



ON AND IN THEIR BODIES: Masculinist Violence, Criminalization, and Black Womanhood in Trinidad

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As Tanya opens the door to the shop, the sound of music and hearty laughter overflow from the space filled with the kinetic energy generated by the women who labor and lime here every day—an energy four walls cannot contain.¹ Catching their merriment, I understand why, as Tanya has informed me, Deja frequents the shop after her work shift. Since I moved in with Tanya in a neighborhood in Laventille, Trinidad, she has insisted I record the story of Deja, whom she met several years ago in this very shop.² I have come to speak to Deja and fulfill my promise to Tanya. The women present in the space pause their conversation only to introduce themselves and inform me that Deja is coming now, which translates to more than an hour later in Trinidadian time. They are discussing recent shootings and robberies in Port of Spain. However, they retell the events with a honeyed bitterness, in which they overemphasize comedic details, making the danger of the events the backdrop rather than the main attraction. They make the stories of crime in the capital city they must venture into daily avenues for cathartic laughter, rather than reasons for despair and fear. As one woman, Ava, ends a story of how she narrowly escaped being robbed in a maxi taxi, another, Sandra, quickly chimes in with her own story of a robbery she witnessed just outside the shop in which we sit. “I see a man rob a woman in town one time. If you see how he rob

that woman, you woulda swear the two of them is lovers. If you see. He lean up on the lamp post, smoking he cigarette cool, cool [she demonstrates his stance]. When the woman come on up, like he done mark her higher up, yuh understand. He was waiting on her—the gold band on she hand. Eh heh. Man, if you see how he push that woman on a car and grab the woman bracelet. Yuh woulda swear is she man.” Sandra’s hyperbolic gestures and comedic tone animate the scene, causing the shop to erupt in laughter once again. However, when the laughter subsides, I am confronted with the gravity of Sandra’s analogy: the man assaulted the woman in the street as if “two of them is lovers.” Then, I remember why I am in the shop: to record the story of a mother living with grief.

Two and a half hours later I am sitting with Deja deep into our interview. We have gotten past her explanation for her tardiness, her apologies for the women jovially carrying on their conversation in the background, and her vetting of me. She begins to reveal more about herself:

You have this emptiness in your belly [emphasis added]. You know you are missing something. You don’t even know how you feel. Sometimes you take out a plate of food to eat and you can’t even eat it because you studying if your child eat? If he eating clean? You studying you know, if he was alive what condition would he be in? How would he be? You also studying each day pass if they would have come to burn down your house—if they would come and shoot down your house to get to him? . . . [hushed voice] It ain’t have a day, it ain’t have a minute, that you don’t think—

She trails off and sits quietly for a moment before resuming:

I feel—I feel—I need to open up. That the grief is what have me so. Girl, if I talk about him long, sometimes my voice go for hours and I can’t talk again. So I feel that I need to open up to get relief. Because it come like I have that lock in a cage inside of here [her voice breaks]. Cause I never—no, I go counseling, but it was a set of *dead mother*. When I say ‘dead mother,’ I mean mothers who loss their children [she pauses again]. It take long to catch back myself like how I is. REALL LONGGG. And I still ain’t reach . . . ‘Cause, although he was *that*, he was never a rude child, he was loving, caring [short pause]. But what he was doing was wrong [she says with a hint of anger in her voice]! Going to that group or liming with that group or getting yourself in that—you should have be here today to make me feel proud.

I register the multiple tenses and moods that feature in Deja's discussion of her son killed twelve years ago by an unknown assailant Deja assumes was his associate. She speaks about his life simultaneously as what was, what is, and what could have been. This gives me a glimpse of the way her child is housed inside her as layers of time collapsed into one another.

"My son. He was involved in it. But I never encourage it. Like when he got involved *in thing*, I put him out." Deja's tone is calm and deliberate as she delivers these words. She looks at me as if to be sure I record that she was a good citizen—proven by her willingness to expel her "criminal" son—even if he never actually left her. She did not condone her son's illicit activity. She did what she was supposed to.

"Was that really difficult for you when you had to tell him to leave?" I hesitate, understanding the danger of posing this question while suspecting she is less resolved than she performs about her past *choice* to evict her son.

"Yea," she pauses, taking a deep breath that seems to source energy from the shop filled with women who have sustained her through more than anyone should have to bear. "It come like, yuh know, somebody die for you. Yuh know is real difficult telling your child they have to leave just to please—uhh—to save your life. It go hurt you. But like anything he need, I go send for him. His food, if he come for money, any little thing I would give him." We sit with a tense silence between us until Deja breaks it with a whisper, "One shot he get." In her voice, I hear the ripping apart of stitches that were always already insufficient to seal the wounds that have not healed, but I do not hear her exact words. She repeats her utterance for the record: "One shot he get. I always remember him. Not a day pass I don't remember him. Up to this morning."

Two seemingly disparate stories of theft and assault against the bodies of black women were brought together that afternoon in the space of this shop. One woman attacked on the body for the acquisition of her material possessions, an act indexical of intimacy to Sandra. Another woman attacked in her body through the murder of her son. One anecdote gesture to the normalcy of partner violence, the other an illustration of the underrecognized fractal victims of gun violence and the state violence used to manage it. I retell these two stories here as they came to me, uncomfortably juxtaposed, because since receiving them alongside each other, I have been moved to think about them relationally. Gender-based violence, inter/intra-community gun violence, and state violence are often treated distinctly in

analysis. Yet as the women convened in the shop and shared their experience of black poor womanhood in Trinidad, they revealed how these different forms of violence are felt and carried together, thereby inviting us to think more about their entanglements than their divergences.

Since the rise of the homicide rate in Trinidad at the turn of the twenty-first century, gun-related murders of largely young black men by young black men remain the predominant concern of the Trinidadian state, media, civil society, and supra-state organizations. They treat this form of violence as exceptional and public—a threat to the physical safety of all citizens and the economic and moral stability of the nation—distinct from gender-based violence, understood to arise from intimate relations and thus private, outside the purview of the state. While highly vulnerable to physical violence, black women in low-income communities face the erasure of their vulnerability as they are often chastised for their intimate and familial relationships with so-called violent men and scapegoated for high national murder rates as state officials, NGOs, and even their own community members regurgitate theories that interweave blackness, deviant sexuality, matriarchal family structures, and criminality. This chastising and scapegoating occur even as black women in poor urban communities lose kin to murder at high rates—murder conducted both by the police and young men from the same social position. Gun violence, the discourse around it, and the securitization efforts produced to manage it fiercely disrupt the quotidian lives of black women of urban communities in multiple ways even less accounted for than physical harm against women. Yet, embedded in a matrix of violence, black women devise ways to care for others, often at the expense of their physical, mental, and emotional health.

In this article, I place in conversation multiple forms of violence against those who occupy the category of poor black woman in Trinidad: the abuse and premature death of these women at the hands of their partners or strangers; the physical and discursive violence against black women by the state; the theft of their children due to inter/intra-community and police violence; and the grief black women are often forced to carry. I show how these different forms of violence converge on and in black women's bodies and, rather than being distinct in causation and effect, make for multiple iterations of the ongoing colonialist extraction of black women's lives for the constitution of different forms of masculinist state and economic power. In this way, I join the labor of scholars working throughout the black diaspora that refuse the binary of state and interpersonal violence, as well as the colonial/postcolonial divide in excavations of gender-based violence. Scholars who fall into that category are [Shanya Cordis \(2019\)](#), [Christen Smith \(2016\)](#), [Andaiye](#)

(2020), Yomaira Figueroa-Vásquez and Jessica Marie Johnson (2021), Alysia Mann Carey (2014), Savannah Shange (2022), and Brendane Tynes (2022), among others.

Though I center here the pervasive violence against black women in Trinidad, I do not seek to lock them into a permanent victim-hero status or to essentialize black womanhood. Rather, I aim to show how masculine and feminine subjectivities, in tandem with racialized positionings, are produced through violence, more comprehensively documenting the nature of gendered violence and its embodiment. While this article illuminates and brings into conversation the multiple modes of violence against black cishet (cisgender heterosexual) women that go unaccounted for, I also do not seek to exceptionalize this violence. I remain attentive to the ways colonial logics and derivative notions of normative racialized humanity and respectable performances of gender and sexuality manifest gendered violence in related yet particular ways for cishet women and trans-people across racialized groups, gender and sexually transgressive people more broadly, and cishet men in the Caribbean (for discussions on this, see, for example, Trotz 2004; Haynes and DeShong 2017; Cordis 2019; Grey and Attai 2019).

The present work has resulted from twenty-four cumulative months of fieldwork between 2016 and 2020 in Trinidad, dedicated to understanding processes of statecraft, criminalization, racialization, and gendering, though as a black woman born and raised in Trinidad, I have been grappling with this political terrain beyond this formal time period. During fieldwork, I conducted participant observation and interviews with state actors working on national security and development, police officers, news editors, journalists, crime photographers, NGO workers, and community members of state-categorized “crime hotspots.” In addition to ethnographic fieldwork, news media archives, particularly from the past two decades, as well as historical legal archives have proven critical to the development of this work as I write against the impetus to read acts of violence, particularly inter/intra-community violence, as contained performances—singular events originating from individuals that carry a natural and social propensity for criminality determined by racialized (including class, religion, geography, etc.) and gendered markers. This approach rationalizes carceral and supposedly extrajudicial responses as the prime means to redress “crises of crime” and inhibits necessary transformative social intervention and the reimagination of systems of accountability and repair (Gilmore 2017; Kaba 2021; Vergès 2022). Rather, by thinking with the lives and deaths of women across space and time in Trinidad, women I met through ethnographic fieldwork and in primary and secondary archives, I work to develop a more capacious, relational, and historically layered understanding of gendered

violence. Finally, I plumb stories of pain not simply to regurgitate black death but to chart the ground on which unequivocally *precious life* is made.³ In this vein, I also consider the ways black women make joy with and despite this terror as they contribute to re-crafting a world in which women no longer have to steal space for themselves in landscapes of death—where they no longer have to be women fitting the category of womanhood as defined by Western humanism.



Figure 1. The cover of the *Trinidad and Tobago Guardian* newspaper, February 7, 2017.

FAMILIAR WOUNDS

She rarely spoke of her personal life to those around her, so we cannot know what Jamilia DeReveneaux endured at his hands before the night of February 5, 2017. What we do know from newspaper reports is that Jamilia confided in a friend earlier that day that she was going to make some relationship changes (Dolwat 2017). One of those changes involved asking her lover to return the keys to her car, which he used to work as a “PH” (informal) taxi.⁴ He called her while she was at work at her second job at a restaurant in MovieTowne (a local entertainment complex) and asked her to come to the basement parking lot. She went to

the deserted basement around 8 PM to collect her keys. They met. They talked. He gave her the keys. Then, as Jamilia turned to leave him, he slashed her throat. He would instead leave her. The tragically unsurprising final scene of their relationship: Jamilia, a twenty-seven-year-old black woman bleeding and gasping for air on the cold concrete floor of the parking structure, her once trusted lover escaping into the night with her freedom.

In my studio apartment in Philadelphia, I found out about Jamilia's murder as many within Trinidad did. Shortly after MovieTowne patrons discovered Jamilia in the basement, pictures of her wounded body began to circulate on social media platforms as proof of the crime crisis in Trinidad. In an attempt to calm the fearful citizenry, Prime Minister Keith Rowley addressed Jamilia's killing the following night in a public meeting with residents of Maloney, Trinidad—a state-categorized hotspot. “You called on the Prime Minister to do something about crime. I am not in your bedroom, I am not in your choice of men,” he said. (Hassanali 2017). With these words, the prime minister refused state responsibility for the prevalence of intimate partner violence.⁵ He framed this violence as a personal choice, private and ahistorical. Yet the means of Jamilia's killing, a cut to the throat, belies this framing. That wound is a citation. Its referent: enslavement.

As Jennifer Morgan (2018, 1) states, “Atlantic slavery rested upon a notion of heritability”; racial capitalist production and white heteropatriarchal plantocratic power were constituted through black women's wombs (Hartman 1997; Beckles 2004). In 1662, Virginia became the first colony in the Americas to enact a law that saw the state of freedom or bondage on birth determined by the status of the mother, or *partus sequitur ventrem* (the Latin later added to the Laws of Virginia, 1662 Act XII)—“offspring follows belly” (Morgan 2018, 4). As Morgan shows, although this was the earliest law of its kind, it simply codified practices of racial inheritance already followed in other English colonies in the Caribbean. The driving force behind this legislation was not the natural reproduction of a labor supply, but rather the need to establish distinct racial categories and tether blackness to enslavement. The law also enabled white men to commit sexual violence without the risk of the inheritance of white property or whiteness itself. Furthermore, the legal code, which reverberated throughout the Atlantic world to legitimize black subjugation, placed black women and, by extension, black people closer to animals or objects of possession than humans as colonizers circumvented normative European laws of patrilineal descent and instead looked to husbandry and property law to regulate black reproduction. “The law [1662 Act and the Slave Codes that emerged from it] locked enslaved women into a productive relationship whereby

everything that a body could do was harnessed to the capital accumulation of another” (Morgan 2018, 17). In law and practice the black woman’s body was captured and made valuable only for constituting others’ personhood, property, and protections (Hartman 1997, 80). The *Siete Partidas* (a thirteenth-century Castilian legal code influential in the legal rule of Spain’s overseas possessions) explicitly equated a person to a domesticated animal with the words, “So the mother’s owner also owns her child, just as the sheep’s owner also owns her lamb,” and Morgan sees them echoed in the 1662 Virginia act. It is the logic of racial slavery that considers a black woman a sheep that can be owned—a lamb that can be slaughtered—that I saw cited on Jamilia’s neck as her photo came across my phone screen.

Yet the plantation history of black women’s violability was not only legible on Jamilia’s body. It also resonated in the prime minister’s response to her death and the in high rates of gender-based violence in Trinidad more broadly as he criticized women’s choice of violent men. Within the social order of the plantation, black women’s and girls’ bodies were not just constructed as sites of conquest for constituting masculinist power but were also seen as the “locus of culpability” (Hartman 1997, 82). Legal cases during the formal period of enslavement document this formulation of black womanhood as always guilty for that which is done to her. One such exemplary case occurred against the British governor to Trinidad, Thomas Picton, for the 1801 torture of Louisa Calderon, a girl aged ten or eleven (Epstein 2012).

Picton claimed that Louisa, a “free mulatto woman” and the “mistress” of Pedro Ruiz, had orchestrated the robbery of Ruiz’s home alongside one Pedro Gonzalez. When Louisa claimed innocence for both herself and her alleged accomplice, Picton had her tortured to elicit a confession. She was just one victim in a regime of brutality implemented by Picton to establish and enforce a clear color line in Trinidad in the early days of British rule. When Britain took over Trinidad from Spain, it inherited an embryonic slave economy with just over 50 percent of the total population enslaved and unusually large free colored and free black populations (Brereton 1981, 16).⁶ Picton, himself a landowner with enslaved labor, sought to regulate this “frontier society” by instituting new forms of racial policing. Charges were brought against Picton by a commission headed by Colonel William Fullerton because his despotic practices risked endangering the image of British white civility that the Crown government was trying to establish, particularly as the British era of abolition had already begun when Britain acquired Trinidad (Matthews 2007, 92).

Critically, during the case, the prosecution aimed at Picton, effaced Pedro Ruiz's sexual violence against Louisa as the barrister normalized their relationship through a racial science theory purporting that climate accelerated puberty and womanhood in nonwhite females in the colonies. On the other side, Picton painted Louisa as a morally lacking "Mulatto prostitute" who made "a criminal connection with a Sambo or Negro" to rob her "industrious" partner, and his defense cited the ungovernability and social chaos of the island to justify his use of torture (Epstein 2007, 725). Louisa's mixed-race skin and gender emerged as the core evidence of her criminality and responsibility for any abuse she endured. It would take the whitening of Louisa and the darkening of her torturer in circulating illustrations of the case to make the British public recognize Louisa as a victim of state violence (Epstein 2012). The case dragged on from 1803 to 1807. In the end, however, Picton was cleared of all charges and went on to be remembered as a British military hero.

The permissible denigration of the black/blackened female body and the transfer of responsibility from the violator to the violated feature in both the case of Louisa and that of Jamilia. In Prime Minister Rowley's critique of Jamilia's "choice" of partner we hear resonances of Picton's castigation of Louisa for her criminal connection with a degenerate "Negro" man. Both men show "a refusal to bear witness" (Figueroa-Vásquez and Johnson 2021, 88) to these women's lives, and both try to efface the state's (in)direct hands in the violence the women endured. How does this through line occur despite the process of formal emancipation from slavery, formal decolonization, and the rise of the postcolonial state?

The engendering of black womanhood as both fungible and criminally culpable meant a fundamentally divergent positioning of black and white women pre-emancipation, and utterly different experience of domination. While the heteropatriarchal policing of white women's sexuality aimed at the protection of respectable motherhood—the production of legitimate kin—the control of black women's sexuality was rooted in abjection (Sharpe 2016; Hartman 1997; Spillers 1987). Thus, while white women rendered as pure maternal figures were the measure of ideal femininity, on the de jure abolition of slavery, black women would have to be re-invented as chaste mothers instructed in the rearing of civilized children if they were to become proper colonial subjects and, eventually, proper citizens of an independent nation-state. To use Saidiya Hartman's words, "Marriage and protection rather than sexual freedom and reproductive justice were the only ways conceived to redress her wrongs or remedy the wound dealt to [her] reputation as a human being" (2016, 167). This was exactly the agenda laid out by the

now infamous Moyne Commission Report of 1945, which analyzed the sociopolitical and economic fabric of the Anglophone Caribbean to determine the cause of the mass uprisings throughout the region in the 1930s.

The Moyne Commission claimed that the lack of stable family structures produced high levels of poverty, leading to the protests of the colonized masses. In fact, the protests were responding to economic exploitation, rampant inflation, and the continued social neglect of the masses by the colonial administration, as well as by local and foreign capitalists (Milette 1999). Yet similar to the Moynihan Report studying black families in the United States almost twenty-five years later, the Moyne Commission Report placed the black matriarchal family at the source of urban socioeconomic problems. Destitution and criminality among black people could thus only be solved through the normalization of "proper" male-centered families and legally recognized marriage (French 1988). This proclamation formed the basis for respectability campaigns against so-called promiscuity, common-law

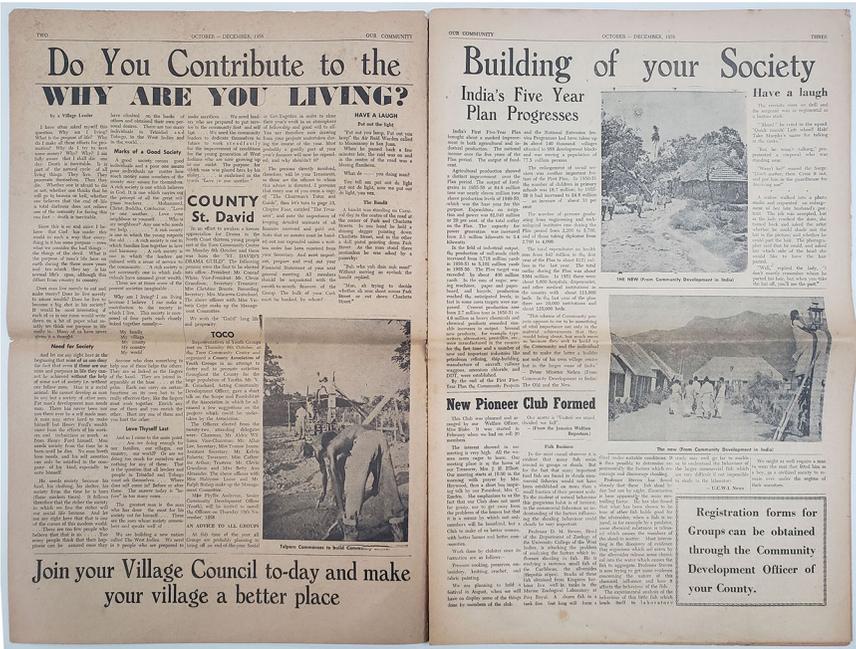


Figure 2. Page from a 1958 issue of the *Community Development Bulletins* published and circulated by the Community Development Department of the Colonial Government of Trinidad and Tobago in the 1950s. This page illustrates the discourse around self-discipline and social reproduction toward nation building characteristic of the time leading up to formal independence. Sourced from the 1950s Community Development Newspaper Collection, the West Indiana and Special Collections at the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, Trinidad.

marriages, and female-headed households. It also generated educational programming on civics, child-rearing, and hygiene particularly targeted at poor black women in the Anglophone Caribbean—educational training that continues to the present.



Figure 3. Page from a 1959 issue of the *Community Development Bulletin* published and circulated by the Community Development Department of the Colonial Government of Trinidad and Tobago in the 1950s. This page gives a glimpse into the work of the women's institutes and women's groups founded during that era. Sourced from the 1950s Community Development Newspaper Collection, the West Indiana and Special Collections at the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, Trinidad.

As the modern Trinidad and Tobago nation-state emerged in the 1960s, the creole elite upheld the colonial idea that to be both an ideal woman and citizen meant to be heterosexual, monogamous, fertile, and a producer of economically productive and law-abiding offspring (Reptax [Alexander 1994](#)). Thus, the postcolonial state structured itself on the imaginary of the respectable, maternal black woman (Rowley [2010](#)) and continued to treat black women's bodies as primarily sites for

social reproduction and capital accumulation. No longer the producers of enslaved property, they now emerged as the progenitors of the new nation responsible for choosing, raising, and supporting “good” men (even as they remained men’s possession)—men who could spur development, counter established notions of black inferiority, and prove the ability of formerly colonized people to self-rule. However, as the postcolonial economy, based on hydrocarbon energy and associated petrochemical exports (heavily reliant on foreign investment, highly sensitive to global economic shifts, and plagued by a racial hierarchal organization of labor) now constricts, working-class labor power weakens, and social investment declines with neoliberal reform, levels of unemployment, underemployment, and informal labor rise in Trinidad (Perry 2022).⁷ This increasing economic precarity, fueled by both local and global colonial economic relations, continues to hinder the performance of the *productive* masculinity and femininity the nation-state dictates.

Poverty fuels antagonistic social relations in urban communities with limited resources—both gun violence and gender-based violence—as men positioned as inadequate providers face a crisis of masculinity. This friction intensifies as men more frequently construe women’s educational and economic advancement as a rejection of normative femininity contributing to male marginalization (Hosein 2019). Recall, Jamilia had requested the return of her car, which her partner had been using for work, leading to her murder. Economic conditions also limit the channels through which women can provide for themselves, the ways they can construct and manage kin networks, and the pathways by which they can escape harm (Hosein 2019; Andaiye 2020). Yet these political economic and socio-historic factors that produce and structure women’s relationship to violence are often publicly silenced. Instead, the continued co-optation of black women’s bodies for gendered labor and the modern positioning of women as the nation’s moral center not only restricts the grounds on which they can be valued but also maintains low-income black women as culpable for violence—whether performed on their bodies or enacted in the national body.

In the afterlife of enslavement, black women remain required to perform in confined ways—“strong black woman/m/other”—to retain their conditional *freedom* (Rowley 2010, 11). And if the state finds that black women do not cultivate a socially proper self and a socially proper child according to the strict colonial script of respectable personhood, they will not only be shamed for their presumed gendered failure but will also often see life taken from them with no free space to mourn their loss—a continuation of a plantation horror story.



Figure 4. The cover of the *Trinidad and Tobago Daily Express* newspaper, December 20, 2018. The headline references then commissioner of police Garry Griffith's statement that if directly attacked, police officers should not hesitate or shoot to disarm but instead shoot to kill. Accompanying the headline is a picture of Griffith shaking hands with Rudy Giuliani.

STOLEN BELLIES

At about 9:30 PM on October 25, 2018, members of the Inter-Agency Task Force (a special operations police unit) entered a communal yard in Trou Macaque, Laventille, where eight young men were playing cards. The police were looking for Mechack Douglas and Shaundell St. Clair. Later, the officers claimed gunfire met their arrival, leading them to kill—in supposed self-defense—five of the young men and boys present. Relatives of the deceased—Mechack Douglas, Shaundell St. Clair, Nicolas Barker, Shekeem Francois, and Kudiem Phillip—disputed the officers' claims and described the event as a mass execution (Ramdass 2018). A week after the shooting, I call a senior police officer with whom I have been conducting fieldwork, Officer James, to discuss the occurrence. After four rings, James answers the phone. I begin, "I saw on the news all the reports and concerns about Trou Macaque. How does the shooting affect the relationship between residents and the police?" Without missing a beat, he retorts, "Everyone talking about the

two teenage boys who were killed, but no one talking about Shaundell, Mechack, and the other one. A lot of people are very happy that they are no longer terrorizing the community. . . . I am glad you went on the ride-about with us, because you got to see the kind of terrain we dealing with. . . . *People imagine the terrain is like where they live, and people compare the children with their children. But it is a different environment there*" (emphasis added). He ends the conversation, leaving me to ruminate over his words. James's statements feel like an admission of guilt. Without the slightest hesitation, an officer of the law reveals that he believes in upholding a social order that sees some as born differently human, and those deemed violent or potentially violent as that which can and should be killed.

Following common practice, members of the media went to the Forensic Science Center to capture the reactions of the families of the deceased as they awaited autopsy results they hoped would corroborate their telling of the events. Local newspapers printed the words of Teresa, the mother of twenty-three-year-old Nicolas Baker. I reproduce them as reported:

They kill my child just so! He was going to check his partner and allyuh shoot him like a dog! My child don't be on nothing. He doesn't have a criminal record or anything. You just shooting black people children for nothing. They have children too. *You will feel my pain. That is my belly you gone with just so, innocently!* What you feel it is? Why did they kill my son? Is it because he is from the ghetto? . . . I worked and struggled to make sure my children reached somewhere. I work like a dog to make sure they get what they want. (Hamilton-Davis 2018; emphasis added)

Teresa's statements sit with me. She narrates the loss of her son as the theft of her belly, just as Deja inferred. It is theft because, although Teresa worked to enable her children's social mobility, that is, performed the labor of social reproduction to benefit the nation-state, that state did not return on its debt. Instead, the state's security force took her child. What Teresa clearly articulates in her statement referencing the stolen labor of her belly, work she analogizes to that of an animal, is the endurance of her gendered and racialized positioning born of the plantation. Teresa shows that the reproduction of the postcolonial state remains predicated on the bellies of black women. Not just in the way the nation-state relies on black women to produce appropriate productive citizens but also in the way the state constitutes its power (is produced as a legitimate source of security) through the

murder of poor black women's children who state actors categorize as dangerous criminals (through stolen bellies).

Teresa is fully aware that her son's blackness and geographical identity positioned him in the crosshairs of the police. Nonetheless, she demands someone address why and how her son could be taken from her. Teresa demands accountability and that we bear witness to the pain that she and other mothers like her carry in their bodies. Following the anthropologists [Veena Das \(1996\)](#) and [Deborah A. Thomas \(2019\)](#), I understand the public voicing of pain not simply as an expression of a private state but as an attempt to construct a channel between bodies, along which the burden of pain can be distributed and carried together. It is a call for *affective recognition*—what [Thomas \(2019\)](#) theorizes as a deep embodied intersubjective recognition rooted in love, rather than modernist juridical codes.⁸ However, what happens when one cries out from the depths of their body for others to carry their pain but that call goes unanswered?

As pictures started circulating of two of the deceased from Trou Macaque holding guns—supposed proof of all five young men's violent natures—people began to ask: If the young men were lawless, did it matter if the police killings were premeditated? Could the ends justify the means given the crisis of crime? Almost 3,500 citizens responded with a resounding, yes to the second question in a local newspaper poll hosted on Facebook. Participants expressed no remorse for the families of the deceased. The poll revealed a controversial but widely held belief: not every death appears worthy of grief, and, by extension, not every individual appears worthy of life ([Butler 2009](#)). With this, Teresa was left to individually carry her pain alongside other mothers whose bellies had been stolen, or, as *Deja* calls them, “dead mothers” (mothers who carry their dead children as life within them).

On Saturday, June 27, 2020, almost two years after the Trou Macaque shooting, the police killed three men—Joel Jacob, Noel Diamond, and Israel Clinton—in Morvant, Trinidad. Though the officers initially claimed the deaths had resulted from a shootout, CCTV footage from a nearby home revealed that the officers had fired at the men unprovoked ([Ramdass 2020](#)). Following the release of the footage, citizens of areas around the capital city initiated protests against the banality of police violence in their communities. Ornella Greaves, a young black woman four months pregnant, attended one such protest in Beetham Gardens, intending to record residents' interactions with the police. During the protests, officers fired into the crowd and fatally shot Ornella. Though eyewitness reports, Ornella's own statement before succumbing to her injuries, and protestors' video footage attested

to the police killing Ornella, the police commissioner, Gary Griffith, asserted that he had footage, which he never produced to the public, disapproving these claims (Christopher 2020; *Loop T&T News* 2020). Griffith sought to cultivate doubt by insinuating that Ornella had died at the hands of one of her community members. As a strategy, this could only be conceived as effective because of the racialized criminalization of Beetham and its residents. Up to the time of writing this article, the Police Complaints Authority's investigation into Ornella Greaves's murder remains open, with feminist activist groups such as WOMANTRA and CAISO continuing to call for justice in Trinidad.

At her daughter's funeral, Anette Greaves recounted her last moments with Ornella: "I saw Ornella passing. I asked her where she was going. She had her phone out recording and she said she was going right there. I told her, when you hear the police start to shoot, you might get a bullet, and I don't know what I will do" (Superville 2020). Anette Greaves let the crowd know that while she was still grieving her daughter's death, she had come to terms with her passing, and encouraged mourners to take time to teach their children "the right values and lessons" (Superville 2020). She felt it necessary to deliver this warning because, despite her teachings, her daughter enjoyed parties more than God, and "parties can't save you," (Superville 2020). On the surface, Anette Greaves's last words to her daughter may appear to be prophetic—a mother's intuition—but in fact her words reflect the constancy of masculinist sovereign violence, producing a set of familiar expectations (Thomas 2019). The elder Greaves understood that protests in a criminalized community like Beetham are never read as legitimate civil disobedience but rather as unruliness and a threat to the social order. Greaves understood, given historical precedent, that the police could and would kill with impunity in areas and neighborhoods categorized as black, low-income, and criminal—all in the name of security. She also understood that her daughter did not conform to the colonial script of respectability that she needed to perform to access her rights of citizenship and protection. She was a low-income black woman involved in a common-law marriage who had four children and was pregnant with a fifth, a woman who did not attend church.⁹ Thus, in Anette Greaves's calculation, the probability of her daughter leaving for a protest and not returning home was high. Her refusal to perform responsible gendered citizenship, her "femininity-as-failure" (Barratt 2018), constituted an offense punishable by death.

The fact that Anette Greaves sought to warn parents to raise "proper" children at her daughter's funeral reveals the ways in which black women, through decades of social programming, have been conscripted into the work of reconfiguring

sovereign violence as personal failures in mothering and womanhood. They have been made to invest in a project of respectability that states that no matter how well they perform, their bodies can be treated as open terrain on which various groups can constitute heteropatriarchal power: the bearers of hegemonic white and mimetic white masculinities, as well as men marginalized by their racialization seeking the power of normative white masculinity (Beckles 2004). The continuous, multiscalar struggle for political and economic power, social control, and humanist recognition in the Caribbean in the wake of the plantation creates a normalcy of violence in impoverished landscapes like Laventille and Beetham. This produces the repetition of loss that poor black women are frequently forced to individually carry within their bodies (while sometimes denying the burden, as in the case of Anette Greaves). Meanwhile, the criminalization and subjection of black life erode a public capacity to recognize, legitimize, share in, or, more critically, prevent these black women's grief. At the same time that lower-income black women remain highly vulnerable to the performance of physical violence *on* their bodies they also experience the effects of masculinist violence *in* their bodies.

As state violence and intra-communal violence kills black women and their children, the historical construction of black womanhood produces these women as the genesis of such violence, speaking of “failed femininities” and “bad mothers.” This not only disavows the quotidian dangers of existing as a low-income black woman but also delegitimizes her grief in the face of death, locking that grief as a presence in her body. That presence slowly extracts life from her. The anthropologist Laurence Ralph (2017), drawing on the work of Judith Butler (2009), orients our attention to the potential of grief for valuing black life when black people, particularly black women who often take on this gendered labor, grieve for black victims marked as ungrievable by the logics of the state. Henry Washington Jr. (2020) makes a similar argument as he unpacks the ways Margaret Garner, Mamie Till-Mobley, Karla F. C. Holloway, and Lezley McSpadden challenge (though do not dislodge) liberal humanism (which devalues black life) through their performances of public memory of their children. Following Ralph and Washington, I acknowledge the political work black women enact through their grief for their kin and communities, but I also take stock of this grief's violence—the ways it takes life from black women as it gives life to the dead. I do this to take account of the true depth of the state's theft from these women. First, the state reduces black women and their sexuality to reproductive factories, then it steals black women's bellies because they purportedly produced violent criminals, and finally, the state steals their mental, physical, and emotional health as it forces them to labor to confer

humanity onto their offspring through grief on their death. Yet the nation-state perpetuates the conditions in which that grief can never fully be publicly recognized and cared for. And even black women who do everything to prove that they are “good” mothers and who reject their status as laboratories of violence by investing in the production of “good” citizens must still contend with the presence of delegitimized grief that lingers and takes from them. I return to Deja’s story to elaborate on this point.



Figure 5. *Roadblock*, 2021. Digital collage produced by Leniqueca Welcome using fieldwork photos taken between 2018 and 2019.

CARRYING GRIEF

Sitting with Deja, I ask her opinion on police killings and the representation of grieving mothers in the media. She uses this moment to again distinguish her treatment of her son’s life and death from the normative response to supposed criminality performed by other mothers. “Not everybody will come out and talk like me. They will say he was a good boy and, oh, they just kill him. They won’t say their son was a bandit like how I say it. They will say mistaken identity. That is what they will say.” Deja moves from reassuring me that she is always honest in her portrayal of her son to reflecting on the meaning of his death. “Yes, I am still in the pain of losing my son, but it did bring a little relief from always having to

look over my shoulder. One child could put your whole life in danger, your whole family. So that [when he died] was a relief for me that I didn't have to lose anybody else. *I would say, 'thank you, Jesus, the whole thing done.'* Otherwise you studying when you go out if you go get a phone call [that your child is dead]." Her voice and posture as she delivers these words betray her; nothing about her son is done for her. However, before her sadness has a chance to consume her, she reverts to a disciplinary tone. "They [your children] not listening [being disobedient] put them out. So, when push come now, hear what the people will say, 'She did put he out.' They won't have anything over yuh. They go say, 'You don't take nonsense.'"

Throughout our conversation, Deja oscillates between a state of loss rooted in the love of her child, and her compulsion to be seen as having done the right thing about him as a good citizen and a strict mother. She battles with the reality that her survival and the protection of her other children meant distancing herself from her son. She struggles with the knowledge that she has carried with her since her son got involved "in things," that the termination of her anxiety lay in the death of her son, whether it be at the hands of the police or his comrades. Yet she still feels unsafe. Her disclosure of the small sense of relief that marked his death evinces her deep longing for stability, safety, and freedom—for life outside the shadow of death, things denied to her as a poor black woman in the wake of the plantation. She grieves her son, she grieves the loss of her full personhood, and despite her efforts to distinguish herself from mothers like Teresa, who are criticized for protecting their sons and claiming their innocence, Deja's grief, just like theirs, remains a presence *locked in a cage inside her*, with nowhere to go. It strangles her voice. Recall Deja's words: "Girl, if I talk about him long, sometimes my voice go for hours I can't talk again."

The anthropologist Christen Smith, drawing on her research in Bahia, Brazil, and Austin, Texas, applies the medical term *sequelae* to capture the lingering effects of violence on black mothers. The word refers to conditions resulting from previous diseases or injuries, "that is, the gendered punishment of living death handed down to those who affectively surround the dead" (Smith 2016, 31). Here I build on Smith's concept of *sequelae* and expand my focus beyond the lingering effects of state violence manifested in police killings to elucidate the lingering effects of broad masculinist violence on black women. I do this in acknowledgement that the grief over a child killed by the police and a child killed by someone of a similar racialized and socio-economic positionality can feel indistinguishable in the ways they affect the body. This is despite the fact that a police officer and a young poor black man from a marginalized community are distinct types of offenders in

terms of the material conditions that spur their actions, their relationship to the nation-state project, and the ways their acts of harm are read and held accountable. Killings by people from black low-income communities are criminalized while the killings by the police are state-sanctioned, that is, normalized as part of the everyday violence work police do in service of the state and market (Seigel 2018, 10).

Deja's son was not killed by the police. Deja suspects he was killed by someone like him, someone he knew, someone involved in illicit activities to both sustain life in a resource-poor community and to access a sovereign power they are otherwise denied by virtue of their ongoing marginalization and criminalization (Thame 2016; Welcome 2022). The person who took Deja's son performed one form of masculinist violence that affects her: extractive intra-community violence enacted among those on the margins of manhood, a violence derivative of the colonial violence enacted by those at the center of normative white masculinity (and those later incorporated into the project of whiteness as its postcolonial agents). However, as the colonial framing of black womanhood, black kinship, and criminality invoked by the postcolonial state structures the relationship she has with her son in both life and death, another form of masculinist violence occurs within Deja. As she lived with the constant fear that her son could die at the hands of the police or fellow "criminals"; as she felt forced to practice her citizenship and appropriate motherhood through the eviction of her son; and as she battles with the grief of a stolen child and guilt around her mothering, she feels the violence of the nation-state project. Caught in an assemblage of masculinist violence—with some actors regarded as the problem and others as the solution—Deja attempts to negotiate her position.

Toward the end of the interview, Deja discloses another death that has affected her—the murder of the television talk-show host Marcia Henville by Henville's husband. Henville's show highlighted the lives of people in marginalized communities. Deja tells me that Henville often interviewed mothers who had lost children, and she would always know the right question to ask: *How do you feel?* Deja saw Henville as providing a channel for women's pain, something she desperately needs to exorcise the grief within her, something lost with Henville's tragic death. Here, intimate gendered violence moves from being a shadowy prelude to our conversation to a central feature of Deja's story. It marks the foundation of consent for this interview: to Deja I am a surrogate for Henville to whom she no longer has the chance to speak. A black woman whose husband, before burning her body, stabbed her repeatedly and *cut her throat*. The reappearance of a familiar wound.

FEELING TOGETHER

In this article, I have worked to show how the various forms of masculinist violence that extract from poor black women's bodies—including gender-based violence by partners and non-partners, state violence, inter/intra-community gun violence, and the lingering violence of grief over murdered kin—are entangled in their foundational gendered and racial logics rooted in the plantation, by the political economy that fuels urban precarity and insecurity, and in the ways they are enacted on and felt in black women's bodies. Jamilia and Henville: forever silenced by a cut to the throat. Deja: choked by the afterlife of one shot. Teresa, Deja, and Annette: left to soothe the empty bellies. Lousia and Ornella: tortured and killed for the constitution of state power. Jamilia, Louisa, and Ornella: written into the archive as victims of their choices, masking the true terms of their stolen lives. These women together: "Strangers made sisters through an unthinkable kinship" (Figueroa-Vásquez and Johnson 2021, 91).¹⁰

Poor black women in the wake of the plantation remain the terrain on and within which battles for the power of hegemonic masculinity are fought. Moreover, the personhood of these women is primarily recognized by the nation-state for the maternal labor they perform in its service and at the moment the state transposes its responsibility for perpetuating the conditions that enable violence to the bodies of these black women. However, even as black women are treated as terrains of extraction for the constitution of masculinist power, made to carry the dead, and have their pain disavowed, they carve out space to be alive. They build social worlds through and beyond death (Carter 2018): "*For what is more woman than holding death and life, sky and earth in your body same time, to fly while earth-bound*" (Banwo 2022, 192; emphasis original). While illuminating the violence black women in Trinidad endure against their being, it is critical to also acknowledge how they configure their lives as precious. Thus, I end this article where I began—amid the sounds of laughter from the women in the shop Deja frequents.

Though Deja often uses the space to discuss her son and to temporarily alleviate some of the pressures of his presence inside her, she uses the shop for so much more. While waiting for Deja to arrive the day she told me the words recorded here, the Deja the women in the shop described to me was not a mother who often cried among them. Instead, she emerged as a gregarious comedian who always unabashedly perks up her breasts before venturing off to flirt with those she desires. The shop is a sacred, life-giving space for Deja. Here her body is more than an archive of coloniality. In this shop, these women's laughs fill the cavernous spaces in their bellies, expand up and out of their throats, and flow among them,

weaving them together beyond the violence they endure. The laughter and gesticulations that animate their shared storytelling become an improvisational dance that allows them to feel free in their bodies (if only for a moment)—similar to the way Sarah Bruno (2022) describes the space of the batey, where Puerto Rican women through the practice of Bomba release the wreckage of ongoing colonial violence. When I met Deja, she insisted I omit any information about the venue of our meeting, hence the simple reference, “shop.” She was adamant about this to protect the identity of the space she crafted for herself with other black women to reclaim what is rightfully their own. I mark and hold this space of black women communing, caring for each other, celebrating their full being, and cultivating joy as the grounds for living free.

If we understand the space of the body as the critical terrain on and in which unfreedoms are made, then everyday claims to one’s own body, a body always in relation with others, as a site of pleasure and joy remain critical liberatory work. This work is often obscured, but it exists immersed in the thick of it all. Thus, I continue to mark the ways black people—criminalized (even by people who may share a black identity), violated, and placed definitively outside the limits of whom this world should care for—continue daily to move through the world as if their lives are unequivocally precious, thereby actively enacting a world in which this constitutes a reality. May we take a breath on this ground on which moments of precious life are lived now, and let it help us find an opening.

ABSTRACT

In this article, I place in conversation multiple forms of violence against those who occupy the category of poor black woman in Trinidad: the abuse and premature death of these women at the hands of their partners or strangers, the physical and discursive violence against black women by the state, the theft of their children due to inter/intra-community and police violence, and the grief black women are often forced to carry. I show how these different forms of violence converge on and in black women’s bodies and, rather than being distinct in causation and effect, constitute multiple iterations of the ongoing colonialist extraction of black women’s lives for the creation of different forms of masculinist state and economic power. Ultimately, I show how masculine and feminine subjectivities are produced in tandem with racialized positionings through violence and comprehensively document what is gendered violence and how it is embodied. [gender-based violence; coloniality; state violence; postcolonialism; blackness; Caribbean studies; Black studies]

NOTES

Acknowledgments First, I want to express my gratitude to you, Deja, for taking the time to sit with me and trusting me to care for your story. Your words not only shaped this article but reconfigured aspects of my larger project. I also extend thanks to Tanya, the other women of the shop, and all others who have glimpses of their lives featured here. I am grateful to Deborah A. Thomas, Sara Rendell, Chrystal Oloukoi, Ashley Aghasoga, Ampson Hagan, and Victoria Massie for their valuable comments on early versions of this piece, and to Diana Pardo Pedraza and Sarah Bruno for their generative input on later drafts. Additionally, I greatly appreciate the feedback from the anonymous reviewers and the *Cultural Anthropology* editorial collective, which significantly enhanced the article. Finally, this research was made possible by support from the Social Science Research Council's International Dissertation Research Fellowship and the Wenner-Gren Dissertation Fieldwork Grant.

1. *Lime* is a colloquial Trinbagonian term that when used as a verb means, “to hang out.”
2. The names used in the ethnographic vignettes throughout this article are pseudonyms. However, names of individuals from news media stories appear as reported, and the names of public officials remain unchanged.
3. The use of “precious life” here references Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s words “where life is precious, life is precious” (Kushner 2019), an abolitionist orientation to move beyond criminalization that legitimizes premature death and to consider all life as unconditionally precious. This is the political commitment that informs my larger project.
4. “PH” is a colloquial term for an informal taxi in Trinidad. It means that the car being used to run the service is private and thus has a license plate starting with the letter “P” rather than a license plate starting with “H” used to indicate that a car has the hired status and thus is legally allowed to run as a taxi.
5. A 2022 government report stated that in its 2017 survey, about 30 percent of women experienced partner violence and 20 percent of women experienced sexual violence from non-partners (Ministry of Health of Trinidad and Tobago and Pan American Health Organization, and World Health Organization 2022). These statistics, however, are partial, as sexual violence is notoriously underreported.
6. The Royal Cedula of 1783 issued by the Spanish governor in Trinidad, Don José María Chacón, offered land grants to French Catholic planters including “free negroes and mulattoes” in an attempt to develop the Trinidadian plantation economy and increase the enslaved labor population.
7. As Keston Perry (2022) states, in the late nineteenth century, Trinidad and Tobago’s large petroleum reserves were discovered, and in the early twentieth century, the British colonial government started extracting them in service of its empire. Given hydrocarbon resources, following independence, the Trinidadian government sought to develop industrial production and managed to rely less on tourism than other Caribbean islands. However, industrialization did not lead to major social transformations as predicted, as the finance, manufacturing, and hydrocarbon sectors post-independence maintained a colonial structure. They remained dominated by foreign enterprises, with limited local capital gains concentrated along class and color lines. While, as Perry notes, the Trinidad and Tobago state did attempt, following the social uprising of the 1970s, to implement a more nationalist approach to industrialization, over time this strategy became undermined by international policies (U.S. and European protectionist measures concerning their industries and exports), predatory international loan agreements, and the government’s continued reliance on foreign expatriates for managerial and executive labor, among other factors.
8. For an in-depth discussion of *affective recognition*, see Deborah A. Thomas (2019, 213–21).
9. Commentary on social media and in private conversations with some of my interlocutors used Greaves’s assumed status as a negligent mother to rationalize her death, asking: Why did she go to a protest pregnant? Who was taking care of her other four children?

Why did she not protect her unborn child? This again makes Greaves responsible for her own death.

10. I could feel the expansive black diasporic geography of this sisterhood as I read [Figueroa-Vásquez and Johnson's \(2021\)](#) work on the recommendation of one of the reviewers for this piece. The content, texture, and affect of their writing resonated strongly with the stories of the Trinidadian women I render here.

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