84 | women, theatre and Calypso in the English-speaking Caribbean

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abstract

The present essay discusses how women calypsonians in the English-speaking Caribbean use Calypso performances as a theatrical platform to offer a gendered critique of the nation and engage in a dialogue, which despite exhibiting pride in the nation, questions its various exclusions in ways that seek to redefine dominant constructions of the nation as 'we'. Not only do they offer a vision of the nation and its cultural aspects that is more inclusive, they also speak out against cultural and political oppression. I analyse specific performances by Singing Sandra (Trinidad) and Queen Ivena (Antigua) from my position as an 'indigenous-outsider' and 'outsider within' in order to demonstrate that Calypso performance is a post-colonial form of theatre in the English-speaking Caribbean that is being used by women as a site for feminist action and agency.

keywords

post-colonial theatre; Calypso; nation; English-speaking Caribbean; feminism

introduction

It is the night of the 2002 Carnival Calypso Monarch competition in Trinidad and the stadium is filled to capacity. Everyone waits in expectation for the next performer. The stage once dark is now partially lit and a man dressed in knee length shorts and a yellow T-shirt appears on stage. He begins speaking and as he speaks a steel band plays in the background. When he concludes, a woman dressed in a green, yellow and black cape, the colours of the Jamaican flag, comes on stage. On her left shoulder extending to her heart is a patch of red, white and black, the colours of the flag of Trinidad and Tobago. As she steps on the stage, the lights brighten and she explodes into a song. This is how Singing Sandra's performance of the Calypso National Pride begins. Her costume symbolizes the impact of Jamaican culture on Trinidadian youth identity. Singing Sandra sings about national pride; she is upset that during the Trinidadian and Tobagonian independence celebration, the Jamaicans living in Trinidad staged a Reggae show. Her disgust with that incident as well as her complaint that Trinidadian youths are forgetting their culture and leaning more towards Jamaican culture are evident in her language, gestures and facial expressions. Like many of her fellow calypsonians, Singing Sandra uses the word and performance to captivate her audience and introduces on stage a dialogue about national issues in Trinidad and Tobago. She speaks particularly about the migration of Jamaicans to Trinidad and its effects on Trinidad's culture. She raises questions about the politics of identity and the role of music in shaping identities. On this night of the Calypso Monarch competition, Singing Sandra is not the only performer who raises these questions. In fact, most of the other competitors also comment on issues that have affected Trinidad and Tobago within the last year, and the Jamaicanization of Trinidadian youths is a theme that is present in many of the renditions. The most obvious difference between Singing Sandra and most of the other performers is gender. She is one of the three women performing; the other nine competitors are male. By participating in this art form, Singing Sandra and other female calypsonians cross boundaries that transgress the male-dominated space of Calypso, and become involved in a dialogue on the nation, which has traditionally remained the domain of men.

Existing work on women's theatre in the Caribbean examines primarily groups such as the Sistren Collective[1] in Jamaica. Outside of this, research on women and theatre in the English-speaking Caribbean is less known. Calypso performances provide an example of women's involvement in theatre, but their contribution remains relatively under-recognized. There has been some recognition of the theatrical elements in Calypso performances and also of the potential for Calypsos to be developed into theatre performances. However, most academic research that specifically investigates theatre in the English-speaking Caribbean has not included Calypso performances in their investigations.[2] I argue that these performances should be included in theatre studies because the Calypso

1 Women's theatre group in Jamaica comprised of working class women. Honor Ford Smith directed this group from 1977 to 1988. The group used local languages and cultural elements and expressions to stage women's experiences.

performances presented on the night of the Calypso Monarch competition, particularly in the islands of Antigua and Trinidad, are theatre performances often brought alive through collaborative effort that involves both the writer and the performer. Singing Sandra explains that in her experience, sometimes she is the one who gives her writer an idea about what she wants to sing, who then writes the song based on her input. She also points out that even when the writer generates the theme of the song, there is a discussion between the writer and herself about how the song should be moulded so that it fits her role, since as a performer she is the one who brings the song to life (Smith, 2004). The performers have absolute control over how the song is performed; they add movement to the performance and in the process may add or drop certain lyrics. To this end, a reading of Calypso as a theatrical platform emphasizes recognition of calypsonians as actresses/actors and performers on the one hand, and as creators, on the other, since along with the writer they also play a role in creating the Calypso and in executing the story.[3]

The growing body of academic research in recent years, even though largely focused on Trinidad,[4] has begun to show that women in Calypso are presently singing about every aspect of their lives. However, as Harewood (2005) and Smith (2004) explain, much of the research on Calypso has focused on its literary elements, and the elements of performance, which Harewood refers to as 'masquerade' and Smith calls 'nuanced performance' (movement, music, drama and props), have received less attention. My objectives in this essay are as follows: I seek to discuss how Calypso in the English-speaking Caribbean represents a form of theatre by examining not only the literal elements but also its performative dimensions. As well, I demonstrate how women not only in Trinidad but also in Antigua have used this theatrical platform as a site for feminist resistance and critique. Through their participation in the roles of mothers, political advisors, preachers and ministers in the government, they provide a critique of the nation from a gendered perspective. In order to meet these objectives, I first describe Calypso performances within the context of Carnival for which Calypsos are primarily created. I then provide examples of women's performances in Trinidad and Antigua in order to show their involvement in raising social and political awareness. To this end, I examine specifically the Calypso performances of Singing Sandra (National Pride, 2000), and Queen Ivena (After Lester, 2004). My analysis has been aided by video tapes acquired from the 2002 Calypso Monarch competition in Trinidad (Major and Minor Productions Ltd) and the 2004 Calypso Monarch competition in Antigua (Antigua and Barbuda Broadcasting Service). I examine the manner in which these performers use movement, words, music, costume and props to tell their stories.

I have chosen these performances because of the importance of Singing Sandra and Queen Ivena in the Calyspo arena. Both women have won the Calypso Monarch title. Additionally, their performances expand the dialogue on the delineations of

2 Several aspects, such as the influence of African traditions in this art form and the centring of colonized peoples' experiences, may account for such exclusions, especially as they do not fit Eurocentric models of theatre. For example, Cooper (1995), with reference to Jamaican popular culture, tells us that local knowledge produced by Jamaicans is considered vulgar. She asserts that the vulgarity is usually traced to Africa, whereas the refined is seen as that which comes out of Europe. That which is vulgar is devalued; it is considered low culture, whereas the refined (European) forms are prized. A similar explanation is applicable to the case of Calypso performances since African slaves and their descendants are central to their creation.

3 While there are women artists who write some of their own material and the material of others (e.g. Calypso Rose and Queen Ivena), these artists are in a minority. Also important to note is that many calypsonians, both men and women, do not write their own materials (Smith, 2004).

4 Susan Harewood is one the few exceptions since her work addresses the calypso of Mighty Gabby in Barbados.

what is considered Black feminist activity, an issue that has been raised by scholars such as Patricia Hill Collins (2000). While their songs do not overtly speak out against what have been traditionally accepted as female issues (such as domestic abuse and other forms of women's oppression), they demonstrate that Africana and post-colonial women see issues of the nation and nationalism as a central concern. Anne McClintock (1993: 63) emphasizes the need for examining issues of the nation as part of the feminist agenda. She explains that 'White feminists in particular, have been slow to recognize nationalism as a feminist issue'. Such oversight, however, can have serious repercussions. This is because nationalism is a gendered construct, and as Cynthia Enloe (1989: 44) points out, nations have 'typically sprung from masculinized memory, masculinized humiliation and masuclinized hopes'. Referring to the importance of including discussions of nationalism in relation to gender, McClintock (1993: 77) warns that 'if nationalism is not transformed by an analysis of gender power, the nation state will remain a repository of male hopes, male aspirations and male privilege'. By performing on the Calypso stage and engaging in critiques of the nation, despite exhibiting cultural pride, Singing Sandra and Queen Ivena pose a threat to the masculine nationalisms of Caribbean states such as Antigua and Trinidad.

Before presenting my findings and interpretations, I will expose my biases since this impacts my analysis of these performances. I am an Antiguan woman who has witnessed live Calypso performances. This makes me a part of the information I present. At the same time, my present location in North America complicates my position as an Antiguan; I am indigenous to that culture, but I bring into the milieu experiences from outside of Antigua. The rigid dichotomy of insider/outsider does not adequately describe my position as researcher. Acker (2000), Collins (1991, 2000) and Banks (1998), in discussing the rigidity of the insider/outsider dichotomy, suggest other categories that more aptly describe the fluidity of positions of the researcher. James Banks (1998) proposes four categories: the indigenous-insider who is a member of the people participating in the study; the external-outsider who is not a part of the group being studied; the indigenous-outsider who is a member of the group but has other experiences that makes him/her different from the group; and the external-insider who is not a member of the group but who can relate to the group due to similar experiences. For a nuanced analysis, I prefer to apply the more fluid categories proposed above.

My position as 'outsider within' North American society enables me to examine Caribbean societies from a different perspective. I identify with Alice Walker (1983: 244) when she says 'it was from this period – from my solitary, lonely position, the position of an outcast – that I began to see people and things, really to notice relationships'. Being away from home and living in a country where I am now a 'visible minority' enables me to notice and experience

phenomena in ways I would not have if my experience and status were different. As I watched the videos in my living room in Montreal, I was excited about the prospect of getting a taste of 'home'. What remained missing was the interaction of performers with the crowd, the feel of the stadium and the carnivalesque atmosphere. I made up for what was missing through what Susan Harewood (2005) calls 'remembering re-member-ance'. As I watched the videos, I was able to, to some extent, project myself to the night of the performance. I saw the stadium and I remembered what it was like when I was there. I also saw familiar faces in the audience and I imagined what they were discussing based on my re-member-ance. In the midst of this re-member-ance, I found myself not remembering. There were things presented in the video of which I had no knowledge, and for a greater understanding of what I was missing and to fill the gaps in my knowledge, I consulted Caribbean newspapers and Caribbean nationals still living at home.[5] My analysis is therefore mediated by my personal experiences and memory and enables me to present one of the multiple viewpoints or 'truths' that represent an aspect of the evolving discourse on women, theatre and Calypso. In doing so, my work adds to existing research on post-colonial forms of theatre, Calypso, and to the literature on women and theatre in the English-speaking Caribbean.

5 Special thanks to Cornel Hughes Jr. and Andrea Otto for their assistance with this essay.

post-colonial theatre: Calypso and Carnival

As mentioned earlier, a discussion of Calypso cannot be undertaken without exploring its connections to Carnival. Carnival and Calypso are part of the colonial and post-colonial history of Caribbean islands such as Trinidad and Antigua. Information from the Antigua and Barbuda museum's website reveals that as early as the 18th century, Africans, who were at the time slaves living in Antigua, celebrated Carnival. During this time, they used songs as a form of communication and to mock their European masters. These songs evolved into what is called Benna. Benna is similar to present-day Calypso in that:

> Benna dealt with the bawdy, the scandalous, the cruel and occasionally the humorous. Benna provided slaves with a common voice. In the 1900's, Benna evolved to becoming the newspaper of the people and provided an often illiterate population with rapid transmission of information. The earliest traceable record of Benna song states – 'Emancipation day is past, massa done cut naygra ass'.
> (http://www.antiguamuseums.org/cultural.htm#Calypso, accessed on 5th December 2005).

By the mid-1950s, the music coming out of Antigua was referred to as Calypso and Benna had been replaced. As in Trinidad, the participants were mostly working class and male. In Trinidad, French planters in the 18th century celebrated Carnival as a pre-Lenten festivity. It began at Christmas and ended on Ash Wednesday (DeCosmo, 2000). These carnivals involved street processions,

costumes, music, dancing and feasting. The tradition continued even after the British replaced the French as colonial rulers. During colonial times, slaves held separate celebrations. Their Carnival practices included stick fighting, dancing, drumming, singing and the staging of short plays. Role-playing was an integral part of Carnival and continues to be the case today. Ex-slaves masqueraded as White slave masters while others were costumed as Kings and Queens of England, angels, death and American Indians.

These remnants of the colonial past are still found in the Carnival celebrations today. In Trinidad, Carnival preparations begin after the Christmas celebrations have ended and involve activities such as parties, steel band competitions and Calypso-qualifying events. In Antigua, Carnival is a summer festival and occurs in July. It is usually planned to coincide with the first Monday in August since this day is celebrated as Emancipation Day.[6] In Trinidad, Carnival is planned so that it ends on Ash Wednesday. The Calypso-qualifying events are held at various Calypso tents and there are several rounds of elimination competition. These begin with the quarter-finals followed by the semi-finals, and the end result is the selection of 12 calypsonians who compete for the title of Calypso Monarch. In Antigua, 10 calypsonians are chosen who later perform at the finals. The competition format also raises questions regarding issues of control and its consequences for silencing calypsonians. Judges are chosen by the Calypso organizing committee and these judges are given a set of criteria regarding how the competition should be judged. There is much controversy regarding judgement since this is a subjective decision and prone to personal and societal bias. There are claims that calypsonians have been eliminated from the various rounds of the competition because of gender politics and political orientation. Calypso artists such as Latumba from Antigua complain that the Calypso competition is set up to muzzle the calypsonian. Scholars such as Shannon Dudley (2003) have discussed the complexities of the competition pointing out that while the state and bourgeoisie use competition to reform society towards achieving more European ideals, the masses use the competition as a site of resistance. In spite of these concerns, the Calypso Monarch competition remains one of the highlights of Carnival and is one of the most popular shows in terms of audience attendance. Once the Calypso Monarch results are announced, people take to the streets for Jouvert and dance from the early hours of the morning until noon. The days that follow the Calypso competition are known as Carnival Monday and Tuesday. These are celebrated with processions of bands and colourful troupes and masqueraders. The evening of Carnival Tuesday offers one last opportunity to 'break away' from conventional norms of 'respectable' behaviour, as the bodily gyrations associated with Calypso dancing and jumping are considered lewd. There is one last round of 'jump up' until midnight. This is referred to as the last lap. The next day, Wednesday, is the beginning of Easter, which, in Trinidad, marks the end of Carnival for that year. In Antigua it is back to work as usual.

6 Emancipation from slavery.

As scholars have argued, Carnival is a site of resistance; it is a ritual forged from the history of struggle of Black slaves in Trinidad (Gilbert and Tompkins, 1996). Hollis Liverpool explains that giving the credit to slaves for their role in transforming Carnival has been challenging, since previous historical accounts attributed the development of Carnival to Europeans. He argues that

> the notion that the Carnival in Trinidad and Tobago originated in Europe arose from the fact that Carnival festivities that in some ways resemble the Trinidad Carnival are still held today in Europe.
>
> (Liverpool, 1998: 24).

Liverpool (1998: 24) states that 'European writers undervalued the experiences and thought processes of the oppressed lower class in Trinidad and Tobago particularly those of African descent', and further contends that while it is true that the Spanish and the French who colonized Trinidad contributed to the art forms found in Trinidad today, as far as Calypso and Carnival are concerned 'it was the African who revolutionized the celebrations' (Liverpool, 1998: 30). Such rewriting of the history of Carnival overturns European authority and ideas concerning the knowledge base of previously colonized societies.

Citing examples of Carnival, mass making and street theatre during this event, Gilbert and Tompkins (1996) point out that the re-creation and appropriation of indigenous forms of theatre is one of the methods through which post-colonial subjects resisted colonialism. Their observation is in line with those of Errol Hill (1972), who argues that the Carnival of Trinidad should be developed into a national theatre. In presenting his mandate for a national theatre, Hill gives an overview of the history of Calypso performances. However, he neither provides details about the sophisticated dramatic aspects that constitute these performances nor addresses the role of women in Calypso. Overall, however, Hill's work, along with Gilbert and Tompkins', is useful in pointing to Carnival as a model for Caribbean theatre and provides examples of plays that have been developed using the elements of Calypsos. In describing some of the theatrical aspects of Calypso, Hill tells us that calypsonians use a technique called 'packing' in preparing their Calypsos. This is 'rehearsing it to the point where lyric, melody, rhythm, phrasing and pantomime cohere with a complete work of art' (Hill, 1972: 65), a technique similar to theatre where several elements – movement, music and speech – come together to create a performance. Abrahams also highlights the theatrical nature of the performed Calypso. He states that 'The calypsonian merely brings to life a larger character in a structured, professional setting, with a more formal and elaborate acting out of the assumed role. He or she must dress the part' (Abrahams, 1983: 472). The Calypsonian actor plays out the role of the assigned character and the singer. Smith (2004) adds that by the time the Calypso is performed at the Calypso competition, the staging of the issue the calypsonian is addressing is complete. Many develop playlets and even go to the extent of having local actors perform on stage with them.

Singing Sandra is an example of a calypsonian with a gift for dramatic presentations. In an interview with Smith, Singing Sandra states:

> I still consider myself an actress…You…see a part of Sandra on stage because I like to dramatize what I'm singing in any event. That's one of my loves. I love drama, I love being an actress.
>
> (Smith, 2004: 45).

Clearly, Singing Sandra sees the connection between Calypso performance and theatre. As an actress, her role is to understand and perform her character so well that people will believe that she has become that character. This is also the responsibility of all calypsonians. They must demonstrate to their audience that they have a strong conviction about the particular issue they are addressing.

throwing their voices: women, theatre and Calypso

Because Calypso remains a male-dominated arena, one might be led to assume that this was always the case and that men created this art form. Contrary to what is seen and what one might assume, in actuality women are beginning to reclaim a space that was originally theirs since women were the original transmitters of Calypsos (Maison-Bishop, 1994). Calypso emerged from the praise song of West African women (Mahabir, 2001) and Elder (1966) confirms that women, especially poor women who were prostitutes and petty thieves, contributed to the art form as singers and dancers. Additionally, Edmondson (2003), in her discussion of public performance of women in the Caribbean, describes women who were referred to as Jamettes. She tells us that these women were considered 'disreputable' and 'wanton' and were active as chanterelles or Calypso singers back in 1884. Men soon displaced women from this space and Calypso became a male-dominated space.

The gendered make-up of Calypso performers is changing as women are increasingly entering this arena and using this platform as a way of throwing their voices about their condition as women. In the 2003, 2004 and 2005 competitions, Queen Ivena emerged as the Calypso Monarch in Antigua, and in 2005, the first, second and third place winners were all women. There is a similar phenomenon in Trinidad where women are actively competing in these competitions and have emerged either as Calypso Monarchs or runners up. Examples include Calypso Rose, Singing Sandra and Denyse Plummer. With attention to specific examples of women's performances, I discuss, in this section, their use of Calypso as a theatrical space for critiquing power relations and nationalist ideologies.

The Calypso Monarch competition in Antigua and Trinidad takes place at a national stadium. In Trinidad, it is the Queen's Park Savannah, Port of Spain; in Antigua, it is the Antigua Recreation Grounds, St John's. Both of these centres

have colonial roots since they were established by English colonial governments and were used for hosting public events. This tradition continues. In Antigua, the Recreation Grounds host some of the most important and popular public events such as international Cricket[7] competitions. These stadiums are outdoors where members of the audience are seated in stands or on folding chairs that are placed very close to the stage. The majority of the stands are covered, although there are 'bleacher' stands that are not covered. These stands separate the performers from the audience. Far from being passive, the audience participates in the performance by clapping, cheering, dancing and singing. Additionally, there is a lot of discussion in the stands regarding the performances, the presentations, the themes and who should win the crown. At the beginning of this essay, I introduced the performance of Singing Sandra. I will continue that discussion here. I present some of the lyrics and describe the theatrical actions that occur on stage, in parenthesis. In 2002, Singing Sandra appears on stage dressed in a gown the colours of the Jamaican flag and the Trinidadian flag. She is contesting the Jamaicanization of Trinidad. She speaks specifically of an incident that occurred on Independence Day in which a Reggae show was staged at the Queens Park in Savannah – the same venue as the Calypso Monarch competition. As she steps on the stage she begins singing:

7 Popular game in the English-speaking Caribbean with colonial roots. Scholars such as CLR James have written extensively on cricket as a form of post-colonial resistance.

> We reach, (holds out hand to audience)
> Ah tell you we reach (puts hands on hips).
> The examination I must now impeach (points finger first at audience then at youth on stage).
> All was scorn (mimes knife cutting through stomach with hands) independence gone (points behind)
> Yes dem young Jamaicans (point to youth on stage) they treat Trinbagonians with scorn (points at audience).
> A night for national celebration they invite a JS squad
> It was a gross insult to me nation (angry expression on face)
> No they couldn't do that abroad
> Could you imagine my people, (hands on hips) if the places were reversed
> Tell me which Jamaican wouldda put Calpysonians first?

Singing Sandra employs the theatrical art of miming to portray how she feels about the incident. She performs the role of a Trinidadian national who has been insulted by the actions of young Jamaicans. As she performs, there are other performances taking place. There is on stage with her a man who portrays the role of a Trinidadian youth who loves Jamaican culture more than his own. When he first steps on stage he declares:

> And it have Buju and Shabba Ranks
> And all dem fellars down in the Ovals, boy!
> You got to be making joke
> This is a serious thing boy
> Yaw!!! (using Jamaican accent) So hear what going on

Mas, that is for Carnival
But we not on that round this time.
Hear what going on
Shabbas and dem down in dey boy
Down in the Ovals boy and I gone wid that.

The Trinidadian youth, who has been acculturated into Jamaican culture, no longer cares about Calypso; he prefers Reggae, another musical genre that is male dominated. Both Singing Sandra and this youth speak of the nation as 'we' but there clearly is a difference in how they define the 'we'. Singing Sandra's 'we' includes women and the cultural importance of Trinidad, whereas the youth's 'we' refers to young Trinidadians whose heroes are Jamaican artists, Shabba and Buju Banton. In another verse, Singing Sandra claims:

As a country, a country
We is a Jamaican colony (walks to the other side of stage)
A night of display – red, black and white (holds hand open wide)
Ten thousand pack the Oval tight.

Singing Sandra critiques the increasing cultural domination of Trinidad by Jamaican popular culture. Jamaica is one of the most popular English-speaking Caribbean islands and its music has been a major factor in propelling Jamaican popularity. In the US, many Rap and Rhythm and Blues artists are featuring Jamaican Ragga in their songs, including, for example, the music of Buju Banton and Beanie Man, resulting in a higher exposure of Jamaican Ragga when compared to other music genres of the English-speaking Caribbean, such as Calypso. The popularity of this music has led some Trinidadians to embrace this music not only for personal consumption but also for generating revenues. Trinidadians are gaining revenue from Ragga artists such as Bunji Garlin and Benjai and also as Ragga concerts organizers. Singing Sandra, however, warns that she will not allow Jamaican culture to swallow Trinidadian culture. Trinidadians have participated in moulding a culture that is theirs and this should be appreciated.

Singing Sandra points to the indigenous knowledge of Trinidad by showcasing a variety of cultural symbols and costumes. In addition to the acculturated youth, there is also a pan man on stage. He has his steel band on the stage and there are two flags of Trinidad and Tobago on both sides of the steel band, which begins to play just as Singing Sandra comes on stage and continues to play throughout the performance. The steel band represents one of the national prides of Trinidad and Tobago, since it was an instrument created in Trinidad and bears witness to the resistance of the African people living in that country to slavery and colonial oppression. As her performance nears the end, Singing Sandra pulls the man to the side and more drama unfolds:

Hold this! (hands him a flag of Trinbago)
This belongs to you.

Let me tell you something
Your thing come first, not second no time.
As a Trinbagonian, ah telling you, listen don't get me vex
You have to appreciate yours, you understand?
You think you understand?
Youth: Yes mother, I now understand (repentant)
What it feels to appreciate
Your own before other people.
Oh God Mother! (Singing Sandra hugs man and they start walking off the stage together with man holding the flag.)

As Singing Sandra is about to leave the stage, other groups come on stage. One group consists of people dressed in the national costumes of Trinidad and Tobago. The other consists of Bunji Garlin and Benjai, two well-known Trinidadian Ragga singers. They too are carrying Trinidadian flags:

Bunji Garlin: Mother, Mother, Mother
Sandra: Who is that calling me dey?

Bunji Garlin then explains that they are all listening to her and Singing Sandra concludes by reaffirming:

This is Trinidad and Tobago
Not on Independence Night
Light the sky for your culture
This is Trinidad and Tobago
We aint talking that
Play for me
This is we ting

As she leaves the stage, Singing Sandra refers again to 'we' implying that she claims her right to be included in Calypso. Bunji Garlin and Benjai acknowledge her as 'Mother' and affirm that she has participated in the struggle to make Calypso a 'we ting'. A reading of the lyrics shows that Singing Sandra is singing about the need to preserve the culture of Trinidad and Tobago. However, Calypso is constituted by both lyrics and performance. As a woman, Singing Sandra performs through a gendered body. Chalk (2001) reminds us that a woman's body carries cultural significance, portraying her womanhood and what it means to be a woman in her society. Based on social constructions of gender, Singing Sandra's voice is interpreted as feminine and so are her movements on stage. While I have tried to give a written description of her body movements, it is difficult to fully describe in written words her actions on stage. It is worth noting, however, that the ways in which she places her hands on her hips is a gesture often used by women of African origin in the Caribbean, and is symbolic of both disgust and defiance. The gender implications of this action are, thus, significant. When a woman puts her hands on her hips while speaking to someone in authority, she is

often chided as being rude and accused of not knowing her place or even 'getting outta hand'. If this action is carried out by a young girl, she is accused of 'acting womanish' or being 'force ripe', the underlying meaning being that she is not acting in accordance with appropriate codes of behaviour. Mohammed (1991) and Collins (1996) tell us that these terms are powerful metaphors that evoke certain constructions of womanhood in Africana societies.

Singing Sandra's performance must be placed within the history of women's involvement in Calypso in order to understand how she critiques and participates in the dialogue on the nation. Harewood (2005) tells us that academic writings about Calypso cast it as a unified 'we ting'; it has become an icon for nationalism, yet there are many who have not been included in definitions of the 'we'. On the contrary, when Singing Sandra speaks of 'we', the 'we' includes others plus *herself* and when she claims Calypso as a 'we ting' it includes women, men and all those involved in the cultural make-up of the nation. Harewood (2005) reminds us that standard histories of Caribbean nationalism and independence have been written by middle class Black men. Hence, the resulting narrative describes the Caribbean states as male, African and heterosexual. This explains the exclusion of women from the national versions of Calypso history.

Singing Sandra's presence on stage sends a message about all those that 'we' should include. Her refusal to be excluded does not involve simply calling this is a 'we ting'; she claims the stage by being the central figure. Her actions are congruent with African forms of feminist activity where women's activism is focused on action (Collins, 2000). This action of claiming the stage by Singing Sandra and other women calypsonians is revolutionary given the fact that women were previously pushed out of this arena. Smith (2004) explains that public ordinances prohibited women calypsonians' activities, which resulted in decreasing numbers of performing venues and a reduction in the visibility of women as performers. Additionally, social pressures restricted women from participation. Women were expected to conform to ideals of womanhood created by colonial society (Rohlehr, 1990). This meant that African women living in Trinidad and other parts of the English-speaking Caribbean were pressured to fit the mould of Christian White English women. The marginalized groups tried to conform to this idea whereby the man aspired to be the principal provider and the woman a 'proper' woman.

As well, as Edmondson (2003: 1) tells us, the Black Nationalist ideal saw Black women as 'icons of respectability, virtuous women who must be properly educated and acculturated in order to take their place as symbols of national progress'. By the turn of the 20th century, the coloured middle class controlled the Carnival (Smith, 2004). As this group became more educated, some members were willing to accept European ideals concerning good citizenry and respectability (Edmondson, 2003). Under the leadership of the middle class, Carnivals became more 'respectable' and commercialized. No longer community events, they were turned

into profit-making 'music ventures' by middle class businessmen who controlled the shows, including participation. One consequence of this change was that female singers disappeared from public viewing and Calypso became a space for men.

Underlying the colonial and national agendas was thus the issue of control that attempted to keep women out of public spaces such as Calypso performances in favour of confining them to the realm of the private as home makers, faithful Christians and wives. This desire did not fit in with the realities of non-White women living in slave societies. The public and the private have never been separate in the lives of Black and African diasporic women in the Caribbean. This intersectionality caused bell hooks (2000) to critique *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) by Betty Friedan for assuming that emancipation simply meant the ability to leave the household and go to work. hooks showed how in making this argument, Friedan excluded thousands of poor women, many of whom were women of colour who had worked for generations, usually for White women. A similar intersectionality of women's lives with national concerns caused Singing Sandra to sing about national pride.

On stage, Singing Sandra is referred to as mother by the Ragga artists and by the youth. In doing so, she engages the politics of motherhood, which plays a central role in Caribbean feminist discourse (Rowley, 2002). The image of the mother represents the paradoxical situation of Black women in English-speaking Caribbean societies. On the one hand, they are celebrated as creators; yet, such celebration leads to the construction of myths about Caribbean Black women as super and strong women (Rowley, 2002) who can overcome all obstacles. One consequence of such myth-making is that problems affecting Caribbean women are not considered a priority and it is often assumed that these women would be able to deal with their own problems without any external or institutional help. The image of the mother also brings to attention other realities about the lives of Black women in Caribbean societies. As Janet Momsen explains:

> Within the Caribbean regional diversity of ethnicity, class, language and religion there is an ideological unity of patriarchy, of female subordination and dependence. Yet there is also a vibrant living tradition of female economic autonomy, of female-headed households and of a family structure in which men are often marginal and absent. So Caribbean gender relations are a double paradox: of patriarchy within a system of matrifocal and matrilocal families; and of domestic and state patriarchy coexisting with the economic independence of women. The roots of this contemporary paradoxical situation lie in colonialism.
>
> (Momsen, 2002: 45).

In acting out of the role of mother on the traditional masculine Calypso stage, Singing Sandra demonstrates the power she can exercise through her role as mother in educating her children (Trinidadian youths) about the need to value their culture and resist domination by another.

Another example of a woman using theatre to critique the nation is Queen Ivena of Antigua. The year 2004 marked a historical moment in Antigua and Barbuda

with the end of the 'Bird Dynasty'. In some circles, Antigua, up to that point, had been referred to as 'Bird country' because the Bird family dominated Antiguan politics for almost half of a century. The Bird family members were leaders of the Antigua Labor Party (ALP) party. It began with Vere Cornwall Bird Sr. who was dubbed the father of the nation, and then continued with his son Lester Bird when he became Prime Minister in 1994. Under the Lester Bird government, scandals continually plagued the ALP government and were recorded in local newspapers such as the *Outlet* and *The Daily Observer*. These scandals involved sexual exploitation of young girls, money laundering and child pornography. There had been relentless reports of government ministers pocketing money that should have been used for the development of Antigua and Barbuda. Consequently, the country incurred large economic deficits, which negatively impacted the quality of life of Antiguans.

The changing and charged political atmosphere created the theme and setting for Queen Ivena's performance 'After Lester'. I remember this as I watch Queen Ivena's performance. Before coming on the stage, the Master of Ceremony introduces Queen Ivena as the next performer. Once the announcement is made, the stage darkens and all that can be heard is the band as it begins playing the music for Ivena's Calypso. When the stage lights come back on, there is a table with chairs and a large white box labelled 'files'. Queen Ivena enters the stage accompanied by two women who leave once Ivena reaches the middle of the stage. Ivena is dressed in a white pant-suit and patches of the national cloth are woven into the pant-suit at the neck, hands and feet. Once on stage, Ivena begins:

> Shu-be-dah
> All your songs Ivena (holds out hands to audience and walks closer to the front of stage)
> in the past was against Lester,
> Now he slipping (puts hands on hips and jumps backwards)
> What will you be singing?
> And we saw you jumping (jumps)
> when the new PM Baldwin win
> Oh we watching (mimes watching)
> Who you attacking.
> We want to see if you taking sides
> We want to see if the truth you'll hide
> We want to see if you favor Baldwin but never Lester
> Ivena we DEMAND an answer.

As Ivena sings, she walks to all areas of the stage. Her movements are well choreographed and her performance energetic and exaggerated. She continues

> But Let me tell you Antigua
> I have nothing against Lester
> But his government (look of disdain)

Was incompetent (mimes telling someone to leave)
I am glad that Baldwin win but I might have to hit (hit) on him
If the establishment remain delinquent
I still see the need for us (points to audience) to change
To protect and talk and rearrange
Man still living from hand to mouth
Then there's much to sing about
So Antigua will hear from Ivena (puts hands by ears and then turn from side to side)

As Queen Ivena performs, there is another performance taking place on stage. The once empty tables and chairs when her performance started are now occupied by two men who are engaged in a discussion. I am assuming these men represent the now elected officials. This discussion continues throughout the performance. In another verse, Queen Ivena sings:

The police dragging their feet
They saw they must be discreet
The laws must prevail
And Asot Michael must face to jail…

As she sings, an actor costumed as a policeman comes on stage. He is surrounded by a group of people who begin to argue with him. This action continues for a few minutes until someone from the group picks up the large box marked 'files' and runs off stage. Queen Ivena explains this action when she says:

government files are still missing
Righteous lady has something to sing
So Antigua look out for Ivena (puts hands about eyes and look from side to side)

Ivena's Calypso is consistent with that moment in Antigua's history. Her performance brings on to the public arena a dialogue that has been taking place in Antigua. The ruling party is presently mounting an investigation into the dealings of the previous government and ministers such as Asot Michael are alleged to have stolen large sums of money. Finding information is problematic because government files that would provide evidence are missing.

Ivena's Calypso is highly political and her performance is also enacted through a gendered body. Her words foreground the role and power of the calypsonian – a power and role that is usually associated with male calypsonians. She describes herself as a guardian, a role that has traditionally been associated with the masculine. Interestingly, Queen Ivena is petite; her body in no way resembles the accepted strong masculine body of a guardian. Her role is to keep the government in check and people are counting on her to do so. She declares that as long as there is injustice, she will not be silenced and will continue to sing and perform. There have been rumours in the local newspapers and by Antiguan nationals that the judges have at various times tried to eliminate Queen Ivena in

the early rounds of judging. Hence, her declaration that she will not be silenced should not be taken lightly. Queen Ivena is a type of conscience of the nation and she dresses the part. Interestingly, she does not wear the full national dress; even the performers who come on stage are dressed only partially in the national dress. What she does instead is to create her own costume using fragments of colours of the national dress. Perhaps, she is making a statement, through the use of this costume, about the reinvention of the nation and the role she has chosen to play in the remaking of the nation.

Singing Sandra and Queen Ivena are examples of two women performing Calypso, but there are other women who continue to participate in this space. By participating in such public activities, particularly the Calypso competition, women calypsonians become highly visible. They are visible because not only are they participating in one of the most highly attended Carnival shows, but also because they are major contenders in this arena and address themes that cause audiences to pay close attention. This has resulted in disruption, to some extent, of ideologies concerning the place and role of women in Caribbean societies, which shows up in a variety of forms. For example, when Calypso Rose entered the competition in 1963, the name of the competition (called the Calypso King competition at the time) was changed to Calypso Monarch competition to reflect Calypso Rose's participation. Additionally, while there are still Calypsos that portray women as sexual objects, there are also male calypsonians who are now addressing issues regarding gender imbalance, which has been attributed in part to the presence of women singing Calypso and to women who have been involved in other forms of feminist activity (Mohammed, 1991). To add to this, in Trinidad, there appears to be a change in attitude towards domestic violence as more women are reporting these incidents (Mohammed, 1991). Domestic violence remains a big issue but some women are no longer putting up with it; rather, they are being empowered through Calypso and other feminist venues to stand up for their rights (Mahabir, 2001).

conclusion

More women are performing on the Calypso stage even though barriers have been set up to hinder their participation. These women are also redefining who should sing Calypso. I discussed earlier that Calypso, which was once a female space, became a space considered unsuitable for respectable women. Their re-entry was not an easy task and they continue to face challenges. In an interview with Mahabir (2001), Calypso Rose explains that there was a lot of backlash about her singing Calypso since it was felt that no respectable woman would pursue this art form. She recounts:

> I took a lot of criticism from women and church groups. But I tried to show them that calypso was an art, and that it was nothing derogatory. This is our culture, I said, the culture of Trinidad and Tobago…
>
> (Mahabir, 2001: 413).

Denyse Plummer's experience highlights the role of gender and race/ethnicity in excluding women. She states that during her early years, some of the audience members threw stones and toilet paper at her. In an interview with Ottley (1992), she reflects: 'I was not the normal Calypsonian'. She is not visibly Black, being the product of a White father and a Black mother. In addition to being a woman, she was seen as someone who should was not racially 'authentic' enough to be involved in the art form. Other artists such as Drupatee, a Trinidadian Indian woman, have suffered a similar fate because of their ethnicity (Mahabir, 2001).

Singing Althea was the first woman to enter the Calypso competition in Antigua and win one of the top three positions. At the time Singing Althea entered, I was living in Antigua and there were comments from Antiguans about whether Singing Althea should perform. Unlike Denyse Plummer and Drupatee, Singing Althea is visibly Black. However, people argued that she did not have a Calypso voice, commenting that she had a fine voice that was better suited for gospel or Rhythm and Blues, but was not strong or coarse enough for Calypso. I see this comment about Singing Althea as a question related to Singing Althea's identity, her gender, social class and degree of Africanness. Singing Althea's voice is considered refined, and as Cooper (1994) explains, refinement is linked to Europe. Calypso was created as a space for the African lower classes whose cultures were associated with coarseness and vulgarity. Those from the more elite classes are not expected to be as coarse or as vulgar because they have been absorbed by Euro-American culture. A calypsonian's role is to speak for the people. Singing Althea's voice raised questions about her identity and ability to be the voice of the people, particularly poor people. Such questions stem from stereotypical assumptions and yet despite these barriers Singing Althea has continued to perform and defy the unwritten rules about who should sing Calypso.

The Calypso performance space overturns accepted traditions about the role of writer, performer and audience. The audience members at the Calypso Monarch competition also become participants in the performance through active involvement and discussion of the performance as the performers (also at times creators of the songs) sing, dance, cheer, dialogue on issues about the nation, and speak out against injustice, imperialist practices and hegemonic displays of power. Calypso performances thus offer an example of the ways in which local theatrical forms and practices are deployed for resistance to colonialism and its continuing aspects. The increasing involvement of women in this art form offers an opportunity for investigating the ways in which women debunk colonial and nationalist ideas about who should participate in theatrical spaces and use tools rooted in history as instruments of resistance. My own investigation reveals that by participating in Calypso, Trinidadian and Antiguan women throw their voices and 'talk back' to the prevailing powers. Ogundipe-Leslie (1994) encourages us to look for spaces where women's voices are to be found. In the English-speaking Caribbean islands of Antigua and Trinidad, one of these spaces is the Calypso, a

theatrical space that represents a site of struggle where women are actively involved in the quest to re-create and re-imagine the nation as a 'we ting'.

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doi:10.1057/palgrave.fr.9400300