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**Caribbean Queer: Inscriptions and Potentialities in Shivane Ramlochan's  
*Everyone Knows I Am a Haunting* and Nalo Hopkinson's *The Salt Roads***

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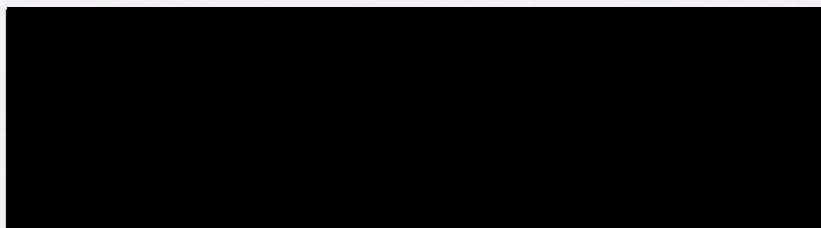


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## **ABSTRACT**

This study aims to analyse how queer subjects are able to articulate their non-normative and unstable gendered and/or sexual identities in Caribbean literary texts, drawing on both Caribbean cultural and queer theories. In the present study I will focus on how some characters are depicted as queer subjects in some poems from Shivane Ramlochan's *Everyone Knows I Am a Haunting* and in Nalo Hopkinson's novel *The Salt Roads* and on how both texts open the possibility to imagine constructions of gender and sexuality that contest hegemonic heteronormativity based on a binary system. More specifically, I will analyse how both authors' construction of cultural identities in relation to queer subjects draws on Caribbean cultural manifestations and folklore, as both authors present narratives that are attendant to local realities. In addition, this paper elucidates how these authors inscribe the presence of queer characters in Caribbean history, space and time. This study aims at contributing to the emerging field of Caribbean queer studies

**KEY WORDS:** Caribbean queer, Nalo Hopkinson, Shivane Ramlochan, gender, sexuality, queer theory

## **RESUM**

La finalitat d'aquest estudi és analitzar com els subjectes *queer* articulen les seves identitats de gènere i/o sexuals com a no normatives i inestables en textos literaris caribenys, tenint en compte tant teories culturals caribenyes com *queer*. El meu estudi es centra en com alguns personatges estan representats com a subjectes *queer* en algunes composicions del poemari *Everyone Knows I Am a Haunting*, de Shivane Ramlochan, i en la novel·la *The Salt Roads* de Nalo Hopkinson, així com en la possibilitats que ambdós textos ofereixen per a imaginar construccions de gènere i sexualitat fora de l'heteronormativitat hegemònica basada en un sistema binari. Més específicament, analitzaré com les dues autores construeixen les identitats culturals dels subjectes *queer* a partir d'expressions culturals i folklore del Carib, atès que ambdues autores ofereixen narratives que responen a realitats locals. A més, intentaré dilucidar com les dues autores inscriuen la presència de subjectes *queer* en la història, el temps i l'espai. El present estudi té com a finalitat contribuir a la disciplina emergent d'estudis queer caribenys.

**PARAULES CLAU:** Carib *queer*, Nalo Hopkinson, Shivane Ramlochan, gènere, sexualitat, teoria *queer*.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Caribbean is characterised by an assemblage of palimpsest narratives of resistance, from the first African people who tried to resist enslavement in the boats during the Middle Passage to present-day economic alternatives that have developed to counter the effects of the neo-colonial tourism industry in the region. Like in many Western countries, in the Caribbean, heteronormativity, social stigma and homophobia also hinder the possibility for queer subjects to have livable lives.<sup>1</sup> In the tradition of this continuum of resistances, it is not surprising that even though contemporary constructions of Caribbean genders and sexualities are imbricated in existing discourses of hypersexuality and heteropatriarchy in the region (Kempadoo, 2004, p. 7), queer subjects should manage to articulate non-normative constructions of identity contesting these discourses and, at the same time, open spaces in which it is possible to negotiate them. The region's troubled relationship with its past, characterised by colonialism and different forms of enslavement, is key to understanding how notions of gender and sexuality have developed and shifted in the Caribbean. Within this context, literature and other cultural manifestations have proven to be a prolific site wherein identities and lives can be reimagined, reconceptualised and negotiated, and many authors choose to include queer characters in their texts to contest heteronormative and patriarchal discourses.

This is the case of Nalo Hopkinson's novel *The Salt Roads* (2003) and Shivane Ramlochan's debut poetry collection *Everyone Knows I am a Haunting* (2017), which will be the object of analysis in this study. Both texts are by contemporary writers who self-identify as queer and bear strong ties to the Caribbean: although Nalo Hopkinson lives in the USA nowadays, she was born in Jamaica from Jamaican and Guyanese parents and spent the first 16 years of her life living in Jamaica, Trinidad and Guyana before moving to Canada, and Shivane Ramlochan is a Trinidadian poet. The choice of these authors is informed by the idea that it is necessary to study works by authors who are based in the Caribbean, as it is Shivane Ramlochan's case, and also authors who, despite being diasporic, incorporate many aspects of Caribbean traditions and folklore in their writing, as it is Nalo Hopkinson's case. This context-based approach is especially relevant when discussing Caribbean queer subjectivities, since it opposes the idea that narratives

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<sup>1</sup> Here I am using the concept as how the philosopher Judith Butler (2004) theorized it. According to her, what makes a life livable is "certain normative conditions that must be fulfilled for life to become life" (p.39), that is, "what humans require in order to maintain and reproduce the conditions of their own livability" (p. 39), as a life that is recognized as valuable and legitimate.

featuring subjects with non-normative genders and sexualities should be deterritorialized because queer subjects are always forced to leave the region in order to have livable lives. Rather, this study intends to endorse the idea that they can also articulate instances of resistance within the Caribbean. In addition, the choice of two authors with different cultural backgrounds—Afro-Caribbean (Nalo Hopkinson) and Indo-Caribbean (Shivane Ramlochan)—has been deliberate, as it captures the cultural diversity of the region.

This study analyses how both *The Salt Roads* and *Everyone Knows I Am a Haunting* depict characters with non-normative genders and sexualities. In particular, I will focus on how both authors inscribe the presence of queer subjects in time, either past or contemporary, in order to explore how these identities were or can be articulated in the Caribbean. In addition, this study explores how both Ramlochan and Hopkinson draw on local cultural traditions, such as folklore or mythological characters, to envisage ways in which these tropes offer conceptual spaces to explore and imagine queer genders and sexualities. Hopkinson's *The Salt Roads* presents the trans-historical and trans-geographical experiences of three black women: Mer's experience as an enslaved woman in a plantation in 18<sup>th</sup> century Saint Domingue, Jeanne Duval's experience in 19<sup>th</sup> century Paris and Meritet's experience as a pilgrim to Jerusalem in 345 CE. Mer and Jeanne have homoerotic desires and engage in same-sex sexual acts, and the novel therefore inscribes queer desire in a broad span of time and in multiple spaces. What connects this triad of women is the Voudou lwa Ezili, who is deployed as a trope to map and explore queer experiences. In a similar way, in *Everyone Knows I Am a Haunting* Ramlochan uses folk characters, such as the douen and La Diabliesse, and Trinidadian celebrations to imagine potential ways in which both cultural manifestations can allow for the construction of non-normative gender formations. In turn, her poetry collection also inscribes queer experiences, such as cross-dressing and same-sex desire, in the Indo-Trinidadian culture.

As the title of this study indicates, my contribution is informed by what Alison Donnell calls "Caribbean Queer", that is, "a mode of theorizing that seeks to affirm the culturally specific and locally sensitive possibilities that already exist in terms of configurations of sexual eclecticism in the Anglophone Caribbean" (2012, p. 217), one that draws centre stage the connections between queer possibilities and place. In using situated epistemologies and contextualized narratives, these authors also contribute to decolonize the ways in which gender and sexuality can be conceptualized in the



Caribbean.<sup>2</sup> Both Shivane and Ramlochan move away from understandings of gender and sexuality that come from Western traditions and they rather open conceptual spaces to explore what it means for queer subjects to articulate their gender and desires *in* the Caribbean and *through* Caribbean cultural manifestations.

Although the field of queer Caribbean studies is emerging, there have been some scholars who have already analysed the ways in which queer genders and sexualities are deployed in *The Salt Roads* (Houlden, 2015; Marinkova, 2012; Tinsley, 2018). Yet, their focus has been mostly on the character of Jeanne and her BDSM practices (Tinsley, 2018) or on Mer's character in relation to Makandal: her narrative has been analysed as offering a female and alternative perspective on the Haitian Revolution (Houlden, 2015) and as embodying a micropolitical stance opposed to the rigidly identarian and patriarchal narratives that Makandal embodies (Marinkova, 2012). Moreover, as for now, there have not been any scholarly texts, aside from reviews, dealing with Shivane Ramlochan's poetry collection. Hence, with this study I will contribute to the aforementioned body of work on *The Salt Roads* by offering an analysis of Mer's character and the relationship between her, Tipingee and Patrice with a focus on how they resist normative discourses on gender, sexuality and relationality that were metaphorically written on enslaved bodies and how this resistance is inscribed in time, space and history, mainly through Ezili's character. Although I will also be drawing on other critics' readings of Ezili's relationship with time, I will use these readings to examine how her character relates to queer time. Additionally, I will contribute with the first academic reading of Ramlochan's poetry, which may be useful for further scholarly research.

My choice to focus on literary productions by Caribbean authors which are attendant to local cultural aspects has influenced the methodology used in this study. In these texts, I will be analysing queer subjects and I will be drawing on theoretical aspects that have been conceptualized by Western critics. Yet, the applicability of such theories in context-based narratives has already been challenged by some postcolonial scholars, as it is the case of West Indian scholar Gordon Rohlehr (1996), who claims that “[o]ne will have to study the Caribbean people [...] and listen to them, before one can learn to make important or relevant critical statements on the new writers. The critic's business is

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<sup>2</sup> Some decolonial thinkers have drawn attention to how the modern colonial system also brought an epistemic hierarchy that privileges Western knowledges and cosmologies and a global sexual and gender hierarchy (see Grosfoguel, 2011; Lugones, 2007) and how decolonial liberation process should contest these hierarchical and binary systems by taking into account subaltern knowledges, from the perspective of, for instance, “critical border thinking” (see Mignolo, 2000).

first to understand the contexts out of which the work that he [sic] is examining grows” (p.265). The use of queer theory by Western academics and scholars in this study may thereby present some limitations when read in relation to literary productions of the Caribbean.

In order to address this issue, I will draw on Global North epistemologies on queer theory, such as Butler’s theoretical approach to gender and sexuality, but at the same time I will also provide a nuanced view of such theories when reading texts based in the Caribbean which draw attention to the local. As I am going to discuss on section 2, some critics have questioned whether labels of non-normative genders and sexualities, including queer, can be useful descriptors for Caribbean lived experiences (e.g. Fountain-Stokes, 2009; Nixon and King, 2013; Tinsley, 2010). However, I choose to adhere to the term *queer* for two main reasons: firstly, because some of the theoretical frameworks I will be drawing on for textual analysis have been included under the umbrella term of “queer studies” and, secondly, because definitions of *queer* encompass and describe similar ways of conceptualizing gender, sexuality and relationality to those I will be analysing in the texts. In addition, in section 2.2 I also offer some ideas on how Caribbean and queer studies interdigitate, especially in terms of the conceptualization of identity, which may be useful to think about possible bridges between both disciplines. Yet, whenever the occasion allows for, I have also considered “how people name themselves and describe their own behaviour, as well as expressions found in regionally-specific languages” (Nixon & King, 2013, p.9), and I will explore how issues of gender and sexuality relate to other categories of identity such as race, class and ethnicity, something that is particularly necessary in a multicultural place as the Caribbean. In so doing, I would like to contribute to evidencing the necessity to take into account queer subjects in the study of Caribbean texts and, in turn, how Caribbean subjects can contribute to expand the field of queer studies, endorsing the idea that “a real restructuring of postcolonial and sexuality studies [and I would add gender studies] will only take place when the academy *listens to other kinds of theorists*” (Tinsley, 2010, p.28, emphasis in original).

This being said, this study is undoubtedly informed by queer theory, so it is relevant to include an overview of this discipline. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, gay liberationist and lesbian feminist models stood on universalizing assumptions about sexual and gender identities, which were considered to be “an essential property of the self” (Jagose, 1996, p. 79), and on the necessity to priorly define a stable, coherent identity as a the basis for any political intervention. Some critical voices claimed that this form of

identity politics entailed a series of exclusions and hierarchies between different understandings of gender and sexual practices and experiences. According to Annamarie Jagose (1996), within this context,<sup>3</sup> *queer* emerged as a response to these understandings of identity, establishing both a continuation and a critical distance to them (p. 75).<sup>4</sup> Drawing from post-structuralist and post-modern theorizations, *queer* regards identity as “an effect of identification with and against others” (p. 79), one which is “ongoing, and always incomplete, [...] a process rather than property” (p. 79) and as constituted within the interplay of different discourses with neither uniform or stable tactical strategies (Foucault, 1976/1998, p. 100). Hence, *queer* regards identity not as a stable individualised possession, but as a multiple and unstable discursive position. Although part of the potential of *queer* is in its resistance to encompass a fixed definition, *queer* “describes those gestures or analytical models which dramatize incoherencies in the allegedly stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender and desire [...] includ[ing] such topics as cross-dressing, hermaphroditism, gender ambiguity and gender-corrective surgery” (Jagose, 1996, p. 3). Moreover, *queer* tries to eschew any conceptualizations of sexuality and gender based on binaries. Rather, as Eve K. Sedgwick (1993) argues, it refers to “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or *can’t* be made) to signify monolithically” (p. 8). Thus, *queer* contests heteronormativity and draws attention to subversive, anti-normative and dissident forms of gender performativities and sexuality, mapping how agency may contest, reconfigure and create spaces of potentiality in relation to gender and sexuality.

Although queer criticism soon entered academic circuits, despite emerging in activist circles, many critical interventions contesting universalizing notions of gender and sexuality had been previously made, especially from black, postcolonial and lesbian feminist perspectives. In 1987, chicana lesbian, feminist and activist Gloria Anzaldúa, in her semi-autobiographical and trans-genre book *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, already posits a mestiza metaphysics which envisages a subject-position that is hybrid, in-between and bordering different cultures and identities. Having been sidelined by Native American, Mexican and American communities for being a lesbian and a

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<sup>3</sup> It is important to mention that the AIDS crisis played a detrimental role in the development of queer criticism, as it foregrounded the need of “a radical revision of contemporary lesbian and gay politics” (Jagose, 1996, p. 95).

<sup>4</sup> Whenever I use the term “queer” without any adjunct, I want to allude to a more encompassing, transdisciplinary approach of what queer refers to, not restricting it to a purely theoretical or activist arena. The term “queer” has been deployed as a reappropriation of what used to be, and is, a derogatory term to refer to homosexuals.

woman, she celebrates the space she occupies as a subject-position in relation to them: “as a *mestiza* I have no country, my homeland cast me out; yet all countries are mine because I am every woman's sister or potential lover. (As a lesbian I have no race, my own people disclaim me; but I am all races because there is the queer of me in all races.)” (p. 80). In turn, she envisages an other identity for her, one that resists being fixed or described in binary terms, and generates a space of possibility to resignify it: “*Soy un amasamiento*, I am an act of kneading, of uniting and joining that not only has produced both a creature of darkness and a creature of light, but also a creature that questions the definitions of light and dark and gives them new meanings” (p. 81). Anzaldúa’s conceptualizations of identity, based on border thinking, have strong connections with those of queer theory, such as Sedgwick’s use of queer in *Tendencies* (1993), which she regards as “transitive—multiply transitive. The immemorial current that queer represents is antiseperatist and antiassimilationist. Keenly, it is relational, and strange” (p. xii).

In the 1990s, queer theory entered academic circuits and consolidated itself as a field in gender and sexuality studies, establishing some continuity with the already consolidated gay and lesbian studies. Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* (1990) made a ground-breaking intervention in these fields, as it problematized the ways in which gendered and sexed bodies have often been regarded within feminism. Butler contends that non-heterosexual subjects, that is, “heterosexual, bisexual, and gay and lesbian contexts in which gender does not necessarily follow from sex, and desire, or sexuality generally, does not seem to follow from gender—indeed, where none of these dimensions of significant corporeality express or reflect one another” (p. 185) challenge the false stabilization of gender which is compelled in the interests of maintaining heterosexuality as the norm.<sup>5</sup> Since “[t]he internal coherence or unity of either gender, man or woman, thereby requires both a stable and oppositional heterosexuality” (pp. 30-31), in exposing such a discontinuity, the body as a coherent entity is problematized and gender is no longer regarded in binary distinctions or the expression of a ‘true self’.

In turn, according to Butler (1990), compulsory heterosexuality aims at keeping coherence as something desirable, as an idealization. So as to achieve such coherence, subjects produce a series of acts, enactments, gestures that “produce the effect of an

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<sup>5</sup> Despite not being dealt with here, it is important to state that Butler contends that both gender and sex are socially and discursively constructed, challenging how gender is usually regarded as “the variable and cultural construction of sex” (Butler, 1990, p.152) and sex—or the body—as a pre-discursive, biological and passive locus, which “appear[s] to be in some sense there on the far side of language, unmarked by a social system” (Butler, 1990, p.155 italics on original).

interior core or substance, but produce this *on the surface* of the body” (p. 185, italics in original). Judith Butler reverses the cause-effect relation of gender by arguing that this assemblage of acts is what constitutes gender. For her, gender is *performative* “in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means” (p.185). Identity and the unity of gender is an illusion that is constantly supported, fabricated and (re)created: we “are not” gender, but we are constantly “doing” gender. The gendered body is not the origin of such enactments and it does not have an ontological reality: the gendered body is constituted through them.<sup>6</sup> That subjects think that they possess a gender as an interior essence is an effect of regulatory practices that aim at establishing boundaries between a purported inner essence and outer expression and which, in turn, privilege and naturalise heterosexuality. Stepping outside normative codes of gender brings some consequences in relation to how bodies are made legible, and very often ostracized, by others. As Butler (2017) suggests, “[b]odies that do not conform with the normative conditions of appearance still do appear. They appear as the monstrous, the criminal, the pathological, and in some ways they carry with them, or embody, a critique of those constraining norms that govern the field of appearance” (p. 70).

Queer theorist Jack Halberstam explored how time and space may be reconfigured outside a heteronormative framework. In *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (2005) Halberstam begins by arguing that during the AIDS epidemic, queer subcultures acquired a new understanding of life, since the possibility of infection and the effects it would have for their future made them produce “a new emphasis on the here, the present, the now [...], allowing their participants to believe that their futures can be imagined according to logics that lie outside of those paradigmatic markers of life experience—namely, birth, marriage, reproduction and death” (p. 2). Halberstam argues that while family, child-rearing and reproductive time are constructs that reproduce and sustain bourgeois and heteronormative understandings of temporality, queer counterpublics appropriate time and inscribe their own nonnormative experiences to create a new relation with temporality outside this framework.<sup>7</sup> He links this

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<sup>6</sup> Judith Butler (2004) later on will clarify that in arguing this, she is not denying the material existence of bodies, but rather questioning the way “to distinguish between what is “materially” true, and what is “culturally” true about a sexed body” (p. 87), and she adds, “I don’t mean to suggest that purely cultural signs produce a material body, but only that the body does not become sexually readable without those signs, and that those signs are irreducibly cultural and material at once” (p.87).

<sup>7</sup> Queer counterpublics can be defined as “the places, spaces, or emans through which those pushed to societies’ margins develop their identities, construct communities, and formulate strategies for transforming wider publics” (Friedman, 2017, p. 3).

conceptualization of time to how queer experiences also enable new understandings of space that disrupt notions of normalcy (p. 7). Although Halberstam's theory on queer temporalities and spatialities focuses on those experiences that aim at subverting normative discourses of sexuality, he does not restrict its use to LGBTIQ+ practices and offers the possibility to use the terms to explain "nonnormative logics and organizations of community, sexual identity, embodiment, and activity in space and time" (p. 6).

Following this introduction, this study presents a second section, mainly theoretical, devoted to the intersections between queer and Caribbean studies and the realities of Caribbean queer subjects. This section is subdivided in four parts: in the first one, I problematize the use of queer theory from a Caribbean perspective, in the second one, I analyse how queer theory and Caribbean studies interdigitate, in the third one, I explore how forms of enslavement, either chattel slavery or indentureship, informed current notions of gender and sexuality and, finally, in the fourth one I present how queer subjects live in the Caribbean nowadays. Afterwards, I provide an analysis of the aforementioned works. Finally, in the last section, I draw some conclusions before moving on to the analysis carried out in parts 3 and 4.

## 2. THE QUEER CARIBBEAN

### 2.1. *Problematizing Queer Theory*

Within the field of queer studies, many academics writing from the perspective of the Global North have already acknowledged and brought to the fore the limitations of queer theory when it disregards considerations of race, ethnicity and cultural specificities.

Indeed, Eve K. Sedgwick in the introduction to *Tendencies* (1993) claims that

a lot of the most exciting recent work around ‘queer’ spins the term outward along dimensions that can’t be subsumed under gender and sexuality at all: the ways that race, ethnicity, postcolonial nationality criss-cross with these *and other* identity-constituting, identity-fracturing discourses, for example. [...] Thereby, [...] the term ‘queer’ itself deepens and shifts. (p. 9, italics in original)

Taking into account race, alongside other categories of identity, is essential when considering queerness as a lived experience for queer theory to fully reach its critical potential. In similar terms, Judith Butler (1999) also points towards the need to use an intersectional approach to queer theory, and specifically, to her theory on gender performativity, when she claims that “the question to ask is not whether the theory of performativity is transposable onto race, but what happens to the theory when it tries to come to grips with race” (p. xvi). Hence, the need for a context-based approach that aims at producing situated knowledge(s) ought to be of central importance in queer theory, but especially when accounting for the experiences of queer subjects in the Caribbean.

Some Caribbean writers and critics have already cautioned against the power relations in which discourses of queerness coming from Western countries are imbued and which may affect the process of translating experiences between different cultural contexts. As Kei Miller (2013) puts it:

This is the problem, that this particularly western [sic], first-world epistemology with its own ideas of closets and queerness and gayness—its attempt, yes, to describe traditionally victimized subjectivities, but with a language that, coming from the centre, will always wield its own power. It will always be a sort of colonial language, and a colonial language in which we try to translate other postcolonial experiences, perhaps not appreciating the long-standing axiom about translations, that in the process something is inevitably lost. (p. 101)

Miller establishes a connection between language and colonialism by acknowledging the fact that “processes by which they [transgressive gender and sexual performances] have been accommodated do not map easily onto neo-colonial notions or cultures of ‘queer’ or ‘LGBT’” (p. 102) because indigenous experiences are rather understood “*in* their own terms and *on* their own terms” (p. 102, emphasis in original). These translation processes result in “the postcolonial subject begin[ning] to understand himself [sic] in the imported

terms, through someone else's pitying gaze" (p. 102), that is, from the perspective of the Global North.

Kei Miller's concern about the issue of language when accounting for queer experiences has also been of paramount importance for other critics working on Caribbean genders and sexualities. On the issue of terminology, Rosamond S. King (2014) points out that it is

because terms represent lived experiences in particular cultural, geographical, chronological, and social spaces that they make sense to us all. To use a term in an appropriate context is to erase the specificity of that context and the agency of the individual, and to superimpose assumptions on them about what it means to inhabit their identity. (p. 94)

The fact that Caribbean subjects are free to self-identify with any term based on contextual factors and beyond Eurocentric frameworks thereby constitutes a step towards epistemological decolonization.

Yet, since nonheteronormative subjects adopt and negotiate different subject positions in relation to the cultural (con)texts in which they are immersed, the terms they choose to identify themselves with is far from homogenic. The region's linguistic environment allows for the expression of gender beyond masculinity/femininity, since "[t]he absence of grammatical gender for Creole nouns [...] and pronouns [...] suggests a culturally specific grammar of gender that differs from Europe's compulsory binary, [...] accompanied by rich vocabulary to express female masculinity and male femininity" (Tinsley, 2010, p. 9). Moreover, there is not a monolithical view on the terms' connotations and uses and "[s]ome people in the Caribbean explicitly identify the term *lesbian* with white North American and European women, while others use local nonderogatory or reclaimed terms such as *zami*, *mati*, *buenas amigas*, *entendida*, *kambrada*, and various euphemisms such as "so," "funny," or "goes with women," and still others refuse to label their sexuality at all" (King, 2014, p. 94). Although the issue of naming could be understood as the basis of identity-politics, something that queer theory eschews, these terms encompass a multiplicity of gender performativities and sexual experiences and desires that go beyond binary understandings of sexuality and gender. Rather, identifying with a specific term should be regarded as a means to understand their own sexuality and/or gender through a Caribbean lens.

## 2.2. *Caribbeanness and Queerness: Fluxes in Conversation*

A flux entails perpetual change, movement and constant instability, concepts that are fundamental to both Caribbeanness and queerness. At the same time, water, and the



sea, central and ubiquitous tropes in Caribbean literature, are also quintessential elements that could be related to this concept of flux. Such fluidity also entails intermingling and the existence of contact points. Indeed, this section precisely briefly discusses the intersection between queerness and Caribbeanness. Although in the previous section I have problematized Western queer epistemologies, these contact points evidence how queerness, focussing on how gendered and sexual subjectivities are constructed, is embedded in the Caribbean experience and how studying them in parallel is a productive endeavour, being “in part a strategic intervention that directly contests the impossibility of fluid sexualities in the region” (Donnell, 2012, p. 220).

In *The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective*, Antonio Benítez-Rojo offers a postmodern approach to Caribbean cultural forms and history. In his renderings of it, the Cuban philosopher claims that the Caribbean goes beyond any binary oppositions and that when studying the Caribbean, “the postmodern perspective can also offer interesting angles, since it assumes the impossibility of finding authentic origins and predictable outcomes” (Benítez Rojo, 1996, p. 295). These ideas are echoed on queer understandings of gender: destabilizing binaries and not biologically determined or stable. As Alison Donnell (2012) argues, “[b]oth Caribbeanness and queerness are places then where identity is unmasked as a performance, as what can be crafted, invented, and styled rather than what is discovered or known” (p. 209).

In a similar vein, Martinican critic Édouard Glissant, drawing from the Deleuzian and Guattarian notion of the rhizome, understands identity from the lens of a “poetics of relation”, that is, taking into account connections and relationships between subjects as opposed to an understanding of identity based on exclusivity (2002, p. 32). He puts forward the Caribbean as a paradigmatic site wherein this “poetics of relation” occurred: “what took place in the Caribbean, which could be summed up in the word *creolization*, approximates the idea of Relation for us as nearly as possible” (Glissant, 1997, p. 34). According to Glissant, creolization, that is, the mesh, influence and interrelation of different cultures—indigenous, African, European, Asian and Caribbean—that occurred in the Caribbean, is “a perpetual movement of cultural and linguistic overlaps that prevents the emergence of a definition of being” (2002, p. 125, my translation).<sup>8</sup> Glissant’s ideas relate to how Eve K. Sedgwick (1993) understands relationality, openness and fluidity as being constituent elements of the queer, as it has been previously

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<sup>8</sup> In the original: “un movimiento perpetuo de interpenetrabilidad cultural y lingüística que impide que desboquemos en una definición del ser”.

discussed. In fact, queer theorist Paul B. Preciado (2019) equates being trans with a process of internal creolization, as both imply “accepting that one is oneself only thanks to and through change, cross-culturality and blend” (n.p., my translation).<sup>9</sup>

As a paradigmatic example, Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley (2008) makes a critical intervention grounded on the dialogue between queer and Caribbean discourses by offering a rereading of Gilroy’s notion of the Black Atlantic from a queer perspective. She locates the possible emergence of queer relationships in the slave ships that crossed the Atlantic to reach the archipelago:

[d]uring the Middle Passage, as colonial chronicles, oral tradition, and anthropological studies tell us, captive African women created erotic bonds with other women in the sex-segregated holds, and captive African men created bonds with other men. In so doing, they resisted the commodification of their bought and sold bodies by *feeling* and *feeling for* their co-occupants on these ships. (Tinsley, 2008, p. 192)

While she rejects the slave ship as a straightforward place of origin, she opens the possibility to read both the Middle Passage as site of queer and fluid bodily encounters and black queerness as “a crosscurrent through which to view hybrid, resistant subjectivities—opaquely, not transparently” (p. 199). Hence, queerness has been present from early historical times, evidencing that the Caribbean is “an already queer place” (p. 218).

### 2.3. *The Impact of Enslavement*

Enslavement has been perhaps the major landmark in the history of the Caribbean and it was materialized in a system of plantations established in the different islands. The plantation, which relied first on chattel slavery and on indentureship later, as a social and economic unit was paramount in the region’s development as a whole, so much so that some scholars have argued that this common history is a cohesive force between the different islands and it is useful to explain the Caribbean’s “regular differences” (Benítez-Rojo, 1996, p. 39). This system operated through a set of normativizing discourses, which affected subjects and their conceptualizations of gender and sexuality. I limit myself to providing only an introductory overview on how different forms of enslavement affected gender and sexual codes to historicize constructions of gender and sexuality in the region.

On the one hand, colonialism played a major role in shifting and reconfiguring how gender and sexuality were understood by colonised people. For instance, many Native American societies did not understand sex in binary terms (male/female) and they

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<sup>9</sup> In the original: “aceptar que uno solo es uno mismo gracias y a través del cambio, del mestizaje, de la mezcla”.

even recognized intersexuality, other genders beyond masculine/feminine and homosexuality (Allen, 1986/1992). Moreover, in precolonial Yoruba societies gender was not established as an organizing principle (Oyewùmí, 1997). Yet, María Lugones (2007) argues that the coloniality of power brought changes in social structures by imposing gender as an organizing principle and/or shifting how gender was understood. As the Argentinian decolonial thinker puts it:

Colonialism did not impose precolonial, European gender arrangements on the colonized. It imposed a new gender system that created very different arrangements for colonized males and females than for white bourgeois colonizers. Thus, it introduced many genders and gender itself as a colonial concept and mode of organization of relations of production, property relations, of cosmologies and ways of knowing. (p. 186)

Hence, enslaved people in the plantations also experienced changes on how they regarded gender in their former African societies. As Omise'eke Tinsley (2010) points out, females of African descent in the plantation underwent a process of ungendering and were forced to accommodate to the plantation's gender politics. For instance, regardless of gender, Africans were taken by quantities to the Caribbean and they performed the same tasks in the plantation while working with the cane, which entailed a blurring of gender difference. According to Tinsley, many women also rejected maternity and reproductive heterosexuality in order to resist bearing new chattel for planters, resulting in planters regarding them as "failed heterosexual producers and as potential rebels" (p. 11). Plantation owners thought that the only way to keep female slaves subservient was through compulsory heterosexuality, since they considered slave husbands "symbols of a heterosexual domination that could keep enslaved females properly docile" (p. 12). When women of African descent were allowed freedom from the plantation, the process of ungendering continued for them, as colonists ensured that they performed codes of femininity different from those of white women's (p. 13) and often hypersexualized them.

On the other hand, the experience of indentureship also had an effect on the population of Indian descent who came to the Caribbean to work in conditions resembling slavery while still living under colonial rule. As Gayatri Gopinath (2005) argues, the indenture system was "central to process of racial, gender, and sexual subjectification in the Caribbean" (p. 179), especially for women, who migrated in lower numbers than their male counterparts. Immigrant Indian women were deemed by the British colonial state and immigrant Indian men as "outcasts, immoral, and prostitutes" (p. 179) and they "were cast as 'loose' elements who disrupted dominant notions of decency and proper family values" (Kempadoo, 2004, p. 38). Such a stigma created and perpetuated both gender hierarchies between Indian immigrants and a complex set of gender politics. In terms of

sexuality, indentureship also hindered women's sexuality, which was articulated around different discourses:

First, Indian immigrant masculinity attempted to reconstitute itself through the control of 'unruly' Indian female sexuality. Second, Indian immigrant women were instrumental within gendered discourse of anticolonial nationalism in India, where arguments against indentureship were articulated as safeguarding the purity and sanctity of Indian womanhood. Finally, a Victorian discourse around domesticity and ideal womanhood sought to "domesticate" Indian women immigrants by transforming them from wage labourers to dependent housewives. (Mohammed, 1995 qtd. in Gopinath, 2005, p. 179-180)

In conclusion, both chattel slavery and indentureship, alongside colonialism, influenced the ways in which gender and sexuality were conceptualized in the archipelago. By historicizing gender and sexuality, we may find proof that Caribbean subjects, especially women, did not fully embody traditional masculinity and femininity understood in the same ways as those of the colonizer, and start understanding how, in their circumstances, they strategically negotiated gender and sexual codes in their own ways.

#### *2.4. Contesting Heteronormativity and Patriarchy: Histories of Resistance in the Caribbean*

As Kamala Kempadoo (2004) argues, hypersexuality and heteropatriarchy are two defining elements of Caribbeanness in relation to gender and sexuality (p. 7). While the former "relates to a pervasive, long-standing ideology that holds that Caribbean people possess hyperactive libidos and overly rely upon sexuality as a marker of identity", the latter "captures the interplay as well as the specificity of two distinct sets of relations of power that are in operation in Caribbean societies: heterosexism and patriarchy" (p. 7-8). As elsewhere, these two dominant discourses clearly police and hierarchize bodies, desires and gender performativities in general, but its effects are even more crippling in bodies that step out from the norm, hindering the possibility of queer subjects to have livable lives in the region.

Indeed, homophobia has been a long-standing issue in the region and it has often been an object of denunciation both by local and global communities, resulting in the Caribbean being stereotypically labelled as "the most homophobic place on earth" (Padgett, 2006).<sup>10</sup> Indeed, having sexual desires and performing gender outside the

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<sup>10</sup> This criticism was grounded on the high murder rates of gay men in the islands, as in Jamaica, and the endorsement of violence towards LGBTQ subjects in dancehall lyrics, which is undoubtedly a reality in the Caribbean. Yet, these contentions have been problematized by some critics, since they offer a stereotypical view of the reality in erasing any articulation of resistance, and some also contribute to the neo-colonial view of

heteronorm has been one of the reasons why many people have decided to leave the region, engaging in migration processes called ‘sexiles’ or ‘queer diasporas’ (Fountain-Stokes, 2009, p. xix). Some diasporic Caribbean writers have claimed that violence motivated by sexual orientation or gender identity was one of the reasons why they had to leave their home countries. For instance, Marlon James (2015) recounted his experience growing up and living in Jamaica as a gay man and admitted that “[w]hether it was in a plane or a coffin, I knew I had to get out of Jamaica” (n. p.) and in “The Colour of Free”, Staceyann Chin (2007) narrates her experience of suffering a “corrective rape” in Jamaica, which she ends by admitting that “[w]hen I come up gasping from that experience I decide it is time to consider America” (p. 64).

However, when describing the gender and sexual politics of the Caribbean, it is important to differentiate between the set of discourses that construct notions of gender and sexuality in the region and the actual lived experiences of queer subjects. Both aspects are undoubtedly intertwined: subjects come to understand themselves through existing discourses which, in turn, mediate and influence their perception and appreciation of their lived experiences, resulting in a multiplicity of understandings of gender and sexuality. Yet, queer subjects find ways to negotiate these discourses and manage to articulate their non-normative gender and sexuality within the Caribbean, often “by literally and figuratively clearing space for themselves in the public domain through artistic expression and community-building techniques” (Gill, 2018, p. 1).

Hence, in the Caribbean gender and sexuality are experienced in diverse ways and, despite the existence of homophobia and heteronormativity, non-normative genders and sexualities have come to be quite accepted in local-specific ways. As Kamala Kempadoo (2004) argues, “multiple partnering relationships by both men and women, serial monogamy, informal polygamy, and same-gender and bisexual relations are commonplace” (p. 8), which evidences that nonhegemonic understandings of sexuality and kinship exist in the archipelago. According to Rosamond S. King (2014), as far as gender is concerned, although trans people are acknowledged their existence but not considered full members of society (p. 20), there is a “continuum of gender-variant experience—*trans* experience—in the Caribbean, the range of which includes people who live as a gender other than that assigned to them at birth and those who perform transvestite carnival characters” (p. 20). In the region, there are varying levels of tolerance

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Western countries being ‘more developed’ than the Caribbean, even if homophobic violence also exists in these countries. For further discussion see Rosamond S. King (2014, pp. 82-87).

towards non-heterosexual or trans subjects, which depend on the specific context and material conditions wherein queer subjects find themselves. Homosexuality, usually male, is often negotiated as an open secret or *secreto abierto*, “a situation in which many people ‘know’ someone is a homosexual though the fact is not openly acknowledged” (p. 64), a context that differs very much from the coming out narrative that is frequent in the Global North. For women’s part, those who desire women live in a state of less visibility than male who desire men, particularly Afro-Caribbean lesbians (Silvera, 1992). However, at the same time, denial and invisibility means existence; this near-invisibility does not entail lack of agency, eroticism and love (King, 2010, p. 103).

Finally, cultural forms, such as carnival, religion and folklore, are another means through which queer subjects open spaces to negotiate and imagine gender and sexuality outside the framework of normativity. For instance, carnival, by means of ‘playing mas’, temporarily offers the opportunity to embody non-hegemonic gender (Philip, 2014, p. 162). Moreover, Omise’eke Tinsley (2018) discusses how Voudou, and specifically the lwa Ezili, offers “conceptual and spiritual space for expansive gendered and sexual practices” (p. 10), since “the Ezili are one of many pantheons of lwa who model and mentor the divinity of gender and sexual nonconformity” (p. 9). In similar vein, the soucouyant, a Trinbagonian mythical figure, has also been read as a queer mythos. The soucouyant is “a person, usually an old woman, who sheds her skin, travels as a ball of fire and sucks people’s blood, leaving a blue mark” (Winer, 2009, p. 838). As Lyndon K. Gill (2018) argues, in the act of sucking people’s blood, “[i]f the gendering of the soucouyant is imagined to persist even beneath her skin, then she cannot fly from a kind of queer intimacy as she places her ghostly lips upon her bisexed dreamers” (p. xxix).<sup>11</sup>

In conclusion, discourses based on heteronormativity and hypersexuality, alongside homophobia, are a reality in the archipelago and they often hinder the possibilities of queer subjects to have a livable life by forcing them to migrate. Yet, queer subjects are also able to negotiate between levels of tolerance and contest these discourses by articulating their desires and experiences in the region. Cultural forms and folkloric tropes can also be conceptual spaces through which it is possible to reimagine gender and sexuality in other, non-normative forms. Indeed, as I am going to explore in the following sections, Shivane Ramlochan and Nalo Hopkinson articulate such an appropriation in their works, *Everyone Knows I Am a Haunting* and *The Salt Roads*, respectively.

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<sup>11</sup> Yet, Gill acknowledges the feminist critical reading of the soucouyant as a mythos used to constrain women’s sexual agency and her reading it is offered as an expansion to it.

### 3. 'PLAY YUHSELF': QUEER AND FLUID IDENTITIES IN SHIVANEE RAMLOCHAN'S *EVERYONE KNOWS I AM A HAUNTING*

In the same way that Judith Butler (2017) argues that feminism, queer theory and activism, and trans theory and activism ought to aim at redefining and opening up categories to “make it easier to breathe, easier to move down the street, easier to find a livable life, to gain recognition when we need to have it, a life we can affirm with pleasure and joy, even in the midst of difficulty” (p. 56), Shivanee Ramlochan (2016) advocates for the necessary inclusion of subjects with non-normative genders and sexualities within Indo-Caribbean feminism:

If your Indo-Caribbean feminism makes no room and holds no breathing space, no blossom of fierce welcome for dougla identities, transwomen's identities, dark-skinned identities, femme women's identities: if your Indo-Caribbean feminism isn't intersectional, then it is suspect, and it breathes with all the wrong kinds of complacent insularity in Trinidad and Tobago in 2015. (p. 321)

Ramlochan presents feminism, queerness and (Indo-)Caribbeanness as an indissociable triad, three central aspects in *Everyone Knows I Am a Haunting*. In her poetry collection she inscribes the presence of characters that go beyond hegemonic gender constructions or that embody fluid and ambiguous subject-positions, defying gender binaries and heteronormativity, in Trinidad and Tobago.

Shivanee Ramlochan's poem “Duenne Lorca” is part of a trilogy, alongside “Duenne Lilith” and “Duenne Lara”, of poems that were produced for the Douen Islands project.<sup>12</sup> A douen is “the spirit of a child who died before baptism. Douens wear large hats, have backward-pointing feet, utter a soft hooting cry, and often lead children to wander off” (Winer, 2009, p. 310). It is thereby a liminal and subversive figure who is in-between life and death and epitomizes the marginal and monstrous. In an interview, Shivanee Ramlochan talks about her duenne poems as follows:

This trilogy . . . troubles the spelling of ‘douen’, and pries with the associations of douens as genderless and faceless. Conventional folklore has offered us the douen as a demon, but even demons have desires. What might they hunger for? Where, after all, could their navel strings be buried? Do even douens/duennes have mothers, who might, on the coldest of nights, scan the forest periphery for the trail of backwards-facing feet? From these questions, my duennes emerged. (Roffey, 2017, n.p.)

Hence, Ramlochan reappropriates this myth and imaginatively explores the uncharted territory that has been silenced and neglected around the figure of the douen.

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<sup>12</sup> The Douen Islands is a collaborative project by a group of Trinidadian artists—Andre Badoo (writer), Kriston Chen (graphic designer), Rodnell Warner and Brianna McCarthy (artists) and Sharda Pastar (musician)—which appropriates one of the quintessential national folklore figures, the douen, to explore what it can tell us about present-day Trinidad. For more information about the project, see Laughlin (2013).

In “Duenne Lorca”, Shivane Ramlochan envisions the duenne as a figure that destabilizes gender binaries and she cherishes its abjection and unconventionality, especially prompted by the duenne’s genderlessness. The poem’s title contributes to foregrounding the figure of the duenne as a mythos that resists being categorized in terms of gender: on the one hand, Ramlochan’s choice of this specific spelling of ‘duenne’ evokes, but not acknowledges, a female understanding of the folk figure, and, on the other, it bears the name Lorca, from Federico García Lorca. This tension between gendered attributes appears in other instances of the poem, such as on the opening verse, where the poetic voice invites the duenne to take its father’s bois, gendered as masculine, and a skirt, gendered as feminine, before going “to the eyelid of forest edge”, an image of liminality that adds to the blurring of categories.<sup>13</sup> Yet, throughout the poem, the poetic voice, i.e. the duenne’s mother, refers to him as “[d]arling son”, “[d]arkling son, neither female nor filial” and “[d]readling son”, alluding to its masculine gendered identity before his entrance in the forest. Within this complex interplay of gendered attributes, the poetic voice works as mediator to enable the duenne’s multiple transgressions:

[...]  
the schoolmistress tried to beat the unchristian out of you.  
I rinsed her religion from your blue shirt every Sunday.  
I kept your khakis clean and my own tail hidden.

By keeping her son distanced from religion and refusing to baptise him, she opens up the possibility for him to turn into a duenne, an outcast that wanders in the forest.

Nevertheless, the forest is deployed as a locus of freedom wherein gender transgression may occur. In entering the forest, the poetic voice’s son will undergo a process of (trans-)gendering, since he will become a non-binary or genderless figure, the duenne. In celebrating the (queer) potentialities that this mythical figure offers in terms of gender, the duenne loses its assumed monstrosity and becomes “more than mere demon”, a figure with its “own desires, three-dimensional rather than mere trope” (Fordon, 2018, p. 103), since the poetic voice asserts that “Nothing the forest raises is a monster.” The poetic voice ardently encourages her son to enter the forest and take part in this reconfiguration of gender:

Teeth-grit your father’s bois and climb.  
Though knuckles bruise and your ankles snap southward, climb.  
Though rivers flow against their hearts and I cannot follow you upward, climb.

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<sup>13</sup> A bois is a “long supple wooden stick used in kalinda or stickfighting” (Winer, 2009, p. 105), a type of combat in which only men engage during Trinidad and Tobago’s Carnival.



By using images of bodily pain and effort, Ramlochan emphasizes the difficulties that come along the transgressive move of leading a life outside normativity, but at the same time encourages and cherishes the fact that, in the forest, the poetic voice's son will be able to live as a duenne, against dominant gender categories and binaries:

[...]

Tell the woods you will make a faithful bride.

Take your own feet as dowry.

Turn a poem under Spanish tongue for each green ladder you branch  
into your husband, the mountain's back.

Trust no one with your straw hat.

The poetic voice encourages the duenne to appropriate its feet and straw hat not as elements of abjection or monstrosity, but as marks of uniqueness and non-normativity to be celebrated. In foregrounding the duenne as a subject that questions and destabilizes gendered normative codes, Ramlochan contests “either/or” views on gender and deploys this Trinidadian folk figure as productive local mythological trope to negotiate between gendered attributes and undermine gender binaries.

In “All the Dead, All the Living”, Shivane Ramlochan immerses the reader in one of the Carnival events through a highly rhythmic and sensuous use of the language. In the poem, she also plays with the parallels between the performative aspect of Trinidad's Carnival and Judith Butler's notion of the performativity of gender.<sup>14</sup> The poetic persona opens the poem by depicting the multiple possibilities in terms of performance, and thereby identity, that one may embody during Jouvay, or J'ouvert, the opening nocturnal mas of Carnival in which people cover themselves up with tar, mud, grease and/or paint: “At Jouvay, it eh matter if you play yourself/or somebody else.” The poetic voice invites the reader to “[p]lay your dead eighty-year-old granny” and/or “[p]lay your living mother”, two female figures characterised in the poem as agent subjects: they are resilient and are not afraid of striking back, both verbally and physically. The persona also invites the reader to temporarily inhabit other subject-positions by playing mas in any gendered clothes, disregarding one's sexed body.

Play all the dead and all the living in you,  
in yuh shortpants,  
in yuh badjohn drawers,  
in yuh ragged fishnets and curry-gold battyriders,  
in yuh half-top, in yuh no-top,  
breasts swinging under electric-tape nipples,

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<sup>14</sup> Yet, it is important to establish a contextual difference: for Butler, gender is not merely voluntarist or wilful, but articulated through a set of constraints while in Carnival there is much more free play and theatricality of gender.

panty forgotten in a culvert overflowing with holy water and hell liquor,  
your own perspiration sliding between bodies at play  
like the wetness from your body is purgatory-unction.

A combination of garments that are gendered as masculine, such as shortpants and badjohn drawers, alongside others that are gendered as feminine, such as the ragged fishnets, curry-gold battyriders and panty are presented to the reader.<sup>15</sup> Such an inventory of gendered clothing mirrors the open mesh of possibilities that Carnival offers in terms of embodiment and gender performativity. In presenting this semiotic play, gender is denaturalized, exposed as a social construct and conceptualized as performative: it is constituted through the stylization of (gendered) bodily acts (Butler, 1990).

In turn, the poetic voice depicts a public display of flesh and celebrates the sensuality and excess of bodies in motion. The body is a central element in the fifth stanza, where the poetic voice presents bodies that transgress normative gendered behaviour mainly through images that belong to the Caribbean cultural realm:

Play yuhself.  
Clay yuhself.  
Wine en pointe and wine to the four stations of the cross,  
dutty angel,  
bragadang badting,  
St. James soucouyant,  
deep bush douen come to town  
to make a killing in mud and mudder-in-law  
on fresh doubles, after.

Although the poetic voice's semantic choices refer to women (*badting* is an epithet used to refer to women who openly enjoy their sexuality and the *soucouyant* is a female mythical character that, as mentioned in section 2, could be read as queer), they step out of conventional femininity based on female subservience and sexual respectability. Moreover, the genderless figure of the *douen* is introduced. Both aspects contribute thereby to dismantling and subverting gender binaries and destabilizing identity categories.

After presenting a public servant who still feels the imprints that Carnival has left on their body, both physically and metaphorically, since "spirit does linger", the poetic voice invokes again the shape-shifting potential of Carnival:

You eh waiting til next year.  
Where you plant yourself this Jouvay  
is where your spectral, midnight lagahoo rattling she coffin,  
turning wolf

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<sup>15</sup> In Trinbagonian English, shortpants are "[b]oy's trousers that end above the knee; typically for primary school uniforms" (Winer, 2009, p. 814), badjohns are "[s]treet-toughened fighters connected to communities and steelbands, who aggressively defend territory, dignity, and honor" (Martin, 2004, p. 284) and battyriders are shortpants that leave the flesh of the buttocks on show.

to woman  
to wolf again.

Through another mythological figure, the lagahoo, the persona poeticizes how “playing mas”, and thereby temporarily embodying other identities, including gendered ones, is a central part in Jouvay.<sup>16</sup> In “All the Dead, All the Living”, the poetic voice offers a version of Carnival as “a state-sanctioned occasion to gender bend and embrace one’s individual and communal multiplicitous self” (Philip, 2014, p. 160) which “challenges the present-day respectability politics that exists within the Caribbean by encouraging, i.e. not explicitly criminalizing, nonhegemonic masculinities, femininities and sexualities” (Philip, 2014, p. 160). Thus, this Caribbean festival is deployed as a gender b(l)ending cultural practice, which offers a temporal hiatus to step outside and undermine gender binaries, making gender open to resignification. But this fluidity of identity goes beyond gender because the poem “celebrates the powers of transformation and anonymity that come with Jouvay, because – as the poem suggests – it is the ability to shape-shift that enables the oppressed to evade their oppressors” (Estruch, 2018, n. p.).

In a similar fashion, Ramlochan’s poem “Crossdressing at Divali Nagar” also deploys a local festivity, Divali Nagar, as a queer navigational system, one in which gender codes can be negotiated. Divali Nagar is part of Indo-Trinidadian culture and it is “a temporary ‘village’, consisting of cultural and religious booths, performance stage, and food stalls, used to celebrate Divali” (Winer, 2009, p. 301). Unlike in “All the Dead, All the Living”, which uses a much more celebratory tone and where gender bending is officially sanctioned, this poem offers a more intimate stance in the form of crossdressing. Part of the poem’s subversive potential lies on the fact that both characters are not explicitly gendered: although the fact that they cross-dress may well be indicative of their masculinity, assuming this would cancel out the multiple possibilities in terms of gender that both characters could embody.

The poem opens with an act of transgression related to appropriation: “The glass bangles are the easiest to steal.” The poetic voice steals some glass bangles, symbols of marital status in Indian culture, used by women. This gendered attire is the first element used to cross-dress the second character in the poem: “I use spit to force them on you,/knuckling into each one with soft growl.” The poetic diction used generates an antithesis of ambiguity between the bruteness of forcing them and the softness of the

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<sup>16</sup> A lagahoo, the quintessential shape-shifting figure in Trinidadian folklore, is “a human who takes the form of an animal, generally at night” (Winer, 2009, p. 509).

sound they generate. Again, in the third stanza, the speaker dresses the other character with an ohri and, through sensuous language, evokes (homoerotic) desire for the other person's body: "and I smooth it over your cheeks before I kiss/the gaps moths have loved with their teeth."<sup>17</sup> The persona also applies sindoor and tika on the other character's face, two elements that are gendered as female and that are to some extent related to marriage.<sup>18</sup>

Ramlochan's use of this assemblage of gendered clothing and accessories as a means to cross-dress should not be read as if femininity was defined by and reduced to these elements, which would entail that their act of crossdressing complies with hegemonic codes of femininity. Rather, Judith Butler's understanding of drag and its implications for the conceptualization of gender prove fruitful to illuminate a reading of this crossdressing scene. For Butler (1990), drag "mocks both the expressive model of gender and the notion of a true gender identity" (p. 186). Since drag brings to the fore the dissonances between the performer's anatomical sex, gender identity and gender performance, it exposes how these aspects are "falsely naturalized as a unity through the regulatory fiction of heterosexual coherence. *In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself—as well as its contingency*" (p. 187, emphasis in original). Nevertheless, Butler does not claim that drag is an imitation of an original gender, but that the original is also constituted as an imitation. Hence, the whole structure of gender is organized around imitation: we are always approximating an idealized version of gender. Therefore, "Crossdressing at Divali Nagar", as well as "All the Dead, All the Living", denaturalizes gender and, by disclosing its constructedness, they open gender to resignification and recontextualization.

In addition, the poem celebrates the freedom and joy that cross-dressing brings both subjects.

We giggle like blind chicks gagging free of the slaughterhouse,  
and I scoop cotton candy into your mouth  
under the four arms of Mother Lakshmi, my sari and yours  
trailing the wooden floorboards of a mehendi booth.  
Inside, women and girls are paying for sunbursts,  
cloud-spirals, lotus vines looping one good wedlock  
after another into their veins.

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<sup>17</sup> An ohri is "a traditional Indian woman's scarf worn around the neck, sometimes covering the head, with the ends hanging down in the back, or one end in front over the bosom and one in the back" (Winer, 2009, p. 653).

<sup>18</sup> Sindoor is "[v]ermillion powder, used to make a red mark in the part of a married Hindu women's hair, and to make tika marks on the forehead, etc." (Winer, 2009, p. 820) and tika is a "red or white mark on the forehead made with sindur, chandan or vibhute, as an ornament, to mark religious affiliation or devotion, or betrothal; or in the parting of a married woman's hair" (Winer, 2009, p. 899).

The poetic voice presents again images of them enjoying each other's company and bodies by means of sensuous images with homoerotic undertones, next to the mehendi booth, an element symbolic of the marriage institution.<sup>19</sup> Throughout the poem, Shivaneeramlochan juxtaposes images of gender and sexual transgression, homoeroticism and cross-dressing, with clothing related to the marriage institution. In so doing, Ramlochan subverts the traditional and normative ways in which these objects are used to perpetuate the heterosexual marriage institution and appropriates them to explore possibilities in queer and alternative logics of relationality. The poem closes with an image of the persona painting the other subject's body with henna, enhancing the celebration of the body and desire. Hence, Shivaneeramlochan inscribes queer desire and gender within the Indo-Caribbean tradition, specifically within the Divali Nagar celebration, by undermining normative conceptions of gender, sexuality and the marriage institution.

In "Vivek Chooses His Husbands", Shivaneeramlochan opens the poem with the poetic voice addressing another subject who had received a homophobic comment from his father: "Your father said not to take faggots to your bed, so you called them festivals." Rather than opting for silence and subservience, the same-sex desiring subject, that is, Vivek, decides to pursue a creative endeavour to turn his object of shame in the eyes of his father into festivals—Corpus Christi, Phagwa, Samhain and Hanukka. Hence, same-sex desire and the desired body are textualized by means of religious discourse, which contests any homophobic discourses that could be upheld by some religions. Shivaneeramlochan creates highly-erotic and sensual imagery and textualizes the body by means of elements that are part of Christian celebrations and rites:

Corpus Christi gave his body up between bites of bread,  
leavened a Sunday on your tongue so hot  
that you chased the burn with olive oil,  
sprung from some garden where other men  
have fallen to their knees.  
You knifed the best sounds of him clean  
with eucharist-butter, blessed the back and the sides of the body,  
going over catechism scars with tonguepoint,  
cock heavy and poised for betrayal.

Indeed, the desired body, which is a mutual source of pleasure for both Vivek and his lover, is central to the whole poem. The sexual act and the interchange of fluids are incorporated in the third stanza, wherein the desired subject embodies this time an Indo-Trinidadian celebration, Phagwa, alongside a vivid image of a conflation of colours

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<sup>19</sup> Mehendi is "[a] red paste made from the henna shrub, mendi, used to paint designs on the body, esp. to decorate the head, hands and feet of a Hindu bride and groom" (Winer, 2009, p. 593). A mehendi booth is a stall in the Divali Nagar where they paint designs using this paste.

provided by powders used in this festival. The poetic voice decides to emphasize red, and its erotic and sensual connotations are invoked to account for the sensuality and enjoyment of the beloved's body.

The fourth stanza offers a specific location, the Welsh town of Aberystwyth, which contrasts with the Caribbean location that is endorsed in the previous stanza, perhaps pointing at the diasporic status of many Caribbean subjects. In this town, the encounter with another man who embodies Samhain, a Gaelic festival which marks the end of harvest season and the beginning of winter, is set:

Samhain you found in an Aberystwyth dive bar, and when he asked you  
*What island does your voice come from, handsome?*  
You showed him mouth-first, worked glottals over his girth, tasted his  
grandfather's name in your soft palate for weeks after,  
the ancestry of him roving in your spit,  
routing for fire,  
cleaning you for the virgin-kill.

Samhain recognizes Vivek's accent as one that comes from an island, supposedly from the Caribbean and his question is deployed as a pretext to use vocal/buccal imagery to depict them performing same-sex oral sex. Vivek still carries with him the memory of Samhain even after the encounter, encoded in the metaphor of his ancestry. The use of such a metaphor, alongside the fact that Samhain assumes that he comes from an island, could be indicative of Samhain's Caribbean origins—and their sexual encounter could be read as a way to remind Vivek of his homeland in a diasporic context.

The poem ends with a bold statement that evidences Vivek's move to contest his father's authority and, by extension, heteronormative and homophobic discourses that hinder his possibilities to have a livable life:

The day you marry Hanukkah is a glock pointed to your father's face.

You tell him  
I am the queen  
the comeuppance  
the hard heretic that nature intended.

Homosexuality here is not claimed as a fixed identity, a subjectivity that is assimilated by a hegemonic gay identity. Rather, similarly to the duenne in relation to gender in "Duenne Lorca", Vivek's abjected sexuality by his father is re-semanticized: it does not entail a subject-position defined by heterosexist and normative discourses, but rather with agency to interiorize and celebrate his sexual difference, with no desire of assimilation. Moreover, he uses two metaphors that could be gendered as feminine to claim such abjection—"queen" and "hard heretic", with the connotations it carries in relation to

witch-hunting—, which trouble the stability of gendered identity. His non-fixed identity is further epitomized by the fact that he rejoices in his heresy when the whole poem has been focusing on his desire for men textualized as religious festivals, indicative of how Vivek positions himself in an in-between space where he is able to negotiate his identity.

At the same time, in using religious festivals from different cultures and religions, Shivane Ramlochan introduces hybridity and multiplicity, tenets that are central to the discussion of Trinidad's cultural diversity. In a way, since festivals are also collective gatherings, Ramlochan goes beyond the individual and appeals to the (Indo-)Trinidadian community in general to bring to the fore how queer identities already exist and resist patriarchal and heteronormative oppression in the region. As Estruch (2018) suggests, “[t]he voices [in the whole book] are collective, yet unique, suggesting the importance of community in resistance without forfeiting individual difference” (n.p).

In conclusion, in the poems analysed, Shivane Ramlochan uses Caribbean folklore, the douen in “Duenne Lorca”, and explores the possibilities that cultural festivals or celebrations, such as Carnival in “All the Dead, All the Living”, Divali Nagar in “Crossdressing at Divali Nagar” and a diverse array of festivals in “Vivek Chooses His Husbands”, offer in order to reimagine ways in which gender and sexuality can be articulated by contesting—and even negotiating—heteronormativity and a binary gender system. Hence, in capitalizing on context-based cultural manifestations, Ramlochan contributes to decolonizing the ways in which it is possible to conceptualize queer genders and sexualities. In turn, Ramlochan also inscribes the presence of queer subjects in contemporary Trinidad, by imagining instances in which their identity can be negotiated.

#### 4. 'HER LOVE WAS BIGGER FOR HAVING SO MANY TO LOVE': QUEER SPACE, TIME AND HISTORY IN NALO HOPKINSON'S *THE SALT ROADS*

In an interview, Nalo Hopkinson establishes a parallelism between how queer subjects envisage possibilities that go beyond binary views on gender and sexuality and how speculative fiction also creates worlds through literature:

Sexuality gets binarized too often. Not only do I resist the idea of one form of sexuality, but the assumption that there are only two forms, and you do one, the other, or both, and those are the only possible behaviours. It sometimes seems to me [...] that the people who are courageously non-normative in their sexualities are doing in the real world some of the work that speculative fiction can do in the world of the imagination, that is, exploring a wider range of possibilities for living. (Johnston, 2008, p. 203).

Indeed, as she herself claims, central to Nalo Hopkinson's fiction is the "challenge [of] unexamined norms and binarized conceptions of human sexuality and gender identity (and race, and class, and...)" (Johnston, 2008, p. 213). These poetics and politics that she associates with the speculative fiction genre are reproduced in *The Salt Roads*, a text that shares some characteristics with this genre, including magical realism, mythic fiction and historical fiction. In the novel, she depicts the lives of three racialized women who participate in non-normative sexual desires and practices—from same-sex to kinky sexual practices—, an aspect that also sparked a lot of controversy amongst the novel's readers (see Johnston, 2008, p. 211).<sup>20</sup>

One of the same-sex relationships that Hopkinson presents—and the one I am going to focus on—occurs in a plantation in Saint Domingue between two enslaved women, Mer and Tipingee. The outset of their relation can be traced back to the slave ship that took them from Africa to the New World: "Tipi was Akan, but on the ship, as we learned each other's speech, I would tell the stories of the power of Aziri, how she wouldn't let us drown. Tipi had adopted Aziri to herself" (Hopkinson, 2003, p. 26). Not only does the Middle Passage represent the meeting-point of different cultures, but also a locus of potentiality, where same-sex intimacy can be found: "[s]ometimes Tipingee forgot too; could only remember Mer's strong hands, her eyes deep, the muscles of her thighs scissored around Tipingee's waist. Mer always been there for her: *shipmates*; sisters before Tipingee's blood came; wives to each other after, even when they had had husbands" (Hopkinson, 2003, p. 12, my emphasis). Hopkinson's use of the word *shipmate* to describe their relationship is not coincidental. Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley (2008) traces the etymology of the word *mati*, a word in Surinamese Creole used by women to refer to

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<sup>20</sup> Kink sex is an umbrella term used to refer to nonconventional sexual practices, such as BDSM.



their female lovers, and she suggests that “figuratively *mi mati* is ‘my girl,’ but literally it means *mate*, as in *shipmate*—she who survived the Middle Passage with me” (p. 192, emphasis in original). As already announced in section 2, a (queer) reading of the slave ship as a potential locus for homoeroticism has been explored by Tinsley, who claims that “[t]he brown-skinned, fluid-bodied experiences now called *blackness* and *queerness* surfaced in intercontinental, maritime contacts hundreds of years ago: in the seventeenth century, in the Atlantic Ocean. You see, the black Atlantic has always been the queer Atlantic” (p. 191, emphasis in original). The queer Atlantic became a site of resistance wherein brutalized black bodies “refused to accept that the liquidation of their social selves—the colonization of oceanic and body waters—meant the liquidation of their sentient selves” (p. 199) and sometimes opposed this through same-sex eroticism, “a *feeling of, feeling for* the kidnapped that asserted the sentience of the bodies that slavers attempted to transform into brute matter” (p. 199). In locating the presence of queer subjects in the slave ships, Hopkinson inscribes their existence at the beginning of the Caribbean history of slavery.

In the same way the sentient body was a way to counter the brutality in the slave ship, the novel also presents the potentialities of touch in relation to resistance within the plantation. Mer and Tipingee’s bodies are victims of the brutality inflicted by the plantocracy on their bodies, but affect and care between them are presented as a healing practise, both for physical and psychical pain.<sup>21</sup> Mer recounts how after the “[b]ook-keeper popped me with the whip two more times [...] Tipingee would have to rub my back good with aloe tonight” (Hopkinson, 2003, p. 61)—Tipingee’s touch becomes a way to erase the marks of slavery that have been forcefully written on Mer’s body. The effects of physical intimacy are a pervasive image throughout the narrative, evoked by sensual and erotic memories of each other: Mer remembers that “Tipingee had come to see me the night before, and I still had the smell of her in my nose [...]. Cool day, a skin-memory of Tipi’s hands on my body in the night, and my mother’s voice in my head. A good day” (Hopkinson, 2003, p. 308), the narrative voice states “[t]hat warm touch would stay with Tipingee till evening, when she could see her Mer again, run her hands under Mer’s dress, feel the smooth hard of her flesh” (Hopkinson, 2003, p. 13) and Tipingee recalls how “Mer, her words remained in her head, but her actions went out into the world. There was

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<sup>21</sup> The potentialities of tactility and the haptic have also received critical attention, especially in relation to “the field of affect and emotion: to be touched means to be affected physically as well as emotionally” (Marinkova, 2011, p.5). Queer theorists working on affect theory have also made critical interventions on this area (see Sedgwick, 2003).

healing in her hands. Release” (Hopkinson, 2003, p. 10). As Kate Houlden (2015) suggests, “[i]n contrast to the acquisitive heterosexual relationships described, Hopkinson shows the love and support black women offer each other being a source of sustenance, as well as conduit to sexual pleasure” (p. 467), in the tradition of Audre Lorde’s conceptualizations of the erotic as a revolutionary tool (Lorde, 1984/2007). In a similar fashion, Nalo Hopkinson (2008) herself commented on how “Mer and Tipingee have this horrible life that can injure or kill them at any moment, and that deliberately works to break their spirits, yet they find ways to love each other and other people, because that’s what keeps human beings going” (p. 210). Thus, the tampering effects of suffering are countered by the sentient body and emotional bonding between both women.

The rest of the African population in the plantation are aware of Mer and Tipingee’s relationship, presented in the tradition of the open secret. While Rosamond S. King (2014) and Makeda Silvera (1992) have claimed that women who desire women in the Caribbean live under the trope of invisibility, particularly those who are Afro-Caribbean, in this case both women are offered a sanctioned space to articulate their desires within the plantation system:

[s]o if she and Tipingee wanted to play *madivinèz* with each other like some young girls did while they were waiting for marriage, well, plenty of the Ginen felt life was too brief to fret about that. So long as Tipingee was doing her duty by her husband, most people swallowed their bile and left them be. Tipingee esteemed her Patrice for that, how he had never tried to take the joy of Mer from her. Patrice had gotten to know that her love was bigger for having so many to love: him; her child Marie-Claire; Mer. (Hopkinson, 2003, p. 13)

Such a negotiated visibility is enabled by the fact that Mer is a prominent figure in the community—she is the plantation healer and midwife—and Tipingee stays married to her husband. Again, Hopkinson decides to use the term *madivinèz*, a word in Haitian Creole used to refer to women who desire other women, to describe their relationship from a decolonial lens, not relying on metropolitan sexual constructions but on local ones. Their understanding of their own sexuality is not monolithic, but fluid (Mer and Tipingee had and have husbands, respectively) and their relationship eschews binaries and hierarchization of relationships on which heteronormativity is based. Tipingee is married to Patrice, with whom she has a daughter called Marie-Claire, but she does not renounce her relationship with Mer; their relationship is non-exclusionary and relational. Patrice recognizes that Tipingee’s love is shared between different subjects, her relational systems are queer—she desires and loves both men and women, as “Tipingee beckoned for her [Mer] to come, that half of her heart, but there she remained. The other piece of Tipingee’s heart was Patrice” (Hopkinson, 2003, p. 78). The three characters need to

negotiate the place they occupy within the relationship, something that is not devoid of the complexities that any relationship entails:

But no sleep came. My mind was only running on Tipingee, Tipingee. When Patrice had lived here before, it was better. We knew our places then, all three of us. Had a balance. One person shifts, the other two shift little bit too to preserve it. For me and Patrice, Tipingee was the torch moving between us. Sometimes it was he getting the light, sometimes me. And sometimes we both make space for each other and get comfort from her warmth. But now? Where do I fit now? Tipingee only has eyes for her Patrice. (Hopkinson, 2003, p. 99-100)

After Patrice comes back from his maroonage in the forest, Mer feels set aside by Tipingee, a feeling projected in the fact that Tipingee does not plait Mer's hair anymore (Hopkinson, 2003, p. 186). Yet, during his maroonage Patrice established a relationship with another woman, with whom he has a child, and he feels haunted by her lack: "he would try to be a husband to Tipingee again. Try to avoid Mer's anger. And always, always there was an image in his mind of other hands digging cassava beside their hut in the bush, of other twitching hips, of young breasts hard and round as oranges, and a bright, trilling laugh. His Curaçao, his unborn baby's mother" (Hopkinson, 2003, p. 95). Hence, their relationship is non-static, non-exclusionary, and poses a challenge to the heteronormative system epitomized by the plantocracy. Hopkinson thereby foregrounds the plantation as a queer space in the way Halberstam conceptualized it: a space where queer characters are able to articulate and negotiate their identities and desires. By combining elements of Caribbeanness and queerness, "the novel needs to be viewed as standing within that body of literary material identified as the Caribbean queer, work that expands the dominant sexual models of contemporary Caribbean culture and counters the shame and silences" (Houlden, 2015, p. 469) present in the archipelago.

In addition, their relationship goes beyond the normative structure of kinship that was trying to be imposed by the plantocracy: the nuclear family. By presenting these forms of intimacy as already existing in the plantation, Hopkinson draws centre stage other conceptions of family and kinship that have been present in the Caribbean, in a context where, according to Trinidadian scholar, activist and cultural worker Merle Hodge, "our traditional family systems have not given any recognition or value, while the nuclear family has been strenuously promoted" (2002, p. 475). Rather, if we scrutinize the system of networks in the Caribbean, "[n]either the sexual union nor the household provides a complete definition of family in the Caribbean. The functions of family may be performed by far-flung organization which includes people living down the street, or in another village, or up in Toronto" (2002, p. 478). Nalo Hopkinson thereby presents

queer intimacies that are articulated outside the nuclear family in the plantation system, characterizing them as a culture-specific form of affiliation.

The passage wherein Patrice returns to the plantation from maroonage, which has received no scholarly attention for now, also presents how the logics of community and sexuality operate outside notions of normativity. As soon as he sets foot on the plantation, Patrice is found by Father León and taken to the master's house while a crowd of Africans and other lower-class *blans* accompany him with musical rhythms. Tipingee, enthusiastic about having reunited with him, albeit fearful of the possible reprimand that awaits Patrice, is holding his hand, and Mer is looking from the distance. The description of the master's house in the narrative evidences how said spatiality embodies the norm: "The great house loomed in its whiteness before them, like a large albino toad on the path. The verandah that wrapped around it looked cool and shady" (Hopkinson, 2003, p. 80). The two references to the house's whiteness are not unexpected provided that we consider the master's house as symbolic of normativity and authority. The flamboyance prevailing in furniture and decorative elements, an amassing of riches at the cost of the exploitation of slave labour, further enforces the normative aspect of said spatiality. Yet, when Patrice enters the house, "Tipingee clung to Patrice's hand, reached unhappily behind her for Mer's. She could have sobbed when she felt the dry rasp of Mer's palm against hers. She held on, held on to her loves" (Hopkinson, 2003, p. 83). Throughout this scene, Tipingee constantly searches for reassurance in her queer relational system so as to withstand the slavery institution. In so doing, she reconfigures the master's house as a locus where it is possible to contest normativity.

Hopkinson also offers a metaphor for liberation within this oppressive environment when "[t]he door whispered shut behind her, and in the faint breeze of it Tipingee thought she just could smell the sea. Tipingee closed her eyes. How strange a day this was!" (Hopkinson, 2003, p. 87). Encapsulated in the image of the sea, symbolic of Tipingee's African origins, this brief sensation represents a momentarily hiatus that permeates the structures of hegemonic discourses endorsed in the plantation. Their African spirituality also takes part in the scene as a way to contest normativity, as "Tipingee shut her eyes tight and prayed for Aziri to deliver Patrice, prayed for miracles she feared would not happen. She could hear Mer behind her, whispering in her own tongue to Lasirèn" (Hopkinson, 2003, p. 86), which contrasts with Fater León's prayers to "his white god" (Hopkinson, 2003, p. 83), the embodiment of spiritual normativity. Remarkably, the plantation master's beloved saves Patrice from a tough reprimand from his master and

Tipingee is grateful, for “at last they could leave that evil place. Soon Patrice would be back in her bed. Soon she could find Mer alone and ask, *who was it who had come as Patrice’s saviour, hiding in the white woman’s head? What ancestor, what spirit?*” (Hopkinson, 2003, 91, italics in original). This ancestor and spirit may well be Ezili, the link between the characters and their homeland. Hence, Hopkinson foregrounds the presence of African ancestry and queer relational systems as a way to confront the plantation’s authoritative normativity and to affirm the possibility to queer the Caribbean spaces of the plantation.

Nalo Hopkinson deploys the figure of Ezili to represent the trans-national, trans-historical narratives of black female and queer resistance. Ezili is a Vodou pantheon of spirits that includes “Gran Ezili, Ezili Freda, Ezili Danto, Ezili Je Wouj, Ezili Taureau, Lasireenn, and others [who] are immensely influential for all those practitioners who embody and/or desire femininity” (Tinsley, 2018, p. 16). In *The Salt Roads*, Nalo Hopkinson represents the multiplicity of spirits that constitute said pantheon: Ezili-narrator is the sexual dominatrix Ezili Je Wouj who embodies Ezili Frèda, Lasirèn, and Ezili Danto (p. 304).<sup>22</sup> As mentioned in section 2, Ezili could be read as a queer lwa because despite symbolizing femininity, “[s]he takes on the garb of femininity [...] in order to confound and discard the culturally defined roles of men and women” (Dayan, 1995, p. 6). Her figure is multiple and fluid, which is mirrored in her (fragmented) ability to embody and inhabit bodies of various women and men, regardless of their gendered body. Ezili acknowledges the multiplicity of subjects that she inhabits: “I used to be many, but now we are one, all squeezed together, many necks in one coffle.” (Hopkinson, 2003, p. 44). As Milena Marinkova (2012) argues, Ezili represents “the anti-identitarian collective impetus” (p. 193) that triggers “alliances among the disenfranchised across time and space, race, gender and sexuality. For the deity reaches, converses and empowers the bodies she inhabits not through violence and opposition, but through the transformative powers of artistic creation” (p. 191). Ezili is thereby the meeting point of these embodied and diverse (hi)stories, she is presented as a fluid character that subverts gender binaries and heteronormativity, and she is defined in relation to other characters, closely related to Glissant’s poetics of relation and queer theory’s relational stance.

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<sup>22</sup> These manifestations of Ezili can also be read as from a queer lens: Danto is a protector of the disenfranchised who “embraces transgender and pansexual qualities” (Conner and Sparks, 2004, p. 60) and Lasirèn is “a mermaid who swims lakes and rivers where she invites women passersby to join her and initiates them into mystical (erotic?) knowledge” (Tinsley, 2018, p. 16).

In a similar fashion, Hopkinson’s poetics of the novel also embraces the inscription of queer subjects in historical accounts, as the novel does not exclusively portray the lives of Mer and Tipingee, but also those of Jeanne—with her lovers Charles Baudelaire and Lisette—and Meritet’s friend Judah. Debra Providence (2016) explores how the novel “engages ideas of historical reclamation” (p. 71) as it “experiment[s] with ways of viewing history and her consequent challenge to ideas of historical authority and [...] presents a feminine perspective leading up to and during the initial slave unrests on the island of Saint Domingue” (p. 71) by employing three main elements: a non-linear narrative structure, “the polymorphous voudon deity Erzulie” and the speculative fiction genre that allows for a “discussion of historical representation of real historical figures from a discursive position of fantasy” (p. 73). To Providence’s reading of the novel, I would add that Hopkinson, alongside the queer reading of the Middle Passage that I have previously discussed, also offers a queer perspective on historical narratives on the Haitian Revolution and the nation-building project. Mer and Tipingee assist women in their births although the latter “hated births, but she helped me [Mer] with them for love, she said” (Hopkinson, 2003, p. 100). Both women help two other women give birth to two children that are going to play a fundamental role both within the narrative and/or in larger historical accounts: Georgine’s child and Marie-Claire’s daughter Dédée Bazile, who is going to be called Défilée “**when you [Bazile] and I [Ezili] march with the Haitian soldiers of the revolution**” (Hopkinson, 2003, p. 376, bold in original).<sup>23</sup> In turn, these births also entail the conception of two other entities. On the one hand, the vodou lwa Ezili is born while Mer and Tipingee are helping Georgine give birth to her son and they are all “chanting to her god of preference—Christian or voodoo” (Marinkova, 2012, p. 190); Ezili is born thanks to the help of two queer subjects. In a similar vein, Dédée Bazile is going to “**collect the torn pieces of the body of the black Emperor Dessalines who made the flag of the land he called Ayiti**” (Hopkinson, 2003, p. 376, bold in original), epitomizing the birth of the nation. By placing the former at the beginning of the narrative and the latter in the end, Hopkinson makes a statement about how queer subjects have been present from early times in the history of Haiti—and, by extension, the Caribbean—, feeling for each other in the slave ships, but also in the birth of the nation. In so doing, she contests discourses endorsed by “political and religious leaders as well as popular cultural icons” that sustain that “homosexuality is not indigenous but

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<sup>23</sup> The references provided in bold have the same format in the original text, as it is how Hopkinson indicates Ezili’s first-person narration.

is imported from the United States or Europe” (King, 2014, p. 116), as well as nationalist discourses put forward by a new postcolonial elite who

while embracing the newly independent Caribbean as uniquely hybrid in its social and cultural structures, privileged heterosexuality and masculine dominance, upheld a modified version of the European monogamous marriage system as the dominant norm, and continued to view African Caribbean working women’s sexual behavior as loose yet subordinate to men’s needs. (Kempadoo, 2004, p. 19)

Thus, again, besides the queer reading of the Middle Passage, Nalo Hopkinson also presents a queer perspective on the Haitian nation-building project.<sup>24</sup>

Ezili’s movement across time and space could be read as a means to portray a variety of lived experiences in historical accounts, but it can also be read differently: as a way to open up the possibilities to approximate temporality from a queer lens. As mentioned in the introduction, for Jack Halberstam (2005) queer subjects live on the margins of chrononormativity and straight time, both mainly based on reproductive heterosexuality.<sup>25</sup> Throughout the narrative, Ezili rejoices in the freedom she finds when moving between bodies, especially while she is in the aether, where she can reach a state of limitlessness.

**Every time your dreaming mind sets me free, I float into the spirit place, into that aether that birthed me. There I can perceive a little bit more clearly. There are currents there. There is movement. Helpless, I tumble and splash from one to the next. Each eddy into which I fall immerses me into another story, another person’s head. The streams are stories of people; I can/will/did see them, taste them, smell them, hear and touch them. [...] I want to always be free, to choose to be enhorsed, or to navigate the aether world!** (Hopkinson, 2003, p. 208, bold in original)

Alongside allusions to water and fluidity, the aether is foregrounded as a space of possibility that enables her to move between bodies. It is thereby devoid of any notions of straight time and chrononormativity, as Ezili is free to choose where and in which historical time she wishes to land, and what body she wishes to inhabit outside “the temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance” (Halberstam, 2005, p. 6). The three tenses used to describe the temporalities wherein she locates the stories of African people—*can* describes present and possibility, *will* speaks for a future and *did* looks back at the past—offers an approach to time that

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<sup>24</sup> The fight between Ezili and Ogu, which ends with him chopping Mer’s tongue, has also been read as a scene wherein official nationalist narratives are contested. Debra Providence takes a historiographical approach to the scene and she argues that it is “a symbolic silencing of women’s histories” as well as “a rejection of a feminine perspective or role in shaping the destiny of a nation” (2016, p. 89-90), while Kate Houlden offers a queer perspective by arguing that the “battle between the sexually fluid female Mer/Ezili and heterosexual male Makandal/Ogu highlights those patriarchal and heterosexual principles limiting black freedom struggles” (2015, p. 471).

<sup>25</sup> Elizabeth Freeman (2010) uses the term *chrononormativity* to refer to uses of time “to organize individual human bodies toward maximum productivity” (p. 3) and wherein “temporal schemes necessary for genealogies of descent and for the mundane workings of domestic life” (p. xxii) interweave.

breaks with temporal linearity and opens a space for future resignification. As Milena Marinkova points out, “[w]hat she [Ezili] cherishes, instead, is the aether of the story-stream, the temporal and spatial uprootedness of that ‘betweenplace’ (p. 288) where stories are intertwined with one another, temporal linearity and progress suspended, fact and fiction blended” (2012, p. 193). The potential of queer time to break away with linear temporality, which the aether encapsulates, is closely related to José Esteban Muñoz’s conceptualization of the connexion between temporality and queerness. For the Cuban-American scholar,

[q]ueerness’s time is a stepping out of the linearity of straight time. Straight time is a self-naturalizing temporality. Straight time’s “presentness” needs to be phenomenologically questioned, and this is the fundamental value of a queer utopian hermeneutics. Queerness’s ecstatic and horizontal temporality is a path and a movement to a greater openness to the world. (2009, p. 25).

In the same way Esteban Muñoz emphasizes queer time’s ecstaticity and horizontality as the basis for the possibilities that queer temporality offers, for Ezili in *The Salt Roads* the aether provides her with an almost ecstatic affective mode. Omise’eke N. Tinsley (2018) establishes a connection between how temporality is appropriated by practitioners of kink sex and by Hopkinson as a speculative-fiction writer. For Tinsley, “[b]oth break time into fragments that propel readers and bottoms into pasts, futures, and alternative presents without being sure where we’re going, leaving us with an embodied experience of how contingent and malleable historical realities can be” (p. 106).<sup>26</sup> By extension, if we apply Tinsley’s approach to temporality to how history and historiography are rendered in the text, Hopkinson seems to advocate for what Elizabeth Freeman (2010) calls “a kind of bottomy historiography” that the scholar discusses in relation to Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando*, one that takes into account “the potential for collective queer time—even queer history—to be structured as an uneven transmission of receptivity rather than authority or custom, of a certain enjoyably porous relation to unpredictable futures or to new configurations of the past” (p. 109). Thus, the heteroglossia imbricated in Hopkinson’s text fashioned by the deployment of Ezili to account for the diverse stories of black women breaks away with a monolithic historiographic authority. In this sense, we could argue that not only does Nalo Hopkinson queer the narrative time, but also the different historical times wherein various black (queer) female characters live.

In conclusion, in *The Salt Roads* the Nalo Hopkinson inscribes narratives of queer desire and relationality in space, time and history. Mer, Tipingee and Patrice’s

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<sup>26</sup> Tinsley also mentions how you can get this experience from *spirit time* in African-diasporic religious ceremonies (2018, p. 106).



relationship offers a new understanding of space based on same-sex desire, ways of relating that lie outside a hierarchical and binary system characteristic of hegemonic heteronormative relationships and the sentient body as a way to counter the tampering psychological and physical effects of the normative structure of the plantation. Hopkinson also deploys the figure of Ezili, a highly ambiguous Vodou lwa in terms of gender and sexuality who inhabits different characters' bodies throughout various historical periods, to explore the possibilities of understanding time from a queer perspective: she thereby troubles temporal linearity and chrononormativity and opens up new ways to think about temporality. In turn, Hopkinson also brings to the fore the presence of such modes of queer embodiment in history, contesting some historical and nationalist discourses that negate their existence in the Caribbean region and its history. In using culture-specific narratives and cultural manifestations, she contributes to decolonizing the ways in which queer subjects are imagined and depicted in the Caribbean.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

Despite the existence in the Caribbean of heteronormative and patriarchal discourses based on a binary (hetero/homosexuality and masculinity/femininity) and hierarchical system, some authors explore the possibilities to articulate queer desires and gender performativity in the archipelago, offering at the same time a context-based perspective attendant to cultural specificities. Theoretical aspects that have been proposed by queer theorists may be useful to illuminate readings of contextualized narratives that include queer characters, albeit with a nuanced contextualization of queer narratives in terms of space and culture. This study has aimed at shedding some light on the intersections between Caribbeanness and queerness. In this regard, it has attempted to explore how queer subjects are depicted in Shivane Ramlochan's poetry collection *Everyone Knows I Am a Haunting* and Nalo Hopkinson's novel *The Salt Roads*.

Both texts challenge normative constructions on gender, sexuality and forms of relationality. This study has demonstrated how subjects in the Caribbean engage in same-sex sexual practices and have homoerotic desires, without any willingness to define themselves by means of a coherent and stable sense of identity. This is the case of Mer and Tipingee in *The Salt Roads* and, for instance, Vivek in Shivane Ramlochan's poem "Vivek Chooses His Husbands". Moreover, both texts open the possibilities to imagine gender outside normative constructions. In so doing, Ramlochan and Hopkinson advocate for a fluid and multiple conception of identity that troubles binaries on which heteronormativity is based and expose the constructedness and fictionality of gender categories. In order to imagine how gender and sexuality can be conceptualized in this way, both authors also employ Caribbean traditions and mythos. Shivane Ramlochan deploys the figure of the douen in "Duenne Lara" and other Caribbean cultural traditions such as Carnival or Divali Nagar in order to trouble gender formations and explore the possibilities that lie outside the gender binary. In turn, Hopkinson employs the Vodou lwa Ezili as a means to challenge chrononormativity and straight time. The presence of local elements enables the construction of culturally situated narratives, which aligns both authors with the endeavour to bring together queerness and Caribbeanness. Yet, their project is not restricted to queer subjects, as it also embraces the portrayal of identities that are not static, but multiple and in constant becoming.

In carrying out their project, both authors also make important interventions to expose the existence of queer subjects in Caribbean history. Mer's story in *The Salt Roads* is set in the colonial plantation system and Hopkinson evidences how Mer's relationship

with Tipingee, which originated in the journey through the Middle Passage, represents the existence of queer subjects even before enslaved Africans set foot on the island. In addition, although Shivane Ramlochan's poems are not specifically historically-located, they may well be set in contemporary Trinidad. Thus, both texts represent a continuum of existence and resistance in the Caribbean and they thereby contest homophobic discourses that dismiss the existence of queer subjects in the region and that exclude them from historical accounts.

As a suggestion for further research, it would be interesting to offer an analysis of both works from a decolonial perspective. As I have already hinted at, both texts draw on context-based elements, such as traditions and myths, in order to conceptualize queer genders and sexualities. Reading this aspect in relation to decolonial thinkers (e.g. Grosfoguel, 2011; Mignolo, 2000) and in particular María Lugones's work (2007) could be useful to elucidate the work both authors conduct regarding epistemological decolonisation, as they trouble and dismantle the heterosexual matrix that was inherited by the modern colonial system through local cultural manifestations. In addition, recent contributions to the field of queer studies about affect (see Ahmed 2001, 2006; Sedgwick, 2003) may be useful to illuminate readings of both texts focusing the relationship between bodies, affect and queerness.

In conclusion, as this work has tried to elucidate, it is important to analyse the presence of queer characters in the Caribbean literary tradition, as it contributes expanding modes of gender performativity and sexual desire beyond binaries and stable categories of identity. Exploring how they are, were or could be articulated in the Caribbean addresses the need for including a queer perspective in Caribbean literature. This study also calls for the necessary study of representations of queer subjects outside Western literary traditions in order to broaden scope of queer studies. Hence, as I hope I have tried to prove with this study, both Nalo Hopkinson's *The Salt Roads* and Shivane Ramlochan's *Everyone Know I Am a Haunting* are paradigmatic examples of what Alison Donnell calls the Caribbean Queer. As for their political potential, critical interventions drawing attention to the connection between queer subjects and place contributes thereby to generating possibilities that make life more livable for queer subjects in the archipelago as a mode of queer utopia.

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