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Site Seen: Visual Art, Sovereignty, and Blackness in the Anglophone Caribbean

Chinyere Brown
Decolonial Feminist, Researcher and Artist

Abstract

This paper examines how colonial constructs continue to shape and obscure how Blackness is understood in the Anglophone Caribbean, and experiments with how art can expand these articulations. Caribbean visual art here is a site that affords possibilities for non-binary modes of inquiry, expansive spatio-temporal analysis and other logics that may address these occlusions. Drawing on Deborah Thomas' *Political Life in the Wake of the Plantation: Sovereignty, Witnessing, Repair* and Faith Smith's *Strolling in the Ruins: The Caribbean's Non-Sovereign Modern in the Early Twentieth Century*, this paper develops a method of 'Strolling through the Ruins'of Caribbean art in order to 'Witness' the complexity of Caribbean Blackness. In doing so, there is prioritisation of the type of unfolding 'sight' that their theorizing offers through an examination of how sensory, embodied, and relational forms of recognition, love, and care can be used to look at the imperfect, contradictory, and evasive as essential for imagining complexity. This meeting of theory and method elucidates the tensions and possibilities that shape Blackness and the co-constituted concepts of sovereignty and humanity. Anchored in an intersectional feminist perspective, the paper highlights how race, gender, class, and sexuality are integral parts of this artistic and epistemic analysis for generating more nuanced and expansive understandings of Blackness.

Keywords: Caribbean Blackness, Black sovereignty; Visual art; Witnessing; Ruin; Care; Contradiction; BlackCaribbean Feminism; Black queerness; Black Caribbean Women; Black complexity.

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Colonialism creates conditions that keep Blackness in the Caribbean obscured despite its centrality and vastness in the social landscape of the region and the world. This paper centers different methods of examining Caribbean art as an avenue for witnessing the complexity of Blackness and sovereignty in the region. Freedom has long been central to ideas of Blackness, intertwining its very meaning with the fraught questions of sovereignty, a relationship that the visual helps illuminate, having long played a crucial role in shaping the region. Nixon observes, "the visual landscape of the Caribbean has been forged with complex layers that expose the region's histories of colonialism, slavery, indentureship, occupations, and hegemonic relationships, yet also reveal the dynamic undercurrents of resistance and struggles for emancipation" (2016, 172).

I turn to Deborah Thomas' *Political Life in the Wake of the Plantation: Sovereignty, Witnessing, Repair* and Faith Smith's *Strolling in the Ruins: The Caribbean's Non-Sovereign Modern in the Early Twentieth Century* to 'Witness' and 'Stroll through the Ruins'of selected pieces of Caribbean visual art. Their work on sovereignty and coloniality emphasises embodied methods, providing direction and grounding for an illuminating analysis of Blackness and Humanity. In their work, significant attention is paid both to what we look at and the avenues we take to look at them. I meld significant aspects of these theoretical and methodological concerns to examine Blackness through the visual as it "provides different affordances than academic prose", including those of space, chronology, materiality, affect and indeterminacy (Thomas 2019, Preface xv). Despite its own colonial entanglements, the visual still has the potential to excavate those that obscure Blackness, as it is the methodologies applied to how we analyse that transform how we understand.

Colonialism's logic binds Blackness in binaries and hierarchies that mark some things as good, others bad, and both as unrelated. However, this conceals their interdependence, a structure through which Blackness is continually defined and redefined. In this way, contradictions become intrinsic to our experience. Wynter brings our attention to the concrete self; what we may "intrinsically" be, and the abstraction, what we are made into by being recast through binary and object-

based logic (2003). We may reject, accept and negotiate these, but they are still relevant to conceptions of Blackness and to what it means to be human and sovereign in colonial pasts and contemporary moments. Integral to coloniality is what Sylvia Wynter calls the rupture/mutation. This casting of Blackness as non-human and inferior, and whiteness as most human and superior, emerged when Black people were marked as property, during slavery and colonialism, causing a shift that fundamentally changed what it means to be human (Wynter 2003). This marking of Black people as non-sovereign and therefore non-human is a part of how these terms are situated in a constellation of co-constructed meaning-making.

Wynter also reminds us that integral to the West's assertion of global sovereignty was not only the association of Blackness with racial inferiority, but the places they came from as the boundary of non-human (2003). This logic is in colonial arguments that posit "if Europeans withdrew entirely from the West Indies, the blacks would relapse into "hordes of mild mannered, indolent semi-savages" (Brereton 2002, 196). Questions and constructions of the category of human, sovereignty and Blackness have always been connected and yet a site of contradiction. The region is both independent and not, and sovereignty is figured as desired, while the colonial legacy is also willfully and coercively maintained (Barriteau 2004). In the global imagination, the Caribbean has been positioned as both an erased, backward, non-sovereign, and hypervisible beauty, best enjoyed when questions of its sovereignty and Blackness remain unspoken (Kempadoo 2004). The Caribbean Blackness that can evoke visuals of "whip-suffering or sweaty skins in the Tropics" contradicts its "potential pleasures" (Sheller 2003, 113). Contending with these issues at the level of the individual, diaspora, or nation is an essential part of grappling with Blackness. W. E. B. Du Bois's notion of double consciousness is relevant to one aspect of how I imagine the contradictions of blackness throwing us into crisis by having to imbibe the gaze of the other (1903). However, this work engages a plurality of ways that contradictions are inherited and impact constructions of self. In this context, contradiction is about: 1) the original site of opposition that calls something the inverse of what it is; 2) the complexity of living as both an abstraction and a

concrete self; 3) disallowing something/someone a range of definitions of self, including parts of those that were thrust upon them and the ways they negotiate this. We are confronted with these ideas when Spillers asks how pleasure might exist within captivity, where enslavement so violently erased autonomy (1987). Colonial logic, she argues, denies the coexistence of opposites and renders contradiction itself a site of crisis. In this almost inarticulable state of contra (against) diction (speaking), Blackness is obscured or silenced as power seeks to suppress the tensions it produces (Spillers 1987). As Sheller notes, this erasure extends to the Caribbean, which, though central to Western modernity, has been "spatially and temporally eviscerated from the imaginary geographies of 'Western modernity'" (2003, 1). Visual analysis highlights patterns and repetitions and can bend normative logics of time and space if the methods we engage it with are open to strolling, witnessing, and ruin.

I sit with tools of analysis provided by Deborah Thomas and Faith Smith for this visual exploration. Their analyses of sovereignty understand it as a rehearsed performance and mode of address that takes into consideration how it is "constituted both from 'below', as it were and from 'above'" (Thomas 2019, 5). This insight opens avenues for my witnessing of visual art as performance. Thomas' concept of Witnessing 2.0, is a co-performative embodied practice that centres the importance of recognition and love for seeing and responding to complex things with complex modes of presentation. Here, recognition and love are concerned with witnessing's sensory, affective, and relational presence. In this way, seeing is about accountability, not "ocular-centrism that has facilitated imperialism" (Thomas 2019, 2). Witnessing the visual asks that we implicate ourselves, our bodies, and our responses in how we look and what we do after that encounter.

Faith Smith offers a way to think about contradiction, imperfection, bodies, time, landscape, and power in the Caribbean. Smith offers that "*Strolling in the Ruins* names both theme and disposition… an indulgence in an inclination to meander, to pursue the open-ended or provisional path, or to reconsider moments claimed as triumphant or unseemly in the later genealogies of the nation" (2023, 26).

Further, Smith asks us to consider what concepts ruins bring up for us around time and subjectivity as they evoke questions of 'what' and ultimately 'when' should be preserved, and who gets to say something is significant or catastrophic enough to be ruinous (2023). Binary understanding of time positions some things as confined to a completed past and others as belonging to a wholly separate future. Such a disavowal of these ruins demands the erasure and exclusion of people, struggles, and complexities. Lastly, *Strolling in the Ruins* also points our attention to themes of gender, sexuality, and performance as "Ruined/ruint also names the perception of a woman as fallen—sexually compromised and publicly known to be thus" (Smith, 2023, 27). This provides important context for examining Caribbean Blackness since "Black woman's ruin is used to gauge the moral condition of a constituency, or to insulate themselves against their own susceptibility to ruin" (2003, 28). This approach resists simplistic narratives and embraces the complexities of the region's history, culture, and social dynamics. These explorations create thematic and theoretical signposts that I will explore in the visual. These considerations guide both the concepts I look for and the embodied practice I employ when witnessing.

In this paper, a qualitative mixed-method approach is employed. Primary data is drawn from art pieces by Caribbean artists Anna Gibson and Amir Hall, complemented by secondary sources. It is underpinned by a feminist research ethic that emphasizes alternative knowledge production, capable of challenging dominant narratives. The selection of artists began with an examination of art collectives, galleries, and social media, using snowballing techniques and insider knowledge as a Black Caribbean artist. Emphasis was placed on young artists whose work had not yet been academically explored at length, providing a fresh perspective on the themes of Blackness in the region. The pieces of work from these artists were chosen using non-probabilistic selection techniques. These selection techniques are appropriate as this research does not aim to make generalisable claims about the artists selected, but rather seeks to engage in thematic analysis based on the offerings of the visual knowledge produced. Intersecting themes of identity, particularly race, gender, and sexuality, emerge in their work.

I see this project as fragile, as I attempt to use language in the form of academic prose to do what I believe language and academic prose might struggle with when speaking to contradictions. Further, this project is "fragile" and "clumsy" as it hopes to attend to something of great importance, Caribbean Blackness and sovereignty. Here, I employ feminist tools to help with methodology. Sara Ahmed's work on "care" in *Living a Feminist Life* (2017) addresses the challenges of attending to fragility. Ahmed "contends with fragility, anxiousness, and points of rupture" (2017, 208). She adds that "Care is also often the product of recognition" (2017, 218). Blackness, as outlined in this work, is born of and lives in points of rupture, unfinishedness, and lack of recognition. In this way, care becomes a method for responsive research to something that has been impacted and exists on the margins of ruin/breaking and desired continuation. Ahmed offers that, "You can become clumsier when you are trying to be careful not to break what easily breaks" (2017, 169). Clumsiness in this way is partially a testimony to the history of something made fragile, and the importance of trying to make an effort around something that is deeply valued and full of futurity. This influences my methodology in multiple ways. It has given me permission to be curious about how I use certain tenses, weave 'we, I, and you' into sentences, and use other grammatical structures on occasion to break certain normative structures and implicate the reader and myself in the work. It encourages my choice to mobilize Smith's strolling method of centering open-ended questions. Lastly, in caring for these visuals, I am choosing to avoid

> …a liberal notion: that everything is equally fragile; that we must care for everything equally. It is not. Some things become more fragile than others do in time. To attend to something that has become more easily breakable is to attend to its history, with love, and with care (Ahmed, 2017, 266).

Undoubtedly, there are other visuals and groups worthy of care. However, this project asserts its right to tend to Blackness and, in this way, its connections to what is understood as human. This, too, elucidates meanings of sovereignty in the Anglophone Caribbean with love and with care for the future.

Anna Gibson, ***Festering Fantasy 2,*** 2022. Acrylic on canvas, 36 x 48 in.

Strolling with Black Women through Space and Time; Tenderness, Ruin, and Shine

Anna Gibson uses "multiple mediums, crafting images of body manipulation through realism and expressionism" (Gibson, "About"). Her images centre Black Caribbean women in various forms, postures, and landscapes. In her collection titled *Reconstruction*, Gibson includes pieces that are put in direct and indirect conversation with one another. We see this with titles of pieces like *More* and *More II*. This is also present in the gentle placements of elements that centre the aesthetics of Black girlhood, like butterfly hair clips and bubbles, featured among those typically associated with Black womanhood, like colourful wigs, lashes, makeup, and lingerie. Gibson brings these playful forms right alongside and on top of harsher ones, such as staples, lacerations, and tied and protruding flesh. There are also combinations of textured and raised elements; bandages of pearls, rhinestones that glitter like tears, shiny golden metal lines layered on flesh. The physicality of Gibson's pieces, which are at times 3-dimensional, connects the viewer's world to the work, providing what Tina Campt refers to as haptic images' ability to move us through the multi-sensory engagement of viewing (2021). These affective registers of Blackness invite engagement with its complex and layered meanings, provided we approach it with care. Gibson's assemblage of fragmented and manipulated bodies alongside cultural nods and affective artifacts tells many stories that order and reorder themselves in complex configurations across space and time. *Festering Fantasy 2* is no exception.

Witnessing 'Festering Fantasy 2' and *Strolling Through* its *Ruins* brings attention to issues of time, bodies, power, quiet, gender, and sexuality. Blackness, humanity and sovereignty and their constitutive contradictions unfold as this method meets visual analysis. I slowly meander through *Festering Fantasy 2* in a piece that meets us from behind with a story that seems to have begun before we arrived. We are immediately put into conversation with the past, present, and future and their watery fluidity. In the foreground of this painting are large yellow and blue flowers, and pink butterfly hair clips. Centrally located is a Black

woman on her knees, her behind in the air, an opaque lacey underwear covering her in part, with her butt and legs visible and protruding from tall, sharp-tipped, shrouded grass. The grass around her signals nature's tendency to grow wild when the estate is left to ruin. Darkness is beyond her. She is central and quiet, below and between. She is the subject of the painting without a visible face or eyes to stare into. Following the footsteps of other migratory people, she remakes conventions of the typical portrait, which in its earliest forms were largely the preserve of colonialists (Campt 2017). Lastly, the flowers that float about the piece are notably daffodils. This flora that signals rebirth is non-native and foreign on one hand, yet recognizable in the Caribbean on the other, as it is featured in the cultural and literary landscape of the region. Many curricula ask students to memorize "I Wandered Lonely as a Cloud" by William Wordsworth, where he ponders upon the golden daffodils. In this way, they are also an emblem of colonial instruction. (Smith 2002). The visual world Gibson's work creates is rich with complexity and provides ground for an unfolding analysis of complex themes related to Blackness, sovereignty and humanity.

Festering Fantasy 2, the title of Gibson's piece, signals complexity in the space, time and narratives of the region. Festering evokes an unattended wound beneath the surface, while Fantasy resonates in the Caribbean with associations of paradise and the picturesque. The idyllic too is layered in meanings, as Nixon observes, "the Caribbean picturesque" continues to dominate touristic representations of the region as available for consumption, reproducing sexual-cultural tropes and politics of colonial tropicality" (2016, 172). In this context, the picturesque fantasy asks questions about power, who is eating, and who is offered up for consumption in the name of sovereignty. Black women's bodies are often given to the nation in service of tourism cum colonial project, ideals of sexual propriety, symbols of the nation, and other ideological fare meant to erase and repeat notions of a sovereign state (Alexander 1994). Black Women's relationship to colonial and sovereign time becomes a central part of understanding the complexity and obscuring of Blackness. An examination of how time can unfold across this visual allows for layered insights.

A linear reading of *Festering Fantasy 2* positions the clips and pastel colours sitting in the foreground as first, the woman on her knees next, and the darkness she heads into last. These sequential stages offer a time that is chronological, unidirectional and fixed. This kind of time is defined by "discrete… modular change" that signals movement toward improvement or completion (Scott 2014, 5). Linear time sustains the illusion of progress, suggesting an orderly path from past to future where each constitutes the other's opposite. This logic of modernity, as Scott notes, rests on "an endless chain of displacements of before and after" (2014, 5). Erasure and repetition are the mechanisms by which modernity fulfils its promise of progress, despite it being colonial fiction. Modernity positions countries and people as existing in separate time; in particular, women are often constructed as " 'inert, backward looking and natural,' …'denied any relation' to 'agency,' in contradistinction to 'forward-thrusting, potent' "others (Smith 2023, 23). These racialized and gendered, state and individual level constructs conceal the exercise of power and violence that made it possible for them to inhabit the same time with such different yet layered and contingent byproducts. Colonial logics erase traces of who, what and when we fragment, quiet and displace in the name of modernities. Smith offers that "while some have the freedom to talk about an event, or to invoke a time in the past and integrate it into the ongoing present, others are enjoined to be silent" (2023, 19). For this fiction to hold, those who live within other temporalities, whose futures remain entangled with their pasts, and whose pasts refuse closure, are marked as contradictory in order to flatten and invisibilise their complexity.

In this linear reading, the Black woman in *Festering Fantasy 2* is removed from the bright colours of girlhood. Her crawl is no longer ambiguously playful. The prospects for meanings of feet coyly overlapped and certainly headed in uncertain directions are collapsed into a singular, final destination. Here, feelings about scalloped trimmed panties that reveal and hide behinds that are pushed out and yet moving away must be narrowed, lest they fray and ruin the logic of this time. If one thing is true at a time in this reading, and the order is past, present, then future, is Black girlhood the ruins held in time and unable to exist

on its own terms? Is she presently an object, her sexuality to be consumed? Does our inability to perceive her future mean that there is nothing to come? Further, what happens to Black girlhood and womanhood when they are disallowed a multi-directional conversation and their temporalities forcibly separated by colonial frameworks? How does erasure of one impoverish both? Are Black women confined to this time?

The visual does offer us multiple ways to envision time. An alternative reading of *Festering Fantasy 2* sees the woman existing across it. The visual arrangement of hair clips and bows, nearly the size of the woman's body, connects her experience. The nods to girlhood sit in the same space and time as the woman. Indeed, as Thomas offers, "in visual work, we are able to proximately juxtapose divergent scales, perspectives, and times" (2019, Preface xv). When time is not divided into separate stages, we can better examine how questions, pleasures, and even violations of the sexual, often associated only with Black womanhood, do not simply appear suddenly. Rather, recognizing the continuities between girlhood and womanhood allows us to reject the oversimplified notion that so-called "loose" or fast girls are illogical or disposable, and instead see that these experiences, emotions, and realities also belong within the realm of Black girlhood. Connected time allows them to become the narrators of where and when in time and with what registers they evoke ruin. It can be in their assessment of the state as ruined and not themselves. It can be in their uses of their bodies as 'canvases for dissent', articulating their own sovereignty and ruining silences made and expected of them. Complexity abounds in these spaces.

These affordances allow us to understand Black women not as unmoving but existing across her girlhood, womanhood and future simultaneously. This ability to bend spatio-temporal logic is presented and responded to differently. Working class Black women's actions and autonomy around narrativising ruin for example are often held as some of the most threatening to the nation as, "it is nonwhite, working-class performances of womanhood in particular that are held to be too assertive, too public, too commercial, or otherwise unappealing

as to undermine masculine authority or cast their community as insufficiently moral or modern ... they offend precisely because their modernity surpasses notions of propriety" (Smith 2023, 24). This reminds us again that the violence of colonial structures seeks to label and silence that which threatens or moves against it through totalising capture. Far from a benign linguistic tendency, the colonial logics that bind how we speak also seek to bind how we understand, how we exist economically and racially, and how we move. As Smith reminds us, "far from inert—it is precisely women's movement… across borders, households, and relations that produces anxiety for onlookers" (2023, 23).

These are the fluid, reflective waters in which Gibson's central subject moves mediated and mediating several registers of time, capture, erasure and ruin on repeat. Concrete and abstract worlds are still relevant to her negotiations of self, Blackness, sovereignty and humanity. How then can she read and reckon with herself? While these constructs create contradictions that obscure sight even amid desire to look, I propose that she can be witnessed rather than invisibilised. The witnessing required here asks for a 'response-able' form of recognition, a "reformulating the ground of the human outside of modernist binaries" and employing "a practice of recognition and love that destabilizes the boundaries between self and other, knowing and feeling, complicity and accountability" (Thomas 2019, 3). I mobilize 'a politics of tenderness' here as an offering to them and myself in hopes of doing so (Johnson 2019).

Jasmine Johnson's Black Girl: Linguistic (2019) introduces a politics of tenderness that centers Black girlhood as a site for understanding Black womanhood. Johnson offers that tenderness "does not simply rest on the fact that its subject is Black girlhood. Rather, its importance rests on what that centering of adolescence advances: softness and exposure as performance modes toward fuller understandings of Black womanhood" and on "Black women's unique gestural vocabularies" (2019, 21). In *Festering Fantasy 2,* we look at the cocked hip, the positioning of the feet and forward tilt of the body with curiosity. These gestures invite us to imagine the unseen face and hands that lift and support her. We destabilize boundaries between ourselves, Black girls and Black women

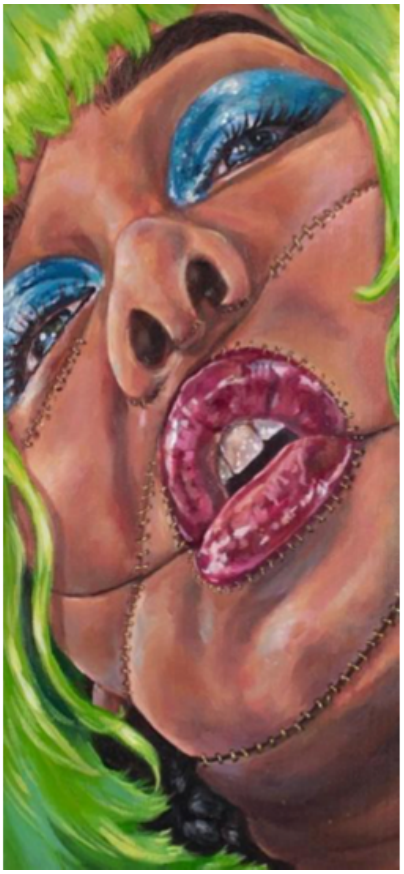
by engaging the offerings of a tender witnessing through its embodied lens and practice of dance and play and affordances that ask Black girls, "Who was I before the world defined me," and does so, "without necessarily relying on pre-existing logo centric vocabularies of stereotype." (Johnson 2019, 23)

Tenderness here emerges as both affect and analytic. It implicates time in all its registers and responses. This witnessing of a possibly more tender, expanded reading of Black womanhood contains a lot of promise; however, the promise of a layered reading does not negate the descriptive powers of the linear one. Black womanhood also contends with abstractions it has inherited. As Johnson cautions, "A politics of tenderness is not merely about presenting Black girls in a 'favourable light.' Its intention is not to elevate the glorious without the wretched. Rather, it captures a practice of complicated care" (2019, 33). It is " a mode of address in which Black women explore themselves through a revisitation of their own pasts" (2019, 23).

Black women and girls navigate, negotiate, and "falter" to these systems. If we employ a softness to witness their embodied histories, we are in the best place to gain expansive sight of them/ourselves. This does not ensure that what we see will be desirable, kind, resistant to the colonial or 'good', but it will be a more informed, unobscured insight, the kind that tells us more about Blackness, and what it means to be human and sovereign in the Caribbean. This sight helps us, "lookout for performers who, whether quietly, or in the expansive gestures and itineraries rehearse loyalty to all kinds of sovereigns, and to their own sense of personal sovereignty, employing their bodies (or being read by others) as 'canvasses of dissent' or as acquiescent" (Smith 2023, 10). There is much to be gained for how we understand our social world and the people within it, if we can do this tenderly and without being seduced by what it means "to be human within developmentalist frames … perfectible, and therefore always measured against the ideals of Western liberalism" (Thomas 2019, 129). When we return to the visual world of Gibson's work and apply this, we are offered opportunities to be accountable to these frameworks. Can we witness the thin thread that binds and disfigures, while attending to her precarity and potential,

her danger and safety, with care? How is an audience implicated in the possible ruin in all its registers that may well inform her future? What do we do with the uncertainty that lingers in the same watery possibilities of life and death germane to the lives of descendants of the transatlantic slave trade? How do we contend with the feeling that seeing and not seeing in the space of the visual may evoke in our bodies? How do we hold this unfaced yet not faceless, Black woman and her contradictions well, despite never meeting her eyes?

Anna Gibson, 2021
Consume
Acrylic and string on canvas
6 x12 in.



Consuming
Acrylic and mixed media
on canvas 6 x12 in.

Consumed
Acrylic and mixed media
on canvas 6 x12 in.

Finally, in her other work, "Consume", "Consumed", "Consuming", Gibson's pieces provide a rich backdrop for thinking about how Black women, particularly those who wear colourful wigs and shiny jewelry, are cast as loud and vulgar for their shine, a shine that makes them hypervisible in some moments, protects them with the blinding light of bling in others, and can transform them into something magical and desirable to be looked at too (Thompson 2015). Black women are castigated for being loud and yet also for choosing quiet. The visual provides spaces to examine other registers of sound. Here, sight of the sounds of Black women allows us to see that binaries do not serve her. There is much to be written here about these pieces and the insights they offer on Blackness through their engagement with ruin, adornment and shine. However, in an act of what Ahmed (2017) refers to as *care* that may appear *clumsy* in its attempt to hold something fragile precisely because it recognizes its value, I offer Gibson's artwork as a conclusion to this section. This gesture honours the visual as a mode of knowledge production in its own right: as capable, resonant, and encompassing of details and ways of speaking that convey something that words may get in the way of. Here I attempt to practice the method that I value by having words give visual not just peripheral, but central space to speak.

Amir Denzel Hall, 2023. ***Where is the Lamb?***, Photography, 20 x 12 in.

Queering the Horizon and the Caribbean Black Lives that Matter

Amir Denzel Hall is a young, Black, non-binary Trinidadian artist who works in different forms of media, including mixed media and photography. The body, religion, and landscapes feature heavily in their work. The slightest gestures and smallest movements tell intimate stories and demand the attention of the viewer. Hall often includes their own body in the pieces in ways that seem to offer a simultaneous boldness and vulnerability. Their work itself provides a map for witnessing through a *response-ability* that puts their body on the line (Thomas 2019). In doing so, Hall encourages viewers who desire to co-create this form of witnessing to do the same. At times they offer us work with the intensity of a direct gaze, and at other moments we are given a naked body with a turned back, or the mixed presence of an ethereal blur. Literary influences that range from biblical sources to Caribbean novels leave traces across the names and content of Hall's pieces. In their latest works of photography, altars and landscapes have become recurrent symbols. These are sometimes represented

in the same piece of work, like in their 2023 work *Altar Call* or separately, such as in *Where is the Lamb?* and *Castle of Skin*.

Amir Denzel Hall, ***Castle of Skin***, 2023. Photography, 16 x 12 in.

Castle of Skin is set in an environment where the land seems to roll further back into the sky than we can perceive. There is a central path in the middle of the scene, flanked by manicured crops that suggest that someone has attended to them. On the path, there is a blurred figure barely visible, but hauntingly present. Context gives more definition to the figure than our actual sight, as it is hard to tell if it is going or coming, momentarily at rest, or at work. Beyond the blurred figure, both the path and the landscape go on for a considerable while, until they meet the thick brush of green foliage and even further than that, the ever-continuing horizon. Hall's piece, *Castle of Skin,* holds a similar title to the 1953

novel *In the Castle of My Skin* by George Lamming. In Lamming's text, the titular character G speaks about his relationship to being legible, saying that he fears being known but that one can never be known/destroyed in the castle of their own skin.

Skin is central in Hall's work. The depth of hue of it on the body in Hall's piece, *Where is the Lamb?*, sits strikingly against the chipping white paint of the wall and the altar below and behind it. It creates directional interest as it stands out, cutting across the piece in a landscape orientation. The body is splayed across the width of the holy altar, held up in front of a hole(y) wall, elevated almost as if it is in the sky. The figure's nakedness is present in the now, while their turned back marks the distance of their gaze. The sight of soft but articulate gestures in the form of a bent wrist, cradled head, self-protecting and caressing legs, offers us something we can and cannot see, creating a gap between where we are and where their interiority may be. In this way, the body in this piece becomes a horizon of sorts.

Witnessing Blackness here becomes a practice of attending to the simultaneity and contradictions of presence and how Blackness moves through queer visibility, time, and feeling. The visual affordances in both *Where is the Lamb?* and *Castle of Skin* allow us to inspect this. If Gibson's women teach us to witness tenderness and ruin, Hall's figures invite us to reckon with legibility and blur, extending the practice of seeing across gender and temporal lines. Through both, witnessing becomes a way of dwelling with the ruins, not to repair or redeem them, but to recognize how they continue to shape the textures and possibilities of Black life.

History of Black/Queerness on the Horizon

Blackness/Queerness as horizon bears a simultaneous presence here and elsewhere, extending beyond the limits of sight while remaining visually distinct. It serves as a seemingly tangible backdrop for the intangible blur in *Castle of Skin* and an embodied metaphor in *Where is the Lamb?*. It marks a threshold in both works that delineates and exceeds capture, holding within its ephemeral distance the tension between what can be seen, known, and imagined. This provides a helpful lens for trying to understand Blackness and its complexity in the region. In one of its earliest emergences, Blackness is confronted by the horizon of the sky and the sea as it is put on to ships during the transatlantic slave trade. Here, the simultaneous sharpness of horizon as break, and gentleness as illusion, mirror processes of regendering and ungendering. Spiller points out that during slavery, "we lose at least gender difference in the outcome…and the body becomes a territory of cultural and political maneuver, not at all gender-related [or] genderspecific" (Spillers 1987, 106). Black people, however, remake these meanings in "private and particular space [where] biological, sexual, social, cultural, linguistic, ritualistic, and psychological fortunes join" (Spillers 1987, 95). Here, a disrupted gender emerges in "profound intimacy of interlocking detail". It is both its own and yet must contend with "externally imposed meanings and uses" (Spillers 1987, 95). Exquisitely sovereign and non-sovereign in its construction, Blackness and queerness emerge as something that even the visual cannot pin down but can strongly gesture towards. The blur in Hall's *Castle of Skin* shows us how essential the visual is as it queerly crafts this affect as it sits across the horizon. We also witness the ways that the past sits in the present and the future, in Hall's *Where is the Lamb?* as they too seemingly grapple with the queer horizon. They seem to lie with the inheritances of queer bodies figuratively and literally naked atop of and moving beyond the symbolic colonial whiteness that seeks to remake it. Hall offers, "This piece visually explores the experience of being in a body so subject to daily sacrifice, like the days I choose to wear boy clothes for my safety's sake and the days I choose not to leave the house for the same reason…" (@amirzinggrace, Feb 28th, 2023).

Blackness and queerness here tell us about multiple forms of sacrifice and resistance, all negotiated differently. The body reminds us that an intersectional lens is necessary since both Blackness and queerness exist within it. *Witnessing* Blackness and Queerness asks that we take love seriously. In doing so, we see that "black Atlantic same sex eroticism: is a feeling of, feeling for the kidnapped that asserted the sentience of the bodies that slavers attempted to transform into brute matter" (Tinsley 2008, 199). Black queerness, therefore, both refers to same-sex relationships and is

> …a praxis of resistance. Queer in the sense of marking disruption to the violence of normative order and powerfully so: connecting in ways that commodified flesh was never supposed to, loving your own kind when your kind was supposed to cease to exist, forging interpersonal connections that counteract imperial desires for Africans' living death (Tinsley 2008, 199).

From its inception and as the connectivity and order of the horizon suggests, prior to this moment, Blackness has a long history of queerness based in its capacity for love.

Queerness tells us about the power of non-normative ways of being and organizing time and presence. In his work on Queerness as Horizon, Jose Esteban Muñoz speaks to the promise of the horizon as a way to gain "a posterior glance at different moments, objects and space that might offer us an anticipatory illumination of queerness" (Muñoz 2009, 22). It is, "a forward dawning futurity"(Muñoz 2009, 23), with a positive affective orientation stemming from marvelling in the queer work of raced survival" (Ellis 2015, 5). This walking backward into a future as a racialized being that survived gives us insight into a non-normative, queer way of moving through the world. Here, failure to understand the direction that the figure in *Castle of Skin* is moving may be positive. Further, what other ways should we embrace the non-normative, and how do we see a person who has been marked as non-human in their fullness, if not through alternative means of looking? As we stroll through and care for Blackness, we see how witnessing its complexity and providing it with the

recognition it is often denied requires a queer way of seeing. Understanding the complexity of Blackness means not just looking at its present but caring for it by searching for it along its queer ruinous horizon. The visual analysis of the blur in *Castle of Skin* might provide a conceptual framework to better understand Blackness and the ways it is co-constituted.

This direction toward blur sends me to Ana-Maurine Lara's *Queer Freedom: Black Sovereignty* as a powerful roadmap for these non-normative ways of understanding. Black Sovereignty is a term she enjoins with queer freedom as a way of identifying their inextricable link. I use Blackness/queerness to suggest the blurring of the edges that is shared by the non-normative concepts in a manner that is similar to Lara's use of Black sovereignty: queer freedom. Here, I embrace the ruin of singularity through attempting to approximate in the written what the visual supplies. This is essential as before the birthing abstraction of binaries, concrete Blackness and queerness could be understood as contiguous. However, it currently exists in the contradiction of a blur as its oneness is in opposition with, yet ultimately tied to itself. I use this '/' to acknowledge the impacts of its connection and separation. Black/queerness negotiates colonial logics and is often offered up as a ruinous sacrifice. Colonial and neo-colonial use of straight time tries to separate Blackness and queerness. Blackness' revolution and independence are sometimes marked as past, and queerness' victories are only to be had in a future. Their opposition signals the peril of either. In other narratives, queerness is marked as an amoral and savage thing belonging to the past, while Blackness belongs to the future of a nation that must be saved from it (Alexander 1994; 2005). Each of these sets of claims tries to stand as a singular justifying truth for why there must be this sacrificial splitting.

Where is the Lamb? provides us with ways to think through sacrifice. I read Hall's piece alongside, "this metaphysic that uses Spirit knowing as the mechanism of making the world intelligible" (Alexander 2005, 30). The biblical reference to the question 'Where is the Lamb?' refers to the story of Abraham and his son, Isaac. Issac is framed as being of Abraham. God asks Abraham to offer up his son, whom he loves, a son that he had asked for and waited on for a long time. The

son who helps to create the very altar on which he is offered is surprised that it is not a lamb, but himself put up for slaughter. What does it mean to have asked for something for so long and then kill it? What does it mean to kill something that is of you and your futurity and necessary for your freedom? If loyalty necessitates such violence, then should we be questioning what it means to be loyal to something that would carry out the act of sacrificing you? When Blackness offers up queerness, it sacrifices itself by sacrificing its complexity, futurity and those Black people it has othered by creating a false binary and enacting violence. How does Blackness contend with this? Illegibility can serve as protection from non-consensual sacrifice, and legibility can allow us to see ourselves clearly.

(Il)Legibility Matters

Hall's pieces stage the contradictory promises of legibility through the gifts of the visual. In *Castle of Skin,* past a suggestion of their likeness, we do not know much of the spectral blur. Is it a visiting ancestor or a beleaguered spirit, haunting some and/or looking out for others? Is our not knowing where their freedom lies? This complex placement requires complex negotiations and presentations. This is why illegibility may hold some fullness for Blackness faced with binaries that suggest it must only be one thing. In the *Queer Art of Failure,* J. Halberstam engages James Scott's offering that "illegibility has been and remains, a reliable source for political autonomy" (2011, 6). Blackness faced with violence and confinement may refuse to be legibly known. As G in Lamming's novel offers,

> I am always feeling terrified of being known; not because they really know you, but simply because their claim to knowledge is a concealed attempt to destroy you … They can never know you. The likenesses will meet and make merry but …They won't know the you that's hidden somewhere in the castle of your skin (Lamming 1953).

In *Where is the Lamb?*, the position of the body stops us from knowing what is on the chest and between the legs of the figure. This "not knowing" refuses binary sex's obsession with genitalia as a way of knowing all the specifics of the future. It suggests that we do not and should not own this part of another person in order to make it a future of our own design. However, gender is not lost to nothingness because of a failure to see. When we witness them, we understand how queer and non-binary people craft futurities with the humility and boldness of the queer horizon's illegibility as a guide, failing at what heteronormative gender ascribes that they need to be.

Under certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world. Failing is something queers do and have always done exceptionally well; for queers failure can be a style, … it can stand in contrast to the grim scenarios of success that depend upon "trying and trying again." In fact, if success requires so much effort, then maybe failure is easier in the long run and offers different rewards (Halberstam 2011, 3).

The potentiality of such a position is particularly powerful. Still, the usefulness of illegibility does not negate the importance of questions of legibility. Visuals are an important place to examine legibility as they are often only seen through the lens of visibility. *Where is the Lamb?* offers a reckoning showing us that Blackness is often most visible when thrown against a contrasting white backdrop. The white-supremacist violence of systems, with anti-Black agendas, like policing, is often made invisible in Black countries. We are confronted, for example, with the fact that "if the police in the US killed proportionally the same number of people as the Jamaican police, they would have killed nearly 30,000 in 2013 instead of 1,106" (Thwaites 2020). This blur of the afterlife of slavery's haunting spectre reflects the region's "skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment" (Hartman 2006, 6). These realities leave us wondering, as Thomas asks in her 2022 article "Can Black Lives Matter in a Black Country". I argue that they can if we look beyond visibility to *witnessing,* in order to understand legibility. If we take Thomas' *witnessing* and its calls for recognition and accountability seriously and

are instructed by Smith's *strolling through the ruins* and its offering that we should contend with the silences around what has been broken over time, the legibility of the Black Caribbean emerges in ways that matter.

Conclusion

Blackness is tender, expansive, mean, deserving of care, ruined, sexual, autonomous, shining, ugly, imperfect, magical, queer, loud, worthy, dark, and full of more than what we can see or know. Its complexity continues to unfold on the horizon. We are most able to understand Blackness when we recognise that it contains multitudes. This recognition comes from a particular way of seeing, a relation, a responsible sight: a witnessing. Witnessing Blackness is about love, "it is the love of Lauren Berlant's (2011b: 685, 687) 'attachment to the world,' an 'affective binding that allows us to iron things out, or to be elastic, or to try a new incoherence' " (Thomas 2019, 219). This project is invested in trying a new incoherence as a way of loving Blackness. This project understands "new" with a Caribbean sensibility, "it is not exhausted. It is new. But it is its complexity, not its historically explained simplicities, which is new" (Mohammed 2009,4).

Throughout this paper, it has become clear that an examination of the new is necessary in order to gain a greater appreciation for how Black Caribbean identity has been made and remade. Equally, there is also a need to analyse what historically explained simplicities have done to our understandings of Black Caribbeanness, sovereignty and humanity. Analysis of visuals is an important way to see what is invisibilised, hidden and shamed. This is essential on many levels and may prove to be powerful, allowing us to "eschew the heroism of black pasts and the promise of liberated black futures in order to register and revere rapturous joy in the broken-down present" (Abdur-Rahman 2018, 345). This paper reveals that centering the visual is important because it taps into old and new ways of understanding the region in the global and local imagination. As the visual lays bare the significance of how people and things are ordered and relate to one another, Black feminism provides greater clarity around the

meanings of those relationships. Exploring visual art and examining its arrangements exposes some of the most complex negotiations happening in the lives of Black people, particularly women, girls, and queer folk, especially around their sexuality, colour, class and their intersections.

Throughout this work, I examined contradictions and silences and the ways Blackness is still composed of the totality of their possibilities. Visual analysis makes clear that they can be tender, sexual, in danger, safe, not for consumption, exposed, inward and outward looking, uncertain of their certain futures, all at once. Black women and queer people's complexity range, and they are simultaneously cast as what they make and are made of by themselves and others. This analysis does not seek to assert a postmodern belief that individual analysis makes reality but rather that Blackness is composed by "contingent, evolving, and uncommon thick particularisms in the aggregate" (Iton 2008, 16) that are deserving of our "intensified curiosity" (Robinson 2011, 206). Intensifying our curiosity around this concept is valid despite the "looseness of this method" as "we can recognize its instability and openness to contestation as part of the arena for feminist politics, sites where we can, among other things, disrupt empathy's disembodiment of women" (Robinson 2011, 206). Recognition disrupts static ideas of Blackness. The complex negotiations engaged by Black women, gender expansive and other queer people are also present in complex embodied ways.

Black feminist theory, paired with visual analysis, reveals that we can look at how we dress, gaze, move, have sex, refuse, embrace, adorn, and speak, as just some of the ways that power is exerted and mediated in the most monumental and quotidian moments. I hope this work can contribute to understanding the importance of Black diasporic power too, as all too often, "overlapping ideological struggles for recognition and the redistribution of resources, which emerge as competing ethno-nationalisms, erase the complexities of Black Caribbeans' experiences [...] and undercut resurgent radical politics of Black solidarity" (Wallace 2023, 39). As we *stroll through the ruins* of Black lives, we can appreciate our specificity, difference and complexity in time and space.

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