Intersectionality and Imagery in the Caribbean Context

Dominique Hunter
Guyanese visual artist

Abstract

In this piece, I discuss the ways in which my art practice becomes an opportunity to explore questions of identity - individual and collective – in ways that are specific to the nuances and complexities of the Caribbean. At the core of my creative interrogations is desire to facilitate the subversion of intersecting oppressions by providing new and innovative ways of merging critical thinking and problem-solving qualities through social science disciplines and creative expression. I use the piece to grapple with the ways in which my art is simultaneously an effort at developing a visual language that speaks directly to the issues of our region.

As a mixed-race Guyanese woman artist who identifies as black, I am constantly pushing back against the constraints of those individual descriptors. Like many others, I wrestle with the impositions of what it means to be black, what it means to be a woman, what it means to be an artist and what it means to be from the Caribbean and/or South America. Within the confines of those layered definitions exist even more converging systems of classification that have proven to be equally contentious and often oppressive. My art gives me an opportunity to intimately examine and engage with these intersections as individual and collective formations. Recent musings, however, have led to an interest in envisioning how those intersections would be represented if they existed within a framework of policies that facilitated examination from a national, regional or even international perspective.

Another layer of complexity is added when we consider the politics of location. What does it mean to think about these identities in the context of the Caribbean? In the context of prevailing ideas of the Caribbean as peripheral, an exotic 'adult' playground of bush, beach populated with indulgent natives eager to cater to the whims of rich, white tourists. In the Caribbean, where in the 21st century ad campaigns would still suggest that when the natives aren't busy pandering to the needs of foreigners, they could be found lazing around in tree-strung hammocks, drinking rum punch out of flower-adorned coconuts. This fringe land, often marketed as a tropical escape, allowed foreigners to live with careless abandon by offering them temporary respite from the stress of their lives back home. They were encouraged to sample the local delicacies, and they did. So what then do these multiple intersectionalities mean in the context of such imagery? Where does Guyana fit within the parameters of this manufactured imagery of the Caribbean?

I often question how much of the politics that govern the manner in which the Caribbean is perceived, is applicable to the space I occupy. While politically, Guyana has long since affirmed its position as part of the Caribbean community, we are far removed from most of the clichés associated with the region's

collective image. Guyana does not share the same history of tourism as most of our island neighbours because we don't offer the same kind of tourism "packages," that is, the white sandy beaches, crystal clear waters, beach front condominiums etc.   And although we, despite being the only English-speaking country on South America, should be more closely aligned with our South American neighbours, we don't share much of their history either. As a result I find myself working with the awareness that, as Guyanese artists, we are quite frequently stuck in this strange, transitory space where our aesthetic, varied as it may be, doesn't quite fit anywhere. We are neither here nor there. Our decision to have one foot in and the other out of both spaces has resulted in a kind of perpetual identity crisis.

Nevertheless, in spite of the obvious differences in tourism "packages" and our obscure collective identity, the exploitation of both male and female bodies remains a common thread that ties all of the region's territories together. Traditionally, gender has always been considered within the parameters of binary oppositional thinking, a system that reduces everything to two inherently opposite halves. Within the context of this kind of thinking where hierarchy is implicit in its definition, one half gains meaning exclusively in relation to its counterpart. It is only when one succumbs to the other that the existing tension is temporarily relieved (Wood 2005). Men have always been the dominant half of the gender binary and even with the recent shift that has seen increased sections of our populations embrace a non-binary spectrum, straight men continue to occupy positions of privilege long denied to both women and gender non-conforming persons. Further, intersecting systems of oppression including (but not limited to) racism and slavery, have always worked in tandem to elevate heterosexual (white) men to positions of power while simultaneously protecting them from any form of exploitation that less-privileged groups would have no doubt experienced.

It is for these reasons that we cannot attempt to speak about sexism without speaking also about racism, which in the Caribbean is its own layered phenomenon, requiring that we pay attention to the internal hierarchies of the

region, and as a migratory population, the shifting racial hierarchies that we experience in the larger global order. Sex tourism, although, in its historical context, not advertised as such, developed into a wildly popular 'pull factor' that facilitated the exploitation of local men and women's bodies by perpetuating stereotypes born from slavery. As an artist I think often about slavery, about the institutionalized theories about gender and race, which in a white patriarchal society distinguish enslaved and indentured men and women from the others. I think often about practices of dehumanization and hypersexualization of men and women in the Caribbean. They were jezebels and mandingos, oversexed, promiscuous and, most importantly 'fair game.' Those stereotypes did not end with slavery or indentureship. Instead, they were repackaged and kneaded into the core of Western television and print media. The work of tourism advertising raises our own complicity with these histories as the groundwork for these exploitative tropes was completed long before they entered the scene.

Kimberlé Crenshaw's engagement with the category of intersectionality in her 1989 essay offers a theoretical framework that helps me examine all of the aforementioned facets and systems of oppression that threaten the experiences of men and women within the region. In her text Crenshaw echoed hooks' theory that we cannot effectively advocate for anti-discriminatory policies if we continue to address those systems individually. A singular approach would run the risk of downplaying or dismissing entirely the interconnectivity of each system. So although the term was initially used to describe the convergence of sexism and racism that effectively shut black women out of feminist discourse, it has since expanded to include additional and equally charged social categories that experience various forms of discrimination (for example, sexual orientation, class, socioeconomic status etc.). Consequently, recognizing that these systems don't function independently of each other points to a distinct shift towards a more progressive understanding of how fair and just solutions could possibly be formulated for the benefit of those affected.

So then, if we were to transplant the theories of intersectionality from its place of origin in the U.S. and hope that they take root in the Caribbean space, it would be imperative that we consider our unique geographies, our varied sexualities, our complex history of slavery, our past systems of indentured labour, and the sweeping effects that followed as equally legitimate components in this discussion. It is precisely because of these multiple layers that we are only able to identify with the theories that govern Western feminism and gender policies to a limited extent. Beyond that we must find our own way, past the convoluted representations of our individual and collective self, towards something that allows for a more accurate likeness of our particular range. We must find something that considers all the facets of our lived experiences, past and present, if we hope to have any meaningful discourse about the policies that could be effective for us. My various bodies of work represent my attempt at grappling with what this notion of "finding our own way" means in such historical morass. To that end, each piece hints at a kind of inward contemplation for hypothetical outward resolutions, all in an attempt to dismantle inherited stereotypes we ourselves might have also been guilty of inadvertently perpetuating.

The examination of self as a reflection of society is an interesting concept that has always been central to my own creative practice. As a result, I've often employed intersectionality as the framework to help me to think about how and why gender-based strategies to redress our layered individual and collective histories have failed. Years before I had begun any serious contemplation of these issues, I found myself in conversation with an older mixed race (Black and Amerindian) woman who thought it appropriate to explain to me, in great detail, why I would be considered "spoil breed" (sic). This woman, whom I had never met prior to that moment, could not see how she had been brainwashed into accepting an ideology birthed from slavery, an ideology that insisted Black women (particularly from the region) were supposed to look a certain way. By her logic, I would be cast aside in the reject pile for simply being a skinny, Black girl from the Caribbean. Her sons would never show interest and even if they did, she wouldn't have it. "Bones is fuh dawg," she said, blindly perpetuating yet another stereotype about Caribbean gender relations. I had been subject to similar but

less blatant remarks about my body type all my life but for whatever reason, hers had struck a chord. And while it wasn't necessarily something that weighed heavily on my mind every day, it remained close enough to the surface that it began to re-emerge a few years later during my time at the Barbados Community College.

After careful deliberation about the topics I could possibly engage with during the three-year art programme, I was encouraged by my lecturers to embrace a subject that had the potential to be thoroughly fleshed out over that time span. It was then I decided to revisit that encounter and pick apart why that particular moment stayed with me all those years. While in this state of self-reflection I became fascinated with the term "spoil breed," so much so that it sparked a series of performance-based photographic works which featured me performing in what I referred to as "body suits." One suit in particular (pictured) was constructed to suggest a grotesquely exaggerated and distorted female bust, spilling out of a corset branded on the front with the words "animal feed." This piece became my response to years of endless body ideals being imposed upon me. In many ways I was using the work to draw attention to the complicity of both Black men and women in the continued objectification of the Black female body. I was also using the work to address the absence of black female bodies from art historical text and imageries in positions that were not servile. I imagined that if those bodies were indeed pictured, they would have been done in a way that emphasized prevailing beliefs of

259

inherent promiscuity and sexual availability associated with black female bodies. The work therefore became my way of reclaiming representation (and the resulting power) while simultaneously employing the very stereotypes designed to oppress Black women to highlight the work that still needs to be done with regard to how Black men and women consider our own imagery, inherited and otherwise.

These concerns all represent equally important components of my own trajectory as I navigate this nebulous space of intersectionality and imagery in the Caribbean context. In addition to helping me understand the nuances of my own personal practice, they help me to think about the available room for the arts as a movement to occupy within this much larger discussion of gender policy. How could the work of creative individuals shift from simply being mounted on the walls of commercial banks or in the lobbies of hotels to occupying a more dynamic position in the much larger discourse happening at national and regional forums? And how could it be done in a way that encourages the involvement of every demographic of society, particularly in a region where the widespread belief among citizens is that these discussions are disconnected from the realities of their lived experiences and therefore represent meaningless engagement? How could we expedite the process of dismantling centuries of internalized self-hatred, even as we fight against the unrelenting "outside gaze"? What would be the ideal point of entry that would allow for healthy conversations about all of these questions and more? The answers are not as elusive as we are led to believe.

Art comes from quite a long tradition of agitating change whether social, political, economic etc. We don't have to look too far back for evidence of such. The anti-Trump protests that have erupted since the result of the 2016 U.S. elections are proof enough that artists remain central to the effectiveness of movements that resist racist, sexist and xenophobic agendas. Consider the work of the many graphic designers, illustrators, cartoonists, fine artists, knitters from the Pussyhat Project and even social media meme creators during the last few months. Now try to imagine the movement without their contributions. It is an

undeniable fact that much of the success attributed to those protests is linked directly to artists who were keen enough to identify ways in which their work could be used to dismantle oppressive systems that threaten both their singular and shared realities. A closer look home at the Life in Leggings movement, which started in Barbados, would reveal a similar kind of movement that used the power and reach of social media to shine a brighter light on gender-based violence in the Caribbean. What started as a Facebook hashtag intended to create a safe space for Barbadian women to share their experiences of sexual harassment and abuse, quickly transformed into a regional movement that swept across the Caribbean, gaining momentum in countries like Guyana, Trinidad and Tobago, Jamaica, Dominica and The Bahamas. The resounding success of those protests represented one of the few occasions a movement of that nature was able to start in one territory and quickly spread across waters to set into motion equally successful protests in other territories across the region.

So what is the connection that I'm trying to make between the protests overseas and the occasional waves of protest actions occurring in the Caribbean? While it would be impossible to discredit the tremendous success of the Life In Leggings movement, it does call into question why the level of solidarity shown in this instance was the exception and not the rule. Perhaps the most glaring observation that could be made between the two regions regarding the manner in which these issues and the public policies designed to address them are considered, is our general reluctance or disinterest in engaging with creative practitioners in a way that could influence how those policies are decided upon and implemented. There seems to be a widening gap between policy makers and art makers, something that could have been avoided altogether if there was a sincere and serious deliberation of how a more inclusive environment between the two could be cultivated. Perhaps then it would be recognized that while the value of art is not necessarily something that could be measured quantitatively, it does not suggest there is no space for creative work in this discussion. Contrary to prevailing beliefs in the region, there is room for artists in the street as well as in the boardroom. In fact, artists have been keen enough to recognize the value of occupying space on the relatively "new" platform for activism: the worldwide

web. This is a clear indication to me that creatives are ready and willing to embrace shifting dynamics if they present an opportunity to achieve the desired results. Therefore, any attempt at deliberate disengagement by factions on either side should, in my opinion, result in the same kind of resistance at home as we have been witnessing overseas in the past few months.

The take-away from the anti-Trump protests for us as a region is that, in addition to reaffirming what we already knew about strength in numbers, those movements have also underscored the power in both the still and moving image. These two categories of media have become crucial to the undermining of institutionalized patriarchal beliefs and practices. They are part of a sophisticated network of channels that allow us to address gender and race disparities by challenging the hetero-normative roles imposed on both sexes. Almost every successful movement of change has been dependent on a very specific kind of visual language, one that was easily identifiable and accessible to the public. Whether it was a symbol, a logo or an image, some kind of unifying iconographic material would have been created to support expressions of solidarity with oppressed groups. And it is precisely at this point that the Internet, and more specifically social media, would have stepped in to function as the vehicle responsible for transporting said material, making deposits in various pockets across the world.

We need to work on developing our own visual language that speaks directly to the issues of our region. We must think of ways to inspire the same kind of passion about the victories and failures of those state and regional policies designed in our interests. We must find creative ways to dismantle the stereotypes of Caribbean men, women and gender non-conforming persons with the understanding that we are all responsible for reclaiming our representation. No more blindly subscribing to the pervasive and archaic ideologies surrounding the self-image we inherited from our colonizers, an image we internalize to this day. In the same way art, historical text and imageries were created to uphold a racist, patriarchal society, we too can use literature and art to model effective policies that could potentially change our narratives.

It would be in the best interest of every nation to provide the kind of creative incubators that nurture critical thinking and fuel the manifestation of those ideas. It would also be of great import that space be made available for those persons to shape a sustainable practice for themselves after their incubation period would have ended. Too often countries lose great thinkers and makers to other spaces that they perceive to be more appreciative of the work they are producing. And while in most cases the unfortunate truth is that artists are indeed under-valued in their homeland, we must still find ways to prevent further hemorrhaging of our local talents. Where governments fail to provide the necessary infrastructure to support such creative practices, the private sector must step in to provide a solution.

It is the mark of a healthy and progressive society when, despite being previously disarmed by colonialism, one can readily identify multiple systems that support any kind of creative contemplation and/or projection (whether through the public/private funding of art programming, workshops, residencies, grants, scholarships etc.). At the core of these types of initiatives is the capacity to facilitate the subversion of these intersecting oppressions by providing new and innovative ways of merging the critical thinking and problem-solving qualities linked to both the creative and social science disciplines. A shift in this direction would, in my opinion, signal a breakthrough in how they would have been examined traditionally, as separate and unrelated topics. Perhaps the acknowledgment that we should no longer consider the two areas as being mutually exclusive but rather complementary to each other, would be the kind of across-the-board engagement of creatives and non-creatives necessary should we hope to affect any real change in future policy making practices. Audrey Lorde (1984), in a brilliant summation, explained why our efforts would be futile if we looked to outdated models for resolutions to the issues affecting us now:

> "The old patterns, no matter how cleverly rearranged to imitate progress, still condemn us to cosmetically altered repetitions of the same old exchanges, the same old guilt, hatred, recrimination, lamentation, and suspicion.

"For we have, built into all of us, old blueprints of expectation and response, old structures of oppression, and these must be altered at the same time as we alter the living conditions which are a result of those structures. For the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house."

References

Crenshaw, Kimberlé. 1989. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." University of Chicago Legal Forum, 1989, Issue 1.

Lorde, Audrey. 1984. Sister Outsider. New York: Ten Speed Press, 123.

Wood, Jack Denfeld and Gianpiero Petriglieri. 2005. "Transcending Polarization: Beyond Binary Thinking," Transactional Analysis Journal, 35(1): 33.