

Let's Liberate the Bullers! **Toronto Human Rights Activism and Implications** **for Caribbean Strategies**

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Abstract

Caribbean queerness has gained increased attention by activists working in the Anglophone Caribbean. This is evidenced by a concerted effort engage publicly, a wide range of issues affecting queer people across the region. To this end, numerous advocacy groups have been formed in the region and in diaspora metropolitan cities in North America and Europe to address, among other things, the issue of criminalisation of homosexuality in Caribbean countries. This paper provides an overview of some of these recent human rights interventions, and also explores other popular campaigns in the region that focus on human rights for Caribbean queers.

Key Words: Human Rights, Queer Activism, Anglophone Caribbean, Canadian Homoimperialism

Introduction

The Anglophone Caribbean is touted as one of the worst places to be queer,¹ and human rights defenders exaggerate instances of violence to evoke a sentiment of death for all queer people in the region. It is important to understand how the intersections of class, race, sex, gender, and location, among other things, influence queer people's location within Caribbean nations, and here I argue that Canada's framing of the region as dangerous for queers elides the creative and innovative ways that these communities actualise agency, in spaces that transgress dominant expectations about (hetero) sexuality. This framing also retains its imperialising power to 'fix' the region, by positioning Canada as a queer-friendly, post-homophobic refuge. This essay takes as its object of analysis Toronto-based human rights projects as a starting point for thinking through the ways that those located outside the region frame queer Caribbean people as powerless and at risk. In my analysis I ask, what are the stakes of employing popular Canadian modes of organising for queers? And, how are the interventions of groups like the Canada HIV/AIDS Legal Network (hereinafter referred to as the Legal Network), and the Envisioning LGBT Human Rights (Envisioning) project counter-productive for the legacies of resistance and community building that characterise regional queer politics? I also address the problems of representation, visibility and domination that inhere in local and diaspora relationships, especially when Caribbean people living in the diaspora speak on behalf of the region through a discourse that fails to disrupt colonial relations of power and knowledge. I draw on the seminal theorisations of Caribbean scholars like Rinaldo Walcott and Amar Wahab, among others, to problematise current human rights trends to liberate Caribbean bullers.²

¹ The term queer has been accepted in with caution in discourse on Caribbean gender and sexuality. However, I draw on Caribbean sexuality scholarship (Gill 2010; Tinsley 2008, 2010; Wekker 2006) to name Caribbean people's queerness, following Krystal Ghisyawan (2015), as practices imbued with radical potential to disrupt dominant heteronormativity. I therefore use the term 'queer' in this essay to emphasise the multiple transgressions that queer people engage in; and to suggest that the more popular acronyms like "LGBT" or "MSM" are insufficient references for queer Caribbean people's experiences as they limit vast sexual and gender praxes to three exclusive identity categories.

² Terms like buller, bullerman, battyman, and zami are typically uttered in the pejorative, are propelled by varying degrees of violence, and have been utilised by many to assert queer people's Otherness to mobilise tropes of disease, discrimination and death that confront queers across the region. However, many queer Caribbean people have also reclaimed them as markers of endearment to embody their non-conformity, and negotiate and resist dominant gender and sexual hegemonies over time. In fact, scholarship on non-Anglophone Caribbean sexualities (Agard-Jones 2013; Murray 2012; Allen 2011; Cabezas 2009; Ramírez and Casper 1999; Padilla 2008) provides useful insight into how indigenous/queer naming practices trouble dominant hegemony typically imported from first world frameworks as incapable of accounting for the complexity of sexual and gender

In the following sections I provide an overview of the aforementioned Toronto-based campaigns followed by a discussion of regional activism and the politics of rights talk to consider whose voices dominate narratives about queer realities in the Anglophone Caribbean.

About The Organisations

The Legal Network's initiatives and the Envisioning project are two prominent human rights investments spearheaded by white Canadian lawyers, academics and activists based in Toronto, Canada. These groups have invested extensively in programming, training and advocacy in Caribbean islands like Barbados, St Lucia and Jamaica, and have also recruited representatives, usually gay Caribbean men, to execute their human rights strategies. The Legal Network's website explains that it was founded in 1992 by "a group of activists [who] came together...[to] ensure that the human rights of people living with HIV and communities particularly affected by HIV are respected, protected and fulfilled" (Legal Network "Our Story" n.d.) Today, it markets itself as "one of the world's leading organisations tackling legal and human rights issues relating to HIV, and advocating at both the policy and community levels" (ibid). It has diversified its research and resource portfolio to include support for "front-line AIDS service organisations, researchers and community activists from across Canada and around the world," while "defend[ing] and advance[ing] human rights through strategic litigation in the courts, in Canada and internationally" (ibid).

A team of analysts manage the Legal Network in the areas of research and policy, communications, development, finance and program support. Initiatives in the Anglophone Caribbean have been spearheaded by Senior Policy Analyst Maurice Tomlinson who, since joining in organisation in 2015, "acts as counsel and/or claimant in cases challenging anti-gay laws before the most senior tribunals in the Caribbean" (Legal Network "Maurice Tomlinson", 2015) Tomlinson, like other queer Caribbean refugees (typically Jamaican men), have been positioned / assumed the position of "native informant" – a queer diaspora person who provides expert knowledge on Caribbean realities – with organisations like the Legal Network, and Rainbow Railroad to advise on the issues of homophobia in the

praxes across multiple cultural, race, class and linguistic intersections in the region. I therefore invoke the term 'buller' to reclaim the sexual and gender praxes that are made to appear threatened by prevailing homophobia, and to call attention to the fact that there exists a Caribbean where queer people have actualised various forms of erotic autonomy over time, have established communities, and have made significant strides in negotiating and resisting the normativity that establishes heterosexuality as the norm.

region.³ In these scenarios, the region is “presented as ‘hostile’ to gays and lesbians, [and] Canada is presented as a country of “diversity and inclusivity and freedom of expression that [the region] should mirror” (Jackson 2015, 22). Popular campaigns executed by the Legal Network and its partners include *The Abominable Crime*, a documentary featuring Tomlinson’s experience of fleeing Jamaica after news of his marriage to a Canadian man became public knowledge in Jamaica. It has also spearheaded and supported various training sessions with police officers in Barbados and St. Lucia and litigation training with advocacy groups from various Caribbean countries.

Envisioning, led by Nancy Nicol, Professor of Visual Arts at York University in Toronto, was part of a larger project titled Envisioning Global LGBT Human Rights. The Canadian subsidiary, which comprised a team of academics, activists and community groups received CAD\$1,000,000.00 (SSHRC 2011) in funding from Canada’s Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council for a five-year (2011-2016) project to investigate (1) the laws that criminalise same-sex sexual intimacy in commonwealth countries, (2) movements to decriminalise these laws, (3) the relationship between United Nations human rights mechanisms and LGBT⁴ rights initiatives and (4) issues affecting asylum seekers in Canada (Nicol, Gates-Gasse, and Mule 2014, 2). To this end, it has worked with partners in India, Uganda, Kenya, Botswana, St. Lucia, Jamaica, Belize and Guyana to produce video shorts, documentaries, a Toronto World Pride 2014 conference, and an exhibition titled *Imagining Home: Migration, Resistance, Contradiction* at the Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives (CLGA). These outputs have similarly framed Caribbean queers as needing to escape a violently homophobic region in order to fully actualise their queerness.

I examine these projects in greater detail below to interrogate the ways that those outside the region position queer Caribbean people as powerless and at risk, and how “[North American] exceptionalism is deeply invested in racism, patriarchy, the spread of capitalism and the continuation of imperial projects” (Gosine 2015, 880). This analysis is in no way an attempt to pit the diaspora against the region, but is particularly invested in Canada’s imperialistic domination in the Caribbean’s

³ Gareth Henry’s asylum has also been publicised widely since he relocated to Canada from Jamaica as a refugee in 2008. He was also one of six Pride Marshals at Toronto’s World Pride celebrations in 2014 and, at the time of this writing, worked with Rainbow Railroad to tell his story of persecution in Jamaica. See <https://www.rainbowrailroad.ca/whatwedo> for Henry’s story on Toronto City TV’s “The Inside Story.”

⁴ I use Envisioning’s term here to capture their framing of queer politics.

queer organising. In doing so I call into question, the varied manifestations of power and inequality that validate some voices over others, by producing particular types of queers as vectors of peril.

Overview of Toronto-based Campaigns

Canada enjoys a reputation for being a safe-haven for queers, and Toronto has become a place of refuge for many people from the Anglophone Caribbean. This has been achieved through a long legacy of organising, where activists have steadfastly exerted their power to influence human rights politics, and especially queer advocacy campaigns elsewhere. For example, popular initiatives like the Stop Murder Music campaigns of the 2000s, sought to “shed light on “murder music” being produced in the Caribbean... and enable[d] many Canadians of different backgrounds to voice their concerns about human rights violations against the LGBT community in the Caribbean” (Larcher and Robinson 2009, 2). More recent work by the Legal Network, has continued to emphasise that “across the region, homophobia, stigma, discrimination, and violence are wreaking havoc on the lives of LGBTI people, and their families”(Armstrong 2015). Such sentiments readily depict a region crippled by exceptionally violent homophobia and allows Canada to position itself as “a peace-keeper, a middle power, and a land of freedom” (Dryden and Lenon 2015, 8). This rhetoric I argue, avails the Caribbean queer as a site through which imperialistic control is mapped on to bodies and communities, notwithstanding the fact that such sexual praxes are indeed sites of resistance against prevailing control mechanisms.

On April 16th, 2015, The Network screened *The Abominable Crime* to an audience of largely white Canadians and people from the Caribbean diaspora. It has also been shown widely in the United States and the Anglophone Caribbean, with showings in “Manhattan, Queens and Brooklyn, NY; Mexico City; Wanstead, Barbados; London; Titusville, NJ; Washington, DC; Kingston and Montego Bay, Jamaica” (Fink, 2015). The piece called on viewers to “follow Simone, a lesbian mother, and Maurice Tomlinson, a leading LGBTI human rights activist, as they navigate the conflict of loving their homeland [Jamaica] and wanting to stay alive” (Fink 2015). Despite its broad appeal, it has also received criticism for its problematic rendering of queer Caribbean reality. Colin Robinson, a Trinidadian writer/activist and Angelique Nixon, a Bahamian academic/ activist/ artist provide a compelling critique of this film:

The Abominable Crime locates itself within a genre of human-rights filmmaking, which often plays a problematic role in firming up a troubling and essentialist imagery in western human rights of victims and heroes – some on account of their victimhood...Nevertheless, Fink is an effective

filmmaker. The closing scene in which Simone and Kayla are reunited after years makes anyone weep. As the film winds up, Simone says: “I have a future now. I never had a future in Jamaica.” But her brother leaves us with something more haunting: “I’ve lost more than I’ve gained.” (Robinson and Nixon 2014)

This documentary reveals the imperialistic violence imposed on Caribbean people by the groups doing work from Toronto. In it there is an explicit focus on the hardships of being queer and unwanted in Jamaica. It tells stories of death and danger to the main characters who stand in for other queer people in the country, and those who have since fled to safe havens like Canada and the Netherlands. Unfortunately, there is no extended focus on the various strategies being employed by queers as they creatively manoeuvre the complexities of their sexual desire and identity, or even the various organisations – like the Jamaican Forum for Lesbians And Gays (JFLAG), The Colour Pink Foundation or Trans Wave⁵ – that assist queer people there. This film also fails to acknowledge, as Robinson and Nixon (2014) continue,

how human rights gains come through unglamorous, messy, everyday work; movements, not individual activists; and institutional change. Missing in a narrative of ‘death threats’ and ‘hate crimes’ is the nuanced nature of most real-world rights violations, and the film misses many opportunities to explore this, relying heavily on heroic storytelling devices of horror and champions.

There is currently burgeoning scholarship on the counter-hegemonic world-making activities in the Anglophone Caribbean, and academics like, Mimi Sheller (2012) Jafari S. Allen (2011) and Gloria Wekker (2006) have called into focus “aspects of everyday physical life, the disavowed, and abject (low class life, low brow, low down) that are usually excluded from the ‘high’ political realm (high class, high politics, high minded, high and mighty) (Sheller 2012, 24), alluding to the ways aberrant Caribbean subjects produce *Citizenship From Below* (ibid).⁶ I expressed my concern that the screening in Toronto ignored these facts, but was

⁵ The only attention paid to J-FLAG in the documentary focuses on Karlene Williams-Clarke, who was once affiliated with the organisation and was now the coordinator of LGBT Newcomer Services at the 519 Community Centre in Toronto. The documentary focused on her role in helping (mostly) Jamaicans in Canada after receiving asylum in Toronto.

⁶ Important interventions in the field of queer Caribbean sexualities also include Krystal Ghisyawan’s (2016) ‘Queering Cartographies of Caribbean Sexuality and Citizenship: Mapping Female Same-Sex Desire, Identities and Belongings in Trinidad’; Angelique Nixon’s (2015) ‘Resisting Paradise’; Rosamond King’s (2014) ‘Island Bodies’ and Lyndon

quickly shut down by some participants and then later by Tomlinson who chastised me on social media (Facebook) as a “‘rich queen’ certainly [not] exposed to the sorts of physical attacks experienced by the ‘scared/scary queens’” (Maurice Tomlinson, April 19, 2015). I acknowledged that such claim about the conflicted interactions between groups of queers bore some truth, but also cautioned about the divisiveness of this problematic compartmentalising of experiences in the region. Tomlinson effectively made it appear that “rich queens” and “scary queens” never crossed paths and are entirely separated by exclusive spaces, therefore silencing the creative ways that queer persons negotiate and resist heteronormativity in their societies. He also privileged a discourse that remains deeply rooted in colonising notions about the region as unsafe; and “enact[ed] a violating gaze that constructs those ‘back home’ as ‘backward’, while using the slippery language of identity politics to claim a right to do so” (Alturi qtd in King 2014, 6). I also welcomed his comment that I may indeed be protected by location as an academic in Toronto, and may not experience queer life like some other bullers; but argued that while “running away” and living abroad may be the survival strategy for some, it is important to note that many queers cannot or choose not to do so. In fact, Caribbean queers living in the region mobilise strategies of community building through underground party networks, drag pageantry and alternate forms of kinship. Said differently, those at the margins “build protective boundaries around marginalised community” in order to re-conceptualise the terms in which to manage their identities and communities (Bailey 2013, 69). In that moment, Tomlinson ignored the ways that queer people build communities – how they party, how they support each other, and how they network across boundaries (2012, 278). Effectively, he ignored the various ways that they engage in, to borrow from Lyndon Gill, “a praxis of survival” in the region.

More tangible evidence of how a divisive rhetoric widens the gap between those in the diaspora with the financial and institutional capital is evident in Tomlinson’s exportation/importation of North American-themed Pride celebrations to Montego Bay, Jamaica and Bridgetown, Barbados since 2015. This is despite already-established pride celebrations across the region. Montego Bay Pride was first hosted on October 25, 2015 with a series of events for queer Jamaicans who “had limited time off and resources to travel to and stay in Kingston” (Kuchu Times 2015) for the Island’s first official pride festival hosted by JFLAG in August that year. By 2017, this alternative pride had also garnered increased technical and financial support from international groups such as the Legal Network, the AIDS Healthcare Foundation (AHF), Toronto P-FLAG, Rainbow Alliance and the

Gill’s (2010) ‘Transfiguring Trinidad and Tobago: queer cultural production, erotic subjectivity and the praxis of black queer anthropology’.

Ontario Public Service Union (OPSEU). Tomlinson also hosted a similar pride event in Bridgetown, Barbados from November 27-29 2015. With technical assistance from the Legal Network, he launched a “Barbados Pride Committee” with a flash Stand for Equality outside the Barbados Parliament, followed by a “Beach Fun day,” which aimed to “further increase LGBTI visibility – an important initiative in light of a recent study that revealed the extremely high percentage of LGBTI people who experience some form of discrimination in Barbados” (Stewart 2015). Pride Barbados 2017 was being advertised widely on social media at the time of this writing.

The heavy-handed influence of diaspora groups like the Legal Network was most evident in the debates among regional activists concerning its influence on regional strategies. Between September 21st and 23rd 2015, the Legal Network in partnership with other regional and international organisations conducted a strategy meeting with participants from the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS) in Grenada.⁷ This meeting was co-organised by *United and Strong* from St. Lucia and the Grenadian group *GrenChap* to address “the very real stigma and discrimination faced by LGBT citizens” and the “resources for litigation and advocacy within the Caribbean” (Dominica Times 2015). A variety of organisations were represented, and as one source explained, they “were well-placed to identify challenges and map the way forward” (ibid).

It is important to emphasise here, the influence of these white and diaspora organisers on regional human-rights campaigns, especially when they have the financial capital, typically out of reach for many activists, to determine how things are done in region. This financial control has also greatly influenced the positioning of token native informants as authentic cultural voices with seemingly expert knowledge, whose views are upheld as sacrosanct. Upon hearing about this meeting, Colin Robinson, Executive Director of the Coalition for the Inclusion of Sexual Orientation (CAISO) based in Trinidad and Tobago, and then a regional coordinator for CariFLAGS,⁸ made a direct appeal to the Legal Network’s Executive Director, Richard Elliot, to ensure that its politics “doesn’t undermine or disrespect the work we are doing in a place in which you do not live” (Robinson, personal communication, September 21, 2015); and also extended an invitation to “gain a direct understanding of what we are doing, what our vision and needs are, by visiting with *us* (emphasis added) here and engaging in dialogue” (ibid) CAISO was subsequently disinvited from the event by “one of the convenors” despite

⁷ The Caribbean Vulnerable Communities (CVC), Heartland Alliance, Arcus Foundation Human Dignity Trust and the Open Society Foundation partnered with the Legal Network to discuss the criminalisation of homosexuality in the Caribbean.

⁸ Robinson’s relationship with CariFLAGS ended in 2016

being “scheduled to do a presentation to open the meeting on Litigation as a Movement Strategy: Caribbean Visions and Lessons” (ibid). These actions also resulted in the Society Against Sexual Orientation Discrimination (SASOD), from Guyana, declining participation and withdrawing from the meeting “[under] those circumstances” (Simpson, personal communication, September 22, 2015). Robinson argued that such actions are indeed “an illustration of the collateral damage of Global North organising and money in the region” (Robinson, personal communication, September 21, 2015).

Why then was Robinson disinvited from this meeting after cautioning Elliot about his imperialist role as an outsider? Or even, why was it only SASOD who supported such call to disrupt the Legal Network’s influence while other parties remained silent? As I illustrate through these series of events, the human rights discourse of these Canadian and diaspora groups monopolise extreme instances of homophobia, disease and death to continuously produce Caribbean queers as needing critical intervention. They activate what I theorise here as *conditional belonging*, a process that “exacerbates the conditions that lead to the devaluation of poor, racialised, and sexual – and gender-deviant populations, and the relegation of these populations to premature death (Hong 2015, 12). In this construction, groups must draw extensively on queer people’s stories of extreme destitution in order to assert their agendas. In conjunction with native informants, they corroborate to produce the at-risk queer Caribbean body in order to sustain continuous buy-in from the white sympathetic outsiders who are investing millions of foreign dollars in the region. These complicated relationships keep all stakeholders in place, and human rights defenders are not concerned with confronting the “complex relationships between eroticism, colonialism, militarism, resistance, revolution, poverty, despair, fullness, and hope” (Tinsley 2010, 204). Instead, they force organisers to adhere to the prescribed stipulations that continue to colonise our bodies and experiences, which results in the latent but powerful condition that black, working class and other queer persons who do not fit the rubric of conditional belonging be silenced so that groups have work to do. It is through the circumstance of conditional belonging that queer subjects are left to serve their purpose of attracting investment, while elevating those in the diaspora as “authentic” cultural voices.

After much silence, Elliot responded to these concerns via email in a lengthy, defensive rebuttal to justify The Network’s role in engaging with “some” Caribbean advocates in Toronto and in the region on issues of “litigation Strategies, as appropriate” (Elliot, personal communication, September 21, 2015). This well-crafted reply has reinforced The Network’s authoritative role in regional organising and has once again silenced the legitimate concerns of advocates who do various types of work (including litigation, which groups like CAISO and

SASOD do). As Robinson argues, “they have outshouted those of us working within our own nations to build ownership for a vision of postcolonial justice, national pride and liberty that includes sexual autonomy” (Robinson 2012, 6). While most advocates from the region agree that litigation is important, there is great discomfort because these Toronto-based organisations appear unwilling to consider the proposals offered by those at home, and suggestions that human rights frameworks cannot fully account for the anatomy of Caribbean non-heterosexuality.

Prior to Tomlinson’s exportation/ importation to the islands, Nicol’s Research Team emphasised “*particular challenges for Canada in fulfilling and upholding its international commitments and obligations to protect human rights and to provide a sanctuary for people fleeing persecution due to their sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression [emphasis added]*” (Nicol *et al* 2015, 10). For Toronto’s 2014 World Pride celebrations, many activists were invited from the Caribbean, Africa, the Middle East to experience the freedom that Toronto offers to queers, but more importantly, to exhibit their struggles at the Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives. Nicol explains that “this body of work speak[s] to profound discrimination and violence: random violence in public places; police harassment, extortion, custodial rape; ‘corrective rape’ against lesbians ‘to make them straight’; exclusion and violence perpetuated by friends, family and community...” (Nicol, Gates-Gasse, and Mule 2014). Video shorts of stories from Botswana, India, Uganda, St. Lucia, Kenya, Belize, Jamaica and Guyana were streamed at the exhibit, and were touted to teach Canadians “about discrimination and violence fuelled by state, church, workplace, family and community. Most importantly, we hear stories of resistance and resilience: building support within family and community, building movements, using media, challenging the laws through legal cases” (Envisioning 2014). These accounts drew extensively on victims’ memories of homophobic violence and the need to escape homelands in order to survive. The Caribbean narrators all spoke, on one end of the spectrum, about being stifled or abandoned and chastised for their sexuality by family, friends and community. In extreme instances, they reminded the Canadian audience “how it hits home when we lost friends to brutal murders simply because of them living their lives” (Placide 2014). On the other end, they yearn for the opportunity to “be like a regular couple” (Hunte 2014), to “go to school, get an education, work, make a living and be who we are” (Quetzal 2014), and for people to “know us as people first” (Broderick 2014). Missing from these narratives, or overshadowed at the very least, are the various other contours of queerness that define Caribbean people’s resistance to the prevailing homophobia and heteronormativity in the region. Through these stories, there is an implicit reverence to the “help” received from the already-

liberated North America and Europe. Or, as Vincent Mc Doom reminds us in his story, “France gave me something that St. Lucia never gave me. France gave me a voice” (Mc Doom 2014).

The stories were well crafted and moved audiences to sympathise with the struggle that queers face on a daily basis. In these accounts though, very specific victims emerge – like Placide, Quetzal, Hunte, Broedrick and Mc Doom- to exaggerate tropes of despair in framing Caribbean queers as injured and quickly succumbing to the violence of their phobic and restrictive societies. In these depictions, trans people, and especially working-class trans people (like Kingston’s gully queens⁹), are also sacrificed in the pursuit of framing the dying queer body. Viviane Namaste’s argument that: “certain kinds of speech are not allowed, while others can only occur in select contexts” (Namaste 2011, 42) provides useful context here to emphasise the silencing of numerous other identities, sexualities and praxes that share spaces of queerness in the islands. Bearing in mind my mapping of conditional belonging, it is apparent how these stories authenticate the queer other’s despair and legitimises Canada’s imperative to help the region. The efforts of this Envisioning project then, readily cements Canada’s vision as a defender of people who need to be freed, but they also expose some glaring gaps between questions of representation and truth telling.

This sole focus, by the Network, on the criminalisation of queerness and the illegality of same-sex sex acts; and the invitation to queerness that Envisioning evokes in its project, remind us that our Caribbean bodies are unfortunately tied up in a web of neoliberal homoimperialism. They raise issues, as Amar Wahab (2012) tells us, about the “colonialistic flavor” of the queer Caribbean diaspora in Canada (27), and situates the Global North as a site of sexual modernity through a rhetoric of queer friendliness that in turn demonises regions as “morally bankrupt and excluded from a privileged liberal subjecthood.” (Hong 2015, 13). In this situation, Caribbean people remain the property of outsiders who, because of their financial and political capital, can continue to impose their homoimperialising agendas. These arrangements groom people in the region towards what Carla More (2014) theorises as *rainbow modernity*, “wherein the ‘correct’ performance of ‘queerness’ – usually premised as visible queer resistance – and the acceptance of that performance, become the markers of development and human-ness” (4). Or, as Vanessa Agard-Jones argues, these tensions help us to “think Caribbean bodies in systems, moving us from the innards of embodiment to the space of global capital” (Agard-Jones 2013, 187). In the following section I explore some prominent

⁹ Gay men and trans women who live in the storm drains (also called gullies) running through and below Kingston’s central business district.

campaigns in Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago in order to unsettle the homoimperial domination of these Toronto-based organisers.

Legacies of Regional Activism and Resistance

The Caribbean can boast of the long legacies of resistance and organising by queers, and this is possible because of the labour that the Caribbean women's movement has done over the years. Such feminist investments have helped to lay much of the groundwork for queer interventions across the region. Angelique Nixon and Rosamond King (2013) have paid particular attention to some of these ways "that people have challenged normative relationships, fought for change, and written their 'outlaw selves' into citizenship" (8). While early mainstream Caribbean feminisms have been critiqued for a silencing of queer voices and issues, more recent organizing by groups such as the CatchAFyah Network and CODE RED for Gender Justice in Barbados, the Tambourine Army in Jamaica, Red Thread in Guyana, and WOMANTRA in Trinidad and Tobago have provided salient platforms for supporting anti-oppressive organising by Caribbean people. Or, to echo Wesley Crichlow, they have begun the necessary conversations that Caribbean people have "for far too long have tried to erase, and by proxy avoid" (2004a, 186). Queer activism has thus grown significantly over the last decade in tandem with such feminist engagements, and has also created space for engaging "strategies to confront homophobia" by groups of queer people in the Islands (King and Nixon n.d.).

The year 2016 was an important moment for the strengthening of such synergies with the spread of the #LifeInLeggings movement across the Caribbean, when in November 2016, Barbadian activists Ronelle King and Allyson Benn created the social media hash tag to highlight women's daily experiences of sexual violence and harassment, and ignited a movement of women across the region who found a safe and empowering space on social media to also share their #LifeInLeggings experiences (iamxilomen 2016). The movement grew in the months that followed and culminated with a region-wide solidarity march on March 11th 2017 in commemoration of International Women's Day, to support women and victims of gender-based violence. Many women's groups, government agencies, NGOs and other supporters collaborated to produce a synchronised mass rally across six Caribbean countries – Antigua and Barbuda, The Bahamas, Barbados, Guyana, Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago. The general theme as Caribbean feminist scholar and activist Gabrielle Hosein explained, was an acknowledgement that "women's rights are everyone's responsibility and this march is to gather our strength to boldly pursue changes we need" (Hosein 2017). While this moment provided an important space for generations of Caribbean women to publicly address the issue of gender-based violence, it also presented a valuable opportunity for queer

activists to stand in solidarity and engage publicly about their experiences of violence, harassment and discrimination. Silver Lining Foundation (SLF) Director, Jeremy Edwards, noted of the Trinidad and Tobago leg,

Our presence at this march was intended to stand in solidarity with women across our nation on the common themes of discrimination, exclusion and inequality, which continues to form the everyday reality for LGBTQIA citizens of this nation. This Women's March provided the often unseen LGBTQIA community a welcomed opportunity to maintain a larger presence of visibility against adversaries opposed to their human rights, of which SLF, alongside other organisations, was extremely proud to lead. (Boodram 2017)

In the area of queer organising, Jamaica has taken a notably visible lead over the years. JFLAG has hosted numerous sensitisation-training sessions with the Clarendon Health Department for healthcare workers, "focusing on those most-at-risk such as MSMs and sex workers" (Brown 2014). JFLAG's website notes that it has also expanded services to include community building and capacity training programmes, counselling and referral programmes, and has also engaged government and civil society stakeholders on issues affecting queer people in Jamaica (JFLAG n.d.). This group celebrated its first official pride festival in Kingston in August 2015, but it is interesting to recall as I note earlier, how Tomlinson's Montego Bay Pride has replicated much of what was already being done in Kingston. More radically, members of the group Quality of Citizenship Jamaica (QCJ) participated in a controversial feet washing ceremony officiated by Anglican priest Rev. Fr. Sean Major-Campbell at his church on December 8th, 2014 (Senzee 2014). In this moment, Major-Campbell, himself a public queer ally, with support from other local activists intruded a domain considered to be exclusively heterosexual and unavailable to those persons who defy heterosexist religious mores of sexuality and gender identity. It was indeed a significant event in Jamaica's history of queer politics as, following Christopher Charles' analysis, it has impacted a fundamentalist Christian belief that condemns homosexuality, and holds fast to "the literal word of God that should be adhered to without question (2011, 9).¹⁰ This action also occurred shortly after a mass church rally in June 2014 by the group Jamaica CAUSE (Churches Action Uniting Society for Emancipation), which gathered approximately 25,000 supporters who opposed Prime Minister Portia Simpson Miller's announcement that she intended to introduce legislation to repeal the country's sodomy laws (Skyers 2014). Despite

¹⁰ See Wesley Crichlow's (2004) "History, (Re)Memory, Testimony and Biomythography: Charting a Buller Man's Trinidadian Past" for popular biblical references condemning same-sex relationships.

an intense discomfort by Jamaicans, and although its political efficacy may not have been immediately tangible, it will be interesting to observe, as one *Advocate* writer imagined, “whether an ongoing conversation can now occur among the open-minded pastor, his entrenched congregants, and the broader community across Kingston and Jamaica” (Senzee 2014).

In Trinidad and Tobago, CAISO has resisted the trope of conditional belonging to instead engage a vision of inclusivity and legitimacy. Its 2010 protest against the “ex-gay” pastor Phillip Lee’s visit to Trinidad and the subsequent production of its “Homosexual Agenda” t-shirt campaign are salient examples of its “nationalist feminist politics” of inclusion (Robinson 2011). These t-shirts displayed the three main “agendas” of local homosexuals: (1) To buy Crix, (2) To spend time with family, and (3) To work for equality (CAISO 2010). Andil Gosine’s discussion of CAISO’s nationalist feminist politics provides some useful context,

The references to spending time with family and working for equality appear on the surface to be reminiscent of the normative organizing poetics of dominant gay and lesbian movements, but I believe a more accurate reading of their meaning must take account of the Trinidadian context. Thus, ‘family’ connotes much broader and looser networks of attachment than the nuclear Euro-American notion of ‘family’ (that US and European gay organisations have tended to mimic) suggests. And working for equality is a stark reference to the central positioning of social justice in formulations of Trinbagonian nationalism. (2015, 867)

As part of a network of groups called *Allies for Justice and Diversity*, CAISO helped to create a manifesto titled “12 Initiatives to Improve LGBTI Lives & Options for National Decision Makers” (Hosein 2015), which aimed to sensitise candidates in the 2015 general elections about the needs of sexual and gender minorities. In 2017, this network was formalised through a TT\$1.3 Million European Union grant “to embark on a three-year project that includes family groups, strengthening policing, school safety, learning about LGBTQI lives and legislative change” (Silver Lining 2017). With further funding from the Canadian High Commission, it also piloted a campaign during the 2017 Carnival season titled “Watch Stop Send,” which called on queer persons to exercise increased vigilance when interacting in and outside of queer communities (Justice Diversity TT 2017).

Although CAISO’s politics has diverted towards a more nationalistic yearning for inclusion, these visions of belonging to the nation may also inadvertently complicate a desire for queer legitimacy based on ideas of heterosexual citizenship. In focusing on “building strong organisational structure, creating support and

services for GLBT people...to live healthy and productive lives, and making it safe for people to believe that they are children of God” (CAISO brochure n.d.), the group remains deeply entrenched in a homonationalist quest for legitimacy. This therefore involves a process of normalising queers so that they can be included in national heterosexual imaginations of citizenship. In other words, this desire produces the queer who is legitimised as a subject that successfully embodies all that heteronormativity commands. Such homonationalism bolsters the nation as it “reiterates heterosexuality as the norm... and fosters nationalist homosexual positionalities indebted in liberalism (Puar 2007, 50).”

WOMANTRA has also taken the lead on queer activism in Trinidad and Tobago within recent times through its staging of protests public in partnership with other local social justice groups on issues of gender stereotyping and victim shaming. For instance, on December 11th 2015, when female club patron Shannon Jacob-Gomes was debarred free entry into the upscale Aria Lounge nightclub in Port of Spain Trinidad because she was “projecting the image of a man” (Ali 2015), the group initiated a call to action against the club’s discriminatory policies, and the instances of micro policing of people and especially women’s gender performances. The group’s co-directors Stephanie Leitch and Khadija Sinnanan argued that while not specifically targeting Aria Lounge, the protest was “specifically about people’s right to express their gender however they feel and your right to not be discriminated against on the basis of gender nonconformity which simply means if I am female I do not have to dress in whatever you believe female to be or female clothing to be” (Clyne 2015). Though small, it managed to garner support from other local queer and feminist activists; and while there may not have been any immediate outcomes from this intervention, it acted as a catalyst for other actions to follow. These include the historic “Tim Kee” protest, which saw the forced resignation of Port of Spain Mayor Raymond Tim Kee after murdered Japanese Tourist Asami Nagakiya’s costume-clad body was found in the Queen’s Park Savannah on Ash Wednesday morning following the 2016 Carnival parade, and his victim shaming comments that “the woman has the responsibility that they ensure that they are not abused. You can enjoy Carnival without going through that routine” (Rambaralli, Wilson and Hasanali 2016).

Although these, and other, groups have invested extensively in public engagements on issues of wider acceptance of queer people, larger groups like JFLAG, CAISO and SASOD have been criticised for their Afro-Caribbean, male-run and androcentric interventions, and an inattention to issues affecting lesbian women, trans men and trans masculine people in the region. Both SASOD and JFLAG have attempted to remedy these within recent years, as is evidenced by the creation of the SASOD Women’s Arm Guyana (SWAG), which is “committed to promoting gender equality and women’s rights; advancing sexual and reproductive health and

rights; facilitating women's leadership and political participation; as well as community mobilisation, economic empowerment, and socio-cultural initiatives that create space and propel the voices of LBT women and women's allies" (Guyana Times 2017). JFLAG on the other hand has strengthened ties with WE-Change, which was launched on May 2015 to respond to "the 'invisibilisation' of lesbians, bisexual and transgender (LBT) women in the LGBT rights movement in Jamaica" (WE Change n.d.). In Trinidad and Tobago, WOMANTRA has created a vibrant virtual social media community of regional activists and community members, but has since been critiqued about its "high colour" politics and inattention to issues affecting women across race and class intersections (Julien 2017). I draw attention to these important dynamics in recognition that issues of representation and visibility do not only circulate simply between regional and diasporic activists, but also influence the ways that particular people are similarly included and excluded from regional activisms.

These snapshots of regional activisms are by no means exhaustive, and can barely do justice in capturing the vast amount of work being done across the region by other groups. However, they are intended to give an indication of the variety of activities and nuanced issues of representation in the area of sexual and gender politics. There are indeed many more creative ways that people navigate the heteronormative structures that limit their claim to full citizenship - in the queer night clubs and parties, in drag queen competitions, women's groups, kinship networks, and other transgressive spaces like Carnival celebrations.¹¹ These accomplishments, when placed alongside the narratives of the aforementioned Toronto-based groups reaffirm that queer people are envisioning difference in the Caribbean despite the rhetoric of homophobic violence and a 'need' to flee. They are creating communities, family and support networks, and they definitely have the capacity to organise on their own terms. Canadian narratives therefore remain highly unsubstantiated because they "enact a violating gaze that constructs those 'back home' as 'backward', while using the slippery language of identity politics to claim a right to do so" (King 2016, 6). Reflecting on the earlier discussion of the homoimperialistic nature of diaspora interventions and the silencing of queer Caribbean realities, I call attention to the fraught relationship that regional organisers have with those located in the diaspora. Should they continue to speak out against the colonising motives of groups like the Legal Network and Envisioning and risk losing the valuable money that they can access? Or, should they buckle under pressure and adopt the white sympathetic politics that relegate Caribbean bodies to positions of precarity? I address these concerns in the next,

¹¹ See Agard-Jones (2013) King (2011) and Murray (2002) for a discussion on Carnival gender/sexual transgression.

and final, section as I critique this Canadian dominance in the region, and explore the implications of seeking to liberate queer people based on such racist and homo-imperialist tactics.

The Politics of 'Rights Talk'-Whose Rights? On Whose Terms?

An important contention regarding the relationship between the diaspora and the region is a *politics of speaking* that is revealed around controversial events like those implemented by the Legal Network and Envisioning. Whether or not these organisers in Toronto choose to admit, their discourse usually revolves around a death narrative which, as I suggest earlier, confines Caribbean queers to a trope of conditional belonging where they become intelligible through a rhetoric of disease, death and needing to escape. So, because these diaspora groups focus explicitly on addressing criminalisation in the Caribbean, they must mute the creative communities that exist at home to support their projects while emphasising an exaggerated hypersexuality and homophobia among Caribbean people. It is no surprise then, that this diaspora politics is disrupted when, as M. Jacqui Alexander posits, what the “queer native” has to say might indeed be dangerous because they are not what they are imagined to be (2001, 300). I extend Alexander’s argument to emphasise that when “queer natives” speak of world-making praxes in the region, they disrupt the homo-imperialist agendas and death narratives of those in the diaspora who speak of, and do human rights work in the region. This is especially poignant when native informants like Tomlinson maintain a conflicted relationship with the region as a cultural insider/outsider who has been sanctioned to speak on behalf of regional queers, but through a language that does little to disrupt colonial power relations and knowledge.

The queer diaspora is often used as a vehicle to transport this Canadian homoimperial politics to the region, and Caribbean queers residing in Toronto often become the expert informants about queer life in the region. We see this in the monopolisation of death narratives by people, like Tomlinson, who provide “the hegemonic narrative about gay persecutions” (Shakhsari 2012, 23). Relying on tropes of exclusion “from the heteronormative imaginations of the [Caribbean] nation,” they willingly take the opportunity to insert themselves into national imaginations in diasporic reterritorialisations” (ibid, 27). The nation here can be understood through Alexander’s theorisation of queer exclusion that is enshrined in regional legislation to define “appropriate sexuality, about the kind of sexuality that presumably imperils the nation and about the kind of sexuality that promotes citizenship” (Alexander 1994, 6). Here, queer refugee activists transition from positions of “relative rather than absolute citizenship, or rather none at all” (Alexander 1994, 52), to one invested with the power to announce messages like

“either you stay and die or you run away with your life” (Robinson and Nixon 2014). Rinaldo Walcott troubles this occurrence in *Queer Returns: Human Rights, the Anglo- Caribbean and Diaspora Politics* as he grapples with the ethical responsibilities of those who “speak to somewhere and from another place...as displaced subjects both inside and outside of the region” (2009, 3-4). He makes clear how human rights talk inscribes homonormativity that “measure[s] citizenship in the exact and minute terms of heterosexual citizenship” (ibid). Or, as he argues further, this framework “provides space for elites within states to self-express... produce and police sexuality on singular terms forcing sexual minorities into a one size fits all model” (Walcott 2015, viii). These issues are glaring in the relationship that Toronto-based Caribbean diaspora organisers share with the region.

Amar Wahab’s discussion of how Canada’s Stop Murder Music Campaign “calls homophobia into place” by lobbying for a ban on homophobic Jamaican music, provides a useful contextualisation of how the queer Caribbean diaspora “has become inextricably tethered to the Canadian national project” in the Caribbean (2016, 4). Here it is evident that such campaigns “help to render queer diasporic subjects as citizen-worthy on the condition that these subjects help to authenticate the outrage of the gay international” (ibid, 16). Additionally, they require that diasporic queers embody and export such Canadian-flavoured homonationalism to their islands, a process that situates the region as anachronistic. In doing so, these native experts are successfully integrated into “proper” Canadian politics, and become the poster children who, as agents of Canadian homoimperialism, champion the need to save their “dangerous” homelands. Such discourse is often used to validate and celebrate rights discourse in “a way that presumably makes Canadians feel proud of their nation’s status as a gay-friendly refuge” (Jackson 2014, 217).

It is important to read these interventions by Canada and the Caribbean diaspora as part of a larger politics of neo-imperialism and neo-colonialism, as the powerful speakers continue to exert their influence in order to steer focus on the visible surface of human rights infringements in the islands. To put it another way, large organisations and funders, with the help of some smaller groups in the region work together to emphasise the instances of extreme persecution and simultaneously silence the many underlying complicities at play. These investments form the backbone of the “not-for-profit industrial complex” that is crucial to managing populations marked as deviant (Hong 2015, 22), and ensure that large and powerful economies, like Canada’s, are able to invest in rights causes to secure its aggrandisement. This occurs at the expense of those on the ground who engage in the messy work of organising for queers who live in, and form a major part of their

communities and societies. Critical Development scholar Ilan Kapoor argues that such focus on immediate crises tackles symptoms rather than causes, and shies away from the more complex political struggles and recurring patterns of inequality and dispossession (2012, 4). He further posits,

If...humanitarianism is to be meaningful (and meaningfully destabilised), [it] needs to move away from the domain of unilateral and moralising solutions such as those offered by [the humanitarian industry], towards the much broader, long-term, and necessarily messy, terrain of politics (ibid).

Based on this very salient argument then, it becomes clear, how the work of groups like The Network, and projects like Nicol's Envisioning propagate a sensationalised remedy for the problems that the queer Caribbean faces.

The above interventions by Walcott and Wahab, when read in conjunction with Kapoor provide a useful framework for interrogating the current tactics that dominant organisers employ to achieve substantial legibility for Caribbean queers. They are useful prompts for further theorising the politics of liberation that is influenced by the heavy-handed input of white, gay, male, middle class, elite advocates, and their native informant from the Caribbean diaspora. Walcott asks provocatively: "What kinds of subjects are made when rights are claimed under such circumstances?" (2009, 11), and I maintain that the process of conditional belonging frames Caribbean queers as 'at risk' and misses valuable opportunities to engage with the more complex and nuanced realities that lie beyond a human rights model. Other Caribbean scholars have rightfully gestured towards the need to "move away from the viewpoint that constructs Caribbean queers as *only* (emphasis added) oppressed, damaged, uneducated, and in need of Western interventions" (Campbell 2014, 4). Rosamond King, for example, has cautioned that if the terms in question are set by the global North, then queer Caribbean subjects will always be considered backward failures (2014, 86). Those who organise and advocate for Caribbean queers need to acknowledge the dangers of the imperialistic violence, exerted through global North domination. Scholars, activists and organisers, must remain cognisant of how they are implicated in a politics of (re) imagining a region where there is, to borrow from Wesley Crichlow, a "culture of bullers" who create "their space for survival, and their geographies and sites of pleasure" (2004b, 201). Doing so will complement the creativity of those on the ground, who embrace their sexualities and identities in dynamic ways to disrupt typical marked-for-death narratives that have come to define human rights talk about queerness.

Conclusion

If an individual cannot be a citizen - whether in a socialist sense or the (neo) liberal sense- can he or she at least be (in one form or another) free? (Allen 2011, 130)

It is clear in this analysis that the Anglo-Caribbean region remains inescapably tied to forms of control that influence how it is (re) imagined as a dangerous place for queers. However, as the above epigraph by Allen captures, it is imperative to envision the ways that Caribbean queers navigate prevailing heteronormativity, embody their queerness and participate in the world-making forms of citizenship. It is necessary then to acknowledge how people continuously hone their erotic autonomy in order to visualise useful forms of resistance, to actualise citizenship on terms that resonate with queer desires, practices, and experiences that lie beyond the reach of limiting human rights frameworks. Queer people, activists, and scholars must continuously remind the external advocates that, as Robinson argues, “you have to listen and talk to a lot more people than the ones you appear to be [talking to], and you need to talk to the people, that the people you are talking to, are preventing you from talking to” (Robinson, personal communication, September 27, 2015).

Based on the details about fighting for liberation that I have discussed, it is imperative to ask: how does the queer movement move forward? How can it conceive of liberation beyond rights talk that is steeped in white, gay, male, Euro-American ideas about sexual repression? What would liberation look like on Caribbean terms away from this logic? How can Caribbean people dismantle the narratives that frame us as salvageable? Or, as M. Jacqui Alexander so eloquently emphasises, could Caribbean queers engage a methodology of stripping that disrupts, unsettles, or defragments the colonising rhetoric of the global north (2016)? As living, breathing, loving, feeling and fucking bodies queer people must conceive of liberation in terms that resonate with them. Once they recognise this and actively try to reconfigure the status quo, the movement will be on the right track to honing the world-making potential of its Caribbean queerness.

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