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Public Spectacles: Caribbean Women and the Politics of Public Performance

Belinda Edmondson

The race rises as its women rise. They are the true standard of its elevation. We are trying to produce cultured men without asking ourselves where they are to find cultured wives. We forget that cultured families constitute a cultured race and that a cultured race is an equal race. The elevation of [black] women to equality with [their] white counterparts is the Condition Sine Qua Non of the elevation of the Negro race.

—Editor Robert Love, Jamaica Advocate, 1895

The obscenities, the bawdy language and the gestures of the women in the street have been pushed to a degree of wantonness which cannot be surpassed and which must not be tolerated. . . . The growing generation of young girls will become the curse of the country if these yearly saturnalia are allowed to continue.

—Port of Spain Gazette, 1884

I begin this essay with two quotations describing nineteenth-century women because they contain the central ideas and images that frame my argument about the contradictory ideologies surrounding contemporary women’s performance in the Caribbean public sphere. The visions of black women captured above encapsulate the warring images of black femininity at the center of the debate over the place of black women in the nineteenth-century Caribbean public, images that affected, and continue to affect,
Caribbean women of all ethnicities into the twenty-first century. On the one hand, black women are represented as icons of respectability, virtuous women who must be properly educated and acculturated in order to take their place as symbols of national progress. This is the black nationalist ideal. On the other hand, black women are represented as the antiwoman, pathological and lascivious viragos who undermine the nationalist project. This is the historical stereotype, the nationalist nightmare against which the ideal labors. Both images spring from representations of women in popular culture rituals such as carnival, or through women’s civic organizations and other vehicles of uplift.

In the Caribbean certain popular culture rituals performed by women constitute a kind of ideological “work” that both reflects and furthers the struggles for power among the various ethnicities and classes in the region. It is therefore critical that any discussion of contemporary Caribbean women in popular culture be historicized. The origins and development of Caribbean discourse on “public women” illustrate the historical nature of state and class interests in women’s behavior in the public arena of the street, in the “low-brow” arena of the dancehalls and the carnivals, and in the “middle-brow” venue of the beauty pageant stages. A historical lens reveals that the traditional attitude of the respectable and aspiring-respectable classes toward (usually black) women in the public sphere has been to perceive these performances as indices of black women’s innate degeneracy, a view that, I argue, has been turned on its head in the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries as modernity and cultural progress have been linked to respectable women moving into the public sphere.

My main argument centers around the different meanings accorded to different kinds of female public “performances,” a term I use to describe women’s popular culture rituals and behaviors in the public sphere. In that “performance” suggests a physical gesture made with a physical body for a passive viewing audience, it is a particularly apt term for my purposes here. “Performance” implies agency, an act meant to do particular kinds of work or make particular kinds of statements. The viewing of women’s bodies in public, as opposed to the domestic space of the home, has always been framed in overtly political terms in the West (and, as far as I can tell, in the East as well). It is a truism of feminist theory that if the domestic space has traditionally been marked as innately and appropriately feminine, then the public space is masculine, such that any crossing of the boundaries by women from private to public space must be interrogated and assessed as either a proper intervention that preserves the woman’s femininity, or a social violation that masculinizes or otherwise pathologizes her.

My argument hinges on the idea that in the Caribbean, with its history of slavery and indentureship, and the corollary pathologizing of black and other nonwhite women
as nonwomen or nonsubjects, the black, brown, and Asian constituencies’ desire for a publicly acknowledged “respectable” femininity is both overtly and covertly tied to the desire for social mobility and political or economic advancement. In that public and intellectual discourse tended, and still tends, to focus on blackness as an index of the region’s progress, I maintain that the issues surrounding black women’s performances tend to shape the content of the discussion about nonblack women’s performances. My analysis distinguishes between the two basic categories of female popular culture performance, both of which I argue are politically determined: the transgressive, “vulgar” spectacle¹ associated with atavistic racial recidivism or, depending on the ethnic constituency, with taboo race-mixing, both of which are perceived as a backward step for nationalist ambitions; and the socially approved, “decorous” spectacle that does the work of social uplift and thereby furthers national desires for political autonomy or socioeconomic progress.

A discussion of the politics of women’s public performance in popular culture might seem beside the point since Caribbean women, particularly black Caribbean women, continue to move into positions of power and authority with regularity; indeed, former Dominican prime minister Eugenia Charles was the first female leader of the Americas. With this kind of political progress, one might argue, Why focus on the apparently less meaningful details of women’s participation in calypso contests, beauty pageants, and other middle- or low-brow cultural forms as if these constituted the sole media for women in the public sphere?

The apparent paradox of having relatively numerous Asian female leaders command societies where large numbers of women still are bound to the home, the farm or other traditionally female spaces begins to answer the question. In other words, political progress, as measured by the number of female leaders, politicians, corporate executives, or other professionals, does not tell the whole story. The more relevant question might then be, What is the impact, if any, of the one public sphere of women—the popular, the “fun,” the low-brow—on the other? My point is that the perceptions of one are historically bound up in the other.

The first quotation that begins this essay, black Jamaican editor Robert Love’s exhortation to “raise” black women up via education so that they can become the cultured wives of cultured black men, is intensely nationalist in spirit, if problematic to our twenty-first-century views of the role of women in society. What is important to us here is his vision of black women as central to the black nationalist agenda; at the close of the nineteenth century, with the rise of an educated black middle class in the still-colonized anglophone Caribbean, there was much public debate about the possibility of future black rule of the islands. Much of the debate among English intellectuals and leaders centered on the “fitness” of black people—black men—to rule, and as black professional men sought to be recognized as civilized and therefore capable of self-rule, their focus—as well as the focus of white Englishmen—turned to their women. Black male leadership qualities were judged by the ability of black men to “rule” their women, and in this respect they were found sadly wanting. As nineteenth-century Oxford historian Anthony Froude put it, “If black suffrage is to be the rule in Jamaica, I would take it away from the men and give it to the superior sex. . . . They would make a tolerable nation of black amazons, and the babies would not be offered to Jumbi.” Froude’s and other English male travelers’ supposed admiration for the self-sufficiency of black women cannot be taken at face value, however, since the purpose of these observations was really to point out the insufficiencies of black men. Their observations of black Caribbean women, when not a comparison with the men, were far more critical: black working class women were usually described as loud, lewd, and not respectable because they were too strong to be “protected” by black men and also because they were always “in the street.” In Trinidad in particular, black women were constantly compared to the “delicate”—and less publicly visible—East Indian women.

These English perceptions of the pathological masculinity of black Caribbean women, highlighted against other racialized femininities such as those of white and Asian women, were—and arguably still are—the basis for black (and later, Indo-Carib-

3. In his travelogue, nineteenth-century English writer Charles Kingsley (of Barbadian descent) makes the following observations of the public behavior of black and Indian women at the races in Trinidad: “The Negresses, I am sorry to say, forgot themselves, kicked up their legs, shouted to bystanders, and were altogether indecent. The Hindoo [sic] women, though showing much more of their limbs than the Negresses, kept them so gracefully together, drew their veils around their heads, and sat coyly, half frightened, half amused, to the delight of their ‘papas,’ or husbands.” At Last: A Christmas in the West Indies, volume 2 (New York: Harper, 1871), 262. I am grateful to Faith Smith, from whom I first discovered Kingsley’s comments on black and Indian women, in her paper “Gentlemen and Jamettes: Gender and Creole Nationalism in Nineteenth-Century Trinidad” (Caribbean Studies Association conference, Panama City, Panama, 24–28 May 1999).
bean) nationalists to police the public images of their women, and this policing meant scrutinizing their public behavior. The second quotation that begins this essay, taken from an 1884 editorial in the Trinidadian newspaper the Port of Spain Gazette, refers to the “yearly saturnalia” of carnival, and exhorts the respectable classes not to tolerate the “wantonness” of the young girls, known as “jamettes,” who participated in it.

The term “jamette” refers to black women in nineteenth-century urban Trinidad, black women who were associated with the barracks yards, gangs, and the streets. (Originally the term refers to female stick fighters; stick fighting is considered a male sport.) These disreputable women, these thorns in the sides of lawmakers and the respectable classes, were also active as “chanterelles,” or calypso singers, and their “carisos,” songs, were habitually castigated as being lewd and erotic, and for allegedly instigating obscene dancing.

Clearly the criticisms levied by both English travel writers and black newspaper editors at the public behavior of black Caribbean women were taken from their observations of women specifically of the working class or peasantry. Yet these images circumscribed the behavior of all black women, across class lines. Given the historical stereotypes of black women perpetuated under slavery, it is not surprising, then, that members of the relatively small emergent black middle class, barely a generation out of slavery at the end of the nineteenth century, should feel the need to distance middle class black women from these images in order to make social and political progress.

Since respectable middle class black women could not create physical differences between themselves and working class women—to the nonblack observer, though, black was simply black—it became imperative to create notable and distinct differences in habit, speech, and style. This essentially political need to establish difference is, I believe, at the root of modern anxiety about black women’s performances in the public sphere, an anxiety that requires “decorous spectacles” of black womanhood as its antidote. If black working class women have heretofore defined black womanhood, then now, in the postcolonial era of globalization and “positive” indigenous symbols, the old need to identify different classes of black women is indistinguishable from the modern need for middle class women to participate equally with working class women in the public sphere, with parallel yet distinct rituals that are at once authentically Caribbean and identifiably modern.

I submit that, in the Caribbean, modernity is associated with whiteness, in the sense that it represents the First World, a technologically advanced and therefore supposedly superior culture. The symbolic positioning of mixed-race, or “brown,” women provides some insights into how the nationalist project has attempted to fuse the indigenous and “primitive” with visions for national progress in the postindependence era.
If on the one hand black women’s public performances in carnival and in general were decried as shameful images that kept the nation from being viewed and from viewing itself as civilized and therefore worthy of political equality, on the other hand English travel writers displayed an undercurrent of consistent admiration for brown women’s physical appeal in carnival and other public cultural rituals. The seemingly more benevolent images of brown women displayed in the pages of English travel narratives—always with an emphasis on physical beauty—laid the groundwork for the different treatment accorded brown women in the public sphere today. In the contemporary Caribbean, images of brown women are ubiquitous: they adorn tourism posters and newspaper advertisements for glamorous items such as jewelry, and are habitual winners of the region’s innumerable beauty contests (except in the hispanophone Caribbean).

In her fascinating study of brown (mulata) women and Cuban nationalism, Vera Kutzinski notes that the images of brown women were central to the construction of Cuban nationalist discourse in the nineteenth century. Brown women, as symbols of the intertwining of the two dominant ethnic groups, European and African, were seen to be peculiarly apt images of Cuba’s revolutionary *mestizaje*, or mixed, vision of itself, far more so than brown men. Even today, one of the ways in which communist Cuba is advertised in Europe and Canada is through the images of its brown women, whose bodies are used to showcase the *carnavale*, the exciting nightlife, and, as some have suggested, the unofficial sex trade. Since the traditional race-mixing image was the combination of the nonwhite woman and the white man, the brown woman’s body was overtly sexualized as the means by which racial progress, or racial devolution (depending on the political viewpoint), came about. Consequently, there appear to be far more references to brown women than to brown men in the literature of the nineteenth century. The values accorded to black, brown, Asian, and white women’s bodies in Caribbean societies have

4. Read, for example, the following description of the John Canoe parade (an African-derived public masquerade, somewhat similar to carnival) in early-nineteenth-century Jamaica: “But the beautiful part of the exhibition was the Set Girls. They danced along the streets, in bands from fifteen to thirteen. There were brown sets, and black sets, and sets of all intermediate gradations of colour. . . . I had never seen more beautiful creatures than there were among the brown sets—clear olive complexions, and fine faces, elegant carriages, splendid figures—full, plump, magnificent.” Michael Scott, *Tom Cringle’s Log* (1821; reprint, London: Dent, 1969). I was drawn to this description of the Set Girls in Pamela Franco’s work, “Dressing Up and Looking Good: Afro-Creole Female Maskers in Trinidad Carnival,” *African Arts* 31, no. 2 (spring 1998): 62–67.


thus remained more or less constant for over a century. These values are by no means equal, nor do they necessarily reflect the multicultural utopia that the states promote. In many—if not all—of the Caribbean societies where the black population is a plurality or a majority, there seems to be an almost visceral desire both to emphasize their multicultural nature and to deemphasize their blackness, at least where middle- or high-brow culture is concerned. The Spanish-speaking Caribbean nations are notorious for their undercount of the black population, notably because much of it does not identify itself as black on the census. And in English-speaking nations like Jamaica, where the population is 90 percent black, the brown and nonblack members of society are featured so prominently in public spaces like the national newspaper, beauty contests, and tourism posters as to reflect a more ethnically diverse population than is actually the case. One might assume that, in this context, the obsession with brownness is linked to the politics of the dominant brown or white elites of the region, who would clearly have reasons for promoting this particular vision of the nation. But not so. The black populations of the Caribbean also have a concerted interest in promoting the image of the brown nation, it seems. The most vociferous supporters of the brown-identified beauty contests are the heavily black audience members.

Moreover, as has been noted more than once, Jamaica’s famed dancehall queen is a brown woman, whose decade-long reign is unheard-of in a contest where the queens do not usually last longer than a few months and whose tenure is usually determined by the approval of the black working class.⁷ Despite the overwhelming disapproval expressed by the respectable classes toward female dancehall participants, Queen Carlene is feted in the newspapers and even made an appearance in a recent tourist-oriented video.⁸ Thus the “vulgar” spectacle of black working class dancehall women dancing obscenely in lewd outfits is transformed into “decorous” spectacle when performed by eroticized brown women. The dancehall moves of black working class women, descendants of the nineteenth-century jamettes, can therefore mean something entirely different, depending on who is performing them, and to what purpose. Part of the problem of female public performance is that there are different registers of signification accorded to different racial types, even as the society continues to underplay race and overplay class as the criteria by which such distinctions are made.

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⁷. For a more detailed discussion of the racial politics of brown women, popular culture, and dancehall queens in Jamaica, see my essay “Trinidad Romance,” Caribbean Romances (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1999).

The brown ideal for Jamaica and other Caribbean societies is nowhere more apparent than in its beauty pageants, where brown women have predominated. Beauty pageants in the Caribbean are something of a regional obsession. As a mostly state-approved form of female spectacle, pageants are particularly useful in any discussion of the politics of femininity and public performance in the Caribbean. A study in contradiction, they function as low-brow—or perhaps more accurately, middle-brow—popular entertainment, featuring the physical charms of middle class women of apparently high-brow tastes, who then are used as national icons and spokeswomen at nationalist-tinged events.

Interestingly, Jamaica’s desire to be represented as a brown nation has not always meant a de facto flight from blackness or an alignment with elite white interests. One of the more bizarre moments in the history of beauty pageants occurred in Jamaica in 1986 when, amidst a sea of brown contestants, Lisa Mahfood, a white upper class Jamaican of Middle Eastern descent, won the Miss Jamaica title and was stoned off the stage by the outraged black audience. The violent public rejection coincided with the increasing unpopularity of the Jamaica Labour Party, the capitalist-oriented party in power at the time, a party headed by the then prime minister Edward Seaga, himself of Middle Eastern descent. Moreover, the government was publicly aligned with American political and business interests on the island. Quite possibly Lisa Mahfood’s connections to the business community and her membership in the white merchant community (an important distinction in the types of whiteness on the island), were the main reasons why the partisan crowd rejected her victory, feeling it to be part of a larger political “fix.”

However, at a time when the increasingly corporate nature of beauty pageants demanded that all the contestants have sponsors from the business community, and at a time when the contests were (and still are) fixated on picking a winner who was perceived to have a better chance of going on to win a more internationally recognized title such as Miss World or Miss Universe, Lisa Mahfood’s connections to the business community were not at all unusual. The other white beauty queen of note, Cindy Breakespeare, who became Miss Jamaica 1976 and later Miss World, also came with corporate sponsorship and was from an elite white family. However, unlike Mahfood, Breakespeare was a wildly popular queen: this at a time when Jamaica had reached the

apotheosis of its black consciousness movement, with a socialist government in power, black nationalist figures such as Marcus Garvey iconized as national heroes, government ministers eschewing Western business suits in favor of the cariba jackets, or “guayaberas” (which are indigenous to the region), and the rise of reggae, previously scorned by the respectable classes as black ghetto music, to national and international acclaim. Why the difference?

Perhaps the answer is that Breakespeare, though white, was perceived to be a part of the new cultural order, a woman who embraced “roots,” or popular Jamaican culture, and who had a public relationship with Jamaica’s (inter)national black working class icon, the reggae superstar Bob Marley. It is not merely race alone, then, that determines the meaning of the beauty queen’s appeal but also whether or not she is seen to represent the interests of the country at large. In the postindependence years, with the increasing acceptance of the postcolonial philosophy that indigenous Caribbean culture is as good as the “superior” cultures of Europe and the United States, and that a showcasing of state-sanctioned totems of Caribbean culture is in fact the very sign of modernity, beauty queens who were not born in the region or who could not sufficiently perform Caribbeanness by using a local accent or by identifying key local items were publicly scorned and ridiculed. Witness, for instance, the lyrics to the calypso hit “Miss Barbados” (1985) by calypsonian Mighty Gabby:

[For the beauty queen crown]
It’s big prizes they offer
Jewelry and trips galore
Things they never give calypso
The beauty queen
Will get a limousine
...  

When they announce this Caucasian as the winner
If you hear the boos that night
Some say she get it because she white
But they didn’t know
That she wasn’t Bajan at all,
And when they find out the truth
They hold down they head and bawl.

[Chorus]
Miss Barbados never hear ’bout ackee tree!
Miss Barbados never hear ’bout Sir Gary
or even me
Miss Barbados never hear ’bout bul-jol and ackee, so
when she get she Bajan citizenship, lemme know!
Miss Barbados, she don't know 'bout cassava
Miss Barbados, I don't want she portrayin’ us.

The framing of this critique of the white Canadian-born Miss Barbados is particularly noteworthy for the contrast it offers between the pampered pageant winners, showered with expensive gifts, and the calypsonians, who are almost exclusively black, male, and working class.¹⁰ The implied meaning behind the contrast suggests that calypsonians, as popular and more “authentic” representatives of Barbadian/Caribbean culture, are being unfairly treated by the establishment in favor of an inauthentic foreign white woman who is supposed to perform the all-important task of representing Barbados to the world even as she is unable to identify key items of “Bajanness”: ackee, bul-jol, and cassava, which are vegetable dishes indigenous to the region; Sir Garfield Sobers (“Sir Gary”), the famous Barbadian cricketer and regional icon of black Caribbean respectability and nationalism; or even the calypsonian Mighty Gabby, himself a cornerstone of Barbadian popular culture. The result is that the beauty queen does not fulfill the requirements of nationalism that are intrinsic to this particular form of decorous female performance, hence the calypsonian’s pronouncement, “I don’t want she portrayin’ us.”

Despite popular black outcry, the white winners of the Miss Barbados and Miss Jamaica contests were clearly the choices of the business establishment, which saw them as appropriate models of Caribbeanness to showcase to the world, if not to the majorities in their own societies. Times have changed, and the increasingly vociferous nature of public protests of inauthentic representatives of culture have dovetailed with the increasing number of black women entering and placing at the top of regional beauty contests. Notably, there has also been a significant number of black women—dark-skinned black women—who in recent years have won such major First World titles as Miss America, Miss Italy, and, twice in a row, Miss Universe. It is no coincidence either, I think, that the more recent Miss World and Miss Universe pageants have been held in developing countries: India, Namibia, South Africa, Trinidad and Tobago, to name a few. Whether or not the fact that the global beauty industry is now apparently recognizing black beauty will change the nature of the class and racial politics in Caribbean beauty pageants remains to be seen. However, given the intimate relationship between inter-
national beauty pageants and American corporate finance, it may be closer the mark to suggest that it is not racial progress per se that is changing the face of pageant winners but rather the strategic move to open Third World markets to First World business by embracing Third World nationalist symbols.

**Asian Caribbean Women and the Politics of Public Performance**

It should not be assumed, however, that beauty contests are considered a vehicle for social mobility and social visibility by all ethnicities of the Caribbean. As Natasha Barnes notes, though the first woman of color to win the Miss Jamaica title in the pre-independence era was a Chinese-Jamaican, in the immediate postindependence era of the mid-1960s virtually no white- or Chinese-Jamaican women dared to enter because of black nationalist interests; the Chinese, as part of the merchant class, were perceived to be aligned with white interests, while Indo-Jamaicans, who came to the Caribbean as indentured laborers, continued to enter the contest along with brown women.¹¹

By contrast, even to the present day Indo-Trinidadian women are not particularly visible in the Miss Trinidad pageant, which is primarily a Creole¹² arena, and have never won the contest, although an Indo-Trinidadian contestant has placed second. In recent years, as Indo-Trinidadian women enter beauty contests in ever increasing numbers—in fact, the most recent winner was an Indo-Trinidadian woman—there has been increased criticism from the Indo-Trinidadian community about how Afro-Trinidadians dominate the contest. As if to underscore the competition between Afro- and Indo-Trinidadians over such national symbols, Indo-Trinidadians, in the 1999 Miss Universe contest held in Trinidad, were accused of being unpatriotic because they cheered for Miss India, not for the black Miss Trinidad.¹³

The relative absence of Indo-Trinidadian women in the pageant may have something to do with the politics of Indian nationalism in Trinidad, where conservative Indo-Trinidadian nationalists perceive the entertainment arena to be a degraded Creole

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¹¹. However, one of the most popular winners of the Miss Jamaica contest was 1973 winner Patsy Yuen, a Chinese-Jamaican whose popularity skyrocketed even higher when she won the Miss World pageant—albeit by default; the real winner was dethroned—and thereby thrust Jamaica into the international spotlight. Barnes, “Face of the Nation.”

¹². In Trinidad, the term “Creole” usually refers to Afro-Trinidadians, though it also encompasses whites and mixed-race peoples. In short, Creole refers to those who are descended from or who participate in the mixed cultural heritage of the society.

¹³. “No, Trinidad Isn’t Guyana,” Trinidad Express, editorial, 19 April 1999.
space. The prevalent fear of the cultural nationalists is the “douglarization” of Indo-Trinidadian culture (a “douga” is a term for someone of mixed Indian and African heritage, and apparently derives from the Hindi word for “bastard”). As if to counter the growing participation of Indian women in the creolized space of the national beauty pageants, the Indo-Trinidadian community organizes an annual, televised “Miss Masta Bahar” pageant, where contestants wear saris—there is no bathing suit competition—and answer questions in Hindi. Their Indianness is gauged by whether or not they can identify the names of Indian movie stars or Indian songs, and in this way a parallel national Indo-Trinidadian space is evoked and preserved.

It therefore should have been no surprise that when female Indo-Trinidadian calypsonian Drupatee Ramgoonai brought chutney soca—the distinctively Indian version of Creole-derived soca music—to the annual calypso competition, she was vilified by a chorus of outraged Indian nationalists for her sexually suggestive lyrics and for throwing away “her high upbringing and culture to mix with vulgar music, sex and alcohol in Carnival.”¹⁴ As Shalini Puri points out, though chutney soca is seen by many conservative Indo-Trinidadians as authentically Indo-, not Afro-, Trinidadian, it is only valid as an Indo-Trinidadian art form when performed in the contained, female space of the traditional all-women’s gatherings during Hindu wedding festivities.¹⁵ Outside that space, the same art form becomes debauched, creolized. The public sphere of Trinidad is still, for the Indo-Trinidadian nationalists, innately black.

Calypso and its accompaniment, the steel band, are still overwhelmingly black working class male preserves. However, the encroachment of nonblacks, in particular privileged white and brown Trinidadians as well as Indo-Trinidadians, into this domain has caused some anxieties about the black hold on national symbols. This is especially true since the recent election of an Indo-Trinidadian, former prime minister Basdeo Panday, whose tenure increased the fear among the black population—which is slightly smaller than the Indian population—that it is losing political, and with it cultural, power. The initial reception of Denyse Plummer, a white Trinidadian female calypsonian who first ascended the stage in 1990 during the annual carnival’s Calypso Monarch competition and was pelted with oranges and rolls of toilet paper, parallels that of Lisa Mahfood and the white Miss Barbados. Although she has subsequently gone on to become one of the


15. Ibid., 26.
most successful female calypsonians ever, Denyse Plummer was seen not as an inauthentic Trinidadian per se but as inauthentic in that particular Trinidadian context. As the exact antithesis of the black working class male, she was an interloper from the other side of the class and race divide come to take away one of the only acknowledged forms of black working class male authority on the island.

**GLOBAL DESIRES: CARIBBEAN NATIONALISM AND MISS UNIVERSE 1999**

In an interesting contrast to the scorn displayed by Indo-Trinidadian cultural nationalists toward women who engage in public performances, the Indo-Trinidadian government leaders had a concerted interest in promoting the 1999 Miss Universe pageant. Seeking a chance to create economic opportunities for Trinidad by showcasing the country’s rich cultural heritage, the government hoped to introduce the “international” (that is, First World) audience to Trinidad as a desirable tourist destination. Also, the large and small business communities desired to make money from the event and to build business contacts with the likes of Donald Trump, who owns the Miss Universe franchise. Added to this was the feverish hope among the general population that another Miss Trinidad and Tobago would win the title yet again. The Miss Universe franchise holder in Trinidad dreamt that Miss Trinidad placed as a second runner-up, and a newspaper rushed to print the story on the front page.¹⁶

In a bizarre move to marshal public support for the pageant, the Miss Universe Pageant Company sought to exploit national desires for international recognition by declaring 6 May 1999 “Red Day” and by “call[ing] on all citizens to wear red in solidarity with the Miss Universe show and also in recognition of indigenous beauty.”¹⁷ Red Day was clearly supposed to meld the opposing poles of postcolonial modernity: it would satisfy the need to “indigenize” the pageant as well as to “globalize” the populace by connecting it to the wider world. The show itself was filled with spectacular displays of every conceivable Trinidadian cultural symbol. African-style dancers, complete with feathers and loin cloths, performed on the stage, and stick dancers perched on stilts; African drumming was featured alongside Indian tassa drumming; a limbo exhibition took place during the bathing suit competition; and huge dancing puppets from carnival were brought on to gyrate wildly while a steel band played as the finalists took center

stage, escorted by local cricketers. The suited and bejeweled audience members were given white handkerchiefs to wave in the air, carnival style, in an imitation of wild and sweaty carnival abandon.

Newspapers commented that Red Day had succeeded in highlighting the country’s charms: “There were some especially proud moments [in the pageant] for citizens of this country,” swelled one commentator.¹⁸ The spectacle of Caribbeanness on parade at the Miss Universe pageant was generally a proud moment for the local audience and did not appear to be viewed as anything akin to the mindless caricaturing of local culture that is the usual entertainment at tourist resorts, despite the similar financial aims of both endeavors. Beauty pageants are a curious combination of low-brow culture with high-brow pretensions, at best; who has not heard the snide jokes about beauty queens in bathing suits and high heels laboring to illustrate their erudition on questions of world peace? Nevertheless, in the Caribbean, where contestants of whatever ethnicity are inevitably from the relatively small, relatively well-educated middle class, the display of the region’s educated brown and black women in competition with (and not in service to) the world’s “best” before an international audience is an indication of the region’s entry into modernity, into the value systems of the industrialized West. The display of local culture in this context transforms it from the “backward,” or the merely local, into a global culture.

Regional newspaper stories, such as that which appeared in the Daily Gleaner (Jamaica), extolled the appeal of first-time African winner Miss Botswana and appeared to underscore the perceived link between victory in the Miss Universe contest and economic progress in the Third World: “Botswana has the Prettiest Girl in the World—and One of the Fastest Growing Economies as Well.”¹⁹ Because of this general perception of a link between beauty pageants and economic progress, Caribbean beauty queens are ideal spokespeople for nationalist sentiments. The region’s queens can frequently be heard issuing sound bites on the need to celebrate indigenous culture. A similar conflation of nationalist sentiment with global ambition can be seen in the beauty contests of Latin America, in particular Venezuela, where the Miss Venezuela pageant is close to a national industry, a precious natural resource, like oil, to be developed and sold abroad for the enrichment of the nation.

The desires of nineteenth-century black nationalists like Robert Love to raise Afro-Caribbean women from the bawdy spectacles of street life to the enclosed respectability

of educated society would find an ironic end in today’s beauty pageants, where genteel black women are sanctioned precisely by being “on display,” thus raising the image of black women from the “incondite,” vulgar spectacles of the carnival and the dancehall to an eroticized yet decorous vision of a peculiarly Caribbean modernity. By rendering black womanhood visible in this space, the tainted racial meanings of stick fighting or other black-identified cultural forms are divested of historical meaning and become just another marker of authenticity.

Nonblack Caribbean women have helped to demarcate the public space in various ways: white and brown women have legitimized the movement of respectable femininity from the private, domestic sphere to the public space and the public gaze by performing a sanitized eroticism for public pleasure. The link between white women and corporate finance has in large measure validated spaces such as the beauty pageants and the carnival competitions. Brown women made nonwhiteness, in the form of hybridity, into an acceptable nationalist symbol. Asian women remain both within and without the public gaze, “Asian” when they are confined to private, Asian spaces, “Creole” or “Caribbean” when they step into the public domain. The entry of brown, white, and Asian women into the “vulgar” public spaces of black working class culture is also a performance of a perceived authentic Caribbean subjectivity, since blackness itself marks the Caribbean space in the both the national and international gaze.

At the core of these various responses to women’s public performances are a series of negotiations over, and a desire to transform the image of, the “authentic” Caribbean subject. This holds as true for black women as it does for nonblack women. Black middle class women in beauty pageants defuse the very idea that a “real” West Indian is a vulgar black “street” woman, who is herself the very essence of the antimodern, or to put it in Paul Gilroy’s words, the very “counterculture of modernity.” In this way, a class discourse helps to erase an overdetermined race discourse in the establishment of blackness as a legitimate cultural signifier. It is then possible to replace the entrenched images of blackness as “backward” and “primitive” with these new icons of a black(ened), creolized modernity.

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