be the listening ethic of the Fung/us videotape: conversation, with its digressions, repetitions, and free associations hold together such kaleidoscopic thoughts-apes as sexual communities and ethnic diasporas.

## **Listening as Disruptive Strategy**

This listening essay examines how videomaker Richard Fung uses the unpretty strategy to invite reexaminations of dominant visual narrative structures, particularly in Hollywood media and gay pornography. It then pivots to the unstable meanings of the Caribbean, as discussed by Stuart Hall, for thinking about Fung's cinema of intersecting diasporas. Within the "Caribbean Queer Visualities" project, one of the more complex tasks is bridging what can seem like disparate critical discussions of sexuality and of ethnicity. But conversation, not only talking but careful listening, as Fung demonstrates, offers a powerful strategy disrupting this impasse. A portion of Fung's filmography consists of autoethnographies, revisiting his Chinese Trinidadian heritage in the Caribbean, while

other works take on the role of race in forming sexual identity. What holds them together is a critique of whiteness and dominant narrative forms in media.

Lyndon K. Gill's essay "Situating Black, Situating Queer: Black Queer Diaspora Studies and the Art of Embodied Listening" asks us to think about the body as a vessel of listening and of experience. Its theoretical foundations rest on innovations in black feminist anthropology and queer anthropology that are centered on participant observation methodologies. "Black feminist anthropology," Gill explains, "promotes this listening practice as part of an elaborate strategy for interrupting certain forms of biased knowledge (re) production in the service of a holistic praxis of social transformation." And the contributions of queer anthropology are just as crucial because "queer anthropology . . . has insisted upon the inclusion of sexuality as a category of analysis in any fully embodied listening praxis." In thinking the efficacy of queerness in Caribbean visibility, the ancient technology of conversation advances an urgent praxis of producing work that is reflexive and connected to actual viewing communities. Fung's videos present a reflexive discussion about what constitutes documentary, but they also provide a public forum of gay Asian men discussing and deconstructing white gay media's construction of desirability.<sup>1</sup>

Fung's videotapes provoke us to listen to the voices in our heads. He appropriates the conventions of documentary, such as medium shots of experts speaking, explanatory text, voiceover, historical footage, and narrative, but he disrupts the expected flow of these elements with reflexive fantasy or performance sequences. In his 1986 *Chinese Characters*, for instance, gay Asian men describe (their) experiences with gay pornography as they sit posed within a carefully staged mise-en-scène. Diverse voices and viewpoints are heard, but each man on screen is not identified by name, and the

use of asynchronous sound makes each vignette resonate beyond the expository. The word *characters* in the video's title seems benign, yet the text of the film reveals that it is a barbed and incisive read on the way personhood is always already fabricated and what seems authentic is generated through our absorption or imitation of the characters and caricatures we see and are seen through in media. The artfulness of *Chinese Characters* reworks and unpretty conventional documentary technique in order to explore dialogues of sexuality and race and their reproduction in society and in the self. Brief shots of Croton leaves in the "South" section of *Chinese Characters* highlight the West Indian location of Fung's childhood, where he experienced his "first encounter with fairy tales as an already nostalgic text[,] . . . another shore of the ever-expanding Chinese diaspora."<sup>2</sup> The Caribbeanness in Fung's videos visually traces migration and the layered formations of identity for the public self but also the private, intimate self. Through Fung we understand place as itself media—an intervening complex of stories and, of course, desires about location and identity between the self and society. In *Chinese Characters* particularly, but throughout all Fung's videotapes, the editing style embodies the desiring paradox, what it is to want to be wanted where you're not wanted, particularly when Fung's performers reenact scenes from appropriated pornography. The video's cuts, performances, and repetitions embody the uneven sifting, resisting, and desiring of images of the self, even as the othered self.<sup>3</sup> In *Chinese Characters*, how Fung uses the architecture and the porn clips as one framing within the larger frame exemplifies this point—the double framing emphasizes the importance of its contents but undermines it too. Fung's practice of bricolage highlights the value-structured improvising and recontextualizing of preexisting materials.<sup>4</sup>



Figure 1. Richard Fung's *Chinese Characters* (1986) examines the ambiguous relationship between gay Asian men and white gay porn. Still image provided by the videomaker

## Office Hours

Putting spoken exchanges into print amplifies and makes permanent that which is usually ephemeral, since it prioritizes lived experience, verbal, intellectual, and emotional bricolage, and multidisciplinary. It is a queer thing to do, as in odd, curious, or indeterminate and between specifics. Its place here makes the essay something like the bricolage of a Fung video, foregrounding improvisation, listening, and mutuality. And there is also the somewhat risky unevenness of translating the inflections of the spoken word into written structure. But listening seems a necessary adventure in queering Caribbean visualities and being accountable.

This essay grew from nested collaborations, beginning with “Caribbean Queer Visualities II” and continuing in a discussion after class with Josh Byron, a queer white undergraduate filmmaker in my Black Women Make Movies class.<sup>5</sup> They mentioned their curiosity about combining their filmmaking with curating a microcinema, which made me think of Fung’s engagement with multiple publics as a videomaker, writer, teacher, and social activist throughout his career. I sent Josh off on a binge-watch, and when they reported back that they were enthralled with the videos, I decided I wanted to learn from their viewing experience. We recorded the in-person exchange of ideas that followed, and it is excerpted and edited here.

**Joshua Byron:** But I think that one of the other problems is that even the queer film circuit can become a gateway or a filter very quickly. A lot of queer film festivals, at least the few that I’ve started to hear of, have this sort of “everything needs to fit in a different program” approach. So they have very specific themes—

**Terri Francis:** Which can quickly become programmatic and prescriptive.

**JB:** Which I think is why Richard Fung’s situating his films between documentary and art film and as independent films in *community* is a way to circumvent that. In the microcinema, many

more people get involved in film [exhibition], so there’s kind of this contextual work already happening, and all those people *know* about the film and you get it in different places—and they are closer to it. That is very powerful, and it kind of breaks that festival [model] *down*. I think he’s circumventing a lot of these ideas of film festivals as gateways and gatekeepers and just kind of doing the work and getting it in places.

**TF:** He has said that he sees his work as more pedagogical than anything.<sup>6</sup> One of the issues has to do with the way film festivals solved a problem but raised new problems of inclusion and exclusion, but what you’re also saying is that it’s . . . the goal of the film festival is something like “consumability.”

**JB:** Yes. I’m critical of media that sells gayness, especially when it is divorced from bodies. The body does not define queerness, but the idea that queerness is in fact a bodily issue is an important one. Stripping sex from queerness results in these ideas of the ideal chaste white gay. Of course queerness is not merely sex, but divorcing queerness from sex can easily result in a diverse silent other.

**TF:** But the queer film—and I’m thinking of your film *Queer yet Godly* (2015)—like all pretty things, can have a *musicality*, in which its appeal could undermine its intervention.

**JB:** Yes. Fung’s use of pornography in his videotapes reeducates the idea that sex is dirty partly by this intervention of inserting porn into art films and by creating art porn with something like *Steam Clean* (1990) or *Chinese Characters*.

**TF:** And making sure there’s a body there.

**JB:** A character in *Chinese Characters*—he seems to be from Malaysia—says, “One of the things that I’m grateful about in my experiences with North American porn is it increases my ability to fantasize and make those fantasies come true . . . and feel good about those fantasies. It’s not dirty or whatever. It helped me overcome guilt. When I say that, I’m thinking particularly about the washroom. When I was in Malaysia, I was cruising the washroom. But I always feel it’s dirty. It’s a place where people go and shit and piss, and to change that attitude to, ‘You know, so what? You know, it’s a bodily function.’ It helped me to become more free and open doors to more different ways to have sex.” So there is that idea of sex as dirty.

**TF:** In his case, white porn was liberating, not humiliating, for him as an Asian man. Shaming can be replicated in scholarship too. When we talk about sexuality without sex, it’s “the softpedalling of the hanky-panky.”<sup>7</sup>

**JB:** Fung challenges the idea that queerness is not involved with the body. Queerness is always linked to the body, whether the body is correct, is attainable, or is pure. The idea of purity is constantly open to interpretation and interrogation in queer film and especially in Fung's work.

**TF:** Let's not talk in vague generalities. We need a good pictorial and detailed summary of *Steam Clean* here and Thomas Waugh's essay has a rich one: "A subjective hand-held camera moves attentively through a gay male sauna past towel-wrapped clients in the corridor and the cubicles, to an upbeat disco-ish soundtrack. The subject, soon revealed as a slim young Chinese man in a jaunty baseball cap, considers several potential sexual partners and is declined by others, before finally coming to an unspoken agreement with a South Asian man of the same age. In the latter's mirrored cubicle, the two engage in kissing and caressing and then anal intercourse, the seated Chinese man penetrating his partner who is astride his lap. The men's bodies as well as their condom and lubricant are all carefully and graphically shown in closeup operation. Safe sex slogans scroll by in several languages and then the final credits."<sup>8</sup> A description like this makes us notice the body in terms of content but also the body of the picture itself. And let's be specific about the logics of pornography here, which are basically "the lack of mimetic interference with naked bodies, the double-identifications of sexual virtuality, and the rhetoric of the cum shot."<sup>9</sup> The double-identification reference reminds me of a quote from one of the guys in *Chinese Characters*: "But it's sort of a different thing, though, when gay men say, 'Suck my dick,' or something like that. It's sort of different because you can use it for yourself." It's not an either/or top/bottom thing.

**JB:** But there is still the paradox that the orgasm of the penis, visually or phallically, is placed above that of the woman in straight porn. In gay porn, a similar aesthetic occurs. As Fung incisively points out, engaging Richard Dyer's work on gay

porn, "Although at a level of public representation gay men may be thought of as deviant and disruptive of masculine norms because we assert the pleasure of being fucked and the eroticism of the anus, in our pornography this takes a back seat."<sup>10</sup> The pleasure of the penetrating penis is promoted over the pleasure of the anus. Fung deconstructs that in *Steam Clean*. Not wanting to create a passive Chinese stereotype, he made the Chinese man the top; however, this made the Indian man the bottom. Fung assuages this by valuing the pleasure of the anus and having the Indian man play the role of the power bottom. Fung is invested in thinking about bottoming in perhaps a way that invites agency and pleasure. Linda Williams, too, also points out the gendered idea of the "feminized 'bottom'" and all the problematics that entails as well. However, Williams, like Fung, understands that the dominated is also a dominator in a way. The bottom does not forgo all power.<sup>11</sup>

**TF:** *Steam Clean* is a public service announcement about safe sex but it does seem erotic too. It's instructional but when the titles read, "Fuck safely." That says go have fun, which seems unexpected somehow.

**JB:** Victorian morality is not new, nor has it disappeared, but the way porn has evolved to draw on ideas of dirtiness has created an ideal dirt aesthetic. Gritty, hedonistic, and socially "dirty." Penetration has historically been the definition of hard core. The penis is what is always hidden, the penis is what is kept "under wraps." Partly due to misogyny, partly due to homophobia, the penis is dirty. Not to be seen.<sup>12</sup>

**TF:** But it is seen in Fung's films. I actually thought of *Steam Clean* and *Chinese Characters* as forms of erotica, but the José Esteban Muñoz essay in *Like Mangoes in July* has me seeing Fung's "interventionist video performances"—the work they do—in a more nuanced way.<sup>13</sup>

**JB:** Fung writes, "Even in my own video work, the stress has been on deconstructing sexual representation and only marginally on creating erotica."<sup>14</sup> The deconstruction, while not necessarily filling the same void [of diverse representation in gay porn], is filling a different void of talking about Asian sexuality in explicit ways; it fills this space and problematizes not just the idea that queerness is dirty but whether cleanliness is the goal. Fung criticizes the penetration of queer porn with Judeo-Christian and white values. He also critiques porn's rejection of the validity of the pleasure of wanting to be fucked. The miseducation of white gay porn creates odd ways for queer Asian men to enter into gay sexual contexts. In *Chinese Characters*, one of the men says, "A lot of times people make comments that I speak English normally with a Happy Chinese accent, but when I go to bed and I start to talk dirty, [they say,] 'How come you drop your accent?' [laughing] Well—because I learned this right from the start through another language, and I've adapted myself so well that whenever I think of something dirty, I would just speak like a Caucasian." White gay porn as education is limited. But Fung isn't against porn; he calls for better porn industries.<sup>15</sup>

**TF:** Cut to a man who appears to read from a script. No matter how sincere it seems, the staging is important to how it works. The interviews are so interesting because of what they say but also because the audio looks out of sync with the video, as if it's being translated.

**JB:** Fung is intent on deconstructing the ethics of porn not on the basis of exploitation or economics but on the basis of inclusion. Fung sees porn as possible pedagogy, yet a dangerous one in which Asians are often demeaned or left out entirely.

**TF:** Let's go back to the discourse of dirtiness and cleanliness you raised a minute ago.

**JB:** "Queer dirt." That's my shorthand for the idea of queer as dirty. Many heterosexuals associate gay male sex acts with the anus and thus with excrement; queer folks are mediated through notions of uncleanliness and disgust, and this is even more relevant for queer folks living with HIV/AIDS. In a personal essay, "poz" blogger Alexander Cheves describes a confrontation with his father, where he said, "It's poop. That's all gay sex is. You'll live in some apartment that smells like stool, and you won't even notice it because you'll live in it." Cheves writes that his father said, "You'll go off to the city and die of AIDS," tying together queerness, urban filth, and disease.<sup>16</sup> The confluence of discourses of dirt and queer sexuality underscored his sense of shame once he was diagnosed.

**TF:** Fung is able to almost use—

**JB:** Deprettying. The videotape as a medium has the ethics and aesthetics of DIY. There's a fuzziness and unprettiness to it that recalls porn and dirtiness.

**TF:** Yeah.

**JB:** It's not exactly unprettifying. But it's unprettifying enough that you're focused less on cinematographic issues such as, "Is this shot well? How does this sound?" And I'm not saying that the

sound is bad, or the shots. There are some very beautiful moments and there's some very interesting sound mixing. That's *not* the problem. But I just think it's not going to be this Hollywood aesthetic, or even *trying*, because that's not the point of queer film.

**TF:** Because queerness seems like an indeterminacy. A kind of movement among and between. And I remember in my conversation with Richard at the symposium, I said, "Queerness feels like a lifeboat, it feels like a raft"—but what did I mean by that? I could have meant a lot of things.

**JB:** But that's what queerness is. It *can* mean a lot of things. It's this murky space that people can be in. Versus—I think gayness is very restricted to certain cultural aspects, to certain ways of being read. And queerness is kind of a breach against those specificities.

**TF:** A breach against the specificities . . .

**JB:** So the *lifeboat* might be getting off the boat and floating through the different islands, and so maybe the queerness . . . I don't know . . . is the moving between.

**TF:** The moving between—

**JB:** But I don't think it's moving between sexualities either. I've seen queerness defined that way, and that's still a restricting way of thinking about queerness. Because it's not just movement between, "Hi, I'm bi," or "I'm pan." But I think it's kind of moving between and breaking even those [categories] down into fluidity. Queerness also lends itself to more gender fluidity than gayness.

**TF:** For a while I was worried about this term being too comfortably flexible. I was worried about appropriating, overusing it . . . *breaching* it somehow.

**JB:** I think it's a hard word to breach.

**TF:** It's very friendly.

**JB:** It is! Queer friendly. I think it's much more open than gayness. Which I thought was interesting, watching Fung's films. So many people define themselves as gay.

But, I mean, of course it's a different time. But to see these people describe themselves as *gay* struck me. I noticed that they do seem to differentiate between *white gay* and *gay*, which I think is totally right, but that's what queerness is trying to compensate for—the whiteness of gayness.

**TF:** Could you say more?

**JB:** Well, I feel like the whiteness of gayness is that gayness has been a constructed field to be super involved with marriage and [policies such as] with Don't Ask, Don't Tell and super involved in

these constructions of nationalism with homonationalism. Being against capitalism is a much more queer [perspective] because white gayness wants to assimilate. Queerness is much more likely to be paired with other forms of resistance, so I think when I hear somebody say that they're queer, I think they're invested in the cause. It's much easier to be invested in antiracism or socialism or punk aesthetics with queerness than it is through gayness because I think gayness is much more rigid. It wants you to get the man, get the cottage in Massachusetts, and have the white dog. A lot of people in Fung's films—that's not what they're looking for, and so they understand [queerness] intuitively without using that term. And I think the film *Orientations* (1984), in talking to people of color, supports this idea. As black women are precluded from white ladyhood (read, cleanliness/whiteness), so too are queer men, especially queer Asian men.<sup>17</sup> However, the distinction between *queerness* and *white gayness* here is critical. As white gays assimilate into marriage and the army (as Conrad Ryan points to in his *Against Equality* project), they are allowed to participate in the chasteness and cleanliness of whiteness (as I am asserting). However, queer Asian men are not allowed this right, and gay shame perpetuates powerful emotional, cognitive, and spiritual blocks.

**TF:** So you make a distinction between queerness and gayness?

**JB:** White gayness and queerness are distinct and opposed, particularly in how each handles skin. A queer aesthetic cannot seek to assimilate to white norms of civility, shame, power, patriarchy, or celibacy. Queerness seeks to neither impose chasteness nor hypersexuality and allows for both to exist as long as neither is imposed. This is one of the key differences between white gayness and queerness. Queerness allows for multitudes. Or as Thai filmmaker Apichatpong Weerasthukul states in a recent interview, "For me the word 'queer' means 'anything is possible.'"<sup>18</sup> Queerness is not as much concerned with what it is as what it is not. It is not white gayness. It is not cis white heteropatriarchy. That's where the shore ends. Queerness's borders are set against those of white men.

**TF:** Ok, I need to think about this ocean metaphor some more. Because if queerness is a lifeboat in the Caribbean Sea, then we need to consider the history of that water as one point in the maritime routes of the Atlantic slave trade. New thalassology scholars reject the tendency to theorize "from the shore" because that is an imperial/colonial position. They tend to propose oceanic orientations/metaphors instead.<sup>19</sup> These folks rarely address queerness explicitly, though they do emphasize openness. Some queer-Caribbean scholars talk about the region as *inherently* queer because the islands themselves are so different from one another culturally/linguistically/historically, yet they are put together under a single designation (Caribbean), arguably because they are surrounded by the same sea.<sup>20</sup> That is, they argue that Caribbean identity is located in the shifting expanse of the sea, not in the stability or logic of the shores.

## Blood and Water: Queering Caribbean Cinema

Landmark Caribbean diaspora films *The Harder They Come* (1973), *Pressure* (1975), and *Bim* (1975) proceed along a trajectory of aggrieved and alienated masculinity. And yet sexuality has not been a prominent component of how Caribbeanness in the cinema has been formulated.<sup>21</sup> But the impulse to define Caribbean identity in terms of location and race has been in play, particularly when it comes to theories of its complexity and range. In "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," Stuart Hall launches his provocation on Caribbeanness with reference to an emerging new Caribbean cinema. The essay is essentially an effort "to theorise identity as constituted, not outside but within representation; and hence cinema, not as a second-order mirror held up to reflect what already exists, but as that form of representation which is able to constitute us as new kinds of subject, and thereby enable us to discover places from which to speak." Without reference to specific filmmakers (he mentions the photographer Armet Francis), Hall suggests that Caribbean cinema is marked by a "diaspora aesthetic," by which he means the African diaspora. Africa is, as Hall admits, "a privileged signifier." He conjures the appeals of that "imaginary plenitude, recreating the endless desire to return . . . to go back to the beginning," but ultimately argues for a cinema that allows us to think instead about the vicissitudes of subjectivity.<sup>22</sup> Among the Caribbean nations, the archipelagic republic of Trinidad, Fung's birthplace, consisting of some twenty-two islands, exemplifies Hall's challenge to oneness.

Fung's videotapes exemplify Hall's Caribbean cinema in their unprettiness, which encapsulates their essayistic visual rhetoric, the effects of the videotape, and their discursive deconstructions of white sexual identities. In particular, *Sea in the Blood* (2000) "tells a story of discovery and desire, in which Fung disrupts both the imperial travel narrative and the heterosexual imperative by

placing queerness in the context of the classic contemporary rite-of-passage/coming-of-age tale: backpacking abroad.<sup>23</sup> Mixing the pedagogical with the poetic and the ethnic with the sexual and autobiographical, the video opens with footage of Fung floating in what appears to be a red sea. He explains this effect was a happy accident that came from finding “a lens for deep water diving that was on the camera when [he] rented it,” and how he took advantage of the way it filtered colors and light under water. The water creates an ambivalent sense of cleanliness and dirtiness. Its bubbles suggest air but also somehow the presence of a noxious gas. As Fung and his partner, Tim, float in the water, the image suggests all at once a bath, drowning, and embryonic immersion. Tim and Fung play at swimming through each other's legs like underwater leapfrog. Sequenced early in the film, they seem to give birth to each other, playing in an indeterminate and unbounded space, but the images also suggest interchangeability. The red-dish color creates a visual metaphor of urgency and blood, foreshadowing the hematologic condition of thalassemia that afflicted his late sister, Nan, and the HIV virus with which Tim is living.<sup>24</sup> In its explanation of Nan's illness, *Sea in the Blood* adapts the educational film, a genre that constitutes some of the earliest motion pictures to circulate in the Caribbean and the home movie.<sup>25</sup> The red water evokes history as well. Although the actual location of the film may not be the Caribbean, the image of the water evokes the dirty and unpretty histories beneath, sunk into the water.

Fung's work engages diaspora, in the way that Hall means it, without idealizing a mother country, but Fung goes further in constituting the Caribbean as intersecting diasporas of Asia, Europe, and Africa—out of many, many people. In Fung's videotapes, the essayistic structure, with its capacity for layered and multidirectional referencing, is Caribbean in that it signifies a direct structural critique of classic Hollywood editing patterns that favor a simple and coherent, heroic and white-identified narrative. In contrast, Fung's work often consists of multiple voices and perspectives, often contradicting one another.

In his appropriation videotape *Islands* (2002), Fung models the challenge to whiteness that ought to be a hallmark of Caribbean cinema. Fung manipulates and reanimates clips from the CinemaScope 1957 feature film *Heaven Knows, Mr. Allison* as a method of deprettifying a grand Hollywood film. His process draws our attention to the emotional and visual structures normally hidden by the smooth seamlessness of Hollywood film editing patterns.



Figure 2. Richard Fung's *Sea in the Blood* (2000), a personal documentary about living with illness, traces the artist's relationship to his sister Nan's thalassemia and his partner Tim's life with HIV. Still image provided by the videomaker.

The 8-minute *Islands* consists of shots extracted from *Heaven*'s 147 minutes, representing disruptions, which cut into the feature film's continuity. Instead of *Heaven*'s self-referential story world, *Islands* opens it up to recontextualization and critique. Fung's process of extracting and rerecording minimizes the grand physicality of the CinemaScope format, cropping its wide 2:66 aspect ratio to video size. CinemaScope is meant for projections in large spaces in which the illusions of proximity and clarity can work their magic over distance.<sup>26</sup> But the microproduction of *Islands* re-visions *Heaven* as a small-screen intimate and reflexive video that brings the viewer up close to the materiality of the cinematic image.

CinemaScope films are panoramic and have stereophonic sound, an ideal technology to showcase the Caribbean picturesque and similar fictions of landscape. An early discussion of this technology in *American Cinematographer* exclaims, "From its panoramic screen, two and a half times as large as ordinary screens, actors seem to walk into the audience, ships appear to sail into the first rows, off-screen actors sound as though they are speaking from the wings." By remaking *Heaven* Fung disrupts yet reveals the visual, political, and emotional structures of cinematic suture between audiences and the self-proclaimed, amazing experience: "[The] most completely entertaining motion picture your heart has ever known!" Yet *Heaven* already contained an ironic twist in its structure in that it is a relationship film—about a tough Marine and a gentle nun stranded on an otherwise "uninhabited" island—photographed with a format that uses close-ups of faces, the bodily stage where the dramatic action of their relationship would be overblown. From *American Cinematographer*: "Although close-ups are reproduced dramatically in CinemaScope films, fewer may be needed because medium shots of actors in groups of three and four show faces so clearly that the most minute emotions and gestures are obvious." Sounds like a good thing, but in fact, by 1957, four years after this article was published, CinemaScope became known for "the mumps," which referred to the effect of stretching the actors' faces when they were shown in close-up. The anonymous author of the *American Cinematographer* article predicts, "In the beginning, it is likely that most CinemaScope productions will be basically outdoor spectacle dramas."<sup>27</sup> *Heaven*, set in the South Pacific during WWII and featuring a tropical location and explosions, uses CinemaScope to its advantage.

Fung appears to slow down and pixelate the images of faces borrowed from the film and the take-away is two-part: the Caribbean is overly seen but then it is also interchangeable. Tourism industries routinely advertise the Caribbean using images that reference locations seeming to offer the traveler panoramic and codified views. In *Heaven*, Tobago's coastline is conscripted into Hollywood as a filming location but not as a setting; the Caribbean is not the intended subject of this film and it is extraneous to the narrative. The location is the star of the CinemaScope format, but the Caribbean is just an extra. Fung depretties images and dialogue from the Hollywood movie, juxta-

posing them with recurring images of unpretty black palm trees set against a gray-blue sky and a-synchronous text, all of which is mixed with a B-roll story of Fung's Uncle Clive and his role in *Heaven* as an extra. In a sense, Fung's film concerns the extra, the cuttings containing the extraneous, distracting storylines, and rumors that are marginal to the main event or the dominant narrative. Here such material is activated and deployed as disruptions to the seamless and seemingly impenetrable Hollywood editing style and its emotional colonization of our perceptions of what matters and what to make-believe. Fung's working over of *Heaven* makes us see mediation, both in this source material and in his own *Islands*. Put another way, when Fung appropriates *Heaven*, its framing and materiality come into view.



Figure 3. Richard Fung's *Islands* (2002) is an experimental video that deconstructs a film by John Huston to comment on the Caribbean's relationship to the cinematic image. Still image provided by the videomaker

# Endnotes

- 1 Lyndon K. Gill, "Situating Black, Situating Queer: Black Queer Diaspora Studies and the Art of Embodied Listening," *Transforming Anthropology* 20, no. 1 (2012): 34.
- 2 Bérénice Reynaud, "Chinese Characters," in Kerri Sakamoto and Helen Lee, eds., *Like Mangoes in July: The Work of Richard Fung* (Toronto: Insomniac, 2002), 45.
- 3 Stuart Hall discusses the colonization of identity through mediated images in "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in Jonathan Rutherford, ed., *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1998), 222–37. In particular resonance with Fung, Hall notes, "Not only were we constructed as different and other within the categories of knowledge of the West by those regimes. They had the power to make us see and experience ourselves as Other. Every regime of representation is a regime of power formed" (226–27). Later, drawing on Frantz Fanon, Hall elaborates: "The look from—so to speak—the place of the Other, fixes us, not only in its violence, hostility and aggression, but in the ambivalence of its desire" (233).
- 4 See Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (New York: Routledge, 1991). *Bricolage* is borrowed from the French, essentially referring to a person's improvisation and experimentation in any activity. In *Subculture*, Hebdige expanded the term *bricolage* to describe the way that consumers created new meanings of and with their purchases through effecting a personal style.
- 5 The *Small Axe* symposium "Caribbean Queer Visualities II," held at Columbia University, 2–3 April 2015.
- 6 Helen Lee, "Dirty Dozen: Playing Twelve Questions with Richard Fung," in Sakamoto and Lee, *Like Mangoes in July*, 105. In her interview with Fung, Lee poses the following question: "Do you see yourself as an artist first?" Fung responds, "I don't see myself as an artist first," and he goes on to explain, "I see my work more as pedagogical, though hopefully not pedantic. . . . Put it this way: I don't not call myself an artist, but I feel a little like a fraud when I do" (105).
- 7 Thomas Waugh, "Good Clean Fung," *Wide Angle* 20, no. 2 (1988): 166.
- 8 Ibid., 165.
- 9 Joshua Gunn, "Maranatha," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 98, no. 4 (2012): 373.
- 10 Richard Fung, "Looking for My Penis: The Eroticized Asian in Gay Porn," in Bad Object-Choices, ed., *How Do I Look? Queer Film and Video* (Seattle: Bay Press 1991), 153. See also Richard Dyer, "Coming to Terms," *Jump Cut*, no. 30 (March 1985): 28.
- 11 See Linda Williams, "Power, Pleasure, and Perversion: Sodomasochistic Film Pornography," in *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible"* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 184–228.
- 12 See *ibid.*
- 13 See José Esteban Muñoz, "Revisiting the Autoethnographic Performance: Richard Fung's Theory/Praxis as Queer Performativity," in Sakamoto and Lee, *Like Mangoes in July*, 53.
- 14 Fung, "Looking for My Penis," 150.

In thinking the efficacy of queer visualities, we recognize how queerness can appear to encompass a seemingly endless range of utilities. As a metaphor of the Caribbean, queerness offers a way of reflecting on geographical displacement and diversity. The multiple a-ways-and-belongings that characterize the Caribbean cast into relief not only its distinct nations and separate islands but the mixing and exchange that come through bonds of trade, tourism, migration, and aid. The Caribbean in this sense is less a place and more an idea that puts disparate locations into relationship. But then, like queerness, it can quickly become an extra, a location that can be anywhere instead of a carefully wrought setting for contemplating the intricacies and chaos of being a modern person.

The unpretty reminds us of the need for disruption and untidiness in thinking through identity. The unpretty lends queerness—as it does to Caribbeaness—the capacity to visualize, validate, and radicalize sexualities. Yet if queerness works to illuminate sexual multiplicity, it is not merely a cipher for any- and everything. Rather, queerness makes space for compounded and intersectional identities. As a relational term, it provokes and intervenes according to context. *Queer*, applied to Caribbean visuality, aids in envisioning experimental narratives and performance styles. Sexuality is a diaspora. The efficacy of queerness in Fung's work is the unpretty visualizing of homosexuality within the context of exploring migration, race, and ethnicity within intersecting diasporas in North America, Asia, and the Caribbean.

## Acknowledgments

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- 15 Ibid., 168.
- 16 Alexander Cheves, “Why I Didn’t Come Out as Poz on World AIDS Day,” *Advocate*, December 4, 2015, accessed May 30, 2017, [www.advocate.com/commentary/2015/12/04/why-i-didnt-talk-about-hiv-world-aids-day](http://www.advocate.com/commentary/2015/12/04/why-i-didnt-talk-about-hiv-world-aids-day). Poz is slang for HIV positive.
- 17 See Mireille Miller-Young, “Sepia Sex Scenes: Spectacles of Difference in Race Porn,” in *A Taste for Brown Sugar: Black Women in Pornography* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 23–33.
- 18 Apichatpong Weerasthakul, quoted in Nigel Andrews, “Weerasethakul’s Waking Dreams,” *Financial Times*, 6 October 2015, [www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/2/e23e05e2-105a-11e5-ad5a-00144feabdc0.html#axzz3x9rlV4H9](http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/2/e23e05e2-105a-11e5-ad5a-00144feabdc0.html#axzz3x9rlV4H9).
- 19 See Barbara Humberstone, ed., *Seascapes: Shaped by the Sea* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015); Jerry H. Bentley, Renate Bridenthal, and Kären Wigen, *Seascapes Maritime Histories, Littoral Cultures, and Transoceanic Exchanges* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2007); and Steven Mentz, “Toward a Blue Cultural Studies: The Sea, Maritime Culture, and Early Modern English Literature,” *Literature Compass* 6, no. 5 (2009): 997–1013.
- 20 See Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley, “Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic: Queer Imaginings of the Middle Passage,” *GLQ* 14, nos. 2–3 (2008): 191–215; and Aliyah R. Khan, “‘Calling the Magician’: The Metamorphic Indo-Caribbean” (PhD diss., University of California Santa Cruz, 2012).
- 21 On the collaborative nature of filmmaking, see Jean Antoine-Dunne, “Sound and Image in the Caribbean Imaginary,” *Journal of West Indian Literature* 18, no. 2 (2010): 95–114. In *Small Axe*, Meredith Robinson details the development of cultural initiatives in Martinique, Guadeloupe, and Haiti, followed by recent regional and international events featuring francophone Caribbean films; see Meredith N. Robinson, “*Ciné woulé, ciné en progrès*: An Investigation of the Francophone Caribbean Film Circuit, 1968–2010,” *Small Axe*, no. 33 (November 2010): 45–68. On defining Caribbean cinema, Mbye Cham writes, “It is a cinema of ‘ex-îles’—from the islands/of people from the islands—and it is also a cinema of ‘exiles’—by people from the islands, living in exile”; Mbye Cham, “Introduction and Overview,” in Mbye Cham, ed., *Ex-Iles: Essays on Caribbean Cinema* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World, 1992), 9–10.
- 22 Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” 231; 236–37.
- 23 Katherine B. Lawless, “(Re)Circulating Foreign Bodies: Richard Fung’s *Sea in the Blood*,” *Feminist Media Studies* 12, no. 1 (2012): 119–32.
- 24 Lee, “Dirty Dozen,” 109.
- 25 See Terri Francis, “Sounding the Nation: Martin Rennalls and the Jamaica Film Unit, 1951–1961,” *Film History* 23, no. 2 (2011): 110–28.
- 26 See “CinemaScope: What It Is, How It Works,” *American Cinematographer* (March 1953), [www.widescreenmuseum.com/widescreen/cscope-ac.htm](http://www.widescreenmuseum.com/widescreen/cscope-ac.htm).
- 27 Ibid.

# leashoJOHNSON

JAMAICA

***Promised Land***, 2015

Dyptich painting composed  
of multiple 20in x 25in frames.

Images courtesy of the artist.



# “Church inna Session”: Leasho Johnson, Mapping the Sacred through the Profane in Jamaican Popular Culture

*Patricia Joan Saunders*

The overlapping, and at times contradictory, nature of anxieties shared between the church, the state, and artists appear most visibly in an array of Caribbean popular cultural modes of expression. In fact, there is a growing body of scholarship that focuses on these intersections, work that highlights the curious, and yet productive, moments of critical reflection that these “perverse modernities” make possible.<sup>1</sup> Arguably, visual excess is one of the primary modes of expressing and performing identity in Jamaican popular culture, and this is certainly the case with artists such as Ebony G. Patterson and Leasho Johnson. However, there are other artists engaged in similar critical conversations that draw on public spaces and state practices in order to consider the plight of black subjects who are struggling to remain visible and alive despite their limited access to the critical avenues for opportunity. Jamaican citizens have historically turned to the church for social and spiritual uplift, and when the church could not provide this, they turned to the rituals and performances that sustained them through slavery, emancipation independence, economic depression, and state violence. These places of respite—bars, streets, dancehall sessions,

clubs—helped to restore the spirit and humanity of the working poor and dejected, albeit through rituals and traditions that ran contrary to those of religious organizations.

The history of political and cultural rifts between secular and sacred institutions in the Caribbean has been well documented in myriad forms. Some would argue that the close proximities from which these epistemologies emerge have led to lasting intimate conflicts and contradiction. But the Caribbean region is not exceptional in this instance; I am reminded that similar histories of antagonism have also shaped the history and development of jazz music, rhythm and blues, and gospel music in African American culture. Perry Henzell's 1972 film *The Harder They Come* is one of the earliest Caribbean representations of this conflict in Jamaican popular culture, particularly of the fine line separating the sacred and the profane in the lives of the working poor shortly after Jamaica's independence. Henzell keeps his finger on the pulse of the forces that draw these seemingly desperate communities into conversation with one another through the poignant visual and lyrical representations of the passions of the poor in their love of the Lord and in their desire to better themselves. In the film, the church is at once the pathway to respectability and the institution that holds us all accountable to the "other powers" in our day-to-day lives that compete for our attention, our energies and, yes, our souls. Without the guiding hand of a disciplining institution (church, legal or political system, social mores), temptation, it seems, when paired with healthy doses of desire and inaccessible opportunities, can form the trifold of elements that threaten the spiritual well-being of the nation and its citizens, or so the story goes.

What Henzell's film makes clear is that both entities—the music industry and the religious institutions—are so intimately bound up with one another that they are almost inseparable, particularly from the social and economic standpoints. Michael Thelwell's novelization of *The Harder They Come* highlights another aspect of the intimate relationship between these two institutional forces in Caribbean culture. During what can best be described as one of the novel's most pivotal scenes, Ivan visits Miss Ida's café for the first time. It is in this cultural space that he first hears a radio and the music that would simultaneously capture his spiritual and sexual imagination. But it is not *just* the music that takes hold of his spirit; watching Miss Ida move in response to the music evokes a recollection of a parallel spiritual experience:

And the café filled with music. Or rather, to Ivan, the café filled with Miss Ida around whom throbbing, heady, erotically insistent rhythms swirled and played. The big lady was light on her feet; the carnal exuberance of her breasts and hips seemed to engulf him. She seemed transfigured, not unlike the ladies at Miss 'Mando's pocomania\* meeting, but the dreamy expression on her face, the smile on her painted lips were not very spiritual. Nor was her sweet, heavy perfume as she danced around them. Ivan's sense were assaulted

in a new way. This was city music, café music, the music of pleasure and fleshly delight, and Miss Ida was its incarnation. [. . .]

*Oh Miss Ida*

*Don't you lift up any widah!*

*Seem to me that you set pon glidah!*

*Oh Miss Ida . . .*

*You a real rough ridah.*<sup>2</sup>

The confusion registering in young Ivan's mind is not simply a burgeoning sense of sexuality; Miss Ida's presence is at odds with his understanding of women, which up to this stage was limited to Miss 'Mando and her pocomania sistren, whose embodiment of the spirit is of a different sort. The pleasures of the flesh are symbolized (at once) through Miss Ida's body, its movement, and the rhythm of reggae music coming through the radio. Although Ivan recognizes that this is *not* the sanctified body, the one filled up, so to speak, with the holy spirit, he realizes that it is indeed an empowered, possessed body, one that has the capacity, and indeed the ability, to evoke a desire toward devotion (and damnation) for those who worship it. Later, in the front of the café, the checkers game of several male patrons is "temporarily suspended" when Miss Ida "emerge[s] from behind the bar": "'Lawd,' one of the men breathed reverentially, but loud enough for the tribute to carry, 'what a woman walk nice, sah?' He shook his head slowly in rapt devotion."<sup>3</sup> Yes, Miss Ida is a woman, just like his grandmother and her friends, but Ivan realizes in this moment that there are worldly pleasures that can unsettle a man's soul as powerfully as the spirits in pocomania, and this is what distinguishes Miss Ida from the other women he knows. What Ivan and the men in the bar (and the narrator) observe in Miss Ida, as a woman of substance, is that her comportment—her style, walk, voice and gestures—are all purposefully constructed for a particular effect.

In an evocative essay titled “Accessories/Accessaries; or, What’s in Your Closet?,” Petrine Archer highlights the long storied traditions of exchange (coerced and voluntary), in all their perversions, between the planter classes and enslaved persons in Jamaica. These traditions, she argues, are most readily visible through a series of images and performances that recur across a range of historical and cultural venues that have come to inform, if not define, Jamaican visual and popular culture. By mapping the links between modes of oppression during colonial rule and modes and traditions of resistance, and by reimagining these histories of resistance and systems of oppression with independence, Archer develops a methodology that I want to engage in my reading of the work of one of Jamaica’s emerging contemporary artists, Leasho Johnson, who engages the historical struggle between the sacred and the profane in particularly productive, and often perverse, ways. Archer asserts,

I have challenged narratives about Jamaican art that define the island’s art history as a relatively modern one in which black people have had little visibility to consider whether we have been searching in the right places. Images of blackness proliferate in the public domain, and despite their sometimes pejorative nature, we need to track and reread them. . . . I want to explore the repeating patterns of our subordinate colonial relationship, using a handful of images that make links between slavery, pageantry, racial uplift, dancehall, and dress.<sup>4</sup>

As Archer suggests, visual cartographies are invaluable because of what they show and tell us about our anxieties during different historical periods. Once more, these images of blackness chronicle a different array of cultural expression from what we have come to think of as “mainstream” or even, as Archer suggests, stereotypical representations. Johnson’s work is overtly aware of the extent to which public spheres of power, authority, influence, and access shape the ways working poor and working-class black subjects are both invisible and hypervisible in Jamaican culture.

Archer begins her critical engagement in the street with the work of Isaac Mendes Belisario, who chronicled Jamaica’s street culture during the colonial period in Jamaica. I begin in the same place, the street, as I analyze Johnson’s work in order to highlight his reimaginings of the links between Jamaica’s colonial postindependence future, particularly because these works appear in the public sphere. A good amount of Johnson’s work is staged in public spaces, on walls and buildings—in short, in the streets. As such, it is consumed, or at the very least viewed, by a different constituency of people from those who might enter the museum or gallery space. Much of his work is part of the everyday movements of people in Kingston, Jamaica; not cordoned off from the public, it occupies the unsanctioned spaces of the city: walls of abandon lots, sides of buildings, walls that mark the boundaries of public and private property. In fact, because of its public appearance, Johnson’s work could be considered “not-art” or even defacement of public property. However, in the Caribbean the reality of public spaces being occupied by unlicensed persons and industries has, more recently, grown to include works of art, all of which fly in the face of law, order, and respectability.



Figure 1. Leasho Johnson, 6:30, 2014. Paper and yeast paste on wall; approximately 30 x 30 in. Kingston Parish Church. Photograph by Randall Island

Johnson's public installation of *6:30* (fig. 1) on a wall just beneath the Kingston Parish Church wonderfully embodies the myriad levels of negotiation between public and private and between the sacred and the secular that are always already at work in the country. This contemporary figure, juxtaposed against the landscape of one of Jamaica's oldest churches, creates an opportunity for viewers to consider if and how the image is connected to the edifice that occupies this public space. The positioning of the figure makes it appear as though the church is resting on her back. Its location also brings to mind the iconic power of the church, its looming authority over this mode of expression.

There has long been a tug of war over who has the authority to occupy public space and for what purposes. The working poor and working classes, in particular, even when attempting to ply their wares and, in so doing, improve their lives, are seen as infringing on the rights of the sanctioned businesses and citizens. According to Winnifred Brown-Glaude,

Poor Black female street vendors in public spaces often spark public discussions around their legitimacy as entrepreneurs working in public economic spaces. We particularly hear this in public outcries that accuse Afro-Jamaican higglers of being “out of order,” which in Jamaican parlance implies that one is “out of place.” But representations of higglers as out of order are not simply economic matters; they are also social and spatial ones: these representations raise the question of whether these bodies—poor black women—rightfully belong in public economic spaces as independent entrepreneurs. . . . Such representations . . . reveal the presumed violations of social, economic, and spatial boundaries of inclusion and exclusion that are not only gendered but also racialized and classed.<sup>5</sup>

Johnson's use of public spaces as the canvas for his work provides a curious opportunity for thinking through some of these historical links between class color and visibility in Jamaica. The title of the installation *Back-fi-ah-Bend* (fig. 2) comes from a 2014 song by Vybz Kartel about the “wuk” endured by women during sexual encounters. The song title, like Johnson's images of the women, highlights different kinds of backbreaking work done by women in the public and private spheres. *Back-fi-a-bend* invites viewers to contemplate precisely what Archer describes as the ways “blackness proliferates in the public domain . . . despite their sometimes pejorative nature,” in order to “track and reread them.”<sup>6</sup> By creating a visual link between a contemporary representation of a woman in a dancehall pose and of nineteenth-century market women, who appear with some regularity on photo postcards set in Jamaica, Johnson reminds viewers of the weight of representation that rests on black women's bodies. We are invited, at the very least, to consider the link between the four women dressed in nineteenth-century attire, with their bananas on their head, and the female dancehall figure who also bears the weight of the “cash crop” (bananas, respectability, productivity), this time on her back. I would suggest that the iconography of the black female body in Jamaica, across two generations of women, speaks once again to what Archer describes as “the

repeating patterns of our subordinate colonial relationship, represented by a handful of images that makes links between slavery, pageantry, racial uplift, dancehall, and dress.”<sup>7</sup>



Figure 2. Leasho Johnson, *Back-fi-a-bend*, 2015. Paper and yeast paste on wall, Kingston. The work was installed for Labour Day and removed after three days by the apartment authorities. Photograph by the artist

The fundamental difference with the contemporary images is the absence of the more “respectable” attire for work that is, by no means, white-collar (or white-fabric) work. But there is also a visual ambiguity in the absence of clothing on the contemporary anime figure: does this signify that the new commodity for export is now black sexuality? Several of Johnson’s newest works, such as *Land of Big Hood and Water* (fig. 3), directly link sexual tourism with the new branding of Jamaica in the global market place.

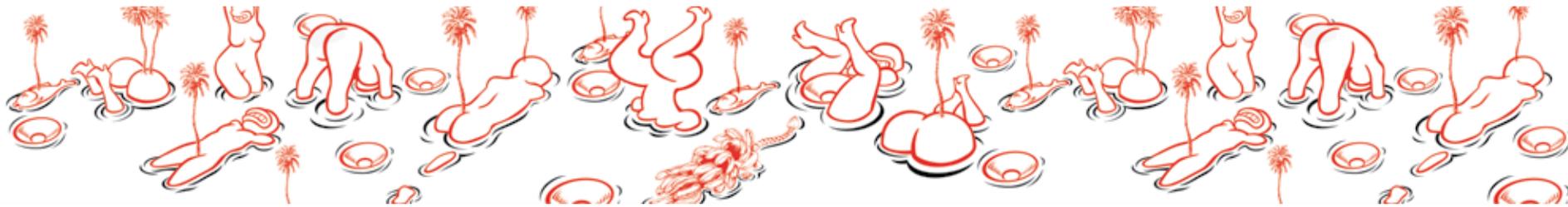


Figure 3. Leasho Johnson, *Land of Big Hood and Water* (detail), 2015. Paper and yeast paste on wall, Old Hope Road, Kingston

Johnson’s contemporary images, inspired by the anime aesthetic and popularized by Tokyoplastic, are of female figures executing postures often assumed by female dancers in the dancehall. In 6:30, the figure’s large tattooed buttocks and legs seem disproportionate to the rest of her body, but this is part of the aesthetic allure of the Tokyoplastic phenomenon in which the heads and facial features (eyes, smile, teeth, and ears, the latter usually covered by large headphones) are disproportionately large when compared to the bodies of the dolls. “The figures,” Johnson says, “have gone through various stages of evolution since I first used them in my installation ‘The Product’ during Young Talent V.” However, it seems as though Johnson has reconfigured the aesthetic to reflect the preferences in Jamaican popular culture by enlarging aspects of the anatomy that are prized in dancehall culture. He admits that he “had to change them slightly” when he began *Church Is in Session* “so that the characters could imitate the human anatomy to do dancehall moves.”<sup>8</sup> But the placement of the image in 6:30 brings us back to my opening comments on the relationship between the sacred and the profane in Jamaican culture.

charting the battle for the hearts and minds of the working poor, it also highlights the emergence of working-class cultural aesthetics. The story highlights the intimate overlap between music and labor, between songs sung in the fields (as slaves or maroon descendants) and those sung to dispel the pain and suffering of systemic racism and disenfranchisement after emancipation and colonialism. In both instances music provides the avenue to transcend (if only momentarily) the social ills while also acknowledging joy and thankfulness, even in the face of struggle. The vehicle and style of delivery vary between the church and the street, but the potential for experiencing spiritual uplift and redemption is invariably one and the same.

One would imagine that the street sessions and the church would be incongruent spheres of spiritual expression, but musicians have found a way to fuse the sacred and the secular for generations, sometimes out of cultural necessity, other times out of circumstantial or industry necessity, especially in African diaspora cultures. *The Harder They Come* is as much a mapping of the musical and political journey of Jamaica as it is an accounting of the social and economic strictures of the country. In addition to

## “Where Two or Three Gather in My Name”: Consecrating the Street and the Session

David Rudder’s 1998 song “High Mas,” in paying homage to the gift of calypso, borrows heavily from the rhythms and cadence of the Catholic liturgy (specifically, the “Our Father” prayer). Representatives of the Roman Catholic Church felt that Rudder had strayed too far away from the secular realm and into the sacred with his lyrics as well as in his evocation of the hymnal tradition of the church. However, for many carnival revelers, “High Mas” was a praise song in the most traditional sense of the word in African literary traditions. That is to say, it is a series of laudatory epithets sung in honor of gods, men, animals, places, women—all intended to capture the essence of that which is being praised. “High Mas” is a praise song for the creative spirit that is undoubtedly, according to Rudder, a gift from God. In his eyes, calypso is the salve, the balm; and the ritual of carnival (its dances, praise songs, oral traditions, costumes) is the vehicle to restore the spirit that has been stripped away during the course of the year. Rudder’s praise song acknowledges the sins that are part of man’s “natural state” but not without the possibility for redemption through praising God’s generosity and extending this invitation to all acolytes to celebrate in the mas’:

Our father who has given us this art  
so that we can all feel a part of this earthly heaven . . . amen  
Forgive us this day our daily weaknesses  
as we seek to cast our mortal burdens on your city . . . amen  
Oh merciful father, in this bacchanal season  
Where some men will lose their reason  
But most of us just want to wine and have a good time 'cause  
we looking for a lime because we feeling fine, Lord . . . amen  
And as we jump up and down in this crazy town,  
You sent us some music for some healing . . . amen

[Chorus]

Everybody hand raise, everybody give praise [2x]  
And if you know what ah mean put up yuh finger  
And if you know what ah mean put up yuh hand  
And if you know what ah mean put up yuh finger  
And if you know what ah mean, then scream:  
Give Jah his praises, let Jah be praised  
The father in his mercy, he send a little music,  
to make the vibrations raise.<sup>9</sup>

Johnson’s series *Church Is in Session* parallels the spiritual (rather than the religious) sentiment that Rudder’s song espouses, albeit far more controversially in its iconography. The series includes several paintings, with two bearing the series title, along with several earthenware figures. Each of the earthenware pieces carries its own title: *Pum-Pum Tun-up East and West*; *Pum-Pum Tun-up Heaven Bound*; *Pum-Pum Tun-up North and South*; and *Pum-Pum Tun-up Dive*.<sup>10</sup> The paintings communicate to audiences that the sacrosanct nature of spirituality is no longer the domain of the church and its officials; it now extends to the streets, the balm yards, and the dancehall sessions and gatherings. Spiritual uplift and redemption are experienced through different rituals and performances, and the venues vary widely. In the secular realm, uplift and redemption can be achieved without the weight of moral authority, particularly vis-à-vis discourses of respectability and its byproduct: shame. Johnson’s *Church in Session #1* and *Church in Session #2* (figs. 4 and 5) are wonderful representations of the ways spiritual iconography have been reappropriated and dispersed among congregants of the dancehall. The ubiquitous “Jesus piece”—spiritual or religious jewelry popular in the hip-hop community—as well as other signposts of life in dancehall sessions feature prominently in both paintings.

The “Jesus pieces” are the central focus in the paintings, as are the facial expressions that suggest an exchange of sentiment between the two participants, one that is well known in African diaspora performances. The call-and-response between the singer (preacher) and the listener (parishioner) in the dancehall is usually the call for audience members to “put yuh lighters inna di air” to show their appreciation for the “boom tune” or an old classic that has stood the test of time.



Figure 4. Leasho Johnson, *Church Is in Session #1*, 2012. Mixed media; 30 x 54 in. Courtesy of the artist



Figure 5. Leasho Johnson, *Church Is in Session #2*, 2012. Mixed media; 30 x 54 in. Courtesy of the artist

The lighter represents a moment of rapture for *both* the singer and the audience. It is a moment of recognition and visibility, a means of paying homage to a mutually uplifting moment. This is most apparent in *Church Is in Session #2*, in which the subject’s closed eyes leave viewers to imagine what he is experiencing while simultaneously inviting them to join him by reflecting inward. His facial expression certainly reminds viewers that performance, like spirituality, is a deeply personal experience but one that is also shared and enjoyed through fellowship with members of the community. And it is this last aspect of spirituality that makes the dancehall session a space for redemption and community building through sharing in the good vibes. At the same time, however, the usual markers of style, fashion, or “bling” that traditionally accompany performers in the session are totally absent. Viewers are instead given large orange spaces that force their eyes toward the stark contrast of the singer’s/listener’s dark skin and accessories. The “Jesus piece” in *Church Is in Session #2*, which appears to be made of wooden beads, is distinctly different from the shine of the cross in *Church Is in Session #1*. But bling still makes an appearance, albeit a subtle one, in the ear of the performer, enough to articulate the “tun-up” element that is essential for visibility in the session. These subtle distinguishing features encourage viewers to reflect on the nature of materiality in Johnson’s work and on the role of materiality in articulations of faith as well.

## Praise Songs for “Tun Up” Pum-pum: Queering Aesthetic Practices in Dancehall Culture

As noted earlier, the phrase “perverse modernities” best describes the confluences of ideologies, performances, bodies, desires, histories, economies, and institutions that collide in critical conversations about popular culture in Jamaica. Jamaican popular culture, particularly reggae and dancehall music, share some of the equally problematic ideological foundations that inform the ironic, contradictory nature of secular and sacred traditions. This irony is most visible in the overlapping anxieties about sexuality among religious, national, and popular cultural institutions. More than a decade ago, in an essay titled “Is Not Everything Good to Eat, Good to Talk,” I argued,

Despite the discursive and ideological similarities between Jamaican popular and national culture, the stark differences and disagreements emerge at the level of praxis, particularly about how workers (politician, ganja farmer, tourism worker, or gun man) and sexuality (the stallion, whore, batty man, “pussy watchman”) are defined. In the end, men who cannot uphold their political and economic roles as (and with their) member(s) of society are relegated to the den of sexual and political inequity. However, when these seemingly separate categories are fused (gunman/battymen, “whore”/sex tourism industry, don/poli-

tician), the line that separates these constructions seems less and less sturdy. This is the problem that many of these songs attempt to negotiate through explicit assertions that “gunman and batty man” have no business with one another (figuratively and literally).<sup>11</sup>

This argument is as culturally and politically relevant now as it was in 2003, when that essay was published. As such, the aesthetic and discursive landscapes of Jamaican popular culture have accelerated the need for more theoretically sophisticated ways to engage with the changes that are underway. Though these unholy alliances remain unencumbered by emergent critical discourses, the turns in the aesthetics of Jamaican popular culture suggests the boundaries I outlined before are no longer simply being “fused.” Rather, they are being queered such that a completely new aesthetic that borrows liberally from both “camps” (i.e., “gunman” and “batty man,” “don/politician,” “whore/sex tourism”) to create a new aesthetic that rests un/comfortably outside of both of these realms.

Kartel’s 2012 song “Ever Blessed” could easily be described as an excellent example of the phenomenon I’m describing, and Johnson’s work reflects this aesthetic in productive, provocative ways. If Rudder’s “High Mas” left the churchgoing community at odds with his appropriation of traditional liturgy for street mas’, one can only wonder what church officials, and even the dancehall faithful, make of Kartel’s praise song to pum-pum. I have long argued with several friends and colleagues that in light of Jamaica’s long tradition of exceptional (formal and informal) poets, and the subsequent naming (in 2014) of the country’s first poet laureate, that there could well be something of a similar order for recognition in dancehall culture. Quite naturally, any such title would have to be considered by category, and I would venture to say that of all the dancehall artistes, Kartel would undoubtedly be a finalist for the pum-pum laureate of Jamaica. This is not to suggest that he

is the first dancehall DJ preoccupied with female sexuality, sexual expression, and genitalia; dancehall music is always already a referendum on sexual appetites, proclivities, positions, and politics. “Ever Blessed” spares no biblical analogies in praise and worship of “pum-pum”:

Yuh pussy comin like bible when it open up  
Mi see heaven, yuh punnany blessed my angel  
Loving yuh, loving yuh, like Rachael  
Yo pussy comin like bible  
A parable of some great sex  
From yo born till now that stay bless  
Never never fraid a di AIDS test

[Chorus]

Yuh have di ever blessed pum pum  
Ah God ah go wid yuh  
And am in love with yuh like woah  
The ever blessed pum pum  
God ah go wid yuh  
And am in love with yuh like woah  
The ever blessed pum pum<sup>12</sup>

Yes, the ubiquitous “run di place red,” “slammin in de bed,” “stabbing up di meat” tunes have always populated the playlists in every dancehall session. But these songs, and indeed this aesthetic, are distinctly different; there is a newfound reverence toward pum-pum, spearheaded in music by Kartel and chronicled wonderfully in Johnson’s series of modified spirits bottles that feature terms and phrases that have come to embody and represent this “love affair” with pum-pum in a most succinct fashion.

Left to right: Figure 6. Leasho Johnson, *Stab-up the Meat*, 2014 . Bottled “ratchet” knife with white cut-out label, 4.4 x 11.5 in. Courtesy of the artist

Figure 7. Leasho Johnson, *Gumtion*, 2014. Spray-painted bottle with vinyl cut-out label, 3.5 x 13 in. Courtesy of the artist

Figure 8. Leasho Johnson, *Di Good Hole*, 2014. Bottled pink paint with clear vinyl printed label, 4.5 x 11.5 in. Courtesy of the artist





"Church Ina Sesion": Leasho Johnson, Mapping the Sacred through the Profane in Jamaican Popular Culture / Patricia Jean Saunders

The series, in which these “repurposed, reimagined alcohol bottles are experiments about Caribbean identity as a by-product of colonial commerce,” is, according to Johnson, “a comment on a lost identity transformed (or bottled) for the sake of commercial gain.”<sup>13</sup> Somewhere around 2010, as the titles in Johnson’s series highlights, “pum-pum tun up,” and in so doing, pum-pum became an overt focus in dancehall culture like never before. The fundamental difference between the “pum-pum tun-up” aesthetic and the previous “spread out inna bed” representations seems to be a matter of agency. In Jamaican parlance, the phrase “pum-pum tun-up” connotes high quality, exceptional stature or power, or (in the interest of not overstating the obvious), as one of Johnson’s titles indicates, “the good hole.”

Figure 9. Leasho Johnson, *Pum-pum Tun-up East and West*, 2012. Earthenware, 12 x 8 x 5 in. Courtesy of the artist

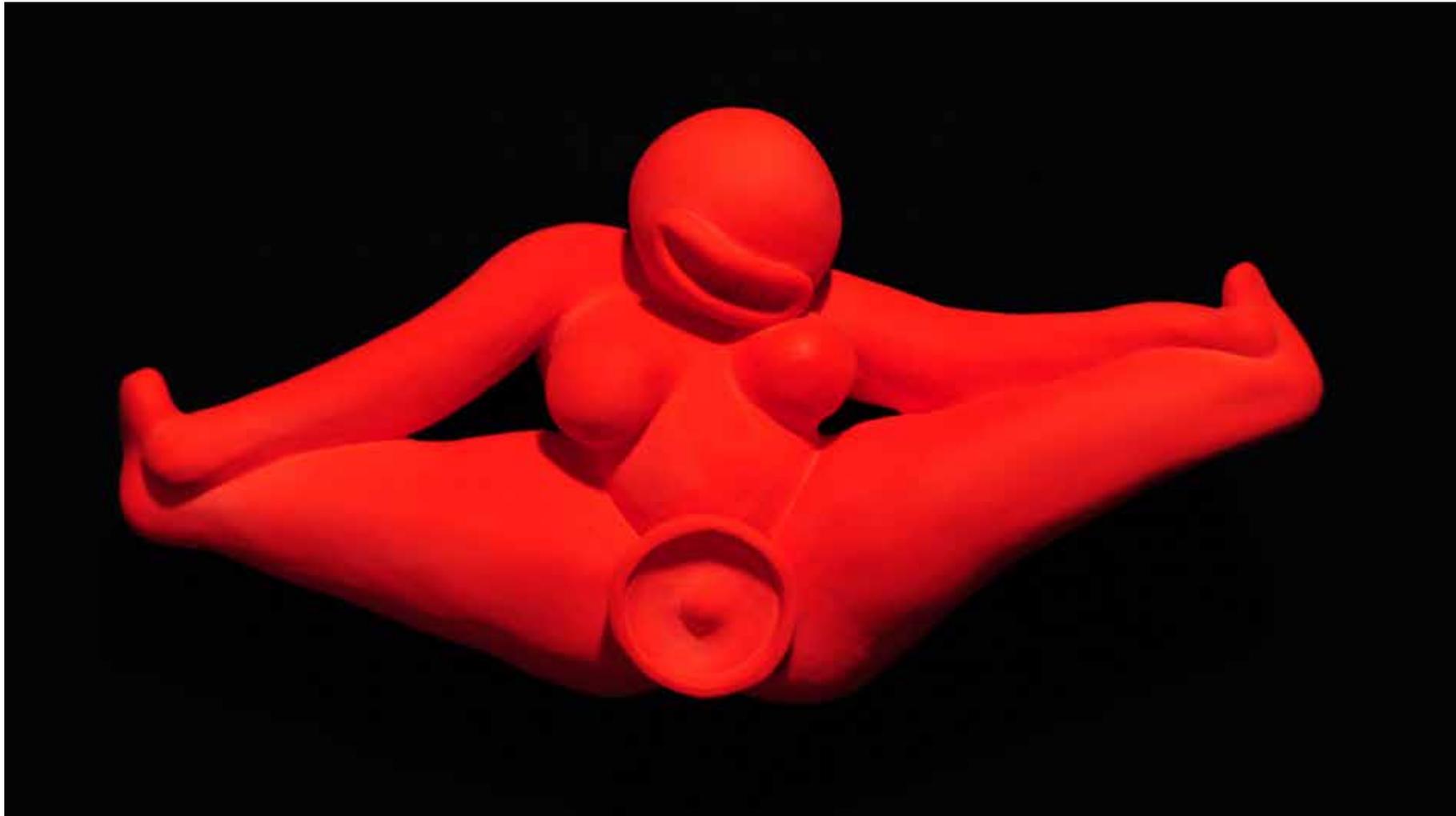




Figure 10. Leasho Johnson, *Pum-pum Tun-up North and South*, 2012. Earthenware, 12 x 8 x 5 in. Courtesy of the artist

Suddenly, female genitalia went from having a supporting role in dancehall culture to being the star, now headlining in more than one genre of Jamaican popular culture. What makes Kartel's songs (and there is a wide array of them, which include "Benz Punaany," "Happy Pum-pum," "Pum-pum Paradise," and "Ever Blessed") unique is the unabashed manner in which each song expresses its reverence for "pum-pum." As Kartel's lyrics suggest, the perversity is not coincidental nor is it necessarily contradictory in its origins. This is the same irreverence shown to Miss Ida by the men in her bar; the only difference is that their comments about how she walks and moves are cloaked in a very thin layer of respectability. In these recent representations of female genitalia, the layer of respectability is still there (in a manner of speaking) but not at all in the ways we imagine. So, quite naturally, several questions come to mind in response to this current trend: How should we account for this shift in representation of black women's bodies in dancehall culture? Can we understand this shift as corresponding to a heightened awareness of the failures in the rhetoric of respectability, particularly in the face of increasing demands to brand Jamaica for consumption? Or is this shift a kind of performance which functions similarly to the kind of "consecration" of the dancehall space that opens up new terms of engagement for performances and practices that are not traditionally welcomed in the dancehall?



I have made a similar argument about the work of another contemporary Jamaican artist, Ebony G. Patterson.<sup>14</sup> However, the works of these two artists are distinctly different in form, content, and modes of delivery. Where their work overlaps is in their interest in dancehall culture and how we might begin to understand and interpret many of the social and political changes taking place in Jamaica by paying closer critical attention to the fashion, style, and various modes of performance in dancehall, and, in the case of Johnson’s work, its ability to queer traditionally stable boundaries that have effectively demarcated who has a right to be seen, in which venues, and for what purposes. Both these artists have sought to engage their audiences through their artwork by appropriating public spaces to highlight issues that affect black subjects whose lives, struggles, and rights have been erased by the state and the church. Their approaches are markedly different, but their critical interests mark them as contemporary artists who understand the power of the popular and the public sphere. Johnson’s representation of dancehall performances raises curious questions about the relationship between secular rituals and performances, juxtaposing them directly against religious and political institutions that have castigated these modes of expression as vulgarity dressed in the vices of excess. Of course, the deep irony in re/cycling the “disposable” elements of Jamaican popular cultural expression and consumption highlights an engagement with the politics of class and identity formation in Jamaica, which makes Johnson’s work across the range of media (paints, ceramics, public art/ graffiti, and graphic art) all the more insightful.

Figure 11. Leasho Johnson, *Pum-pum Tun-up Heaven Bound*, 2012. Earthenware, 4.5 x 5 x 9 in. Courtesy of the artist

# Endnotes

- 1 I am borrowing and deploying this phrase in the sense evoked by Duke University Press in its name for a critical series edited by Jack Halberstam and Lisa Lowe. According to the press's overview, "[The series] Perverse Modernities transgresses modern divisions of knowledge that have historically separated the consideration of sexuality, and its concern with desire, gender, bodies, and performance, on the one hand, from the consideration of race, colonialism, and political economy, on the other, in order to explore how the mutual implication of race, colonialism, and sexuality has been rendered perverse and unintelligible within the logics of modernity." To date, the series includes twenty-three books. See [www.dukeupress.edu/Catalog/ProductList.php?viewby=series&id=73](http://www.dukeupress.edu/Catalog/ProductList.php?viewby=series&id=73).
- 2 Michael Thelwell, *The Harder They Come* (1980; repr., New York: Grove, 1988), 29 (italics in original). Thelwell footnotes the definition of *pocomania* as "African-inspired religious sect noted for possession by spirits during ceremonies."
- 3 *Ibid.*, 27.
- 4 Petrine Archer, "Accessories/Accessaries; or, What's in Your Closet?," *Small Axe*, no. 32 (July 2010): 99.
- 5 Winnifred Brown-Glaude, *Higglers in Kingston: Women's Informal Work in Jamaica* (Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt University Press, 2011), 4. A higgler is (more often than not) a woman who sells fruits, vegetables, and sometimes other household items in the marketplaces and on the sidewalks in Jamaica.
- 6 Archer, "Accessories/Accessaries," 99.
- 7 *Ibid.*
- 8 Leasho Johnson, e-mail conversation with the author, 8 June 2016.
- 9 David Rudder, "High Mas," on *Beloved* (New York: Musicrama, 1998).
- 10 See *Small Axe*, no. 46 (March 2015): 144–45.
- 11 Patricia J. Saunders, "Is Not Everything Good to Eat, Good to Talk: Sexual Economy and Dancehall Music in the Global Marketplace," *Small Axe*, no. 13 (March 2003): 95–115.
- 12 Vybz Kartel, "Ever Blessed," on *Rvssian Presents Free Worl Boss* (Head Concussion Records, 2013)
- 13 Leasho Johnson, artist's statement.
- 14 See Patricia Joan Saunders, "Gardening in the Garrisons, You Never Know What You'll Find: (Un)Visibility in the Works of Ebony G. Patterson," *Feminist Studies* 42, no. 1 (2016): 98–137.

# nadiaHUGGINS

ST. VINCENT & THE GRENADINES

*Is That a Buoy?*, 2015

Digital photographs,  
22.5 in. x 30 in.

Images courtesy of the artist.





# Troubling Queer Caribbeanness: Embodiment, Gender, and Sexuality in Nadia Huggins's Visual Art

*Angelique V. Nixon*

Caribbean cultural workers (intellectuals and artists) continue to push the boundaries of how we see and understand gender and sexuality. The region has a complex landscape of languages, performances, attitudes, behaviors, and practices when it comes to sex, gender, and sexuality. Our creative and cultural work emerges from heteronormative structures built and sustained through colonial and postcolonial conditions, yet we do battle with these conditions and offer spaces through self-expression for trouble making, fluidity, and resistance. This essay explores such spaces through a critical analysis of and conversation with Caribbean visual artist Nadia Huggins and her photography. Huggins's modes of self-expression through self-portraits, digital underwater photography, and bodies in Caribbean land- and seascapes contest gender and sexual norms in ways that exude fluidity and can be described as "queer." However, I offer an interrogation of the usefulness of "queer," or what I describe as "troubling queer Caribbeanness."

The Small Axe project "Caribbean Queer Visualities" brings together Caribbean writers and visual artists to engage a series of questions on the conceptual work of "queer" and how we understand contemporary Caribbean art practice. My standpoint as a Caribbean writer, scholar, activist, and artist who identifies as queer (specifically, as a woman-loving woman and bisexual) is important to acknowledge as I engage in a critical conversation about "queerness" in the Caribbean. In the spirit

of Stuart Hall, it is also vital to share my positionality as a light-skinned-black mixed-race Caribbean cis-woman from poor, working-class roots, born and raised in The Bahamas, with ancestors from Jamaica and Trinidad. Further, I am involved with and deeply invested in community building and organizing work around LGBTI issues in the region. Thus this critical work is more than theorizing for me. It is praxis—what I see as the uniting of theory and action that reflects the movements for sexual and gender justice on the ground. It is seeing art as knowledge producing and creating potential sites of transformation, particularly in terms of gender and sexuality.

This project asks us to think through the usefulness of “queer” and “queerness” in the region and how it registers (or does not) in contemporary Caribbean art. While art spaces are known for being safer places for difference and sexual others, they are also wrapped up in privilege (at the intersections of class, race, color, gender, and sexuality). Nevertheless, it can be useful to consider the ways art spaces are queer—meaning spaces that are non-normative and that can be safe or safer for those who are sexual outlaws or gender and sexual minorities (i.e., LGBTI people). The category “queer” then becomes itself a space for difference that represents sexual diversity and perhaps multiplicity. However, it is important to think through the ways “queer” doesn’t quite register in many local spaces across the region as an identity category. Yet I find it is being embraced more and more by younger people, especially by those who identify as gender nonconforming. Therefore, we can ask further what this category “queer” represents, in terms of various artists and their artwork.

This leads me to the specific questions of this Small Axe project that I focus on: “How does the visual reference or even convey the embodied experiences, passionate longings, and scattered attachments of queer Caribbean lives? Can the visual arts represent the social forces that shape our racialized, gendered, and sexualized Caribbean selves, and if so, how?”<sup>1</sup> My goal in this essay is to engage these poignant queries through the work of Nadia Huggins. I argue that her photography represents embodied experiences of our racialized, gendered, and sexualized Caribbean selves in ways that disrupt normative notions of gender and sexuality. My approach to embodiment is grounded in what I argue elsewhere with Rosamond S. King: “The acknowledgement of one’s own location is a fundamental aspect of embodied theories, an approach that is particularly relevant in sexuality studies, which are necessarily preoccupied with bodies. An embodied theory is a theory that does not ignore the reality of bodies—either of the people being studied or of those doing the analysis.”<sup>2</sup> Therefore, after discussing my subject location in this essay, I will now engage with the artist’s location in the region as well as the locations of her artistic subjects and what I see as the regional space she opens through her work.

First, Huggins is from and resides in the region (born in St. Vincent and the Grenadines and based in Trinidad and Tobago), and her work is also grounded in the Caribbean. Second, it is important to know that Huggins, as cofounder of *ARC Magazine* in 2011, has contributed directly to space creation for visual artists across the Caribbean; through the vision of *ARC* we have been able to see the Caribbean and also to see it *differently*. Given the overwhelming touristic visual representations of the region, it is beyond necessary for us as Caribbean people to be able to really see ourselves. My recent creative and critical projects have led me to serious consideration of Caribbean visual representations and their power as a medium that can allow us to transform notions and perceptions of self and each other. In *Imaging the Caribbean*, Patricia Mohammed argues that visual imagery allows us to “look at history and society differently, to find new social categories of analysis, rather than perceive only the tired old ones of class, race, and gender.”<sup>3</sup> Caribbean visual art created by and for Caribbean spaces and people can perhaps center and ground our own (shared and different) experiences. As Mohammed asserts, visual representation may indeed be able to best celebrate our differences outside the usual constructions of essentialist categories. Huggins as a self-taught photographer offers a distinctive perspective to visual representation in which she explodes and refutes essentialist categories, yet her subjects are located in spaces and bodies that are racialized, sexualized, and gendered.

Further, as David Scott explains in the Small Axe project statement for “Caribbean Queer Visualities,” contemporary visual artists of the postcolonial Caribbean have been transforming visual practice and culture, which has opened up “an aesthetic space” that is “embattled, uneven, and conflicted”:

New questions about subjectivity and identity, powers and subjugations, have emerged, questions that are less about ideologies than about embodiments, less about representations than about performativities, less

about utopias than about instantiations, less about belonging than about lovings, less about stabilities than about displacements, less about sexualities than about desires. Powers of conformity and normalization are now as much inside as outside—inside the nation, inside the community, inside the family, inside the self.<sup>4</sup>

Scott's provocative engagement with a new generation of Caribbean visual artists provides an intriguing framework for us to engage these questions about normativities and queer sensibilities in relation to the visual. The assertions of embodiments over ideologies, lovings over belonging, displacement over stabilities, and desires over sexualities resonates clearly with a particular defiance to the messy and conservative politics across the region in relation to gender and sexual justice. But it is also in attentiveness to experience, feeling, and carving space for living and being in the region as sexual others and outlaws that I see Caribbean artists engaging the visual as power. It is timely that *Small Axe* provides a critical and artistic space to discuss "queerness" in the Caribbean, given the increasing scholarly and popular use of the term *queer*. Yet during the conversation among writers and artists leading up to this collection of work, there was a general consensus that *queer* doesn't quite fit or work in the region. And so there was a grappling with *queer* and perhaps even some resistance, yet also a kind of usefulness, in terms of aesthetics emerged.

For me, these contestations and negotiations reflect a broader troubling of queer politics by people of color, particularly in response to the popular notion that one can now "queer" anything—and then we must ask, What about people who live queer lives, who embody queerness, especially those at the margins of race, class, gender, sexuality, and so on? While queer theory and its intersections with feminist and postcolonial theory has offered dynamic ways of theorizing the complexities of culture, identities, and experiences, mainstream queer politics has seemingly taken on different priorities (namely, homonormative focus on same-sex marriage and equality discourse of sameness). Yet we can understand the impetus "to queer" as another dimension of change and transformation, another way to engage with shifting twen-

ty-first-century identities and subjectivities using new technologies and a more inclusive way to discuss sexual and gender politics. But for those of us in communities and societies in which *queer* doesn't quite register, then what do we do? How do we define an aesthetic space for Caribbean visual art that may exude queer sensibilities (in terms of non-normative expressions of genders and sexualities) through the imagination, bodies, and politics? What is at stake in using *queer* or not using *queer*? What about the lives, loves, and experiences of people who are same-sex desiring and loving, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or gender nonconforming or who engage in nonnormative sexual practices in the Caribbean?

Hence, as I work through embodied theories for this project, this means the privileging of local and regional terms when describing sexual and gender minorities, as other scholars do, such as Gloria Wekker, Kamala Kempadoo, Lawrence LaFountain-Stokes, Omis'seke Natasha Tinsley, Rosamond S. King, Jafari Allen, and Carlos Decena, among others.<sup>5</sup> Caribbean sexuality studies as a field includes more and more work that focuses on diverse sexualities and genders that trouble notions of "queerness" even if scholars themselves use queer theory. And so I wonder what it would do for us to theorize "queerness" in the Caribbean through the local, especially given that the Caribbean normative is located differently than in the global North or even in the dominant narratives of the Caribbean itself. In *Island Bodies: Transgressive Sexualities in the Caribbean Imagination*, King examines "how sexuality can support or challenge Caribbean traditions of heteropatriarchy and binary gender."<sup>6</sup> She identifies how people contest these traditions through what she calls transgressive sexualities that evoke new understandings of Caribbean sexual desires and experiences—grounded in the local and regional yet also reflecting what she calls the *Caribglobal*. King calls upon us to privilege the local in all its contradictions and complexities and challenge what is considered the norm inside and outside the region for Caribbean peoples and cultures.

Thus I often use terms such as *sexual and gender minorities*, *women-loving women*, *men-loving men*, *same-sex loving*, *same-gender loving*, and others that describe various desires, practices, and identities, while embracing changes in language as inevitable. Certainly, there are advantages to using the more well-known global terms and acronym of LGBTQI, which includes Q for *queer* and *questioning*. In advocacy work and political organizing through sexual minority organizations across the region, LGBTI has gained prominence and usefulness (and, increasingly, with the added "Q" in addition to *gender and sexual minorities*, is used to specify communities being engaged with and including gender identity and sexual orientation as the focus of advocacy work). Furthermore, local and regional terms that describe the ranges of sexual identities, practices, and behaviors of Caribbean people—*mati*, *zami*, *maricon*, *makome*, *buller*, *batty bwoy*, *loca*, *tanti-pimpim*, *anti-man*, *man royal*, and *ma divine*, among others—are part of Caribbean languages of sex, sexuality, and gender expression, even though they can be used in derogatory ways to incite violence and discrimination.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, these words are used in complex ways, and some are reappropriated at times in positive ways. The point here is that genders and sexualities across the region have long been

complex, diverse, and nonnormative as Kamala Kempadoo reminds us in her work, particularly in *Sexing the Caribbean*.

My engagement with *queer* and its use for the region has shifted into seeing and contemplating its expansiveness.<sup>8</sup> And while I do use the term for my own identity (as well as engage with queer theory in work), I am fully aware of the ways it can alienate people across the region—even as I notice how much more often people are using the term not only as an umbrella for LGBTI people and experiences but also as its own descriptor for all that does not fit into the LGBTI. Therefore, I embrace the ways that *queer* opens space in terms of sex, sexuality, and gender identity and how it leaves room for fluidity. This is the place from which I begin my conversation and engagement with Nadia Huggins’s photography—the issue of fluidity and opening space, which I think is what “queer” can do.<sup>9</sup>

## Gender Fluidity and Sexuality in *Fighting the Currents*

Huggins’s series *Transformations*, one part of her *Fighting the Currents* project, focuses on bodies underwater; she uses her own body, the ocean, and marine organisms. The diptych pieces reveal intense fluidity and ambiguity in terms of gender—masculine, perhaps, but also gender nonconforming—and being human. This work uses and plays with the ocean and also bodies (specifically, the body through self-portraits) in relation to water. Given that water is a life force and that our bodies are mostly water, we can see this play as essential to our being—the sea as space for movement and healing of the planet. Water itself is very sensual and sexual. There is so much we do not know about the ocean. The sea is both healing and dangerous, comforting and mysterious, constantly changing yet ever present. This series plays with these metaphors and with movement of the body and the sea. Further, the pieces push against gender norms, with representations of an ambiguous body and marine organisms, in paired vertical compositions, creating the illusion of the subjects merging into a new (human) being. Gender presentation and expression are deliberately troubled in this series, as is evident in the series title, which evokes not only the more obvious change in the human body but also change in the sea—perhaps the sea as necessary healing and transformative conduit of the human.

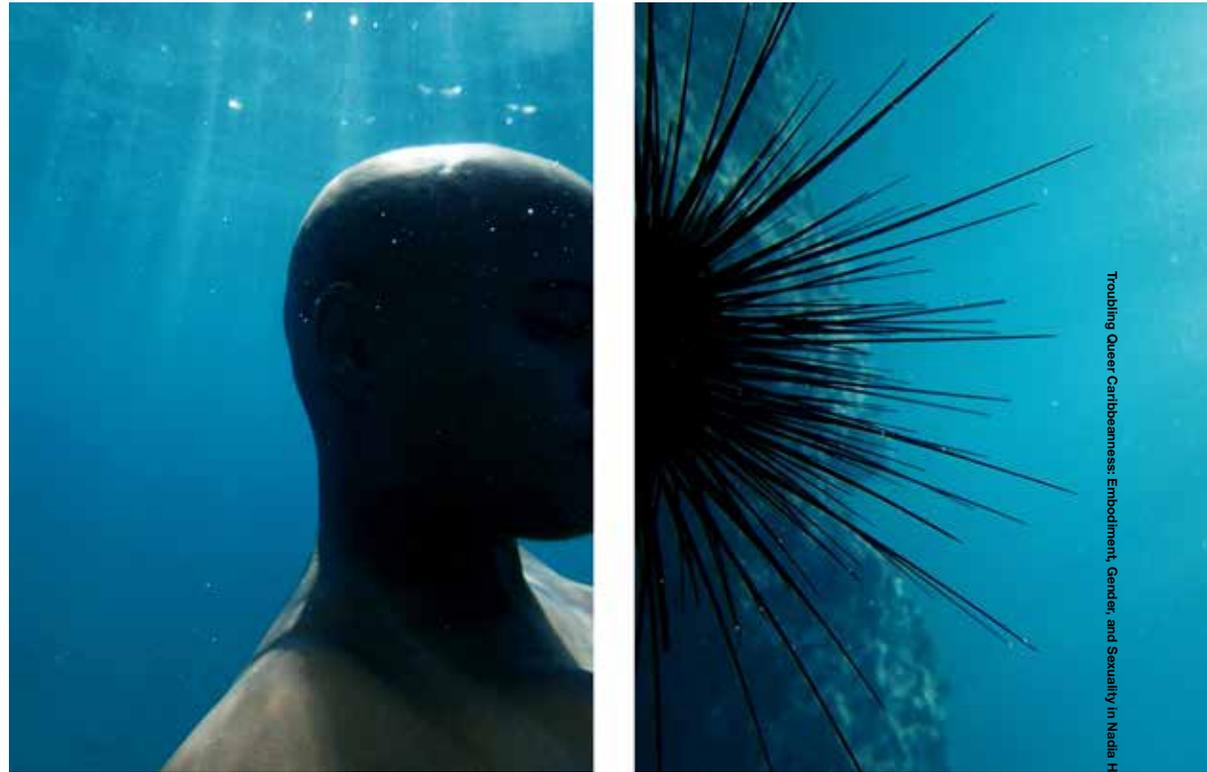


Figure 1. Nadia Huggins, *Transformations 1*, from the *Transformations* series, 2015. Digital photographs. Courtesy of the artist

In my conversation with Huggins during the *Small Axe* symposium in April 2015, she spoke at length about the process of creating each of these pieces, describing it as a physical challenge in the ocean, pushing herself, but also as playing with buoyancy, breathing, and depth. The choice to bring the body underwater, she explained, is inspired by the way skin changes and interacts with the ocean and marine life; the artist claims the sea life as part of self. The self-portrait diptychs of *Transformations* have been featured twice in *Small Axe*.<sup>10</sup> The work in progress published in *Small Axe* 47 (since titled *Transformations 1*), which brings the artist's body into play with coral and a black sea urchin, is incredibly haunting and exquisite; it is both science fiction and fantasy, surreal and fantastical (fig. 1). The artist merges the images of the body and the sea urchin, her body underwater and sea life. The mode of expression—the self-portrait—works well for this journey and for playing with the body and representation. Huggins explains that she also experiences freedom in the sea, under the sea, in particular, even as she experiences the limitations of the body and the constraints of the ocean. The artist describes this work as a labor of self to create the art and carry out the aesthetic. Most assuredly, if we are using the term *queer* to describe nonnormativity, we could describe Huggins's work as evoking queer aesthetic, but if we also center her work in the region, her artwork challenges and troubles the term *queer* through a defiant perspective on space, place, and futures.

The other pieces in this series—all digital photographs in the diptych style, all titled *Transformations*—do similar work: they create the illusion of transformation and wholeness, with full immersion into sea life, healing, and being. There is also tension in these pieces, as the overall project title, *Fighting the Currents*, suggests—struggle, perhaps, against change, against gender and sexual norms, against assumptions about gender and sexuality. The project title can also be seen as a reference to the hard work associated with bringing transformation to life and, quite literally, to the artist who pushes herself and her body in the ocean, with and against the currents, to create her art. Huggins has placed her body in the forefront of her art, which can be seen as vital to movement building and space(s) created in the Caribbean art

world for nonnormativity and difference. Her work also affirms a Caribbeanness that is inclusive, expansive, and future oriented in its visioning of gender and sexuality and of being human.

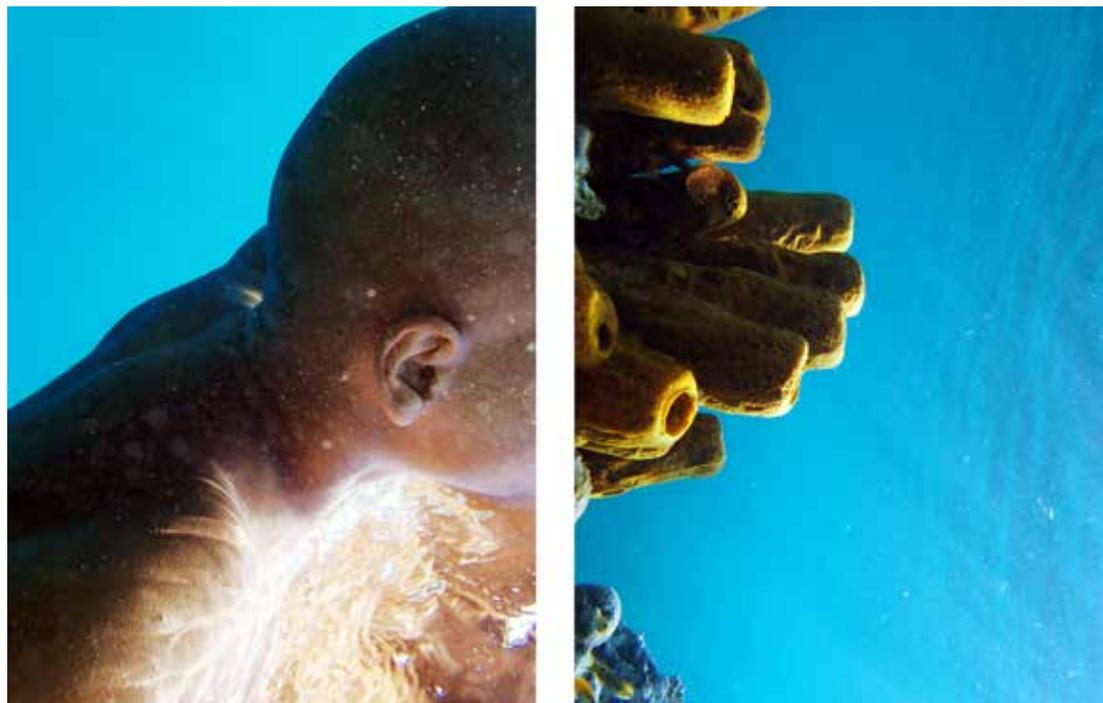


Figure 2. Nadia Huggins, *Transformations 8*, from the *Transformations* series, 2015. Digital photographs. Courtesy of the artist

The mode of self-portraits through digital photography is a signature style of Huggins's. I am particularly interested in her self-portraits that push against the normative representations of being human, as do those in her *Transformations* series. But it is important to also reference her earlier work, such as *The Architect* and *Self Portrait—Infinity*, that illustrates her long use of self-portraits and digital photography from 2004 to the present.<sup>11</sup> She has long created artwork that engages self-representation and affirmations of self that move outside repression and the male colonial gaze. I see her work as playfully and powerfully rebuking the white male colonial gaze in particular. Another piece that I would like to focus on, in order to discuss further the artist's play with gender fluidity and the body, is her 2006 digital photograph *New Skin* (fig. 3).



Figure 3. Nadia Huggins, *New Skin*, 2006. Digital photograph. Courtesy of the artist

This unique and provocative piece aligns with her other series, yet Huggins does not include it as part of her series projects. I see this artwork as a prequel to *Transformations* and an evolution of her earlier self-portraits. In *New Skin*, the body is the center and nude, yet it is also submerged through reflections of light and vine-like branches as skin, textured with an almost three-dimensional effect. The face, shoulders, and chest are human in form, but the skin of vine and branches gives the artwork an “alien” feeling, yet it is most certainly human. The artist’s body is recognizable as “she,” if we know Huggins’s work, but if not, this body can be seen as ambiguous or even genderless, beyond gender, or gender fluid. The title most readily evokes the notion of transformation and the skin becoming new—eluding perhaps to reptilian shedding of skin or butterflies and moths emerg-

ing from their cocoons. The human body changing and becoming something new is most readily represented in the realm of science fiction and fantasy and in the imaginary of myths, folk tales, and legends. This visual representation can be seen as asserting mythical symbolic power of space making and celebration of a masculine female body, while offering the possibilities of being and becoming more than societal/cultural norms. I would argue, then, that *New Skin* plays with performance of gender and identity explicitly through the ambiguous body and digital enhancement in ways that trouble and contest gender norms.

While gender can be a performance and run the spectrum between masculinity and femininity, we also know that gender socialization is strict, policed, and enforced through families, societies, and cultural norms and expectations. Therefore, as I discuss “gender performance,” I do so with great care and consideration of the very real experiences of gender and complexity of gender identity and controls—and the extent to which gender must be understood in relation to other aspects of identity: race, class, and sexuality. In the Caribbean, we continue to experience the damage of deeply gendered, racialized, sexualized, and class-stratified (post)colonial societies in which it is difficult to be our whole selves or to decolonize our consciousness to be ourselves. Through this artwork, I vision the radical potential of pushing and expanding our notions of gender and sexuality as fundamental to the ongoing struggle for decolonization of our minds, bodies, and spirits. This is the work that representing “queerness” can do—and for the region in particular, this means addressing gender and sexuality at the intersections of race, class, and space.

### **Gender Performance and Identity in *Black and Blue* and *Circa No Future***

Huggins certainly pushes boundaries of representation through her unique perspective and engagement with subjects. Two earlier series, *Circa No Future: Exploring the Masculine Underwater* (photographs taken in St. Vincent of adolescent boys) and *Black and Blue* (young boys/teens playing football in St. Lucia), both represent youth and masculinity in the Caribbean land- and

seascape. The artist explains that these two projects/series rely heavily on interaction with the subjects and that her gender presentation and identity affected these interactions. In *Black and Blue*, Huggins obscures faces and bodies with black and blue shadows that give a haunting effect, since the images are all slightly blurred and distorted (see fig. 4). The landscapes in the series are not recognizable, and the black bodies of the youth are juxtaposed to the sepia tones of the background. This creates a “not quite here” futuristic vibration to the entire series; each image contains different motions and bodies with the same effects and tones. The title has layered meanings as a descriptor of the bodies as well as a reference to violence and bruising and to the physicality of football and masculinity. But the images themselves counter the signifier of violence: the boys are represented in playful motion, with shadow effects of blue over their black skin.

Figure 4. Nadia Huggins, *Black and Blue 8*, from the *Black and Blue* series, 2014. Digital photograph. Courtesy of the artist



The description of the series—young boys playing football in St. Lucia—places the series in firm context and space. The artist explains that she was in St. Lucia doing work when she encountered this group of teens playing football. Huggins explained that while photographing, she kept a distance from the boys as they played what she described as an aggressive game. She was not able to get very close to the boys, which is revealed through the black and blue shadows of the series. Yet her keen eye as an artist and use of an aesthetic that carefully approaches subjectivity comes through in this series. I focus here on one image that includes a young boy with one hand on his waist (arm akimbo) and his hip slightly tilted, his body in the foreground with other bodies in the distance. The framing of these boys in motion and playing football offers an intriguing perspective of the performance of masculinity and gender. This one in particular reveals a play with gender, with feminine masculinity, in the Caribbean space where young boys are too often raised to fear the feminine and to assert violent masculinity. The distortion of the image and aesthetics of the artwork offer a challenge to dominant regimes of representations and normative expectations of black Caribbean masculinity.

While the *Black and Blue* series is not about sexuality explicitly, it certainly speaks to the relationship and intertwining of gender identity and sexuality, for youth especially. The performance of gender for young people is the pathway to their sense of self and their sexuality. The interconnections between gender and sexual norms are evident if we consider how often the notions of gender roles and the binary system of gender within heterosexist patriarchal societies regulate and police normative ideas of both gender and sexuality. Most often these controls result in restrictive and violent notions of masculinity, which assert patriarchal and heterosexist violence. We are all deeply affected by these limited and controlling notions of gender and sexuality, which become heightened in relationship to race and class. Huggins's artwork engaging and complicating notions of black Caribbean masculinity, then, for me is radical in its deconstruction of gender norms and expectations, for black boys and teens especially.

In *Circa No Future*, Huggins captures boys near and underneath the sea in a series of photographs that offer a beautiful representation of Caribbean black masculinity (see fig. 5). These photographs were taken in the artist's home country of St. Vincent and in the sea that she grew up near; she's been documenting these boys for two years. The series has an "other-worldly" vibration through the underwater scenes and the motions of the young men, yet the images are also Caribbean Sea specific. The boys are in various physical states of jumping or diving into the sea and underwater, which Huggins photographs in ways to represent their humanness, their masculinity, their performance of gender. Huggins describes the process of establishing rapport with the boys as having to build relationships. In getting permission to photograph them, Huggins experienced first their confusion over her gender and then the shift to acceptance as she earned their respect in the water. She describes this process as one of creating space and relationships with her subjects. At first contact, they questioned her gender, perhaps reading her as masculine/boy, but eventually, as

they spent more time with her, the boys became more open and comfortable. The artist explains that as she photographed their interactions with the sea, over time she noticed how typical notions of masculinity changed, especially underwater.



Figure 5. Nadia Huggins, *Circa No Future 21*, from the *Circa No Future: Exploring the Masculine Underwater* series, 2014. Digital photograph. Courtesy of the artist

The image I focus on in this series is one with a fully submerged youth whose eyes and mouth are closed yet he is smiling. The young boy's expression, his body buoyant in the saltwater, and the spread of his arms evokes calmness, happiness, vulnerability, and a sense of freedom. The title may proclaim "approximately no future" for these subjects, but the photographs tell a different story for these boys—near and under the Caribbean seascape there is possibility and hope for the future. The boys are strong yet sweet, determined, uncertain, and vulnerable. Their performance of masculinity is transformed through their interactions with the saltwater and their playfulness in and with the ocean. Further, in their opening up to the artist they perhaps let go of some of the constraints of gender roles, of masculinity, and they simply get to be themselves and somewhat free.

## Genderqueer Caribbeaness and Sexuality

As we consider the breadth of Huggins's artwork, it is intriguing to consider the ways her digital enhancement of self-portraits extends to her representation of others. Further, her series/projects of self-expression and representing youth connect through questions of identity, gender, sexuality, and space. In order to analyze and understand her approach to self-expression and identity, we should consider the trajectory of her use of the "selfie" to affirm her own identity and to play with the ways her gender is sometimes misread. She often experiences the world through the lens of having no hair, which dramatically affects how people see her and then make assumptions about her gender and sexuality. In our conversations, Huggins expressed how much she has been affected by her bare head, which is the result of hair loss she experienced in her teen years. Growing up as a teenager in St. Vincent, she played football, and she describes herself as a tomboy. But as she began to lose her hair, this affected how her tomboyhood was understood. As an adult, and as a Caribbean artist moving through the region and the world, Huggins continues to be treated in various ways because of what people assume about her gender presentation and identity and her sexuality. Her masculine-presenting dress combined with her bald head trouble notions of gender, and she also identifies as a same-sex-loving woman. I would argue that between her gender presentation, identity, and sexuality, and how these intersect with and provide inspiration for her artwork, there is a *genderqueerness* that is uniquely Caribbean. I see the pushing against all boundaries of identity as something that Caribbean artists are in a unique position to do.

Huggins does not want to be placed in any identity category box and prefers to focus on transgressive representations and pushing against boundaries rather than on the specifics of identity. We discussed these issues during our conversations, and we both expressed the difficulties around identity and how we are defined as writers and artists, creative and intellectual workers, and the challenges for those of us who exist as both/many/multiple beings and beyond labels. While I have found much room and defiance in self-identifying and the naming of myself, my work, and my place inside/outside spaces, I

recognize all the ways some writers and artists prefer to not identify explicitly. For Huggins, as one looks at the breadth of her work, one can see the resistance to labeling or identifying herself explicitly in the artwork; rather, her identity comes through in different ways. She says she does not set out to make "queer" art or anything labeled because she refuses to be limited or locked into a particular style or focus.

However, it is clear that at the center of her artwork and art praxis is the body—her own, and thus her identity/identities, as well as that/those of each of the Caribbean subjects she chooses to represent—and the future-oriented and other-worldly visioning of Caribbean land- and seascapes. As a mixed-race Caribbean person, Huggins may be described as racially ambiguous and, combined with her gender presentation, as lying outside or beyond many of the norms of gender, race, and sexuality. When reading her artwork, one can see the interplay of race, gender, class, and sexuality in terms of being and representing Caribbean bodies, subjects, and places. Yet her work also transcends and pushes beyond space and place. She asserts that her use of visual art is to create new visions of self and transformation. For example, over the years she has taken a series of selfies that include her head in different places and spaces. In figure 6, we can see several of them from her iPhone collection, put together in a montage by the artist for our conversation.

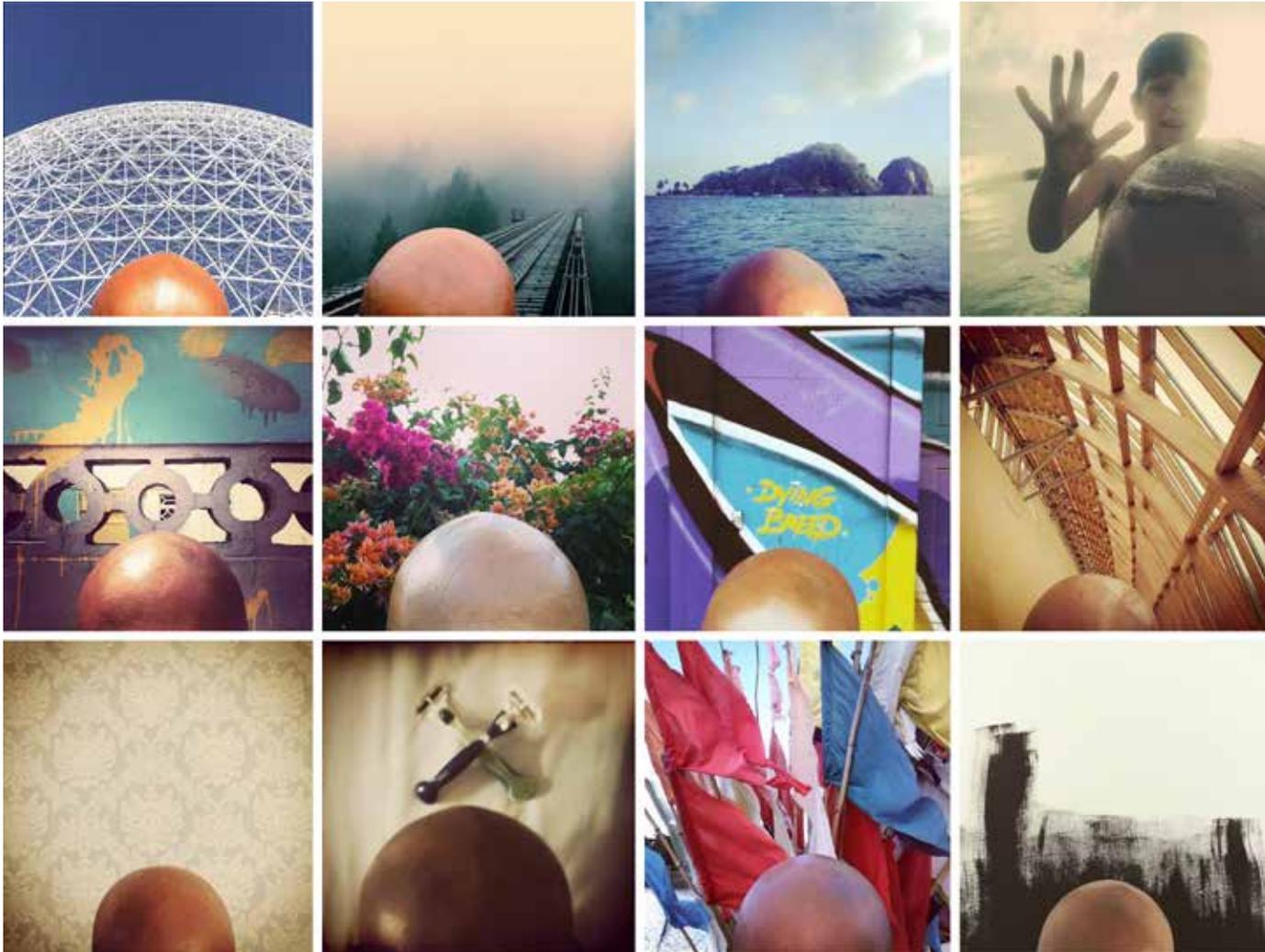


Figure 6. Nadia Huggins, #selfie, 2013–15. iPhone photographs. Courtesy of the artist

Her selfies can be understood as the beginning of her *Fighting the Currents* project, in terms of how she plays with the notion of self-portraits. Whereas the selfies are all the same positioning of her head, the *Transformations* series expands to include more of the body and a digital enhancement and manipulation of the body—a gender-fluid body, an ambiguous body—as represented under the sea. She uses the metaphor of the sea for space, change, and transformation. These selfies, when placed alongside her most recent work specifically created for this “Caribbean Queer Visualities” project, reveal the ultimate play with gender and being mistaken for a boy. *Is that a buoy?*, in line with *Transformations*, uses a diptych format, deliberately juxtaposing, in almost a mirror effect, the submerged body of the artist on the left, with her head and part of her face coming out of the ocean, and, on the right, a buoy (fig. 7). In St. Vincent, as well as other parts of the Caribbean, *buoy* is pronounced *boy*, and so the play on words and gender identity is obvious.

Huggins's artist statement reflects on the purpose of the piece and makes a direct correlation between her self-portraits, deliberate play with gender, and representations of young boys in her other series:

*Is that a buoy?* explores the ambiguity of the body in the sea, especially when observed from a distance, and the assumptions one makes about gender and sexuality based on physical appearances. We have been conditioned to make certain distinctions between male and female. Hair is one of the first attributes that we use when making these distinctions. I am stereotyped as being masculine constantly because of the absence of my hair.

I have been documenting adolescent boys and their interactions in the sea for the last 2 years and I have the same encounter when I initially come into contact with them for the first time: they question my gender. As the relationship develops they become more open, and my appearances becomes less novel, but the initial encounter has always struck me as something interesting and worth exploring.<sup>12</sup>

*Is that a buoy?* exudes the gender play and fluidity of the body I have been analyzing throughout this essay, and it also offers specific engagement, through the artist statement, with the artist's own gender presentation, hair loss, and identity. The intentional obscuring of features contributes to the subject's ambiguity and the comparison to the buoy—which can so often be mistaken as a person swimming. The ocean and its currents are in full frame, as the metaphors for change and transformation exude through the photograph. Huggins explains her choices and what she wants her piece to do: "I choose to work in black and white to create a sense of ambiguity in the images. . . . My desire is to leave the viewer with more questions than with a resolution. What lies below the surface in both images? Can we define a person or object by only knowing and experiencing a part of it?"<sup>13</sup> The artist's questions evoke their own assertions around expansive being and belonging, on the possibilities of gender fluidity and ambiguity, and about the importance of experiences both outside and inside. We are reflections of our experiences, yet we can determine and transform the world we live in and the spaces, communities, and societies we come from and are a part of that are in desperate need of transformation, rebuilding, and healing.

This engagement with representations of the body through a critical analysis and conversation with Caribbean visual artist Nadia Huggins and her photography offers space and possibilities for how we as Caribbean people can see and create new futures that are not bounded by limiting notions of gender and sexuality. I have argued in this essay that Huggins's modes of expression through self-portraits, digital underwater photography, and bodies in Caribbean land- and seascapes contest gender and sexual norms. And it is through the spectrum of her series—*Black and Blue*, *Circa No Future*, and

*Transformations*—that we can see her artwork exuding gender fluidity and a "genderqueerness" that is uniquely Caribbean. Moreover, the evolution of her self-portraits through selfies in different settings has brought her to her most recent work. Ultimately my interrogation of the usefulness of *queer*, or what I call "troubling queer Caribbeaness," reveals itself through the analysis of the artwork and the ways we can theorize "queerness" through the Caribbean local/regional space. I believe that contemporary visual art may offer us expansive language and possibilities for understanding transgressive expressions of gender and sexuality that are much needed across the region.



# Endnotes

- 1 These questions were shared with writers for two *Small Axe* symposiums: “Caribbean Queer Visualities I,” 14–15 November 2014, Yale University; and “Caribbean Queer Visualities II,” 2–3 April 2015, Columbia University.
- 2 Angelique V. Nixon and Rosamond S. King, “Embodied Theories: Local Knowledge(s), Community Organizing, and Feminist Methodologies in Caribbean Sexuality Studies,” *Caribbean Review of Gender Studies* 7 (2013): 2–3.
- 3 Patricia Mohammed, *Imaging the Caribbean: Cultural and Visual Translation* (Oxford: Macmillan, 2009), 16.
- 4 David Scott, “A Small Axe Project Statement,” *Small Axe*, no. 46 (March 2015): 118–19.
- 5 See Gloria Wekker, *The Politics of Passion: Women’s Sexual Culture and the Afro-Surinamese Diaspora* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006); Kamala Kempadoo, *Sexing the Caribbean: Gender, Race, and Sexual Labor* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Lawrence LaFountain-Stokes, *Queer Ricans: Cultures and Sexualities in the Diaspora* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009); Omis’seke Natasha Tinsley, *Thieving Sugar: Eroticism Between Women in Caribbean Literature* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010); Rosamond S. King, *Island Bodies: Transgressive Sexualities in the Caribbean Imagination* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2014); Jafari Allen, *¡Venceremos?: The Erotics of Black Self-making in Cuba* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011); and Carlos Decena, *Tacit Subjects: Belonging and Same-Sex Desire among Dominican Immigrant Men* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).
- 6 King, *Island Bodies*, 19.
- 7 For more on local and regional terms and their nuances, see *ibid.*, chaps. 2 and 3.
- 8 In my forthcoming essay “On Being a Black Sexual Intellectual: Thoughts on Caribbean Sexual Politics and Freedom,” I discuss this more in a personal reflection on embodied theories and black queer politics.
- 9 All references to the artist and her descriptions of the artwork and her process are based on our personal conversations and discussions in preparing for the *Small Axe* symposium in April 2015 and also in preparing our work for this project over the course of a year (January–December 2015).
- 10 See “Caribbean Queer Visualities: Portfolio II,” *Small Axe*, no. 47 (July 2015): 152–53; and “Art as a Caribbean Feminist Practice: A Portfolio,” *Small Axe*, no. 52 (March 2017): 156–57. Please note that the titles of the images have changed since publication.
- 11 See “Caribbean Queer Visualities: Portfolio II,” 150–51.
- 12 Nadia Huggins, “Artist Statement,” *Is that a buoy?*, 2 December 2015.
- 13 *Ibid.*

Figure 7. Nadia Huggins, *Is That a Buoy?*, 2016. Digital photographs. Courtesy of the artist



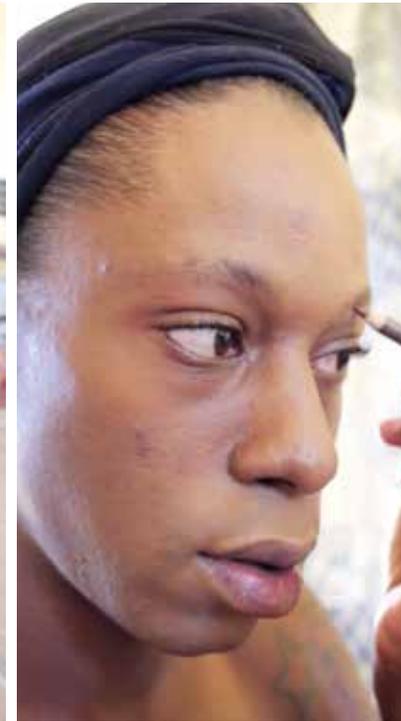
# kareemMORTIMER

THE BAHAMAS

***Witness***, 2016. Video installation.

Images courtesy of the artist.





# Troubling an Unjust Present: Kareem Mortimer's Filmmaking Ambition for The Bahamas

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This essay explores the relationship between cultural projects and questions of social justice, taking as its starting point a conversation I had with Kareem Mortimer at the first “Caribbean Queer Visualities” symposium, held at Yale University in 2014.<sup>1</sup> Here, I reflect on Mortimer’s filmmaking practice, especially the films *Children of God* (2011) and *She* (2012), a feature-length fiction film and a short documentary, respectively, which I explore within the wider context of Mortimer’s work and vision for filmmaking in The Bahamas. His projects currently include establishing and extending film programming and strengthening filmmaking production in The Bahamas. These backstories are significant to sustaining debates and creativity in the Caribbean, where the work involved is often undertaken by artists whose efforts as autonomous, active agents of cultural change influence national debates and sensibilities.

In a similar approach to the discussion I had with Mortimer, this essay reflects a more creative enterprise in style and manner, making more of relevant news items revealing new and renewed forms of protest, attempted coups, shootings, and other regimes of violence. Writing about Mortimer’s work at this particular time and within this particular conjuncture is significant. The writing, conversation, and “Caribbean Queer Visualities” project

have been timely, acknowledging the increasingly significant contribution that queer visual expression makes to the debate and definition of Caribbean sensibility and culture.

My writing comes from a feminist and situated perspective in exploring the work, making apparent a personal and partial narrative. As a London-based feminist of the Caribbean diaspora, I am caught in the United Kingdom, within the current highly globalized quasi-European space in a dystopian political and cultural climate that is perceived as “post-Brexit,” postfactual, socially divisive. Mortimer’s filmmaking and efforts represent important challenges, providing cinema as alternative spaces for voices emergent from southern, majority world perspectives and landscapes associated with the present and future. I also approach this essay with Rinaldo Walcott’s writing in mind, aware of “the trip wires of speaking from here to there” that he acknowledges: “I thus speak as an ambivalent ‘extension’ of the Anglo-Caribbean collectivity conditioned by a diasporic experience . . . I speak among others whose practices, desires and politics inform my own.”<sup>2</sup>

The sections of this essay explore Mortimer’s filmmaking as an embodied practice. “Queer Flesh” explores his film *Children of God*, particularly the end sequence, looking at the question of pathos in queer stories and characters. “Queer Bodies and Relational Space” notes the ways transnational relationships, migration, and questions of home are embedded into Caribbean culture. “Bahamian Queer Bodies in Performance” focuses on Mortimer’s film *She*, a short documentary that pays tribute to the Miss Drag Bahamas beauty pageant as an event establishing itself more fully in Bahamian culture.

## Queer Flesh: Between Hope and Despair

In “Desire through the Archipelago,” the introduction to his anthology *Our Caribbean: A Gathering of Lesbian and Gay Writing from the Antilles*, Thomas Glave describes his editorial project:

Walking though slowly, and increasingly aware of its flesh taking shape, the book began to ask questions—pester, even. Through all the hours of its more groggy, wobbly-kneed state, it wanted to know the same things I did. . . . People “out there” who also gazed across that water that simultaneously divided and united us all and who dreamed—yearned their way through those emotions and all that desire: women for women, men for men, women and men for women-men. That erotic-emotional desire for people of our own gender that it seemed no one—not anyone at all—ever spoke about, much less wished to hear about unless in the realm of “scandal” and “disgrace.”<sup>3</sup>

Glave’s text provides an artistic and nuanced narrative for introducing his thinking (and aesthetics) about queer projects and queer perspectives. What is central to queer knowledge here is the metaphorical presence of the body as a site of knowledge production as it mobilizes and performs. Other writers such as Sara Ahmed, Tony Ballantyne, Antoinette Burton, Laura Marks, and Fred Moten perceive the corporeal and queer body as an active and affective site of reflection and becoming. Glave evokes the body to describe ideas in formation and production, the creation of a project as a living, breathing, active process. The violated racialized, subaltern, Southern body in various conditions and states of being is constituted as flesh, bones, blood, or skin. As metaphors, these latter terms evoke questions of memory and history of the fugitive body, or are deployed to engage with film analysis and cinema, or are used to create theoretical frames as affective, associated with tactility, haptic, and sensory experiences. The use of the body as a knowledge-generating site *in process* has become more central to postrepresentational thought, emergent from and associated with feminist, postcolonial, and queer epistemologies.<sup>4</sup> As Ballantyne and Burton suggest, in inscribing the body as central to knowledge making, we can identify different narratives of history and storytelling as “bodies evoke birth and death, work and play, disease and fitness; they carry germs and fluids as well as a variety of political economies and the pretext for intrusion, discipline, and punishment at both the individual and the collective levels.”<sup>5</sup>

Mortimer’s filmmaking practice straddles both fictional and documentary genres, creating feature-length works and shorts.<sup>6</sup> In the case of both *Children of God* and *She*, his creative aesthetic works within the stylistic conventions and boundaries of film production aimed at the independent filmmaking global circuit. This is concerned with fund-raising from established film funds and using film festivals as the predominant mode of distribution and recognition. As a filmmaker, Mortimer works within the confluence of an earlier generation of Caribbean filmmakers, including Horace Ové,

Euzhan Palcy, Raoul Peck, and Perry Henzel. Mortimer's films are also in direct dialogue with those of other contemporary filmmakers from the Caribbean and the Caribbean diaspora, including Lisa Harewood, Maria Govan, Alrick Brown, Mary Wells, Lucien Jean-Baptiste, Campell Ex, Richard Fung, and Isaac Julien.<sup>7</sup>

Cinema, says Teresa de Lauretis, is "one of the modes in and through which public fantasies are taken up and rearticulated."<sup>8</sup> Experimentation is apparent in the narratives of Mortimer's films as he takes up the familiar heterosexual and homophobic tropes associated with queer culture. His work is concerned with the misperceptions and phobic fantasies about homosexuality and LGBT matters. Filmic fantasies, de Lauretis proposes, is an activity "based on the capacity for imagining and imaging" aimed at transgressing boundaries between what is perceived as real and the phantasmatic. Mortimer's film innovation lies in the narrative and subject matter, with a specificity and nuanced reflection about

homophobia, gay rights, and homosexuality that have until more recently been persistently unspoken, silenced, and invisible in the Caribbean. Mortimer's queer stories and characters navigate a complex rhetoric about being queer, providing a sonic and visual focal point in which queer black bodies "pester" and quarrel with Caribbean heteromascularity and its associated violence and abuse. His films are cultural punctums, if you like, emergent from queer ideologies that sustain the possibility and hope of a plurality and future.

Shot in Nassau Eleuthera, *Children of God* is a romantic drama/tragedy based on the attraction and growing love between two Bahamian characters, Johnny and Romeo, and is generally considered to be the first Caribbean feature film to explore homophobia and gay issues. There is an interlocking narrative of a Bahamian heterosexual couple (and their child) who, as Christian church elders, lead the Save the Bahamas campaign against gay rights on the islands.<sup>9</sup> Other significant characters are Reverend Ritchie and a character nicknamed "Purple" — "Because my heart is so black, it's purple," he explains.<sup>10</sup> The Reverend Ritchie is the local minister on the island of Eleuthera who is characterized by his moderate Christian values; to him, everyone is God's child, regardless of race, sexuality, or gender. Purple, who leads the homophobic taunts and beatings, and beatings, fatally stabs Johnny in the penultimate scene of the film.



Figure 1. Still from "Bike Scene," *Children of God*, 2011. Director, Kareem Mortimer; Director of Photography, Ian Bloom.



Figure 2. Still from “Dance Scene,” *Children of God*, 2011. Director, Kareem Mortimer; Director of Photography, Ian Bloom.

*Children of God* is rendered as intimate, romantic, and melancholic, created through the use of subdued lighting, muted colors, frequent close-up compositions, and narrow depth of field, allowing for visual focus and emphasis on the performance in the foreground. Amplified diegetic sounds often accompany intimate or interior scenes, which are contrasted by the booming and yet tinny male voice as the preacher uses the cheap microphone of a public address system. Particularly noticeable too is the use of cello music, often associated with evoking and sustaining pathos. The film is in keeping with Judeo Christian mythic metanarrative of the Christian belief system that rages a moral war between the forces of good and evil. The film underlines and addresses head-on the way Christianity dominates a mainstream Bahamian society and everyday experience. Mortimer imbues the film with Christian moral judgment, sentiment, and knowledge, confirmed in the details: the choice of film title; the use of archive news footage of antigay protestors (as if the angry crowd is at a crucifixion); the preacher’s voiceover of antigay rhetoric, rationalized through biblical knowledge that runs repeatedly through the film’s soundtrack; and various religion-focused scenes and acting. This includes the church and the reverend’s house and office as spaces for confession, for praying, and for everyday social events, with the reverend’s bedroom as the location to practice sexual abstinence and control. Recurring visual and sonic tropes associated with biblical narratives and characters are seamlessly incorporated into the film’s narrative. One example is Johnny’s symbolic unaccompanied journey of self-discovery to Eleuthera and more specifically his continuing on to Lighthouse Point at the southern tip of the island, clearly serving as the metaphor to “finding one’s way” through the wilderness. Johnny is construed as the tragic victim, awkward and scared to “touch” or be “touched.” The use of the visual and sonic trope of the ocean and water is conventionally used as the place of revelation, calmness, and transformation, involving Romeo’s challenge to Johnny to jump off the cliff into the sea and his learning to float in the sea—a baptism of trust in others.

*Children of God* presents Caribbean queer matters as eminently more complicated once the “surface or skin” of the film is pierced. Or, put another way, once the flesh and body has succumbed to self-awareness, self-confidence, confession, redemption, and loss. Mortimer addresses the specifics of racism, race, and tropical tourism in the dialogue, referring to the racialized, black bodies of Romeo and Purple in their encounter and relationship to Johnny as the deeply unhappy white Bahamian:

ROMEO: I don't know too many skinny white Bahamians boys and besides I never forget no body's face.

JOHNNY: I am not white.<sup>11</sup>

Sara Ahmed's writings on “queer point[s]” of view about happiness, optimism, and pessimism are pertinent to exploring Mortimer's *Children of God* as a poetic, romantic, and yet dystopian film magnified by its futile and fatal conclusion. In her analysis of the film *Children of Men* (2006; dir. Alfonso Cuarón), Ahmed reflects on the state of happiness as being affective and visceral. The tragic ending to Mortimer's film, in which the character Johnny dies from his stab wounds, is of interest here. Ahmed wonders why it is that we often encounter the figure of the “unhappy queer.” She suggests that perhaps the “queer point” is that we do not have to “choose between pessimism and optimism.” A starting point, according to Ahmed, would be to engage with the “messiness of the experiential” as being the “‘drama of contingency,’ how we are touched by what comes near.”<sup>12</sup> Mortimer shot two endings, and while the film ends on a pessimistic note, the very last scene—Johnny's five-minute dreamscape—induces more ambivalent feelings and emotions. The concept of the dreamscape is introduced by Johnny's character and is described to Romeo as a tale of shared fantasy. This is related in the earlier scene set in a beach cove, when the two, after swimming, share an intimate moment and their first kiss. Johnny's story is based on a fantasy he constructs in his head after his heart stops but before his brain stops being active. He imagines himself as lying prostrate on the beach at Eleuthera. The camera goes in and out of focus, taking up Romeo's point of view as it lingers longingly over Johnny's body, which is unmarked by any stab wound that occurred earlier. There is no bright sunlight; rather, the light is overcast and subdued. Romeo invites Johnny for a swim, reaching out to him. We see a close up of Romeo's black hand outstretched toward Johnny. Central to the dreamscape are their bodies: touching, caressing, romantically holding on and longing. We see them walking away together toward the sea's horizon, holding hands tightly, their backs to the camera as they walk away into the ocean. As they enter the water, the camera pans away and fades to black. Mortimer presents this final scene to evoke loss, tragedy, and despair, while providing a contradictory state of elation, relief, and life beyond the “real” world. This contradictory condition or emotional space, Ahmed argues, can work also to intensify feelings of pleasure. “[In this way] we can interrogate the belief in alternatives as a fantasy that defends against the horrors of the present,” she suggests. “In other words, the belief that things ‘will only get better’ at some point that is always just ‘over the horizon’ can be a way of avoiding the impact of suffering in the world that exists before us.”<sup>13</sup>

## Queer Bodies and Relational Space: Institutional/International Frames in Bahamian Filmmaking

The *PhillyVoice* newspaper reported on the film *Play the Devil* by Bahamian film director/scriptwriter Maria Govan and Trinidadian producer Abigail Hadeed, which picked up the jury award for best feature film of qFLIX 2016, Philadelphia's annual LGBT film festival.<sup>14</sup> In line with the global recognition since the late noughties of successful Caribbean visual artists in the international art market, Caribbean filmmaking, distribution, education, and audience development are also expanding and consolidating. Film festivals taking place in the Caribbean have been strengthened and have become more international. An example of this is the Trinidad and Tobago Film Festival (ttff), which has expanded in budget, sponsorship, and reputation over the last five years to include the Caribbean film mart and community cinema screenings.<sup>15</sup> The first Caribbean film distribution company, Caribbean Tales Worldwide Distribution, was launched in Barbados in 2010. This organization received funding for two years (2014–16) from the African, Caribbean, and Pacific Group of States and the European Union for establishing more effective income-generating streams for film production and distribution.<sup>16</sup> The Caribbean Film Database representing the largest single source of information of films produced in and about the Caribbean, was launched in 2015, conceived and implemented by ttff, in association with the Fundación Global Democracia y Desarrollo, in the Dominican Republic; the Association for the Development of Art Cinema and Practice, in Guadeloupe; the Foundation of New Latin American Cinema, in Cuba; and the Festival Régional et International du Cinéma de Guadeloupe.<sup>17</sup> The Caribbean Film Academy (CaFA), a nonprofit organization based in Brooklyn was founded in 2012 by Justen Blaize and Romola Lucas. CaFA was established for the “promotion and support of Caribbean filmmaking and filmmakers, in the region and the diaspora” and benefits from attracting funding from US arts and state

councils in addition to other emergent transnational diasporic institutions.<sup>18</sup> Cameron Bailey, a significant film critic and writer, is one of the few individuals of the Caribbean diaspora to artistically lead an international film festival (Toronto International Film Festival).

The recognition of filmmakers, and the infrastructural development of film distribution and audiences, represents the burgeoning transnational economic, intellectual, and cultural relationship being developed between the Caribbean, the United States, and Canada. North America is competing and responding to increasing threats (perceived or otherwise) to its global and economic dominance as China and other countries compete. First- and second-generation Caribbean visual artists and filmmakers who have been and continue to be educated in the United States and Canada often act as catalysts to these robust North American projects.

Similar to other filmmakers of his generation, Mortimer carefully and cogently negotiates the economic benefits *and* cultural and political limitations of living in close proximity to the United States and Canada. This cultural sojourning between the Caribbean islands and North America is an important method and means of survival for many Caribbean practitioners. With a film company formed in The Bahamas, and having been involved in making films since 1998 (producing Bahamas Games documentaries), Mortimer has won more than twenty-five awards for his last three film projects and has had films distributed in more than forty countries. This work includes *Chance* (2005) and *The Eleutheran Adventure* (2006), as well as *Float* (2007), which won five international awards and distribution in five countries. The development of *Float* led to the feature-length film *Children of God*, which has won eighteen awards and was screened on the television channel *Showtime* and distributed to more than twenty-four countries. Other recent films include *She* and *Passage* (2013). In December 2015, Mortimer finished shooting in Nassau for the feature-length film *Cargo*, taken from the earlier short film *Passage*, which explores Haitian human trafficking. The *Cargo* film project is the result of support from CaribbeanTales and the Toronto International Film Festival in 2012 and 2013.

Mortimer is currently appointed as the cinema programmer for the recently built forty-eight-seat cinema as part of the boutique hotel complex, the Island House in Nassau. Programming cinema screenings in The Bahamas, according to Mortimer, is concerned with being “creatively involved in a cutting-edge theater that showcases first-run, independent, main-stream, foreign, art and family films.” As he explains, “The cinema will provide attendees with consistent, diverse and entertaining films. . . . Every person has a favorite film that has transformed the way they see the world, which is testament to the fact that the moving image is the most powerful art form of our time.”<sup>19</sup>

Mortimer’s film initiatives and efforts stand in contrast to a local political and religious backdrop that is still marked by regressive queer politics and antigay rights, despite The Bahamas being one of the leading Caribbean nations in legalizing same-sex marriage in 1991.<sup>20</sup> State legitimacy of

heterosexuality as it occurs in The Bahamas and Trinidad, Jacqui Alexander notes, still determines citizenship:

Not just (any) body can be a citizen any more, for some bodies have been marked by the state as non-procreative, in pursuit of sex only for pleasure, a sex that is non-productive of babies and of no economic gain. Having refused the heterosexual imperative of citizenship, these bodies, according to the state, pose a profound threat to the very survival of the nation. Thus, I argue that as the state moves to reconfigure the nation it simultaneously resuscitates the nation as heterosexual.<sup>21</sup>

The question of equality of citizenship of queer bodies has increasingly been contested in contemporary Caribbean spaces as gay rights agendas and bodies become more visible, advocating for equality and justice. Alexander attributes these contradictory and fractured contemporary perspectives and actions to the “complicated process of decolonization and reconstruction,” in which postcolonies as nation-states have naturalized the perceptions of heterosexuality, represented in forms of black masculinity and nationalism. This is exacerbated by the way black nationalism seamlessly associates queer bodies and activism as forms of physical and “cultural contamination from the ‘West.’”<sup>22</sup>

## Bahamian Queer Bodies in Performance

Live performances and arts events as globalized commodities that are integral to tourism development have been created by a proliferation of summer or year-long festivals in most cities under the guise of economic growth and wealth creation. Festivals have various shapes: exhibition blockbuster summer shows and biennales, such as the survey exhibition *About Change: Art in Latin America and the Caribbean* of more than 350 artworks that opened at the World Bank headquarters in July 2011; music festivals, including the *Nevis Blues Festival* and *Moonsplash* in Anguilla; street parades and carnivals, such as *Notting Hill Carnival* in London, *Caribana* in Toronto, and gay pride events across a range of cities; and spectacular attractions, including sporting events and internation-

al meets such as the *Hero Caribbean Premier League 20-20* cricket tournament. Common to these big businesses is a gargantuan appetite for more of the same, conditioned by a need to scale up and mass produce their form and content to accommodate the sheer scale, volume, and capacity of each idea. The “branded” event is marked by particular colors, logos, and wearable products, usually involving the audience in regular synchronous participatory performance that are often moderated by instruction and rhythmic beats calling to the crowd. Celebrity endorsement of and “big names” in attendance at such events are crucial to their success. Events like these also require policing, both physically and electronically, using wristbands, nametags, and swipe cards under the guise of security measures and to ward off any potential risk of attack from extremist groups or individuals. Participants as performers and audience are also controlled for the purposes of insurance, since companies underwrite the risk of damage and liability to buildings and property. These complex and grand arrangements help determine the “bodies” that constitute the event, helping to determine who is welcome to (and has paid for) the “party” and who is (has) not. The events are carnivalesque and spectacular because they are selective and exclusive.<sup>23</sup>

During the summer months, LGBT/pride events have increasingly become an integral part of the global calendar of festivals, despite being banned or prohibited by some religious or authoritarian governments.<sup>24</sup> Jamaica’s first gay pride event, *Pride JA*, which was held in August 2015 and became the first in an English-speaking Caribbean nation (a planned Bahamian event was canceled in 2014 because of death threats made to the organizers). The festivals as displays of global capital seen as “eating” itself have produced inevitable and ironic twists and counternarratives from radical and progressive activists.



Figure 3. Still from *She*, 2012. Director, Kareem Mortimer.

Mortimer's film *She* is a short documentary based on a small unique amateur event the Miss Drag Bahamas beauty pageant, produced by Anthony Stubbs, who also runs the nightclub where the pageant takes place. Stubbs is interested in developing the drag pageant into a more commercial enterprise and to opening the pageantry beyond the gay community to a general public, that is, to "take drag pageantry to another level." The film compliments his ambition of making the drag queen pageant public. This pageant is small, independently run, and organized largely by the Bahamian gay community. *She* is concerned with making represented and visible the previously less familiar and unknown community of Bahamian persons who perform in drag. The film is stylistically observational in approach. The camera is often hand held and animated, getting up close, tracking and focusing on the numerous bodies as they physically prepare for taking on and developing a more female form dressed in women's clothes. Most interviewees either speak directly to the camera or their interviews are voiceovers during film footage showing the preparations for the pageant.

The film visually focuses on the performance of the male body being adorned, masquerading in a woman's body in public. Masquerading is inextricably linked to mimicry involving masking, deception, and illusion. "[The pageant] create[s] the illusion that creates confusion," says one of the contestants, a self-declared (unidentified) transsexual (the first and only transsexual from The Bahamas, she notes in the interview).<sup>25</sup> The mask of femininity and womanliness is in play, an identity created that is malleable and associated with performativity.<sup>26</sup> While we see quick edits of the pageant in the opening sequence, the film is not concerned with reveling in the spectacle of the pageant itself. Instead it is centered on two main characters, the transsexual just mentioned and transgendered person, an entertainer and a make-up artist, who identifies as a woman in public. As viewers, we are transported and visually enveloped by the atmosphere of the nightclub's room—a dress rehearsal and preparation space, with contestants performing feminine transformations. As Vivian Sobchack notes about cinema, it is as if we are "able to touch and be touched by the substance and texture of images." *She* visually connects us with queer bodies as they are transformed; we are viscerally absorbed by scenes of contact between bodies touching, smoothing, caressing, patting down. In this sense, Sobchack continues,

We might wish to think again about processes of identification in the film experience, relating them not to our secondary engagement with and recognition of either "subject positions" or characters but rather to our primary engagement . . . with the sense and sensibility of materiality itself. We, ourselves, are subjective matter: our live bodies sensually relate to "things" that "matter" on the screen and find them sensible in a primary, prepersonal, and global way that grounds those later secondary identifications that are more discrete and localized.<sup>27</sup>

*She* frames the drag beauty pageant performance as a "site of agency," echoing Patrick E. Johnson in *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology*. He offers *quare* as a term and a "theory in the flesh" for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered people of color. Johnson's *quare* studies is "a praxis that speaks to the material existence of 'colored' bodies" and sees performance as self-reflexive and a transformative experience of "self in relation to the world."<sup>28</sup>



Opposite Page:

Figure 4. Still from *She*, 2012. Director, Kareem Mortimer.

Mortimer also uses the jump cut and zooming out as camera techniques to cut away from the caring/caressing space of the nightclub to a street protest. In this way, he continues to pester away at the ongoing debates that are central to the politics of location and orientation (which way we face and make strange)<sup>29</sup> that bring together the specificity of geography, history, and memory in which the queer Bahamian is marked as the outsider. Mortimer includes similar footage of a religious gathering as seen in *Children of God*, providing space in the film for an antigay Christian rhetoric of “unnaturalness” to interrupt the narrative. This rhetoric is masterfully countenanced by a clearly articulated argument made by the transsexual in voiceover: “Anytime you find a person has so much hate or so much animosity for gay people, they have an inner struggle within themselves.”<sup>30</sup>

The combinations of the footage of the religious gathering and the intimate preparations for the drag queen pageant places value on the importance of recognizing local and everyday struggles that Bahamian lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered people experience. It also identifies the pageant as a mode and strategy in dealing with dominant ideologies. José Esteban Muñoz advocates that this mode “works on and against” a “cultural logic from within,” trying to transform and “enact permanent structural change.”<sup>31</sup>

## Conclusion: Unjust Present

Mortimer’s keenly observed and insightful explorations of queer life in The Bahamas through feature and documentary filmmaking firmly commits to the ways cinema may re-create and imagine individual and collective fantasies that are often unspoken, unacknowledged, or unchallenged.

Current demonstrations, performances, and protests dominated by feminist and queer bodies of color, whether in North America, the Caribbean, or other nations in the global South, have brought urgent questions of equality, justice, protection from violence, state duty of care, and compassion into sharp relief. Recent reports include Black Lives Matter–Toronto protestors refusing to move, blocking the July pride parade in Toronto for around thirty minutes, publicly “calling out” the organizers by demanding a set of changes to recognize marginalized communities as the central focus for the festival. “It’s sadly obvious that many white mainstream queers have been numbed into passivity by the ongoing rhetoric of having come so far,” Rinaldo Walcott writes in response to the event. “This rhetoric has kept many from noticing some of the most urgent political questions of our day. . . . Their insensitivity to contemporary struggles after all the rhetoric of being able ‘to love who you want’ . . . is a fundamental part of the problem.”<sup>32</sup> The “urgent political questions of our day” are based on what Jack Halberstam, in his introduction to *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* by Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, describes as a response to the “brokenness

of being, a brokenness . . . that is also blackness, that remains blackness.”<sup>33</sup> Mortimer’s films are cinematic forms of theories in the flesh that provoke and reflect both the concept of brokenness of being and blackness. Racialized queer and black bodies have become central to urgent debates and current civil movements. As queer life stories and imagined narratives, the films are collective statements, registering what is necessary and pertinent to creating a just present.

# Endnotes

- 1 The symposium “Caribbean Queer Visualities I” was convened by David Scott (Columbia University; editor of *Small Axe*) and Erica James (Yale University), in November 2014 at Yale University. It was the first of two events that were part of a *Small Axe* initiative to explore aesthetic provocations about queerness through dialogues between scholars, contemporary Caribbean visual artists, and the audience. (“Caribbean Queer Visualities II” was held at Columbia University in March 2015.)
- 2 Rinaldo Walcott, “Queer Returns: Human Rights, the Anglo-Caribbean, and Diaspora Politics,” *Caribbean Review of Gender Studies*, no. 3 (2009): 3.
- 3 Thomas Glave, “Desire through the Archipelago,” introduction to Thomas Glave, ed., *Our Caribbean: A Gathering of Lesbian and Gay Writing from the Antilles* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 2–3.
- 4 See Fred Moten and Stefano Harney, “Grammars of the Fugitive,” lecture, Black Study Group, Goldsmiths, University of London, 6 December 2014, [archive.org/details/Blackstudiesgrammarsoffugitive/](http://archive.org/details/Blackstudiesgrammarsoffugitive/); Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000); and Sara Ahmed, *Willful Subjects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).
- 5 Tony Ballantyne and Antoinette Burton, eds., *Bodies in Contact: Rethinking Colonial Encounters in World History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005) 7.
- 6 See “Kareem Mortimer,” Caribbean Film Academy, [caribbeanfilm.org/kareem-mortimer/](http://caribbeanfilm.org/kareem-mortimer/); and “About the Company,” Mercury Rising Media, [mercuryrisingmedia.com/www.mercuryrisingmedia.com/Home.html](http://mercuryrisingmedia.com/www.mercuryrisingmedia.com/Home.html) (accessed 21 April 2016).
- 7 See the Caribbean Film Database (CFDb) at [www.caribbeanfilm.com](http://www.caribbeanfilm.com).
- 8 Nikki Sullivan, *A Critical Introduction to Queer Theory* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003), 61.
- 9 “The LGBT Debate: A Historic Perspective,” *Nassau Guardian*, 17 March 2014, [www.thenassauguardian.com/national-review/45916-the-lgbt-debate-a-historic-perspective](http://www.thenassauguardian.com/national-review/45916-the-lgbt-debate-a-historic-perspective).
- 10 Kareem Mortimer, *Children of God*, TLA Releasing, 2010, 144 min.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Sara Ahmed, “Happy Futures, Perhaps,” in E. L. McCallum and Mikko Tuhkanen, eds., *Queer Times, Queer Becomings* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011), 161, 162.
- 13 Ibid., 170.
- 14 Brandon Baker, “A Chat with Maria Govan, Director of Standout Qflix Film *Play the Devil*,” *PhillyVoice*, 7 July 2016.
- 15 See Trinidad and Tobago Film Festival (ttff), [www.ttffilmfestival.com](http://www.ttffilmfestival.com).
- 16 For further information, see “The ‘3D’ Distribution Project: Digital, Domestic, and Diaspora Distribution of Caribbean-Themed Audio-Visual Content,” *ACPCultures+*, [www.acpculturesplus.eu/?q=en/content/%C2%AB-3d-%C2%BB-distribution-project-digital-domestic-and-diaspora-distribution-caribbean-themed](http://www.acpculturesplus.eu/?q=en/content/%C2%AB-3d-%C2%BB-distribution-project-digital-domestic-and-diaspora-distribution-caribbean-themed); and “3D Distribution Project,” *CaribbeanTales Worldwide Distribution*, [www.caribbean-antales-worldwide.com/3d-distribution-project](http://www.caribbean-antales-worldwide.com/3d-distribution-project).
- 17 See the Caribbean Film Database (Cfdb), [www.caribbeanfilm.com](http://www.caribbeanfilm.com).
- 18 See the Caribbean Film Academy (CaFA), [caribbeanfilm.org](http://caribbeanfilm.org).
- 19 “Bahamian Director Kareem Mortimer Appointed to Run the Island House, Nassau,” *ARC Magazine*, 27 November 2014, [arcthemagazine.com/arc/2014/11/bahamian-director-kareem-mortimer-appointed-to-run-the-island-house-nassau](http://arcthemagazine.com/arc/2014/11/bahamian-director-kareem-mortimer-appointed-to-run-the-island-house-nassau).
- 20 “Death Threats over GB Gay Pride Event,” *Nassau Guardian*, 1 September 2014, [www.thenassauguardian.com/news/49937](http://www.thenassauguardian.com/news/49937).
- 21 Jacqui Alexander, “Not Just (Any) Body Can Be a Citizen: The Politics of Law, Sexuality and Postcoloniality In Trinidad and Tobago and the Bahamas,” *Feminist Review* 48 (1994): 6. See also see Jacqui Alexander, *Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).
- 22 Alexander, “Not Just (Any) Body,” 15.
- 23 See “Ja Rule’s Luxury Fyre Festival Canceled after Disastrous Start,” *Rolling Stone*, 28 April 2017, [www.rollingstone.com/music/news/ja-rules-luxury-fyre-fest-canceled-after-disastrous-start-w479298](http://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/ja-rules-luxury-fyre-fest-canceled-after-disastrous-start-w479298).
- 24 George Arnett, “How LGBT Pride Marches Spread around the World,” *Guardian*, 25 June 2016.
- 25 Kareem Mortimer, *She*, 2012, 8 min.
- 26 Sharlene Khan, “Postcolonial Masquerading: A Critical Analysis of Masquerading Strategies in the Artworks of South African Visual Artists Anton Kannemeyer, Tracey Rose, Mary Sibande, Senzeni Marasela, and Nandipha Mntambo” (thesis, Goldsmiths, University of London, 2014).
- 27 Vivian Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 65.
- 28 E. Patrick Johnson, “‘Quare’ Studies, or (Almost) Everything I Know about Queer Studies I Learned from My Grandmother,” in E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson, eds.,

*Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 127, 137–38.

- 29 See Adrienne Rich, “Notes Towards a Politics of Location,” in Reina Lewis and Sara Mills, eds., *Feminist Postcolonial Theory* (1984; repr., Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003), 29–42.
- 30 Mortimer, *She*.
- 31 José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 11–12. Johnson also refers to Muñoz’s seminal text and theory concept “disidentifications”; see Johnson, “‘Quare’ Studies,” 139.
- 32 Rinaldo Walcott, “Black Lives Matter and Misconceptions,” *NOW*, 13 July 2016, [nowtoronto.com/news/black-lives-matter-and-misconceptions](http://nowtoronto.com/news/black-lives-matter-and-misconceptions), paras. 20, 25.
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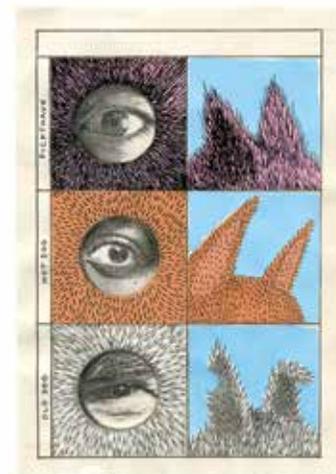
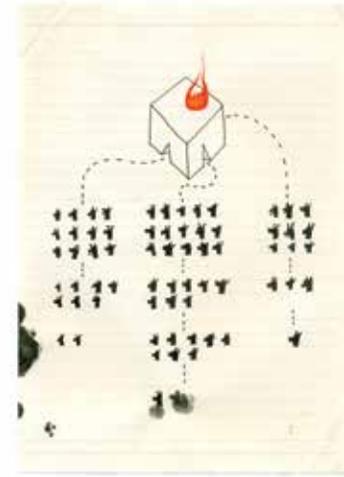
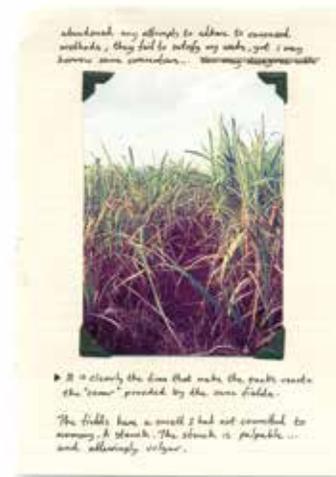
# ewanATKINSON

BARBADOS

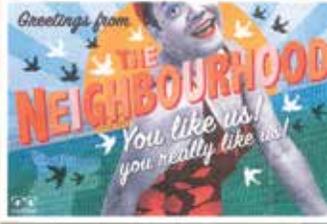
**Select Pages from the  
Fieldnotes of Dr. Tobias Boz,  
Anthrozoologist, 2015**

Mixed media on paper,  
60.24in x 35.43in.

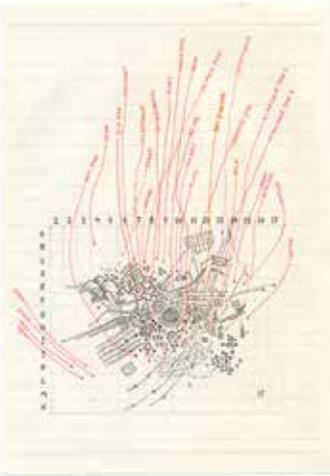
Images courtesy of the artist.



And this before, what if I were to remove it?  
 Would the spine be worth my safety? If Father's  
 investigations in mythology bear me anything it is  
 the importance of keeping the quality of each person  
 secure and intact! Yet how often, in the dark, unknown  
 how near I will venture to violence from their  
 shadow of death and back! The Suppression Savage!  
 THEY KNOW I KNOW. THEY WATCH ME WATCH THEM...



Original, Suppression Savage



BY NEW FRIEND POKRY (UPHOLDING)

water, no one! I stand with my hand on the clock,  
 today that I have just been found with a most  
 unusual painting! The clock himself in place and  
 regularly now, throughout the form an order.  
 This contradicts the tale of hydrophobia, I was told  
 in my youth, perhaps my father's the exception.  
 He says I may have order his treatment if I will have  
 been. I cannot recall much longer, I am his painting  
 I wish he to help me control ourselves of my own  
 so that I might be rid of this insane fever.



ENLARGED PHOTO (UPHOLDING)

The pink dye makes of this fact has a strange  
 effect on the surface. They are input it constantly  
 faded before the surface.



To find that the effects of my father have been found!  
 The first among this matter, he showed us signs  
 of fear, shame or indignation, as he showed me  
 to photograph and measure, for my records.  
 He that, were the same, in thought and action.  
 He stand, making us nervous, I had much more  
 not to see the child of such, I could not  
 have been able to bear it, though they look  
 at me.



II	A	B	C	D	E	F
CHAMP	■	■	■	■	■	■
HEBO	■	■	■	■	■	■
KILLA	■	■	■	■	■	■
PICKTRANK	■	■	■	■	■	■
POT STARKER	■	■	■	■	■	■
MAGON DOG	■	■	■	■	■	■
DOUGAL	■	■	■	■	■	■
FINKY	■	■	■	■	■	■
DIAMOND DOG	■	■	■	■	■	■
YKS YKS	■	■	■	■	■	■
BLACK BITCH	■	■	■	■	■	■
DEPVTY DAWG	■	■	■	■	■	■
SANDY	■	■	■	■	■	■
BYRS DOG	■	■	■	■	■	■
SNAKE	■	■	■	■	■	■

It hit her! It hit her hard! It hit her finger right off  
 and landed it!

"Who are you, dog?" She asked. "Where are  
 you visiting from? Where is your collar?"

She saw flowers and fruit in the spots of its coat,  
 saw butterflies and airplanes in the shine of its eye!

FROM PAGE 23 OF THE MESSAGES WITH UNRECORDED MESSAGES

The dog... Under this heading a line of dog prints  
 against the conventional behavior of the community with some  
 of this with regard to our order. It is true that the dog  
 of London has been something going dog form, but the  
 common could be better still with this by finally opening  
 the surface quality of the dog-form that are generally  
 named as to the little black children, who group of London  
 from these people have been common, holding the most common  
 with them. The speaking style of the dog can even compare  
 for the domestic quality of their, however, all both can  
 be better than any other or make any other to believe.

THE LITTLE OF FATHER'S SUBSTITUTION TO THE JOURNAL

I have measured the method being my father's for rather  
 the country's system. That his system was my own  
 a rather old. It might be best to create my own  
 thoughts when necessary, when dangerous.



©: FATHER

ITEMS, BELONG FROM MY POKRY, POKRY



THE APLOS, YOU DON'T HAVE ANY, NO YET YOU DO NOT



A GAMI MUP KLUPPUSISSEK RUMV, OGAH M  
 NUSAN PS PLP AADUVEEN, TRAKUL HR,  
 QWLVKATQ, TRADUVEE, LKAVIEP, NO YUSU  
 VOPPAK AP/LJ YORVHOD, AN ERVE RLV, LEAD SO  
 HOD VY, SO HO E KURVAPTEY, TH YVTVN, SAE  
 VUWVUPLS CARPUSHEP SO SHP AGTIX SW, A  
 SHP EXPLA RTY, H SHS MIT TOL, H SHS PAVS LEE  
 SH T SHD XBLM AP, LKIL YE, V ATD TH OR  
 KIZVWF SAVVVE KJACQAD HO WELSDIA, A  
 CASI PLAS ZAT TH WLE ESKAR, ETH DML OY  
 DYSD, LTH VV ES TH EP SHST,  
 WAFFLE MZ SHMKT.

# **A Queer Decipherment of Select Pages from the Fieldnotes of Dr. Tobias Boz, Anthrozoologist**

*Jafari S. Allen*

A new attitude towards the object. . . . Restor[e] liberating, catalysing and *dangerous* power to the object, . . . giv[e] back the profaned object its dignity of mystery and its radiant force, that, when all's said and done, . . . mak[e] of it again what it should never have ceased to be: *the Great Intercessor*. / Once generalized, this attitude will lead us to the great mad sweep of renewal.

—Aimé Césaire, “Calling the Magician: A Few Words for a Caribbean Civilization”

La poésie martinique sera cannibale ou ne sera pas. (Cannibal poetry or nothing.)

—Suzanne Césaire (née Roussi), “Misère d’une poésie”

Ewan Atkinson’s *Select Pages from the Fieldnotes of Dr. Tobias Boz, Anthrozoologist* is a portfolio of twenty-one digitally manipulated works in which Atkinson provides a beautiful and finely rendered critical archive. Through invocations of everyday and unexpected visual and textual elements, the work defies banal explanation and refuses easily apprehension. Following the theme of his long-term Neighbourhood Project, Atkinson makes playful and queer use of local and trans-local referents. To borrow from Suzanne Césaire, Atkinson’s visuality is fittingly “cannibal poetry.”<sup>1</sup> Perhaps the work and form he employs here eat its own: a classical education of portrait artistry, landscapes, and drawing turned on itself through digital photography, computer manipulation of images, and playful mockery of social science and hegemonic order. Here, the artist pushes us significantly beyond the facile assumption that the only “queer” part of queer Caribbean visuality is the representation of sexual or gender nonnormative subjects, or work *by* sexual or gender nonnormative subjects. The work contributes to an emergent queer visual archive that does not depend on “positive” representation. While it does not seek to provide easily usable “evidence” of wrongdoing, this magical and “sur-rational” frisson of images and text answers Aimé Césaire’s poetic call to “magicians” of the Caribbean to militate against “manufactured . . . graded concepts.”<sup>2</sup> In this case, one of Atkinson’s aims seems set on the discipline of anthropology and thus the whole project of colonial sense making and knowledge production through which we understand concepts such as genealogy and inheritance, intimacy, longing, shame, and belonging.

I read Atkinson’s fabulated field notebook of a second-generation anthropologist as more than an(other) critique of anthropological fieldwork. Dr. Tobias Boz is overcome with reflections on and confrontations with his and his father’s fieldwork desire. Engaging this work challenges the trade of the ethnographer, who must listen carefully but also look, then attempt to sketch, draw, assemble, compose, and poetically build narrative. Further to the project of destabilizing the authority of social science in order to see other forms of knowledge production and authority more clearly, his work brings social science categorizations, queer (interspecies) sex, and Caribbean localization into a common frame—the creativity and play of which can be generative toward rethinking archives and methods as well as theory and craft. As an anthropologist and a writer, I am not only implicated in Atkinson’s critique of the ways anthropologists work. More pointedly, I am also preoccupied with the question, How do we best see and say? One of the central metatheoretical impulses in my own work is to explicitly follow Sylvia Wynter, who averred that “*ethnopoetics* can only have validity, if it is explored in the context of *sociopoetics* where the *socio* firmly places the *ethnos* in its concrete historical particularity.”<sup>3</sup> This is an ethnographic register that aspires to frame the materiality of the social for critique and transformation, while at the same time represent the poesis of everyday political-economic struggles and “personal” joys, as specific instantiations of world making.

Following Wynter’s critical provocation in “Re-thinking ‘Aesthetics’: Notes towards a Deciphering Practice,” here I offer a “speculative decipherment” of Ewan’s Atkinson’s *Select Pages* and of “Caribbean queer visualities” more broadly. Wynter calls us to “identify not what texts and their signifying practices can be interpreted to mean but what they can be deciphered *to do*,” as well as the “‘illocutionary force’ and procedures” with which they do it.<sup>4</sup> Regardless of whether a viewer more sophisticated than I am could unlock Atkinson’s precise intentions or deconstruct each symbol, signification, and aesthetic choice, I do not seek to

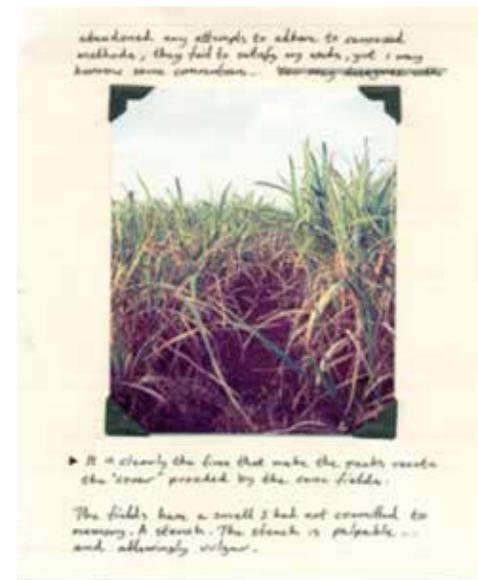
demystify or deconstruct the works. Wynter's deciphering turn must not be confused with rhetorically demystifying or deconstructive modes of criticism. She asks us to make systems of meaning decipherable and their purposes alterable—emphasizing the dialectical and socioculturally countering practices of the works, rather than what she describes as falling into an “ethno-aesthetic trap.” In this mediation, I take inspiration from this (while not claiming total fidelity to this high bar in a short essay)—queerly engaging Wynter's (positively anthropological) proposal to “provide a language . . . able to deal with how, as humans, we can know the social reality of which we are both agents and always already socio-culturally constituted subjects.”<sup>5</sup> Since I find the mystifying and imaginative aspects of Atkinson's work exciting and generative, I hope to offer a reading that is likewise imaginative and notional—a meditation on what it is I think this portfolio is *doing*. I will begin with a description of what I see in these notebooks. Following this, I will turn to consider issues of methodology, ethics, and desire, and the surreal and the queer. I end with a suggestion for one way to decipher Caribbean queer visualities.

## Notes on Fieldnotes

Following Atkinson's cheeky invitation to see differently, please allow me to turn first to what Barthes would call the *studium* of the some of the images—that is, a sort of description—while attending mostly to the punctum of the project itself, my view of what this work does and how we might appreciate Caribbean queer visualities. The artist begins here:

Dr. Tobias Boz was born and raised in The Neighbourhood. He became well known for his anthrozoological study of Neighbourhood dogs, both stray and domesticated. Celebrated and maligned, these dogs became a life-long obsession for Dr. Boz. These pages are selected from notebooks that he kept during the study. On close inspection they divulge more than the habits of the canine population. Despite the study's questionable accuracy one can explore the complex relationship between Tobias and his subjects, contemplate the collection and representation of empirical evidence, and relive a torrid confrontation between shame and desire.<sup>6</sup>

The first page of the portfolio looks as if it had been ripped from a notebook. Centered prominently on the page, and carefully held in place by old school black tabs, is a color photograph of a sugarcane field. Perhaps it is mid growing season—the cane is not tall and thick but also not entirely green. The thicket of brown leaves is growing. The photograph serves as a kind of opening in at least three ways. The top of the image shows the palest of blues, then a bit of white fluff interrupted by spiky green “grass” that gives way to browning leaves and dark brown earth, forming a path on which one may choose to trod. But that is merely the two-dimensional read. The thicket will not be penetrated easily. If



this is a path the photographer and artist (or “anthrozoologist”) wants us to take, it is surely not a direct or easy route. Looking at the photograph, one is drawn to its dark brown center, which seems to promise more than the predictable terrible sweetness of the storied *cañaveral*. Reorienting one's gaze, a sort of portal to the non- or other-terrestrial dimension emerges. Atkinson entices us to follow into his imagined space located at once in some imaginary space that resembles but is not the artists' native Barbados or anywhere in the Caribbean region. As I have averred before, places must be reimagined, but also temporally recalibrated. There is time-travel here too. Atkinson's protagonist, Tobias Boz, is following, many years later, the fieldwork footsteps of his father. The junior Dr. Boz attempts a recalibration and renarrativization of the old researcher's (illicit) desires. This process of imagination and movement renarrativizes experience and reconstitutes space—on the actual pages of the notebook and in the mind of the viewer. Perhaps it is better to accept the invitation: step inside this portal rather than walk the cultivated path, the image and text seem to suggest. The handwriting framing this first image reads, “Abandoning any attempt to adhere to canonized methods, they failed to satis-

fy my needs, yet I may borrow some conventions . . .” The next line is crossed out, as if the author realized while writing that they need not make allowances for others’ impressions or misgivings in their own field notebook: “~~You may disagree with.~~” The fires. The stench. The fields. Cover. Alluringly vulgar. These signal the affect the anthropologist wishes to record and reproduce.

The second page is a diagram of the location of the packs—individual dogs and “dawgs” represented by Atkinson’s familiar dog-head profile icon. It is rendered in a sort of queer anthropological kin diagram, in which generations of a dozen or more dawgs beget smaller and smaller packs, and in which two are left unconnected to a pack. The groupings emerge from a burning cube in three packs, or generations. Unlike the first, this page is not ripped, and the illustration is rather neatly and precisely drawn. Still, the ink is smudged, and a relatively large figure on the left margin appears as humanoid, but it could also be just a smudge.

In figure 3, there is a return of more of the familiar imagery of Atkinson’s Neighbourhood series. This one looks like a vintage postcard that Boz has collected as “Official Neighbourhood Memorabilia” for his research archive; it reads, “Greetings from the Neighbourhood. You like us! you really like us!” and features a feminine character wearing a red 1950s-style one-piece bathing suit, with matching bathing cap and red lips. The exuberance at acceptance conveyed by this narration is matched by the playful turn the figure makes—chest out, head tilted up, coquettish smile. As in most of Atkinson’s work, the figure is the artist himself in a playful drag that sets him in different guises and incarnations in The Neighborhood. In this one, the background promises sunshine, blue skies, water, and singing birds. The orange sun behind the figure frames the head partially cut off on the upper right side, so that only one eye is shown, recalling the profile of the dawgs. The sun sends out its rays of light blue and pale blue, over a darker blue horizontal line that seems to indicate water, followed by a next layer of green. There are short, orderly vertical lines/marks from the first blue (sky) layer to the green. They evoke grass, of course, but also perhaps headstones. Or are they more routes of the dog packs? In any case, the dawg logo sits to the left of the figure, toward the corner in which another logo (is it the autograph of The Neighbourhood authority or tourist board?) shows a pair of eyeglasses with dog profiles facing each other, one in each lens. The text of Dr. Boz’s field note is likewise preoccupied with issues of who likes whom and the politics of looking: “And this distance, what if I were to remove it? Would the gains be worth my safety? . . . Yet how else am I to find answers? For now, I will continue to observe from this shelter of branch and bush: “Me Garçonniere Sauvage”! THEY KNOW I WATCH. THEY WATCH ME WATCH THEM . . .”

Atkinson nicely expresses the angst of novice contemporary ethnographers. Aware of the folly of old notions of “objectivity,” one wonders how, then indeed attempts to “remove the distance” between watched and watcher. Boz does not say why he fears for his safety. Still, one is watched by those the professional watcher pretends toward systematically watching. One wonders, *Do they like me?*, as the subjects surmise how the ways the watcher “likes us” will matter, in print, in the representations they will make from all their collecting, note taking, and time taking. The piece in figure 4 is looks like a topographical map showing the positioning of the dogs in The Neighbourhood. It is both a chart and a map, with lines extending from locations indicated by a small red dot. The Y axis is numbered 1–17, and the X, alphabetically A–N. Above the lines are individual names of dogs, from “Hot Dog” on the far left to “Astro” on the far right; lower in the front left quadrant, as if on the outskirts of town, there are four others. The lines extending up to the careful lettering form the strong suggestion of a fire.

Figure 6 reveals Pocket, the “new friend” of Dr. Boz (in fact, also an old friend of the senior Dr. Boz, as we will learn later), drawn in ebony pencil. Pocket is a pink, unruly haired dog head with a human eye and a masculine torso, crotch, and thighs. By chart in figure 5, we can deduce that Pocket is a hybrid of the pre-figured and categorized varieties enumerated in the chart. There is no direct analogue for Pocket’s pale pink color, with a bit more of the intense color around the mouth. Perhaps color 5H (just a bit darker) combined with pattern 5D (with less coarse texture). Here, Pocket is bathing in clingy white briefs. We can look back at figure 4 and see that the object of Dr. Boz’s affection is from section 10 between D and E, just beyond what looks like the smaller of a twin peak mountain range.

Consider the figure of the father in Atkinson’s notebook. We can read his encounters with Pocket and The Neighbourhood as an unspoken fieldwork scandal. What is left of that relationship—charts, notes, offstage scholarly writings, clips of anonymous

defenses of the neighborhood dogs in the scholarly literature, and the detritus of Pocket's pockets revealed later—instantiates a sort of ephemeral evidence of the relationship between Pocket and the father, and now between the author/observer/author of the notebook, Dr. Boz, and the object of his and his father's preoccupation. In the latter pieces, shame thus emerges as a theme—connecting to a by now long history of animating childhood shame in gay men's work. In the last notebook page of the first row, Boz admits that he is smitten with Pocket: “[He] makes me smile! I float with my head in the clouds,” he writes. His close association with Pocket at once reveals falsehoods in the popular and academic understanding of his kind but also make the anthropologist second-guess whether the loss of ethnographic distance compromises his interpretations. Atkinson tells us that these pages are taken from an “anthrozoological” study. Are the objects of the study thus not human? With the heads of dogs (or dawgs), the close-ups in several of the individual drawings reveal human eyes, human legs, and human penises (one with further evidence of human cultural intervention—circumcision), covered in a topping of feather-like paper fur, or as Boz terms it, “vestments.” When Pocket is later killed in an apparent car collision—tire tracks sub-secting his body and red watercolor denoting the bloodiness of the scene—the legs splayed in tragi-comedic posture are human, as is the eye peeking out of the dog head in horror and surprise (see fig. 18).

Not unlike a number of other contemporary Caribbean artists, Atkinson must at once contend with a long history of misrepresentation of the Caribbean and ignorance of local artistic traditions, as well as an art market primed to consume readymade images of Caribbean fauna and tropical objects. One must ask, Is there a *subject* to be represented, or merely tropes and objects to be recycled from colonial, missionary, and anthropological notes and notebooks, like the ones the artist creatively reimagines in this work? Are there *citizens* in The Neighbourhood, or merely residents, maps, and representations of natives? “These [emerging contemporary Caribbean] artists display a defiance against being pinned down to a single location, and the expectations ascribed to being here or there,” curator and visual artist Christopher Cozier writes. “They are . . . daring themselves to transgress boundaries and new experience.”<sup>7</sup> The Neighbourhood setting defies easy localization of “The Caribbean.” At once here and there, then and now, the indeterminate time and imagined place may in fact invoke “another place” of “timeless people,” as other generations of hemispheric Caribbean artists have already offered.<sup>8</sup> Of course, we must take a moment to take Atkinson's play seriously—are the dawgs human in any way? Are these dawgs free and beautiful in ways others—including Dr. Boz—cannot be? Hear the echoes of Wynter again here, calling forth a new humanism. Feel the ineluctable connection to the magic and surrealism Suzanne Césaire and Aimé Césaire promoted. The erotic play between Pocket and Tobias (Pocket's “plaything,” according to Tobias) now includes the latter looking under the former's furry vestments—“If I call him Boss,” he says. Boss/Boz? Boz, in turn, longs to be rid of his shame and loneliness, and asks Pocket to help him create vestments of his own. Would he return to early charts in the portfolio,

to choose colors and textures, or is this somehow predetermined? Is it the perversely shaped and fuzzy Apple of Sodom that gives these dawgs their surreal qualities?

## A Surreal (That Is to Say, also, Queer) Archive

“True civilizations are poetic shocks: the shock of the stars, of the sun, the plant, the animal, the shock of the round globe, of the rain, of the light, of numbers, the shock of life, the shock of death,” writes Aimé Césaire. “Since the sun temple, since the mask, since the Indian, since the African man, too much distance has been calculated here, has been granted here, between things and ourselves.”<sup>9</sup> Following the serious play of going with Atkinson through the portal of his cane field thicket, does it make a difference whether the dawg or dawg vestment is human? Beyond reckoning answers, Atkinson's work assays a set of questions about “evidence” itself. The empirical evidence of Dr. Boz's notebooks is thrown into relief as the story of his obsession—and the obsession of his (fore)father(s)—is revealed in fragments. But what counts as proof eligible for an archive? For the ethnographer, the central archive is the lived experience of their respondents—apprehended through their own sense and evaluated vis-à-vis their own sensibilities (although historical and brick and mortar archives, pop culture, etcetera are increasingly deployed). The archive, as we understand it now, is “composed” as a “product of judgment” of and by regimes of power that decide what is important to “save” and remember and also what is ok to let slip into literal and figurative dustbins of (not) history.<sup>10</sup>

## Looking, Writing, and Drawing

While the angst-filled center of ethnographic practice has been authenticity—I was there; I took good notes; I classified

and made charts; I made people into objects of study—John Jackson holds that “an attempt to remember the significance of laughter, love, and the everydayness of affect is an important methodological, epistemological, and political intervention, a differently animated ghost in the ethnographic machine.”<sup>11</sup> And Atkinson’s author/observer is certainly haunted by a sort of ethnographic machine as well. To what uses does the visual artist put the method or medium of the ethnographic notebook? For Michael Taussig, the notebook is a type of modernist literature that crosses over into the science of social investigation and serves as a means of “witness,” but ethnographic observation is “seeing that doubts itself” because the reality of what we experience can diminish with the act of sense making in formal notes and especially in published prose. Taussig holds that the surreal provides a “threshold situation” in which, in Walter Benjamin’s words, “sound and image, image and sound, interpenetrated with automatic precision and such felicity that no chink was left for the penny-in-the-slot called “meaning.””<sup>12</sup> Still, to eschew meaning altogether strikes this reader as positively anti-ethnographic. It seems to suggest that the quest for meanings (even multiple, and of course situated) is unworthy of our attention. This is not the surreal Atkinson pursues. It is certainly not the surreal the Caribbean has nurtured in various forms, such as “marvelous realism” (or Afro-surrealism), and through figures such as Martiniquais Suzanne Césaire, Aimé Césaire, and René Ménil; Haitian Jacques Stephen Alexis; and Cuban Wilfredo Lam. This generation of writers and artists sought to represent the (im)possible worlds under which their people lived and worlds they might imagine—not in order to provide one static meaning but rather to generate what I would like to propose as *interrogative meanings*. In Atkinson’s work, surreal depictions are written, painted, and drawn over colonial tropes, texts, and representations. The artists artfully blurs the lines between the real and unreal—and times past, present, and future—thus discursively disturbing colonial order and assumptions and the hierarchies of its academies. As a queer visual archive, his art can serve as one reservoir of such ongoing questioning and probing toward new worlds.

The lines in this portfolio are purposefully blurred and unstable, providing a number of openings through which viewers can read the visual and textual narratives that Atkinson creates. In so doing, he disturbs the convention of reading. Meanings seem up for grabs, or at least seem meant mostly to provoke still more questions or complex assemblages of meaning. By figure 9, Tobias Boz has “gone native.” In the image, five sets of masculine legs cross and mingle under a single dawg vestment, and the crossed-out notes in the subsequent figure expresses his joy: “I am alive now! Living! Living amongst the fields and trees! No longer inside where there was only desire.” The pack apparently greeted and examined Boz thoroughly before initiating him. Again, here he refers to his own “ugliness” that the vestment would efface. As the viewer attempts to read the crossed-out handwriting—blocked by a close-up photograph of a disheveled *guayabera*-wearing human torso embracing a white dawg vestment—one is left with a staccato scene of sexual climax: “shivering .

. . . movement . . . held . . . all there . . . shamelessly watching . . .” Tobias ends with an admission: “I want this wildness inside me always, to penetrate my every pore.” It is, therefore, not only an outer transformation—effacing ugliness with new vestments and, in a way, “coming out” into a community of dawgs. More deeply, Boz reports that the “corruption” he feels from this experience with Pocket is now “lodging” within his body “for ever and ever.” At the end of the notebook page, the Malinowski-in-training explicitly spells out his now resolved fieldwork angst-as-desire: “If I am to know them I am going to have to fuck them all.” The next page shows a more rapacious looking dawg, clad in shorts under a gold vestment and oddly reaching out with a human arm to grab the ass of a bent-over pink dawg. The two stand above a sort of rainbow.

The discipline of anthropology is clearly implicated in colonial order assumptions and scholarly hierarchies. Although since the 1980s anthropology has mostly disavowed its pretension to “objectivity” and positivism, these haunting remain. Moreover, much of the work of anthropology of the Caribbean, and larger social science projects of redress and revindication, has insisted on “data” and strict adherence to received standards of “rigor,” to combat racist or otherwise jaundiced representations of “the other.” Instead of questioning the terms of this order, and their prescribed “slot,” early social scientists of the Caribbean took up the charge to explain precisely how Caribbean societies did or did not fit those expectations that Michel-Rolph Trouillot later incisively named “North Atlantic universals.” We know, of course, that North Atlantic universals “are not merely descriptive or referential.” Trouillot explains that “they do not describe the world; they offer visions of the world.” While “evocative of multiple layers” and “tied to [a] localized history,” they nevertheless “deny their localization . . . from which they spring.” A proliferation of universals prescribe, in Trouillot’s language and Édouard Glissant’s description of the “project” of the West, everything good and just, but they also proscribe, of course, other ways, “disguise[ing] and miscontru[ing]

the many Others that [they] creat[e].”<sup>13</sup> For example, instead of critically challenging the assumptions, too often scholars capitulated to “North Atlantic universals.” They composed, for example a dreaded *mother who fathers*, and, narrated masculine failure for men who cannot become proper capital-holding patriarchs because everyone, including and especially black women, block their access to true masculine mastery, leaving behind men who are “feminized,” that is, already penetrated by capital.

In this portfolio, Ewan Atkinson takes up the work of exposing North Atlantic universals and various ways the codes of a particular place can be imposed then taken on in others as universal common sense. Now inscribed in Tobias Boz’s “anthrozoological” research project, Pocket begins sending dawgs to Boz to be photographed and measured for the study. By figures 13 through 16, the notebook shows more up-close detail and data than in previous note pages. Is that not always the way? It takes time to develop “fieldwork rapport,” after all. Still obsessed, Boz longs to be one of them. Knowing that he is an outsider, he allows: “Already they laugh at me.” Finally, after Pocket’s tragic vehicular murder—depicted in figure 18 but foreshadowed in an excerpt from the elder Dr. Boz’s notes in figure 17—figure 19 reveals that the elder Dr. Boz’s love/obsession for Pocket was not unrequited. In the corpse’s pocket (revealing, perhaps, the provenance of this anonymizing pseudonym) is a photograph of Dr. Boz, the father, wearing a safari suit and boots and standing in a field of young sugarcane. The snapshot is head-and-shoulder-less. One might say the subject is standing imperiously, gesturing with his hands on the hips of his khaki jacket, weight shifted to his right, since this pose is already prescribed, or rather figured in advance of this pictorial narration: master, surveying. This could have been a fitting end to the notebook, neatly returning the viewer to the cane field where they began this journey. Atkinson chooses, however, to end with two more journal entries, featuring Pickthank and written in code illegible without use of the *tabula recta* in figure 9.

Has the research proffered a new, more willing and less docile dawg for Boz—one who is literally a pickthank, or syncophant? Might Atkinson have named him Caliban?

## Queer (and) Caribbean

“The vital thing is to re-establish a personal, fresh, compelling, magical contact with things,” claims Aimé Césaire. “The revolution will be social and poetic or will not be.”<sup>14</sup> Scholars of the anglophone Caribbean have long been concerned with gender—qua “the family”—as a problematic element in the project of constituting a modern and developed nation. The emergence of the study of black masculinity in the Caribbean in the 1990s was borne from an understanding of a black male crisis and “black masculinity marginalization.” The severity of the crisis, in the Caribbean and elsewhere, was obviated by statistics of low educational achievement and high incidence of sexual and domestic violence, and incarceration. It became fashionable in the 1980s and 1990s to uncritically accept various iterations of essentialist thought that find black men fundamentally disabled perpetrators of violence. Typically, these studies focus on black males as vectors of one or another pathology, including violence and HIV/AIDS most prominently, while others foreground “decency” and illuminate various forms of (alternative) respectability. Linden Lewis later refuted a number of the bases of this work, thereby pushing the study of black masculinities in the Caribbean significantly forward. Lewis asserted that Errol Miller and others had made the error of generalizing black masculine marginality “as a general process of struggle rather than a specific struggle” (of would-be black hetero-patriarchs against actual white patriarchs).<sup>15</sup> Still, some good Trouillot students echo his critical insight vis-à-vis the hidden localization of North Atlantic universals while remaining steadfast to something called cultural tradition, with respect to same-sex attraction and gender multiplicity.

*Queer* (studies) on its own (that is, outside of the reworking it continues to undergo in the hands of critical race, decolonial, indigenous, and disability theorists in the arts and activism as well as in academe) may never do what some defenders claim it was meant to do: include a more capacious co-articulation of a number of embodied and embodying categories of normativity, like nationality, gender, region, class, and ability, as well as sexuality. Still, despite often important critiques of its provenance and the ways it can be used as no more than an inaccurate or sloppy shorthand, queer thinking and queer seeing (still) uniquely facilitates pushing past normative assumptions of “sexuality.” While emerging from a very particular place and time, the use of *queer* in scholarly work does not only describe a sense of the nonnormative status of men and women who identify with or are identified as homosexual or those whose gender self-identification is not resonant with the sex as-

signed to them at birth. Atkinson makes the category interrogative, and he troubles our vision with images and variations on his themes over time. Are we watching a serialized cartoon? Grappling with an erudite critique of anthropology? Viewing another comment on miscegenation, colonialism, tourism, or sexual freedom? Yes, and no—all of the above and none of it.

So, is queer Caribbean visibility therefore a method? Or is it an idea that carries on the important work begun by Caribbean feminists, that of creating counternarratives of antiromance to contest North Atlantic universals and to oppose discursively violent just-so stories of smooth and unproblematic heterosexual coupling and reproduction and smooth simplistic narratives of transition (from precolonial to colonial, to nationalist movement to nation-state) as if this is “natural” fait accompli? The synthetic force of feminisms and queer theory provides a more precise understanding of the mutually constituting and interpenetrating social fields of race/color, sexuality, and class on which masculinity is made, unmade, and perhaps also undermined, but the fanciful imagination of the artist has given us new grammars and queer new horizons of possibility to imagine. Atkinson, without referring directly to any of this academic work, and in concert with Wynter’s warning against counternarratives that merely counter, turns our ambit posthuman and postsocial science. Analyzing, as if charged by Trouillot, “the relation between the geography of management and the geography of imagination,” Atkinson’s visual critique further pushes social science interventions through engagement with an imaginative realm in which *men are dogs*, literally.<sup>16</sup>

# Endnotes

- 1 Suzanne Césaire, “Misère d’une poésie: John Antoine-Nau,” *Tropiques*, no. 4 (January 1942): 50.
- 2 Aimé Césaire, “Calling the Magician: A Few Words for a Caribbean Civilization” (1944), in Michael Richardson, ed., *Refusal of the Shadow: Surrealism and the Caribbean*, trans. Krzysztof Fijałkowski and Michael Richardson (London: Verso, 1996), 119. The quote used as an epigraph is on 122.
- 3 Sylvia Wynter, “Ethno or Socio Poetics,” *Alcheringa: Ethnopoetics 2*, no. 2 (1976): 78.
- 4 Sylvia Wynter, “Re-thinking ‘Aesthetics’: Notes towards a Deciphering Practice,” in M. Cham, ed., *Ex-Iles: Essays on Caribbean Cinema* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World, 1992), 266, 267.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 265, 268.
- 6 Ewan Atkinson, introduction to *Select Pages from the Fieldnotes of Dr. Tobias Boz, Anthropologist*, n.d.; multimedia on paper. See [www.theneighbourhoodproject.com/the-fieldnotes-of-dr-tobias-boz](http://www.theneighbourhoodproject.com/the-fieldnotes-of-dr-tobias-boz).
- 7 Christopher Cozier, “Notes on Wrestling with the Image,” in Christopher Cozier and Tatiana Flores, eds., *Wrestling with the Image: Caribbean Interventions*, exhibition catalogue (Washington DC: World Bank, 2011), 11, 15.
- 8 For instance, Paule Marshall’s 1969 *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People*.
- 9 Aimé Césaire, “Calling the Magician,” 119–20.
- 10 See Achille Mbembe, “The Power of the Archive and Its Limits,” trans. Judith Inggs, in Carolyn Hamilton et al., eds., *Refiguring the Archive* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic, 2002), 19–27.
- 11 John Jackson
- 12 Michael Taussig, *I Swear I Saw This: Drawings in Fieldwork Notebooks, Namely, My Own* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), xi, 2, 7. Taussig quotes Walter Benjamin, “Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia,” in *Refelctions*, ed. Peter Demetz (New York: Schocken, 1978), 178–79.
- 13 Michel-Rolph Trouillot, “The Otherwise Modern: Caribbean Lessons from the Savage Slot,” in Bruce M. Knauft, ed., *Critically Modern: Alternatives, Alterities, Anthropologies* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 221. “The West is not in the West. It is a project, not a place.” Édouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, trans. J. Michael Dash (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999), 2n1.
- 14 Aimé Césaire, “Calling the Magician,” 121.
- 15 Linden Lewis, “Nationalism and Caribbean Masculinity,” in Tamar mayer, ed., *Gender Ironies of Nationalism: Sexing and Nation* (London: Routledge, 2002), 262.
- 16 Trouillot, “The Otherwise Modern,” 234.



# Afterword

*Erica Moiah James*

How can a journal nourish a discourse? How might it stimulate new engagements of concepts visible in artistic practices but not fully rendered in critical conversations? How might it center this work on a method that allows an artwork to author itself? How might we think of art at its own point of emergent criticality? And how might this encounter be marked?

In 2014 the Small Axe Project began thinking about a series of artworks that engaged or exhibited what we soon began to describe as Caribbean queer visualities. The fluidity of this concept shadowed but did not contain the possibilities of this work. The Caribbean is a space in which entire languages have been created in the modern age, languages that continue to evolve. Therefore, rather than viewing *queer* as something fixed, owned, or imposed on the region, the term became a suitable sign for a generative alterity, one that allowed us to momentarily think through irruptions of form in the works of artists from a globally conceived Caribbean. As these works made their way into public and critical

spaces and quietly asserted their presence, we came to see them as radical expansions of Caribbean artistic practice that demanded attention.

The exhibition builds on the initial “Caribbean Queer Visualities” gatherings at Yale University in fall 2014 and at Columbia University in spring 2015. It is expressive of our desire to have the ethos of those conversations radiate far beyond the confines of the rooms where we met—beyond the academy, onto the page, across the Internet, and into the galleries and the public sphere.

At the Yale gathering, filmmaker Kareem Mortimer provided a queer libation over the room and our efforts as he and every artist who followed shared their work in an open, direct, and personalized manner that was unusual, unexpected, and perhaps undervalued in an academic setting, in *that* setting. Mortimer spoke of an emergent understanding of himself as a gay man whose work is guided by the desire to create “stories that have meaning” in “a visual language” accessible to his parents. The short film *She (2008–2014)* accomplishes this by centering on the experience of transgender women, who at great personal risk choose each day to enunciate themselves by pushing against what the filmmaker Richard Fung describes as “the notion of normativity.” Fung recognizes queering’s potential to become a tool that unsettles and disrupts through a visual language capable of crafting an avant-garde artistic practice grounded in humanism. For him, Trinidad (and, by extension, the Caribbean) is a queer space, partly because its narratives often exceed the limits and frames of normativity imposed on it.

All the works in this exhibition emerge from visual languages that unsettle and disrupt. Using Google Earth, Ewan Atkinson hovers above the island of Barbados and comes to understand how space has been transformed to such a degree that the expectations of binding and bonding, standard notions of belonging—to a place, to a home, to a village—may no longer apply. Seeing from a distance allows Atkinson to untether the romance of physical and national bonds in his work.

For Andil Gosine, the village Atkinson resists travels via personal bonds, intimacies, and self-fashioning. Gosine’s work defies and disrupts “the dehumanizing ways in which the desires of the poor are explained” and the efforts to deny them a complex subject position. Through formal reappropriation and narrative transformation, Gosine’s art embraces the vulnerabilities of a migrant’s struggle against trajectories of historicization. It works to build a visual archive of a place, position, and

experience that disentangles across the globe in the bodies of residents of George Village, Trinidad, and the descendants of those born in places like it.

The artist Charl Landvreugd draws on the “more was just more” aesthetic and philosophy of 1990s drag and club culture to push against rote notions of vision, meaning, and being. In his work, queer becomes normative through the visual articulation and disarticulation of the artist’s own body. Nadia Huggins, like Landvreugd, thinks through the disruptive possibilities of being, reinventing notions of self-portraiture and re-presenting her body stripped of tropes associated with the feminine. In the process, Huggins moves outside the ontological bounds of identity, queering expectations of gender through the processes of displacement and defamiliarization.

Queering is intrinsically iconoclastic. It can conceptually challenge its own validity and allow for the possibility of its own erasure. Jean-Ulrick Désert’s work pauses in this critical space. While Désert asserts that his practice is not overtly queer, his work is squarely positioned within the same radical ethos Fung described. Désert situates his practice “outside the margins of heteronormative or gay-art clichés.” In the work *Neque mittatis margaritas vestras ante porcos, Mat 7:6*, the artist wryly employs “clichés” of gay iconography as form to engage LGBT longing for Judeo-Christian, heteronormative tropes such as marriage. In so doing, Désert brings attention to the asymmetries of this desire and the kinds of freedom he chooses to affirm.

In Leasho Johnson’s hands, asymmetries produce a space for artistic invention. Johnson draws images from downtown lives and places them, without permission, in uptown sites in which society has deemed they do not belong. The limited shelf life of Johnson’s public works indicates a conceptual queerness that disrupts through clandestine exhibition practices. In these public spheres, Johnson’s work sheds light on the hypocrisy that underlies public anxieties of sexual nonconformity and respectability politics in Jamaica.

Jorge Pineda queers form in his work, consciously embracing gender ambiguity and producing art on the borderlines of unsettled identities and relations. In works such as *Zapatos de ceramica*, Pineda redeploys familiar signs in new configurations. The work unmoors coded meanings and normative expectations of form, reflexively challenging his audience’s rote encounters with art and evoking something new.

While in conversation with these works’ emphasis on the discursive potential of form and process, Ebony G. Patterson extends her engagement with the use of skin bleaching by young male offenders as a tool of disidentification, going far beyond that initial point of departure. Is this work literally or narratively engaging a “queer aesthetic” as commonly imagined? No. Instead it moves beyond this aesthetic frame, dissembling meaning with bodies that dematerialize into light. Patterson’s work puts into relief the discursive possibilities of *queering* as critical practice as it brings to the surface of Caribbean visual discourse what remains unspoken.

What is normative in the Caribbean is often “queer” elsewhere, but like the artist Ewan Atkinson, through this exhibition we seek to rethink the limits of our bindings and bonds by cultivating connections with broader publics willing to engage the innovative possibilities of queer visualities.

# acknowledgements

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**LEASHO JOHNSON**, born in Montego Bay, Jamaica, in 1984, the son of an artist, was exposed to art at an early age. He graduated from the Edna Manley College of the Visual and Performing Arts in 2009 with a degree in visual communication. His work is influenced by 1950s pop art, with a mix of various graffiti/graphic art styles through which he seeks to engage the context of his own environment. His work has been exhibited at a number of venues, including *Rockstone and Bootheel*, at Real Art Ways Gallery, New York (2009), and *Young Talent V*, at the National Gallery of Jamaica (2010).

**ROSHINI KEMPADOO** is an international photographer, media artist and scholar creating photographs, artworks and writing that interpret, analyze and re-imagine historical experiences and memories as women’s visual narratives.

Central to this is to re-conceptualize the visual archive, the subject of her recent monograph *Creole in the Archive: Imagery, Presence and Location of the Caribbean Figure* (2016) published by Roman and Littlefield International. She studied visual communications and photography, creating photographs for exhibition including the seminal digital montage series ECU: European Currency Unfolds (1992) first exhibited at the Laing Gallery, Newcastle. As a photographer, she was a member of Format Women’s Picture Agency (1983-2003) documenting black communities, women’s groups and trade union events. In 2004, Sunil Gupta curated her retrospective exhibition *Roshini Kempadoo: Works 1990-2004* (2012).

**ROSAMOND S. KING** is a critical and creative writer and artist whose scholarly work focuses on sexuality, performance, and literature in the Caribbean and Africa. Her book *Island Bodies: Transgressive Sexualities in the Caribbean Imagination* received the 2015 Caribbean Studies Association best book award, and her research has been published in many journals. King’s poetry collection *Rock | Salt | Stone* was recently published by Nightboat Books, and her performance art has been curated into venues around the world. King is the creative editor of *sx salon: a small axe*

*literary platform*, on the Board of Directors of the Organization of Women Writers of Africa, and is associate professor at Brooklyn College, part of the City University of New York.

**CHARL LANDVREUGD**, born in Paramaribo in 1971, works in Rotterdam as a visual artist, writer, and curator, researching the idea of an Afro-European aesthetic, with special focus on the subjectivity of the artwork as a generator for new knowledge. His work has been shown internationally, including at the Deutsche Bank New York, Marowijne Art Parc (SU), Trinidad and Tobago Film Festival, Dak’Art Biennial, Stedelijk Museum Bureau Amsterdam (SMBA), and TENT. His written work has appeared in *ARC* magazine, *Small Axe*, and *Het beste van De Unie in Debat*. A selection of his curatorial work includes *Agnosia* (CBK Zuid Oost), *Am I Black Enough* (De Unie, SMBA), and *ROUTES* (Schouwburg Rotterdam). After studying at Goldsmiths, University of London, and Columbia University, he is now pursuing a PhD at the Royal College of Art, London.

**KAREEM MORTIMER**, a filmmaker who has won more than thirty film awards, was born in Nassau in 1980. His feature films include the LGBT drama *Children*

*of God* (2010), which has won eighteen festival awards, and the family comedy *Wind Jammers* (2010), which had a worldwide release through Filmworks International. He is also an accomplished video artist who has made three experimental films (*Back to Nassau*, *Blow*, and *Black to White*) and four medium-length shorts (*Float*, *Chance*, *She*, and *Passage*) and has directed three feature documentaries (*The Eleutheran Adventure*, *Chartered Course*, and *I Am Not a Dummy*). His work has been showcased on Showtime, PBS, LOGO, NBC, and Canal 22. He is currently in development of his third feature, *Cargo*, about human smuggling, which at the script level has already won three awards.

**ANGELIQUE V. NIXON** is a Bahamas-born, Trinidad-based writer, artist, teacher, scholar, activist, and poet. She earned her Ph.D. in English specializing in Caribbean literature, postcolonial studies, and women and gender studies at the University of Florida, and she completed a postdoctoral fellowship in Africana Studies at New York University. Her scholarly book *Resisting Paradise: Tourism, Diaspora, and Sexuality in Caribbean Culture* (2015) won the Caribbean Studies Association 2016 Barbara T. Christian Award. She is author of the poetry and

art collection *Saltwater Healing—A Myth Memoir and Poems* (2013). And she is co-editor of the multimedia online collections: *Theorizing Homophobias in the Caribbean: Complexities of Place, Desire, and Belonging* (2012) and *Love | Hope | Community: Caribbean Sexualities and Social Justice* (2017). Angelique is a Lecturer at the Institute for Gender and Development Studies at the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago.

**EBONY G. PATTERSON**, born in Kingston in 1981, completed her undergraduate studies at the Edna Manley College of the Visual and Performing Arts, Kingston, and earned her MFA in 2006 from the Sam Fox College of Design and Visual Arts, Washington University, St. Louis. She currently serves as an associate professor in painting and mixed media at the School of Visual Arts and Visual Studies at the University of Kentucky, Lexington. She has been featured in publications such as the *New York Times*, *Frieze*, the *Huffington Post*, *Art Papers*, *Art Nexus*, *Small Axe*, and the *International Review of African American Art*. Her work has been included in notable group exhibitions, including *Wrestling with the Image: Caribbean Interventions*, at Art Museum of the Americas, Washington, DC (2011);

*Caribbean: Crossroads of the World*, at the Studio Museum in Harlem, El Museo del Barrio, and Queens Museum of Art (2012); and *Visual Art and Music in a Post-Hip-Hop Era*, at the Museum of Contemporary African Diasporan Arts, Brooklyn, and *Six Degrees of Separate Nations*, at the Patricia and Philip Frost Museum, Miami (2013). She recently staged her first solo US museum show at the Nerman Museum of Contemporary Art, Kansas, and her work is currently on view in *GOLD*, at the Bass Museum, Miami.

**JORGE PINEDA** was born in 1961 in the Dominican Republic, where he lives and works. He has presented solo shows at Hunter College, New York City, in 2012; at the Insitituto Valenciano de Arte Moderno (IVAM), Valencia, Spain, in 2013; and at UNESCO, Paris, in 2014. He exhibited at the 52nd Venice Biennial in 2009 and also at the 55th Venice Biennial, with the Collective QUINTAPATA, in 2013. In 2014 he attended the Davidoff Art Residency at the Künstlerhaus Bethanien, in Berlin, and was part of the collective show celebrating the thirtieth anniversary of the Biennial de La Habana.

**JERRY PHILOGENE** is an associate professor in the American Studies and Africana Studies Departments

at Dickinson College. In addition to exploring the intersections of race, ethnicity, class, and gender as articulated in contemporary visual arts, her research and teaching interests include interdisciplinary American cultural history, Caribbean cultural and visual arts, (with an emphasis on the Francophone Caribbean), black cultural politics, and theories of the African diaspora. Her essays have appeared in *Small Axe: A Caribbean Journal of Criticism*, *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies*, *Radical History Review*, *MELUS: Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States*, and most recently *Journal of Haitian Studies*. She is completing a book manuscript titled, *The Socially Dead and the “Improbable Citizen”: Cultural Transformations of Haitian Citizenship*, which provides a rich textured analysis of the power of the visual field and its complex relationship between violence, domination, and liberation through an exploration of painting, photography, film, and comics.

**PATRICIA SAUNDERS** is an associate professor of English at the University of Miami, Coral Gables where she is the Co-Editor of *Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal*. She is the author of *Alien-Nation and Repatriation: Translating Identity in Anglophone*

*Caribbean Literature* (2007) and co-editor of *Music. Memory. Resistance: Calypso and the Caribbean Literary Imagination* (2007). Her work has appeared in journals such as: *Plantation Society in the Americas*, *Small Axe*, *Transforming Anthropology*, *The Journal of West Indian Literature* and recently, *Feminist Studies*. Her second book, *Buyers Beware: Epistemologies of Consumption in Caribbean Popular Culture*, examines a range of contemporary Caribbean popular cultural modes of expression to argue that the bonds between consumption and citizenship in the region are stronger now more than ever despite higher rates of unemployment and socioeconomic inequity. *Buyers Beware* is forthcoming with Rutgers University Press.

**DAVID SCOTT** is professor and chair in the Department of Anthropology, Columbia University, and the director of the Small Axe Project. He is the author of a number of books including, most recently, *Stuart Hall’s Voice: Intimations of an Ethics of Receptive Generosity* (2017).



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