



Gender Bend and Play a Mas'! Confronting the Gender Binary

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Abstract

Carnival engenders a period of festivity and cultural capital that has survived, arisen out of, and is in response to, years of enslavement, colonization and indentureship. A miscegenation of European cultural expressions and African spiritualities and cultures, Caribbean Carnival has now become a culmination of celebration, song, art, fractured histories, spirituality and in that same breath, debauchery. These various elements that comprise Carnival are critical as they demand of us a rethinking, redefining and repossession of our multiplicitous selves. Participating in Carnival also allows revellers to be confronted with their own perceptions and manifestations of power, gender, sex and sexuality. Carnival permits the remixing and recreating of ourselves since it affords people the opportunity to mask and reveal, of their own volition, the multiple sexual and gender identities and expressions they may embody. This paper will explore Carnival as (i) a site to engage with gender transgression, which I also refer to here as gender bending, (ii) a site to challenge respectability politics and, very briefly as (iii) a site to (re)ground oneself in African traditions and spiritualities.

Key words: Carnival, culture, mas, power, gender, sex, sexuality, gender bending, African traditions

Introduction

Though I continue to participate in North American (Ottawa, Montreal and Toronto) Carnivals since leaving Grenada, it has been almost a decade since I last participated in the annual Grenada Carnival celebrations. Compared to its North American counterparts, Caribbean Carnival remains seemingly less commercialized (though it is becoming increasingly commercialized with an increasing presence of for-profit companies) and in some aspects, is able to retain an almost sacred [read spiritual] and historicized element. During my last Carnival celebrations in Grenada in 2004, I remember quite vividly, excitedly participating in J'ouvert¹ and feeding off the energies and the joys that were exuded from the bodies around me. Then, to my surprise and that of other revellers, amidst the 'jump-up', a scuffle began and folks quickly started to disperse. A fight between two young people was about to escalate. Immediately, an elder started shouting that Carnival was not a space for fighting, so they had better take that nonsense elsewhere. Other members of the crowd, feeling emboldened because one person had spoken out, immediately began chastising the two young people until the situation was eventually quelled. This memory brought me back to what I consider to be a sacred, untouchable yet simultaneously raunchy, and communally (though not necessarily legal) self-governed space that is Carnival — take that fighting nonsense someplace else!

To complement and expand on the perspectives that my lived experiences contribute to this paper and to fill in any possible gaps that my physical disconnect from the annual Carnival celebrations in Grenada may create, I interviewed four young Grenadians aged between 25 and 30. To preserve anonymity, aliases will be used. The only male-identified person, whom I will refer to as Ron, currently lives in Grenada and has spent a large majority of his adult life in the region. The other three interviewees, who are all female-identified, were also born and raised in Grenada and left the island in their late teens or early twenties but return to the island, on average, at least once a year.

Throughout this paper, these three women will be referred to as Michelle, Allison and Rhonda. The interviewees were asked a series of seven questions that can be found in the appendix to this paper.

The annual Grenada Carnival comprises a few key events: Ole Mas, the Dimanche Gras Show, Panorama, the National Queen Show, Soca Monarch, J'ouvert, Monday Night Mas, the Pageant Mas and the Parade of the Bands. Ole Mas is an annual theatrical show whereby participants perform and engage in satire directed at local leaders, politicians and anyone who may have been involved in a national or more localized scandal. Usually accompanying the participants' vivid costumes are pieces of cardboard with text to further explain the significance and context of the costume with questions or comments usually intended to further prompt audience engagement. The Dimanche Gras Show is the annual calypso competition where artists perform their songs, as they vie for the title of Dimanche Gras Queen and King. The Soca Monarch competition, now known as that of the Groovy and Soca Monarch, is quite similar to the Dimanche Gras competition. Panorama, as its name suggests, is the annual steel pan competition, while the National Queen Show is the annual pageant that in the past comprised female competitors from each of the seven parishes. However, in 2014, the show was changed to reflect seven themes under the new "Pure Grenada" tourist brand for the island's tourist industry. J'ouvert, Monday Night Mas, the Pageant Mas and the Parade of the Bands usually occur over the course of the week directly preceding the final two-day 'jump-up'². J'ouvert opens the two-day 'jump-up' during the wee hours of Monday morning with Monday Night Mas the following evening and the Parade of the Bands beginning Monday afternoon with the major parade occurring on the Tuesday afternoon.

From the ancestral Shortknee³ to J'ouvert, Carnival in many ways requires a masking ritual that includes facial masks and the painting of one's partial or entire body. In her interview, Rhonda attributed the wearing of masks to Grenadians' African and French colonial histories (personal interview, 16 July 2014). The events listed above are more than festive celebrations; they also

create communal identifiers among a group of people and are a central aspect of nation-state formation and survival. Locals play into the Western gaze, thus reaping profits for the state by allowing governments to capitalize on the presence of tourists mesmerized by the erotic colonized body (Kempadoo 2009 King 2011). In some ways, however, this playing into the Western gaze can also become a means for locals to talk back and secure some form of agency throughout the process. Similar to Mikhail Bakhtin's analysis on Carnival and the carnivalesque, Carnival is a space imbued with freedom, excess and wisdom where alternative identities, behaviours and expressions can flourish and engage in different forms of resistance and existence (Bakhtin 1984).

This paper argues that the annual celebrations of Carnival in the Caribbean, particularly in Grenada, provide a state-sanctioned occasion to gender bend and embrace one's individual and communal multiplicitous⁴ self. In particular, Carnival challenges the present-day respectability politics⁵ that exists within the Caribbean by encouraging, i.e. not explicitly criminalizing, non-hegemonic masculinities, femininities and sexualities. Carnival acts as a site where state-imposed binaries around sex, sexuality and gender can and are confronted with explicit expressions of performativity and gender transgression.

Gender, Gender Bending and Gender Transgression in the Context of Coloniality and Carnival

When asked what came to mind when they thought of **gender**, gendered expectations and performance in the context of Carnival, all of the interviewees highlighted Ole Mas and J'ouvert as examples where gender transgression and performance play out. During Ole Mas and J'ouvert, both male-identified and female-identified, but particularly the former, wear clothing that would typically be associated with another (usually within a heteronormative, cis-gendered⁶ binary) sex. Michelle was the only person who underlined the heightened sexualisation of women during Carnival that may simultaneously occur with

gender bending and transgression (personal interview, 18 July 2014). She stated that women are expected to wear skimpy and close-to-naked attire, whereas men are not expected to do so. As Michelle noted, however, at the same time that these gendered expectations are enforced, they are also challenged through music by some of the soca and calypso artists, e.g. Alison Hinds' 'Roll it Gyal' — an empowering song where the artist encourages women to know themselves and enforce their own personal boundaries (personal interview, 18 July 2014).

The terms gender bend and gender transgression may not immediately register with many in the Caribbean, particularly with those residing in Grenada. In the context of Grenada, terms such as *zami*⁷ and *buller man*⁸ may be more familiar when thinking about other (read non-conforming) sexualities and expressions of gender and intimacy; they not only signal gender transgression in terms of performativity, but are also used to refer to manifestations of sexual attraction and preference (though the two are not mutually exclusive). *Zami* and *buller man* are identities imposed onto bodies of people who fall outside of the boundaries of heteronormativity. Wesley Crichtlow (2004) urges us to use indigenous terms situated within a Caribbean context to better understand the interplay between racial, gender and sexual identities (32-33). Therefore, where necessary, these terms will be used to better contextualize and situate my analyses.

The social norms and boxes that one has to remain within, in order not to be labelled as 'queer' (acknowledging that queer is not necessarily a term used in the Caribbean) or, as Grenadians would say, 'funny', becomes less relevant during Carnival as revellers are able to mask or pretend to exist within the confines of a mask. Grenadian scholar Caldwell Taylor, in discussing the significance of Carnival on the Grenadian website *Big Drum Nation*, quotes C.L.R. James: "Carnival is the rule of the subconscious. A time when, among things, we don masks to portray our inner lives—our fears, our desires, our defects: Carnival is both confession and confessional; it is rebellion and

submission” (James 1959). The wearing of the masks, figuratively and literally, affords the reveller an anonymity that can usually be translated into spaces that afford some level, if only transitory, of safety and reduced vulnerability.

Throughout this paper, the term ‘gender bend’ will be used to refer to the active transgression of gender roles and expectations as a means of decolonizing and deconstructing the heterosexist gender binary (Lugones 2007). The annual Caribbean celebrations of Carnival allow for a space for children and adults to play into, and experience a remix of gender, sex and sexualities that has been largely defined by the ongoing colonial process. Carnival celebrations can be an important space to critically, honestly, and playfully engage in liberatory sexual politics within the context of our lived experiences. Carnival, in a sense, provides a (state-) sanctioned occasion to gender bend and, in particular, to embrace non-hegemonic, fluid masculinities and femininities. Male-identified people proudly choose to wear what would be considered female-identified and/or androgynous-type clothing and effeminately dance to the rhythms of soca and calypso, though as noted in the interview with Ron, this satirical behaviour by individuals is not intended to mock those who are gender non-conforming, but rather meant to mock the system that continues to keep them oppressed (personal interview, 18 July 2014). During Carnival, men dressed in female attire may not, in that moment, be seen as buller men but merely ‘regular’ men enjoying the festivities. Female-identified people perform what would typically be considered cis-gendered, heterosexist male-identified roles as they pursue women and take on certain masculine roles. Gender and sexuality become fluid in a space that is governed by temporal lawlessness and freedom.

Sexualities and sexual expressions will be used broadly to refer to one’s identification with pleasure, attraction, and the psychological and ontological interaction with those thoughts and feelings, as well as the corporeal embodiment of thoughts and desires. Such manifestations are rendered visible in the choice of clothing, one’s mannerisms, choice of intimate partner(s), and

the types of intimate relationships that one engages with. Sexualities and sexual expressions can further be manifested in the general expressions of individuality and personality. In Gloria Wekker's (2006) account of Mati work done in Suriname, it becomes clear that people who desire others of the same sex or gender may instead view this desire as behavioural as opposed to being part of their identity⁹. For example, when Wekker asks Juliette, a woman who engages in Mati work, whether or not she was a Mati, Juliette impatiently and with annoyance answers, “*Ma di m'e srib' nanga umasma, dan m'e mati*”/But since I am sleeping with women, then I mati” (13). Wekker's use of the verb *na*/to be and the noun *mati* implied that she was imposing an identity onto Juliette, whereas Juliette chose to view her choices as not tied to an identity but more so associated with her behaviour and actions. Her sexuality was fluid and was not the end-all of who she was. As Wekker noted, there was a tension between identity versus activity where the former belongs to a “dominant Euro-American” space and the latter refers to a “working class Afro-Surinamese model of how sexual subjectivity is envisioned” (12-13).

In spite of Carnival acting as a space to gender bend, it also serves as a space to re-entrench colonial heterosexist gender categories. Allison recounts an incident where, during J'ouvert, she witnessed a Jab parading around with a woman chained to him which to her [Allison] “... could be seen as a way of showing ‘male control’ over his female property” (personal interview, 17 July 2014). This powerful rendition of male-female interactions re-entrenches the narrative of women's bodies as [lifeless] property and again removes any agency that they may have. It is also a violent display of heterosexist masculinity and femininity that locks both parties into a rigid expectation of their relationship that is motivated and maintained by brute force, cruelty and power imbalances. A woman-identified person choosing to act ‘manly’ is still performed within heterosexist ideals of masculinity, i.e. the man occupying a space of sexual prowess and the woman merely the receiving object.

It is important not to appear as romanticizing Carnival. With lawlessness

comes the possibility of boundaries not being heard and respected, which may lead to sexualized violence, harassment and gender-based violence. Carnival can be a very unsafe space and in so many ways, does promote the erasure of personal boundaries. In order to address this violence, the Grenadian public's broad acceptance of the colonial gender binary system and the conceptualization of gender, sex and sexualities within a heterosexist, dimorphic framework needs to be challenged. The dual and oppositional categorization of gender, expressed as either male or female, carries with it entrenched asymmetrical power relations. These cis-gendered ideologies pervade the everyday ideals, traditions, perceptions and social attitudes regarding gender, gendered practices and sexuality in Grenada, inadvertently endorsing numerous forms of violence. This colonial gender binary system also inherently excludes gender non-conforming people and intersex people who fall within neither the heterosexist male or female categories.

Whereas gender bending can be seen as one form of resisting colonial ideals of gender and sex, Grenada has also challenged its colonial history in a myriad of other forms. From the uprising of workers, then led by Eric Gairy and that led to Grenada receiving independence in 1974, to the overthrow of the Eric Gairy government in 1979¹⁰, Grenadians have always resisted. The Grenada Revolution officially started in 1979 with the People's Revolutionary Government (PRG) coming to power. Those involved challenged the multiple faces of colonialism, in terms of the economic, the social, the political and the cultural. One of the core tenets of the Revolution was the narrative of internationalism and a linking with global struggles for true independence and liberation. This core tenet was critical in the reshaping of Grenadian nationalism. In his opening address to the First International Conference in Solidarity with Grenada, held on the island 23–25 November 1981, Maurice Bishop states as follows:

[The] conference manifests our [Grenadians'] continuing strict adherence to international principles. We have always scrupulously avoided viewing our struggle, our revolutionary process, from a narrow nationalist perspective. We have long understood that the

world revolutionary process, the struggle of oppressed mankind everywhere, is one and indivisible. Thus, this International Solidarity Conference holds grave importance as it bears testimony to our commitment to the notable concept of internationalism (PRG Speeches 1982, 9).

Though Bishop and other PRG freedom fighters did not use terms such as coloniality to explain why Grenadians chose to link their struggles to global struggles, this linking clearly remained an important part of their analysis and political actions. There was a recognition that coloniality did not only manifest itself in the ways it valued our bodies and minds as labour-producing machinery, but also in the ways in which we saw ourselves and our global perspectives. Hence, coloniality also represented our longstanding crisis of epistemological, cultural, economic, and political dependence (PRG Speeches 1982). Coloniality constitutes and is constitutive of the hegemonic mind, the white, or masculinist, or heterosexist, or national chauvinist (Lugones 2007, 2010). Coloniality's hegemonic power and grasp over our labour, our lands, our sexualities and governance structures took the form of the "nation-state, capitalism, the nuclear family, and eurocentrism" (Martinot 2011, Introduction). The Grenada Revolution attempted to challenge the coloniality of our nation and, more so, of ourselves. This raises the question: What did gender and sexual expressions look like during those four Revolutionary years? Did Carnival exist and what form did it take? These may not have looked any different compared to contemporary Carnival celebrations, but if the decolonizing project was so deeply embedded within the political and everyday interpersonal landscape, then could there not be a possibility that sexuality and gender expression were also part of that decolonizing process?

Keja L.Valens, in *Desire Between Women in Caribbean Literature* (2013), covers one of the main characters, Mayotte, who embodies impressions of gender transgression and sexual expression:

During Carnival, Mayotte gives up the play of gender traits and

roles that she relished in her rural childhood for a straightforward set of reversals that rely on a stable set of binary opposites: “Many were, like me, transvestites for the night. I had, in fact, gotten myself a man’s costume...Soon I noticed that a masked woman was following me. I looked back occasionally and found with pleasure that she was still there...” She had explained her own manly costume as what girls wore, not an expression of gender bending but of gender conforming (126).

The above excerpt highlights the hidden desires and associated shame that comes with expressing one’s non-conforming gender, sexual identity and desires. Carnival is temporal, therefore, even if one feels more comfort and safety in challenging heteronormativity during the festivities, those feelings of safety and comfort are not guaranteed beyond the two or three day highlights. The name-calling and shunning that happens all-year round has already become so embedded within one’s skin, bones and psyche that it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to fully feel safe.

...years of socialization girl wear pink boy wear blue
 boy play sport girl play house girl get barbie boy
 get fire-truck gendah is a social construct wi tell
 har she she musn’t climb tree we tell him seh dry
 him eye we tell har seh fi close har legs wi tell him
 seh boys don’t cry we tell har seh fi please har
 man wi tell him oomaan deh deh fi please man
 gendah bendah schooling pretendahs unlearning
 british colonizashun gendah bendah urging di
 sisters redefine your wombanist position... (Anitfrika 2011)

The above *Gendah Bendah (remix)* lyrics by Jamaican storyteller d’bi young on her 333 album captures what this paper intends by the term gender bend. As d’bi so creatively and critically puts it, this process of gender bending is a necessary part of the decolonizing exercise that sometimes occurs apart from a deeper interaction with colonized gender and sexual identities.

The Carnival celebrations in the Caribbean present an opportunity for persons to move through and occupy different worlds (Lugones 2007, 2010) that blur the lines of gender, sex, sexuality and agency. This fluidity and in many ways freedom — that is central to Carnival — regulates at the same time that it restricts, gender bending and the ability of persons to step outside of the heterosexist gender binary without drawing too much attention to their individual self. Therefore, in a society where homophobia and transphobia is so prevalent, Carnival allows for a less attention-grabbing way for men to play around with their masculinities, for women to push the boundaries of femininity and for gender non-conforming people to [almost] embrace their full selves, if only temporarily. The colonial order attempted to disfigure and mutilate sexuality and desire in the Caribbean. However, Carnival has been able to survive “by withstanding and incorporating [colonial] influences, from within and without, above and below, by adapting the change without changing completely” (Valens 2013, 61).

To mask oneself or to participate in a public exercise of masking that differentiates one's everyday individual self is to intentionally, though not directly, participate in a cultural aesthetic, to express and embrace one's multitude of characters while, at the same time, to survive. The survival aspect is important, as the persistent regulation and policing of bodies and sexualities is one of the most influential offsprings of colonialism and the miscegenation between the law and religion in the English-speaking Caribbean (Alexander 1994; King 2011). This is, partially, what Carnival represents for many Caribbean people. Thus, in many ways it conceals and reveals our inner and outward femininities, masculinities, sexualities and expressions that challenge Western religions but also lay us open to being judged by those very institutions (Tamale 2011; Alexander 2005).

Respectability Politics and Carnival

Generally speaking, the social organizational structure within the English-speaking Caribbean, at least in Grenada, is largely based on respectability and reputational politics that are very much embedded within a colonial history (Wilson 1973; King 2011; Murray 2009). Respectability politics deeply affects how people see themselves and how they are perceived by others and society. It becomes worrisome as these skewed and, many times, imposed views that often go unchallenged, ignore our historical realities allowing for Black men's bodies to be automatically considered as physical and sexual threats and Black women's bodies as unsanctioned hosts for sexual lasciviousness (King 2011). They also limit the imaginations and possibilities through which we can express ourselves.

In his account of his childhood days during Carnival, Grenadian M. Martin Lewis recalls of Carnival, that it

...was like a "people's mas." It had no standards; or rather that all standards could be broken; any standard. No one held you to anything. Lazy or fit you made it up as you went along. No tradition was sacred with Jab; every year was a new year. Fat, skinny, rich, poor all played Jab. Jab was the nearest thing to a classless society and for those two days I relished in it. (Lewis 2012).

Though Lewis is referring specifically to Jab Jab (J'ouvert), these thoughts and feelings of freedom and, in many ways, acceptance, regardless of one's social status, class, gender and race, can be broadly applied to Carnival and thus can also be used to support gendered and sexual freedoms as well.

Samuel Kinser (1999) argues that Carnival's origins in mediaeval times lay bare four aspects — the ecological, the social, the metaphysical and the moral (45). The ecological had to do with the geographical location of the wild people — usually a mysterious, giant figure who is typically in the nude, hairy

and alone. The wild people played a frightening, frolicksome and delightful role in mediaeval Carnival (43). The social had to do with the social and living arrangements of the wild people who lived either alone or in isolated families and thus had “no settled abode and consequently no societies, laws, or the courtly and civil manners accompanying such institutions” (45). The metaphysical had to do with the pagan lifestyles of the wild people. This paganist lifestyle allowed the wild people to live excessively sensuous lives that were “without true — i.e., Christian — spiritual life; hence they are subject to the devil's temptations, and often yield to diabolic prompting” (45). Finally, the moral refers to the irrational and disorderly behaviour and mannerisms of the wild people as a result of their lives and societies being devoid of ecological, social and metaphysical groundings.

These four aspects of mediaeval Carnival can be identified in current day Grenadian Carnival celebrations. Whereas many of the people participating may not want to be referred to as wild people, they do occasionally inhabit bodies of transgression. Throughout Carnival celebrations, there is a wandering, a type of loitering almost, that occurs as people *chip-chip*¹¹ down the streets to the sounds of jab-jab songs and soca, with little or no care in the world. As though without a home, the Carnival revellers embody what Kinser identifies as the wild people. Regarding the social, as already mentioned, Carnival acts as a space for lawlessness. Though state-sanctioned, the actions and bodies that would typically and immediately be labelled as criminal and immoral are allowed limited freedoms within the context of Carnival. Reflecting on this triggered a memory of myself chipping down the road during J'ouvert one morning, absolutely enjoying the dance I was having with this 'masked' stranger — masked because everyone at the time was either covered in tar or blue paint. It was not until the sun had risen and I got a proper glimpse of my very committed dance partner that I realized that he was a well-known homeless person. To my surprise, this homeless person who is a Grenadian national, yet is not regularly afforded the benefits and rights of being a citizen as a result of him being homeless (Alexander 1994), had traversed the boundaries of class, status

and citizenship and for an hour or so was 'human' in my eyes. This led me to engage in a self-reflective practice that forced me to confront my own biases, perceptions and the social and economic spaces that I occupied and how I was complicit in this man's ongoing lived experience of oppression and isolation. Carnival temporarily placed us both on an equal-level playing field.

The metaphysical aspect of Carnival is what intrigues me the most as I truly envision Carnival as a space for African spiritual awakening that I will discuss in further detail. Whereas Kinser's use of the metaphysical is counter to Christianity and, therefore, in some ways, vulnerable to the Devil's temptations, I view this resistance to Christianity as an opportunity to reinsert African spiritualities that were stripped or minimized during colonization.

Regarding the lawlessness aspect of Carnival, apart from the behaviour of Carnival revellers, there is also the nature of the songs used throughout Carnival. One song that stood out in 2012 for its violent lyrics is '*Kick In She Back Door*' by veteran Antiguan band Burning Flames. Here is an excerpt of the lyrics of this song:

[woman screaming]

[man mocking woman's voice "murder murder, ah kill he gine kill me"]

If she front door lock and you can't get in

And she bathroom window lock

And you can't get in

And she bedroom window lock

And you can't get in

And she kitchen window lock

And you can't get in

What to do?

Kick in she back door

Kick in she back door

What ah mean?

Kick um in
And she bawling murder
[more screaming]
I don't really know bout you
But I know just what to do
When a woman batten down she house
Make up she mind to keep you out
You push your key to find it jam
And it in [something] in you hand
So the solution to get inside
Cause she lock down she house so tight
Whether rain or shine
Morning, noon or night
Is the only way to win this fight

Chorus

[more screaming: "Call the police, come of mi yard, you too damn wicked"]

Women does mek things real hard
Especially when they get mad
No matter how hard you try
No easy way to slip inside
So the solution to get inside
Cause she lock down she house so tight
Whether rain or sun
Morning, noon or night
Is the only way to win this fight.

(Borrowed from Code Red for Gender Justice)

The song above illustrates an escalation and extreme of the type of lawlessness that is very present throughout Carnival. This song is violent. It is true that calypso and soca have had a history of including political commentary¹², humour and in many ways debauchery. However, instead of creating and stimulating

movement building, songs like the one above help to ensure that Carnival remains a space where abuse and violence are justified.

Issues of safety are a real concern during the annual Carnival celebrations as illustrated in the song lyrics above and as highlighted in some of the answers provided by the young people I interviewed. When asked what safety meant to them in the context of Carnival, three of the four interviewees talked about sexual assault, harassment, and substance abuse (mainly alcohol related) as having a very real and increasing presence in Carnival (personal interviews, July 2014). One interviewee also highlighted the prevalence of road accidents during Carnival as a result of excessive drinking (personal interview, 18 July 2014). Interestingly enough, the one interviewee who did not list safety as being an issue during Carnival was the sole male-identified person Ron, which I would argue might speak to the level of gender normalization and internalization that people, regardless of gender, embody.

Rhonda stated “safety is an issue during carnival festivities mainly because the focus of Carnival and ‘playing mas’ has shifted from being a form of cultural expression and ‘revelling’ to “drinking as much as possible” (personal interview, 16 July 2014). Therefore, as much as this paper argues for the possible usefulness in freedom and lawlessness present in Carnival, that freedom cannot be absolute, as safety for all bodies, regardless of gender and sexuality, needs to remain a critical part of those discussions.

African Traditions and Spirituality

It is important to examine the ways in which non-heterosexual identities and sexualities are repressed, threatened and erased when exploring masculinities within the context of Carnival and the ongoing colonial project, as non-heterosexual relations generally represent a threat to dominant and hegemonic identities and sexualities on an everyday basis. In the

groundbreaking book, *African Sexualities*, Kopano Ratele examined male sexualities and masculinities in post-colonial Africa:

The mere existence of male-to-male African sexuality makes those who swing that way objects of fear and hate within the dominant sexual system. Males who like penises rather than vaginas are made into outlaws. Where it does not attract overt loathing and phobia, the sexual love of a man for other men almost always makes the man a marginal figure, an outsider within those societies in which patriarchal heterosexual masculinity is normative. Men who love other men end up as objects of homophobic rage because such love disturbs a cornerstone of patriarchal heterosexual power in that it shows that men are not of one mind and feeling when it comes to sexuality. Men who eroticise men instead of women engender a potential crisis in ruling ideas of true masculinity (p. 408 Ratele 2011, citing Edwards 2005).

Having its roots in African cultures and expressions, Carnival can also be said to mirror the fluid gender identities that explicitly existed in some parts of pre-colonial Africa (see Oyewumi 1997; Tamale 2011) and that in many ways, continues to exist on the continent and in many spaces in the Caribbean. According to the work done by Global South feminist Oyeronke Oyewumi, in pre-colonial Nigeria, the imposition of a eurocentric gender system on Yoruba society encompassed the subordination of females in every aspect of gender and life but was not, in fact, an organizing principle in pre-colonial Yoruba society (Lugones 2007, 2010). In Yoruba society, Oyewumi argues, intersexed people did occupy a location within society that was respected and deemed legitimate. Though the terms *obinrin* and *okunrin* have been mistranslated to refer to females and males, respectively, these terms were neither binarily opposed nor hierarchical (Lugones 2007, 2010). During Haiti's Kanaval celebrations, men embody female deities such as *Lasiren* as depicted in Leah Gordon's *Kanaval: Vodou, Politics and Revolution on the Streets of Haiti* exhibit. In the *Madamn Lasiren* segment, 59-year-old Andre Farmer speaks about how

he prepares to be embodied by the spirit of Lasiren, the spirit that he has dreamt about many times and whom his grandmother, father and mother all served (Gordon 2014). An example of African spirituality thriving in Carnival spaces is that of the Oludum bloco Afro in Bahia, Brazil, which celebrated thirty-five years of retaining its African roots on 25 April 2014 — African Liberation Day. The Oludum Band originated out of the Bloco Afro Olodum, founded on 25 April 1979, whose goal was to ensure that Black Bahians were able to participate in Carnival as a group and in an organized fashion (Duarte 2011). The Afro Oludum Band did not just participate in Carnival, they also fought social discrimination and helped to stimulate the self-esteem and self-worth of Afro-Brazilians (Duarte 2011) who faced multiple barriers simply because they were of African descent.

A Carnival band that is even more grounded in African roots and spirituality than the Brazilian Bloco Afro Olodum is the *Ile Aiye* in Brazil. Brazil is an important nation to examine when researching the role of colonization, as it received the highest number of enslaved African people during the Transatlantic Slave Trade, making its geopolitical location and the current state of Black people there deserving of critical attention. *Ile Aiye* is the first Black organization in Brazil, born in *Curuzu Liberdade* Freedom Neighbourhood, where the largest populations of African Brazilians live (Crook 2005). Besides having a strong Carnival presence, *Ile Aiye* honours African people and Black uprisings in Brazil through song, political actions, education and community projects in order to preserve and maintain Africa-Brazil (*Ile Aiye* official website).

The examples of *Ile Aiye* and the Afro Olodum Band remind us of the possibilities of changing the landscape of current Carnival celebrations that are becoming continuously overshadowed by corporate and imperial interests. From the Big Drum¹³ in Carriacou to the J'ouvert and Shortknee on the main island of Grenada, there is a real possibility to reinsert Africa into Carnival and return Carnival to its roots of resistance and community building. From the inclusion of drums and drumming circles to the introduction of an educational aspect tied to the costumes by sharing their histories, Carnival can become

more than a “jump up, drink rum and dance” type of festival. It can be a festival of awakening, community, movement and jubilee.

The interviewees were asked if there were any segments within Carnival that reminded them of African tradition and/or spirituality, to which they all answered yes. They said that J'ouvert and the drumming and chanting associated with Jab were clear indications of a continuing presence of Africanisms (personal interviews). For Ron, the corporeal expressions of African spirituality in Carnival were most evident in J'ouvert. He stated the following:

J'ouvert reminds me a lot of African spirituality. I was having a recent conversation with a friend who I was telling that J'ouvert is about shango. Dirty with old oil, chanting, behind a fat bumper while the music truck boom rattles your bones with jab jab soca with blood and iron seeping through the beat — that's pure shango. It's the reason some Christians say J'ouvert is demonic, though they can't necessarily explain it like I did. That's the way they vilify forms of African spirituality with their colonial gaze. It's spiritual, I love revelling in that shango energy (personal interview)

Unfortunately, a more detailed conversation on Carnival as a site for a (re)grounding in African traditions and spirituality is critical and not adequately addressed in this paper. I did, however, still want to flag the need to continue these conversations, given the increasing commercialization of Carnival and the rapid departure from its traditional beginnings.

Conclusion

In contemporary Grenada, systems of power that were once white, colonial, and dominant are now viewed as the benefits, sacrifices, and fruits of independence, development, and modernity. Slavery and the official existence

of a dominant colonial administration may have come to an end. However, the effects of colonial power continue to be manifested in the uncritical exercise of power by the nation-state, the regulation of our bodies and sexualities and our internalization of heterosexist notions of identity, gender, sex and sexuality.

Particularly in colonial nation states, as in many English-speaking Caribbean islands, where homophobia remains a central tenet of the laws, social norms and societal ideologies, men are afforded the 'safety' of dressing up, acting out and challenging hegemonic masculinity *in the name of mas*'. To assume general safety and acceptance for all non-heterosexual people during Carnival, however, would be irresponsible. This episodic display of gender bending and revelry ultimately challenges the liminality associated with Carnival and forces one to interrogate the possibility of extending this embodiment of reformed masculinities and femininities beyond the colourful walls and fabric of Carnival. In addition, it poses the question of whether Caribbean peoples' interaction with masking during Carnival is an attempt to reconstruct new sexualities, or a return to sexualities that are not dichotomous? Or is it merely performative and in some ways a temporary and superficial engagement with non-hegemonic sexualities?

Can Carnival be actualized as a space to challenge these manifestations of colonized sexualities or is it merely a display of performances exercised for spectators? In Linden Lewis' analysis of the character Aldrick in Earl Lovelace's *The Dance of the Dragon*, Lewis helped to illustrate the purpose of Aldrick's mask during Carnival which was an extension of his identity as a man: it served as the construction and reconstruction of his masculine identity (Lewis 1998). The masking during Carnival represents an uninhibited expression of one's gender, sex, sexuality and desire. It serves as a manifestation of that freedom that is not looked upon with such judgmental eyes and quiet whispers as would be the case if it were not Carnival. Therefore, the relationship with hegemonic masculinity that is heterosexist, that presumes (hetero) sexual prowess,

physicality and violence can be challenged within Carnival, but the challenging needs to extend beyond that.

Carnival can also be a space for political mobilization. King (2011) does an excellent job of examining the role of jamenttes in Carnival and public spaces and how that engenders political action, resistance and the rise of new sexualities. King notes that the same women who were labelled and dismissed as jamenttes were the same women engaged in direct political action in Trinidad (219-220). Carnival was one of those few times where the poor were allowed to engage in public festivities, even to make a parody of the elite, and so these very jamentte women capitalized on the opportunity to shed light on the structural barriers that they and others in their communities faced.

Recently, there has been public outcry and shaming over what is, seemingly, a recent growth and imposition of non-heterosexual forms of interpersonal relations and intimacies that have been labelled as foreign to the populations. This outcry is, therefore, automatically accompanied by a simultaneous re-rooting of the 'good old Christian ways' that are supposedly central tenets of Caribbean civic and cultural life. Somehow, non-heterosexuality is always only, and inherently a Western ideal and somehow counter to what it means to be Black and/or African — this false and problematic assumption demands a further conversation.

When asked about the potential risks of the increasing commercialization of Carnival, the answers from the interviewees illustrated that some were more amenable to the commercialization of Carnival than others. Some felt that it did not threaten the authenticity of the events and that it could potentially benefit the entire Grenadian economy, whereas others, particularly Ron, were of the mind that increasing commercialization meant greater restrictions and possibly heightened safety. But Ron had this to say, "the increasing commercialization of Carnival is slowly effacing all these elements [gender expectations, roles, safety, governance (be it state or self-governance) and African origins] except that it

makes Carnival a bit safer. I prefer the unsafeness if it means it's more grass roots though" (personal interview, 18 July 2014).

Carnival continues to grow and garner increased attention and participation from across the globe, and with this growth comes a threat to the fundamental and ancestral principles that were part of carnival's inception. With the increasing corporatization and commercialization of carnival celebrations, its ability to continue evolving into a liberatory, anti-colonial, and communal space lessens, leaving little room for transformative, anti-capitalist interactions with gender bending, gender, sex, sexual agencies and freedoms. Similar to the ways that tourism departments and governments play into the Western desire to experience the exotic Caribbean with its readily available lovers (Kempadoo 2009), so too Carnival is being sold as an exotic, sex-filled and boundaryless opportunity for Westerners to enjoy. Not only are the revellers allowed to be lawless but so too the onlookers. This is not to minimize the agency of people who may choose to engage in different interactions such as sex work. Rather, the concern here is what the institutionalizing of Carnival as a commodity may do to the traditional and community-building aspect of it and how it may re-entrench asymmetrical power relations. As we grow wary of the recolonizing impacts on our carnival celebrations, may we continue to resist and take ownership over these sacred spaces as they hold the prospect of becoming spaces for sexual and gender revolutions that ensure the valuing of lives and experiences, regardless of where one falls on the gender, class and sex spectrum. As with the Lanse Kod in Haiti's Kanaval (Gordon Kanaval Exhibit 2014), where they carry cords (pieces of rope) to accompany their intentionally darkened skin and horn-covered heads, may we break free of the cords and chains that represent ongoing enslavement, of the corporeal and mental kind, and may our Carnival traditions carry similar revolutionary spirits as evidenced with the Ile Aiye in Brazil.

¹ The J'ouvert celebrations begin around 5am on the Monday morning of the two-day Carnival celebrations after Dimanche Gras. Revellers blackened with tar, stale molasses, grease or mud fill the streets wearing scant clothing and horned helmets with the intention of scaring onlooking masqueraders.

² The final days of festivities on the streets.

³ "The word "Shortknee" was coined back in the 1920s at a time when "Creole English" was supplanting French Patois as the language of the Grenadian folk; prior to the 1920s the mas (masque) was known as "Grenade Pierrot". The Pierrot, a clown, was one of the more colourful items in the cultural *portmanteau* brought to Grenada, Carriacou and Petite Martinique by the French, who ruled the islands from 1650 to 1763 and again from 1779 to 1783.

The word Shortknee is a clear reference to the mas's knee breeches (trousers extending down to or just below the knee) which, like its bodice, are made of brightly coloured cotton fabric. The Shortknee's bodice is fitted with overlong bag sleeves and these are fastened at the wrists. The front and back of the bodice are "dressed up" with tiny mirrors. Though decorative in part, these mirrors function essentially as talismans, for they "protect" the wearer by "reflecting" his enemies. Spicemas Grenada Official website.

⁴ As borrowed from Gloria Wekker's discussion of the Winti religion and the Mati women of Suriname.

⁵ See Wilson, 1973; King, 2011; Murray, 2009.

⁶ Cis-gendered refers to when a person identifies with the biological sex they were assigned at birth.

⁷ Lorde, 1982; Alexander, 2005, p. 49

⁸ See Crichlow, 2004 in *Interrogating Caribbean Masculinities* (ed by Rhoda Reddock), for a detailed and analytical take on the term buller man and batty bwoys.

⁹ Kamala Kempadoo, 2009, also discusses this activity versus identity narrative when she explores the interplay of sex, sexuality and tourism in the Caribbean.

¹⁰ See Maurice Bishop Speaks, 1983, edited by Bruce Marcus and Michael Taber.

¹¹ This refers to the movement and pace of people's feet as they dance along the streets.

¹² See Grenadian calypsonians Black Wizard and Ajamu and Grenadian-Trinidadian The Might Sparrow.

¹³ The Big Drum is a social and religious ritual that has been sustained on the island of Carriacou since enslavement and the arrival of the Cromanti people. Through the Big Drum circles, elders and community members share knowledge of their traditions, lineages and folklore.

Appendix

1. When thinking about gender, gendered expectations and performance, what are some of the thoughts and examples that come to your mind in the context of Carnival?
2. Do you think that your examples mentioned in answer 1 carry any significance to you and, perhaps, the broader Grenadian community?
3. When you think about safety and Carnival, what comes to your mind?
4. Do you see Carnival as more of a self-governed space or more so as a state-sanctioned set of events?
5. How do you think we can address issues of safety during Carnival?
6. Do any aspects of Carnival remind you of general African traditions and/or spirituality?
7. Do you think that the increasing commercialization of carnival places any of the issues listed before, i.e. gender expectations, roles, safety, governance (be it state or self-governance) and African origins, at risk?

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