



Young, Black, Female and Carefree: Reading "Party Done"¹

[Lisa Allen-Agostini](#)

MPhil Candidate, Institute for Gender and Development Studies, St Augustine Unit
The University of the West Indies

Abstract

This paper offers a reading of young black women's sexuality, agency and notions of black female criminality in the music video for the soca song "Party Done" by Angela Hunte and Machel Montano. Given the paucity of active female protagonists in Trinidadian music videos and elsewhere, this video is unique in its use of young, urban, black women as the centre of the work. With reference to positions by Patricia Hill Collins, Rosamond King and others, I deconstruct the video's underlying narrative: black working class women as capable of being "carefree". I make a case that the video is framed as a short film and I read it using film analysis techniques.

Keywords: Trinidad, soca, music video, film, black women, sexuality, agency, criminality, feminist criticism

How to cite

Agostini-Allen, Lisa. 2016. "Young, Black, Female and Carefree: Reading "Party Done"." *Caribbean Review of Gender Studies* 10: 115–126.

Perhaps, instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished historical fact, which the new cinematic discourses then represent, we should be thinking, instead, of identity as a 'production', which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside representation.

— Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation."

Introduction

This essay analyses the visual semiotics of the short film/music video "Party Done" from a black Caribbean feminist perspective, addressing the issues of representation of the young, black, female working class body and young, black, working class woman as agentic and sexually autonomous. The essay also seeks to examine how the film/video subverts or plays into stereotypes of black criminality.

The moving image in Anglophone Caribbean film, television and video—as an industry and as an art—is still in its nascent stage, despite the existence of productions recognised as breakthrough works. However, in the Anglophone Caribbean there has been consistent use of the music video, with dozens made and released across the region every year. Many of them conform to a common formula that does not centre the young, black, female body as anything but a sexual object.

One of Trinidad and Tobago's most prolific artistes in releasing music videos has been soca star Machel Montano. In 2015, the videos he made included one for the hit he sang with US-based singer/songwriter Angela Hunte, "Party Done".

He made the "Party Done" video under the imprint Monk Pictures; the name appears at the start of the video. Monk Pictures seems to style this music video as a short film, as the credits rolling at either end of the four-and-a-half-minute production may signify.² It was directed by Jerome Guiot, a successful European music video director who has made incursions into Caribbean film as one of the directors of the 2014 feature-length documentary film *PAN! Our Music Odyssey*.

It is partly these factors that lead me to consider the “Party Done” music video as a kind of short film and therefore to use film criticism techniques in discussing it. It is also the film/video itself that leads me to take this position, as it presents a narrative storyline and is filmed with profound artistry and sophistication, reminiscent of the style of the now classic film *City of God*.³

Although in most Caribbean music videos the performers are the stars, Montano and Hunte, the singers of “Party Done”, only appear in the film/video in cutaway shots of them singing the song's chorus. The three protagonists in the film/video are young, black, working class, city-dwelling women who engage in a variety of sexually and socially transgressive acts. For reasons outlined above, I read this music video as a short film with little relationship to the song's lyrics, while recognising that it is ostensibly a commercial for the song.

Discussion

The film/video is markedly different from the typical music videos produced in the region and is therefore, in my opinion, worthy of comment. The young black woman is rarely portrayed as autonomous and agentic in music videos, if one defines “agency” as “an individual's capacity for action” (McNay 2005, 179) that is independent of the male protagonist's wants and needs.

The “Party Done” film/video subversively portrays the female protagonists as “carefree black girls”. The “carefree black girl” is a rarely-seen type of representation that the Internet pop culture and film critic Fanta Sylla calls “a utopian and futuristic project” in which black women have “the ability to transform themselves, to change and circulate as they wish” (Sylla 2014). I say “subversively” because the predominant tropes of black women in international film and music videos remain largely true to the stereotypes of the Jezebel, the Mammy, the angry black woman and the sexual victim (Hall 2013, 251; Hobson 2002, 46).⁴ In film, it is often the (white) male protagonist who is allowed to be carefree without consequence—a quintessential such character being portrayed by Matthew Broderick in the 1986 US film *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*. As in that film, “Party Done” uses the common cinematic trope of a devil-may-care young person stealing an expensive car without legal or moral consequence as

a gesture of social defiance and evidence of their insouciance. This can be compared with perhaps the most famous film about female black criminality, the 1996 Hollywood action film *Set it Off*, in which four black women become bank robbers and are violently killed or forced into exile as a penalty. For other representative images of black criminality one need only open a newspaper or turn on a TV, as news and entertainment images of black youth as drug dealers, thugs or guns for hire are commonplace in the region and internationally. Can the viewer cast aside historical and contemporary narratives of black criminality and see three young black women stealing an expensive car as merely an expression of insouciance and fun?

The visual semiotics of the average soca video fit the pervasive gendered power discourse in the global music video industry. The male performer is the primary focus, while others appearing in the video are there to support or enhance his position of dominance and his masculinity—whether or not the song being illustrated is explicitly about masculinity and domination. Soca music videos tend to be non-narrative performances, with the performer lip-synching the lyrics while nubile women in skimpy outfits or Carnival costumes appear as background dancers. For example, in different ways the video for Mr Killer's 2013 soca song "Rolly Polly", Montano's video for "Like a Boss", Benjai's "Phenomenal", Olatunji's "Wining Good", Fadda Fox's "Ducking", Kes the Band's "Million" and many, many others adhere to this formula.⁵ The skimpy and/or sexualised outfits of the female dancers who often appear in soca videos illustrate the (male) performer's phallic masculinity: he is so powerful that he has access to multiple, sexually attractive, young female bodies.⁶

In the soca industry—as in pop and other genres—in videos where the main performer is female, she is often fetishised, dressed in sexually provocative clothing as Alison Hinds is in her 2007 soca video for "Roll it Gal", Denise Belfon is in her 2013 soca video "Wining Queen", Patrice Roberts is in the 2009 video for "Tempa Wine" and a cartoon Destra Garcia is in her animated video for 2015's "Lucy". The female performer and the other female bodies in the video are positioned as the object of desire for either the male characters in the video or the very audience itself.

Female bodies are often shown as fragmented in music videos, with close-up shots reducing them to their essential sexual aspects: a pair of buttocks, a

gyrating waist, a flash of breast. In her germinal 1975 essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema", Laura Mulvey calls these "moments of erotic contemplation" of the female form that connote "to-be-looked-at-ness". This is accomplished through cinematic techniques of lighting, camera angles and editing that mirror the male gaze and exult in fetishistic scopophilia. In a 2002 commentary on Mulvey's essay, black feminist scholar Janell Hobson additionally notes that the black female body fulfils roles in Anglo-American cinema that are different from white female bodies, and the eroticised black female body may represent "a wildness that signifies the nonwhite, often read in contrast to the 'white,' who is orderly, controlled, neat, virtuous and pure" (48-49). In international cinema as in the generic soca video, the young black female body has been seldom represented as having agency and autonomy, but has been reduced to the representation of its sexual utility. As bell hooks writes in the essay "The Oppositional Gaze," "Conventional representations of black women have done violence to the image" of black women (1992, 120). The "Party Done" film/video has had little to no formal critical response. As a black Caribbean feminist I think it is important to respond to the portrayal in the film/video and to question the representations therein.

The "Party Done" film/video differs from the mainstream soca video. It is a narrative about female empowerment—and not merely female empowerment but *poor, black, young* female empowerment. Rachel Moseley-Wood, in analysing the Jamaican feature film *Dancehall Queen*, argues that the film makes an "attempt to validate" the version of female sexuality of the dancehall (Moseley-Wood 2007, 390), referencing Carolyn Cooper's characterisation of the female sexuality of the dancehall space in Jamaica as liberatory and consciously assertive of women's own sexual representation (388). I think this liberation and assertion of female sexuality is what "Party Done" is trying to portray.

Scene Analysis

In the following paragraphs I give a close reading of the film/video, examining its semiotics and highlighting the class contrasts in the imagery. Through this reading I seek to show the ways in which the protagonists are represented as having agency over their bodies and sexuality. I also discuss the notion of black

criminality and how the heroines of "Party Done" commit criminal acts without penalty.

The first frames of "Party Done" show a working-class apartment in a rundown, urban neighbourhood, the Nelson Street "plannings"⁷ on the poor side of Port-of-Spain, where a young woman is getting dressed to go out. She is smoking a cigarette—itsself marking her as transgressive, as a woman smoking cigarettes is still considered in Caribbean culture. Her next act is to finish dressing: pulling a pink cheetah print tank top over her bra, and adjusting her tight gold lamé short pants. She sprinkles baby powder on her chest—a signifier of cleanliness in Trinidad working class women's culture but widely ridiculed by other classes. The powder remains visible as part of the performance of girl- or womanhood.⁸

The woman peeps through a doorway in the apartment at a man who is sitting watching television in the next room before she ducks out a bedroom window to climb down a fire escape and join a second woman in the yard below—she is literally transgressing the boundaries of the domestic space to which she has perhaps been restricted. The second woman is wearing hair extensions in thick, multicoloured braids, and sports very short cut-off jeans, visually fitting the same "ghetto" aesthetic as the first woman.

The pair walks to a small roadside shop in the neighbourhood and ask for rum. The shopkeeper hands it to them through a space in the BRC⁹ wire grill over the counter that separates the customers from the shopkeeper. This arrangement of space and barriers is typical of a small retail establishment in working class areas and could be contrasted with the open shelves customers are free to browse through in middle class shops on the other—the middle-class—side of the city. The women ask for ice but as soon as the shopkeeper turns his back they run off with the bottle of rum—their first criminal act in the film.

Next we see them laughing, leaning against an old, graffiti-covered city wall. They begin walking and dancing in the street. Significantly, the shots of the women dancing do not focus on their buttocks or waists as most soca videos would; the camera angles used to film their dancing in the street in this video place no extraordinary emphasis on their sexual body parts. In a later scene they sit on a shopfront stoop and eat fried chicken, smoke cigarettes and drink

straight rum by the capful—all of which mark them as the inheritors of the 19th century “jamette” woman who emerged in Trinidad after the end of plantation slavery. Rosamond King (2011) describes the jamette as a black person from the underclass; the jamette woman flaunts her sexuality, flouts the law, and posed a threat to Victorian mores. King describes jamette women as being “engaged in a range of sexual activity disapproved of by the colonial elite” (221). The jamettes, King says, were both disruptive to the colonial elite’s standards and empowering to a class of people who had previously been enslaved and made economically and socially powerless.

As they sit beside the road, they spot yet another young woman—also similarly dressed—who is in an old sedan taxi driven by a middle-aged man. Joining her, all three women swig from the stolen bottle of rum and smoke cigarettes in the taxi, even though it is illegal to smoke in a taxi and most taxis in Trinidad discourage eating and drinking while in the vehicle. They even wine¹⁰ on top of the car. The driver grows increasingly irate until he throws them out of the taxi. Undeterred, the three of them wine in the streets as passersby watch. Again, the predominant use of medium and long shots rejects the fragmentation and objectification of their bodies that would be caused by close-up shots of their hips, breasts, buttocks or waists.

Next, without paying for entry, they force their way into Aria, a middle-class dance club on Ariapita Avenue, literally at the opposite end of the city of Port-of-Spain from Nelson Street—three modern jamette women discomforting the middle- and upper-class elite as jamette women do. There they continue drinking and wining. The bar at the uptown dance club is strikingly different from the women’s home milieu: it is clean and lit in neon colours and there is no wire grill separating the bartender from the customer.

At the club, the women become the centre of attention on the dance floor. Here, although not as strictly as before, the camera work shows them in ways that permit the viewer to see them as whole persons. Although a few shots do emphasise the fragmentation of their bodies into sexual parts, the women’s wining performance seems to be for their own pleasure, not for the pleasure of male onlookers. There are no shots of anyone attempting to dance with them until one of the women starts kissing a besotted-looking middle-class young man and stealthily eases his car keys from his pocket. Giggling, the three women run

out into the street and drive off in his car, a Porsche SUV (a type of car that costs about one million TT dollars). Still in high spirits, they drive to the beach.

The overall impression of this part of the film is one of joy, playfulness and youthful irresponsibility that does not cross over into criminality despite the women's literally criminal actions. As the sun comes up over the beach, the music ends and the women sit quietly, contemplatively. Perhaps the first woman is thinking about returning to the restrictive environment of the apartment from which she stole away and the man she left there the night before; or perhaps they are all comparing the dingy, dirty East Port-of-Spain neighbourhood from which they came with the sleekly expensive SUV they have stolen. Whatever their thoughts, there are no telltale wail of sirens, flashing police car lights, gun shots or any other indication of a looming threat of legal or moral consequence for their actions. They seem to get away with stealing the car as easily as they got away with stealing the rum and shoving their way into the nightclub without paying the night before.

Black US feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins argues in her essay "Learning from the Outsider Within": "The insistence on Black female self-definition reframes the entire dialogue from one of determining the technical accuracy of an image, to one stressing the power dynamics underlying the very process of definition itself. [...] Regardless of the actual content of Black women's self-definitions, the act of insisting on Black female self-definition validates Black women's power as human subjects" (1986, S17). I see the "Party Done" video as an attempt to recast the image of female black criminality as agency, and to celebrate black female autonomous sexuality as symbolised by the women's wining.

Having grown up as a working-class black girl in Morvant, a suburb of Port-of-Spain, I am all too familiar with the notion of black criminality. Given that, when I first saw the film/video for "Party Done", I asked myself why on earth would someone make a film in which, as part of their *fun*, three black working-class women steal a million-dollar vehicle. Doesn't that just play into the stereotype of the black criminal? But why *not* have them steal a car? Stealing a car is a popular trope in white Hollywood films as a signifier of youthful rebellion. For example, the IMDB page for the film *Sleepover* says the white teenage girl protagonists "sneak out of the house, steal a car, snatch a cute boy's boxer shorts, crash a high school dance, and torment a security guard with an inflated

ego". As previously indicated, a central act of rebellion in the 1986 film *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* is the title character's stealing a car. In neither of these films are the protagonists labeled as criminal because of the theft of a car.

Conclusion

Cultural theorist Stuart Hall notes it is possible to subvert racist regimes of representation from the inside by "contesting from within", using the "complexities and ambivalences of representation" to un-fix stereotypes (2013, 274). This is what I argue is being done with the image of the playful theft of the Porsche SUV. Importantly, in the film/video itself there are no negative consequences shown: the young women are not penalised for stealing the car or the bottle of rum and there is no moral lesson at the end of the film/video as to the negative price the criminal acts could incur. Within the universe of the film/video itself, the young women are heroic, facing the dawn and all it symbolises: fresh starts, new days and boundless opportunity.

Thus, in the tradition of these jamette women, the women in "Party Done" represent boldness, audacity and self-confidence. These are not women beaten down by the idea of poverty or disenfranchisement implied by the urban ghetto in which they live; they are women who are courageous and confident enough to claim a street or a club as their own. They are not backup dancers or props in someone else's video; they are the stars of the film and the centre of the narrative. And, most importantly, they are having fun and nobody is beating them or taking advantage of them; they are the ones in control of their movement across the city and they ways in which they dance and comport themselves.

Using old tropes in new ways, the "Party Done" video portrays young black "ghetto" women protagonists as having agency and sexual autonomy, unlike the usual portrayal of poor black women in film or soca music videos. Embedded in the portrayal are significations that hark back to the agentic jamette woman, who was a sexually and socially transgressive urban figure. By appropriating the Hollywood trope of a young person stealing a car, the film recasts black criminality in a new light and shows the possibility that young black women can be carefree figures in film.

¹ A previous version of this essay was published in two parts in the *Trinidad Guardian* on February 24 and March 10, 2015. I am grateful to my cohort at IGDS who encouraged me to discuss the video in my column, and to Dr Angelique Nixon who has offered valuable feedback on this present paper.

² "Like a Boss" also uses the Monk Pictures imprint at its start, and "On My Way", yet another 2015 Montano video, uses end-roll credits, but no other 2015 video by Montano uses both.

³ *City of God*, a 2002 Brazilian crime drama film, directed by Fernando Meirelles and Kátia Lund, was widely praised for its dramatic, groundbreaking cinematography and evocation of the poverty and violence of the Brazilian slums and criminal underworld.

⁴ These stereotypes persist in contemporary film; as of April 2016 the last three black women to win Academy Awards in the US played a slovenly, abusive mother, a maid and a slave, respectively, reprising versions of these stereotypes. In Caribbean cinema comparable types might be "the fallen woman", "the village busybody", and "the longsuffering mother". I have not found an analysis of this topic in Caribbean cinema, so perhaps if it has not already been analysed it could be a future project for Caribbean film scholars.

⁵ All music videos referenced in this article can be found on the video file-sharing website YouTube.

⁶ This formula is not exclusively deployed in the soca video but is standard in contemporary music and is found in reggae, dancehall, hip hop, R&B and pop, ranging from the 1985 Robert Palmer pop video "Addicted to Love", in which identically made-up young women in identical mini-dresses play a musical band behind lead singer Palmer; to the controversial 2013 R&B video "Blurred Lines" by Robin Thicke, Pharrell and TI, in which semi-nude women adopt various sexualised and animalistic poses in interaction with the singers.

⁷ Low-cost government housing in multi-storey apartment buildings.

⁸ Visual artist Marlon Griffith showed photographs of various people with powder on their chests as part of his 2012 installation *The Ballad of Francisco Bobadilla*, in a series called *The Powder Box Schoolgirl Series*. "You wouldn't find a girl in St Joseph's (Convent) with powder around her neck. It comes from your background, class, the kind of people you interact with," Griffith said in a 2012 newspaper article (Drakes 2012). In the "Party Done" video, both the setting and her appearance locate the woman protagonist within an urban, working class milieu—commonly labelled "ghetto".

⁹ "BRC" is the common name for welded steel wire mesh used in construction. It is sometimes used for fences or partitions in the Caribbean.

¹⁰ The *wine* is an informal dance commonly practiced in the Caribbean. In a *Caribbean Beat* article on the topic, I defined it as "to move your hips and waist in a 'winding' motion, hence the name" (Allen-Agostini 2006).

References

- Allen-Agostini, Lisa. 2006. "Wining Words: A Trinidad Carnival Wining Dictionary." *Caribbean Beat*, Issue 77.
- Collins, Patricia Hill. 1986. "Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought." *Social Problems*, Vol.33 No.6, pp. S14-S32.
- Drakes, Sean. 2012. "Powdered Necks Artist Searches for Origin of School Ritual." *Trinidad Guardian*, October 21, 2012.
- Hall, Stuart. 1996. "Cultural Identity and Cinematic Representation." In *Black British Cultural Studies: A Reader*. Houston A Baker, Manthia Diawara and Ruth H Lindeborg (eds).
- Hall, Stuart. 2013. "The Spectacle of the 'Other'." In *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (2 ed.) Stuart Hall, Jessica Evans and Sean Nixon (eds). 225-285. London: Sage.
- Hobson, Janell. 2002. "Viewing in the Dark: Toward a Black Feminist Approach to Film." *Women's Studies Quarterly*, Vol.30, No. 1/2, pp.45-59.. Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40004636>
- hooks, bell. 1992. *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. Brooklyn, NY: South End Press.
- King, Rosamond S. 2011. "New Citizens, New Sexualities." In *Sex and the Citizen: Interrogating the Caribbean*. Faith Smith (ed). 214-223. Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press.
- McNay, Lois. 2005. "Agency and Experience: Gender as a Lived Relation." *The Sociological Review*, Vol.52, Supplement 2, pp. 173-190. <http://ejournals.ebsco.com/direct.asp?ArticleID=4E9D9C5E7DA925F8F010>
- Mosely-Wood, Rachel. 2007. "Jamaica's Emerging Tradition in Film: Presenting the Female Body in *Dancehall Queen*." In *Caribbean Culture: Soundings on Kamau Brathwaite*. Annie Paul (ed). Kingston, Jamaica: University of the West Indies Press.
- Mulvey, Laura. 1975. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." Originally published in *Screen* Vol. 16, No.3, pp.6-18. <http://www.jahsonic.com/VPNC.html>
- Sylla, Fanta. 2014. "Carefree Black Girls, Interrupted: on *Girlhood*, a Film by Céline Sciamma." <http://www.blackgirlstalking.com/annex-home/2015/8/5/carefree-black-girls-interrupted>