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‘Ketch Dis’: Envisioning Alternatives to Gender-Based Violence in the Caribbean

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Abstract

The construction and policing of difference, including gender difference, is itself a form of violence. This kind of power relation also lays a basis for systemic expressions of violence, including the denial of human rights, androcentrism, the sexual division of labour and homophobia. Ultimately, learning to live with multiple ways of being is key to challenging a dualistic and hierarchical organization of social relations, and creating greater gender justice. The spoken word music video, discussed in this essay, uses poetry and images from Trinidad to spark discussion about difference, othering and exclusion. The video can be used to facilitate discussion about the lines we draw between each other and the consequences for those marginalized by social norms. This essay provides some background to the video’s approach and some questions for those using it to facilitate dialogue, questioning and greater openness about, among other things, diverse gender and sexual identities in the Caribbean.

Key words: violence, gender identities, Other, difference, spoken word, music video.

The postcolonial Caribbean has been forged through violent encounters, and patriarchal relationships are an integral part of how human relations have been defined in this historical context (Benito Rojo 1988). Within this, the policing of masculinity and femininity has, among other things, helped to uphold and justify various types of violence. Further, the construction and regulation of what are often considered immutable gender identities can themselves be seen as a form of violence. Idealizations of hegemonic manhood, for example, are grounded in the repudiation of femininities and subordinate masculinities. Establishing what constitutes gender often reduces men and women to partial selves by imposing a dualistic frame on human selfhood (Kaufman 1993).

If we understand violence not simply as acts of physical force, but also as “assaults on personhood, dignity and self worth and value” and their tangible effects (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004), then perceiving the multi-layered qualities and many instances of violence in our midst becomes possible. It is then that one can begin to trace the multiple paths of violence and make visible their embodied, structural, and political implications.

Androcentrism, the universalisation of those qualities stereotypically associated with masculinity and a language that both subsumes and invisibilizes women, is a form of violence. The greater valuing of those qualities associated with dominant masculinities in both public and private spheres has differential and unequal impacts on women while also negatively affecting men. It creates power hierarchies between women and men as well as amongst groups of women and groups of men. These hierarchies are further complicated by women’s and men’s ethnic, class, sexual and other identities. Notions of difference and the boundaries that we establish between groups or categories of people can both be and lay the basis for forms of violence. As Foucault (2003) illustrates, categorizing groups of people more easily facilitates violence being done to some groups in order to protect and maintain the lives of others. Rigid lines of separation must be guarded and there are always high costs for this.

Additionally, the manner in which we ascribe meaning to difference (whether positive or negative) is not ahistorical, “natural” or biologically “right”. As Bourdieu (2004, 339) argues, “structures of domination are the product of an incessant (and therefore historical) labour of reproduction, to which singular agents (including men, with weapons such as physical violence and symbolic violence) and institutions—families, the church, the educational systems, the state—contribute”¹. In essence, violence is not just physical, cultural, private or individualistic. Rather, as feminist scholars point out, violence is a political issue linked to structural and systematic differences and inequalities (Clarke 1995). The overall lesson is that difference can become a basis for inequity and unequal value, denial of human rights and silencing. We have to learn to live with multiple ways of being.

With this message in mind, “Ketch Dis” uses spoken work, music and visual images to

¹ Italics in the original.

describe an awareness of how rights, choices, selfhood and belonging may be denied. It also refers to consciousness that there are alternatives to an unjust social order. It examines gender, patriarchy and violence, and their interconnections as well as implications, and asks how understandings of each other and ourselves can be transformed.

This video was first conceived while I was teaching a gender course at the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago. I was discussing gender and sexuality as a continuum in human behaviour, and the negative effects on individuals and groups which ensue when we draw a binary line between women and men. This gender divide is seen as a line that must not be crossed. It is at the heart of the sexual division of labour, sexual harassment, sexism, heterosexism, hypermasculinity and gender-based violence.

For some students, critically examining gender ideologies was startling and scary. Some wondered if there were any boundaries to what could be challenged, any terrain of intimate, social and political life that could be left unquestioned. Some wondered aloud, "Doesn't a line have to be drawn somewhere?" One young man in the class asked, "But Miss, doesn't someone have to draw the line?" Three years later, a young woman in another class asked me the same thing. "Who gets to draw the line? Who gets to decide?" I asked them, "Where can this line be drawn legitimately? What happens to those left on the other side? What kinds of access are denied by the lines we draw between each other?"

In this context, the video encourages students to examine their positioning(s) as dominant and marginalized and to question the divisions that create exclusions. It puts theory about silencing and invisibility into everyday language and facilitates dialogue on these issues in relation to our everyday negotiations.

Since 2007, I have shown this video in class in the first few weeks when I am outlining both feminist theory of patriarchy and its negative implications for women and men, as well as critiques to this view based on literature or Caribbean and students' personal examples. After showing the video, I facilitate a discussion about power, hierarchies and stereotyping, and possibilities for change to forms of gender injustice founded on these relations. Using metaphors of Caribbean games and landscape, the video seeks to raise consciousness about the anxiety, alienation, fears and violence that stereotypes provoke. Towards this end, I ask some introductory questions useful for facilitating discussion:

1. What images stood out most to you and why?
2. What are some of the ways we draw lines between each other, and what are the consequences?
3. How are the lines maintained?
4. What are the benefits and what are the sanctions?
5. Are the ways we organize our societies inevitable?
6. How can we enable rather than deny access to human rights, autonomous choice over one's lives, and belonging?

7. Do you agree with the video's message? What critiques do you have of this message? How would you express it instead?

The video was made in 2006 while I was at the Caribbean Contemporary Arts 7 Big River retreat for performance artists from around the world. While exploring the Aripo hills and waterfalls in Trinidad, I reflected on how our socially created lines maintained sharp divisions. In contrast, nature showed fluidity, overlap, blurring and sharing. This is not to argue that our lives must be biologically determined, that nature is "pure" and benevolent or that human life must be fitted to what seems to be animals' evolutionary behaviour. Rather, this music video attempts to express the emotion and hope I felt that if we look around us, we will see so many ways that we can live without marking our differences in terms of exclusions. Moving from feelings of denial to hopes for understanding and rights, the message is one feminist activists often invoke.

For this reason, the piece uses images and words to trigger emotions and reflection about who draws lines and, because of that, who has to "ketch" or survive in a world that is disproportionately difficult for them. "Ketch" is also used in the sense of grasping or becoming conscious of a political vision where genders and sexualities are not hierarchically ordered, because this is one of the first points of social and political violence. Caring for each other, respecting our identities and choices, and learning to share our spaces is key to creating greater social and political inclusion, promoting non-violence and envisioning progressive alternatives to masculinist relations between the sexes. With this message in mind, Trinidadian Composer Coreysan created the soundtrack while the lyrics are my own.

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