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“Why Must All Girls Want to be Flag Women?”:

Postcolonial Sexualities, National Reception, and Caribbean Soca Performance¹

Abstract

“Why must all girls want to be flag women?” laments one critic regarding what he sees as the infiltration of “Carnival” culture into the performative desires of Indo-Trinidadian women. The intersections of soca, a form of music derived from the traditional Carnival genre of calypso, and chutney soca, as an Indo-Trinidadian-identified form with roots in traditional South Asian music as well as Carnival cultures, is a particular arena of visibility—and controversy—for critically including Indo-Trinidadian “flag” women in a feminist framework. In this essay, I read these Carnival-related performances in relationship to the colonial and national histories of the circulation of Indian and black women’s bodies in Trinidad and Tobago, asking what is at stake in these occupations of genre, form, and performative presence in the latest global scenes of late capitalism (where image and sound, as cultural productions, are always in circulation beyond the scope of the nation, and their own “original” referents).

“Why must all girls want to be flag women?” laments one critic regarding what he sees as the infiltration of “Carnival” culture into the performative desires of Indo-Trinidadian women.² The intersections of soca, a form of music derived from the traditional Carnival genre of calypso, and chutney soca, as an Indo-Trinidadian-identified form with roots in traditional

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South Asian music as well as in Carnival cultures, is a particular arena of visibility—and controversy—for critically including Indo-Trinidadian “flag” women in a feminist framework. In this essay, I read these Carnival-related performances in relation to the colonial and national histories of the circulation of Indian and black women’s bodies in Trinidad and Tobago, asking what is at stake in these occupations of genre, form, and performative presence in recent global scenes of late capitalism (where image and sound, as cultural productions, are always in circulation beyond the scope of the nation and of their own “original” referents).

Perhaps no cultural event is identified with Trinidad and Tobago more than Carnival, the annual festival of music, dance, food, and culture that has come to symbolize the Caribbean in both theory and cultural practice outside of the region. The internal organization of Carnival in Trinidad and Tobago, as in many Caribbean nations, is a reflection of the diversity of its social and political national body—including more than just black citizens, but those of European, East Asian, and South Asian descent. The move, then, from “girls” to “flag women” reveals gender’s centrality to discussions of national culture while drawing performative sexuality into heightened visibility in the form of those women who participate in costumed, choreographed performance activities (Stuempfle 1995, 201).

In particular, this article attempts to elucidate the very different genealogies of national belonging that can be drawn from the histories of grievance, or legal and cultural complaint, against the state and sexualities in Trinidad and in the black and South Asian diasporas, and how these notions of citizenship might be at odds with the critical desires found in soca’s public reception, and in our own comparative feminist readings of subaltern sexualities.

To map the various fronts of these postcolonial exchanges, this article will work through several spheres of understanding the relationship between critical feminist practice and cultural performance. First, I will outline the unique case of cultural production in Trinidad and Tobago, with its emphasis on music as a national form. I argue that music serves discourses of both anticolonial and intranational grievance. This context allows musical performance to be a pointed site for access to feminist critiques of national modes of representing gender and sexuality. But these national-legal scripts do not account for the complex differences and disjunctures that the history of South Asian sexualities entails. In the second section, I attempt to read intranational and transnational debates

over Indo-Trinidadian women's bodies in terms of anxiety over such histories, particularly their overlap with narratives of black women's sexuality—intersections that interrupt any easy model of cross-cultural feminist grievance. I look finally to one performer of chutney soca, Drupatee Ramgoonai, to demonstrate the limits of a comparative feminism that emphasizes content over form, and the possibilities for a feminist practice beyond good and bad representation. I argue that any discussion of discursive systems of representation necessarily hinges on multiple, overlapping histories of gender, culture, nation, and interdisciplinary feminist thought, ones that may not easily align with readings of progressive political or cultural alliance.

Form and Feminist Grievance

Soca, or "soul calypso," is the most popular form of music in Trinidad and Tobago. Traditionally a male-dominated field, soca now has all-female as well as mixed-gender shows, and since the mid-1980s it has become a visible forum for black Trinidadian women vocal performers. Soca's local, national, and diasporic marketing constructs itself largely through the bodies of black women, as available (tourist) fantasies. Soca as a genre, then, has been locally infiltrated by women performers, while at the same time its transnational appeal as dance music seems to engage in a colonialist alignment of "native" women's bodies with passive sexual consumption.

This complex exchange of black women's bodies within the world of soca has yet another twist; in the late 1980s and early 1990s, a "new" form of soca emerged: chutney soca, a mix of popular soca music sung by Trinidadians of East Indian descent, often performed in Hindi or in a mix of Hindi and English with a heavy emphasis on Indian percussion styles. The term "chutney" itself refers not only to the Indian condiment but to a form of erotic song performed by Indian women and to a popular musical form that emerged in the 1970s in Trinidad and Tobago (Manuel 2000, 337). When chutney first entered into soca (usually performed by Afro-men over a chutney beat), racial distinctions were held lyrically and to some degree authorially in place.³ But by the late 1990s, East Indian women (and men) in Trinidad had become a far more visible presence on the soca scene as performers/vocalists. These women and their performances have often found themselves at the center of debates about gender and cultural

respectability within the Hindu community of Trinidad and Tobago and in the transnational sphere of the Indian diaspora.

Trinidad itself is a nation marked with tensions between Afro- and Indo-Trinidadian citizens. Its national histories are rooted in the diasporic slave trade in the eighteenth and first half of the nineteenth centuries and in the colonial indentured servitude of “coolie” labor during the Victorian period. After independence in 1962, Indo-Trinidadians began to protest their lack of governmental representation despite their significant numbers. The debate about East Indian women taking the stage has proved to be a site for Indo-Trinidadian women to articulate and negotiate their ethnic-sexual identities in relation to the state and with the East Indian community of Trinidad and Tobago. By performing not only in a “black” or hybrid ethnic genre, but by taking up the physical and sexual presence so often identified nationally and diasporically with black women, Indo-Trinidadian women’s soca performances stage a complicated scene of ethnic and national intersections with gendered representations of grievance.

In order to respond to this type of sexual and ethnic regulation through performance in the public sphere, I turn to the use of music in Trinidad as a national form and forum; as soca stands as a challenge to traditional notions of national representation, it also redefines what it means to bring grievance against the nation-state. Post-independence Trinidad was defined politically and culturally as an African-identified state, and as such, calypso and steelband performance—traditionally black male and working-class forms, as well as Carnival staples—have become national culture, the symbol and export of Trinidad itself. Of course being so closely aligned with the state before, during, and following independence, calypso itself has a long history of sociopolitical engagement with the public issues of its time. Here, music seems to intersect with theories of Carnival-as-resistance, where Carnival culture provides “temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and for the established order; it marks the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions” (Bakhtin 1984, 10).⁴

Soca perhaps comes even closer to Bakhtin’s spirit of Carnival as subversion, with its resolute focus on pleasure and the body, rather than on grievance per se. The genre is alternately described as a form of calypso that draws on East Indian drumming or rhythm and as a combination of soul (or American soul music) and calypso. Soca is often read against calypso or, as a common generalization would have it, “calypso is social conscience, soca is

party music” (CaribPlanet 2001, 1). As a musical form different from calypso, soca supposedly places less emphasis on lyrics and on the “public” in general, unless it is the public spectacle of entertainment and sexual performance, typified in the phrase “wine and jam,” or sexually suggestive dancing. Soca registers as a black cultural form of party music, public sexuality, and licentiousness—concerned more with the “female bottom” than with “uplift” and with a black performative cultural idiom (Liverpool 2000, 1).⁵ Soca is also in large part what has taken over popular Carnival, the supposedly inauthentic successor to legitimate national calypso performance.

With their focus on heterosexual sex-gender relations, soca lyrics are supposedly vapid, the opposite of what it means to be socially conscious or politically and publicly engaged with the state and the process of grievance. Grievance is usually defined as a claim to the state over an issue that is the state’s fault or that falls under its domain, or for which the state offers the possibility for redress. Wendy Brown, in her discussion of grievance in *States of Injury*, critiques grievance as an appeal to the state that erases the state’s own culpability and continued performance of injury to the citizen (Brown 1995, 27). When gender and sexuality appear in calypso, it seems, the musical form is difficult to incorporate into national discourse. In his article on intellectual property and Carnival, critic Philip Scher interrogates this split, focusing on how Carnival culture has shifted toward “wine and jam . . . represented by young middle class women” (Scher 2002, 460). The state, however, cannot view these subjects as proper national performers. Instead, “wine and jam” is identified as “unpatriotic, culturally destructive and morally suspect” (473). Trinidad the nation is equated with a masculine model of citizenship, even in its most creative forms. A Carnival that places emphasis on the female body instead of on male musicality becomes national culture without social conscience, a “suspect” performance of nation (Liverpool n.d., 1).⁶

Of course, at the same time that gender and sexuality are articulated as outer-national, not socially conscious, and inauthentic to a national history of calypso/Carnival, the national threat of “the presence of women behaving badly” seems to suggest that there is a direct political content to flipping the script for wine-and-jam performing women; as one interviewee puts it, “This is the one day we women rule the streets and can free up” (Scher 2002, 477, 479). He continues:

From the 1930s through the 1950s it was Afro-Trinidadian, male, working class participants whose grievances, values and dreams were expressed. In the 1980s and 1990s middle class female desires were given voice on the streets. . . . [But] [i]f, for example, Carnival provides an outlet for middle class women to express frustration with a patriarchal and limiting society, it also reifies women as objects of the male public gaze. If women's "wining" on each other has been vilified for its lesbian overtones, those same overtones have excited typical male fantasies of lesbian sex as an occasion for voyeurism. (478)

This sentiment of "freeing up" the public space of the street for women can be read, as in Carolyn Cooper's work on Jamaican dancehall culture, as a feminist intervention.⁷ But it is also a specifically racialized performance in the context of Trinidad, a mixed-race, postcolonial state. Although I agree with Scher's ambivalence about the progressive possibilities of Carnival performance for women in Trinidad, he seems to reproduce state-sanctioned rifts between nation and gender. His analysis moves from a very specific racial location—"Afro-Trinidadian, male, working class"—to an unspecified racial-ethnic makeup of the women who participate in "wine and jam"; they are "young, middle class women" of uncertain and apparently unimportant racial background. He dismisses any national import to these women's sexual visibility with one another—the "lesbian" fantasy becomes "typical" and "male" rather than racialized or nationalized. Never seriously considering what "the presence of women behaving badly" with one another might disrupt for the state—especially considering that national law as well as national cultural preservation seems intent on regulating and erasing women's (sexual) performative agency in the national public sphere—Scher implies, as other critics have and continue to suggest, that the performance of gender and sexuality in the public sphere of popular music writes out the national grievance. Mixing gender, sexuality, and pleasure apparently does not add up to a coherent, "responsible" whole in the national form of Carnival music.

Postcolonial Histories, Performative Tensions

Scher's analysis does not take into account, either, the national debates over (hetero)sexuality that occurred after independence and with particular

ferocity around the same time that such critiques of women's performance in Carnival emerged. This section seeks to complicate further the construction of potential acts of grievance and gendered citizenship through the intersecting and disruptive histories of black and South Asian sexualities in the diaspora. If we take "wine and jam" cultures seriously as a wish to "free up the streets" for progressive gender politics, what kind of grievance can soca performances enact? As performance critic Richard Schechner helpfully elucidates on Bakhtin's temporary power displacement during Carnival, "In Trinidad and Tobago itself, even though Carnival originated as a liberationist exuberance celebrating emancipation from enslavement, it never was 'freely free.' From its very inception, the Carnival was policed and controlled" (Schechner 2004, 5). So, too, has the Trinidadian state attempted to legislate and regulate women's sexuality through the colonial and the contemporary moments; as a discursive category, soca relies on circulating genealogies of Afro-Trinidadian women's bodies as signs of contestation in various forms. Scher rests on just such an easy and unarticulated connection among soca, the sexual performance of "wine and jam," and black women's sexuality when he refuses to name or make visible the race of its performers. As the representation of the English-speaking Caribbean remains overdetermined by its identification with the African diaspora, Carnival and its complicated relationship with gender and class respectability, as implied by this article's opening quote, are also intimately linked to "blackness" as a racial identity. For a small nation such as Trinidad and Tobago, that association is one born of both colonial and postcolonial histories, as well as more contemporary economic realities of tourism. With Carnival culture and its commodification comes a history of the performance and display of black women's bodies and sexuality, for both colonial and postcolonial aims. Black women's visible sexuality, then, becomes the sign under which the Caribbean nation is frequently read (as is implicit in the opening quote) and diasporically distributed. Situated cultural representations of Indo-Trinidadian women, written out of exported national culture even as they occupy a tenuous place in histories of the South Asian diaspora, offer possibilities for countering limiting discourses of sexuality in the public-national sphere (as Shalini Puri [1997], Tejaswini Niranjana [1998], and Brinda Mehta [2004] have all critically and persuasively argued), but what other histories of sexuality linger in these performances of diasporic agency?

Woven into these histories are long-standing colonial constructions of “other” sexuality, and the intense scrutiny and attention paid to regulating postcolonial sexualities. Such state regulation is placed against the diasporic circulation of popular culture narratives of Caribbean identity from both the black and South Asian communities, compliant with colonial forms of power and feminist criticism that attempt to engage cultural performances of potentially resistant sites to such constructions. The particular and wide-ranging ways that sexuality and African and South Asian diasporas have been and are produced in relation to and in tension with one another include: the tensions between postcolonial representation and national resistance, the tensions between circulating discourses of desire and geography, and the pay-offs and pitfalls of visibility for women of color and for transnational feminisms.

As critic Brinda Mehta thoroughly documents in *Diasporic (Dis)Locations*, the attempts and failures of black and South Asian Trinidadian women to forge alliances remain difficult to account for in the postcolonial state’s range of diasporic peoples and their specific relationships to the issues of sexuality and to one another’s histories (Mehta 2004). The articulation, regulation, and visibility of bodies and their movements map differently across (trans)national borders, performing their own “dangerous” mixing of colonial/anti-colonial histories and struggles. Locating some of the convergences—and the divergences—of discourses on sexuality in postcolonial states, particularly in terms of those discourses internal to Trinidad and Tobago as a mixed-race, diasporically (in)formed state, one can begin to see how the sexual and gendered inheritances of Indo- and Afro-Trinidadian women play themselves out within national borders and cultural forms that are diasporically constructed, exported, and received on the legislative terrain. But as critic Michèle Alexandre posits, performing bodies and performing legal grievance need not be mutually exclusive feminist goals (Alexandre 2006, 178). Exploring institutional sexual regulation as a way of creating a racialized-sexual subject in colonial and post-independence Trinidad and Tobago questions the sexual discourse surrounding these narratives of nation and tradition. “Nationness,” in my reading, is in fact over-determined by the limits set on sexuality and sexual economies, leaving even subversive performances—“body protests,” in Alexandre’s terms—with the potential to reinscribe the limitations of national, diasporic, and postcolonial models of sexuality (177).

The borders of sexuality, for both black and Indian women in colonial discourses and in those of emergent postcolonial and diasporic nationalisms, are ones that order more specifically what women as cultural practitioners do with, in, and on the site of “nation.” Sexually marked nationality and nationally defined sexuality have been sharpened for Afro- and Indo-Trinidadians through the legal sphere just as calypso is giving way to soca and chutney soca. What legislative and discursive company does this legal sexuality keep, and whom is it racially and ethnically designating as its implied ideal citizen? Colonial and postcolonial states’ formative focus on the boundaries of sexual-racial bodies cites more than just grievance as its model—indeed, it relies on long histories of complex constructions of black and South Asian sexualities, from indigenous practices to early Western travelogues to the quotidian legislation of colonial and neocolonial intimacies in regard to business, property, and “morality.”

Several contemporary feminist critics have pointed out the connection between gender and racial formations inside the system of colonialism (see Alexander 1991; McClintock 1995; Alexander 1997). As transnational feminist scholar M. Jacqui Alexander puts it, “attempts to manage sexuality through morality are not without historical precursors. They are inextricably bound to colonial rule. In fact, the very identity and authority of the colonial project rested upon the racialization and sexualization of morality” (Alexander 1997, 133). The terrains of this sexual project comprise travelogues, scientific texts, print culture, and that of law or legislation. One strategic operation of this system is slavery, which created a strange intersection of hypervisibility, race, and sex, where the language of physiognomy created a direct discursive link or convergence among black women’s bodies, sexuality, and “objects” of study. Such convergence is not coincidental or merely supplemental to the mission of the construction of citizenship. As such, institutional and legal regulation in the Caribbean and the Americas at large was historically enacted to police the sexual “problem” of black women’s bodies. Black female subjectivity has been marked through the management and organization of desire, both sexual and capital, with the burden of proof and punishment located on the constantly exposed black woman’s body.

Legal-national regulation is one way of understanding a sexually marked citizenship that is both inside and outside of national culture’s parameters, both by the law’s inscription of these sexual bodies and that

which is extra-legal, like cultural productions that set the limit of sexuality. National culture can never be a totalizing site of sexuality's regulation, particularly in a postcolonial state that is haunted by the roving surveillance of colonial cultures (which is to say that colonial cultures themselves are always deeply conflicting and in crisis). And if sexuality is a mixed-raced bag of strategies for identification and then disidentification with the nation, then its "resolution" cannot be subsumed under one discourse to which there are only opposing moments that reinforce that which is already resolved.

The drama of Trinidadian women's sexuality played out this tension among grievance, regulation, and colonial cultural ideology through the drafting, reorganization, and regulation of the Sexual Offences Bill—a bill that regulates national sexual practices. In the bill, passed in 1986, Trinidad and Tobago set sexual regulation into a package law that gathered and reinforced, as well as invented, legislation that defined national boundaries with sexual terms. Largely a consolidation of existing laws regulating everything from queer contact to prostitution to rape to incest, the redrafting of the "new" law began in the 1970s, and its codes went through not just significant changes but much public debate where the deployment of the rhetoric that marks black women's sexual bodies as potential threats to the nation took place (Alexander 1991). Alexander points out in her work on sexual regulation in the Caribbean and in Trinidad and Tobago in particular that the postcolonial nation as a practice requires, encourages, and is predicated on (and therefore citizenship is predicated on) racialized sexuality and its regulation. Passed in a climate that aligned sexuality outside of the nuclear family as aberrant—a common ideological stance of modern colonialist pathologizing of colonized cultures—this law and the debate surrounding it sought to twist that logic around, marking queer and "promiscuous" practices as contaminants of the West. Black women's sexual agency runs counter here to the myth of the "heterosexual family" as the fundamental unit and microcosm of the state, Alexander argues, particularly as a classed "danger to respectability" (Alexander 1991, 64). Black women's bodies come to stand in for the West—like a contagion—which has written its corruption onto their bodies, legitimating even more forceful policing of national-sexual borders in the name of purity. This history is coupled with the postcolonial state's rhetorical attempts to re-naturalize the myth of a precolonial

history of Afro-Caribbean sexuality and society as one of heterosexual and nuclear family constructions (85). Positioning black women's sexuality as both dangerous and necessary to the emergent and post-emergent national project, the national discourse engages in classificatory practices, setting apart the "corrupt"-within from the ideal of national-sexual culture through the rhetoric of the national unit—the nuclear family.

Convergent with the emergent national black cultures in Trinidad and Tobago, the discourse of Indo-Trinidadian women's sexuality calls on a similar mythic time of diasporic "tradition" in its nationalist articulation of women. Emergent nationalisms of Indo-Trinidad in the late 1960s and early 1970s reappropriated the private sphere of women's sexuality as that which was "traditionally" Indian and corrupted by the West, while at the same time adopting/adapting to a more "modern" public identity for the proper (Hindu, middle-class) Indian woman. The colonial policing of Indo-Trinidadian women's sexuality emphasized invisibility. India itself was colonized later than the Caribbean and did not involve either mass importation of outside labor that displaced native and indigenous populations nor a vast system of exported labor. In colonial India, the public construction of women often entailed the vigorous inscription and enforcement of both gender and sexuality into the private, a move that would follow the indentured servants to Trinidad as diasporic "tradition." In this way, Indo-Trinidadian culture became the sign of excess and of disciplinary attention for subcontinental India.

As India was at least recognized as a country with a legitimate "culture," the relationship between the "English Woman" and "Indian Women" was regarded as comparable. Particularly in the Victorian period, "the angel in the house," who was nonetheless "gently" agitating for women's rights, often took up the cause of Indian women—those who were "locked" away in their households, the places that were too private to be civilized.⁸ Without any rights to public discourse—as the colonial state named and visualized Indian women—the gendering "tradition" of "ancient India" was named not just as anti-Western, but defined as a sort of primitive, early version of the family. The now often repeated treatment in colonial tracts of women as signs of a civilization's level of advancement played out repeatedly in the scripting of Indian women in the private sphere of the colonial imagination. Excessively policed by the legislative state, Indian women were rendered invisible by such texts even as they were made

public, or circulated, through the empire. Indian women were the subjects of legal regulation during the colonial period, both by colonial and Hindu law. Under the rubric of “colonial reform,” Indian women, from marriageable daughters to widows, were subject to what Mary E. John and Panaka Nair dub “colonial surveillance” (John and Nair 1998, 24). John and Nair’s introduction to *A Question of Silence?* disputes the distinction between colonial law and the supposedly more “flexible” system of non-state law or Hindu law for women before colonialism, pointing out that colonial law often cooperated with and continued patriarchal regulation of women’s sexual desire in the public sphere (25). Indian Women as “signs,” then, seem to be buried by both colonial and anti-colonial rhetoric as the subjects of private regulation, occluding the system of laws needed to manage that sexuality and set its gendered limits.⁹

Such legal, institutional, and cultural paradigms traveled to Trinidad with and on indentured servants’ bodies through imported Indian print culture and ongoing traffic between the two markets—that of Asia and that of the “New World.” This ideological traffic brings us to the brink of postcolonial national-sexual regulation with diasporic dimensions. The unruly bodies, particularly of lower-class women in both the Indian and African contexts, seem to point toward an emergent nationalism that would at once locate the “infection” of female sexualities with the West and the colonial—they are both the cause of the “illicit” desire and the impetus for the limits placed on that desire within national culture—the need for regulation. As Niranjana outlines, Trinidad’s East Indian population acted as fertile oppositional ground for India’s national campaign from the 1920s onward, with even Gandhi claiming that women were being forced (by the colonial system of indentured labor) into particularly untraditional, un-Indian, immoral sexual activity, like shifting or “reputed” marriages and prostitution (Niranjana 1998, 121). When East Indian women appear in the public discourse that locates women’s sexuality in the sphere of “tradition,” “family,” and the private, they dangerously overlap into/onto the field of public sexual regulation, both legally, as the objects of laws regarding prostitution, and culturally, as the now visible performers of sexual desire in a diasporic terrain. Both fields are literally associated with Afro-Caribbean or black women’s policed and public bodies. Here, the boundaries of both diasporic Indian “tradition” and of Trinidad and Tobago’s “nationness” are shown to be at stake when the

fields are crossed by Indo-Trinidadian women. The postcolonial state relies on multiply racialized configurations of the sign “Woman” and on that sign’s circulation to retain its national and diasporic-cultural boundaries and borders—or at least to attempt to hold those borders. Far from being “resolved,” it is clear that Partha Chatterjee’s “woman question” (Chatterjee 1993, 116) does not just eternally loop back on itself, but is both the underpinning of the postcolonial national project and a constant site of policing, a site of potential crisis that is far from fixed by the public and modern Indo-Trinidadian rhetoric of diasporic tradition with domestic respectability.¹⁰

Considering the recent flurry of scholarship on Indo-Caribbean gender in music and culture outlined above, the range of such work must be thought of as not just about the particular relationship between Indo- and Afro-identified Caribbean women, but among the variety of feminist approaches to recognition by the state. It is no surprise that, with its history of music as a form of state representation and intervention, chutney soca from Trinidad and Tobago becomes a site of, as critic Aisha Mohammed put it, “gender negotiations” (Mohammed 2007). Through forms of cultural representation, both creative and critical appraisals of the state need to consider the gendered politics of the postcolonial economies they trade on in order to legitimate their claims. The critical appeal of Indo-Trinidadian women performers enables us to pause in reading representation in competing and overlapping diasporic contexts, as a recourse to articulated grievance against the state.

Careless Driving/Comparative Feminisms

When Indo-Trinidadian women’s soca lyrics seek to tackle sexual violence within ethnic communities, they seek to perform the state’s failure to “protect” women from sexual violence in a postcolonial system that enacts and is built upon a punitive colonial discourse of indigenous women’s sexuality. This article reads soca performance as a performance of impossibility, where its grievance over sexual “injury” contests the state in a way that always performs its own failure to be redressed. In *Scenes of Subjection*, Saidiya Hartman articulates redress as a tactic rather than the goal of performing grievance, where “the inadequacy of the redressive action undertaken in everyday practices does not signal the failure of these practices but high-

lights the way in which pleasure or the counterinvestment in the body at stake here serves as a limited figure of social transformation” (Hartman 1997, 76). In Hartman’s conception of redress, grievance does not have to articulate subjects as authentic or as having essential origins or cultural forms (à la calypso as national and “black” in Trinidad). Instead, redress acts as a mode of performing grievance to the state that is particularly useful and retrievable by marginalized (here, Asian and black) women, challenging Brown’s strictly legal-national sense of the term, and perhaps expanding the range of grievances that can be addressed to the state.¹¹ Using redress as a performative strategy rather than as a fixed outcome includes the ambivalent, the both/and, and the failures of performance in its scope. This emphasis on impossibility also signifies a potential for visibility that momentarily interpolates the state’s conflicted discourses on sexuality and the narrative of diasporic “tradition” that informs the postcolonial moment for the East Indian community in Trinidad.

Grievance as a process for Indo-Trinidadians or ethnic “minorities” appealing to the Trinidadian state falls into the ambivalence that Brown also articulates: “In this way the right to make claims on the state is one reserved for ‘marked’ ethnic groups and minorities who are symbolically positioned outside the ‘national self’ even as they are included within the political state as citizens” (Brown 1995). In this “contestation over the power to define the cultural coordinates of the symbolic space of the nation,” it is important to note who is left out in Indo-Trinidadian appropriations of black cultural forms as part of a way to be legitimated by the state, to be made visible in a nation that both marks them as citizens and then denies them cultural citizenship by performing their ethnicity as other to a racial-cultural nationality (Munasighe 2001, 1–2). The fact that Indo-Trinidadian women participate in and perform soca culture in the public sphere without having direct access or reference to the state leaves Hartman’s definition of redress as the most salient option for exploring what kind of grievance such performances can level at the state. The question of audience, of who is taking in these cultural forms and how these forms are critically received, seems central to critics’ discussion of postcolonial women’s bodies and their importance to the functioning of a diasporic body of citizens in the public-cultural sphere. In making sexuality visible, these performances hold the potential to disrupt legislative and colonial discourses on postcolonial women’s bodies. But the

grievance articulated through these performances also offers redressive action that reinscribes the limiting state power over sexuality that they contest.

Coming into the public eye in 1987, just a year after the Sexual Offences Bill was passed, with the song “Pepper, Pepper,” Drupatee Ramgoonai launched her career on a platform of intra-ethnic sexual grievance (Saywack 1999, 4). Staging herself as an unhappy housewife, Drupatee—chutney-soca performer and Indo-Trinidadian woman, sang lyrics about spicing up her husband’s food for “revenge” (4). The immediate reaction from certain factions of the public Indian community was framed in terms of “rights”: as Saywack quotes, “No Indian woman has any right to sing Calypso” (4), or suggested that Indian women have no recourse to the national-public redress of sexual injury. It is here that we can pick up on Indo-women’s performances of chutney soca and their dual reception as signs of feminist grievance against the state and a challenge to diasporic histories of sexuality, visibility, and respectability. It is not just the literal sexual content that distinguishes Trinidadian soca as “Afro,” but the proximity of black women’s bodies to state discourses on sexuality. Black women’s sexuality is not only more visible, it is always already the means to public grievance because it is the more publicly traded cultural body. “Private” Indo-ethnic identity offers similar outlets for sexual expression but no public access to grievance on the national level. Chutney music is already erotic but supposedly authentically “Indian”—“Indian” as in imported from India or ethnically distinct. Thus the hybrid chutney soca is pitted against a binary of Indo vs. Afro, where performance practice is connected to ethnic ritual rather than to public social life—public as in national and racial. Of course, when Indo women do finally take the stage in chutney soca, it causes a very “public” outrage. Drupatee Ramgoonai became the center of this controversy, as documented by numerous critics (Puri, Saywack, Manuel, among others).

Drupatee’s performing body was then swiftly and articulately othered, using the existing paradigm of outer-national bodies which perform sexual “offense.” One critic turned her “vulgarity” into pathology, while another termed her “inauthentic and impure, a creolized/douglarized Indian woman” (Manuel 2000, 337; Puri 1997, 143). Drupatee’s body is thus verbally and ideologically regulated through the language of the state and the language of racial contamination, “douglar” being the (pejorative)

Trinidadian term for mixed-race identity. The largest controversy of “the Queen’s” career erupted the following year with the release of “Careless Driver,” or “Lick Down Me Nani”—a song that plays on both on sexuality and state responses to violence by staging a narrator seeking justice for a grandmother who was run over by a taxi, with the embedded pun on oral sex. Public critical responses sought to deny the “legitimacy” of the performance’s sexual grievance. As Shalini Puri points out, “the position that dismisses the political content of the song as trivial does so by casting the song as a party calypso whose form and context of consumption render any serious content impossible” (Puri 1997, 138). But in her commodification of grievance as her trademark, Drupatee’s reception reveals not shock, but immediate recognition in the language of cross-racial contamination—with Drupatee becoming less “pure,” more racialized, and hence more the subject of—and more subject to—the law. Where Puri, Mehta, and Niranjana see understandable possibility in Drupatee’s performance as a “witness” to violence (Puri 1997, 143), we can also question who Drupatee’s performative neighbors are in such an endeavor.

The controversy that erupted when “a nice Indian girl” performed in an Afro-identified sexual idiom (soca performance) and national culture (articulation of grievance) articulates how grievance is sublimated in an ethnic performance that challenges the “private” Indian identity and power structure of the family, which supposedly exists outside the reaches of the state (Mah 2000, 1). Grievance against the state and appeals to the state must be performed lyrically as intra-ethnic concerns between Indo-Trinidadian men and women, even as the genre of chutney soca denies such strict divisions and differences. The performance of grievance, however, and the form that grievance takes in Drupatee’s performances, is not strictly intra-ethnic; it is at the very least a hybrid form, both Indo- and Afro-Trinidadian, and at one level can be understood in terms of cultural appropriation. Drupatee’s lyrical performances and circulations seem like taboos to cross only when one can cross back over into a “private” ethnic sphere of protection (and limits) that the state cannot export to awaiting audiences in the diasporic and national cultural circulation of black women’s sexuality.

Blackness and black female sexuality open the national and diasporic space for Indo-Trinidadian women to articulate sexual grievance, but that grievance seems to be reinscribed intra-ethnically, as part of an appeal to

Indo “families” and gender relations. In its export as national product, the body of the Indo-Trinidadian woman performer seems to be either erased or written over with a sexuality marked by the presence of black women’s performance. Yet the export of Indo-Trinidadian women’s performances bears none of the weight of diasporic histories of black women’s bodies as sexual capital. An emphasis on the fear of miscegenation without an emphasis on the “fear” and regulation of black women’s sexuality comes at the expense of potentially redressive national alliances. Drupatee’s performances circulate in national and local public spheres as arguments for a reconfigured or displaced national space based on gender/sexuality, but they also uphold a racial-ethnic distinction of rights. Whereas Puri sees the possibility for progressive practices of cultural hybridity against a racial construction of sexuality, black women’s bodies are left as the object of critics’ charges of “vulgar music, sex and alcohol” (Mah 2000, 1). We might then read Indo-Trinidadian women as performing grievance against India as the diasporic model rather than against Trinidad, against “private” ethnic identity and another diasporic national idiom (India), part of a postcolonial genealogy of gender and sexuality.

Following Gayatri Gopinath’s compelling question about diasporic soundscapes in *Impossible Desires*, this article has mapped how soca “produce[s] distinct social spaces that offer highly particular modes of gendered and sexualized sociability, pleasure, and desire,” as well as regulation (Gopinath 2005, 57). If Afro-Caribbean culture as a “thing” can leave Drupatee open to performing these socially conscious national moments whereas Indian music or culture as a thing is denied national sovereign access to grievance, whose grievances is the performance of chutney soca attempting to redress? This essay will now turn to another moment with Drupatee, cast as a potential Indo-Trinidadian feminist hero, appropriating the soca performance space with a different, stylized Indian femininity in order to perform a slight, “nonpolitical” appeal to the state, in “Real Unity” with Machel Montano. This song is “aiming to assemble onstage stars who embodied the diversity present in his imagined united nation,” ethnomusicologist Jocelyn Guillbault argues (Guillbault 2000, 223), staging cultural unity in Indo-Afro music and the nation. “Real Unity,” based on a popular Bollywood piece converted with a soca rhythm and sung by Montano, an Afro-Trinidadian, harkens lyrically back to a tradition of black men singing about Indian women in soca, calypso, and chutney soca, where

Indian food acts as the “symbols for Indian women’s sexuality” (Johnson 2002, 1). The song was banned from Indo-Trinidadian (privately owned) radio for the line, “Nothing wrong with wining on an Indian gyul.” This kind of sexual exchange—articulating a lack of grievance as there is “nothing wrong” with this cross-contact between black men and Indian women—is nothing new. What is new is the duet, the presence of Drupatee herself performing the possible “threat” of miscegenation and hybridity, rather than the separate but equal grievance-rights model.

Starting with several bars of Montano singing in a slow Hindi, “Real Unity” quickly shifts into a driving soca beat with the singer’s announcement, in English, “This one is about uniting the nation!” Montano’s declaration immediately positions the song in the political sphere, calling on “the nation” as a coherent, and politically promising, entity. The fact that he registers cultural and ethnic flexibility—singing in both Hindi and English—and hails the song into public-national significance reinforces the mobility of Afro-Caribbean masculinity as the most important representation and spokesperson for acts of (even dougla) citizenship. Then he exclaims: “Why can’t we all get along? Why we fuss and fight?,” echoing liberal political models where the tensions between racial or other factions are expressed in terms of interpersonal dynamics, setting the audience up for the sexual context of the rest of the song. Clearly, the addressed “we” refers back to the “nation” Montano wishes to “unite,” but it is also the play between the performers themselves, Montano and Drupatee, as Afro and Indo representatives. The song continues with Drupatee’s voice singing in a high soprano Hindi and Montano picking up on his “Nothing wrong with wining on an Indian girl” lyric, expanding that to a list of the other ethnic presences in Trinidad: he repeats the line with the difference of “Chinese” and “African,” instead of “Indian.” This variety of “right” women suggests inter-ethnic alliance at the level of object, though not exactly of subjectivity. More importantly, that list of women being “wined” on by the Afro-masculine subject does little to displace the model of state citizenship already in place in Trinidad, despite Drupatee’s lyrical presence.

But in the vein of ethics that Montano suggests, there could be “nothing wrong” with representing Indo-Caribbean women within the sphere of public sexuality. My point here is not to lament the sexual objectification of women, but to suggest that “Real Unity,” as a model of grievance against a

state largely embroiled in “separate but equal” politics, may not in fact challenge the nation at its discursive core. The song was, by all accounts, “hugely popular,” combining the “star” power of Drupatee and the crossover edginess of up-and-coming Montano (Niranjana 2006, 98). Read as a call for “integration” or even “douglarisation,” the song is scandalous yet all too predictable in staging the tensions between Afro and Indo politics as a question of sexuality (100–01). As the debate over Drupatee’s performance of “Lick Down Me Nani” displayed, the articulated fear of Indo women occupying public performative space was that they might be contaminated by the “vice” of Afro culture (Puri 2004, 251). The fear of miscegenation on a literal and representational level is perhaps the offense most often cited against Drupatee, and always suggests the danger of Indo-Trinidadian women becoming linked to the overexposed sexuality of Afro-Caribbean women. A “Dougl Poetics,” although it opens up much for Indo-women trying to enter into public discourse, seems culturally to be couched in the very terms of the state—heterosexualization and family: “Everybody looking at we/How we wining in ah unity/Is Mr. Machel with Drupatee/Movin like ah big family/And that is real unity.”¹² Cast as the new “united” family unit, douglarization seems to offer (Indo) women the possibility of public agency only in the field of (hetero)sexuality. “Wining” becomes the “right” kind of dougl politics for Indo-women, appealing to a postcolonial state that defines itself via sexual regulation. If there’s “nothing wrong” with using sexuality as a metaphor for national practice, what is “right” about it for the Afro-Caribbean women who are most subject to national and diasporic legislation surrounding sexuality?

As much as the song productively threatens a powerful ethnic-racial slip, Drupatee and Montano’s duet and its critical reception seem to favor proximity while reinforcing difference. In the service of “real unity,” Drupatee positions herself as growing up with “Afro brothers,” so that even her claim to (almost authentic) cultural appropriation is through a line of Afro masculinity. This positioning obscures her performative and historical debt to black women and her performative alliances with them, as well as a national alliance among women to register grievance against the state, again erasing the state as a place of racialized sexual and gender violence. Even the continued split between “African” and “Indian” retains the gender-sexual properties assigned to it in early calypso: “On the track Drupatee’s voice is high-pitched, sweet, feminine—the style very East

Indian. Montano's is rough, deep, low, male, very African. The contrast is stark and sweetly sensual" (John 2000, 1). In other words, sexualization still happens at the site of hybridization—the contrast or line between race and ethnicity is “stark” and discernible. What mixing, if any, is going on here? The two voices and bodies' marked difference is what becomes sexy—their heterosexual coming together. Take again this description of the recording from an international retail site: “‘Real Unity’ is beautiful and inspiring. It is a combination of timeless melodies—the rhythm of soca and the melody of chutney. The relentless power chords of soca artist Machel Montano and the soft tones of chutney singer Drupatee Ramgoonai have been combined to produce this Carnival 2000 hit” (eCaroh). In order to masculinize the African (nation) and feminize the Indian (culture), the distinct gender roles are necessary to this message of “integration.” The “hybrid” becomes normalized here through music, Trinidadian national form, as nothing “more” than heterosexual coupling; cultures will remain set and distinct, and will reinforce the state's (patriarchal) interest in discrete racial-ethnic divisions, upholding Indo-Trinidadian Hindu “tradition” and the sexualization of non-“pure” Indo women. As Puri notes, “The stereotypical distinctions that Killer [an Afro-Trinidadian male soca performer] makes between the sexuality of Indian women and that of creolized Indian women, for example, coincide with the distinction the Indo-Trinidadian orthodoxy makes” (Puri 1997, 127).

Drupatee, moreover, to some degree participates in the censoring of her own gender-sexual redress or grievance: “Her last word on real unity, given after some persuasion because she was reluctant to say anything that would be interpreted as a political statement, was: ‘Africans and Indians should give themselves a chance. This is our country called Trinidad and Tobago, with different ethnic backgrounds. They should give themselves a chance to come together’” (John 2000, 1). Drupatee, talking specifically about her nuclear ethnic family and motherhood in this interview, seems like the most innocuous version of mixed nationality; engaging in tradition, she is portrayed in the interview as someone with a flare for the other, the exotic—dabbling in the performance, food, and even political grievance of other idioms only to return to a national construction of marked and visible “difference” (John 2000, 1). Between loving “Latin dance,” eating Chinese food, and performing soca as a practice of sexual grievance, she absents herself from ethnic identity altogether. When she says “they” should come

together, she infers her own displacement in the national scene of contact. So soca becomes the new hybrid and national form where “real unity” happens at the moment that “he hear trinbago is De Land of soca.” Douglas, “physically” mixed-ethnic/racial bodies, are, as Puri states, a “disallowed identity” in this performance, even if the mixed form of soca is not (Puri 2004, 191). The critique of Drupatee’s performances is not just that she is “mixing” with Afro culture but that she is becoming—or performing in the space of—the Afro-Trinidadian woman subject; when she is singing, she is aligning herself with the desire of black men, yes, but also with the performative bodies of black women. Black women must be rendered invisible in this exchange even as they are the carriers of national form and grievance in their reproduction and regulation as well as in their exportation as signs of the nation.

But when Indo women participate in competitions and in fact trade on Afro women as performers, they are written out of the script in the sexual circulation and commodification of “the nation” through diasporic musical distribution. Freed from the burden of national representation, these East Indian women’s performances carry little burden for the state abroad even as they use black women’s performative access to the public to articulate grievances within the borders of the state. If anything, they become more a tradition of Carnival in the state-sponsored “preservation” mode, rather than being associated with wine and jam sexual displays. Black women are potentially erased in order for redress of Indo-Trinidadian women to happen, to give them access to visibility in the public sphere even as they can beat a retreat to the “privacy” of Indo-ethnic tradition. Hybridity, douglaness, and unity happen through the employment of black women’s specific vectors of visibility.

Although I usually find myself on the side of “hybridity” as the undoing of colonial hegemony through repetition of “identity effects” with a difference (Bhabha 1994, 34), I see in certain celebratory employments of the hybrid a fetishization of the mixed body and its genealogies of heterosexual intimacies and relations of power that, in this instance, stand in harsh proximity to histories of representational strategy and effects.¹³ Made hypervisible as speaking, singing, and performing sexual agents, black women open up the site of articulated state regulation, a relationship to sexuality that is always mediated due to a history of chattel slavery. It is this trope of hypervisibility with access to the state that Indo women (and Drupatee herself) perform in

chutney soca's reception. Drupatee acts as an assimilated rather than a hybrid artist (Guilbault 2000, 443); subsumed within national performance, she articulates and performs national grievance without ideological or representational responsibility outside of the state.

It seems important to return to Wendy Brown's wariness of conflicting interests in the process of grievance here. Part of the problem of intersectionality and recognition of the rights of "different" groups, Brown argues, is the inability to see, maintain, and reckon with the potential for those rights to conflict with one another, to contest one another, to undo one another. Expanding her understanding of grievance beyond a strictly legal context, I would ask if perhaps Brown's critique holds here: where does the cultural appropriation and reworking of black women's performative culture by Indo women for expressing grievance to the state place or displace black women subjects of that same state? Because of music's nonrepresentational status, its ability to register multiple histories and valances as well as messages at the same time, to carry something other than the literal and lyrical to its audience, I share with Puri and Niranjana an understanding of music as a potentially redressive form of grievance for a postcolonial nation-in-crisis. But using Drupatee as our model, and thinking about the complicated diasporic export of Trinidadian music-as-cultural-national-form outside of the space of the nation, makes such a progressive reading, or even a cautiously feminist one, difficult. In erasing physical, legal, ideological, historical, cultural, and performative contact between Indo- and Afro-Trinidadian women, the possibilities for sexual "redress" are once again relegated to the "private" ethnic space of gender, or to a public space of policed heterosexuality, rather than implicating the state as a site of sex-gender construction, regulation, and maintenance. Black women's bodies become those that are taken up in form but not made visible as subjects, taken on and off without their own potential for redress.

It is not that I want to foreclose the possibility of these performances cropping up as potentially resistant responses during the drafting and passing of the Sexual Offences Bill, nor would I want to suggest that the articulation of a diasporic sexual grievance or any sexual grievance in the public national sphere and in exported cultural form is a particularly "bad" thing. But I am interested in the practice of that articulation and how possibilities for Indo-Trinidadian women are articulated by foreclosing those possibilities for Afro-Trinidadian women. My skepticism is not of

Indo-Trinidadian women and their performances, but of the critical reception of their increasing visibility in the Trinidadian national and diasporic public sphere. These culture-making audiences invest in reaffirming the separation of the state and sexuality/gender, thereby leaving the state and its diasporic circulation for race, and sexuality for “private” consumption and articulation. The persistence of limiting national models of sexuality within the very articulation of potentially redressive diasporic performances demonstrates the continued and powerful presence of both Asian and African genealogies of colonialism and their contemporary circulation via global capital in determining the possibilities for postcolonial women’s sexualities and transnational feminist criticism.

NOTES

1. I would like to thank the *Meridians* staff, the two anonymous readers of my article, Miranda Outman-Kramer, Jenny Sharpe, and Emily Russell for their invaluable help with this essay.
2. Peter Manuel cites an opinion piece in *The Guardian* (Manuel 2000, 334).
3. “The 1970s made chutney ready for soca as it made soca ready for chutney. But social life in Afro-Creole Trinidad is a stage, whereas for Indians, who tended to be private, defensive, to some, ‘clannish,’ the idea took some getting used to. This was heightened by the fact that, unlike calypsonians, many chutney singers are women who are even more enjoined to public modesty in [competitions] held here. Many contestants performed calypso-type Indian songs. But it was the weekend chutney shows with their wild and almost orgiastic atmosphere, a cross between calypso tent and Carnival fete, that groomed Indian singers for the public stage.
Indian music had grown up in the large weddings which were the main social functions for social and economic reasons; these were now in decline and the gap was filled by a more public, more commercial function—the chutney shows” (Johnson n.d.).
4. Bakhtin was of course referring to the “carnival” in the English Middle Ages and Renaissance, though his theory of the phenomenon has circulated through Caribbean thought for some time.
5. This alignment of black women’s public performing bodies as “vulgar” is reflected upon frequently in discussions of Jamaican dancehall performance as well. See Cooper 1993.
6. For a reading of the “biopolitics” of black music that views the emphasis on the body not as antithetical to politics, but as a politics of, in Paul Gilroy’s view, a dangerous reinscription of racial particularity, see his chapter, “‘After the Love Has Gone’: *Biopolitics* and the Decay of the Black Public Sphere,” in Gilroy 2000.

7. Cooper's argument has generated a body of responsive criticism. Critics of her argument include gay and women's rights advocates (some of whose critiques of dancehall culture and slackness predate Cooper's 1993 book), as well as those who seek to extend Cooper's critique and call attention to her aesthetic analysis of genre (while often still critiquing dancehall's gendered possibilities). See Chin 1999; Stolzoff 2000; Shaw 2005; Alexandre 2006; Barnes 2006; Hope 2006; Sharpe and Pinto 2006; Stanley-Niaah 2006; Pinnock 2007; and Noble 2008.
8. One could read Antoinette Burton's foundational study of the relationship between British feminism and representations of Indian women for a fuller discussion of this characterization (Burton 1994).
9. Very recent years have brought a small but significant burst in scholarship on Indo-Caribbean women's sexuality, much of it focused on analyses of cultural texts, including Puri 1997 and Niranjana 1998, as well as Mehta 2004. This neglected diasporic contribution to the Caribbean's history and present-day makeup continues the trend of linking transnationalism with sexuality in Caribbean feminist scholarship, and complicating the racial-ethnic landscape that has particularly characterized Anglophone Caribbean scholarship. If not the "beached whale" of Caribbean sexuality studies (as Hortense Spillers famously remarked of African American women and sexuality studies [Spillers 1992, 73]), Indo-Caribbean women's sexuality is more like the elephant in the room, caught in the tension between India's "woman question" and the overwhelming history of black women's overexposure with regard to sexuality. This research has begun to address the local silence concerning Indo-Caribbean women's gender and sexual identities that had been erased in much previous scholarship on the Caribbean, which assumed an Afro-centric perspective.
10. See also Puri 2003 and Edmondson 2003 for calls to reconsider women's bodies and public performance in particular outside of binding paradigms of racial, national, and sexual respectability.
11. I am using a theory dedicated to the black Atlantic chattel-slavery system because Indo-Trinidadian women's soca performance relies on black women's performance even if the performing bodies are not black; redress is the space that black women's performance specifically opens up for the articulation of sexual grievance as a performative strategy.
12. Like Puri, Brinda Mehta critiques the Afrocentric focus of Caribbean feminism by suggesting douglaness, hybridity, and mobility as the particular "mix" that considering Indo-women's sexuality can bring to the research table.
13. I place Bhabha's argument (Bhabha 1994) alongside the possibilities set out by Bakhtin 1981, Young 1995, Brody 1998, and others.

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