Queered Descendants of the African Diaspora in Jamaica and Haiti

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Vignette

During the 1840s, a British government-sponsored program in Jamaica—then a colony of the British Empire—implemented an immigration program that brought thousands of indentured laborers from India to Jamaican plantations. A trickle of these Indian laborers turned into a veritable deluge between 1845 (216 Indian workers arrived) and 1916 (approximately 37,000 East Indians entered Jamaica under renewable five-year contracts).[1] The black working class, which had recently been manumitted in 1834, was less than enthusiastic about the East Indian indentured immigration that contributed to downward pressure on the former group's wages and sparked polemical political debates.[2] The guarantee of labor rights and wages contributed to these debates but such issues were not the only concerns black Jamaicans had concerning the Indian laborers, whom they pejoratively referred to as "Coolies." What was critically at stake for Afro-Jamaican men, in particular, was the meaning of their newly bequeathed freedom, and the unexpected vulnerability to it posed by the new indentured communities that offered a negative model to "native"—or Afro-descended, in this context— "virtue" and citizenship rights.

The Anglo-British planters that had once favorably looked upon the idea of employing liberated Africans—that is, those who had been captured from slaving ships and could be signed up for contracts of indenture[3]—to labor on their sugar plantations, quickly gave up on this idea as a number of Baptist congregations (presumably Anglo ones) interpreted the forced separation of families as a continuation of slavery. What seems to have had a more critical effect in

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[1] These figures come from Confidential Jamaica: State of Affairs in Jamaica (1853), 97, Appendix A: Immigration and Sugar Return, Cardwell Papers, no. 6, PRO 30/48. See also Verene Shepherd, "Depression in the 'Tin Roof Towns': Economic Problems of Urban Indians in Jamaica, 1930-1950," in *India in the Caribbean*, ed, David Dabydeen and Brinsley Samaroo (London: Hansib and University of Warwick, 1987), 173. Note: 60 percent of the East Indian laborers who arrived in Jamaica in 1916 remained on the island when their contracts expired.

[2] Mimi Sheller, *Citizenship from Below: Erotic Agency and Caribbean Freedom* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2012), 98.

[3] Monica Schuler, *"Alas, Alas Kongo": A Social History of Indentured African Immigration into Jamaica, 1841-1865* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), 98.

changing the minds of Anglo-British sugar planters to more seriously consider East Indians as prospective laborers, however, was the small supply of captured Africans the planters were able to force into a life of servitude, no matter that the British slave trade had ceased decades before and emancipation of all slaves throughout the British Empire had recently transpired. The introduction of the "heathen Coolies" was not without its difficulties as some (Anglo) Baptists began to warn their congregations about the threat to "Christian society" the East Indians posed, as opposed to the "hardworking native Jamaican Christians." The *Baptist Herald and Friend of Africa,* first launched in September 1839, went so far as to describe itself as a "cheap publication" aimed at the "labouring [Anglo and Afro-descended] population[s]" to advance the "Christian public."[4]

It was Afro-descended men, however, who adopted the racial and religious tropes of their Anglo colonizers in presenting themselves as black, British, and Christian citizens, in contrast to the "Coolies." Many of these black freedmen embraced a colonialist discourse cloaked in Christianity that ostensibly gave these Afro-descended men "…the opportunity [to demonstrate] to the world…that the sons of Africa are capable of exercising the rights of citizens, even in a free, civilized community…"[5] In laying claim to "Christian" citizenship, "…freedom came to be constituted not only through a subordination of women, but also through an equally problematic nationalistic exclusion of foreigners and 'heathens.'"[6]In a seeming attempt to prove themselves worthy of the freedom that had been bestowed upon them by the British, Afro-descended Jamaican men adopted a colonialist-inspired discourse of masculinity, a holdover from the British Empire, that rigidly bifurcated gender (i.e. men were to be providers and fathers, and women were to remain in the domestic sphere and procreate). Citizenship in post-emancipation

[4] *Baptist Herald and Friend of Africa,* vol. 1, no. 31, 3 June 1840.
[5] Letter signed by T.H.P.M., 4 July 1844, *Baptist Herald and Friend of Africa*, vol. 5, no. 28, 9 July 1844, 220.
[6] Sheller, *Citizenship from Below*, 97.

Jamaica also became a rigidly defined category in that only a *certain* kind of man who adhered to a *certain* kind of masculinity (i.e. heterosexuality) could attain political agency and capital, whereas a *multiplicity* of "Black" masculinities (and femininities) was effectively marginalized—and, to these categories, homosexual, queer, non-black and mixed-race masculinities (and femininities), could be added.[7]

Introduction

This essay will seek to demonstrate how queer black bodies are archived and *languaged by sex*, a term coined by Faith Smith, that alludes to the multivalent discourses (i.e. political, economic, cultural, racial, legal, etc.) that surround "legitimate" sexualities and the back-and-forth flow of ideas that serve as notions of identification for who Caribbean people are and who they can be.[8] These notions though can only *purport* to demonstrate where and how Caribbean people fit into their parameters: the conclusions drawn by authors such as Smith are at best valid only through debate and further study since as a topic, Caribbean discourses of (homo)sexuality, have been historically understudied. This essay will situate sexuality within citizenship, or more aptly (sexual) citizenship, that examines the positions of free subjects, freed women and men, who at times had to (indeed, wanted to) perform normative scripts of this kind of citizenship such as the good mother, the respectable woman, the worthy Christian, or the father of the family.[9]As the opening vignette demonstrated, freedom for children of the African Diaspora was often a precarious enterprise, one that was informed by conquest and colored by its aftermath. In other words, Afro-descended Jamaicans and other black Caribbean peoples were compelled to

[7] See Hilary Beckles, *Centering Women: Gender Discourses in Caribbean Slave Society* (Kingston: Ian Randle, 1999), 157 and Richard D. E. Burton, *Afro-Creole: Power, Opposition, and Play in the Caribbean* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 11. While women were initially largely excluded from citizenship in Jamaica, they were able (as this paper will demonstrate) to use their reproductive abilities (i.e. motherhood) to gain inclusion as both citizens and activists.

[8] Faith Smith, ed., "Introduction: Sexing the Citizen," in *Sex and the Citizen: Interrogating the Caribbean* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011), 1.

[9] Sheller, *Citizenship from Below*, 9-10.

adopt or modify colonialist conceptions of citizenship and civilization to survive, even as slavery was dismantled as an institution. This essay proposes a comparative component between Jamaica and Haiti, and the accompanying models of citizenship that brokered inclusion or exclusion for queer black people in these two countries. Before delving into this component, however, I must redress a personal grievance I have with *queering* anything—figures and places alike.

What first do I mean by queering? Even today as disparate scholars have sought to broaden the still often abstracted territory of queer theory, a concomitant emphasis has been placed upon gender and sexuality. While these realms provide fecund ground for queering as repositories of unknown and marginalized voices silenced or excised by the majority (or simply left to be unknown),[10]queerness as an artifact, a label, a way of being, an identity, continues to elude us. The late gender scholar, José Esteban Muñoz, defines "queerness… [as a] thing that lets us feel that the world is not enough."[11] Nadia Ellis expands upon this definition by locating queerness as an outside, or a possibility of difference, that perceives an insufficiency of one's present circumstances, and that located within that insufficiency—that "haunting gap between here and there"—queerness resides.[12] Queerness is an oddity, a discomfort, a non-programmatic interruption of the "normal" (too often conditioned and arbitrated in and by society) that

[10] See Michel-Rolph Trouillot's *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon, 1995), 3. On page 26 of this book, Trouillot persuasively argues that "any historical narrative is a particular bundle of silences…Silences enter the process of historical production at four crucial moments: the moment of fact creation (the making of *sources*); the moment of fact assembly (the making of *archives*); the moment of fact retrieval (the making of *narratives*); and the moment of retrospective significance (the making of *history* in the final instance)." On page 29, Trouillot implicates power as an indispensable component of the archive and as a "constitutive [part] of the story," and as such historians (and other scholars) can say that silences "are inherent in history because any single event enters history with some of its constituting parts missing." On page 49, Trouillot notes that "Something is always left out while something else is recorded…Thus whatever becomes fact does so with its own inborn absences, specific to its production." While the passage that I have included from Trouillot is lengthy, I believe that it is important because it demonstrates the importance of queerness in the archives as a (frequent) silence that should not be overlooked by historians, even if their objective is not to craft a queer project.

[11] José Esteban Muñoz, "Introduction: Feeling Utopia," in *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 1.

[12] Nadia Ellis, *Territories of the Soul: Queered Belonging in the Black Diaspora* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2015), 3.

demands to be met on its own terms and merits its own discourse. Consider, for example, at the fin-de-siècle of the nineteenth century, a well-dressed and well-traveled black man who inhabits circles that although permitting of him still wreak of discomfort *with* him, or even provide the sense, however faint, that this man *is* an aberration of his community and of his society, at large. This man is queer or at least has been queered by his surroundings, and perhaps, even more significantly, by his particular development.

This paper will cover a broad scope from the epoch in which the vignette took place (1830s and 1840s) to the present time. I have selected such a vast time period because I believe that it is informative in demonstrating a wide variety of queerness from Afro-Jamaican female versions of the "Quasheba" (the prevailing colonial stereotype of the proud and independent slave woman); to the "sword-bearing citizens" of Haiti who constantly grappled with defining citizenship in the middle of the nineteenth century; to the "exotic" black people American tourists to Haiti observed in the twentieth century; to the participants in contemporary Jamaican dancehall culture, among others. At its foundation, this essay expands upon Marlon M. Bailey's premise from "Rethinking the African Diaspora and HIV/AIDS Prevention from the Perspective of Ballroom Culture" that posits (in part) that subcategories of black queerness can intersect with primary identarian affiliations (i.e. being both gay and black, respectively).[13] This essay argues that black people are a *queer* people, in general, in their ontological conception courtesy of European hegemony and racial theories that invariably made Afro-descended people an "other,"

[13] Marlon M. Bailey, "Rethinking the African Diaspora and HIV/AIDS Prevention from the Perspective of Ballroom Culture" in *Global Circuits of Blackness: Interrogating the African Diaspora*, ed. Jean Muteba Rahier, Percy C. Hintzen, and Felipe Smith (Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 99-100. Bailey's essay concerns ballroom culture in Detroit, Michigan, and he criticizes dominant discourses of the African Diaspora that have overemphasized the spatial component of forced dispersals and movement of black people as a theoretical concern for why the diaspora occurred in the first place. Bailey elaborates, on how, through performance, ballroom members create a kinship structure that both critiques and dramatically revises dominant notions of black belonging through the construction of alternative and familial spheres. The members of these ballroom communities are consistently negotiating their identities as black and gay in Detroit, which Bailey notes is known as both the "chocolate city" and the "motor city," appendages that refer to this metropolis's distinct racial and class character.

an inferior, a specimen of indeterminate status that could never correlate with being fully human, and therefore, fully valued.

"Becoming" Quashebas: How Black Motherhood Became a Political Weapon in Jamaica

In Jamaican publications of the early nineteenth century, a character called Quasheba, is prominently featured. Quasheba was known as an independent and outspoken troublemaker. She was also known for never showing signs of subjection and took great pride in demonstrating her economic independence.[14] Quasheba's specter had been disseminated across Jamaica as early as 1816 during the "petticoat rebellions," that were documented by slaveowner Matthew Gregory Lewis: "the [slave] women, one and all, refused to carry away the [cane] trash [and] in consequence, the mill was obliged to be stopped; and when the driver on that station insisted on their doing their duty, a little fierce young devil of a Miss Whaunica flew at his throat, and endeavoured to strangle him."[15] Miss Whaunica, it appeared to Lewis, had been fearfully endowed with the spirit of Quasheba.

Ellis notes that issues of reproduction, procreation, and non-procreation are crucial to the exercise of citizenship and central to the very definition of the citizen and to policing the boundaries of the nation.[16] Early historiographies of popular collective action in nineteenth-century Jamaica tended to focus on the actions of male actors and masculine narratives of armed struggle and rebellion. In this manner, queer subjects—Afro-descended women who used procreation as a political weapon—were elided.

Precisely how did these women use procreation as a political weapon in negotiating citizenship? Jamaican historian Lucille Mathurin Mair argues that enslaved women in Jamaica

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[14] Mary S. Turner, *Slaves and Missionaries: The Disintegration of Jamaican Slave Society, 1787-1834* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982), 74.
[15] Matthew G. Lewis, *Journal of a Residence among the Negroes in the West Indies* (London: J. Murray, 1861), 139.
[16] Ellis, *Territories of the Soul*, 52.

deliberately depressed their fertility rates and withheld their labor and that of their children at crucial moments specifically to frustrate "the planter's hopes for a self-reproducing labour force."[17] During the subsequent transition from slavery to freedom, Afro-descended Jamaican women used their positions as working mothers (or prospective mothers) to challenge ongoing exploitation and to protect their customary rights. Part of this ongoing exploitation was manifested in coercive labor policies that emphasized women's "duty" to bear (preferred) male heirs who would navigate the masculine public sphere of intensive labor. Afro-descended women seeing their utility not only as mothers but even more importantly as the only individuals capable of producing a male-dominated workforce, grasped political opportunities to confront overseers directly and to state their cases of exploitation and marginalization before special magistrates. Swithin R. Wilmot observes that, despite patriarchal definitions of "public actors" as male, "Any balanced discussion of politics in the immediate post-slavery period in Jamaica must take into account the extent to which women never accepted that legal marginalisation."[18] Among the "more striking features of all of these [plantation] disturbances," writes Thomas Holt about the post-emancipation period, "was the solidarity of the workers and the prominence of women among the activists and leaders."[19] Notwithstanding the prominence of women in the archive during this critical period in Jamaica's history, convincing explanations for the phenomenon of female leadership are still lacking. Holt suggests that it is explicable "since women made up a disproportionate share of the field labor force on sugar estates."[20] Beyond the sheer numbers at the bottom of the labor hierarchy, however (which in itself does not explain the

[17] Lucille Mathurin Mair, *Women Field Workers in Jamaica during Slavery (The 1986 Elsa Goveia Memorial Lecture*) (Mona, Jamaica: University of the West Indies, 1987), 33.
[18] Swithin R. Wilmot, "Females of Abandoned Character'?: Women and Protest in Jamaica, 1838-1865," in *Engendering History: Caribbean Women in Historical Perspective*, ed. Verene Shepherd, Bridget Brereton, and Barbara Bailey (Kingston: Ian Randle, 1995), 287.
[19] Thomas C. Holt, *The Problem of Freedom: Race, Labor, and Politics in Jamaica and Britain, 1832-1938* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 64.
[20] Holt, *The Problem of Freedom*, 64.

emergence of women as leaders), one must consider *how* freed women were able to exploit politically their dual roles—and identities—as agricultural workers and mothers.[21]

Perhaps, in trying to answer this question, Audre Lorde's conception of the *erotic* as both born of "Chaos" and personifying creative power and harmony, can be invoked: Lorde notes that when she refers to the erotic, she speaks of it "as an assertion of the lifeforce of women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we [*all* women presumably—emphasis my own] are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives."[22] Such a definition might have approximated to how many Afro-descended Jamaican women navigated their roles as mothers and attempted to achieve (sexual) citizenship (i.e. demonstrating that their gender did not make them the "weaker" sex and that they were bona fide mothers of the nation) that put them on an equal footing with Afro-descended Jamaican men who were also trying to come to terms with their newfound freedoms. Mimi Sheller points out that accounts of women's leadership of plantation conflicts demonstrate that it was "their conscious awareness and strategic exploitation of this duality [manifested by their being mothers on one hand and laborers on the other] that enabled them to become mainsprings of collective action in [Jamaica's] post-emancipation era."[23]

A poignant example of collective action wrought by Jamaican women ended in the dismantling of the inhumane apprenticeship system. John Sturge and Thomas Harvey, prominent Quaker philanthropists and promoters of immediate full emancipation, highlighted the abuse women received at the hands of their male overseers: "on Friday morning last, as it was very wet, and they [the women] were obliged to carry their children into the field with them, they did not turn out before breakfast. For this they were taken to the Special Magistrate on Monday, who

[21] Sheller, *Citizenship from Below*, 56-7.
[22] Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches by Audre Lorde* (Freedom, California: Crossing, 1984), 89.
[23] Sheller, *Citizenship from Below*, 57.

sentenced them to pay six Saturdays…For their [the women's] contumacy [an archaic term for willful refusal], they were sent to the workhouse for three days, and will still have to work the six Saturdays."[24] Until recently, many historians would have interpreted such an incident as an event indicative of the "withdrawal of female labor" from plantations in terms of women's supposed reluctance to engage in any grueling forms of physical labor.[25] However, Rebecca Scott argues that "Most discussions of the 'withdrawal' of women's labor tend to blur the question of choice and decision, leaving it unclear just who initiated the reallocation of work time, at what point, and in what directions."[26] Insofar as the apprenticeship system was concerned, even after the abolition of slavery in Jamaica, the whipping and mutilation of women's bodies became markers and symbols of what was abjectly wrong with the system itself and hastened its demise. Diana Paton notes that abolitionists condemned all flogging of slaves, "but found the flogging of women particularly offensive, as much because it led to the exposure of enslaved women's bodies as because of its violence and brutality."[27] The stark positionality of women as mothers also probably aided the abolitionists in coming to their conclusions about the apprenticeship system.

In examining how women navigated the dichotomy between sexuality and citizenship, it is critical to note that these Quasheba Afro-descended Jamaicans were queer subjects whose unique roles in popular political action have too often been silenced, marginalized, or seen only in a peripheral context to that of men. These women used their reproductive labor abilities in an un-juridical notion of power, the converse of which, Michel Foucault would consider a

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[24] Joseph Sturge and Thomas Harvey, *The West Indies in 1837* (London: Hamilton, Adams, 1838), 217-18.
[25] Sheller, *Citizenship from Below*, 63.
[26] Rebecca Scott, "Exploring the Meaning of Freedom: Postemancipation Societies in Comparative Perspective," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 68 (1988): 423.
[27] Diana Paton, *No Bond but the Law: Punishment, Race, and Gender in Jamaican State Formation, 1780-1870* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 6.

repressive trope of power, in that it regulates political (and arguably, any kind of life in purely negative terms—…that is, through the limitation, prohibition, regulation, and even 'protection' of individuals…"[28] These historical actresses did not cater to such a conception of power; they often engaged in active protests and made visible their (sometimes mutilated) bodies to demand justice for tyranny. These newly emancipated women even used the Christian religion of their colonizers to modify the tropes of "respectability" and "reputation" to aid them, whether in a magistrate's office or in a strike, to protest wages and unfair labor policies. In many ways, these women brought new dimensions to the freedom that had (probably) reluctantly been bequeathed them by their former masters and helped to reorient citizenship as an institution that African diasporic bodies could not only participate in but take full advantage of whenever the need arose.

After the Haitian Revolution: Black Masculinity and "Sword-Bearing Citizens"

While the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804) produced the first black republic in the Western Hemisphere, the constant threat of war with disgruntled European powers and the difficult circumstances surrounding state formation in Haiti, produced a polemical combination in the new nation—the egalitarian and democratic values of republicanism were constantly undercut by the hierarchical and elitist values of militarism.[29] As in post-emancipation Jamaica, notions of Haitian citizenship were codified in masculine-oriented discourses that deprivileged women and relegated them to the domestic sphere. The Quasheba Afro-descended Jamaican women of the preceding section were not forced, however—as a case-in-point in contrasting these women with Haitian subaltern women—to navigate the influential political network of Freemasonry, that found fertile ground in Haiti as a homosocial brotherhood preconditioned upon a complete exclusion of women.

[28] Michel Foucault, "Right of Death and Power over Life," in *The History of Sexuality, Volume I, An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1980), 3.
[29] Sheller, *Citizenship from Below*, 142.

It is perhaps more difficult to navigate the precise parameters of (sexual) citizenship in Haiti in comparison to Jamaica owed, in part, to the fact that many original archives in Haiti have been destroyed and historians have had to depend on the writings of a few great Haitian historians, such as Thomas Madiou and Beaubrun Ardouin, a handful of newspapers that have survived, the records of hostile foreign consulates and the (often racist) publications of European visitors.[30] Trouillot's conception of silences in the archive and the power that is (often unequally) disbursed among historical subjects is welcome here. Women, for instance, automatically become queered subjects as their voices are filtered through masculine discourses, or they are left in silence. What about the "sword-bearing" citizens themselves, presumably (only) male citizens of Haiti? The physical deterioration of the archive coupled with the silences that have privileged certain archival discourses over others lends itself to many questions. How might, for example, (homo)sexuality be understood in juxtaposition or within the confines of homosociality? Is this endeavor (im)possible and how might one go about it? Did women try in some way to gain greater access to citizenship? Are there any records that survive that could indicate such a phenomenon? This section does not intend to answer these questions, but they have been posed to demonstrate how queerness can be reified in the archive and how thought processes concerning the illusive nature of the archive itself can (inadvertently) privilege some voices and figures (i.e. the elite versus the subaltern) over others.

For Haitian men, citizenship first took the form of military service. As such, the army became one of the main avenues for these "sword-bearing" citizens' political participation, as well as a route to landownership. The symbolism that accompanied these different outlets was conventionally masculine: weapons, such as rods, swords, scepters, staffs, sharpened sticks, and markers of local or national affiliation, banners and flags, filtered into tropes of power that

[30] Ibid., 146.

Richard Burton points out "[became] the [markers] of both power and popular opposition to power in the Caribbean."[31] As an example, the celebration of familial ideals represented a top-down trajectory of this power. Free Haitian manhood was built upon the premise of the family wherein the wife and mother (i.e. Madame Christophe, the wife of Haiti's only monarch, Henri Christophe) was celebrated with "great pomp" because she was a "virtuous wife" and "mother of the unhappy, consoler of the afflicted, protector of widows and orphans…who fears not to face the miasma of hospitals in order to spread a healthy balm on the wounds of the defenders of the fatherland."[32] Such remarks were made during Henri Christophe's nearly decade-long reign (1811-1820) and yet nearly two decades later, a sexual division of labor still defined Haitian society and one's right (or exclusion) to citizenship. A military spirit pervaded Haiti even in 1837, described by Jonathan Brown, as "a nation of soldiers [in which] every man is required to be a soldier and to consider himself more amenable to the commands of his military chief than to the civil institutions of government…The civil is everywhere subservient to the military power."[33] The civil realm was that to which women were confined: they were unequivocally excluded from military service, from voting, and from holding political office.

Returning to Burton's conception of the sword as both a tool of liberation and oppression—or power and popular opposition—Haitian military men on one hand embodied the masculine empowerment of their training as defenders of the nation, and yet, on the other, were (often) members of the Haitian Freemasonry, an institution that insisted on the propagation of a blind paternalistic devotion and respect for elders. In the lodges of the freemasons, Haitian

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[31] Richard Burton, *Afro-Creole: Power, Opposition, and Play in the Caribbean* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 12-15.
[32] Thomas Madiou. *Histoire d'Haïti*, 8 vols., ed. Michèle Oriol, repr., ed. (Port-au-Prince: Editions Henri Deschamps, [1847-48] 1985-91), 4:32-33.
[33] Jonathan Brown, *The History and Present Condition of St. Domingue*, 2 vols., repr. ed. (London: Frank Cass, [1837] 1972), 2: 259; 2: 266-67.

soldiers became indoctrinated with the notion of a black masculinity that promoted patriarchy and presumed that only literate and educated men "could be entrusted to act ethically and to think disinterestedly in the interests of society, government, and improvement."[34] This black masculinity was allegedly a symbol that stood for African (-descended) determination, black independence, and Haitian national autonomy. Nevertheless, it reinforced not only sexual divisions of labor, class, and citizenship between women and men, but also among groups of men (i.e. the literate versus the uneducated) that returned Haiti in many ways to the colonialist notions of class and gender exclusions that had been pillars of the nation's society in its prerevolutionary years. In effect, the ideals of the small Haitian elite became stand-in beliefs for the entire population, a phenomenon that would lead to classist struggle and the delay of women's empowerment in Haiti.

The "Touristic" Foreign Gaze: "Exotic" Black People in Haiti and Jamaica

Not unlike the missionary gaze in nineteenth-century Jamaica that led to a myriad of fanciful (and inaccurate) assertions about Afro-Jamaican religious practices, cultural values, and beliefs[35], the "touristic" gaze of the American invader during the U.S. occupation of Haiti (1915-34), yielded (often) objectified and racist discourses of "exotic" black men and women. U.S. American travel writer Blair Niles's cringeworthy account of his encounter with a black Haitian boy is emblematic of one type of these discourses. In a disturbing chapter entitled, "A Monkey on a Postcard," Niles writes how "enchanted" he was to see a "small negro boy" reciting the words calamity, morality, timidity, and security;[36] Niles notes how "charmed" the boy was when

[34] Margaret C. Jacob, *Living the Enlightenment: Freemasonry and Politics in Eighteenth Century Europe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 21; 123.
[35] Robert Stewart, "A Slandered People—Views on 'Negro Character' in the Mainstream Christian Churches in Post-Emancipation Jamaica," in *Crossing Boundaries: Comparative History of Black People in Diaspora*, ed. Darlene Clarke Hine and Jacqueline McLeod (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999), 191.
[36] I have made a brief translation here from French to English of the following four words: calamity, morality, timidity, and security.

Niles requested that a photographer take a snapshot of the boy, but the travel writer was affronted by the intervention of an "elderly mulatto man" who tells the photographer that he will not allow a photograph to be taken for the purpose of putting the child on a postcard and labelling him a "monkey."[37] Niles's narration of these events can be submitted to a queer analysis in which the agency of the elderly Haitian man is boldly opposed to the "photographic representational practices" of a white tourist (the creation of postcards) and linked "to a critique of the evolutionist paradigms of social Darwinism (blacks as monkeys)."[38] This Haitian man became a force in countering Niles's "touristic" foreign gaze and problematized Niles's conclusion of the boy as an "other," rather than as a human being imbued with distinct beliefs and emotions.

A similar incident occurred in fin-de-siècle Jamaica when upon arriving in the capital of Kingston, E.A. Hastings Jay, an English traveler, wrote: "We were nearly deafened by the yelling and screeching of a score of shabby-looking negroes, all of whom wanted to carry one's bag at the same time…[A] growing squadron of little black boys…stared at our faces, clothes, and boots, and more than ever at R.B.'s [presumably a companion of Hastings Jay] camera, which he had brought out in search of subjects…"[39] Hastings Jay is so fixated on the fascination these Jamaican boys have with him and his companions that it little occurs to him that he and his entourage are reducing Jamaican human subjects to immaterial objects, exemplified by R.B.'s unwillingness to regard or look in the direction of "little nigger boys."[40] Hastings Jay seems to find the attention he is receiving from these boys discomfiting but he demonstrates no similar discomfort in critiquing black Jamaicans as an "other," as decidedly uncivilized, and as beings

[37] Blair Niles, *Black Haiti: A Biography of Africa's Eldest Daughter* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1926), 9-10.
[38] Sheller, *Citizenship from Below*, 230.
[39] E.A. Hastings Jay, *A Glimpse of the Tropics: or, Four Months Cruising in the West Indies* (London: Sampson Low, Marston, 1900), 211-12, 216).
[40] Hastings Jay, *A Glimpse of the Tropics*, 216.

located on a low spectrum of the European-defined imperium of colonialism.

By the middle part of the twentieth century, accounts made by Niles and Hastings Jay, would probably have been observed as aloof and ill-informed in some circles. Indeed, advice was by this time being dispensed to tourists, on how to be more self-conscious about their relations with native people. Krista Thompson provides the example of Orford St. John, whose essay "How to Behave in the Tropics," published in 1949, counseled: "…[D]o not view the figures that people the landscape as though they were clowns and acrobats in a circus. They are not in the least picturesque. They are human beings like you. When you are tempted to regard them as quaint, remember that they too are watching you. Their way of life is different from yours and yours also is 'different…'"[41] Thompson introduces the notion of the self-reflexive tourist, one who is more aware of the interruption that can be aroused by her or his presence, and strangeness, in a local scene.

I wish to return to the "subjects" mentioned in Hastings Jay's account and how such a construction can be refracted through citizenship, and vice versa. Jamaica would not receive its independence from the United Kingdom until 1962 and thus, in 1900, when Hastings Jay was writing his account, citizenship would have been custodian of the British. The "touristic" gaze then could arguably have been construed as another iteration of the formerly conquering one. In other words, the gaze Hastings Jay leveled at the black Jamaican boys he encountered, was one of the conqueror disembarking from his ship, scanning the surrounding countryside to see how he could take advantage of it—including the usage of (black) native bodies (i.e. as photographic subjects that demonstrated "exoticism" or "helpful" sets of arms that carried luggage). Yet, such a construction would elide the possible ways in which these Jamaicans negotiated citizenship. It

[41] Orford St. John, "How to Behave in the Tropics," 1949, quoted in Krista Thompson, *An Eye for the Tropics: Tourism, Photography, and the Framing of the Caribbean Picturesque* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 240-41.

is possible (more likely probable) that the Jamaican boys Hastings Jay interacted with had been versed in British discourses of colonialism that situated these boys' minds and bodies on the outskirts of citizenship, or at the very least, as those who were not "civilized" sufficiently to understand and enjoy such citizenship. While the allure of citizenship in this regard could be construed as unequivocally negative, power in a Foucauldian context is *not* always repressive. The Jamaican boys probably looked at the Anglo-Victorian travelers as people who embodied the paragon of civilization, who possessed great wealth and privilege, and who were potential subjects to whom they could aspire. Such perspectives would have been furnished (most likely) by racist and classist discourses, but it is helpful to see how the notion of "subjects" could have been conceptualized by black Jamaicans and Anglo-Saxons. While each of these hypothetical excursions into the minds of these two groups is not without flaws, I believe that it is helpful to unpack the term "subjects" and to examine how it could define exclusion and inclusion via citizenship.[42]

In concluding this section, I think that resistance is a topic that should be examined. Sheller notes that "[e]rotic agency can consist of a performance of sexual citizenship as the right of refusal rather than always being a performance of sexualized embodiment."[43] Such an act might have unfolded with the elderly Haitian man who refused to allow the boy to be photographed. Might such an act be constituted as a demonstration of resistance? Possibly, but resistance is a capacious concept and there is no singular form of resistance. When viewing the Haitian man's act in the context of the then-ongoing U.S. occupation of Haiti in the 1920s, it is tempting to look at this micro-history as a powerful act of resistance. The verbiage used in this

[42] In delving into this viewpoint further, I would say that "subjects" excluded from citizenship could be considered figures of fascination in another instance (i.e. convicts, "exoticized" individuals, etc.) while subjects included in citizenship could not only be societally defined or stratified but might include individuals who could pass as citizens or make the transition through a variety of tropes (i.e. racial, economic, political, religious, etc.).
[43] Sheller, *Citizenship from Below*, 238.

altercation with the photographer—the Haitian man said that he was opposed to it and that he would not settle for the boy being labeled a monkey—upset the conventional power balance that privileged at the top, American servicemen and politicians, among others, and placed the native Haitian population on the bottom. The "erotic agency" adapted from Lorde by Sheller, involved the elderly man's mulatto body—a cross between blackness and whiteness—that may have made him a nominal authority although still subject, in the eyes of Haiti's American occupiers, to white hegemony. It is arguable, and yet a still plausible assertion to make, that the elderly Haitian man countered the interruption of American imperialism with one of his own (as an act of resistance or something else); this counter-interruption, he probably knew, might have been construed as feeble by Niles and other whites, but his message rang clear that it did not bode well with him that white Americans had appropriated photography as a colonizer's tool for demeaning black bodies.

Queer Black Bodies in Contemporary Jamaican Dancehall Culture

In 2010-11, public opinion in Jamaica became divided about the condemnation of the dance style known as "daggering" in this island nation, in which a woman stands on her head with her legs splayed open as men on either side of her perform aggressive thrusting movements against her pelvis.[44] Sheller asks what types of masculinity and femininity are being performed in daggering, and how do they relate to sexual citizenship?[45] Only recently has public discussion of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and other minority sexualities emerged but in this regard, history has trailed behind the social sciences and literary studies.[46] What is promising,

[44] Sheller, *Citizenship from Below*, 276.
[45] Ibid., 276.
[46] See Thomas Glave, ed., *Our Caribbean: A Gathering of Lesbian and Gay Writing from the Antilles* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008) and Evelyn O'Callaghan, "'Compulsory Heterosexuality' and Textual/Sexual Alternatives in Selected Texts by West Indian Women Writers," in *Caribbean Portraits: Essays on Gender Ideologies and Identities*, ed. Christine Barrow (Kingston: Ian Randle, 1998).

notwithstanding, for this discussion of understudied sexualities is an explicit platform for the inclusion of a queer theoretic Caribbean. Rather than focusing on the "alleged deviancy" of aggressive heteronormative gender performance, I examine the root of this performativity as stemming from contemporary cultural practices and transnational political and economic struggles experienced by many descendants of the African Diaspora.

One must first disabuse himself of the notion that Jamaican dancehall culture is all brutal edges, sexualized movement, and nothing else.[47] This culture historically emerged as an alternative to the upper and middle-class women's "respectability" of the nineteenth century that was denied to working-class women. Chastity and a prim femininity dependent upon masculine leadership in society characterized this respectability. Motherhood, too, was a central tenet of it. In the latter half of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first centuries, black feminists such as Denise Noble, argued that suggestive dancing styles exemplified in, for instance, ragga lyrics, "…emphasize[d] Black women's sexual agency and advocate[d] a libertarian individualism where women have autonomy from patriarchal marital domesticity and the cult of motherhood."[48] Where the argument against such raucous movement is viewed in terms of capitalist commodity culture, the male gaze, and heterosexism, Noble counters that instead the ragga queen's garish and loud appearance is a kind of kitsch drag in which "erotic style [is used] to play with the sexist gullibility of the male gaze."[49]

While Noble's conjecture is debatable (especially when examined within the context of "erotic style"), women and their bodies have too often been assumed to have no identity outside of sexual exploitation and are "…constructed as absent from their sexual experiences and the

[47] Ellis, *Territories of the Soul*, 188.
[48] Denise Noble, "Ragga Music: Dis/Respecting Black Women and Dis/Reputable Sexualities," in *Un/Settled Multiculturalisms: Diasporas, Entanglements, Transruptions*, ed. Barnor Hesse (London: Zed, 2000), 159-60.
[49] Noble, "Ragga Music," 158.

'body politic of the nation [a typically male-dominated apparatus]."[50] Nationalist discourses of masculinity that mediate (in)appropriate public performances come into play and subsequently regulate "appropriate" male and female sexualities. Too often these appropriate sexualities fall under the categories of reproduction, heterosexuality, and the "conventional" family unit as indispensable to the perpetuity of the nation. To counter this citizenship-from-above approach, popular culture many times creates spaces in which people can "…perform, debate, and to an extent, contest ideas about gender and sexuality."[51] Ragga women engage in this culture by engaging in exhibitionism that is crude, vulgar, shocking, sexy, and powerful.[52]

Ragga women's exhibitionism also demonstrates their right to citizenship in a kind of "This is who I am" mantra that contests conventional societal norms that emphasize quiet civility and non-expletive-laden lyrics in music. While the archive is growing concerning the visibility of ragga women, I wonder how gay men in present-day Jamaican dancehall culture will be featured or have been featured. In reading both along and against the archival grain, a historian can see how homosexuality was (potentially) policed or codified as an "indiscretion" or an "abnormal" act in Jamaica and other Antillean societies. It is not enough, however, to rest on the premise that homophobia was and continues to be so strong in Jamaica, or in Haiti, for that matter, that tropes of homosexuality and other historically marginalized sexualities have been driven underground, and only emerge under the cover of darkness. I believe that it is necessary to probe further. Why, for example, might an Antillean state have considered homosexuality an offence in a rural part of the country but decriminalized it in an urban, tourist-friendly area? Are there patterns of "indiscretion" in the archive? What were the precise laws (if any) governing gay/lesbian sex and

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[50] Patricia Saunders, "Is Not Everything Good to Eat, Good to Talk: Sexual Economy and Dancehall Music in the Global Marketplace," *Small Axe* 13 (March 2003): 114-15.
[51] Deborah A. Thomas, *Modern Blackness: Nationalism, Globalization, and the Politics of Culture in Jamaica* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 57.
[52] Noble, Ibid., 162.

interactions? I believe that these questions, among many others, can help answer how queer black people negotiated their rights to sexual citizenship and survival in public places.

Conclusion

This essay has been concerned with two primary objectives. The first endeavored to examine how (freed) black men and women in Jamaica and Haiti navigated (sexual) citizenship and the diverse ways they went about it. The second objective was predicated upon a broad definition of queerness that attempted, in part, to demonstrate how (some) black bodies were archived by sex and gender in Jamaica and Haiti. While an entire monograph could delve more concretely into an intersection of queerness and sexual citizenship in these two nations, I have tried to examine the interplay of these two tropes in the sections named as follows: Becoming Quashebas: How Black Motherhood Became a Political Weapon in Jamaica; After the Haitian Revolution: Black Masculinity and "Sword-Bearing Citizens;" the "Touristic" Foreign Gaze: "Exotic" Black People in Haiti and Jamaica; and, Queer Black Bodies in Contemporary Jamaican Dancehall Culture.

The underpinning connection of each of these categories with one another was the discussed black bodies' relationship within the African Diaspora. While this essay did not delve specifically into how these Afro-descended peoples arrived in the Americas (whether as slaves or the descendants of them), their bodies, both ideologically and phenotypically, were chronically queered against a European conceptualization of the "normative" and the "civilized." Nevertheless, the people I have described manifested memorable resilience and agency whether through renegotiating citizenship or demonstrating indignation at an affront that considered black people as "monkeys." I hope that this essay has demonstrated that the African Diaspora should never be narrowly defined. A plethora of books has been written about this phenomenon and

even more perspectives have been expressed about it, but to say that the African Diaspora was unequivocally this or that would be a gross misrepresentation of it. Instead, this diaspora should be looked upon as an amalgamation of a diversity of perspectives (and many more that will no doubt follow).

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