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"What's a girl to do when she's needy?"[1]: At the Intersections of Queer Dancehall, Social Media, and Queer Caribbean Visuality

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Abstract

The Caribbean has always been queer, and queerness has always been integral in the Caribglobal (King 2014) imagination. Walking alongside non-Western and "excessively" African cultures long embedded in and embodied through centuries-old oral folklore, literature, regional performances and fêtes, and spiritual practices like Myal and Lucumí, this essay investigates different forms that queer Caribbeanness can take. Here, I posit Queeribbeanness not only as *visual* and *visible* refusals of violent and global anti-Blackness but also as visual and visible inclusivity of folks with diverse gender and sexual practices. Rooted in the aftermath of social quarantines and Zoom meetings, this contemporary survey illuminates how COVID-19 facilitated increasingly global and digital presences of queer Caribbean cultures, practices, and people within, throughout, and beyond the Caribbean and its diasporas.

Analyzing virtual ethnographic fieldwork conducted during COVID-19 between 2020-2022, "What's a girl to do when she's needy?" reflects on the convergences of queer dancehall, social media, and queer Caribbean visuality. In other words, this piece explores how social media platforms like TikTok and YouTube create space for a womanist and LGBTQ+ dancehall dedicated to women and queer practitioners' pleasure, joy, agency, and independence. At the same time, this essay critiques what queer Caribbean visualities have entered a global sexual aesthetic by noting the overrepresentation of femme-on-femme actresses within dancehall music videos. Not only subjected to dancehall's business priorities, this limited Queeribbean visuality is also tied to politics of desirability that structure social media algorithms, who gets monetized, and who gets shadowbanned.

Keywords: queer dancehall, TikTok, queer Caribbean visuality, refusal, queer visibility.

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Introduction

Director X's version of Rihanna and Drake's "Work" (2016) video represents a queer and womanist dancehall that invokes and creates space for women and gender and/or sexual minorities to experience pleasure, agency, community, embodied spirituality, and (homo)eroticism. During the video's opening minute, the camera captures the ways in which Riri chooses to enact her own pleasure through proudly watching herself dance (see Figure 1 below). As the video continues, we witness Rihanna dancing intimately with men and, more importantly for this essay, women who are not Riri's sexual partners. Here, Riri engages in what Nadia Ellis (2011) describes as a queer dancehall hermeneutic that engages homoeroticism, performance, fluidity, and a non-desire to name and/or disclose sexual identity. As Rihanna enacts homoeroticism and women's pleasure on screen, her lyrics refuse the work of Caribbean feminine citizenship[2]: of satisfying her partner sexually, of meeting her lover whenever and wherever they call, and of improving her lover's emotional wellbeing. Instead of working for love and reinforcing womanhood as subservient to malehood, Rihanna positions herself beyond sexual service and instead experiences pleasure in/with herself while creating queer, or transgressive, intimacies and eroticisms.

In line with this interpretation, this essay re-reads "Work" and other women anthems to redefine dancehall as a queer Caribbean (or Queeribbean) visuality of refusal—a *visible* and *visual* African and Afro-Caribbean practice of care, embodied spirituality, meaning-making, refusal of death, and repair amidst post-independence life in Jamaica.[3]

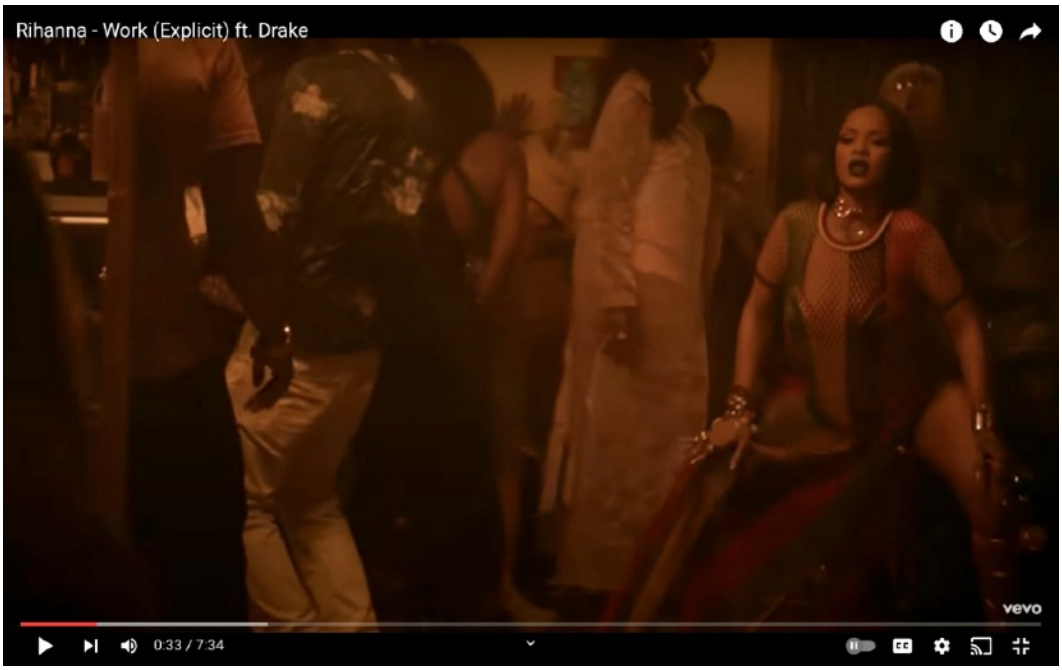

Figure 1: **A YouTube screenshot from Rihanna's 201**6 "Work" music video displaying her wining alone in front of a mirror.

This essay unfolds as an interdisciplinary exploration of how queer, working-class Afro-Jamaicans make and sustain life amidst the failures of structural adjustment programs, ever accruing debt and damage, colonial norms, ecological damage, and the privatization of natural resources in Jamaica. Specifically, I intervene in Queeribbean Studies and draw on a theoretical complex formed by dancehall scholarship, decolonial theory, Black visuality, and Queeribbean feminisms (Queer Caribbean Studies and Caribbean feminisms). I pair and ground this scholarship with auto-ethnographic insights, virtual ethnography, conversations with family and friends, and lyric and music video analysis. In this manner, I extend Queeribbean Studies to focus not only on activism, art, and culture, but also on embodied spirituality, fluidity, and digital visuality.

Before moving further, I note my positionality as a diasporic researcher (Nixon and King 2013). Specifically, I am a second-generation Jamaican-American born and raised in South Florida to two Jamaican immigrants named Marlyn and Garth. As a diasporic researcher who has just started making trips back home, I haven't attended a dancehall in Jamaica yet. A large portion of my dancehall research over the past five years has been virtual. I highlight my positionality and lack of intimate knowledge of dancehall to note that I know differently from local Caribbean people. To ethically represent the livelihoods of marginalized Caribbean people, I have taken time to listen, to ask questions, and to *be* in community with local Caribbean scholars and everyday citizens. I ask that everyone reading this do the same.

Next, I will define three anchoring terms that repeat throughout this article. Operating alongside the text's key phrases, such as Black visuality, eroticism, and Queeribbean visuality of refusal, these key definitions and genealogies function as a starting point for further discussion. Finally, the introduction closes with a roadmap explaining the essay's structure.

Anchoring Terms

- **Queer/Queeribbean**: I define queerness in the Caribbean as life-affirming praxes of empathetic, affective, and sometimes gender-expansive intimacies, desires, and kinships that take form in Caribbean waters and that disrupt social and colonial norms (Tinsley 2008). Queerness is decolonial and is the horizon of a future decentering a world order premised on Western epistemology, racial capitalism, neoliberalism, and environmental damage (Muñoz 2009).[4]

- **Pleasure:** In line with Black feminists such as Audre Lorde and adrienne maree brown[5], I define pleasure not only as happiness and satisfaction but also as Black women's sexual agency, wholeness, aliveness, and intentional joy. As adrienne maree brown (2019) writes, "pleasure is a mark of freedom."

- **Embodied spirituality:** My approach to embodied spirituality draws on Black feminisms, Queeribbean feminisms, and Africana Religious Studies. Embodied spirituality centers the body and its ability to remember ancestral practices as well as the body's intimate connections with political structures, sociocultural norms, and ecologies around/inside us.

Article Roadmap

In addition to the introduction, this essay has three scenes paired with the title of dancehall songs. The scenes re-enact dancehall's interactions between sound, protest, and celebration in closed spaces, such as this essay: each scene begins with a brief overview of its contents. Following the third scene, the article closes with a QR code linking to a collaborative queer and womanist dancehall playlist that I started on Spotify. I encourage readers to listen while engaging with this work, and to add to the playlist as Spirit moves you.

Scene 1.
"Mango": Dancehall as Queer Caribbean Visuality of Refusal

This scene analyzes the "Work" video as enacting a politics of embodied refusal and spirituality. To situate these politics in Black visuality and in Queeribbean feminisms, I place Tina Campt's 2019 essay "Black visuality and the practice of refusal" in conversation with "Caribbean Queer Visualities," a 2016 Small Axe Project curated by David Scott, Erica Moiah James, and Nijah Cunningham. Together, these pieces more explicitly draw out dancehall as a queer/ transgressive Caribbean visuality of refusal. The scene then concludes by complicating the term "queer" as a description for Caribbean practices of gender and sexuality.

"Work" opens with a shot outside of The Real Jerk, a Caribbean restaurant with two locations in Toronto featuring unique art, a rum bar, and karaoke (Rihanna 2016, 0:01). After Drake and Rihanna enter the restaurant, the camera focuses on a flyer on the ground bearing the song's name before panning over to a crushed plastic cup and then to Rihanna's feet. Over the next seven seconds, the camera trails up from Riri's feet to reveal her in a typical dancehall outfit: a Rasta-themed bralette and matching bikini bottom underneath a mesh dress with flashy body jewelry and gold strappy sandals. After the camera moves up to Rihanna's head and behind her back, we see RiRi watching herself dance in front of a mirror (Rihanna 2016, 0:33). As Rihanna works her way through the venue and interacts with other partygoers, the camera continues moving with her figure.

Here, I think about how the camera's tilts and pans (vertical and horizontal movements, respectively) emphasize embodiment. Particularly, the camera mirrors human mechanisms of visual-spatial and sociogeographic processing, incorporating the ways humans process space in a 360-degree manner by shifting our gaze, noticing our proximity to other persons, and moving our bodies. The camera also mirrors the ways in which racialized minorities and women establish and understand our position(s) in space through mental mapping and

maneuvering the people and the social and global processes that produce space (McKittrick 2006). Thus, as it draws our attention to the construction of bodies and social spaces, the camera reminds us of what Caribbean feminist and anthropologist Vanessa Agard-Jones considers "A Trouillotian and feminist recalibration of the body…that helps us think Caribbean bodies in systems, moving us from the innards of embodiment to the space of global capital" (2013, 187).

Taken together, then, the camera in "Work" attunes viewers to the importance of bodies in the system, or the ways in which Black bodies, dancehall, global capital, and exclusionary sociopolitics collide. Following Agard-Jones' intervention, we can re-read the opening sequence of the camera panning from the plastic cup to Rihanna's feet and the camera's continued focus on plastic cups and beer bottles throughout the video. The opening sequence inside The Real Jerk most obviously places Black human bodies in a landscape marked by plastic waste, recalling the devastating effects of environmental racism on Black and Indigenous communities, especially in the Caribbean.[6] Likewise, the beer bottles visually signify global politics and processes, particularly global economics and the way that commodities and their circulation rely on the labor of and consumption by Black bodies.[7] These two examples highlight how "Work" facilitates a visual discussion of bodies in the system, focusing on how "bodies are connected to commodity chains, to uneven relations of colonial/postcolonial power, and thus to world systems" (Agard-Jones 2013, 192).

In addition to bodies in the system, or what I call embodied politics, "Work" highlights embodied spirituality, particularly through close-ups of beer bottles, sweating and seemingly frenzied dancers, and joints being rolled. Drawing on the work of Sonjah Stanley-Niaah and Khytie Brown, I acknowledge that dancehall utilizes African-descended movements and spiritualities as a method of meaning-making and ancestral connection, or what Dianne Stewart (2022) describes as Africana sacred poetics. In her 2004 essay "Kingston's Dancehall: A Story of Celebration and Space," Sonjah Stanley-Niaah highlights dancehall as a

site of collective African bodily memory. In other words, Stanley-Niaah understands the dancehall choreography in "Work" as inspired by the performance cultures of enslaved Africans who were kidnapped and brutally thrown onto the global stage as non-human, as labour, property, and commodity. Likewise, Khytie Brown's article "The Spirit of Dancehall: embodying a new nomos in Jamaica" thinks through how The Real Jerk (functioning as a dance hall), is a sacred space that enables intimate meaning-making, much like Christian churches. Particularly, Brown argues that dancehall is an embodied spirituality in which practitioners refashion Jamaica's religious codes to make sense of their daily lives, to reach enlightenment (often with the use of alcohol and weed), and to connect with deities and ancestors who aid in healing and communal wellness (2017, 22). Together, Stanley-Niaah and Brown illustrate dancehall as Africana sacred poetics, or the spiritual process of strategically (re)membering, (re)creating, and practicing African traditions and epistemologies in order to retain humanness and nationhood during/after the Middle Passage and the deferred postcolonial dream (Stewart 2022, 221; Brown 2017, 23).

Thinking with Vanessa Agard-Jones, Sonjah Stanley-Niaah, and Khytie Brown, "Work" depicts dancehall as Africana sacred poetics and as embodied spirituality. This reinterpretation enables us to understand that 1) modernity is premised on Black labor, death, containment, and subjugation and 2) even as modernity consumes Black humanness and Afro-centric ways of life, Afro-Caribbeans use dancehall as a visible marker of Black aliveness (Quashie 2021) and as a "[B]lack visuality that itself constitutes a practice of refusal" (Campt 2019).

Tina Campt's "Black visuality and the practice of refusal" posits Black imagery and sound as refusal, or everyday practices that challenge anti-Black social norms, rendering Black peoples as disposable, unintelligible, and invisible (2019). Simultaneously, refusal challenges colonial notions of typical genders and sexualities, allowing for the visibility of gender-fluid folks such as the head-dressed dancer who presents as non-binary and as women at different

moments during "Work" (see Figure 2 below). In rejecting anti-Blackness and a strict gender binary, Black visuality remakes Blackness and allows Black lives to take new forms on screen.

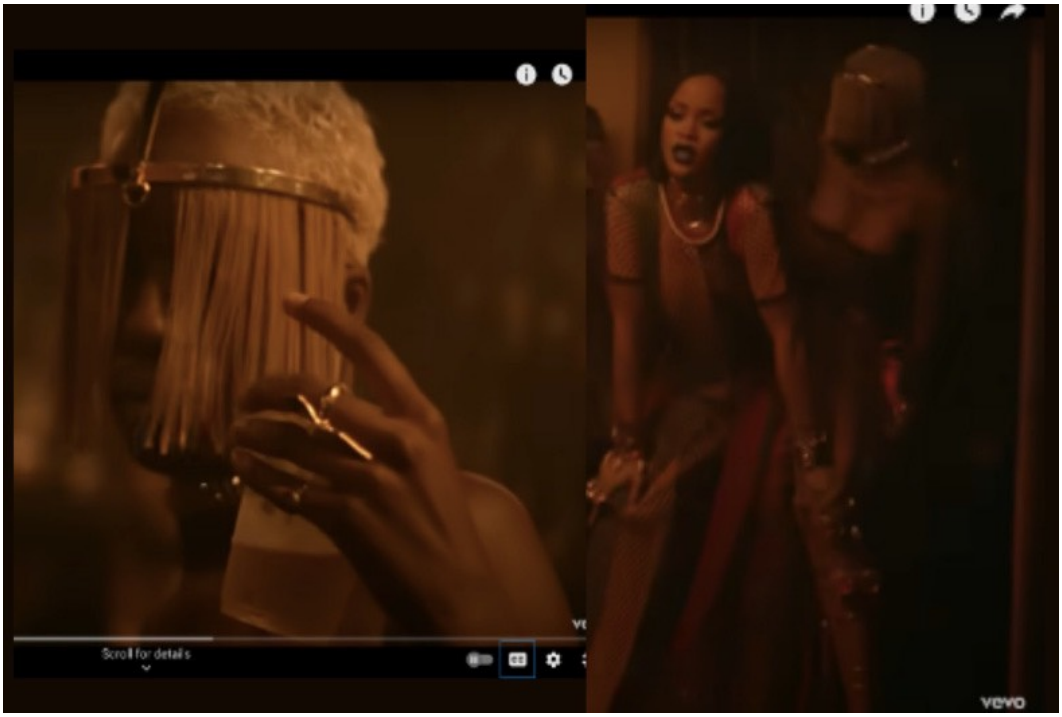

Figure 2: **A collage of the head dressed dancer.** The dancer's gender is difficult to assess based on the photo on the left side. On the right side, we see a feminine chest. YouTube screenshot.

Central to Campt's conception of Black visuality, or should I say visual fluidity, is the adjacency between still-moving-images and phonic substance that "tethers [B]lack life to [B]lack death, [B]lack pleasure to [B]lack pain, and [B]lack beauty to its inextricability from the terrible beauty of a [B]lack grotesque" (2019). Campt (2019) notes that still-moving-images blur distinctions between "paradoxical forms of motion": still images, moving photos, and animations appear in rapid and random order after each other. Furthermore, these frames oscillate between depictions of individual, collective, and pieced Black bodies. The blurring of these bodies threaded with images of drugs, smoke, burning pimento wood, jewelry, and other everyday items, in the case of the "Work"

video, dis- and reassemble Blackness as iconic, fabulous, defiant, mundane, fierce, and vulnerable. In other words, still-moving-images blur boundaries between movement and stillness and thread together varying Black bodies and fragments in order to depict Blackness beyond monstrosity, pain, and death. However, Campt notes that Blackness is made through images as well as what she terms phonic substance, or the natural sounds emanating from/alongside the images themselves. The phonic substance of "Work," for example, is the slow and melodious ping that structures the song's bassline. If we follow the song's first note and count 1, 2, 3, 4— breathe in, breathe out, breathe in, breathe out, we witness the rhythm of life that enables us to hear a Black visuality of refusal.

Thus, the adjacency of still-moving images and an underlying pulse depicts life, refusal, and embodied wisdom that call us to establish pleasure and wholeness by moving in alignment/synchronicity with the bodies on screen and to feel how our individual refusals amplify collectively. To put it differently, Black visuality enacts embodied politics and spiritualities through multi-dimensional and multi-sensorial movements and adjacencies. Extending Campt's analysis of Arthur Jafa's and Luke Willis Thompson's works, I posit that dancehall functions as a Black visuality of refusal in which visual scenery and music work together to depict Blackness beyond death and violence.

Small Axe's project "Caribbean Queer Visualities" continues Campt's attention to multi-dimensional and multi-sensorial embodiments, particularly through Caribbean and Caribbean diasporic visual art. In the project's introduction, David Scott addresses how the younger generation of Caribbean artists born from the 1980's onward depict new questions of subjectivity, power, and identity —"questions that are less about ideologies than about *embodiments*, less about representations than about *performativities*…less about belongings than *lovings*…less about sexualities than about *desires*" (2016, 5). Together, these new orientations center fluidity, and allow us to understand how our subjectivities—the ways we experience personhood and the world based on our bodies and the ways in which society (de)values our bodies—change, conflict, and overlap

(Scott 2016, 5). In highlighting different ways of being human, Queeribbean visualities depict refusals that not only focus on the body but are also affective, (un)conscious, (in)visible, and messy. In other words, Queeribbean visualities extend the body to include the spirit, psyche, environment, sound, and other non-traditional elements, such as fluctuating genders. In doing so, they challenge sociocultural norms and allow for insurgent openings like queer dancehall in the Christianized and colonized Caribbean.

Expanding our notions of what personhood and embodiment can look like, while providing experimental and world-blending platforms, queer Caribbean visualities allow us to think about, challenge, and create "the cultural, political, sexual, aesthetic worlds in and through which we live and work" (Scott 2016, 7). They are transgressive, providing us visual language to challenge the social construction of the spaces we inhabit and the global politics that shape and make our subjectivities. Furthermore, Queeribbean visualities like dancehall are a platform for racialized subjects to rethink and remake our subjectivities beyond pain and death, to enact our own pleasure, to connect with ancestral knowledge, and/or to dream of futures without marginalization.

To flesh out the work of Queeribbean visualities, I turn specifically to two essays within the *Small Axe Project* to give us a strategy of conversing with—or deeply listening to, witnessing, and learning from—queerness in Caribbean media: Terri Francis's "Unpretty Disruptions: Listening and Queering the Visual in Richard Fung's Videotapes" (2016), and Angelique Nixon's "Troubling Queer Caribbeanness: Embodiment, Gender, and Sexuality in Nadia Huggins's Visual Art"(2016).

"Unpretty Disruptions" analyzes the works of Richard Fung, a Sino-Trinidadian video artist and public intellectual living and working in Toronto. The essay highlights how Fung's unpretty, meaning non-traditional and not aesthetically pleasing, documentary techniques explore societal constructions of sexuality and race. Particularly, Fung's non-traditional techniques like asynchronous sound, cyclical editing, fuzzy shots, and interspersed pornographic

performances create and depict a bricolage of marginalized and/or possible sexualities, genders, identities, histories, and cultures that refuse colonial norms. In highlighting marginalized identities, Fung's queer/transgressive bricolage creates less marginalized worlds that grapple with but are not limited by colonial understandings of gender, class, and race. The worlds created by Fung's bricolage refuse anti-Black narratives about the unimportance and disposability of Black queer, trans, and working-class peoples and communities.

Also speaking to queer futures, Angelique Nixon's article "Troubling Queer Caribbeanness" engages several of Nadia Huggins' photographs, including Transformations 1 and Transformations 8 from the *Transformations* series. Nixon theorizes genderqueer Caribbeanness alongside the gender fluidity underlying Huggins' works (i.e. the fluidity of Huggins' body in the water and the ambiguity of her body when juxtaposed with marine life and Caribbean landscapes). The space between Huggins' self-portrait and the black sea urchin in Transformations 1 represents a genderqueer future marked by the merging of human bodies with the sea and marine life (see Figure 3 below). As such, the *Transformations* series represents the horizon of worlds to come and futures that center human transformations beyond "limiting notions of gender and sexuality" and beyond dehumanizing structures of racial capitalism, neoliberalism, and other global processes of inequity (Nixon 2016, 112). These worlds enable and rely on affect, care, and being in good relations with the people, lands, seascapes, and (in)visible worlds around us.[8] Black genderqueer futurities and the transgressive worlds and modes of relation they enable are the political implications of understanding dancehall not as slackness/vulgarity[9] but as Queeribbean visuality of refusal.

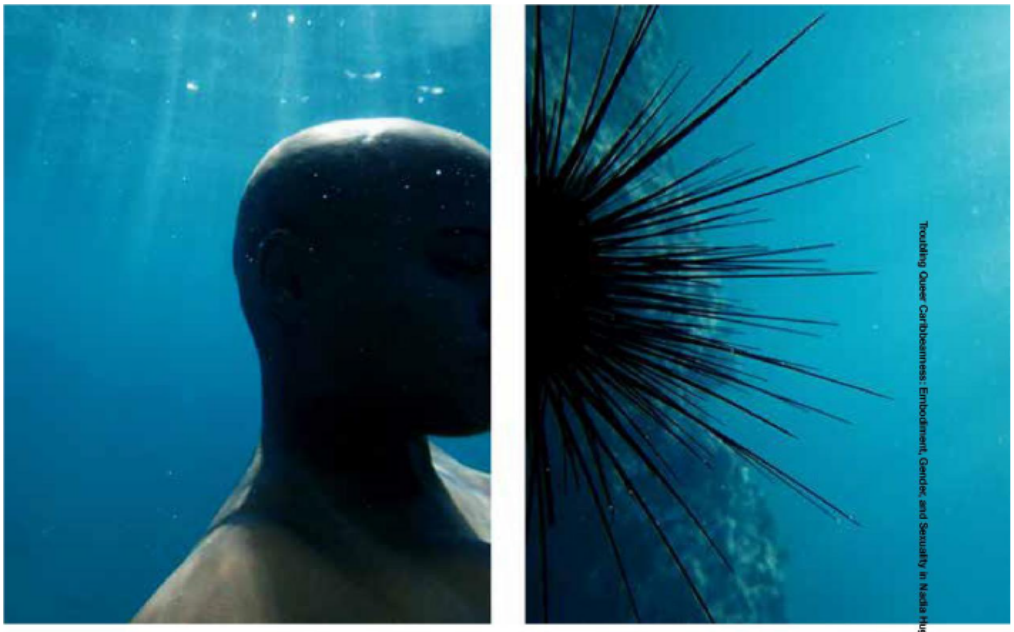

Figure 1. Nadia Huggins, *Transformations 1*, from the *Transformations* series, 2015. Digital photographs. Courtesy of the artist

Figure 3: Screenshot of **Nadia Huggins, Transformations 1** taken from *Small Axe*'s 2016. Caribbean Queer Visualities project.

Before moving to the next scene, I want to pause and reflect on the language of refusal and specifically think about the political implications of using the word "queer." While "Troubling Queer Caribbeanness" addresses the need for Queeribbean art, the piece also highlights "queer" and "queerness" as terms rooted in the Global North. Nixon (along with several other Queeribbean scholars, including Rosamond S. King, Carla Moore, and Nikoli Attai) notes that queerness is attached to respectable notions including family, professionalism, openness, and marriage.[10] Queerness doesn't always apply to Caribbeans engaging in non-normative sexual practices like transactional sex or polygamy.[11] Furthermore, as I note later in this essay, certain queer aesthetics (i.e. femme-on-femme flirtations and sex) are mainstream fetishes, continually objectifying women and subjecting them to the male gaze. These are just a few examples of the neocolonial baggage that "queer" and "queerness" carry alongside their attention to fluidity, space, and non-normativity. As Nikoli Attai (2013, 13) writes, "there is not at this moment a specific term or phrase…that can fully classify 'queerness' in the Caribbean context." Naming and theorizing a Caribbean "queerness" is the task of my current research.

Scene 2.
"Foreplay": COVID, Social Media, and Queeribbean Visibility

This section reflects on the virtual ethnographic research I conducted during the early 2020s. I start with an auto-ethnographic vignette detailing how I came to center TikTok as a research platform and the use/limits of TikTok and YouTube algorithms. Next, I present three vignettes of queer dancehall and highlight how social media attempts to work around geographies of difference. Also called geopolitics, geographies of difference are "ways in which national and local power systems are structured differently and must be taken into account when engaging in both local networked or translocal/transnational organizing" (Blackwell et al. 2015, 16). Finally, I will provide more nuance on using TikTok for research.

When I started conceptualizing this project on queer dancehall around 2020-21, I was just coming into my identity as a queer Caribbean person. Noticing how major dancehall artists like Buju Banton, Skillibeng, and T.O.K. demonized same gender loving people, I wondered if dancehall could hold space for my gender nonconformity and how other queer Caribbean people made space for themselves within dancehall. Socially distanced at home and unable to conduct the fieldwork in Jamaica I had intended to because of COVID, I turned to social media to find answers.

TikTok, in particular, became immensely helpful to this project because of its popularity and function as a social critique and news source. Like other social media, TikTok provides a space for transgressive opinions and perspectives. However, TikTok's speedy algorithm and call-and-response features (like stitching videos, creating video responses to specific comments, duetting videos, reposting videos, and gifting creators during live streams as a symbol of gratitude and support) uniquely allow for a snowball effect deconstruction of social norms. For instance, my TikTok FYP (For You Page) automatically updated to show me DJs' dancehall sets and queer Caribbean people after I watched a few videos by Caribbean women (some of whom identified as lesbian) who

enjoy dancehall. My updated FYP enabled me to interact with queer Caribbean people across space and time and to follow their transgressive comments, videos, and reactions. As I continued interacting with Queeribbean content, TikTok kept showing me similar content. From this snowballing effect, I gathered many perspectives on queer dancehall from people of varying demographics.

In addition to creating community and enabling critical conversations, TikTok provides a level of safety for users. Even in spaces and geographies marked by anti-queer legislation, queer Caribbean people can make and find virtual communities with less fear of physical retaliation. This is not to say that social media is completely harmless: cyberbullying, death threats, and other forms of bigotry circulate in comment sections and through stitched videos. However, TikTok's virtuality provides a sort of buffer, enabling and preserving creators' anonymity and private locations. Specifically, TikTok's effects and filters function as a safety protocol. Creators don't need to show their face in order to gain views or monetize their videos, but should they choose to appear on camera, creators can change and disguise their face and/or voice using various effects/ filters.

At times, TikTok comments directed me to YouTube videos (and vice versa). I also employed a snowball method on YouTube, starting with a specific video and watching the recommended videos that came up. While it expanded my research and allowed me to see more examples of queer Caribbean life than I expected, watching based on my recommendations and FYP presents a bias reflecting my positionality as an American femme interested in contemporary dancehall. TikTok and YouTube's algorithms took note of my interests, gender, and location to tailor content to my liking. This meant that while I interacted with a lot of content, I wasn't exposed to all the forms of queer Caribbean livelihoods that existed on these platforms. Thus, discussions with my Queeribbean friends about what we all were seeing became very important to diversifying the forms of art and visualities this project draws on.

Vignette 1: "Ah Shenseea"

The first example of queer dancehall I want to highlight is Shenseea's 2019 music video for her song "Blessed" featuring American rapper Tyga. Fourteen seconds into the video, there is a wide shot of Shenseea (aka Shenyeng) lying in bed with a sleeping woman. Both women are in their bras with their foreheads touching and their arms around each other (Shenseea 2019, 0:14). While the camera focuses on the pair in bed, we hear Shenyeng thanking God for her life, which includes the sleeping woman in bed (fig. 4). Thus, Shenyeng enacts a queer spirituality in which God allows and even accepts Shenyeng's sleeping with a woman. In enacting a queer spirituality, Shenyeng presents her love as pure and holy, as opposed to the colonial notion of homophobia being sinful and dirty. Their holiness gives the pair the freedom to love and be loved while taking up space in a luxurious villa, and in a larger context, dancehall.

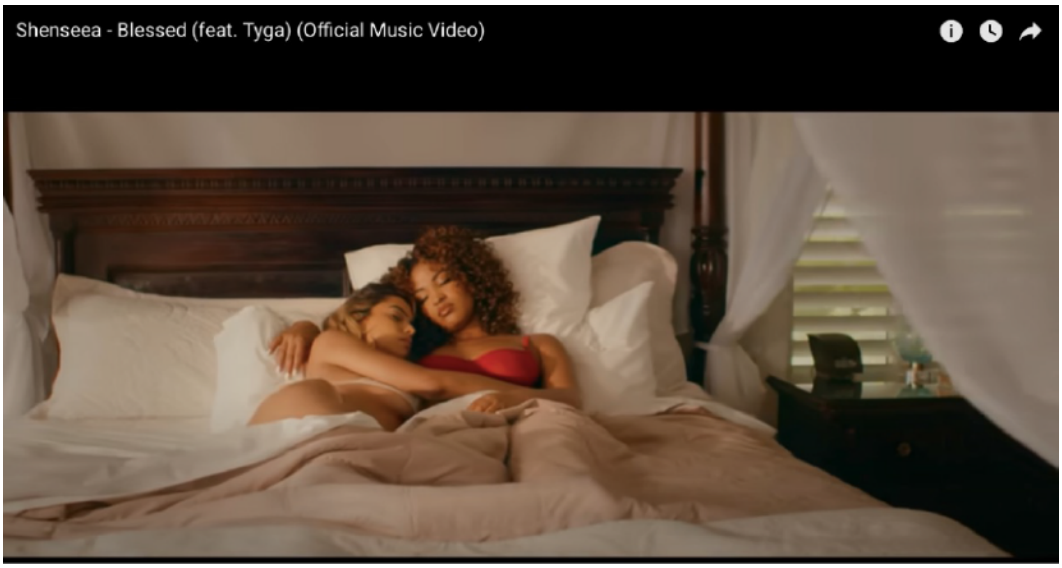

Figure 4: **YouTube screenshot from Shenseea's 2019 "Blessed" music video** where 14 seconds in, she's laying intimately in bed with another woman.

This moment of queer spirituality, I posit, is a queer Caribbean visuality of refusal fueled by the erotic. Audre Lorde states: "For the erotic is not a question only of what we do; it is a question of how acutely and fully we can feel in the doing" (1984, 88). The erotic is spiritual, sensual, and political—all at the same

time (Gill 2018, 10). It invokes enriching emotions of pleasure, joy, love, self-fulfillment, exhilaration, and intense satisfaction. These emotions are enriching because they require more than the capitalist tendency of living to work and working to live. Instead, these emotions lead us to choose more satisfying jobs and lifestyles that fulfill our innermost spiritual, psychic, and physical desires and that aren't invested in neocolonial structures. Thus, the erotic is also intimately tied to the politics of how and what we learn, the value of labour, and desirability. In this manner, the erotic is self-knowledge *and* the power to reclaim "our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, and our lives" (Lorde 1984, 89). We can read Shenseea's moment in bed with another woman as reclaiming Queeribbean history; rejecting self-denial; and satisfying her psychic, physical and spiritual needs. This queer moment is possible because Shenseea is in tune with the erotic and is therefore empowered "not to settle for the convenient, for the shoddy, the conventionally expected, nor the merely safe" (Lorde 1984, 90).

The combination of image (seeing the pair in bed together) and sound (hearing Shenseea thanking God for her life and being blessed) depicts a world in which Shenseea's queerness is accepted without challenge. This "queer paradise" represents genderqueer Caribbeanness built on pleasure and what M. Jacqui Alexander (2005) terms erotic autonomy. Erotic autonomy operates counter to a patriarchal society that reinforces male superiority and assigns women to a particular role. As Alexander questions when describing womanhood under the British patriarchy: "Should woman be perennial daughter raised as lady, always already defined by her relationship to men?" (2005, 37). Instead, erotic autonomy redefines womanhood outside of malehood, heterosexuality, and the nuclear family. Alexander further questions, "Or, should woman and citizenship signify a certain autonomy—what we might regard as erotic autonomy—and sexual agency?" (2005, 37). Here, erotic autonomy hearkens back to Audre Lorde's theory that the erotic propels people to live their most meaningful lives, even if those lives are not conventional and threaten the state. As such, Shenseea depicts erotic autonomy as she chooses to engage in queer relations

and to further her career instead of being a traditional housewife and female citizen responsible for cooking, cleaning, and raising future citizens.

During Tyga's verse, we see pairs of women on the grass. The first pair corresponds with Tyga's singing about being rough and reckless during sex: a woman in light blue shorts holds and rests her head on the boobs of a woman wearing a red top (fig. 5). Immediately after, we see a woman lying on the grass while playfully slapping another woman's ass and staring at the other woman's bouncing boobs (Shenseea 2019, 1:41). A few moments later, we see a woman sitting with spread legs and another woman sitting backwards on her lap, twerking and looking at her. (Shenseea 2019, 1:45) In these moments, the women experience homoeroticism evidenced by intimate eye contact, playful grabbing and slapping of the ass, and laughter. In representing a Queeribbean visuality of refusal and erotic autonomy, Shenseea's "Blessed" video contrasts the homophobia prevalent in Jamaican society and dancehall—even if these moments of queer intimacy and eroticism are brief and fleeting, lasting only a second or two.

Figure 5: **YouTube screenshot from Shenseea's 2019 music video** where two women sit on the grass with their legs folded under them. The woman further from the camera lays her head on and holds the other woman's boobs as they laugh together.

For the remainder of this section, I want to highlight the representational politics associated with the video's focus on femme lesbians.

On the one hand, "Blessed" spotlights Black lesbians who have historically been subjected to invisibility and silencing within Caribbean society (Silvera 1992). Sections 76, 77, and 79 of the Jamaican 1864 Offences Against the Person Act criminalize buggery, implicitly defined through precedence as anal and/or oral sex between two men or a man and an animal. Sections 76 and 77 determine sentencing for persons convicted of and attempting buggery, respectively. Section 79 is vague and subjects men involved with "any act of gross indecency with another male person" to imprisonment up to two years; these "indecencies" can include non-sexual acts like holding hands or hugging (Government of Jamaica 2011, 26). Note that women's homosexuality is entirely missing from this legislation, reminding Black women of their lack of citizenship and their role as fetish and sex appeal. Thus, in giving these Black women screen time and a digital space to exist, Shenseea and YouTube highlight Black women's sexuality in a way that Jamaican legislature does not. They also challenge geopolitical narratives that queerness cannot and does not exist in the Caribbean.

On the other hand, the conscious choice to feature femme lesbians rather than trans women and/or masculine lesbians plays into the fetishization, commodification, and devaluing of Black women. In privileging viewer appeal, YouTube and the team overseeing this music video perpetuate a globalized heteropatriarchy where women exist to satisfy men's sexual needs and are continually subjected to the male gaze.

Shenyeng's video presents Black women with erotic autonomy, experiencing relationships that don't revolve around men and counteracting the historic invisibility of Black lesbians within the Caribbean. However, the video is "blessed," or deemed acceptable, because it features femme lesbians who function as a kink for cisgender heterosexual men. This illustrates how social media operates against geopolitical narratives of domination *and* falls into some of the same geopolitical traps.

Vignette 2: The Week of November 14, 2021

A second moment of Queeribbean erotic autonomy I wish to highlight is the "coming outs" during the week of November 14, 2021. The story begins on Sunday, November 14, 2021, when reggae artist Lila Iké responded to blackmail threats by publicly coming out on Twitter. In the first of a series of tweets, Iké asked if her music is any less real because she's gay. Finally, Iké concluded by confidently reintroducing herself as Lila Iké, a gay reggae artist. This statement shocked many Jamaican listeners and artists, who have been historically queerphobic and have called for the burning of gay Jamaicans. On Monday, November 15th and in support of Lila Iké's coming out, dancehall artist Jada Kingdom tweeted that she had recently come out to her mother, who was not surprised. Then on Wednesday, November 17th, news broke that Spice would be headlining Toronto's 2022 Pride Festival. (Spice did go on to headline Toronto's Pride).

As a Queeribbean diasporic researcher, I've heard many narratives that falsely posit the Caribbean as an exceedingly homophobic region and the Global North (including the United States, Canada, and the U.K.) as places where queerness can thrive. Such conversations invoke a geopolitical discussion that thinks through differences in political structures and local cultures (Blackwell et al. 2015, 7) between the Caribbean and places like the U.S. Feminist scholar Maylei Blackwell addresses geopolitics in more detail during the Transnational Feminisms Roundtable held at Ohio State University in 2014. Specifically, Blackwell highlights forms of geopolitics including sociocultural differences; "the ways in which power relationships actually structured who could travel, who could access which tools and discourses in the transnational arena"; and attention to the intersections of gender-based oppression with "other forms of geopolitical, colonial, and material economic, racial, gender, and sexual oppression" (Blackwell et al. 2015, 7).

Although they are Caribbean people partaking in queer intimacies, dancehall celebrities such as Shenseea, Jada Kingdom, and Spice have different

geopolitical implications than working-class Jamaicans. For instance, these celebrities have access to money, easier international travel, and international audiences through their record labels. I also have different geopolitical implications from working-class Jamaicans and queer Caribbean scholars living and working in the Caribbean: I currently live and produce work in the United States, and American exceptionalism enables my work to travel globally with little hindrance.[12] I can travel internationally without much restriction, and I have the support of a well-resourced university. These factors offer us (the geopolitically privileged) a shield of protection against queerphobia: there are fewer risks associated with our practicing queer intimacies and homoeroticism. As another example, Jada Kingdom received backlash after coming out, but she didn't have to worry about being laid off from her job or losing access to housing and/or medical care. Likewise, my Queeribbean scholarship has not subjected me to housing, medical, or employment crises that queer working-class Caribbean women contend with on a daily basis.

TikTok both perpetuates and attempts to bridge these geopolitical differences. The platform's algorithm is Americentric, allowing viewers all over the world to easily access content from American creators. Yet, accessing Caribbean and other non-American content with a U.S.-based IP address has been difficult. And even within the U.S., Black American content creators are often shadowbanned such that American audiences can't see or interact with their content. These are just a few examples of how TikTok gatekeeps non-conventional information that challenges Americentrism. However, users can manipulate TikTok's algorithm with the right hashtags and reposts, allowing Caribbean content to circulate in the U.S. and generating income from their videos.

Assuming Caribbean content reaches the U.S. (which is not always the case), TikTok facilitates the sharing of information and ways of being from the Caribbean and other non-Euro American regions much faster than academic channels. I'll provide further critique of TikTok, its geopolitics, and algorithm in the concluding Scene; but I want to emphasize that TikTok and YouTube work counter to and in support of uneven geopolitical structures like Americentrism.

Vignette 3: "From dem ah par inna chi-chi man bar"

All around the Caribbean, we can hear the menacing strings start to play, followed by a quiet line of "T.O.K." in the background. The strings stop, and we hear a declaration of their crew, their rules, and their girls—heightened by slight echoes and repetitions in the background. Then we hear these words ringing: "From dem ah par inna chi-chi man bar [*When they gather at gay bars*]/ Blaze di fiyah mek we bun dem [*Start the fire; let's burn them*]." (T.O.K. 2001) At the same time, we hear the pounding of a bass drum before the beat picks up, and a snare and synthesizer join the mix. The next lines ring out: "From deh ah drink inna chi-chi man bar [*When they're drinking at gay bars*]/ Blaze di fiyah mek we dun dem [*Start the fire; let's kill them*]." (T.O.K. 2001)

These violently queerphobic lyrics come from T.O.K.'s 2001 hit song "Chi-Chi Man," whose title employs a derogatory Jamaicanism addressing gay/femme men and whose call to action is to swiftly kill queer Jamaicans. Yet despite the song's violence, queer Caribbeans on TikTok reclaim it as a Queeribbean anthem. For instance, several Queeribbean content makers proudly wave LGBTQ+ flags in the air as they dance to "Chi-Chi Man." Other users, often in the comment section, make jokes about being the first person to buss a wine when the song plays. Still, other queer Caribbeans on TikTok comment about loving the beat and enjoying the song even after realizing what the lyrics mean. As such, Queeribbean TikTokers use "Chi-Chi Man" to assemble other queer Caribbeans and to depict thriving Queeribbean communities in and around the Caribbean.

This phenomenon is what Cuban performance theory and queer scholar Jose Esteban Muñoz described as disidentification. Muñoz wrote, "Disidentification is a mode of performance whereby a toxic identity is remade and infiltrated by subjects who have been hailed by such identity categories but have not been able to own such a label" (1999, 185). Queer Caribbeans on TikTok, following in the footsteps of older queer Caribbeans on and offline, have reclaimed "Chi-Chi" man as an endearing term expressing their erotic autonomy and gender/

sexual nonconformity (King 2014, 94). In addition to reclaiming lost Queeribbean history and challenging gender norms, reclaiming "Chi-Chi Man" "is about cultural, material, and psychic survival" (Muñoz 1999, 161). As Nikoli Attai writes when describing the naming of queerness in the Caribbean, reclaiming slurs "serves as a reminder that despite such long histories of classifying queer Caribbean people negatively, there exists a Caribbean where these terms hold particular resonance for queer people…" (2023, 11-12). Thus, queer Caribbean people reinterpret how the song's call to kill gay men is a signal and testament to queer presence, Queeribbean erotic autonomy, and queer meaning-making in the Caribbean.

Figure 6: **July 26, 2023, Instagram flyer from Equality JA** announcing DHQ as part of the #PrideJA2023 lineup.

Scene 3

"If Him Lef": The Limits of Digital Queeribbean Visuality

While TikTok is a future-making app encouraging users to think critically against normative structures of oppression, it is a mirror reflecting the holes in society. Here, I think alongside Carla Moore's theory of the blind spot, which "allows MSM [men who have sex with men] to move through the dancehall space unnoticed," or to "move from positions of unvisibility [intentionally avoiding visibility] to invisibility [being systemically silenced and hidden from sight]." (2014, 14) Equality JA's 2023 Dancehall Queer event (see Figure 6 below) also highlighted the unvisibility of gay men within the dancehall-scape. Per the panel, gay men strategically become unvisible by performing traditional gender roles and by muting their non-normativity to go unnoticed in the space. TikTok also reflects this blind spot: I was hard-pressed to find a self-identifying gay Jamaican man adding to dancehall conversations. Instead, most of the queer Caribbean people I've encountered online use she/her pronouns. This blind spot signals TikTok's reflection of varying queer visibilities like hypervisibility, unvisibility, and invisibility.

TikTok is implicated in global politics, especially concerning data security and American exceptionalism, as evidenced by the app's twelve-hour ban on January 19, 2025. Addressing security concerns about Chinese companies obtaining and using Americans' data, Congress signed a law requiring TikTok to sell its company or be banned (oyez.org, 2025). Because TikTok refused to comply, the app was banned in the United States and was unavailable to its 170 million users there. The following day, the ban was lifted, and TikTok was granted a 90-day extension (ending on April 5th) to sell its company. Interestingly, right before and during the ban, American users flocked to a Chinese app called Xiaohongshu (RedNote) in such high numbers that the app developers quickly had to auto-translate content into English for its million-plus new users. Meanwhile, without American users, TikTok appeared quiet. Many non-American users commented on their gratitude and relief that Americans were back on TikTok, and how bored they were during the ban. These comments demonstrate

American content's global reach, which, as previously discussed, contrasts with the limited reach of Caribbean content.

I highlight these events to make two points: 1) TikTok is a political space and therefore 2) TikTok presents queerness in very specific ways. Concerning the first point, TikTok is entrenched in and perpetuates politics of desirability, racialization, geopolitics, and national security. Black and Indigenous creators have been shadow-banned for posting about the #BlackLivesMatter movement, teaching African and Indigenous spiritualities, and calling out racist interactions with big-name companies. Plus-size fashionistas and dark-skinned make-up artists appear on FYPs far less frequently than their petite and lighter-skinned counterparts. Creators spread misinformation and harmful content on TikTok. These are only some of TikTok's glaring structural and political issues: others include accessibility (i.e. inaccurate closed captioning and the lack of closed captioning on all videos) and undisclosed uses of AI.

Yet despite these challenges, TikTok provides a space for Queeribbean visualities of refusal, including womanist dancehall clips, queer Caribbean reclaimings of "Chi-Chi Man," and visual art from queer Afro-Caribbean artists. As a researcher working with digital visualities and soundscapes, part of my ethics is noting how my positionality, or my ways of being (perceived) in the world, affects what I see and how I see it. To limit the bias embedded in my TikTok and YouTube feeds, I supplement my digital work with communal discussions and other forms of Queeribbean resistance, including visual art, literature, nonprofit work, and curated events. I also think through structural processes forming TikTok's algorithm and interface; how these structures affect everyday livelihoods and intersect with offline and interlocking systems of oppression; and how creators navigate these processes in tandem. Most recently, I've been experimenting with music's abilities to bring people together and to create a communal experience of politics built on deep listening, memory work, and the different ways in which people hear and process sounds differently. As such, I also diversify my understandings of Queeribbean livelihoods via collaborative sound

practices of co-creating Spotify playlists (see Figure 7 below) and hosting listening parties based on sound clips I collect during fieldwork.

Figure 7: **Spotify code linking to a collaborative queer/womanist dancehall playlist.** Scan on Spotify and feel free to add songs uplifting women and queer folks in the dancehall.

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[1] The title borrows lyrics from Jada Kingdom's 2022 song "Dickmatized." The song, told from Jada's perspective, questions why she allows herself to be treated poorly by her sexual partner, yet she keeps running back to him. "Dickmatized" and particularly the essay's title is an entry point to womanist dancehall: the song illustrates how women in dancehall pursue their own sexual wants and needs and through sexual activity focused on their pleasure.

[2] Here, I'm thinking with Donnette Francis, *Fictions of Feminine Citizenship: Sexuality and the Nation in Contemporary Caribbean Literature* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011). Whereas Caribbean nationhood relies on heterosexual households in which women perform gendered labor of raising children and sexually pleasing their male partners, Francis argues Caribbean women have challenged these notions by living for themselves and finding their own pleasure.

[3] To better understand the formations and effects of Jamaica's nationalism, please watch Stephanie Black's 2001 documentary *Life and Debt*. Also, read Deborah Thomas' Modern Blackness: *Nationalism, Globalization, and the Politics of Culture in Jamaica* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004) and Orlando Patterson's *The Confounding Island: Jamaica and the Postcolonial Predicament* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019). These works draw attention to the underlying historical and social processes (including colonialism, neoliberalism, and racial capitalism) that enable(d) Jamaica's Anti-Black and queerphobic social norms and economic and cultural policies.

[4] For scholarship on sexual and gender minorities in the Caribbean prior to 2016, please consult Angelique Nixon's fifth endnote at the end of her *Small Axe* article "Troubling Queer Caribbeanness." For queer Caribbean studies after 2016, see Lyndon Gill, *Erotic Islands: Art and Activism in the Queer Caribbean* (Duke University Press, 2018); eds. Moji Anderson and Erin MacLeod, *Beyond Homophobia: Centering LGBTQ Experiences in the Anglophone Caribbean* (JA: UWI Press, 2020); Ana-Maurine Lara, *Streetwalking: LGBTQ Lives and Protest in the Dominican Republic* (Rutgers University Press, 2020); Ana-Maurine Lara, *Queer Freedom: Black Sovereignty* (SUNY Press, 2020); Solimar Otero, *Archives of Conjure: Stories of the Dead in Afrolatinx Cultures* (Columbia University Press, 2020); Krystal Nandini Ghisyawan, *Erotic Cartographies: Decolonization and the Queer Caribbean Imagination* (Rutgers University Press, 2022); Nikoli Attai, *Defiant Bodies: Making Queer Community in the Anglophone Caribbean* (Rutgers University Press, 2023); and Preity Kumar, *An Ordinary Landscape of Violence: Women Loving Women in Guyana* (Rutgers University Press, 2024).

[5] See Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (Crossing Press, 1984) and adrienne maree brown, *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good* (AK Press, 2019) among other Black feminist texts.

[6] For more on environmental racism, see Malcom Ferdinand's conception observation of modernity's colonial and the environmental double fracture in his 2022 book *A Decolonial Ecology: Thinking from the Caribbean World*.

[7] See Michel-Rolph Trouillot's 1982 article entitled "Motion in the System: Coffee, Color, and Slavery in Eighteenth-Century Saint Domingue."

[8] What I'm describing here is decolonial ecology. See Ferdinand 2022.

[9] For more on what slackness means and how dancehall resists this category of sexual vulgarity, please read Carolyn Cooper, *Sound Clash: Jamaican Dancehall Culture at Large* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

[10] This is what Queeribbean scholar Carla Moore terms homohegemony, or "the contemporary iteration of white, middle-class, male, Northern out-of-the-closet queerness that holds great cultural currency and is presently being deployed as the 'right way' to be queer." (2020, 182).

[11] For more on transgressive Caribbean sexualities, please use Kamala Kampadoo's 2009 article "Caribbean Sexuality: Mapping the Field" as a starting point.

[12] Here, I am again pointing to geopolitics and transnational movement. As additional resources, please read M. Jacqui Alexander and Chandra Mohanty's chapter "Cartographies of Knowledge and Power: Transnational Feminism as Radical Praxis" and JM Pierce et al.'s 2021 article "Introduction: *Cuir*/Queer Américas: Translation, Decoloniality, and the Incommensurable."