



“Deh Say I’s Ah Madman”: Soca Performance, Afro-Caribbean Masculinities, and the Metaphorization of Madness

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Abstract Despite its prevalent usage within soca music, little scholarly literature has explored how sonic, lyrical and embodied representations of dis/ability permeate throughout the genre to perform critical genealogies of transgressive Caribbean gender practices. In this article I interrogate the dissemination and deployment of madness as metaphor in soca performance, particularly through embodiments of Carnavalesque sensibilities and the pedagogies of non-normativity they articulate. Such performances, I argue, position soca as an inherently “mad music” where disruptive ontological methodologies of speaking, sounding, and embodying cultural resistance have been cultivated through explorations of disability. These representations and methods of using such “mad archives” in projects of self-making, and more specifically Afro-Caribbean masculinity, is explored through the “madman” personae (c. 2003) of Machel Montano and recent soca star Uncle Ellis. Simultaneously, I critique these representations for the ways they perpetuate mental health stigma and ableism in the realms of Caribbean popular culture.

Keywords: Soca, carnival, madness, mental health, stigma, ableism

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Introduction

The affective and transgressive powers of Carnival and Carnival performance can be traced through its genealogy as a disruptive to regimes of normality and technologies of state control and surveillance, specifically in relation to Afro-Caribbean communities and histories. Soca music, the dominant sound of the festivity is thus, by extension, also inextricably linked to such emancipatory ideologies within the Caribbean region and transnationally within its diasporas. In accordance with Bakhtinian logics of the carnivalesque, soca sounds and instructs its participants to perform joyful improprieties as cultural resistance. In moments of ephemeral, albeit collective transgressive performance such as within soca fêtes, Carnival participants disregard and reject Euro-American structures of normalcy – and particularly notions of respectability and reputation (Pinto 2009) – to speak feminist and decolonial action through the body. Here, participants engage in temporary moments of unruliness, transgressive demeanour, performances of illicit sexuality and other acts of cathartic looseness that work to engender a politics of refusal towards (neo)colonial forces of regulation – a distinct transgressive Caribbean performativity also colloquially referred to as “free up”.

Rooted in liberational practice, Carnival performance importantly sounds and embodies Caribbean theories of the flesh, whereby the corporeal archive becomes the site of ancestral/historical knowing, (re)memory and being. Extending the work of important transnational feminists, activists and scholars Gloria Anzaldúa and Cherríe Moraga (2015), who coin this term, this article asks us to reflect on salient strategies that soca and Carnival performance provide to speak such transgressive forms of embodied subjectivity. When also contextualized to the realm of popular culture, soca becomes the arbiter of Carnival's radical and insurgent spirit. When soca is sung, and danced to, Carnival bodies excavate and resurge important historical practises of resistance, self-making, and political activism, furthermore articulating languages of self that can only be housed and understood through such decolonial corporealities.¹

Despite soca performance often being represented as a site of apolitical celebration, joyousness and fun, I suggest that soca has always provided its audiences with resources to think, communicate and perform affective decolonial epistemologies through the body and has never been bifurcated from political praxis. In particular, I investigate how the metaphorization of madness and mental disability is a central mechanism by which such embodied political performances of self are enacted, most of which are recontextualized with new meaning and reconfigurations that move in and out of the (ableist) pejorative. Such forms of madness as self-making instead work to infuse scripts of disablement with agentive potential to perform radical and transgressive Caribbean subjectivities.² For instance, soca lyrics consistently refer to performances of raced/gendered/sexualized improprieties and deviancy as “crazy”, “insane”, “mad”, “slack”, “bad”, “addictive”, and “troubling”. Descriptive terms of madness and ability such as these appear as complex parts of a regional and diasporic cultural lexicon, often employed with a pejorative rhetoric of ableism. Yet despite soca’s heavy use of ableist language, the scholarly and popular literature surrounding the genre has largely overlooked the genealogies and vernacular location of such cultural representations.

In addition, the soca archive is critical to conversations of mental health and ableism in Caribbean communities especially as uses of madness to reference the marginality of Blackness in a global white supremacist racial order garners much currency as a vernacular mechanism to perform bacchanalian attitudes, histories, and ontologies within Carnival geographies. As Moya Bailey (2011) suggests in her study of Blackness, disability and African-American hip-hop music cultures, the social embrace of mental disability and madness, despite stigmatizing and ableist³ implications (which I will discuss later in this article), can be celebrated for their “intentional transgressive powers” providing Black communities with opportunities and resources to challenge their racial marginalization historically and in contemporary moments (143). Offering a relatively overlooked reading of soca music, I suggest that the liberating affect of madness contained within the genre does not act as mere apolitical entertainment but function as ideological weaponry to effectively disturb the

status quo and speak the self. These sonic modalities of being and languages of self reflect how marginalized communities "...navigate intricate desires, hierarchies of race, gender and sexuality, institutions of power and social structures of violence that have historically and continue to disproportionately impact the livelihood of themselves and their communities" (Garcia-Rojas 2017, 255-256).

Reframing arguments of resistance through reclamation offered by Ariane Cruz (2016) through her theorization of the politics of perversion, the affective "mad" qualities of soca perform a particular type of ontological work that reconfigures cultural signs and symbols which have been commonly rendered as deviant and pathological for their agentic potentials. In soca, Carnival bodies effectively work to queer Caribbean ideologies of normativity through such corporeal communications. This is enacted while simultaneously enabling us to see how performances of madness and mental disability can be disseminated for emancipatory means – a performance politic I illustrate through reimagining soca texts and the genre as a "mad music." Performing madness as "psychosocial alterity", as first conceptualized by La Marr Jurelle Bruce (2012), offers us a grammar to unpack how playing the mad "...functions as variable foil to normative notions of reason and order" (372), although, as he also reminds us, for the Black body to embrace madness as a language of self becomes "risky business" as it becomes double crossed by historical anti-Black myths of Black savagery, subrationality (371) and one's "mental unsoundness" (2017, 304).⁴

While some may argue that metaphorizing madness and mental disability is a cause of concern and harm and should be done away with, critical disability scholars such as Clare Barker (2011) and Sami Shalk (2018) note that arguments that erase "ableist metaphors" – or performances/readings that use disability to imply limitation, damage, or other negative concepts (Shalk 2018, 39) – as non-valuable sites of scholarly inquiry elide the very real material consequences of those living with and identifying as mad or mentally disabled. In paying attention specifically to the Caribbean as a site of analysis, a limited engagement with

disability situated on the material without looking at the metaphorical or representational continues a project of treating disability singularly, and not through an intersectional consciousness. Instead, this article seeks to follow interventions provided to us by Shalk (2018), Erevelles (2011a) and Barker (2011) that argue that the construction of disability works through the material and metaphorical simultaneously and must be theorized in its historical, and representational specificity. This also allows us to unpack the ways in which race, gender and disability overlap as well as amplify and reinforce each other (Koivisto 2017, 165).

I draw upon intersectional theoretics offered by mad and disability studies, Black studies, Caribbean studies, ethnomusicology and transnational feminisms to investigate the ways in which, as Robert McRuer (2006) has importantly pointed out: *what might it mean to desire disability?* Or as Shalk (2018) pushes forward: *what might it mean to desire disability differently?* I extend these questions to further ask: what might it mean to make new meaning of mental disability and madness – one that is not eternally fixed within tropes of danger, violence, aggression, harm, and woundedness but in its reconfiguration for radical and transgressive reidentification? As Shalk (2018) reminds us, what would a mad performativity look like outside of “stereotypical stories of pity, helplessness, and victimhood, of evil, bitterness and abjection, of nonsexuality and isolation, of overcoming and supercrips?” (2) At the same time, what are the stakes of engendering such representations of madness and mental disability as an ontological grammar and performance politic?

I explore these representations of madness through the “madman personae” (c. 2003) of Machel Montano and recent soca star Uncle Ellis to explore sonic and embodied representations of Caribbean madness.⁵ At the same time, I also critique these representations for the ways in which they have perpetuated mental health stigma and misrepresented the realities of those who are publicly rendered mentally disabled and mad in the Caribbean. In particular, my analysis of Uncle Ellis’ (2017) carnival hit “I Doh Mind” unpacks the multidimensional

complexities in performing madness as a practice of self-making by someone who is often publicly rendered and self-identifying as "mad" outside of the performative soca arena, unlike Montano. Ellis' work importantly highlights dual readings of the genre: madness as metaphor and as a practice of emancipatory reidentification and reclamation. A consideration of both these artists will be effective in reminding Caribbean audiences how, in the words of feminist musicologist William Cheng, "disability gets packaged, distorted, sanitized, and mobilized to commercial and ideological ends".

Contextualizing Madness in Contemporary Soca Music

The "mad" potentials of Carnival can be most overtly seen within soca texts. Soca is often lyricized as a sonic spirit carrying viral, pathological and penetrating potentials. The ubiquity of scripted madness and its penetrative force is widely understood as a central trope of the Carnival spirit, a bacchanalian entity that runs through the bloodlines of its Caribbean subjects. Destra Garcia's "Bacchanal" (2009) offers one of many examples of this:

'Cus when de music hits de brain, it goin' crazy,
Ah can jump fuh miles an' miles an' feel no pain,
It's in my blood, it's in my face,
Can't wash it off, I'm forever stained...

Evident from Garcia's lyrics, the madness created by soca is untreatable, uncontrollable and incorrigible, which are all conditions similarly attached to those who are rendered "mad" in the Caribbean region. In the Caribbean, madness is often described as an invisible ailment that exists in polarity to those who are deemed "mentally disabled", a condition that can be diagnosed and treated. As the antithesis to mental disability – structured through diagnoses that have largely been formulated through Eurocentric paradigms in the Caribbean imagination (Gorman 2016; Bell 2011; Erevelles 2011a) – "madness" is imagined

as permanent and pervasive; a “pan-affliction” influencing all areas of the person’s functioning. The main difference being that those identified as “mentally disabled” or “ill” are still able to “function properly” in specific environmental settings (Arthur, Hickling and Robertson-Hickling 2010, 265) whereas madness is an eternal pathology.

Indeed, an exploration of metaphorical madness in soca is important because, as Stephen Harper (2009) suggests, madness is understood through multiplicity and specificity and must be discussed in relation to the social, political and economic contexts of the subject’s life. Through soca’s association with Carnival, we can see how the genre must be understood through such “pathological” performativities rooted in histories of the transatlantic slave trade, and resistance to European colonialism. Indeed, the recognition of soca’s rootedness in Carnival is salient as “disability” becomes a condition of becoming for those who take part in the rite, specific to the historical and material context out of which it emerges (Erevelles 2011a, 26). Indeed, soca and soca bodies have always been rendered mad.

Since soca is often lyricized in medicalized terms, we can explore notions of madness in the region through the pathological effects the music produces. This is evidenced in the following examples. First, in *Soca Virus* (2016), the genre is shown to enact uncontrollable and unstoppable bodily behaviours that act as contagions, moving through Caribbean bodies through sonic transmissions. As Destra Garcia sings:

If yuh want to wine, it's a symptom,
Dance tuh every song, it's a symptom,
Yuh wan to sit still but yuh foot tappin',
Yuh might be infected...
Once de music attack yuh brain, yuh could feel it,
Like a sickness takin ovah,

Every song you hear playin', you could feel it,
Like a sickness takin' ovah,
Like yuh goin' insane, yuh could feel it,
Like a sickness takin' ovah...

In Patrice Roberts "Judgement Stage" (2019), we also see how the madness of soca causes aggression, irrational behaviour, and performances of disobedience that move through sound to activate and resurge Afro-Caribbean genealogies of feminist performance such as through references to the nineteenth-century Afro-Caribbean "jammette" figure⁷. She sings:

When yuh see meh start wine and misbehave,
Doh judge meh, doh judge meh,
Cause dat how I does get on when ah in ah rage,
Doh judge me...

I ready fuh de madness, ah ready fuh it,
Ah ready tuh get wotless, ah ready fuh it,
Carnival got me obsessed, de stage look like ah magnet,
Ah wining like a jammette, ah ready for it

And in "Socaritis" (2015), also sung by Patrice Roberts, we hear the following:

Ah wake up dis morning wit ah funny feelin' again,
Ah just cyah behave,
Ah feel as high as de ceiling,
Ah just cyah behave,
Meh whole body start to tremble,

Feel like ah have socaritis,
Meh waist ah start to wiggle,
Feel like ah have socaritis,
Ah feel like to cause some trouble,
Feel like ah have socaritis

In Socaritis, soca is imagined to possess and infiltrate the bodies of soca audiences. Much like the presence of spirit intrusion common within Afro-Caribbean folklore/spiritual practices that is believed to cause madness upon entry into the body (Littlewood 1988, 135), aurally disseminated soca penetrates and infects the body, causing symptoms of lack of control and embodiments of disreputableness.⁸ As a “mad music”, and through its Carnival parentage, soca carries an association with all things unconventional and sounds difference. Consequently, we also see how the musics of mad artists or mad sound carry disruptive potentials as dynamic entities that resist or refuse normality, and reconfigure the hegemonic scripts of madness assigned to them. Furthermore, as Nicola Spelman (2012) argues in *Popular Music and the Myths of Madness*, mad genres like soca perform a desire to play the deviant (160) and express how categories of identity – disability, race, and gender – intersect, cross-over, and work together to impact and speak to the lives of those who are multiply marginalized.

Contextualizing Aesthetic Production at the Intersections of Blackness and Disability

Historical trajectories of madness also show us how colonial perceptions of hegemonic difference such as racism read Blackness as disability - a crucial linkage salient to understanding the musical personae of madmen in soca. Indeed, we cannot discuss Montano's performance of madness without interrogating how discourses of the mad in Caribbean spaces are also intimately

wrapped up in imaginings and perceptions of anti-Blackness set in histories of enslavement and coloniality.

In Hortense Spillers' (1987) canonical essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book", we are reminded of the ways in which the stark materiality of the body, Black flesh and, by extension, contemporary Black ethnicity, have been constituted by the violence's, wounds and injuries enacted by the transatlantic slave trade, and Euro-American imperialist projects. Using slavery as our historical point of departure, we understand that it was under colonial, slavocratic and white-supremacist regimes that enslaved Africans and their descendants were consistently coded and imagined as "savage, mentally defective, psychically unsound, always already, or almost mad" (Bruce 2012, 373) as well as "deranged", "wild", and "perverse" (Bruce 2017, 304). Furthermore, as Bailey and Mobley (2019) suggest, this historicity provides evidence for understanding the ways in which Blackness has been continually used to mark disability and consequently, of subhuman status (24). The disability of Blackness is not just a symbolic trope but actually designates Black impairment that mobilizes through colonial continuities and becomes reproduced in contemporary social and economic contexts (Erevelles 2011b, 41).

Indeed, the project of colonialism and enslavement was not just one of power, exploitation and hegemony but also one of undoing Black humanity through disablement. Thus, any critical investigation of madness must also confront matters of anti-Blackness for it is only through this dichotomization of whiteness/Blackness, sanity/insanity, normality/abnormality, able-minded/disabled, that the racial otherness of Blackness is able to be polarized against the "superiority", "healthiness", and "saneness" of whiteness. As Bruce (2017) importantly reminds us, Europeans were only able to construct their ideas around biological, social and cultural "superiority" and their identities as "free" and "reasonable" by rendering Blackness as the "antithetical embodiment of *unfreedom* and *unreason*" (304). Therefore, the knowledges produced and performed in

Carnival should not only be understood as sites of harm and injury, but also of agentive mobilization, reclamation, and resistance by “wounded flesh” that foregrounds embodiment as a significant political site, practice of speaking oneself (Million 2009) and way of knowing and seeking justice centred on Afro-Caribbean emotional experience and history.

The disability of Blackness is important to recognize when performed because as an aesthetic practice, madness acquires aesthetic value as it represents, for cultural producers, a critical resource for thinking about what it means to be and desire “abnormality” and mental difference (Siebers 2010, 3). Yet, what does it mean also to perform disability, and madness to radically rewrite abject identities in the Caribbean context?

Machel “Madman” Montano

Prior to the colonization of the Caribbean, the madman was already a widely circulated and visible image in Europe who represented a divergence from society's accepted norms of sanity that included roles such as the “maniac”, the “idiot”, the “melancholic”, the “wild man” or the “possessed”. These mobilized portrayals are important to interrogate because they heavily produce stigma that essentialize pejorative characteristics to those who are rendered or identify as mad, or mentally disabled. Several scholars have analyzed the visual and performance archive of madness including Mikko Koivisto (2017), Alex Porco (2014), Michael Birch (2012), Nicola Spelman (2012), Moya Bailey (2011), Greg Philo et al. (1996) and in the Caribbean context, Arthur Carlotta, Frederick W. Hickling and Hilary Robertson-Hickling (2010) have argued that popular media has been complicit in perpetuating misrepresentations about the mad that feed and fuel violent and uninformed ideologies of mental otherness into numerous cultural milieus. Embedded in the act of stigmatizing is a power imbalance where able-minded social actors distinguish, label and assign phenotypic and behavioural differences with stereotyped attributes. In this sense, disability is aestheticized and circulated as cultural capital to participate

in a system of knowledge, advantage, and privilege that provides feelings of able-minded superiority and a critical consciousness of relationality between disabled and mad bodies and those rendered "normal" and able-minded (Siebers 2010, 20). Yet, when disability is desired, such performances blur the boundaries between power and abjection (Price 2015, 275).

In the case of Machel Montano, the madman is personified during performance through facial expressions, sound, embodied gestures, dance and the voice to mark himself as violent and uncontrollable – sonically and visually depicted as such in order to symbolize and offer deviancy as a Carnival ontology.⁹ Yet, his presentation of the madman deserves our attention and critique because it engenders an ableist performance of Carnival sensibilities. Montano has never identified as mad, or mentally disabled outside of his stage persona during this era, and so he is engaged in the practice of re-appropriating the label and using it for new meanings (Cross 2010, 31). When offered to spectators, his deployment of madness does not come with attachments of stigma but is rather celebrated by his global fandom as a recognizable articulation of his Trininess. Here, sonic and embodied gestures become indicative of multiple forms of embodied irrationality or a way to see mental disability as an embodied impairment and illustrate the effects of these illnesses (Lester and Tritter 2005, 653) through raced and gendered codings.

Montano's 2003 carnival hit "Madman", originally released on the album "The Xtatik Circus" presents madness in various formats, often interchanging and mixing varying recognizable indicators of a number of mental disabilities. The song begins with Machel stuttering "mad-ah-mad-ah-mad" repeatedly, that, when vocalized by harsh guttural sounds, imitates a furious shaking of the body and head in a moment of frenzy. Stuttering creates choppy, almost unintelligible speech and vocables¹⁰ or nonlexical words that do not offer any linguistic significance beyond performative pathology. In doing so, he locates and performs madness as the antithesis of rationalism and mental coherence. Here, I argue Montano problematically signals his imagining of epileptic behaviour

through schizophrenic mimesis which, as termed by ethnomusicologist David Feld (1996), describes extractive practices of producing sonic copies, echoes, resonances, imitation and duplications of original sources (26). Mimicking misrepresentations of epilepsy, he re-configures the original source or the continuous seizure, albeit imagined and constructed, through corporeal and embodied chains of audio production, circulation and consumption.

Montano's epileptic vocalities allude to soca as a vice and contagion that is infectious, uncontrollable, and through the aural reception of his words, intoxicates Carnival bodies to furiously dance. The lyrics of the song also evidence and point to examples of the Caribbean body's disobedience and desire to disregard standards of normalcy, and notably male respectability:

And when yuh see me in de street,
Winin' up on de backseat,
Jumpin' up in de burnin' sun,
Down on de ground and back up on meh feet,
The way ah carryin' on,
Dey ask meh de question,
Tell me ah mad, Tell me ah mad,
Don't tell me ah mad,
I's ah madman, Ah wan trouble!

The reoccurring figure of the madman in Caribbean popular culture and Carnival spaces offers us an interesting gateway to read madness as a distinct performance of Afro-Caribbean subjectivity and cultural resistance. Through the madman's villainous presence, we are able to see how madness is strategically used by Montano to mark himself as violent, animalistic and uncontrollable, using and reconfiguring tropes of the disability of blackness assigned by historical white supremacist structures, in order to symbolize a "freeing up" of the Afro-Caribbean body and mind and instead, offer deviancy as a distinctly

Caribbean ontology. Indeed, this is particularly where Sami Shalk's extended conceptualization (from Price 2015) of "bodyminds" holds much weight as it asks us to think through modes of analysis that take into account systems of privilege and oppression alongside the intersections of disability, race, and gender (5). Here we are seeing how mental and physical processes come together to help us theorize how both sociopolitical and structural violence and oppression coincide with lived experiences to cultivate distinct performativities (Price 2015, 269).

In addition, the social dynamics of Carnival ecologies, often characterized by alcohol consumption, flag waving and copious amounts of singing and dancing to soca, creates a unique social environment and a particularly temporal alternative reality. In his well-known theorization of the carnivalesque, Mikhail Bakhtin (1965) states that during carnival:

There is no other life outside it. During carnival time, life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom...Carnival is the people's second life (7).

When carnival practitioners play mas', nothing else matters and their consciousness is completely fixed on the exuberance and joy they are participating in. Effectively, we can read the Carnival state as a time of Caribbean cultural psychosis, reframing the condition used in psychiatry to refer to conditions that involve severe impairments of thought, speech and behaviour that result in grossly distorted perceptions or understandings of external reality (Wahl 1995, 17). This is demonstrated within Montano's song "Craziness" (2004) where he suggests carnival is a time to "get mad now" and act "crazy":

Insane, this year we wan' dem to know we gon' insane,
When carnival time, yuh know we get insane,
Doh play wit we because we get in dis fete is craziness,

Yuh know we like de craziness...

We people love de craziness...

Montano's indication that he has "gon' insane", itself a performance of metaphoric sickness, disability, subrationality or mental unsoundedness, operates in accordance with arguments offered by Erevelles (2011) where we can interrogate Montano's desire to be mad "as a transgressive mode of motion within Reason's oppressive domains: a trembling, swelling, bursting movement that disrupts Reason's supposedly steady order and tidy borders" (quoted in Bruce 2017, 306). Perhaps rather than always-already delegated within the inescapable limitations of slavocratic, anti-black discourses of Eurocentric sanity, performing madness as an Afro-Caribbean language of self is a methodology to find refuge in the fugitivity of frenzy, chaos and craziness or a turning away from the unreachable locations of white sanity. His embodied presentation of "craziness" seeks to engage in transgressive performances yet fails to recognize how those, often rendered or identifying as mad or mentally disabled, do not garner advantage or privilege from such imaginings and representations. Instead, his work here makes aware how representing craziness as capital disseminates harmful notions of mental disability that turn the experiences and disadvantage of those with mental stigma for their disabilities, such as state-sanctioned violence and oppression (Bailey 2011, 147), into popular, profitable choreographies.

In the Anglophone Caribbean, madness is also linked to a number of expressions of abnormality that, in addition to physical or mental exceptionalities, can be understood through psychological damage, colonial memory, trauma, displacement and alienation.¹¹ Kelly Baker Josephs (2013) highlights that the connection between madness and Caribbean colonial histories have produced a "schizophrenic quality of West Indian life" where resistance to colonial/racial hierarchies are frequently performative and marked as mad (24). Yet, perhaps the most ubiquitous meaning of madness in the Caribbean is when it is used to connote dangerousness, violence, anger and criminality. In circulating these

images, popular media plays a major role in communicating that the "violent tendencies" of the mad, disabled and mentally ill are to be feared and avoided (Stout, Villegas and Jennings 2004, 543) while there is little evidence that personal or impersonal contact with those identifying as mad, disabled or mentally ill has led to an increased perception of danger (Phelan and Link 2004, 77). Rather, it is the popular disseminations of these myths that stereotype, and perpetuate the stigma surrounding these misrepresentations.

Connections made between violence, anger and madness in the Caribbean region articulate aspects of creole or Afro-Caribbean identity, history and social organization (Littlewood 1988, 135) that illustrate encounters with white supremacy and the colonial project. For instance, Kelly Baker Josephs (2013) argues that we must read madness in the Caribbean as "ancestral anger", especially with regards to Afro-Caribbean populations. As victims of structural and intergenerational violence and trauma, ancestral anger indicates unresolved and unstable feelings of frustration and anger for the disabling, disembodied and displacing ramifications of European colonialism. As Erna Brodber (2004) argues:

This anger was set in motion by a racism and a colourism that negatively impacted every member. Since no governmental actions have been taken to address this ancestral anger, the anger has remained a part of the psychocultural landscape, into the new millennium (151).

With Brodber's theorizations in mind, I also read Montano's lyric, "get mad now", through a literal articulation. To perform violence, rage and anger mediated through the emotionality of craziness and racialized disablement performs a serious critique to the distribution of violence and pathologization of blackness that Afro-Caribbean bodies have faced historically and in the contemporary moment.

As the song continues, Montano suggests that when carnival season begins, peoples “head gone” as he calls out a number of cities in Trinidad and Tobago (Arima, Sumaria, “Sando”, Port-of-Spain, Laventille, Chaguanas), mapping out a cartography of madness drawn across the country that seemingly is deployed to illustrate networks and an assemblage of carnival bodies and Trinibagonian people deeply embedded into the interiority of the land where moments of delusion are characteristic to the states of mind held during Carnival. In general, a dismemberment of the head also symbolizes the schizophrenic nature of the Trinidadian rite.

Deploying vocabularies such as “crazy”, even when evoked as metaphor, have been heavily critiqued by disability scholars and activists as a term that further stigmatizes people with psychiatric disabilities (Bailey and Mobley 2019, 31). While the soca archive is riddled with disseminations similar to this one, and certainly more research is required in this area, this song offers one reading of the ways in which Montano performs “crazy”, not as a literal psychological condition, but as a historically-constituted language of the self to acknowledge the ways in which Afro-Caribbean bodies disseminate frenzy, revelry and Carnival chaos as a means of fostering radical, decolonial terrains, ontological knowledges, emotions and affects.

Uncle Ellis: Ridentifications and Reimaginings of Madness

In comparison, Uncle Ellis offers us a visual and sonic illustration of how multiple realms of madness can be envisioned within soca performance. Ellis Reid, otherwise known by his stage name “Uncle Ellis”, achieved international fame through a number of videos taken of him furiously wining beside a Kentucky Fried Chicken restaurant in Port-of-Spain, Trinidad that has attracted viral audiences on Instagram and Twitter. As a previously homeless man with a history of drug abuse, the rendering of his madness was closely connected to the structural violence he experienced as a result of poverty - a narrative that he chose to represent in his music by self-identifying as a “madman”. This storyline is

salient for this mad music because as Susan McClary (1991) suggests, "the music delivers a sense of depth and grants the spectator license to eavesdrop upon the characters interiority" (85). As these dancing videos circulated, his fame increased as fans attempted to imitate his unique wining style and began posting their own renditions of the dance by sharing videos of themselves with the hashtag "#UncleEllisDance". Yet, the comic relief and humour he provided to fans must be unhinged from the ableism of this image that endorses and illustrates the "mad" as a site of comedic relief or the "fool", a ubiquitous figure that Lawrence Rubin (2012) and Sander L. Gilman (1982) attest is widespread in Western popular culture.

According to two interviews¹² in 2016 with OJO TTRN (Trinidad and Tobago Radio Network Limited), Ellis Reid was eventually noticed and picked up by soca artist Yankey Boy, Salty, Akim and Trinidad music producer and now manager Dion Gomez who has overseen the marketing of the Uncle Ellis brand. Today, Uncle Ellis continues to travel throughout the Caribbean and its diaspora performing at a number of Carnival celebrations and soca fêtes.

The music video for his single "I Doh Mind" (2017), his claim-to-international-fame song, blurs the boundaries between madness as metaphor and as a performance of self. In his work, he juxtaposes the two meanings between colliding and intersecting notions of madness. The video opens with a solemn capturing of a number of homeless people in the city as police cars whizz by, a physically disabled man with one leg tries to travel on his wheelchair down a street, wide-eyed shirtless men shout into the night beside a Kentucky Fried Chicken restaurant, all-the-while a voice-over of Uncle Ellis emerges describing the violence he faced while homeless. As he continues, he states that he wants his position as a soca artist to address the violence homeless people face in Trinidad. He says that he "...want[s] to be a beacon to the people lying down on the streets...[and]...want[s] to motivate people who are living on the streets" and clearly articulates that living on the streets does not make someone less human.¹³

As the song begins, a number of images of “mad” Afro-Trinidadian men are shown as either shirtless or fashioned with messy, loose, tattered clothing as they race down the streets of Port of Spain in a shopping cart with Uncle Ellis. These figures characterize popular perceptions of madness in the Caribbean: those who exhibit violent and reckless behaviour, and homelessness, often combined with a “poor” or “dirty” outward physical appearance (Arthur, Hickling and Robertson-Hickling 2010, 264). Notions of madness in the Caribbean perhaps are also racialized as black because Caribbean research findings have found that there has been a rise in schizophrenia among Afro-Caribbean populations which may be related to social adversity, deprivation, unemployment, inadequate housing, low social class, negative environmental factors, levels of urbanicity, neighbourhood socioeconomic deprivation and experiences of anti-black racism (Wessely, Der and Murray 1991, 800; Maharajh, Konings and Baboolal 2006, 75; Harper 2009). These images are paralleled alongside scenes of Uncle Ellis performing at a number of Carnivals as he jumps on stage and wines with women within crowds of intoxicated partygoers. Indeed, these portrayals showcase that madness in the Caribbean has multiple meanings that can allude to feelings of happiness, craziness, loneliness and danger. Effectively, it can be read as both derogatory, pejorative, celebratory and liberatory.

The lyrics of the song describe a number of perceived characteristics of madness in Trinidad that Uncle Ellis sonically rejects through his utterance of “I Doh Mind”. The politics of non-respectability for the prejudices he experienced is corporeally represented and embodied as he uses a number of recognizable Carnival dance moves as he utters the text:

Deh say I ah madman (I doh mind, I doh mind)

Deh say I am drunkard (I doh mind, I doh mind)

In addition, as each verse ends, he sings “take a wine on de spot” as he begins showcasing his characteristic Uncle Ellis dance. The centrality of the dance move is important because it has been circulated widely and has contagiously spread across social media. Like many soca lyrics I have described earlier, the

dance carries a viral character, showing how Caribbean dance also carries potentials for irrational and infectious contagion both in the physical and online world. Indeed, the power of the Uncle Ellis dance is its widespread attention and power to enact a sense of dance ecstasy among many of his loyal fans.

Here, I suggest that his evocation of reclaiming the madman seeks to reconfigure it with new meaning. Drawing upon Mikko Koivisto's (2017) theorization of the "egress" or acts of leaving describes the ways in which leaving behind pejorative scripts attached to the mad provide mad subjects with methods and mechanisms to (re)constitute new relationships between oppressive discursive structures and the disabled subjects (167). It is performative of a politics of non-confinement, moving madness beyond its location in harm, brokenness and abnormality towards new potentials for agency and power. Instead of seeking to refuse or disidentify with the category of mad, he seeks to *identify* with it – pushing it in new directions, reconfiguring what was originally made to harm disabled subjects into a performance politic that uses mental disability for radical black joy, resistance and, celebration. A reidentification that works through the egress offers Uncle Ellis with potentials to exit sites of harm for the mad, even if only ephemerally, and re-purpose tropes of mainstream mental disability as a praxis of emancipation and transgressive masculinity.

When looked at holistically, "I Doh Mind" disseminates a unique mad "rags-to-riches" narrative. The branding of Uncle Ellis as a madman explores a story of overcoming and turmoil that is commodified to his audiences and mobilized to sell. This is important because while the non-disabled body can pass almost always without narration, the disabled body, marked through metaphorization or otherwise, calls for a story and is often delivered (Couser 2006, 399). As William Cheng (2017) describes in his study of disability in reality-singing competitions, "disability, neatly packaged, enables producers to turn stories of plight into profit" and by exhibiting deviance, mad and disabled peoples get reified, catalogued and contained in strictures and stereotypes (185).

As a form of madness on display, Uncle Ellis' performances are salient for their liberating potentials but are also deeply troubling. Since the musical persona of Uncle Ellis is crafted, developed and manufactured by a team of upper-class soca vanguards, the implications of staging the mad for profit is concerning. The black body, which has often been interpreted as a simultaneous mad body, has historically been put on display for the sane's enjoyment – engaged in a contemporary freakshow of sorts – a neo-colonial project that his producers and managers are now deeply embedded in. While Uncle Ellis does enjoy success, financial advantage, and as such lives a more fulfilling life as a result of his fame away from poverty, drug abuse, and homelessness, the branding and popularity of his image is inextricably linked and hinged to his “madness” and gives a recognizable face to a mad vocality and embodiment in the Caribbean for the able-minded to consume. In addition to Montano, Uncle Ellis' performances cause us to stare directly in the face of the stigma we, as Caribbean consumers, reproduce, exposing us to the negative implications of marking the mad through soca and the harm we must continue to work to dismantle.

Conclusions

Through engaging with performances of madness in the work of Machel Montano and Uncle Ellis, I have sought to demonstrate how Afro-Caribbean performances of soca masculinities deploy metaphorical madness as a tool to produce emancipatory knowledges and presentations of self. However, as is evidenced here, this comes at a harmful and often violent cost as mental disability and madness stigma is circulated, disseminated, and capitalized on as a performance aesthetic. While mad and mentally disabled subjects receive no generative benefit from such performances, the mental and behavioural differences that place them at a disadvantage in such a global order of ableism becomes the archive with which Afro-Caribbean male soca artists draw upon to perform the historical and lived self. The juxtaposition of pain and pleasure embedded in such performances are important for their radical potentials while simultaneously asking us to strongly direct our decolonial and

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feminist consciousness to the ways in which our beloved soca artists can un/intentionally enact ableist harm. In performing this work, I seek to help extend existing conversations surrounding a transnational politics of care and generosity for violent stereotypes and representations of the mad and mentally disabled, for despite soca's celebratory and transgressive potentials, we must remember at what cost liberation comes if it does not benefit all.

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¹ This is a critical intervention in the extant soca literature as the genre has been widely critiqued for its reliance on "light" themes of joy, harmony, and togetherness (Guilbault 2011, 2010; Hernandez-Ramdwar 2008; Leu 2000; Ho 2000) and its "political neutrality" in comparison to its mother-genre calypso.

² Given these understandings, it is only through engaging with such critical theories of the flesh or, as M. Jacqui Alexander (2005) describes as the "texture of our living", that Afro-Caribbean carnivalists can come to unpack the liberatory, emancipatory and political potentials and messages of soca music and carnival performance

³ Ableism refers to the system of oppression that advantages and privileges able-bodied and -minded peoples above those with physical and mental disability (Bailey 2011, 142).

⁴ In Bruce's (2012) study of madness, black womanhood and Lauryn Hill, he historicizes performances of madness in the US context by tracing its genealogy through performers such as Theolonious Monk, Charles Mingus, Sun Ra, Nina Simone, Richard Pryor and Dave Chappelle. However, for my purposes here, I will be centering my analysis on Carnival sensibilities and the histories, legacies and continuities that have constituted their contemporary manifestation.

⁵ In my discussion of Machel Montano, this period of time aligns with the period in which he released the album "The Xtatik Circus" with this band, prior to his solo career.

⁶ I would like to note that "mental illness" is the language here used in the Caribbean literature and this is why I have included it here.

⁷ See King (2011).

⁸ It can also be argued that these dominant tropes are also very much linked to ritual/folk belief systems in island-nations such as Jamaica where mental disability is consistently linked to black magic or evil spirit possession (Whitley and Hickling 2007, 665) or obeah in Trinidad and Tobago and Guyana. For instance, as Roland Littlewood's (1988) study on Trinidadian local medicine argues, the mentality that spirit can enter the body are very much attributed to various spiritual practices in the country, reflective of the "powers of the Shango culture, African ancestors, the fallen angels of the Bible, [and] the spirit guides of the Shouter Baptists" that cause madness upon the individual as they enter the body (135). Of course, these arguments are also heavily critiqued for implying that mental disability is something that can be fixed without medical attention.

⁹ In Trinidad specifically, the madman is a ubiquitous cultural figure whose presence has not been matched by any scholarly examination of popular Afro-Caribbean conceptualizations of madness or of their social construction (Littlewood 1988, 129).

¹⁰ Ethnomusicologists refer to vocables as nonlexical words that do not offer any linguistic significance. Rather they are syllables vocalized in songs for other meaningful purposes.

¹¹ Popular Caribbean discourses of madness have also been described through a variety of unwanted practices and experiences, including inappropriate uses of psychoactive substances, persistent anti-social behaviours, certain sexual practices, transient dysphoria's and interpersonal conflicts (Littlewood 1988, 129).

¹² These interviews can be accessed online on YouTube at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K8UpG9U91h4> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GiTrw6XyTf0>.

¹³ These moments can be found between 0:42 – 1:00 during the music video.