

It is in this respect that these young men are ours—fully as much as Bigger Thomas was a part of the Black community in Richard Wright's novel *Native Son*. They represent a loss—a deficit in more ways than one. To view them in this way is to find a third way out of the conundrum of rejection or embrace. In the latitude of our compassion—a compassion which we have often had to extend to our erstwhile masters, as we see happening presently in South Africa—we must claim them as ours—as symbols, if you will, of the failure of community through the relentless workings of racism. To claim them is to express compassion for those parts of our communities that are wounded. It does *not* mean that we are responsible for what they have done, or that they should not have to take responsibility for their actions.

To say that these young men are beyond the pale and have nothing to do with us is to engage in the same practice that white society engages in—pretending that crime is somehow out there, over there, having nothing to do with us. But while being a part of us, they are also a product of white society—created by the policies which continue to wreak havoc on Black communities. Would that we could take them into our communities, hold them responsible for their actions and heal them eventually.

Failure like success is seldom sudden. Young, disaffected Black youth, which the accused suspects represent, reflect the failure of many systems, the oldest of which began as long as 500 years ago, when the workings of capital and the profit motive, through the slave trade, destroyed the resources of Africans—their family structures, their spirituality, their languages, their ways of life. These failures are further nurtured by immigration practices that encourage the piecemeal settlement of families from the Caribbean. Often the mother comes first, followed eventually over the years by her children. This results in great pressures on families and early involvement of social agencies. An education system which has not shown itself responsive to the needs of Black students, often streaming them into dead-end programs, secures these failures. A shaky economic system, weakened by the processes of free trade, per-

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meated by racism, sexism and classism, which demands that where they do exist two parents must work, and where they don't that women must work long hours to support their children, imposes further stresses on families. The criminalization of Black youth by a policing and (in)justice system creates a sense of disenfranchisement which in turn creates a sense of not belonging. And this most recent knee-jerk response that questions the right of Blacks to remain here exacerbates this sense of alienation. Further, increased criminalization, as has happened in the wake of this most recent robbery, will only serve to justify those instances where abusive exercises of police power occur.

To those who ask what Black communities are doing about crime, I answer—what they have always been doing—dedicating an enormous number of volunteer hours in remedial programs and organizations in an effort to stave off these very types of acts. Volunteer hours and social work, however, cannot and will not do it all. When an economy is in recession, while education fails to educate Black youth, when racism continues to affect the hiring of African Canadians, and when the policing of African Canadians becomes synonymous with harassment, dysfunctional and criminal activity will continue to flourish.

Eradicating the more deeply-held racist attitudes towards Blacks will be impossible without genuine commitment on the part of all levels of government. In the hardening of attitudes on both sides in the aftermath of the *Just Desserts* killing, that commitment will be harder to execute. Among politicians if has been noticeably absent: if anything, knowingly or unknowingly they have been fuelling anti-Black sentiments.

All of this, however, is not to lose sight of the tragic loss of a young woman. It is to mourn that loss. It is also to mourn the loss begun a long time ago—of young lives—young Black lives—young African-Canadian lives.

But then again—fact is a Black man killed a white woman. And Blacks have always been between a rock and a hard place.

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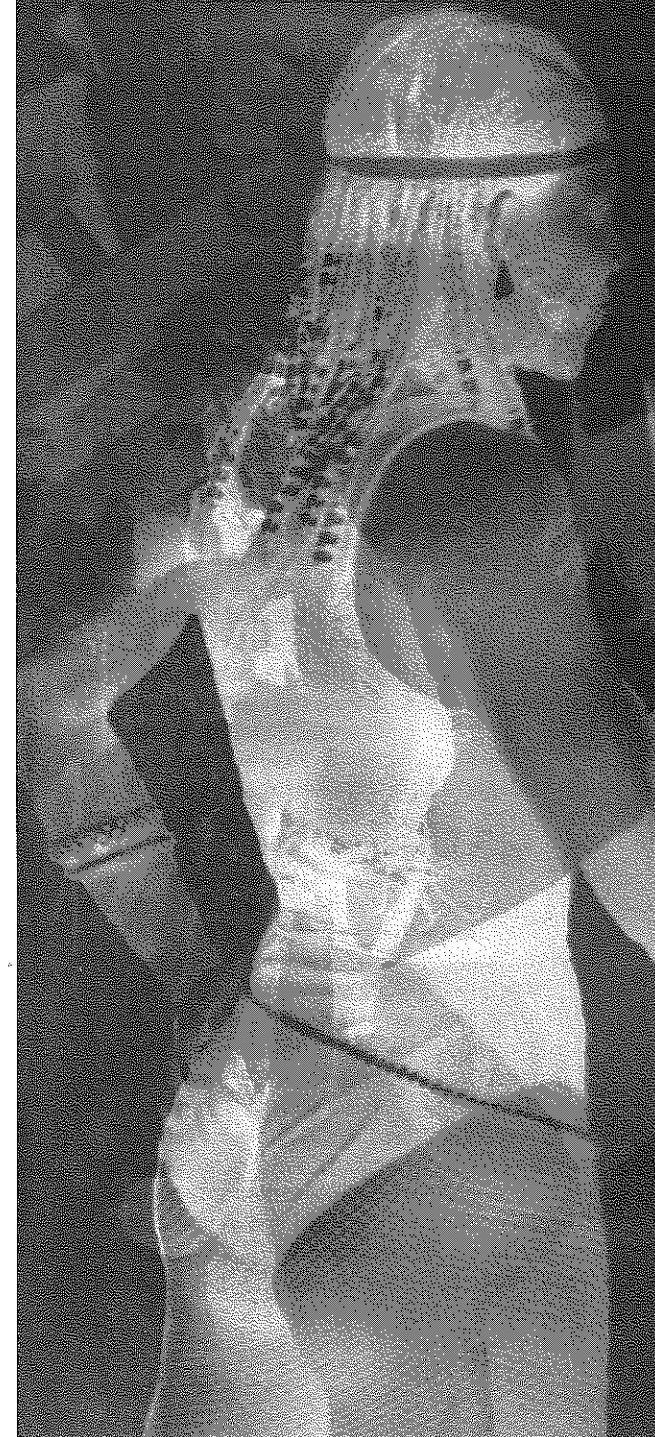
# black bodies, Carnivalised bodies

Carol Boyce Davies writes about Black women and carnival, expressing concern that current gender dynamics do not allow women the free space simply to dance at carnival.

Intellectualizing about carnival runs contrary to its meaning. Still, since one of the most obvious representations and commodifications of the Black female body takes place within the context of carnivals, there is for me a need to raise questions about representation and to try to arrive at some tentative conclusions about the carnivalised female body. A series of Caribbean carnivals, held in a variety of cities, highlights my concerns. Some of these festivals grew out of student/migrant desires to re-create some of the joy and space commensurate with Caribbean Carnival in the otherwise alienating landscapes of North American culture. One occurred at my university during the annual carnival sponsored by the Caribbean students there. A young woman from one of the NYC community colleges entered the performance arena and executed a "wine" that took her from seductive vertical wining to a movement on the floor which then drew a huge crowd which witnessed her gyrations which increasingly became sexual/orgasmic mimings. This motif became increasingly popular and culminated with a presentation from one school last year with the following scenario:

The act begins with about ten young women in "pum pum shorts" on the stage, dancing vertically. A young man enters with a large water gun and shoots them all down onto the stage floor. The now prone young women, with their shoulders on the floor and their legs raised towards the audience, begin a version of the butterfly that was so risqué that two other students functioning as mistresses of ceremonies signalled to the DJ, in prearranged signal, that the music had to be cut. This of course triggered boos from many of the men (and women) in the audience who in the spirit of true carnival would want to see the routine taken to the conclusion.

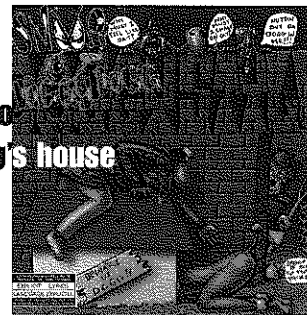
As we know, the logic of carnival dictates that it is equivalent to a crime against the people for anyone in authority to stop the carnival. (As an aside, there were also subsequent rumours that it was my presence in the audience that precipitated the cut, since there were other groups, similarly gyrating before I arrived, which were not cut.)





Being from Trinidad, and having done my own share of carnivalising and wining, I found myself in a very strange position because a part of me completely supported the decision to cut the dance. In this context, my position as a Black woman professor, an authority figure, is relevant. For what it seemed had happened was the obscene "winer" of years passed had been transformed into every Caribbean woman, now the object of a voyeuristic gaze. At the same time, I recognize the need for carnivalised space: the "do what you want to do; this is my body not yours." So I want to locate my discomfort in a series of generating questions and in the midst of this contradictory context: Are these primarily generational concerns and would I, if one of this generation of students, not similarly have participated. How is my own subject position as Black woman professor, working therefore in university contexts with all their hierarchies and social distances, implicated? Where is all of this located in terms of patriarchy and imperialism? What about the highly misogynistic representations of women in the lyrical articulations of female bodies in calypso, reggae, rap, dance hall and toasting?

In the context of patriarchy/imperialism, female genitalia are pornographically exposed, identified in ways so detailed and objectified that no amount reversal is compensatory. To do that, women would have to engage in discourses beyond "how do real men measure up?" Given the politics of power and dominance in terms of gender, the exposure of body parts is not equivalent or symmetrical. In Black male culture women can be reduced to bitches and body parts, as in Snoop Doggy Dog's dog-



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house. Central to this question is the question of space and carnival and the implications of the controlled, inside and staged notion of the carnival as opposed to the outside, street-based carnival. Further, where is female agency in all of this?

Stallybrass and White, in *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, would celebrate carnival as it flaunts the material body as a pleasurable grotesquerie—protuberant, fat, disproportionate, open at its orifices. The carnivalesque inversion mounts a co-ordinated double attack upon the "Ideal-ich," calling the bluff on foreclosure: it denies with a laugh the ludicrous pose of autonomy adopted by the subject within the hierarchical arrangements of the symbolic at the same moment as it re-opens the body boundary, the closed orifices of which normally guarantee the repressive mechanism itself.

A related issue has to be the freedom that African women exercise in terms of their bodies and their physical/sensual possibilities and pleasures in movement, which exist outside of Western, restricted, Puritanical modes of perceiving the body. Still for me, what precisely makes these representations not symmetrical are gender dynamics between men and women and the ways that power relations enhance the continued commodification of Black female bodies. Further, located within white supremacist, imperialistic dynamics, the female body has been trained to function for the benefit and in the service of men.

## 1. The Carnivalised Body

In an article entitled, "Nudity in Brazilian Carnival," Monica Rectora writes about the visual and verbal codes which displace the carnival event to nakedness and also shift erotic nakedness to pornography. It is the women who are reduced to nakedness, making them objects for male consumption and reinforcing the central messages of female subordination encoded in carnival.

In Carnival, then, nudity is transformed into a series of metonymic images of the woman as an object of desire. Her physical charms are presented (ranging from the parts of her body—face, legs, arms, bust, buttocks—to her representation as an erotic object as a whole). *American Journal of Semiotics* (1989)

Still, even as we pursue questions of carnival, we may want to follow Bakhtin a bit in his analysis of carnival as the interruption of dominant discourses. For Bakhtin carnival and the carnivalesque occupy that space outside of the centralizations of modernity, resisting and subverting hierarchies and other societal norms.

Inserting gender into the dynamic of carnival, Mary Russo, in an essay in *Feminist Studies/Critical Studies*, reads Bakhtin with ambivalence given that one of his prime representations is the hag. Thus Bakhtin, in Russo's words, "fails to acknowledge or incorporate the social relations of gender in his semiotic model of the body politic, and thus his notion of the Female Grotesques remains repressed and undeveloped."

If we are to theorize the representation of the carnivalised female body, we must also examine carnival in terms of historical period, class, and so on. In my own reading of Caribbean carnival, distinctions have to be made between the "carnival of resistance," which began in resistance to oppression, and which occupies that same pole as slave rebellions, uprisings, *cannes brulees* (*camboulay*), maroon communities, and the "carnival of cooptation and tourism," which has more to do with selling the Caribbean as site of pleasure to outsiders. It is an important distinction which allows us to uncover and decode the functions of

carnival which have been appropriated by dominant discourses.

It is precisely here where the female body can become part of a series of pornographic representations. Thus, those supine Black female bodies butterfly with their backs on the ground mime a struggle and therefore mark the distinctions I want to make between the horizontal and the vertical in terms of the use of space, gaze and position and the ways these relate to conquest and domination. The Caribbean female body on its back replays, in distinct ways, the imperialist entry into the land, "the lay of the land" as feminist critics would say. The Caribbean, in all its tourist manifestations, gets re-presented as exotic space, with its primary mode of existence as the providing of sexual/erotic pleasure for a series of visitors in the "we are here just to serve you" mode of tourist representations. The island as female body becomes, then, another tempestuous site of male/colonial ownership.

Tourism and prostitution are linked. Women are the visual, the captured, in this exercise in voyeurism and erotic pleasure; they are represented as the "guests of men," the sexualized objects of male gaze. In other words, the sexuality as it is presented is made equivalent to enforced heterosexuality, i.e., women performing the dance of intercourse at the level of desire. For Black female

bodies, the link between the violence of slavery and rape is mapped onto the historical meanings of the voyeuristic gaze.

## 2. The Commodified Body

The commodified body of women, then, in horizontal butterfly-ing position lines up well with the commodification of the Caribbean in tourism. Still, I am thinking of ways to represent the Caribbean other than through fragmentation and commodification and also to allow some female agency. One has, therefore, to make some distinctions between questions of spectatorship, location and the male gaze on the one hand and the ability of women to transform their own spaces on the other. The question of "wining" can be located at this juncture. For example in the popular dance-calypso, "Dollar Wine," some clever calypsonian gives a price to each of the gestures of wining, with the lowest equivalents going to the side to side, the rear being ascribed a bit more value and the full frontal assigned the most value, with each thrust of the body emphasized by the word "dollar." As someone who gleefully participated and mastered the movements, I had to ignore the assignment of cash value to wining to enjoy it fully. Therein lies the primary contradiction for women, for Caribbean feminists and for Caribbean subjects being able to speak on any of this. For in the end, all get subsumed under the carnivalised demands of entertainment: carnival is not to be analyzed or discussed and thus paradoxically it contains the freedom to enforce dominant discourses, continuously and without challenge. For who wants to stop the carnival? This is the one time that women are able to take space, to assert the sexuality which includes women wining on and with each other and which also includes women at home in their bodies expressing with these bodies the very same sexualities which men simultaneously desire and fear they cannot control. Thus, taking space becomes their own version of a carnival of resistance.

Pursuing the ritual of dance and sexuality, at one very important level,



the butterfly is that miming of the female body opening and closing, allowing possibilities for entry and simultaneously barring entry, giving life and also taking it in all its gestures. Significantly, as with any language which one does not know, there always exists the possibility of being mis-interpreted or mis-read by the viewer/listener. For one of the mistakes often made by viewer/spectators from other cultural locations, in apprehending carnival behaviour, is the reading of physical female Caribbean movement as equivalent to heterosexual access or the "cash equivalent." Therefore, the body, read as sexual object, does not exist necessarily in the same way for the viewer as for the viewed, which always has been the racist/rapist/colonizer's mistake.

The unanswered/unanswerable question which arises from all of this is: Can one avoid all those intrusive readings by dominant culture? A recent *National Geographic* (March, 1994) has a piece on Trinidad which is captioned "The Wild Mix of Trinidad and Tobago" and shows painted, gyrating Black bodies in what comes across as orgiastic ritual; these are juxtaposed in succeeding pages with more orderly images such as, significantly, a neatly clad baby boy, born accidentally in New York City and therefore an "American," dressed in red, white and blue jumpers. The historical specificity of the Black body as commodity and its contemporary representation as a site for Euro/U.S. social and political constructions have to be factored in, particularly given the fact that the Black female body became the doubled sign of commodification and reproduction.

## 3. Taking Space: Freedom and Self-Articulation

If dance is a language, then it is not so much the physicality and sexuality of the dance itself, but what it communicates that is most critical. The problem, then, may reside in the voyeur and the colonizer of the Caribbean/female body. The concept of "taking space" in Afro-Caribbean dance allows us some further understanding and allows some agency for Caribbean women, particularly when dance is aligned with personal freedom. Taking space is best understood as taking not simply physical space, but also mental space. Taking space means moving out into areas previously restricted, particularly those racialized/gendered confined spaces. A

few important parallels can be made at this point. One would be with a Trinidadian version in which the dancer negotiates the road, creating space. In this particular context, the dancer is able to negotiate, among a variety of other dancers, his/her own particular dance space. Another example is limbo in which the space metaphor is graphically expressed in terms of a before and after with either side of the limbo bar or pole offering a space of physical freedom. The pole which has to be negotiated represents slavery, the slave ship and the physical gesture of middle passage piled on with fire, lowered to the ultimate; it requires physical dexterity and finally transcendence.

The calculations of the use of space by gender, size, age, for slave ship passage and the use of the Black female body as space to maximize profit through reproduction are significant. The maximizing of space by oppression for material gain meant the constricting of space for Black women. The semiotics of "taking space/making space" references, therefore, become clear in each of these dance formats.

Central to "taking space" is the ability to understand this space. It is not necessarily making big movements that make the statement, but how showing bodies can enlarge space. For dancers, how they position themselves becomes important. This leads to such questions as: what is the space used for? How does one navigate between manipulation and agency? What is significant about island locations is the ability to use circumscribed space.

In that context, the butterfly, itself already a sexual symbol, is simultaneously a movement of limiting space/making space. The space being referred to is the space between women's legs and the space between islands. This is not an empty space for discoverers, navigators, colonizers...men.

One final aspect of this representation that has to be presented is the idea of staging. The staged format for dance and, thus, for spectatorship can be seen in the raised float of, for example, Rio carnival. Staging makes space; it is not the grounded, carnival of resistance with people "taking space." The stage carnival becomes more a site of containment with distinctions between vertical and horizontal intact. The prostrate butterfly, immobilized and staged for colonizing gazes, in the end is not a figure of resistance.



#### 4. Triangular Representations

The problems of representing Black female bodies, we have said, are amplified at the level of the use of Black women's bodies in history. The Black female body in Western culture has existed either in the context of exoticization or abjection. Our bodies have been chained, sold, transported, paraded, flayed, pried open, discarded, possessed.

So, how does one reclaim that female body now in the context of recent history? On the one hand, it is possible to laud the physical control that women take in attempting to do with their bodies as they please. But is it what they please? Or is the female body still doing what it is trained to do?

Some developing new representations of the female body, taking place both in dance and in other cultural forms, present a reclamation of the body for its own purposes. Also, representations of the Black female body in African contexts reveal some interesting "taking space" contexts and oppositional gazes, outside of Western formulations of the contained body. Grace Nichols, in *Lazy Thoughts of a Lazy Woman*, examines the notion of laziness. This challenges colonialist/racist critiques of Blacks as lazy and redirects the political implications of laziness for both women and Black people, on whose backs and with whose labour capitalism took place. Thus, when Black women's labour is consumable, laziness becomes a resistance to our exploitation, unless it is labour in our own benefit and of our choice.

In Nichols' poems, "Dust" and "Grease," which begin the collection, the assertion is that these elements, i.e., dust and grease, which have been related to Black women's jobs, are allowed to be, to exist unimpeded.

Dust has a right to settle  
Milk the right to curdle  
Cheese the right to turn green  
Scum and fungi are rich words (p.3).

Grease steals in like a lover  
over the body of my oven.  
Grease kisses the knobs  
of my stove.  
Grease plays with the small  
hands of my spoons.  
Grease caresses the skin  
of my table-cloth,  
Getting into my every crease.  
Grease reassures me that life  
is naturally sticky.  
Grease is obviously having an affair with me.

Dust and grease exist outside of this woman's identity, unlike for many Black women, for whom waking up often means thinking of the pot and the broom. Nichols, then, deconstructs the stock association of grease. She also attempts to "sing the body reclining," i.e., take space in a way which is directly counter to expectations for Black women.

I sing the body reclining  
I sing the throwing back of self  
I sing the cushioned head  
The fallen arm  
The lolling breast  
I sing the body reclining

This reclining female body becomes "an indolent continent," "sluggish as a river...as a wayward tree": all representations of resistance. Still there is a different intent in this reclining body in the sense of its own definition; not the body reclining as it waits for something/someone else, the phallus and so on, but the body existing in its own right, not to serve. Thus she concludes:

Those who scrub and scrub  
incessantly  
corrupt the body  
Those who dust and dust  
incessantly  
also corrupt the body

Nichols is similarly clear about the representations of Black female sexuality in its own right and in all its triangulated implications. The Black female body for her is expressed in the language of a certain geography and oppressive history.

My Black triangle  
sandwiched between the  
geography of my thighs  
is a bermuda  
of tiny atoms  
forever seizing  
and releasing  
the world

For Nichols, the "Bermuda triangle" gets re-presented in terms of female sexual space, pubic, vulvic, localized, but also historicized in resistance to patriarchal, misogynistic, imperialistic and colonizing imperatives. The social construction of space between women's legs, always making space for something/someone else, has to be overturned. Island space, women's space are all imagined spaces of absence/presence. Caribbean ocean spaces cover the unfathomable existences, unknown except by the daring, but nevertheless still with their own palpable existences and histories. The ocean is a place of escape when island spaces become too confining.

The shock to men is that none of this may be about them at all. Black female space becomes a space of life and rich moisture, a delta of fertility, creativity, life.

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