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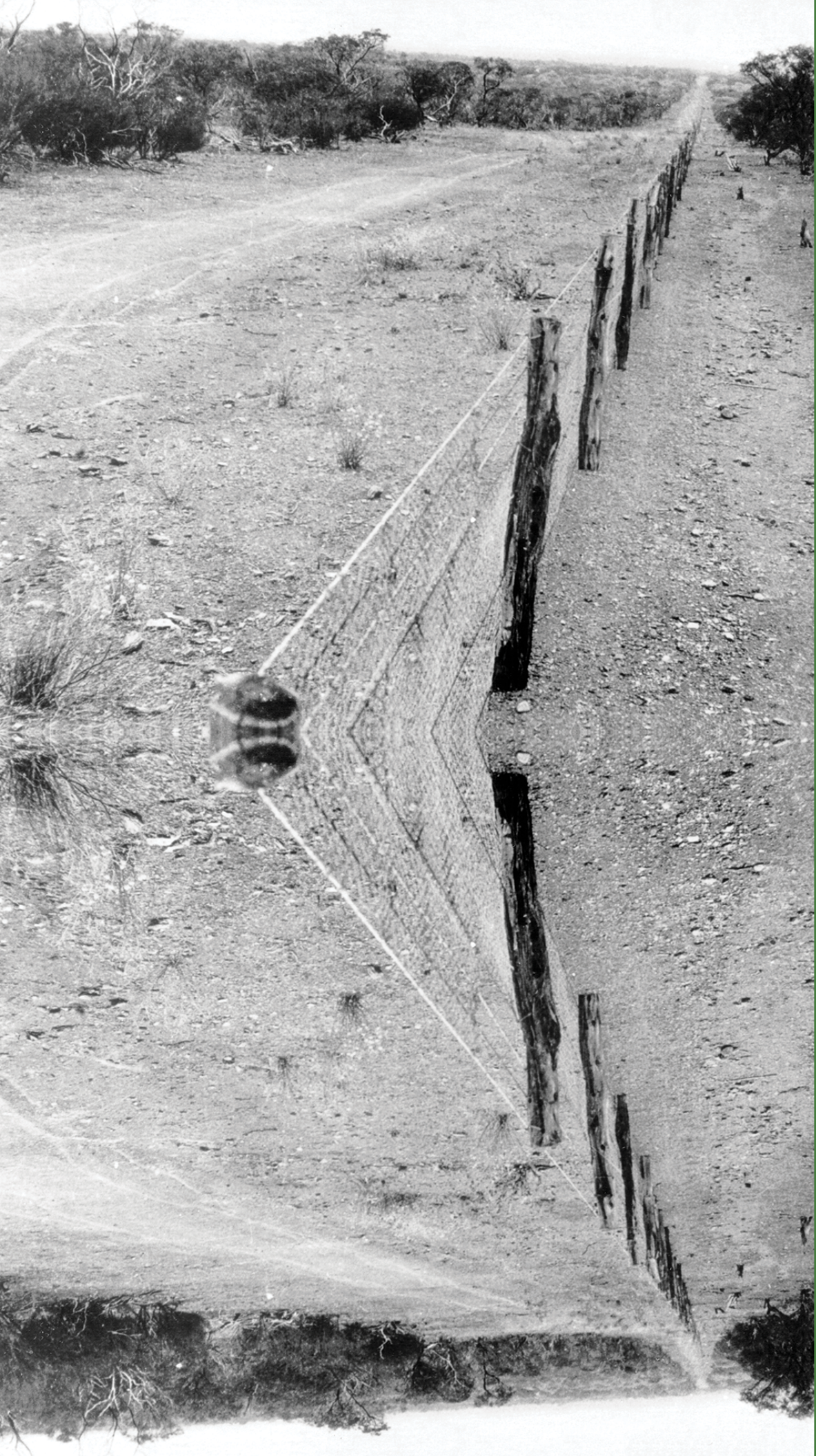
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Confection and the Aesthetic of Collapse: Luis Vasquez La Roche's Sugar Cane Field Performances

Ashleigh Deosaran

Introduction

On a sunny summer evening in late August 2021, I arrived at my doorstep in Chicago to find a much-anticipated delivery from my home-nation, Trinidad, the southernmost island of the Caribbean archipelago. I sliced through a layer of gray packaging to find a shoebox tightly encased in plastic wrap. With each excision from the plastic, a sickly-sweet stench filled the apartment. Prying the box open—with some effort, as its lid was stuck shut by a viscid amber substance (fig. 1)—I found that the shipment arrived in a state of near-total collapse after its the 2,600-mile journey. Tawny beads and shimmering fragments flecked the cardboard interior, melting with each passing moment (fig. 2). Inside lay a pair of partially crushed caramel-colored shoes which, even in its original undamaged state, only bore superficial resemblance to the



sneakers one might expect from a box featuring the internationally legible Nike name and logo (fig. 3). Cast entirely in brown sugar, the pair had been sculpted and

Figure 1. Luis Vasquez La Roche, Untitled, 2021, sugar sculpture in cardboard, dimensions variable. Photograph by the author.

shipped by a close friend and collaborator, Venezuela-born artist Luis Vasquez La Roche. They exemplify what I define in this paper, through Vasquez La Roche's recent confectionary sculptures and performances, as an aesthetic of collapse.



Figure 2. Luis Vasquez La Roche, *Untitled*, 2021, sugar sculpture in cardboard, dimensions variable. Photograph by the author.

The experiment fit squarely into Vasquez La Roche's oeuvre, characterized by site-specific, physically taxing performances with materials that signal fraught histories related to their value, color, extraction, and consumption.¹ Whether he is constructing a temporary monument using red clay brick and palm oil blackened with gunpowder or using the substance to coat his flesh entirely, his body seems to be visually spliced with the material and spatial histories within which he performs. He attends to the ways in which the Black body is enmeshed with/in these architectures and the extracted matter indexical to violent Circum-Atlantic histories. I argue that Vasquez La Roche's recent performances in the Couva community of central Trinidad enact collapse not only literally—taking his interest in ephemerality to its furthest extent—but also conceptually, anticipating a post-collapse future that departs from the idealism of colonial-imperial images.²

¹ The work also fits into a well-established canon of contemporary experiments with sugar and sculpture in visual arts practices throughout the Americas. Some include United States artist Kara Walker's monumental "A Subtlety" (2014); Bahamian-born U.S.-based artist Janine Antoni's "Gnaw" (1992) and "Lick and Lather," (1993); Cuban artist Magdalena Campos-Pons' "Sugar/Bittersweet" (2010); and Brazilian artist Tiago Sant'Ana's recent series of analogous "Sugar Shoes" (2018).

² In a very recent performance not addressed in this paper, "Cómo Saltar la Cuerda de la Manera Correcta" (How to Jump Rope Correctly), he intermittently skips and lashes out with a whip in an old sugar mill in Canóvanas, Puerto Rico. During his residency with the Trinidad-based artist collective and space Alice Yard at *documenta fifteen* in July 2022, La Roche performed the work with a rum soaked whip

Literal collapse is invoked in performances that mount a physical breakdown of materials, such as *But the Real Ones, Just Like You, Just Like Me* (2021), in which Vasquez La Roche destroyed a sugar shoe amidst the infrastructural remnants of an abandoned sugar refinery (fig. 4). In this article, I contextualize this performance as a counter to historic visualizations of the Caribbean sugar plantation during colonialism, as in the idealized sugarscape vistas rendered in the late nineteenth century by British artist Richard Bridgens. Vasquez La Roche additionally explores an aesthetic of collapse through a secondary, post-literal mode that compresses ostensibly divergent materials, spaces and times. In *Canchas de Algodón de Azúcar* (2020), for example, Vasquez La Roche visually foregrounds the refinery's absence and predicts a future in which literal collapse may culminate in ecological renewal and supersede reparative constructions. This performance, which emphasizes a vision of the plantation in a post-decay future, enacts a temporal cohesion between history and future, as well as a spatial collapse between plantations and the recreational site of a basketball court. A conceptual aesthetic of collapse moves beyond actual collapse to imagine a future beyond deterioration, limning multiple spatio-temporal referents through an Afrofuturist lens. Throughout the history of the genre, Afrofuturist works of literature, art, and poetry have responded to apocalyptic scenarios and problematized Anthropocentrism while imagining post-collapse possibilities as a form of liberation from the constraints of both history and the present. As philosopher and environmental theorist Frédéric Neyrat has deftly stated, the "inaugural paradox" of Afrofuturism is to "invent the future even when there is no longer any possible future."³ For visual artists like Vasquez La Roche, Afrofuturist



Figure 3. Luis Vasquez La Roche, *Untitled*, 2021, sugar sculpture in cardboard, dimensions variable. Photograph courtesy of the artist.

which he occasionally put into his mouth. For more, see his website: <https://www.luisvasquezlaroche.com/como-saltar-la-cuerd-documenta>.

³ Frédéric Neyrat, "The Black Angel of History," trans. Daniel Ross, *Angelaki* 25, no. 4 (July 3, 2020): 127.

inventiveness can help us to fathom the paradoxical endorsement of ruin for the sake of renewal, constituting what I describe as an aesthetic of collapse.



Figure 4. Abandoned sugar refinery in Couva, Trinidad, 2022. Photograph by Luis Vasquez La Roche.

Contextualizing Vasquez La Roche's work through a now-rusting refinery perimetric to his interventions, I argue that reading his performances through an aesthetic of collapse can reframe decay as a productive and promising force. In her review of Brian Meeks' text on political revolution in the Caribbean, Maziki Thame has suggested, "there is potential in collapse, in hegemonic dissolution, in disorder."⁴ Following Meeks' recognition of the "implicit potential for a democratic renewal" amid political tumult,⁵ Thame suggests that crisis and collapse can herald equitable Caribbean futures rooted in revolutions that impel "radical change, the actual turning of things upside down."⁶ Taking seriously this potential, I propose that an accompanying aesthetic of collapse, defined through Vasquez La Roche's practice, allows us to embrace the inevitable literal collapses of colonial and capitalist infrastructures and envision through conceptual collapse the potential for post-decay renewal.

⁴ Maziki Thame, "Democracy and the End of Revolution in the Contemporary Caribbean," *Small Axe* 20, no. 2 (July 2016, No. 50): 174. See also Brian Meeks, *Critical Interventions in Caribbean Politics and Theory* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2014).

⁵ Meeks, *Critical Interventions*, 133.

⁶ Thame, "Democracy and End of Revolution," 174.

Countering Saccharine Colonial Visions

Sugar was planted on Trinidadian soil by French immigrants arriving on the island under Spanish colonial rule in the mid-eighteenth century.⁷ The majority were wealthy, white plantocrats retreating from fraught religious conflicts in a recently captured British Grenada, rebellions in Martinique, Guadeloupe, and St. Lucia, as well as nascent revolutions brimming in France and Saint-Domingue.⁸ In 1797, British invaders captured the colony from the Spanish, which further catalyzed migration to the colony from the English metropole in the following decades. Among these newcomers was British artist and plantocrat Richard Bridgens. He depicted his new surroundings—including the family-owned sugar estate of his wife, Maria—in a series of lithographs published in *West India Scenery* (1836).⁹ As Amar Wahab argues, Bridgens' images levied a "colonial will to power" and "pro-plantation logic" that mounted an "aesthetic defensive" against anti-slavery critique in the nineteenth century.¹⁰ Wahab recognizes the depictions as rejoinders to regional unrest spurred by the Haitian revolution, culminating in the emancipation of enslaved people in 1838. He reads Bridgens' depictions of his estate and other sites on the island—published merely two years before emancipation—as part of a broader visual campaign to emphasize their placidity and progressiveness. This visual campaign, as art historian Krista Thompson shows, was circulated abroad through images like those of Bridgens' that made colonial transplantation and enslavement more palatable for audiences in the U.S. and Europe.¹¹ Such representations of the tropics were exported abroad to veil the realities of violence, extraction, and ecological devastation across the circum-Atlantic. Centuries later, Vasquez La Roche's *But the Real Ones* (2021) counters these idealized depictions by staging the field as a site of contention, ambivalence, and literal collapse.

⁷ While this island is one of two that now make up the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, this paper deals exclusively with Trinidad, which underwent a colonial history separate from Tobago until the two were unified under British colonial rule in 1889.

⁸ The untapped agricultural potential in Trinidad was also appealing to those interested in establishing a thriving plantation economy after having sapped the soil of the other islands, making Spain's offer of several acres to any colonist willing to settle the land near irresistible. Linda Newson, "Foreign Immigrants in Spanish America: Trinidad's Colonization Experiment," *Caribbean Studies* 19, no. 1/2 (1979): 133–51. 133.

⁹ Richard Bridgens, et al., *West India Scenery: with Illustrations of Negro Character, the Process of Making Sugar, & from Sketches taken during a Voyage to, and Residence of Seven Years in, the Island of Trinidad* (London: Robert Jennings & Co., 1836). Judy Raymond provides extensive biographical information on Bridgens' life before and during his relocation to Trinidad from England in *The Colour of Shadows: Images of Caribbean Slavery* (Coconut Creek, FL: Caribbean Studies Press, an Imprint of Educa Vision, 2016).

¹⁰ Amar Wahab, *Colonial Inventions: Landscape, Power and Representation in Nineteenth-Century Trinidad* (Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010): 95-98.

¹¹ Krista A. Thompson, *An Eye for the Tropics: Tourism, Photography, and Framing the Caribbean Picturesque* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 5.

Like many of his contemporaries interested in tropicalized landscapes, Bridgens obscured plantation life behind a veil of benevolent stolidity. Such is the case of *The Field Negro* (fig. 5), which depicts an enslaved man in contrapposto stance before stalks of sugar cane, wearing an impossibly neutral, even contented expression. An appearance of ease in the figure's relaxed gait and unsoiled tools obscures the dangers and discomfort of his labor in the surrounding sugarcane fields. Although Bridgens also imaged more 'realistic' depictions of active laboring bodies in fields, such as *Cane Cutters* (fig. 6), the perspective takes what Susan Libby describes as an authoritative position, fostering "an all-seeing gaze" by which "the reader is invited to share their view and assume their right to dominate."¹² Indeed, the image is presented from an elevated view, far removed from the swinging arms and bent backs of the workers who cut looming stalks twice their height. Yet Bridgens is also careful to include in the foreground toward the left of the composition laborers who are at rest, drinking in the cool shade. The artist included scenes of rest and recreation within images of labor to position Trinidad as a progressive colony, protecting his financial interests against rising abolitionist sentiment.

At the same time, he positions at the center of this dynamic scene a white overseer whose pointed arm makes clear the hierarchy of plantation labor. An almost identical figure is repeated in "Interior of a Boiling House" (fig. 7), where enslaved laborers can be seen heating and ladling cane juice to produce a sugary syrup for eventual processing into crystals. The disciplinary gesture is once again a central fixture, fitting squarely within its single point perspective and carefully ordered architectural



Figure 5. Richard Bridgens, *A Field Negro*, c. 1832–1836, lithograph, 10.5 x 14.6in, from *West India Scenery* by Richard Bridgens. Source: Caribbean Views Collection, British Library, London.

¹² Susan H. Libby, "The Mechanical Plantation: Picturing Sugar Production in the *Encyclopédie*," *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* 47 (2018): 76.



Figure 6. Richard Bridgens, *Cutting Canes*, c. 1832–1836, lithograph, 10.5 x 14.6in, from *West India Scenery* by Richard Bridgens. Source: Caribbean Views Collection, British Library, London.



Figure 7. Richard Bridgens, *Interior of a Boiling House*, ca. 1832–1836, lithograph, 10.5 x 14.6in, from *West India Scenery* by Richard Bridgens. Source: Caribbean Views Collection, British Library, London.

elements, including barred windows from which not even the billowing smoke can escape. Driven by an impetus to depict and defend the racialized labor hierarchies on which his family depended for income, Bridgens' illustrations sought to balance narratives of 'civilizing' enslaved people through strict discipline with glimpses of an ameliorative colonial society.

Given Bridgens' aesthetic and financial investment in bolstering the sugar industry in Trinidad, he would likely be dismayed at its eventual collapse. His efforts to maintain and image plantation architectures in Trinidad would prefigure a centuries-long attempt at upholding and profiting from the sugar industry by colonial and independent governments alike until the commodity was finally forsaken in 2003. One year prior to such demise, contemporary multi-media artist Luis Vasquez La Roche migrated with his family from Venezuela to the Couva community. Decaying plantation remains and surrounding cane fields have since become a

landmark in his performances. Against the backdrop of the sugar industry's botanical and architectural remnants, he highlights a series of collapses that are intrinsic to the recently scrapped nationalized project, the subsequent precarity of the community's socio-economic wellbeing, and the uncertain futures of nearby inhabitants.

Whereas Bridgens' illustrations sought to portray the plantation as a site of benevolent discipline, Vasquez La Roche's *But The Real Ones, Just like You, Just Like*

Me (2021) complicates historic and contemporary ideas of labor and recreation. The project involved the creation and destruction of a pair of sneakers, the *Air Jordan 1*, modeled in unrefined (brown) sugar (fig. 8). During the performance, Vasquez La Roche 'shines' the sugar shoe amid the cane, brushing and rubbing its glossy surface, letting it crumble in his hands. The sharp edges of the sugar cut his flesh and his blood blends with the softening sugar. The mixture drips to the ground and the sculpture is destroyed, suggesting a contradictory and ambivalent process of collapse that rejects Bridgens' ordered compositions.



Figure 8. Luis Vasquez La Roche, *But The Real Ones, Just like You, Just Like Me*, 2021, photograph. Photograph courtesy of the artist.

While the basketball shoe harkens to recreational activity, it also signals the commercial enterprise of professional sport, an industry that parallels sugar in that it heavily relies on the labor of Black communities through the (often unfulfilled) promise of social mobility. Recalling Bridgens' emphasis on rest and labor in *West India Scenery*, Vasquez La Roche's decision to cast sugar into a sneaker signals towards an anti-colonial aesthetic that troubles the co-optation of recreation by the entertainment industry in what poet and scholar Elizabeth Alexander has problematized as "the gladiatorial arenas of basketball," placing it in a broader history of spectacle and violence against the Black body.¹³ Instead of uncritically positioning recreation in opposition to the kinds

¹³ Elizabeth Alexander, "'Can You Be Black and Look at This?': Reading the Rodney King Video(s)," *Public Culture* 7, no. 1 (1994): 78.

of forced physical labor depicted in Bridgens' images, Vasquez La Roche's performance entwines both historic and contemporary recreation and exploitation.

Aside from the shape of the mold, Vasquez La Roche's use of brown, unbleached sugar is significant in the context of colonial-era food processing. As historian Elizabeth Heath has argued, bleaching sugar was part of a centuries-long project of assimilating European bodies to the exotic commodity of sugar and vice versa.¹⁴ In France, she writes, historical texts reorganized and reeducated the public in order to "acclimatize European senses to colonial consumables."¹⁵ Sugar's marketing, Heath notes, involved training consumers to recognize "a well-established hierarchy ranging from the modest brown *sucre brut*, or muscovado, to the more refined crystallized brown sugar (cassonades) and the highly desirable white sugars, crystallized or powdered."¹⁶ Unappetizing textures and tastes were attributed to brown sugar and justified by racist colonial narratives on the history of its origin and use outside of the metropole. Whereas 'uncivilized' consumers in the colonies preferred the cane sugar in its 'raw' state, European consumers distinguished themselves as superior by availing the means of 'refinement.'¹⁷

As a result, the sugar shoe is resistant to an essential component of sugar's colonial commodification: purification. Vasquez La Roche satirizes this historic disdain for the unrefined commodity's brownness and the racialized/colorist hierarchies that underpin it by making the sneaker impossible to scrub 'clean' without destroying it. In addition to its literal collapse, a series of material collapses coagulate within the sugar shoe, beginning with Vasquez La Roche's myriad references to and subsequent obliteration of color. He creates a 'naturally' brown version of the Chicago 'Bred' Air Jordan 1, originally designed in the 1980's with a red, white, and black colorway, inspired by the Chicago Bulls uniform.¹⁸ The colors of the original design are obscured by the shoe's casting in brown sugar, but they also reemerge through the artist's flesh and red blood. This material interpolation of the artist's body into the sugar shoe and the very soil beneath his feet, complicates classed and racialized identities across the Atlantic, from the eponymous basketball legend Michael Jordan's position as a celebrity-cum-entrepreneur in an industry overwhelmingly influenced by white, wealthy team owners to the consumers and wearers of the Nike product. The legibility of shared colors between these respectively artificial (refined sugar, leather) and natural (sugar cane, flesh, blood) materials collapse in the amber shine of Vasquez La Roche's brown

¹⁴ Elizabeth Heath, "Sugarcoated Slavery: Colonial Commodities and the Education of the Senses in Early Modern France," *Critical Historical Studies* 5, no. 2 (2018): 169–207.

¹⁵ Heath, "Sugarcoated Slavery," 193.

¹⁶ Heath, "Sugarcoated Slavery," 194.

¹⁷ Heath, "Sugarcoated Slavery," 199.

¹⁸ The moniker 'Bred' refers exclusively to the version of the sneaker featuring black and red.

sugar referent. By splicing the materiality of sugar, flesh, and rubber, Vasquez La Roche denaturalizes both the ostensibly 'unrefined' colonial commodity and the racialized product. As such, both sugar and flesh become as recognizably commoditized in the economies of racial capitalism as the Nike branded footwear itself.

The Collapse of the Sugar Industry

The paradox of maintenance in Vasquez La Roche's performance—that the act of 'cleaning' the shoe catalyzes its literal collapse—echoes the demise of the infrastructural remains nearby after decades of investment by Trinidad's post-independence government. The refinery was built alongside supporting infrastructure for transporting cane from northern plantations to the compound via railroad in the early twentieth century. Although it operated post-slavery, the exploitation and violence that supported racialized labor hierarchies persisted, and the local working class continued to uphold the industry under British overseers for little more than starvation wages.

Visual representations of sugar in the early to mid-twentieth century signaled a new era of sanitized and idealized landscapes and labor conditions focused on the modernization of the plantation. Images used in postcards from the 1930s were, like Bridgens' illustrations, made to circulate abroad, although they were no longer positioned as a defense of slavery. Whereas Bridgens pictured the sugar plantation to counter abolitionist fervor, the postcards created one century later imaged the newly built refinery in Couva as part of a touristic marketing endeavor taking shape across the Anglophone Caribbean. As Krista Thompson has argued, they framed the islands as ideal tourist destinations "to



Figure 9. Photographer unknown, A Sugar Factory, postcard c. 1930s, Couva, Trinidad. Source: Michael Goldberg Collection, University of the West Indies, Trinidad.

convince primarily white travelers to majority Black colonies that the ‘natives’ were civilized.”¹⁹

As a result, many postcards from the region were sent abroad, evidenced by a collection at the University of West Indies in Trinidad which was re-circulated to the island from the archive of an American dentist.²⁰ Located in the Michael Goldberg collection is an image of the Couva cane fields in which a group of laborers form a row and face the viewer, standing in front of the new refinery (fig. 9). In this postcard, the once-prominent cane stalks from Bridgens’ illustrations are displaced by the mechanical means of their refinement and transport. The group’s bodies are no longer dwarfed by gigantic palm trees, but a vertical smokestack stretching beyond the top of the frame. Shifting emphasis from botanicals to feats of modernist innovation and engineering, this new mode of visualization established the colony as a thriving enterprise. As Thompson argues was common to touristic “human-scapes” created at this time, the image spotlights “inhabitants who seemed loyal, disciplined, and clean British colonial subjects.”²¹ No longer turned away from the viewer’s elevated gaze, the inhabitants appear to greet the potential visitor.

At the end of World War II in 1945, the industry’s position at the forefront of Trinidad’s economy had weakened. By the late twentieth century, the booming oil industry beckoned longtime cane field laborers of Couva to a nearby industrial estate, which became a hub of chemical refineries, gas production, a shipping port, and other lucrative new trades.²² Ironically, the immense profits garnered from the competing energy sector constituted the primary source of funds tapped by the Trinidadian government to keep the failing sugar industry afloat through the remaining decades of the twentieth century.²³ Despite continued government subsidization, the industry collapsed following the abandonment of the sugar refinery, Brechin Castle, and the obsolescence of the railway system, and severance from surrounding working-class communities.

¹⁹ Thompson, *An Eye for the Tropics*, 6.

²⁰ “Michael Goldberg Collection,” University of the West Indies Library Database, accessed November 02, 2022, <https://archivespace.sta.uwi.edu/repositories/2/resources/112>.

²¹ Thompson, *An Eye for the Tropics*, 6.

²² Frank Rampersad, *Fundamental Structural Change in the Organization of the Sugar Industry: A Programme for the Survival of Caroni* (Trinidad and Tobago: Rampersad, 1983), 1.

²³ Lovell Francis, “Massa Day Not Done! Lome and the Trinidadian Sugar Industry 1975-2005/Massa Day No Hecho! Lomé y La Industria Azucarera de Trinidad y Tobago 1975-2005,” *Memorias (Barranquilla, Colombia)* 10, no. 19 (2013): 1-29.



Figure 10. Luis Vasquez La Roche, *Canchas de Algodón de Azúcar*, 2020, video still. Image courtesy of the artist.

Post-Collapse Potentiality: Conceptual Collapse and Future Cane Field Constructions

Departing from the idealistic vision of modernity in this colonial-era postcard, Vasquez La Roche's performances anticipate a future in which locals are not conscripted for visual campaigns for sugar or tourist industries, but wrest control of the former plantation's physical space toward their own ends. In *Canchas de Algodón de Azúcar* (2020), he collaborates with his sister to erect a basketball hoop from their childhood home in a desolate sugar cane field. Video documentation depicts them wearing burdensome astronaut gear, as though navigating a dystopian future (figs. 10–11). By inserting the science-fictional trope of the wandering space explorer into a proto-capitalist plantation turned modernist national icon, Vasquez La Roche connects and collapses the future-oriented fantasies of French and British colonial agents to those of the newly independent mid-twentieth century Trinidadian government. Through the conceptual collapsing of time (colonial histories to apocalyptic futures) and cultural referents (literature and recreation), Vasquez La Roche tethers the work to the present, preventing these explorers from wandering too far into the ostensible otherworldliness of science fiction. He connects the inevitable failure of the modern sugar industry to a possible future in which the fallout of its past and present continues to be navigated.



Figure 11. Luis Vasquez La Roche, *Canchas de Algódon de Azúcar*, 2020, video still. Image courtesy of the artist.

The spacesuit donned by the performers is called *OYA-9394*, after the Yoruba Orisha, Oya, and inspired by Octavia Butler’s 1993 novel *Parable of the Sower*. Following the journey of a young African American girl named Lauren Oya Olamina in 2024—a time that Butler presciently portrayed as one of social and ecological collapse—the protagonist embraces a religion called *Earthseed*, founded on the premise of inevitable change as divinity.²⁴ Re-constituting Butler’s fiction, Vasquez La Roche conceives of the suit as potential means of navigating the hazardous conditions faced by marginalized communities at the brink of environmental degradation such that *OYA-9394* becomes a haven within the abandoned cane field. It raises questions about the sustainability of today’s extractive industries, particularly those with an overreliance on Black bodies that—not unlike the sugar industry—are primed to collapse under the weight of their own exploitative practices.

²⁴ Butler does not make overt connections to West African religion beyond the deity after which her protagonist is named. However, scholar Deborah Wood Holton draws parallels between the novel’s ecofeminist themes, Black strategies of survival, and Yoruba culture, underpinned by an embrace of and adaptation to change. See Deborah Wood Holton, “Musings on Octavia E. Butler’s *Parable of the Sower*,” *About Place Journal* 3, no. 2 (2014). <https://aboutplacejournal.org/issues/voices/section-1/deborah-holton/>.

Despite the series of collapses that signal violence and crisis, Vasquez La Roche's West African religious referents via Butler's speculative fiction also harken Afrofuturist literary frameworks that insist on survival. While the performers' spacesuits suggest that the historically hostile environment of the plantation has reached its zenith, the continued return to these sites for occupation and, somewhat ambivalently, recreation suggests a potential for constructing new forms of survival and joy in the wake of collapse. In the performance's documentation, the artist and his sister move purposefully into the eerie twilight fields, working to install a basketball hoop amid the tall grass (fig. 12). Their surroundings occasionally betray this apparent isolation with the red blinking of a cell tower, or the streetlights reflected in their helmets, but these architectures remain peripheral to the chain-link hoop suspended from an NBA branded backboard.



Figure 12. Luis Vasquez La Roche, *Canchas de Algodón de Azúcar*, 2020, video still. Image courtesy of the artist.

Although this structure alludes to the ongoing commoditization and spectacularization of Black labor through sport, the performance also invokes nostalgia and personal memory as Vasquez La Roche works with his sister to repurpose their childhood basketball hoop. The title references both cotton and sugar plantations, as *algodón de azúcar* translates to 'cotton from sugar' describing the delicate dessert,

cotton candy. Each word is laden with violent colonial histories, yet these materials are combined to produce an ironically pleasant referent to a treat typically associated with childhood. The eponymous phrase exceeds the sum of its parts, just as the performance embroils extraction, recreation, colonialism, community, and the potential for play in the post-collapse future.

Across his performances, Vasquez La Roche's repetitive, entangled, and at times paradoxical acts of destruction and reconstruction indicate that imagining not only ruin but also its aftermath may be a necessary precursor for a livable future. In her Afrofuturist-adjacent departure from accelerationism, artist, curator, and writer Aria Dean champions works of visual and musical culture that "participate... in a blacceleration toward the end of the world."²⁵ She proposes that accelerationist theorists, who claim that "the only way out of capitalism is through it," have overlooked slavery as foundational to the structuring of global capitalism. Resisting the impulse to "reclaim" accelerationism, Dean describes theories of non- and anti-humanism in Black radical thought as *already* indispensable from considerations of capitalism, hence the portmanteau, blacceleration. Arguing that Afrofuturist cultural production recenters Black bodies as a primary accelerationalist force, she describes U.S. rapper Busta Rhymes' apocalyptic albums as quintessentially blaccelerationist art.²⁶ Her description of his music closely resonates with Vasquez La Roche's sugar cane field interventions:

by putting the black man at the center of the apocalypse—as both the agent of the world's demise and its inheritor—these works resonate...with the child of these strange bedfellows, black radical thought and accelerationism.²⁷

Like the Afrofuturist icons to which Dean refers, *Canchas de Algodón de Azúcar* (2020) portends the catastrophe of capitalism advocated by blaccelerationism through the spatio-temporal flux inherent to conceptual collapse while rebuilding the site as a symbol of post-collapse possibility.

Conclusion

Unexpected intersections between media, materials, and the histories of their production underlie Vasquez La Roche's practice. His sculptures, made from a range of edible, inedible, ephemeral, and found materials, eventually become props for public performances which blur the line between humans—formerly enslaved and indentured bodies—and non-human materials—leather, cane, soil, steel—in ways that accentuate

²⁵ Aria Dean, "Notes on Blacceleration," *E-Flux* 87 (2017). <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/87/169402/notes-on-blacceleration/>.

²⁶ Dean, "Notes on Blacceleration."

²⁷ Dean, "Notes on Blacceleration."

and accelerate the various forms of collapse that underlie colonial and capital production. From field to factory, Vasquez La Roche probes the violent history of imperial-colonial extraction and its later manifestation in post-independence industrialization. As such, he critiques the desire to develop a Trinidadian economy atop the foundations of a violent, unsustainable plantocracy, exposing the limitations of reclaiming colonial tools. Following Audre Lorde's landmark provocation, Vasquez La Roche's performances do not attempt to appropriate or rehabilitate these tools in service of dismantling the master's house but instead suggest that social and architectural infrastructures might simply be left to rot.²⁸ In what might be called a blaccelerationist practice, Vasquez La Roche bears witness to demise while enacting his own feats of literal/material and conceptual/spatio-temporal collapse. Instead of attempting to resuscitate the fallen and failed socio-economic and material infrastructures of history, engaging in a strategy of collapse may yet unmoor Caribbean communities from the cycles of exploitation and extraction that were promised during and have remained undelivered since independence from European colonial rule.

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²⁸ See Audre Lorde, "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house," in *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches*, Crossing Press Feminist Series (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1984), originally delivered at the Second Sex Conference, New York, September 29, 1979. I make a similar argument for iconoclastic interventions and catalyzed collapse of monuments to colonial figures in "Proposal for a New Necropolis," *PREE Literary Magazine*, *PREE Views* 2 (2020), <https://preelit.com/2020/08/04/proposal-for-a-new-necropolis/>.

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