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Visualising Gender: An assessment of the Visual Arts as a learning tool for Gender  
Performativity in the Anglophone Caribbean.

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## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this research is to explore and examine the visual arts as an educational tool for gender performativity in the anglophone Caribbean. The study asks: How can the experiences and artworks of queer artists from the anglophone Caribbean countries, Barbados, Jamaica, St. Lucia, and Trinidad and Tobago, be used to educate the region on gender performativity. This project was centered on a small sample of interviewees who could speak to the subject in the greater context of their lives and queer experiences through their art. Themes exposed in the course of the interviews included but were not limited to gender identity struggles, homophobia, marginalisation due to gender performativity, along with the compositions of queer art to combat these issues, and Caribbean art culture. The major finding in this research has been the potential effectiveness of art compositions and forms to learn about gender performativity, through the study of each queer artist and their work.

***Keywords:*** gender performativity, Caribbean, queer, visual arts, LGBTQIA, Barbados, Jamaica, St. Lucia, Trinidad and Tobago.

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## INTRODUCTION

“There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender, identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (Gender Trouble p.25). Judith Butler expresses the notion of gender being solely based on a performance rather than an association of ones’ being/identity. Gender is a societal construct deriving from behavioural patterns, norms, tradition and most significantly, repetition, “because gender is a result of repeated ‘styles of the flesh’ that ‘congeal over time’” (“Judith Butler Explained with Cats”). Performative gender exists on a global slate however, the Caribbean fosters a shift in perspective and experience when it comes to its gender issues, queer discrimination standing prominent amongst all.

The chosen topic derived as a result of extensive research on gender performativity as well as personal experience with the issue of gender misidentification in my home country of Trinidad and Tobago. Previous studies done on the subject matter explored gender discrimination and inequality on the level of male and female identification, with little investigation into gender issues within the queer community. Discriminatory issues surface themselves around the Anglophone Caribbean but are unfortunately rarely spoken about due to multiple reasons, one being fear of judgement. Section 9 of Barbados' Sexual Offences Act of 1992 states that "[a]ny person who commits buggery [anal sex] is guilty of an offence and is liable on conviction on indictment to imprisonment for life" (Barbados 1992). Similar laws exist in the country of Jamaica and in an article posted to Rainbow Railroad, lists the island as the most dangerous country for the LGBTQIA community, having relocated three hundred gay, lesbian, bisexual, non-binary and transgender persons experiencing extreme discrimination. The island of St. Lucia is comparable with the laws of Jamaica and Barbados as well, however

prejudice is prominent amongst males as the law indicates, “Same-sex sexual activity between men is illegal and punishable with a 10-year prison sentence and/or a fine. Legal between females” (Handy). As queer marginalization ceases, the lack of proper knowledge on the topic continues which, in turn, promotes similar behaviours in the upcoming generations. During the period of gathering information on said subject, the discovery of various queer Caribbean Artists exploring their world of gender presented itself, along with their individual ways of expressing this matter through their art. In progression, can the Visual Arts serve as a means of exploration towards these issues? This is where this research takes its form in investigating past studies and artists’ experiences in the sphere, maintaining the aim of encouraging awareness towards queer discrimination. This study argues that the visual arts is an educational vehicle for understanding gender performativity within the context of the Anglophone Caribbean, via research of the queer Caribbean community.

## **Parameters**

The research being conducted looks at the Anglophone Caribbean with special attention paid to Barbados, Jamaica, St. Lucia and Trinidad and Tobago. The choice of these islands was determined by their histories of discrimination. In an article collected from *Loop*, a Caribbean news webpage, it was founded that Barbados, St. Lucia and Jamaica were identified as the most dangerous places for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transsexual (LGBT) travellers. The addition of Trinidad and Tobago was based on first-hand experiences of queer discrimination in the country. The study discusses forms of societal marginalization faced by citizens of the aforementioned countries with information being obtained from one queer artist located in each.

## **Objectives**

- To outline and examine the identity issues faced by the queer community in the selected countries.
- To assess the ways in which queer visual artists have explored and dealt with these issues
- To interrogate the role of Visual Arts in educating on the issue of gender performativity.
- To fill the gap of research on the queer community and their marginalisation within the Caribbean.

## **Methodology**

In coherence with this study, both primary and secondary data was utilized to gather information in the argument of the visual arts as an educational vehicle to understand gender performativity within the context of the Anglophone Caribbean.

Primary sources refer to first-hand accounts of the topic from persons who experienced the events during the time of the study. This particular project employed semi structured interviews as its major source of primary data collection. Due to limitations of the pandemic era, interviews were conducted via email and video conferencing. In addition to these methods of investigation, there was also the use of both formal and semiotic evaluation of artwork, the former being used to analyze the conceptualization of a drag queen whilst the latter to examine tangible artifacts (paintings, photographs, sculpture, imagery).

Interview questions were meticulously documented and shared with one queer artist per island across the Anglophone Caribbean countries, Barbados, Jamaica, St. Lucia and Trinidad and Tobago. A draft of twelve questions were curated to serve as a guide during interviews

conducted via videoconferencing, follow up questions being provided while each interview was progressing.

Secondary data collection was also incorporated with the implementation of previously researched journal articles and books being reviewed for the knowledge on the matter. Both international and regional documentations were looked at, all revolving around the theme of gender performativity, the visual arts, and the queer community.

All data gathered was qualitatively based.

## **Chapter Outline**

This study consists of four chapters. Chapter 1 entitled, *Literature Review*, discusses previous research conducted on the topic of this study. It analyses books, articles and artworks that were created based on identity and the Caribbean queer community.

Chapter 2 entitled, *An Exploration of Gender Issues Through Art*, shares and discusses related data acquired from hosting interviews with each artist.

Chapter 3 entitled, *Art as an Educational Tool*, considers how artworks might be used to educate on the queer community.

Chapter 4 entitled, *Conclusion*, summarises the information of the research paper.

# CHAPTER ONE

## Literature Review

### 1.1 *Gender as a Performance*

In spearheading this research, there needs to be a comprehensive understanding of the term, “Gender Performativity.” This investigation of gender supports the interpretation of Judith Butler’s in that, gender is not an association of one’s identity but rather a performance based on repeated behaviours and traditions that does not determine the former. In her essay, *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory*, Butler quotes Simone de Beauvoir in saying, “one is not born, but rather *becomes* a woman.” Beauvoir is making a connection between performance and becoming a woman by stating that it takes constitutional actions before being able to be titled ‘woman.’ With this theory of gender taking the stance of performance, the topic falls into relations with theatre. “The acts by which gender is constituted bear similarities to performative acts within theatrical contexts.” Judith makes mention of Anthropologist Esther Newton who gives an urban ethnography of drag queens in which she explains that the act of drag is an insightful interpretation of the rounded term, ‘gender’ (Butler). Drag in itself is defined as the performance of masculinity, femininity, or other forms of gender expression, reiterating the study of gender being performative and theatrical.

With gender being performative, the discussion of heterosexuality and its relationship to identity issues also arise. Judith Butler’s work makes note of the traditional recurrence of heterosexuality across cultures with the term, “heterosexually based system,” a system which relies on “natural” appearances and behaviours which conform to the term heterosexual. She stresses on the reality of society being inherently conditioned to the sexual reproduction of

“gendered roles” and marriages which reinforces, whether that be consciously or subconsciously, the discrimination to the queer community. “Because there is neither an 'essence' that gender expresses or externalizes nor an objective ideal to which gender aspires; because gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender create the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all” (Butler 522).

### **1.2 Identity Discrimination in Barbados**

Identity in the Caribbean compounds itself into an unexpansive gateway as society progressively becomes more developed. In a 2019 news article, Laura Dowrich-Phillips stated that, “An LGBTQ + Danger Index ranked Barbados at number eight, above St. Lucia at number 12 and Jamaica at number 18 in the top 20 countries in the world where members of the LGBTQ community would be in danger.” In a Barbadian report entitled, “*Human Rights of Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Women in Barbados: A Shadow Report,*” one of the author’s significant explanations was that, though the Barbadian government has enforced legislative measures to aid with the discrimination against women, there is a lack of accommodation towards the Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender (LBT) women of the country with regards to their sexual orientation and gender identity. Unfortunately, in existence are laws that prohibit the equality of these women. “Barbados has three penal codes from Sexual Offenses Act (1992) Chapter 154 that impinge on LBT women’s rights to “non-discrimination and equality in all fields of [their] lives throughout their lifespan.” The government acknowledges the marginalization of women but frequently disregards the prioritization of the queer community as well and their need for protection. Laws such as this continues to be an obstacle, queer women in Barbados are set to live under the microscope of stereotypical gender norms and gender roles and consistently face harassment due to the absence of such (law).

### 1.2.i Art and Identity

Barbadian artist, Ewan Atkinson b.1975, aims at creating work which addresses themes of queer visibility. His most notable creation entitled, *The Neighbourhood Project*, deals with a fictional neighbourhood forged by the artist in which he calls a “head space” that he utilizes to explore and analyze, “Histories, relationships, language, learning to read — these have interested me for years, and it just gets increasingly true as my definition of reading expands. What it means to read — books, people, images — and the idea that how we do that is influenced by everything we have experienced” (Thompson). The collection features a significant work that relates to queerness amongst the Anglophone Caribbean specifically where Atkinson takes the prestigious *Nelson’s West Indian Readers* and recreates the textbook into *Nelson’s New Neighbourhood Reader*. The text highlights more relevant and updated characteristics of the neighbourhood as he now constructs a melting pot of same-sex attraction, cross-dressing, and online sex, purposefully intending to engage the conservative nature engrained within the Barbadian society.

### **1.3 Identity Discrimination in St. Lucia**

Saint Lucia being ranked the 12<sup>th</sup> location considered the most dangerous places for the LGBT community to visit. “Saint Lucia was described as a “heteronormative and patriarchal” society that is “deeply rooted in conservative cultural and religious values” by a senior policy consultant with over seven years’ experience in conducting legal and policy research and in writing on human rights issues in the Caribbean and Canada” (Canada: Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada). In an article published on January 2021 titled, “Human Rights Watch Submission to the Universal Periodic Review of Saint Lucia,” the Human Rights Watch addresses the issue of St. Lucia refusing to decriminalize same-sex conduct as well as inhibiting

antidiscrimination legislation towards LGBT individuals, during their Universal Periodic Review (UPR). *Borgen Magazine* reported in 2017 the intensity of hate crimes in St. Lucia against its queer community by mentioning Kenita Placide, an activist who experienced the murder of her three friends due to their involvement in the LGBT community.

### 1.3.i Art and Identity

The island of St. Lucia consists of very few traditional queer artists, though a significant contributor to the world of art and queerness presents itself in the art of drag queen performances. A drag queen is typically a performer who was assigned the male gender at birth and this act/performance embodies a stylized and exaggerated portrayal of femininity (Dictionary.com). St. Lucian-American drag queen, Monét X Change also known as Kevin Bertin, is known for her various appearances as a proud drag queen across competitions around the globe. Her most popular expression being her emergence in the notorious *RuPaul's Drag Race* television series shows a powerful insight into her performance in drag however, a noteworthy occurrence in her career that reflected the queer community of her home country was being the winner of the 2014 Gay Caribbean USA Pageant as Miss St. Lucia. The physical act of Monét X Change getting into her vibrant and exquisitely designed costumes, accentuating her features with dramatic and colourful hues of makeup, along with the accessorizing of wigs and jewellery, are all conducive participation in the art world. Monét's art form generates unprejudiced opinions and beliefs of gender within the societal construct of what is said to be "male" and "female."

#### **1.4 Identity Discrimination in Jamaica**

Gender and identity issues have been observed as an ongoing occurrence in the country and continues to be a problem as the country develops. Within the Jamaican culture, dancehall, defined as an up-tempo style of dance music derived from reggae (Oxford), is known to be an influential source of anti-homosexuality. In an article titled, “Heterosexism and Homophobia in the Caribbean Dancehall Context,” the authors review famous dancehall songs containing the use of discriminatory language and phrases. An infamous mention was made to popular dancehall artist, Buju Banton, and his 1988 song ‘Boom Bye Bye’, quoting the lyrics:

“Batty bwoy [homosexual male]

Get up an run [leave]

Boom bye bye inna batty boy head [Let me shoot you].”

Researchers Nathan Chapman, Sangeeta Maharaj, Melanie Seeberan, and Emmarica Houlder also included the song ‘Batty Boy (Stay Far from We) by Dr. Evil with the quotation of lyrics:

“Batty boy [homosexual male]

Dem need fi stay far we [They need to stay away or leave]

‘Cause we nuh inna wha’ dem inna (nope!) [We are not promoting that homosexual (penis with penis) sexual behaviour]

Pussy a wha’ buddy fi a go inna [We are promoting heterosexual (vagina with penis) behaviour’].”

Both songs gravely detail the severity of homophobia and the power in which the Jamaican media held as they were able to publicize and profit from such music. The study further explains

that sexual orientation and gender is viewed on a binary scale to society, meaning that the interpretation of these factors are based on ‘man and woman’ and ‘penis and vagina,’ therefore it is common in the country to have homophobic characteristics. Another journal article worth taking note of is, *Family relationships and sexual orientation disclosure to family by gay and bisexual men in Jamaica*, which highlights the conversation of family and their responses to relatives belonging to the queer community. “In this study, familial response to sexual identity disclosure was the single most significant predictor of depression.” The study also states that, “The research literature is replete with evidence that negative or abusive familial responses are associated with poor psychological and general health outcomes, including major depressive disorder, general anxiety disorder, substance abuse, and suicidality, among gay and bisexual men across cultures (Corliss et al., 2002; Ryan et al. 2010; Sandfort et al., 2007; van Bergen et al., 2013).”

#### 1.4.i Art and Identity

Jamaican artist Ebony G. Patterson, born in 1981, creates work surrounding the matters of class, race, gender, youth culture and acts of violence. Ebony also incorporates colours and patterns into her works, but they are done in a diverse number of techniques and with the addition of texture. Patterson’s collection statures around the utilization of colours, textures and patterns to convey meaning and stories of social injustices and violence, such as gender discrimination, to those who are voiceless (Artland). Though Ebony has not openly labelled herself as being a queer, her work certainly emulates many queer visualities and characteristics of the Caribbean queer community. In a meticulous essay written by Nadia Ellis titled, *Obscure; or, The Queer Light of Ebony G. Patterson*, she discussed and analyzed the queer embodiments present in Patterson’s pieces, two of which belonged to the series, *Gangstas, Disciplez + Doily Boyz* and

*Out and Bad* in 2009. Both artworks presented a different side to Jamaican men, one that is controversial amongst their community, and that is their femininity. The men in each piece were adorned in jewellery, makeup, and floral patterns, all highlighting the prettiness that lied within Jamaican men. The addition of sequins, glitter, and many materials to her pieces that were a direct contrast to the manliness being enforced on Jamaican streets, was an educational way to portray the performativity that gender is.

### ***1.5 Identity Discrimination in Trinidad and Tobago***

Gender discrimination is a prominent obstacle within Trinidad and Tobago's society, however the factors that surround this mistreatment are not publicized extensively. Similarly, to its fellow Caribbean islands, the twin island prides itself as having an accepting societal structure but unfortunately, murders and abuse faced by its queer inhabitants remain rampant. Buggery is a common law that exists in a vast majority of the Caribbean Islands, and it remains the same for Trinidad and Tobago. A notable reference of the marginalisation and its effects faced in Trinidad and Tobago was the case of Jason Jones. Jones, an LGBT+ activist, was born in Trinidad but due to the country's transphobic environment, he left for London where the atmosphere was more accepting (Jade). Jason's biggest challenge and win was his 2018 argument and protest to revoke the anti-gay laws that were in effect in Trinidad, some of which banned same sex booking of a hotel room and denial of LGBT individuals into the country. On April 12, 2018, Jason Jones won his case against the High Court of Trinidad and Tobago in decriminalizing same sex intimacy.

#### **1.5.i Art and Identity**

Trinidad and Tobago has a selection of Visual Artists who discuss topics of discrimination however, Nadia Huggins presents compelling photography work that details and narrate her

experiences with gender misidentification and Trinidad's society. One of Huggins pieces which effectively displays the struggles of gender and appearance is, *Is that a buoy?* The photograph was done in 2015 and Nadia explained that it, "explores the ambiguity of the body in the sea, especially when observed from a distance, and the assumptions one makes about gender and sexuality based on physical appearances. We have been conditioned to make certain distinctions between male and female." She explains that an insignificant bodily characteristic such as hair, has been the course for identity issues in her life by saying that she has been constantly stereotyped as masculine because of the absence of her hair.

## CHAPTER TWO

### An Exploration of Gender Issues Through Art

The following chapter details information collected from semi-structured interviews of queer artists ranging from the anglophone Caribbean islands of Barbados, Jamaica, St. Lucia, and Trinidad and Tobago. Their gender issues and gender art will be explored.

#### *2.1 Alex Gibson (Barbados)*

Alex Gibson (b.1994), addressed under the pronouns they/them, is a queer, non-binary, interdisciplinary Barbadian artist based in the city of Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. They are interested in exploring transgressive queer identities in relation to their Caribbean background (Gibson). At an incredibly early age Gibson discovered themselves to be different from their surrounding peers/family and at the average age of 12-13 years old they were questioning their sexuality. Gibson identified as gay at the age of eighteen and has come to realize their gender as being non-binary. “I looked at my life in retrospect and it made me realize even when I was younger, feeling uncomfortable with certain masculine traits and being categorized in a masculine way because of the body that I was assigned showed I was thinking about gender for a lot longer than I thought” (Gibson). The journey of understanding and recognizing as a queer brought on struggles of gender curiosity and gender discrimination awareness, particularly emphasising themes of toxic masculinity and conversations about gender allocations and corresponding actions that should be conformed to within society.

As a Barbadian and being exposed to the culture and traditions of the Caribbean diaspora, Gibson gave insight on their experience and handling of their identity within their surrounding community, i.e., family, colleagues, and those unsupportive of their persona. They speak heavily

on the term “masking;” a word commonly used within the queer community as a resilience strategy. “Masking” elaborates itself with mannerisms such as downplaying, altering or denying ones queerness in the presence of contentious others (Soibelman 41). “In Barbados I hid myself...when I go back it’s almost like a mask I put on, I dress differently.” They express the instilled fear of a closed-minded Caribbean society by reminiscing on being called “faggot” in Canadian streets, apprehensive of worse mistreatment amongst the streets of Barbados that they mask their true identity.

Through these struggles Gibson has endured, Art has become a means in which they have come to educate, express and understand themselves. Whilst being a queer artist, your work becomes inherently queer (Gibson). They (Alex Gibson) create work utilising the manipulation of the human body to adapt to queerness, in that they are delivered in no specific gender as seen in their collection, *Untitled (Garden)*; images featuring plants and non-binary body parts to draw connections to gender fluidity as it exists in nature (Millis and Lamare). In a recent exhibition, Alex produced work using the technique of photogrammetry by forming digital three-dimensional models from objects, structures, and spaces. Each piece is rendered using a smartphone camera and a mobile application in which they scan flora, fauna, garden structures, and the body, to generate a final digital artwork of disruption and lack of definition via image quality loss. Gibson’s purpose for this methodology is to insinuate a metaphor and affirmation of queer and non-binary existences by relating it to the random malfunctions and glitches being provoked from this digital process (Yuill). (*Reference Appendix B*)

## **2.2 Rohan Zhou-Lee (Jamaica)**

Rohan Zhou-Lee (b.1994), addressed using the pronouns they/siya/tā, is a queer, non-binary, Black-Asian author, dancer, and artist abiding in the city of New York, United States of

America. In tune with being an author, they compose essays and poetry, though this study focuses heavily on their Afro-Asian fantasy writing along with their career as a dancer and artist. Zhou-Lee is also the founder of the Blasian March which is an initiative to build solidarity between Black, Asian and Blasian communities through education and celebration (Zhou-Lee). They came into conflict with their sexuality and gender during periods of their high school life and subsequently, though not surely, identified their sexual orientation as a bisexual person (attracted to both men and women) during this time. “Definitely something that changed was how I behaved around my Jamaican side of the family,” Rohan explains as they gathered a newfound expression and means of orienting themselves with their gender. In the interview conducted with Zhou-Lee they conveyed that their sense of masculinity appeared in a heightened state around those they decided would give unsupportive reactions to their story. “It was a time where I realized I had to become strategic about who I was openly queer with” (Zhou-Lee).

As the interview endeavoured into an in-depth state of Zhou-Lee’s complicated experience with connecting to his queerness, discussions of their parents and fatherhood emerged. “He told me he actually suspected that I was gay...that day he disowned me.” In this statement Rohan demonstrated a common and recurring consequence that the queer community is burdened with as they attempt to bring comprehensiveness to their loved ones regarding their identity. A critical figure whose negative rejoinder imprinted on their memory was their father’s towards the knowledge of Rohan’s queer identity. Although frequent communication was not present within this kinship, the assistance that was required to be given to Zhou-Lee’s livelihood was completely absent, in that, their mother solely financed their well-being until their age of leave from their home. Repercussions involved Rohan’s father closing their joint account that supported them in the littlest way possible, which forced them (Rohan) to request emergency

cash via their scholarship fund. Their father also used explosive language towards them whilst referring to their gender struggles with the comment, “I hope you figure out your mental health problems,” as a means by which to mock and condemn Zhou-Lee’s experiences. The latter associated this disownment with the inherent traumatization endured by their father during his upbringing within a Jamaican home as well, indirectly being linked to trauma from the colonisation period.

In addition to this mistreatment amongst their family, minor homophobic instances of discrimination occurred during the span of their career involving themes of homophobic phrases, misogyny, and gender performativity issues. A moment they recalled was a graduation celebration whereby the male and female genders stood predominant throughout their class as each activity took place. Zhou-Lee remembers a group photography session that asked of each student to gather beneath their respective gender; male or female, to which they (Rohan) were left in puzzlement as they were dealing with gender identity issues at the time. They vividly recollect upon a colleague shouting, “No homo!” as the arrangement was taking place. Furthermore, as Rohan’s career accelerated, they openly were faced with gender inequality and performativity disagreement, hindering a numerous of their opportunities as a dancer. Their works/performances as being a ballet dancer persistently inherited struggles of what a ballet dancer is/is not supposed to be. “Folks would jokingly call me ‘the ballerina’,” a term which Rohan considered to be inherently effeminizing, especially seeing as they were battling with the assurance of their gender identity. This is a concrete example of gender being a performance; society is assuming that a specific attire (ballet outfit) and occupation (ballet dancer) is set to coordinate with particular genders. “I have been offered job opportunities many times where I am asked to silence my queerness or, I am not the right kind of queer” (Zhou-Lee). Rohan feels

as though in many occupations, especially being a dancer focused on the field of ballet, there is heavy reliance on binaries in order to fulfil ones duties.

As Zhou-Lee had mentioned during their time of conference, they are now at a stage where they are comfortably expressive with their identity, as well as, in a financial state where every opportunity that presents itself to them, does not demand their immediate attention nor acceptance. This has allowed their craft to develop into an extensive array of personal works, forging the projection of their voice and humanity to the world. They pursue their craft by being inclusive of the queer community and voices within their works. A notable creation of Rohan's is their book character, *Issachar*, who is a trans man belonging the Rastafari religious movement. Issachar is a being rooted within the culture of Jamaica; a being who adorns himself in rings, necklaces, makeup and presents femme. There further exists a complimentary character who is initiated as queer, more specifically, a gender fluid individual who plays a part in Zhou-Lee's musical theatre piece.

### ***2.3 Krystina Snaggs (St. Lucia)***

Krystina Snaggs (b.2000), preferably addressed using the pronouns she/her, is a queer, woman currently residing in Trinidad and Tobago, with origins from St. Lucia. Though she is a member of the queer community, Krystina is not on a definite stance regarding her sexual orientation; she is indecisive between the terms of a bisexual person and a pansexual however, at this time, she favours the orientation of a bisexual. Krystina is a present student at The University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago, completing her bachelor's degree in the Visual Arts. Being a woman also serves as a critical investigation into the treatment she may endure as a female residing in highly discriminatory one as Trinidad. Similarly, to the other interviewees evaluated in the interviews, Krystina learned about her sexual orientation at

an adolescent age through high school experiences. She was 16-17 years old when she came to the realization that her identity was varied from her surrounding peers/family due to emotional feelings geared towards the same sex; discrimination and misogyny pursued during her expression as a queer, female artist.

Though Krystina seldom struggled with her sexuality and gender within herself, issues persist as her being a queer woman in society. At the beginning of the interview, she had vaguely any complaints or negative experiences with her “coming out” (“coming out” refers to the process that people who are LGBTQ go through as they work to accept their sexual orientation or gender identity and share that identity openly with other people [“What’s ‘coming out?’”]) story. Like many other young adults sharing the age of twenty-two with Krystina and residing in a fairly judgemental region, it is second nature to refrain from broadcasting their sexuality, particularly to parents. Though Krystina has not made her parents aware of this, she states, “I think my parents would be accepting...they would be okay, but I am unsure about my other family members.” This was Snaggs response to being asked about any inclination on whether or not her family has displayed any homophobic tendencies, along with the circumstance of them becoming knowledgeable about her sexual orientation. Stemming from this question arose her discussion where fellow female queer members can share common ground on withstanding familiar situations. “I’ve heard people talk, family members who made homophobic comments, but it’s always only about men. I’ve never heard them talk about women.” As Krystina shares this important declaration, it can be recognized as a recurring cultural factor amongst Caribbean society. In reference to cultural mannerisms which originate from decades of instilling, normalized are the misogynistic behavioural tendencies towards women within the aforementioned society where the gender is consistently over-sexualised thus, seeing queer

woman as a fantasy and never to be taken as a serious identity amongst society. Krystina further speaks anti-queer instances she has observed within her space, touching on the tradition of “manly men” being harshly instilled into young, developing boys of the Caribbean families, which forces harsher discrimination towards gay men of the region. She recalls a close friend of hers who faced the wrath of gender assumptions based on performance, where said friend was commented on during his high school life as “acting gay” due to slight displays of feminine qualities.

As spoken by Alex Gibson in their interview, “your work becomes inherently queer,” is an accurate statement to describe Snagg’s work as a queer artist. Although she does not rigorously plan queer statement techniques in her pieces, she subconsciously incorporates queer relationships into their sceneries. An example of this is her collection of chakra cards done using gouache paints where two of these designs illustrated lesbian couples. A similar composition is rendered as well within one of her woodburning pieces. “I am more drawn to expressing women and their feminine energy,” Krystina shares as she delves into these pieces, explaining that these women are also set in in powerful poses enclosed by natural environments of surrounding flora and fauna to hint at their naturalness and energising forms that she speaks of. In the midst of divulging into these works, she recalls a moment of cyber-bullying related to her artwork highlighting the lesbian couple. A male stranger via the internet commented, “This is not something you should be paining,” then preceding to enforce conversations of religion to express his opinions on the wrongness of explicitly representing queer relationships. (*Reference Appendix C*)

#### **2.4 Thomas Haskell (Trinidad)**

Thomas Haskell (b.1988), addressed using the pronouns he/him, is a proud Caribbean queer artist born and raised in Trinidad and Tobago. He currently resides in Ontario, Canada but keeps steady visitation between both countries. Haskell is an avid sculptor for the majority of his life with focus placed on ceramics during his recent exploration of his craft (“Papa Bois by Thomas Haskell”). “Utilizing sculpture, I work towards navigation of my creolized queer selfhood as a Trinidadian Transnational. Drawing inspiration from my experiences and research into the characters of Carnival and folklore I investigate tensions of class and race, power, and gender,” reads Haskell’s artist statement. Thomas Haskell has an expansive perspective of queer life as a Caribbean individual but more specifically, a queer person in Trinidad and Tobago. At the age of ten years old he discerned a conflict within himself which he described as “being different from very young.” It was not until Thomas reached the age of puberty of around 12-13 years old, where he discovered himself to be a part of the queer community. Immediately he was aware of his culture’s treatment towards his fellow queer individuals; he iterates that he went into a mode of fear for what happened to his which caused him to isolate his true identity. The term “masking” appears yet again as a technique Haskell used to conceal his identity amongst friends and family, thoroughly aware of the stereotypical judgement he would have faced. Thomas invested in key points referencing the gender performativity culture amongst Trinidadian society as he speaks, “If I put my earring in this way...if I put my pants on this way.” He is suggesting the mannerisms built into the system determining how boys should and should not be dressed. In Trinidad and Tobago, widely known is when a male wears an earring in both ears he is considered gay, this also applies if his pants give a snug fit to his body.

As the factors above remain as general discrimination of the queer community, Thomas had his unique experience with his journey to queer discovery. Uncommon and a feat to pride

yourself as lucky was the supportive reaction Haskell acquired from his family and colleagues. He first came out to his parents and subsequently sibling, to which he learnt that his siblings also belonged to the queer community. This relieving event for Thomas was appreciated by him unfortunately, his move to Canada involved frequent public harassment seeing as Thomas was openly performing his identity. “You have things like people on the subway calling you an AIDS fucker.” Thomas quickly fell victim to straight male individuals scrutinizing him for sporting feminine traits, an action that solidifies the homophobic and also the misogynistic proclivity these persons display. These words of chauvinism were then reinforced in Trinidadian streets as Haskell briefs on what he calls, “usual terms” , “battyboy” and “bulla man;” these are used as homophobic slurs within Trinidadian context.

As an embodiment of his queer identity, Thomas creates work revolving around his Caribbean identity and his queerness. “This primal material is my medium of choice for an ongoing project titled Mas’Queer’Raid; a collection of Traditional Trinidadian carnival/folklore characters that I invoke to tackle tensions surrounding my Creolized Queer Caribbean Selfhood” (Haskell). Elucidated within these creations are issues of Caribbean whiteness, colonial histories, and transgressive sexualities/bodies. Belonging to this collection is *La Diabliesse*, a sculpture made out of stoneware clay and glazes, and enamel. This piece depicts a traditional character of Trinidadian folklore, La Diabliesse, pronounced *la-ja-bless*. As stated in the Trinidad Guardian, “The La Diabliesse looms tall in the annals of our mythology. She is the devil woman, the temptress and seductress whose wiles would entrap any man whose ill luck led him into her path.” In Haskell’s sculpture he emphasizes this power the la Diabliesse is said to have over men by illustrating her carrying a bowl of penises; an emasculating gesture geared towards addressing a disempowered, misogynistic male. The entirety of the collection suggests the “power of the

penis” as each sculpture shows interactions of varying human/animalistic forms with the penis. One of my biggest pieces in exploring queerness was the Jab Molassie.” In the interview Thomas went into explicit detail to thoroughly explain this character as it relates to masculinity and a queer male. The sculpture is of animal-like depictions of the traditional Jab Molassie in Trinidad carnival, a character stemming from enslavement that was covered in molasses while parading the streets with frantic and wild movements in hopes of being paid by bystanders (“Traditional Mas Characters”). Haskell portrayed them reflecting positions of sodomy, accentuating and sensualising contact with penises, as a means of exhibiting the power men devote to measurement and physicality of their bodies. (*Reference Appendix D*)

## CHAPTER THREE

### Art as an Educational Tool

The following chapter discusses and analyses art works from each artist to concur how the visual arts is an effective tool for learning about gender performativity in the anglophone Caribbean.

#### **3.1 *Teachings from Queer Compositions in Art***

“Works of art sometimes help us to feel less out of place in the world. Alongside queer novels, films, poems and songs, art has played its part in nurturing the self-awareness and confidence of queer people around the world” (Pilcher). Conducting a study such as this one has allowed for the investigation into the techniques and compositions which they produced on their journey of distinguishing their identity.

In one of Alex Gibson’s pieces titled, *Crochet Dress and Butterflies*, they give viewers a simple yet distinct way in understanding what gender performance is and can be.



**Figure 3.1** *Crochet Dress and Butterflies* by Alex Gibson, **Source**, *caribbeanboy.com*, April 2022

Figure 3.1 shows, what can be considered a masculine body wearing a crocheted body-con dress adorned in butterflies. Including a compositional choice such as this one will provide those who are not in favour of the queer community, to develop an understanding that clothing does not equal gender/sex; a generational trait built within Caribbean societies. The butterflies scattered around the human-figure can imply freeness, harmlessness, prettiness and most importantly, a sense familiarity and gentleness with the audience. This instinctively generates a softer approach towards the idea of non-binary to those who are not knowledgeable about it. When interviewing Gibson, in their words, “Art was my memorial diary,” hoping that viewers see the non-binary identity.

Similarly, to Gibson, Thomas Haskell revealed that being a part of the art world has granted him access to forging a connection with minds and hands. This was where he delved into sculpture to aid in the narration of his story to explore his queerness and the relationship it holds to his cultural background. In conversation with Thomas, he mentioned key characteristics of his Trinidadian culture and recollects on experiences of being Caribbean queer. His recent clay sculpture which strongly and accurately reveals homophobic culture within Trinidad is, *Bullaman* and *Battiboi*, a series consisting of two figures, one of which he has completed.



**Figure 3.2** *Bullaman* by Thomas Haskell, **Source**, @tshaskell via Instagram, October 2021

In Trinidadian streets the slang, “bullaman” is commonly thrown around as a derogatory term to refer to a gay male. Thomas Haskell’s creation, as seen in Figure 3.2, is a brown toned bull with gold accents, to go along with an enlarged penis. His craft engages in a phrase he likes to call, “The Power of the Piggy (penis),” which is his version of showing a man’s worship of the genitalia and its ruling over their masculinity. Within the context of validity, it is commonly known to be believed that the larger a male’s genitalia, the more masculine he is and Thomas references this in the sculpture via the enlargement of the penis and the bull dragging along its weight, interpreted as the weight of toxic masculinity. Though this work may be more explicit for local viewers to process, it is an excellent literal way of educating that gender is a performance. The use of something animalistic, the bull, and the addition of the large penis shows that the said rule of appearance of genitalia is futile in distinguishing masculinity, much less one’s gender identity. The idea of materialistic acts and constructs in society correlating to gender is significantly destructive towards the queer community and Haskell’s, *Bullaman*, is an accurate representation of that.

Although Rohan Zhou-Lees craft slightly differs from the two mentioned previously, they have found the art form of theatre to be exceedingly symbiotic, with particular focus on the research and expression of their identity. They go on to unravel the prejudice that a queer non-binary is stricken with as a male presenting ballet dancer. Rohan has featured in a list of plays over the years and two significant ones note mentioning are the Bluebird in *The Sleeping Beauty* at the Victoria Ballet Theatre and the Cavalier in *The Nutcracker* at Le Ballet Petit. In conversation they discussed their gender expression in relation to their theatrical performances saying, “I am able to redefine a movement that fits me when being told they should be more masculine.” They explained that through particular gestural motions they made with their arms

and fingers, were rooted in a queer-based performance technique as a way to incorporate their identity and non-conformity to gender-based roles in the industry. In Caribbean culture the practice of ballet is already seen as not inclusive of men thus resulting in discrimination to the idea of male inclusivity in the form. Theatre and ballet is an effective way in which the Caribbean can be educated on gender performativity amongst their surroundings. Performances like Zhou-Lee’s can create lasting impacts on viewers in helping them understand that actions and gender do not define one’s mannerisms and vice versa. Rohan’s ability to express themselves through their behaviours should not equal their identity. Viewing theatre performances as such would generate a start to understanding and familiarizing them with the queer in society.

Lastly, Krystina Snaggs confidently stated, “My work has helped in me understanding and being more open about my sexuality.” As Snaggs told of her struggles and treatment as a queer individual, her experiences also encompass the misogyny that a queer woman endures; this is why Krystina’s pieces features women, specifically lesbian women. In her piece entitled, *Chakra Cards*, each one is delivered symbolising the seven chakras, common to the religions Hinduism and Tantric Buddhism.

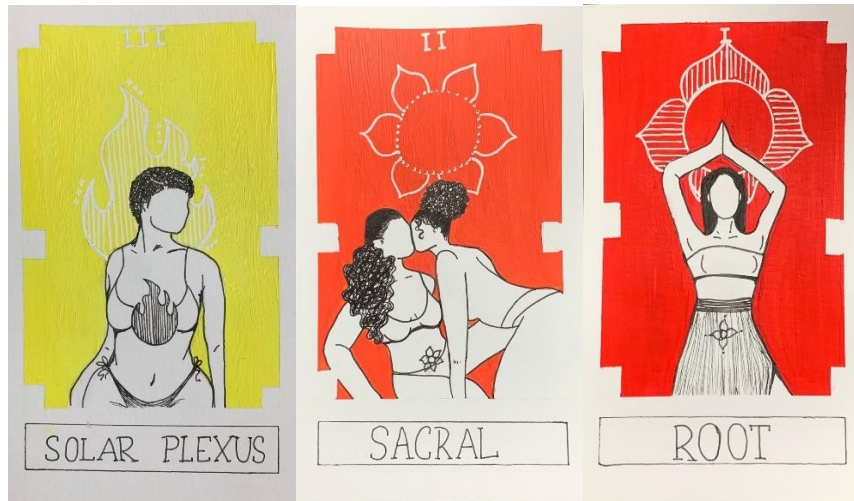


**Figure 3.3.i**

**Figure 3.3.ii**

**Figure 3.3.iii**

**Figure 3.3.i**



**Figure 3.3.v**

**Figure 3.3.vi**

**Figure 3.3.vii**

**Figure 3.3** *Chakra Cards* by Krystina Snaggs, **Source**, *electronic mail*, April 2022

Figure 3.3 shows seven cards, each their own chakra, and these are: Crown, Third-Eye, Throat, Heart, Solar Plexus, Sacral, and Root. Two of Krystina’s cards display interactions between women, which she has confirmed to be lesbian couples. In Figure 3.3.i, the card has two women making contact with their foreheads and one is seen with a protective arm in front of the other. The *heart* chakra is known to represent balance and your ability to love. The meaning behind the card itself is an excellent way to support the idea of loving whoever one pleases, no matter gender identity. The second card which shows another queer couple is Figure 3.3.v, the *sacral* chakra. This particular chakra hold meaning of one’s sexuality and emotions. Krystina hints at the openness of queer sexuality and the unnecessary structure of *sacral* conveying any specific gender/sexuality. These are both useful cards and an all-rounded piece to educate Caribbean viewers, especially the religious homophobic groups, on the inclusion naturalness of queer identities in everyday beliefs and doings. In extension, the religion of Hinduism is practiced heavily in the Caribbean; it remains with a strict structure regarding what genders can

and cannot do. Krystina's piece can broaden their knowledge and acceptance of queerness and other identities not relating to their belief system.

### ***3.2 Carnival and Queer***

Queer art has played a vital role in the destigmatizing of repressive gender norms ("Queer Art"). Home to the Caribbean is each of the countries versions of Carnival, an integral art form in educating generations about the history of their respective countries and hardships. Carnival characters and performances can be an extremely effective approach to endeavour into the issues of today and future gender and queer issues. Gibson began their conversation by voicing, "The Caribbean has a lot of learning that has to be done. Art is inevitably a part of our culture, and it can be great educational tool towards these issues." Thomas Haskell's work follows this as he conversates queerness in Carnival masquerade through his sculptures so that local viewers have a familiarity with the creation. "Art is an invitation to learn" (Zhou-Lee), and Carnival is a popular art form for the Caribbean to do so.

A noteworthy queer influence is designer, Peter Minshall, and their contribution to Carnival as a gay man. Throughout the years Minshall has educated the Caribbean on queerness and the gay community through their creations. His band creation in 2006, *The Sacred Heart*, served as a representation of HIV/AIDS awareness during the time period, particularly the stereotypes amongst the gay community. Another major influencer of Carnival and the Calypso genre is Linda McCartha "Calypso Rose" Sandy Lewis. The artist's calypso, *Palet* (1968), is explained as a "playfully bawdy tune laced with homoerotic double entendre in which Calypso Rose transforms herself into an ice lolly vendor, "Palet" documents female same-sex desire in calypso through the sung symbolism of the Caribbean lesbian phallus" (Gill 16/Introduction).

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study investigated the visual arts as an educational tool for gender performativity in the Anglophone Caribbean countries: Barbados, Jamaica, St. Lucia and Trinidad and Tobago. The paper focused on queer artists, Alex Gibson (Barbados), Rohan Zhou-Lee (Jamaica), Thomas Haskell (Trinidad), and Krystina Snaggs (St. Lucia), from each of these islands and their experience with being queer. Information was gathered using qualitative data by conducting interviews, along with secondary methods. Findings indicated that queer discrimination was rampant amongst the queer artists interviewed. Each interviewee detailed their marginalisation within their surroundings the results being within their household, schools, public and cyber bullying. Each queer artist as well, identified the visual arts as an effective tool for educating the Caribbean on gender performativity. Close studies conducted on artworks from each artist discovered that many techniques and forms can be analysed and used to allow viewers an understanding of gender performativity, encouraging their acceptance toward the community. This was evident in the inclusion of non-binary illustrations, same-sex narrations, men in ballet, and local depictions of discrimination. It was also found that these queer individuals believed heavily in the use of Caribbean culture, particularly Carnival, as a fruitful and entertaining way that viewers can learn to comprehend and accept the idea of gender performativity and the queer community; behaviours and mannerisms should not dictate the idea of gender identity nor the marginalisation of those who seemingly act and appear in contrast to the norm.

### *Limitations of study*

It was difficult to find a variety of sources covering queer discrimination related to visual arts in the Caribbean. Another significant limitation was acquiring the interviewees along with

scheduling an interview with them. Lastly, the study does not include a wide range of participants to represent each anglophone Caribbean country.

### ***Recommendations***

Given a longer timeline to investigate this topic, a well-rounded collection of interviews from each of the anglophone Caribbean countries could be conducted to produce a larger and more intensive look at gender performativity. Future research can also encompass a higher degree of detail on the artists' craft and methods in exploring and displaying their queer identity and performativity. Each artist noted as well that to properly educate on the gender performativity and discrimination within the Caribbean, beginning with the younger generation such as primary and pre-schoolers can be an even greater effective tool in the education and respect of the queer community.

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## APPENDIX A

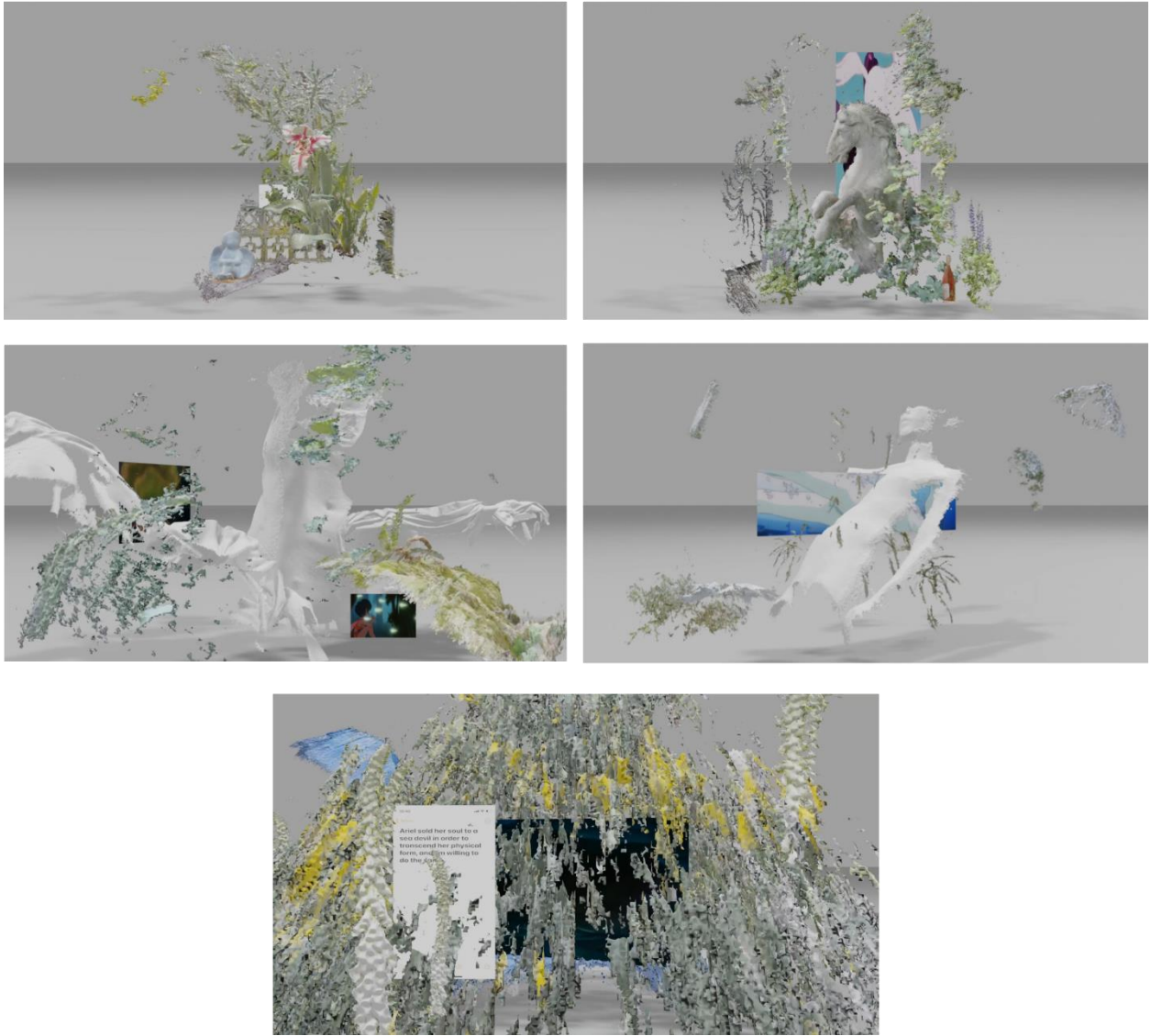
**Julianna Sankar**

### INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

**The following are questions based on the research topic, Visual Arts as an Educational Tool for Gender Performativity in the Anglophone Caribbean. They are aimed at gathering information and generating an understanding of your experience with being a queer artist, in relation to your respective nationality.**

1. When did you first realize you were a part of the queer community?
2. What was your experience with this realization?
3. What were the reactions from your community with this information?
4. It is common to see men belonging to the LGBT community being ridiculed by other men, do you have any experiences with this?
5. In your country, what have you been exposed to by identifying as queer, as well as a queer artist?
6. Describe your current work and its relation to your identity/experience as a queer artist.
7. Do you implement particular methods/techniques into your work to reflect your queer identity?
8. Do you feel that being a queer artist hinders you from gaining opportunities/being successful?
9. Has creating work helped you on your journey of being queer? If so, in what way?
10. Do you think art can be an educational tool for gender performativity? In what ways do you think it can aid? If you can, specify to your country/school system.
11. What is your opinion on the LGBTQIA community being acknowledged and taught to our younger generation (primary schools, kindergarten, etc)?

## APPENDIX B



**Alex Gibson, *Untitled Garden*, Source, [capturephotofest.com](http://capturephotofest.com), 2021**

APPENDIX C



Krystina Snaggs, *WOMAN*, Source, @krystinas.art on Instagram, May 2021



Krystina Snaggs, *Chakras Version 2*, Source, @krystinas.art on Instagram, April 2021

APPENDIX D



Thomas Haskell, *Mas'Queer'Raid*, Source, [tshaskell.com](http://tshaskell.com), 2022