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“Big Fat Fish”: The Hypersexualization of the Fat Female Body in Calypso and Dancehall

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The stage has traditionally been a space where people expect to be confronted with the spectacular, with acts that amuse and astonish. One of the primary components of the spectacular is that it crosses the boundaries of the normative. These border crossings occur as somewhat dichotomized possibilities. On one hand, a performer may cross the boundaries of the normative because she supersedes socially desirable criteria: for example, she may be extremely beautiful or her voice particularly outstanding. On the other hand, she may traverse those boundaries because she exceeds a socially *undesirable* standard, and within the context of the Western beauty arena, this could be because she is fat or black. The result has been that fat black women are welcomed into performative spaces because of the transgressive qualities of these spaces, and because the site of the fat black woman's body is in itself a source of social disruption and she is a poignant embodiment of transgression.

Both dancehall and calypso are musical traditions associated with acts that generate astonishment. Aside from their politically and sexually charged lyrics, both traditions are contextualized within the unruly dance/performance rituals of carnival and the dancehall, which feature the extensive costuming of the female body in highly revealing attire. The fat black woman's body has come to play an instrumental role in the creation of spectacle in these two performative spaces.

Dancehall and calypso are historically associated with disruption and colonial resistance and both present a perpetual challenge to neocolonial cultural norms. Dancehall, one of reggae's offshoots, originated in Kingston's inner-city ghettos, and the music disrupts Jamaica's Eurocentric codes of propriety on multiple planes. Sound system "clashes" are a regular and important feature of dancehall music and perhaps these events best help shape the most appropriate metaphor for defining one aspect of the relationship between dancehall and the Jamaican public. During a clash, groups of deejays affiliated with different sound systems try to outplay each other by selecting songs that best arouse the audience; additionally, the respective deejays compete on the basis of their oratory skills. The conflictive context for these clashes mirrors dancehall's numerous other sites of contestation. For example, the promoters of outdoor street dances and neighbors in surrounding vicinities often clash over the noise from the sound system and issues of public disturbance. Additionally, the evolution of a "vulgar" dancehall cultural aesthetic, as well as its subversive lyrical content consisting of lewd sexual references and clashes with middle-class bourgeoisie propriety.¹ Furthermore, dancehall lyrics are rendered exclusively in the island's local dialect or *patois*, contesting the privileged position of English as Jamaica's authentic discourse.

Trinidadian calypso has a similar legacy of contestation. In the early twentieth century the term calypso came into use in association with Trinidadian carnival music.² One of carnival's earliest expressions was the weekend slave dance, which often came under the suspicion of the ruling planter classes as a venue for coordinating rebellion (Rohlehr 3). Calypso's intimate association with carnival helped fuel its rebellious posture, and this musical tradition started to attract many of the same criticisms currently associated with dancehall. According to calypso

scholar Gordon Rohlehr, articles in the *Port of Spain Gazette* from the late nineteenth century “usually complained about the obscene and abusive songs, as well as the disrespect shown by lower-class masqueraders to the high and mighty in the society” (47).

These complaints regarding carnival music often found themselves specifically located on the site of the female body, and an 1884 article in the *Port of Spain Gazette* situates the young women of Trinidad as the locus for the country’s moral decay:

In Port of Spain we have shown how the bands had been cowed down, but the obscenities, the bawdy language and gestures of the women in the street have been pushed to a degree of wantonness which cannot be surpassed, and which must not be tolerated. Obscenities are no longer veiled under the cloak of words of doubtful meaning, but lechery, in all its naked brutality was sung, spoken and represented by disgusting gestures in our public streets. The growing generation of young girls will become the curse of the country if these yearly saturnalia are allowed to continue. (Rohlehr 31)

The “jаметtes” to whom the article refers were women associated with both carnival and calypso, and their astonishing gyrations simultaneously attracted the public’s attention and its disgruntlement. Within a pan-Caribbean context, these jаметtes are the performative ancestors of the Jamaican dancehall queens as are Jamaican set girls. During slavery as a part of the Christmas season Jonkonnu festivities, set girls paraded through the streets of Jamaica festooned in elaborate clothing and competed with each other to see who was the best dressed.³ These set girls as well as the jаметtes have bequeathed their legacy of spectacular behavior that specifically manifests as dancehall’s outrageous fashion.

Dancehall “divas” populate the literal dancehall, and their bodies are reflective sites for an emergent dancehall aesthetic.⁴ Their notoriety within the dancehall setting expresses itself primarily on two planes: first with regards to their sexually explicit dance performances and second in terms of their elaborate fashion and accessories, which have perhaps become the most familiar visual expression of dancehall. However, unlike carnival, the dancehall operates in a contained space, and the public is not readily privy to the performances that take place within. As a result, the dancehall diva’s ghetto-fabulous style, which is readily observable on the streets of Jamaica, has become one of the primary targets of middle and upper-class disdain (along with dancehall lyrics disseminated on the radio stations). Just as over a century ago the jаметte’s “disgusting gestures” were situated as a source of national decline, so is the female dancehall body situated as a representation of cultural degradation.⁵ In a 1994 newspaper article, Jamaican columnist Morris Cargill comments on the flesh-exposing *haute couture*, no doubt dancehall inspired, that had by then taken hold on the local fashion scene: “Males can become bored by over-exposure. Women’s clothing, including bathing suits and including the crotch-cutters worn by beauty contestants, should titillate and promise, not hand out the prizes before they are won” (Cargill 217).

The tight and revealing nature of female dancehall fashion has not only led to national outrage but to attempts to police the Jamaican female body. In 1993 signs appeared at the Bustamante Children's Hospital in Kingston stipulating that dancehall fashion was not permitted in the waiting area of the emergency room (Ulysse 165). Additionally, in preparation for the funeral of past Prime Minister Michael Manley, guidelines were issued in the newspaper encouraging women to dress "appropriately" (Ulysse 164-65). This "encouragement" was particularly meaningful against the backdrop of another funeral gathering, that of Jim Brown, a popular don in the Kingston area.⁶ One newspaper's fashion commentator conveyed her distaste for the mourners' apparel when she stated that "No mini was too short, no tights too tight, no chiffon too sheer, no lace too see through;" moreover, she summed up the women's dress as a "homage to bareness" (Soas qtd. in Ulysse 164).

The fat black woman's body has come to play an instrumental role in the creation of spectacle in both the calypso and dancehall arenas. Fat bodies contribute to the disruptive spectacle of these two expressive forms, primarily because of the hypersexualizing of those bodies, which is immediately apparent in dancehall tradition. Dancehall has been the venue for the exposure of the fat black female body beyond the platform of the hefty higgler whose association with food and later the supply of scarce imported goods helped to firmly cross-pollinate the higgler's social function as both a literal supplier of goods and an icon of abundance. Gina Ulysse suggests that, "Dancehall not only projected this full black female form into public arenas, but asserted both its desirability and sexuality" (159).

Nowhere has this projection of the large sexualized black body been more apparent than with the unofficial crowning and sustained reign of Carlene the dancehall queen. Carlene came to power in the dancehall arena in the early 1990s via a series of fashion clashes in which she and her posse of women competed against professional models from a local agency (Ulysse 161). Carlene and her crew were situated as a part of the underprivileged Jamaican masses, although technically they did not necessarily fit into this category, while the bodies of the professional models were read as middle/upper-class commodities. The models performed fashion appropriations of female behavior that fell within the boundaries of middle-class propriety, but Carlene and her group set out to astonish. Uninhibited by codes of female propriety, at one clash, barely clad in fishnet and lingerie, Carlene did a dance routine in which she imitated the experience of an orgasm (Ulysse 162). This willingness to shock her audiences by engaging in sexually risqué behavior has helped Carlene become a permanent fixture in Jamaican popular culture, and she has appeared on television in a variety of commercials and has been spokesperson for a brand of condoms.

However, Carlene's ascendancy to fame is complicated because not only is she full-figured, but she is mixed-race and very light-skinned. Carlene's embrace by Jamaica's corporate world suggests that her "brownness" has facilitated her corporate and social mobility by rendering her crude public displays more palatable since the site of enactment is a brown and not black body (Edmondson 7). Nevertheless, Carlene's size has been instrumental in her success

and I believe in sustaining her popularity with the black working class on whose approval she is ultimately dependent. I read her fat as an evocation of blackness that helps to resituate her near-white body as a part of the extended body politic of Jamaica's masses.

In Trinidad, size has an equally compelling role in carnival/calypso iconography, and a number of female calypsonians are women of size. Calypso Rose, Singing Sandra, and Lady Iere are among several fat black women whose bodies reflect the subversive lyrics of their music and the disruptive potential of calypso in general. Soca has become to calypso what dancehall is to reggae, its most recent offshoot, and one of the very popular contemporary soca artists is Denise Belfon, a fat black woman famed for her energetic performances. According to Denise, "People are always amazed at how a woman my size could move so I think a lot of woman respect me for that" ("Denise Belfon"). This comment indicates how Denise's size contributes to the spectacular nature of her performances because audiences are amused by the assumingly incongruous juxtaposition of her large body and her energetic dancing capabilities. Interestingly, Denise names Aretha Franklin, Billie Holiday, and Mahalia Jackson as important artistic influences—all women whose full bodies helped create the spectacle of their performance and aided in their success.

Carlene and Denise's large bodies may also be read within the context of the carnivalesque. In Mikhail Bakhtin's text *Rabelais and his World*, he describes the carnivalesque as a mode of resistance to highbrow culture, and this resistance is accomplished via a redeployment of "proper" upper-class rituals such as language and fashion.⁷ The carnivalesque aspects of carnival and dancehall activities—the elaborate hair, makeup and costumes—comprise a sort of role-playing or pretence at being part of the upper class. The fat black woman neatly fits into this inverted order because she is not beautiful according to contemporary Eurocentric aesthetics just as the carnival/dancehall participants are not wealthy. This is why the large female body is such a dominant image in these performative spaces; it encapsulates the inverted essence of the space.

Both soca and dancehall are musical traditions that have emerged from a social legacy of racism and oppression, and the rituals associated with each style of music address that oppressive heritage. Fat black women have contributed to the musical engagement of this shared diasporic experience of marginalization by providing bodily sites that counter the aesthetic values of the historically white hegemony. Additionally, these bodies gain popularity because they are more readily seen as an acceptable, and in some cases more desirable, form of embodiment. Furthermore, largeness has come to symbolize abundance and prosperity, especially important signifiers throughout the African Diaspora, which has undergone perpetual economic marginalization. The specifics of how large female bodies debase propriety varies across diasporic creative genres, but the hypersexual connotations attendant on these large bodies seem to specifically inform the quality of their disruptive nature.

I believe that Carlene and Denise's performances are in fact feisty and "vulgar" recastings of the hypersexualized large black female body, and these performances function as a subconscious retaliation to historical events like the dehumanizing exhibit of the Hottentot Venus's fat caged body, which was displayed across Europe in the nineteenth. Furthermore, these performances resist the pervasive objectification of the black female body in both Caribbean and North American cultures. Carlene performs with the recognition that her gyrations and scantily clad body offend the religiously underscored Western behavioral norms of Jamaican society. Additionally, the women, both fat and slender, who attend the dancehall and expose their bodies within that performative arena and on the streets of Jamaica at large, similarly engage in their fleshy displays as both a celebration of their sexuality as well as a subconscious class-inflected social affront. This retaliatory affront is propelled by both collective and individual subconscious responses to contemporary manifestations of economic as well as social marginalization, a marginalization that shares similar roots with the racialized oppression enacted against the Venus Hottentot.

Some may interpret Carlene and Denise's sexual agency as problematic and find it difficult to read their spectacular displays as empowering because of the supposedly deviant nature of their performances. However, this problem only arises if Carlene's dancing and Denise's sexually suggestive lyrics are read within the framework of Western, Judeo-Christian behavioral norms and gendered sexual regulation. Beyond the constraints of these or any other behavioral codes in the diaspora, there is no stable reading of this "deviant" sexual agency; the choice to perform in these sexually unruly ways is iconoclastic and, I believe, a form of chosen sexual impropriety and resistance.

Notes

¹I use the term “vulgar” in keeping with Carolyn Cooper’s use of the term in *Noises in the Blood: Orality, Gender, and the “Vulgar” Body of Jamaican Popular Culture* (8-9).

²Errol Hill in “On the Origin of the Term, Calypso,” suggests that the initial use of the term “calypso” in reference to Trinidadian carnival songs was in the *Port of Spain Gazette* in 1900.

³See Avia Ustanny, “200 Years of Christmas.”

⁴I am indebted to Norman C. Stolzoff, *Wake the Town and Tell the People: Dancehall Culture in Jamaica*, for the term “dancehall diva” (xiii).

⁵See Belinda Edmondson, “Public Spectacles: Caribbean Women and the Politics of Public Performance,” for a discussion of how female public performance in the Caribbean has been invested with nationalistic representational value.

⁶A “don” refers to inner city area leaders who often control their territory through a combination of illegal activities, including drug trafficking and blackmail.

⁷Especially 1 - 58.

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