

# 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.

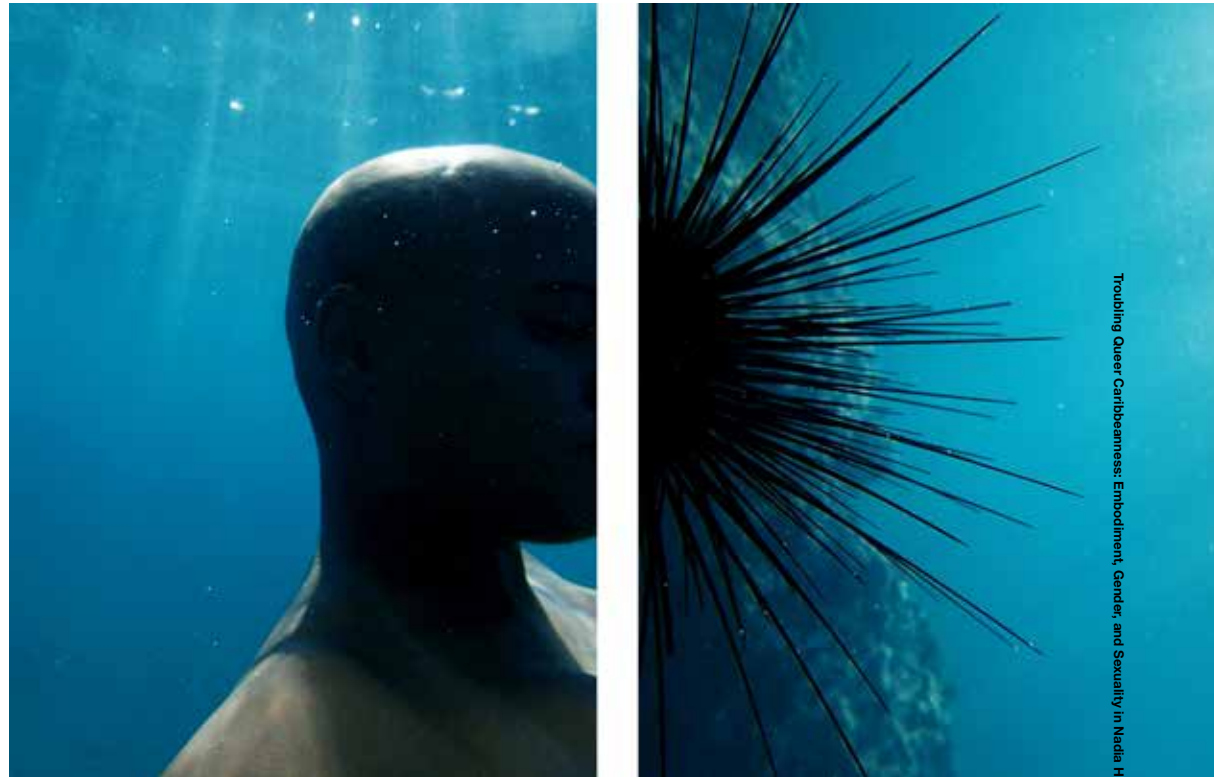


Figure 1. Nadia Huggins, *Transformations 1*, from the *Transformations* series, 2015. Digital photographs. Courtesy of the artist

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 Caribbeaness 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.

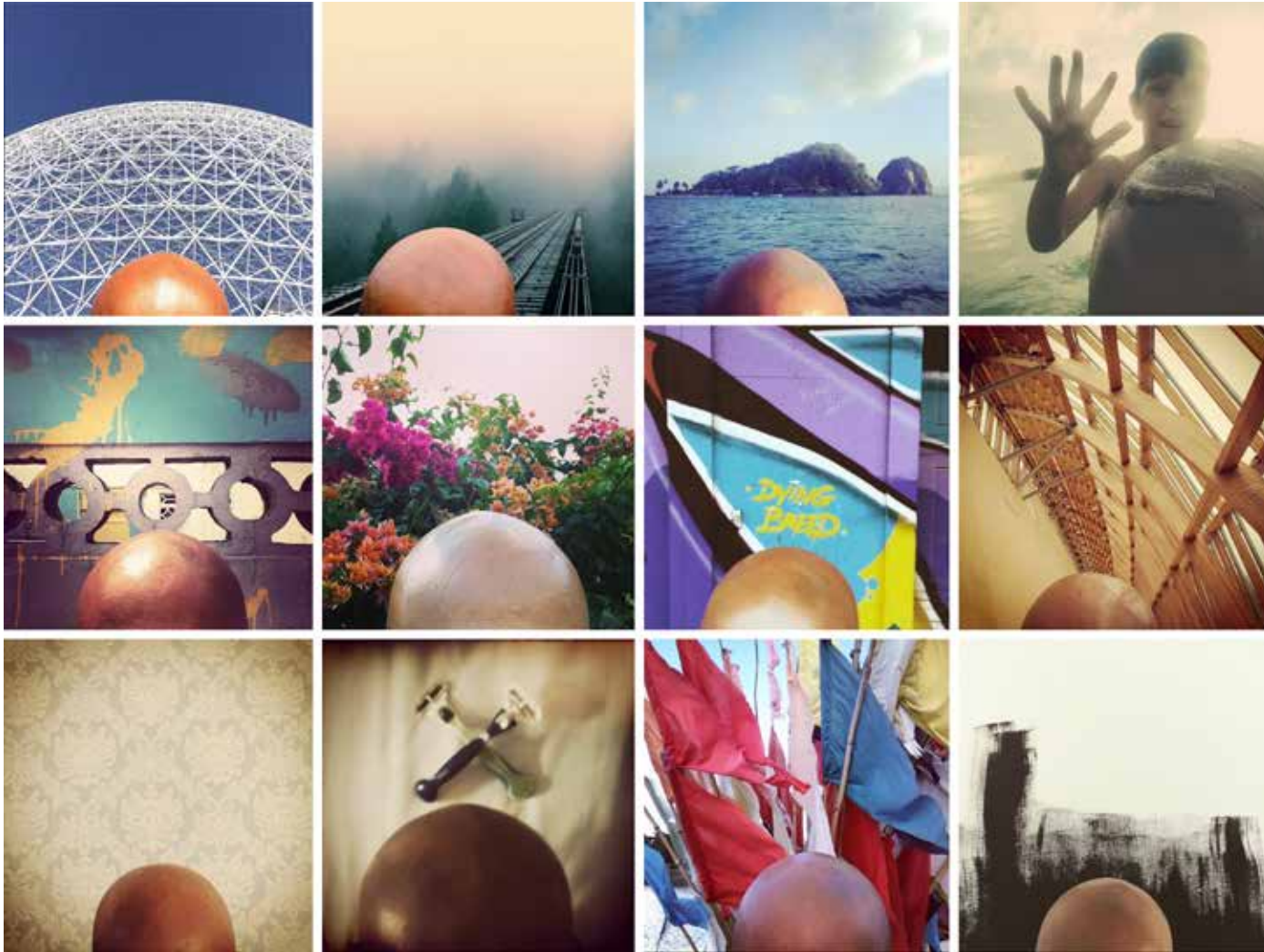


Figure 6. Nadia Huggins, #selfie, 2013–15. iPhone photographs. Courtesy of the artist

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

