

Tout Moun

Caribbean Journal of Cultural Studies

*Creating a Caribbean Sense of Place:
Calypso, Spoken Word and the Oral Tradition*

Vol 6: No. 1 ▪ August 2021

<http://www.mainlib.uwi.tt/epubs/toutmoun/index1.htm>

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‘WHO TAKING ADVANTAGE AH WHO’: SPARROW AND CARIBBEAN MAN/WOMAN RELATIONS†



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INTRODUCTION - THE MIGHTY VOYEUR

Music and song allow us to archive and retrieve events, people, places and emotions that are stored in time. The Mighty Sparrow’s repertoire is not a minor but a major key into our collective memory of Trinidad and Tobago and the Caribbean. These songs, especially for those of us who are of a generous age, prompt both a personalised soundtrack of our lives, as well as a slideshow of political, economic and cultural moments from the late fifties to the eighties, a period I refer to as The Mighty Sparrow’s golden years of kingship. Like the bird after which he is named, Sparrow flitted from subject to subject. The songs are vignettes of a nation claiming its independence and personality, a region grappling with language and establishing its vernacular. If we think for instance of the irony in “Dan is the man in the van” (1965):

The poems and the lessons they write and send from England

Impress me they were trying to cultivate comedians

Comic books make more sense

† This essay is an edited version of the performance lecture for Canboulay Productions led by Rawle Gibbons in 2014 at Daaga Hall, The University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, Trinidad. It was the last of five lectures in a tribute to Sparrow entitled, “If Sparrow Say So.” Selected verses in the presentation were performed by David Bereaux and Friends of Trinidad. The lecture was reprised with some amendments and with the same performers in Barbados for the 21st *Caribbean Women: Catalysts for Change* lecture in honour of Dame Nita Barrow, which I delivered on November 13th, 2015 at The University of the West Indies, Cave Hill Campus. It was taped by the Caribbean Broadcasting Corporation for screening on Barbados television.

You know it is fictitious without pretence

Cutteridge wanted to keep us in ignorance

The songs tell us of a rigid class-based society trying to level off differences as is evident in "The Governor's Ball" (1967):

The Governor had a ball

I never see nothing so yet

Ah mad woman jump the wall and invade the fete

Prospect with the baton in hand conducting the police band

He say the woman shake she waist, in the Governor face.

The Grenada-born calypsonian was brought by his mother to Trinidad when he was twenty-one months old and was made never to forget his Grenadian origins. He occupied the insider/outsider position in the society in which he grew to manhood. This gave him the vantage point of multiple identities from which to speak to provincial, political and economic decisions as, for instance, his critique in "Federation" (1962):

...if they know that they din want federation

And they know that they doh want to unite as one

Independence was at the door

Why they didn't speak before

This is no time to say you eh federating no more

Apart from his political and social commentary which makes up the subject matter of over one third of his songs, Sparrow is perhaps best known for his undressing of the anatomy of the sexual politics of the region – by the latter I mean how men and women negotiate the boundaries between sexual profligacy and harmonious gender relations. I focus primarily on Sparrow's treatment of man/woman relations in Trinidad and Tobago and the Caribbean.

The title of the essay "Who taking advantage ah who" is extracted from his calypso "Stella" (1959):

No no no no no no no Stella
Darling have some behaviour
Darling have some behaviour
You had too much drink in the christening
Now you don't know what you doing
Get out of me place I will tell you flat
Is advantage for me to do a thing like that

Chorus

Go ahead and take yuh advantage
Go ahead I give you privilege
I could take care of myself
Sparrow darling bring the whisky from the shelf
Only give me one or two
And we go see who taking advantage on who

Girl it's getting late I want to go
Move let me shut the window
Remember I know your family
And we all very friendly
It won't be nice when they get to hear
I took advantage of you my dear
So for heaven sake get out go for a walk
When you sober up tomorrow Stella we go talk

As with many of Sparrow's calypsos, while there is a story being told, there is also a lesson to be learnt. He ends "Stella" on a high moral note:

Well I could not stand this thing no more

I decided to throw she out the door

She came to my bar drunk already

Its advantage to sell her more whisky

Her family and I are very good

And we live in the same neighbourhood

Don't mind she give all privilege to me

I will never take advantage on a young lady

While absorbing the superb stretching of a metric rhyme to fit snugly with voice, intonation and musical accompaniment, are we convinced that this is not just another ploy of male seduction? "Darling have some behaviour," says the upstanding older male neighbour/bar-keeper. His very restraint seems to further fuel Stella's desire. Why is Stella at this gentleman's place after the christening? The language and setting challenge our belief that this is all above board and suggests a grey area of gender subterfuge and complicity. I have used the calypso "Stella" as an example in Sparrow's oeuvre to persuade many who have found his repertoire offensive to the current feminist spirit, that Sparrow is in fact quite catholic in his gender calculations. He targets both sexes, although we might argue perhaps not equally.

On stage Sparrow presents the persona of a mischievous child, not up to harmful malice, but naughty and playful, and ready to shock us into confronting our sensibilities and psychoses. I first saw Sparrow on stage in 1971 at the carnival event held each year in Naparima Girls High School. I imagine Sparrow was invited as one of the judges for the calypso competition, with the expectation that he would also perform. Sparrow had won the road march already six times, with "Jean and Dinah" in 1956, "Pay as you earn" in 1958, "Mae Mae" in 1960, "Royal Jail" in 1961, "Melda" or "Obeah Wedding" in 1966 and "Sa Sa Yea" in 1969. The lyrics of these calypsos were not exactly the kind of delicacy we were served up in our polite finishing girls school curriculum. Our Principal, a well-meaning but straitlaced Presbyterian woman, had been skeptical about having a troubadour who sang bawdy lyrics in her school. The head girls and house captains who organised the event had nonetheless persuaded her to allow this smooth talking, handsome and rakish calypsonian into our midst. I am sure he knew the politics around his presence in that large assembly hall. With rows and rows of impressionable

ears hanging on to his every note – what would Sparrow choose to sing from his repertoire – but “Sa Sa Yea” and “The Lizard” (1969) “The lizard ran up she leg and she tay lay lay,” he demonstrated provocatively, belting out the French *patois* chorus of Sa Sa Yea with meaningful pauses that had our Martiniquian teacher Mrs. Alert who was on stage as Emcee, literally blushing and simpering coyly at the same time.

If Sparrow slurs women’s sexuality, he is also castigating of male behaviour. He treats with both sides of the man/woman story. For example in “Who she go cry for now,” the protagonist has lost his woman to another man named Dennis. Here Sparrow is unsympathetic with men who poach:

Well you take away mi woman
 And you put a ring on she hand
 And you feeling down in your heart you so smart
 You thought was an angel cake
 But you tief a bake
 You know she eh love you
 You damn stupid conoomoonoo
 Dennis pay for your damn fastness

Of course we can argue that he is again protecting male patriarchal interests, but The Mighty Sparrow is a complex package and not lyrics dismembered from performance. His wicked lopsided grin, clever and endearing wit, and incredible command of the vernacular: “You thought was an angel cake/But you tief a bake,” makes even the politically incorrect, palatable. Even while mentally rejecting some of the images the songs convey, we sing along with tunes like “Congoman” (1964) and “Saltfish” (1976). His ribaldry and lasciviousness reveal the contradictory nature of sexual politics in a region that is known more for its portrayal of antagonistic rather than supportive relations between the sexes.

PART I - A LITERARY GENESIS

I will return to Sparrow’s preoccupation with gender and sexuality, but first I want to suggest that when we read Sparrow’s cultural production, not as reductive, single sound bytes extracted from the whole repertoire, but as a call and response between this calypsonian and Caribbean society, it places him as an important contributor to the West Indian literary space

that emerges from the fourth decade of the twentieth century. While the origins of calypso remain relatively obscure, researchers have claimed that the word 'calypso' first appeared in 1890 and at that time was spelled 'calipso'. It is also argued that it was the French who originally brought the idea of Carnival to Trinidad, along with the calenda or Kalinda - carnival songs that were sung in French Creole by *negre jardin* stickmen and their followers.ⁱ Half a century later, Sparrow had experienced the patois mix of Trinidad's 'callaloo' of ethnicities, race and gender relations, languages and linguistic expressions. He had an eye for what was trending and, like a sponge, absorbed it all and returned them to the society with a poet's versatility. But he was also innovative and incorporated his own style, lengthening for the first time the shorter repetitive chorus of the traditional calypso into a form more consistent with the literary genre of poetry.

He had learnt his craft from an honourable oral tradition. He absorbed much from the great calypsonians who predated him in the thirties and forties, among them Lion, Atilla, Growler and Caresser. Of nearly 200 calypsos written and sung by him that were examined, 20 are distinctly political, 43 can be described as economic and social commentary, 40 are party and carnival songs and 93 deal with themes of gender and sexuality.ⁱⁱ Looking at the entire body of his work, one can trace a poetic theatre of the streets scripted into song, a balladeer whose storytelling can be compared to the contribution that Chaucer makes to English literature. This likening of Sparrow's verse to the literary arts is not a new idea. Warner (1983) describes the calypso as oral literature and makes extensive use of Sparrow's songs to illustrate this point in his path breaking work. Both he and Rohlehr (1990) agree that we should allow Slinger Francisco the distance "between the e.y.e. (EYE) and "I" personal pronoun - the separation between perception and fiction that "creates out of what it has seen or imagined."ⁱⁱⁱ

By the late fifties, Sparrow begins a systematic storytelling of characters that have become archetypal in our imagination. Like Geoffrey Chaucer he is the scribe of verse for a new era - post war, independence, nationalism, feminine ploys and masculine confidence. *The Canterbury Tales* by Chaucer is a collection of stories written between 1387 and 1400 of a group of 30 pilgrims travelling to Canterbury (England). The pilgrims, who come from all layers of society, tell stories to each other to kill time on the journey, and in doing so relate the minutiae of everyday life and human frailties. Chaucer developed his vision of an English poetry that would be neither obedient to the court - whose official language was French, nor to the Church - whose official language was Latin. Instead, he wrote in the vernacular, the English that was spoken in and around London in his day. *The Canterbury Tales* is written in Middle English, which bears a fairly close visual resemblance to the English written and spoken today.

I illustrate the parallels with only one example of Chaucer's work. "The Miller's Tale" is about a carpenter of more advanced age who marries an 18-year-old wife. The couple takes in a young

male clerk as a boarder in their spare room - clearly an arrangement fraught with possibilities. Here is Chaucer's picture of the wife:

A brooch she wore upon her collar low,
 As broad as boss of buckler did it show;
 Her shoes laced up to where a girl's legs thicken.
 She was a primrose, and a tender chicken

Here is Chaucer's depiction of the carpenter's state of mind.

For she was wild and young, and he was old,
 And deemed himself as like to be cuckold.
 He knew not Cato, for his lore was rude:
 That vulgar man should wed similitude.
 A man should wed according to estate,
 For youth and age are often in debate.

Sparrow is a story teller of tall tales that have to do with love and politics; like Chaucer and other good story tellers, he panders to our prurience for a rumour. And like the griot entrusted with preserving the genealogies of the tribe, he also provides the moral twist to the ending of his "Tobago girls" (1980). This is sung in the middle English of the period in which it was written, demonstrating the mastery of English 'big words' blended with the local idiom, there is a cocktail of references to place, people and situations, well laced with a Caribbean tongue in cheek humour. Like all poets he could stretch the meter of a line to ensure that it met both the rhythm of the music and the rhyme.^{iv}

Dis old man from Ohioho
 Spend the holiday in Scarborough
 Time up, he eh want to go
 Why bredda I really don't know
 Immigration told the old man

You are now a prohibited immigrant

Listen sire the time expire

We would like to know, wey your really want

All them Tobago girl

Thick thick thick like a new sponge ball

Them from Mason Hall eh easy at all

Pretty as a doll

Me I love them Tobago gyul.

I have been east west north and south

I have seen women all about

But they cannot compare

With these you have down here

When they walking, background shaking

Pretty teeth and eyes that just seem to glow

What they eating, what they drinking

have them looking so I would like to know

All them Tobago girl

Sweet sweet sweet like a Kaiser ball

Burrows you could call

Or ring Interpol
Meh eh going at all
Furst I love them sweet Tobago gyul
Look at each in their Bikini
On the beach bathing in the sea
God take he own two hand
To shape Tobago woman
So much beauty, all around me
This place have me heart controlling meh head
Deportation is no solution
Gimme permission to stay till I dead

All dem Tobago gyul
Nice and round like a butterball
Doh meh money small
I go wuk bobol
Just to gie them all
Cos I love them Tobago gyul

In “Tobago Girls,” Sparrow presents the archetypal tourist, not unlike the anthropologist of the 1930s and 1940s gone native, his reference to Robinson Crusoe and utopia in one verse, is a parody of the mythologised history of these islands.

In “Lying Excuses” (1996), he also depicts another masculine archetype: the smooth-talking husband who could get away telling his wife glaring untruths:

Maggy darling, sugar dumpling.

Don't get so mad. Please let me explain.
Doo doo darling, sugar dumpling
Don't get so mad
Please let me explain
If you see me with some woman
I doh want you misunderstand
Whatever you might see me do
Know my love is true, I'm not being unfaithful to you

De woman you catch me with in de bed,
Really didn't have no place to rest she head,
Business close down, she lost she wuk,
Disappointed, suffering from shock,
So ah take she home just to relax and cheer she up,
Exhausted she said to me,
Boy ah so tired and so sleepy,
Casually she sat on de bed,
And ask me to massage she leg,
That's all, that's is all, that is all.

Trouble makers will spread rumours,
For confusion, oh no doh take dem on,
Just be trusting and doh dig nothing,

Try and understand, I'll never do you no wrong
Darling you I'll never deceive,
There is no need to disbelieve,
Keep your trust and your faith in me,
And I promise you there'll be no infidelity.

De lady you saw me with de other night,
She and she husband just had a fight,
Ah fine it was really looking so bad,
How de hell she clothes was in de yard,
She sit down dey and start to cry like she going mad
De two thousand dollars ah give to she,
Was to buy a sandwich and a coffee,
Not another ting eh happen,
Me and de gyul eh in nothin,
That's all, that's is all, that is all.

Let nobody cause you to be jealous and confused,
Doh mind dem and dey news,
Dey want we to mash up,
So dey could come and shack up,
And when you refuse,
We'll be like two fools singing the blues

Doo doo, why these women doh stop,
Always try to set me up,
Trying to give you de impression,
Somethings wrong when my darling nothing eh going on.

De gyul ah was with behind de lamp-post,
Doh get vex cause ah was holding she clothes,
She's ah old tief from in de east
Is somebody earring she tief,
Ah was only trying to hold she for de police
De reason me hand was in she bosom,
Ah was feeling to see if she had a gun,
She didn't have no gun by she chest,
Is why ah was searching under she dress,
That's all, that's is all, that is all.

Just because I am such ah nice guy,
Somewhere, somehow it always leave me in row,
Helping people, seem to be my trouble,
Ah seeing it now,
No more will it be allowed
After all meh go help mehself
Give meh problems to someone else

Is too much conquer and confusion
 And ah know to mehself I am an innocent man

Ah know dey go tell you me and Miss Leach
 Was seen making love on Maracas Beach

Well de fact dat she had on a bikini
 And was attacked by African bees

And very bravely I cover she with meh whole body
 Well she lock meh neck and she grab meh hand

And with dat she pull meh down in de sand
 Ah bee sting meh on meh behind

Ah couldn't help it, ah had to grind.

Naipaul (1969: 90) observed that “It was characteristic of a Trinidadian sense of humour to turn grave international incidents into private jokes. “Congo man” was another example of this of course, Sparrow explained in an interview with journalist Wayne Brown that

The Congo Man” came to me on a subway in New York - just the melody. And the lyrics came from the many activities in Africa at the time. So many nuns and priests were being ambushed and beaten, you know... And I got the idea that this was probably happening there: white people were just traveling through and found themselves in the hands of head hunters, ...who put them in a pot, had a fire at the bottom, and had a chant.^v

Rohlehr (2005) is not convinced that this calypso was “purely humorous and completely unsuggestive” as Sparrow claimed, particularly because the conditions that led to this violence were so distressing. “What Sparrow calls “the activities in Africa at the time” writes Rohlehr, “was really the tragic disintegration of the Congo in the years after Belgium on the 30th of June 1960, suddenly thrust Independence on the over two hundred ethnic nationalities whose land Belgium had invaded, exploited with barbaric ferocity and left completely unprepared for the challenge of independence and nation-building.”^{vi} Despite the licence that was generally allowed to Sparrow in other songs that crossed an imaginary line of acceptability, “Congo Man”

was banned from radio airplay until 1989. Underground however, it remained a favourite, its popularity resuscitated with new cover versions, reflecting for Regis (2013) "the divide between the few thoughtful and the numerous thoughtless in Trinidadian society."^{vii}

Sparrow had cottoned on to the irreverence of the Trinidadian psyche, a coping mechanism for matters that could not be confronted openly for many reasons, as well as a distorted mnemonic device for remembrance. Incidents, whether local or foreign, are captured and politicised in ways that are themselves not deemed political. On closer inspection however, these demonstrate profound identity politics. This is very similar to the way that Chaucer is grappling with the class and gender politics of England at the time.

In 1982 Michael Fagan, an Irishman who apparently bet his friends at the pub that he could breach security and enter the Queen's bedroom, successfully managed this feat. The fact that the queen was sleeping alone in her double bed and Phillip was absent from the chamber was too much grist for the Trini mill of salacious innuendo. Sparrow's "Phillip My Dear" is a good example of irreverent humour spun through an embellishment of the facts.

Phillip, my dear, last night I thought was you in here

Where did you go? Working for good old England,

Missing out all the action. My dear, do you know

There was a man in my bedroom wearing your shoe,

Trying on the royal costume, dipping in the royal perfume

I telling you true.

There was a man in my bedroom

Anxious for a rendezvous and I thought it was you.

Chorus:

He big just like you but younger

He thick just like you but stronger

He lingay like you but harder

He laylay like you but badder

A man in my bedroom

He came on the bed, doudou, and I took him for you.

The palace guards were playing hopscotch in the yard

Abandoned the throne, me with this perfect stranger

The jewel was in danger for I was alone

With a man in my bedroom loaded with brew

Yes, this malodorous urchin on top of my bed was perching like a cockatoo

A man in my bedroom

Sorry, dear, I misconstrued when I took him for you.

Evidently I've suffered great indignity from this commoner

Instead of being free in London

He should be put in a dungeon under the Tower

There was a man in my bedroom enjoying the view

This vicious, immoral scoundrel,

Son of a common mongrel, scared me through and through

There was a man in my bedroom

Your input was overdue and I thought it was you.

Sparrow paints an image of the grandeur of Buckingham palace, diminishing the guards with furry hats that the intruder eluded, and with a sleight of hand, bridged gaps between royalty and commoner. The satirical twist of the intruder's presence is told from the Queen's point of view, the shifting of her voice between middle English and Trini idiom humanizing her for the Caribbean audience. He blends nuances of not only the irreverence of the Trinidadian but an

iconoclasm bred from years of scepticism about the promises made by those in power. Iconoclasm nonetheless co-exists quite comfortably with admiration for the privileges that power allows. Apparently, (well so I heard somewhere), Trinidadians were quite upset that this song was not performed for the Queen's jubilee celebrations. While making fun of the bedroom incident Sparrow had reflected the ambiguous regard that is generally held for the English monarchy. Thus, ironically, the song is the quintessential Trinidadian tribute to its one-time colonial status – placing it in the dispatches as akin to Barbados's encouraging message to Britain during the outbreak of hostilities in the imperial war "Go ahead England, Barbados is behind you."

An interesting area of comparison in the works of Sparrow and Chaucer are the use of rhyme and meter. *The Canterbury Tales* of Chaucer is composed in iambic pentameter, the latter a type of poetic meter that is deemed similar to the cadence of regular speech in English, and refers to the number of stressed and unstressed syllables in each line of a poem.^{viii} Sparrow's poetry does not fit snugly into categories of rhyme or meter and differs according to the particular song. He has been described as producing "adventitiously structured" verse, absorbing and generating slang and creating nation language.^{ix} What is marked similarity between both is that they are bawdy and lascivious and largely non-judgmental of human foibles. Like Chaucer, Sparrow is the traveller in time telling other people's stories or fables some of which project a moral ending, capturing the lives of the people who inhabit a place and time. "It is only in the calypso that the Trinidadian touches reality" writes Naipaul (1969: 75). While Belafonte's universalizing of the island ditty "This is my island in the sun, where my people have toiled since time begun" was valuable touristic public relations verse for the region, it nonetheless conveyed a romanticised version of colonial history and claims to heredity. The calypso form was more authentic of this history, exempted from the photo-realist postcard image. The frequent references and use of Sparrow's calypso by Naipaul in the *Middle Passage* and *Miguel Street* is as much a homage to calypso as it is to Sparrow himself.

Sparrow's repertoire has been described as pre-literary. Perhaps pre- in the sense of its precocious anticipation of pastiche and postmodernism. Adding the prefix again in another allusion to Sparrow, John Thieme comments that "The Mighty Sparrow's "Dan is the Man in the Van" (1963) takes as its departure point the pre-text of Captain J. O. Cutteridge's "West Indian Readers," diminishing its didactic capacity through his comic approach while parodying the educational curricula first afforded to West Indian children. This calypso is probably one of the earliest trenchant critiques of the primary school curriculum, allowing the listener the range of emotions – entertainment and laughter combined with an appreciation of originality, while conveying a serious message.

Sparrow's repertoire of calypso inherits from all of those who filled the stage before him and literally spans the gamut of the oldest traditions in calypsos call and response, simple re minor

key, to the ballad form, but he adds to it a consistent experimentation with the form, a changeability in the content and music, a shifting between substance and moods as seen for instance the song range between “The Slave” (1963) and “Sandra: (n.d), and his unrivaled ear for the cadences of speech and accent. If we return to the last verse in “Tobago Gals”:

Will you incarcerate a man
 Wid honourable intention
 Your country is pure bliss
 For ah polygamist
 Oh what rapture
 The thrill of capture
 Robinson Crusoe was the smartest man
 I see hope here
 This is utopia
 Perfectly, try and understand

Sparrow seamlessly incorporates the way in which a Trinidadian would actually speak the word – not incarcerate but in - carcerate, not honourable but honour...rabble in - tentions. In stretching the syllabic meter to ensure a recurrent rhythm he transmits other meanings of words or phrases. In the example cited, we immediately question the honourability of the visitor’s motives. In doing so Sparrow picks on the intonations of accents which he clearly listens to acutely, he is familiar with the slangs and idioms of the street and can combine these with the “good English” that a colonial education and Cutteridge’s *Nelson’s /West Indian Readers* were trying to inculcate. I would argue that this capacity of Sparrow to reflect back to a nation how it had appropriated another language forges a modern acceptance; perhaps even more, a delight in being able to switch dialect and language codes and thus create a style of speaking and public delivery that has become firmly accepted as typical of Trinidadian speech and language composition of the labouring classes.

Much remains to be done on the linguistic deconstruction of his style and his particular method of bringing together a rhythm of his speech - prosodic, with the music and performance. I suggest that, like C. L. R. James, Albert Gomes, Sam Selvon, V. S. Naipaul, Edgar Mittelhozer, Wilson Harris and other writers at the time who are introducing the

vernacular into dialogue and fashioning a literary Caribbean sensibility, Sparrow has the advantage. He was able to comfortably and unapologetically use the colloquial form of poetry that combines an intricate verbal texture, local imagery, honing into the psyche and psychoses of a society, and establishing the network of psychological relationships between characters and a narrative structure, to relay the sequence of actions in a plot. Sparrow, like Chaucer, has constructed a new folkloric space – capturing the archetypes like Jean and Dinah, Elaine and Harry, Melda, Mr. Walker, members of high society, the village Casanova and Carlton the peeping tom, those who fill the life of the streets of his familiar, the people and events that now shape our imagination of a time that has already passed us by. Perhaps in the future these will become the mythological characters who inspire our theatre, film and novels.^x

PART 2 - WHO TAKING ADVANTAGE AH WHO

The conventional view of male calypsonians is that their calypsos have been largely patriarchal, misogynistic, controlling and violent to women. Sparrow's repertoire in this respect, despite his likable and commendable qualities, places him as one of the primary culprits. Of approximately 200 songs he recorded, 93 deal directly with women and matters related to man/woman relations. Hodge (1975) argues that "the violence, verbal abuse and humiliation of women advocated in calypso is an emulation and appropriation of the hostility the black man learned within the plantation system." Rohlehr (1990, 216) had pointed out also that since the 1920s and 30s, "in the process of fictionalizing domestic lower-class situations, calypsonians brought into focus the confrontation of males and females in a context where both were battling for economic survival" The dominant script about love Caribbean style presented by the calypso therefore was primarily that of lust with implicit mistrust.

To hold the ideas that colonial imbalances of power, poverty and a natural opposition between the sexes are the primary sculptors of a gender and sexual culture, makes cardboard characters of real life people who are constantly engaged in re-inventing their sexuality, gender role attributes and identities. All women are not natural victims and all men are not natural perpetrators. Gender and sexuality are, like all other aspects of human society, multi-dimensional, contradictory and chaotic. Calypsonians and song writers continue to offer some of the best insights into this unfathomable area of social life.

About a decade ago, I had interpreted the calypsos of the 20s and 30s as creating a blueprint for gender relations in the creole aesthetic of Trinidad (Mohammed 2003: 129: 168) By this, I meant that in those tent and radio days, the calypso provided an accessible means by which men and women could debate and sanction acceptable or unacceptable sexual norms, concepts of good and bad behaviour, which physical attributes were considered beautiful or ugly, and who was desirable or undesirable. How else could one explain the calypso dialogue between Lion and

Beginner in 1934 that debates the virtues of the Ugly Woman versus the Pretty Woman. Lion's song "Ugly Woman" goes like this:

If you want to be happy and live a king's life,

Never make a pretty woman your wife.

All you've got to do is just what I say

And you'll always be happy and gay

From a logical point of view

Always marry a woman uglier than you.

Those were the days when the word *gay* had a completely different meaning of course. "Ugly woman" took New York by storm, hitting it seems a universal chord among men. The debate was then primarily among men and men. Women's voices were silent – a situation that changed from the sixties onwards when more female singers like Singing Francine could retaliate "dog does run away, cat does run away, woman put two wheels on your heels and you could run away too" a tradition that was picked up by others like Singing Diane and Singing Sandra.^{xi}

I have read Sparrow's oeuvre or legacy of male/female encounters as a dialogue between men and women and with the society, rather than a one-sided masculinist position. Sparrow was a product of a post-war era that was the precursor and usher of a second wave feminist movement of women, women like Rosita and Clementina who possibly migrated from Venezuela in search of work, women in trousered suits with padded shoulders smoking cigarettes that Atilla had sung about,^{xii} like those seen in the black and white movies that had presented a post-war era femininity. With the new found confidence of a black masculinity that had confronted, although not erased, the colonial spectre, Sparrow took the performance stage and the airwaves with an assurance. This command of the stage had been earned from years of apprenticeship and study of those that preceded him. He gained a dedicated following and was poised to present the primer on love Caribbean style.

Citing Sparrow's "Benwood Dick": "Tell your sister to come down here I have a message for she," Naipaul (1969: 70) comments that this is Trinidad's version of the Emily Post Advice on dating, a column for the lovelorn published in the Trinidad Guardian at the time. One can read Sparrow's songs on love and sex as defensive of a male patriarchal control of "we women." But Sparrow's women by and large, as we see already from Stella's response in "who taking

advantage of who," are not without agency. Men are also fully equipped with their masculine wiles.

In "Benwood Dick" (1960) for instance the silent Mildred is no lady in waiting. Sparrow relates the story of "a boy's bewilderment at the sudden appearance of his sister's shabby ex-boyfriend who expects to awaken her affection with the memory of his peculiar anatomy."^{xiii}

Benwood Dick

Aye, little boy, let me tell you this.

Don't be afraid. I ain't the police.

You wouldn't know me, but I want you to show me

A girl around here they call Mildred.

When I tell you mister, Mildred is meh sister

He jump up and then he said:

Chorus

Tell your sister to come down quick.

I have something here for she.

Tell she is Mr. Benwood Dick,

The man from Sangre Grande.

She know me well.

I gih she already.

She must remember me

Go on, Go on, tell she Mr Benwood come.

Chorus

Sorry old man, that won't do for me.

I don't carry message for anybody.

If you want to see she, doh worry to send me.

Climb up the step. You won't fall.

It have a bell on the gate. Ring it and wait.

She must come after you call.

Chorus

Curiosity, had meh head confused.

I wonder what Mildred doing with a man who cyah buy shoes.

They start to talk and talk, then they went for a walk.

If you see them, hand in hand.

When he gone I ask she, who is he?

She tell me, is she compere but was she man

Apart from the obvious *double entendre* encoded in the caller's name Benwood Dick, Sparrow depicts him as up to no good, trying to get Mildred's attention through her brother rather than going directly to her house. By introducing himself as Mr., he invokes some notion of respectability to the young boy, with the allusion "she know me well. I gie she already" suggesting to us the listeners, knowledge in the biblical sense. He renders both character parts of this song in a rapid delivery, while "shaping the lyrics with a relaxed, lilting voice that rises and falls effortlessly, managing to make fun of the hapless suitor while expressing his yearning."^{xiv} Do we sympathize with Mr. Benwood Dick who has come all the way from Sangre Grande or pass judgement on Mildred for walking out with a suspicious financially challenged character. While the underlying message is the power of the phallus, the song leaves the judgement open to us. What Emily Post advice to men is Sparrow giving here? In Benwood Dick, unlike Stella, we are not privy to Mildred's side of the story, as we are in another song "Monica Dou Dou" (1959), where the protagonist complains that her husband leaves her alone

for weeks on end and she has to depend on a seaman friend. Monica says in her defence "When the seaman friend bring a friend is then I have cash to spend." The narrator commiserates with her: "Darling that's a shame, your husband is the only one to blame, he shouldn't get on so. ...you may not have quality, but you got personality, your husband stupid like hell, if was me, I eh letting a next man smell." Sparrow's raunchy and wicked wit rescues the song from too much moralizing but he has laid out the cards on the table for us to see both sides.

The calypsonian in the society therefore is merely the mouthpiece for echoing the emotional and sexual transactions that are continuously taking place around him. Women are viewed as manipulative and trying to tie men's foot through fair or foul means as we see in the song "Obeah wedding" which has come to be seen as the quintessential advice on how (Caribbean) women attempt to entice men through other worldly means.

Obeah Wedding (Melda)

You making youself a pappy show Melda,
 You making youself a bloody clown
 Up and down the country looking for Obeah,
 And your perspiration smell so strong, well.
 Girl you only wasting time,
 Obeah Wedding Bell's don't chime
 And you can't trap me with necromancy

Chorus

Melda oh you making wedding plan,
 Carrying me name to Obeah man
 All you do can't get through,
 I still ain't go marry to you.
 The amount of incense that you burn at night,
 Lard and garlic stinking up me place

So much different colour candles that you light,
Rubbing red lavender in your face, well...
Nastiness gone cause your death,
Girl no man can stand your breath,
You too damn nasty, get away from me.

Chorus

If you really want a wedding ring Melda,
There are many other ways and means,
Like scrubbing your teeth and bathing regular,
Soap and water keeps you fresh and clean
Dress up in the latest style, always wear a charming smile,
Some koonoomoonoo bound to say I do.

Chorus

Look how many nights we hug up tight tight tight ,
All we ever know was love and peace
Now every minute is only fight fight fight,
till you using Obeah man for priest, well...
You don't seem to understand,
Obeah can't upset my plan.
For Papa Nisa is me grandfather.

My sympathies for any young woman named Melda in Trinidad after this calypso became popular, such is the power of art. "Obeah wedding" together with others like "Congoman" and "Jane" are often used to invoke Sparrow's misogyny. Women in these calypsos argue that they are adopting coping strategies, and for obvious reasons. The unmarried childless woman was considered a failure in society, the unmarried woman with children needed to find a provider. In singing about women however, Sparrow also immortalizes different stereotypes. Even if their roles and morality are depicted as questionable, they are visible and given voice. I for one am happy that we have such echoes of women in our history and the kind of agency that we see in Jean and Dinah, Rosita and Clementina, Monica, Sandra, Mildred and Teresa, Melda, Raphaela, Maharajin and Matilda, Dorothy, Elaine, Eve and Gloria, Jane, Lucy, Maria and May May, Miss Mary, Miss Ruby, Rose and the ever grateful Stella.

To compensate or define what has, since slavery, emerged as a transcript of black male sexual prowess, Sparrow is selling metaphors of Caribbean sexuality packaged in *double entendre* that continue to signify place and space, demystifying these "islands in the sun." Earl Lovelace (2014) argues that Sparrow's "lyrical prowess made him the Anansi of T&T, a "master trickster,"^{xv} who could be both a hero and a villain and he used his music to reflect the reality of society as he saw it." I would add that he is also a chameleon, a shapeshifter, he moves in and out of each calypso, even geographically, having convinced you that the persona of Sparrow and the protagonist of the song is one, we are forced to suspend disbelief during his live performance or while listening to him on the airwaves. This shape shifting is not only in the character imagery but in his ease with language, to reinforce a former point, moving between the dialect and polite English, from one language to another, investing his character with archetypal persona. When he grunts like the Congo man he signifies a popular movie borrowed image, as politically incorrect as this is, of the African cannibal; in "Teresa" he is the Spanish lover saying *yo te quiero mucho*, in "Lying Excuses," the smooth talking husband who could fool his wife and in "May May" (1959), he becomes the female character, expressing the sensibility of a syrupy femme fatale voice.

May May

Making love one day, with a girl they calling May May

Making love one day, with a girl they calling May May

I pick May May by the railway

And we take a taxi straight to Claxton Bay

Before we lay down on the carpet

She start catching fits

Well she bawling

Darling don't bite me

Don't do that honey

I never had a man who ever do dat to me

Ay ay ay yay doo darling

Look meh pores raise up

You making me feel so sweet

Stop Sparrow stop

Dis time if you see

How she hook me and ah hook she

Like two snakes roll up

She so deceitful, she bawling stop

But she like it, I know dat

By the way she start to scratch me like a cat

Leggo leggo

Stop Sparrow stop

Darling don't bite me

Don't do that honey

"I never had a man who ever do dat to me

Ay ay ay yay doo doo darling

Look meh pores raise up

You making me feel so sweet

Stop Sparrow stop

Sparrow does not take the easy linear path. His may understandably identify more with men, but can we grudge him his masculinity? In continuing to shape the anatomy of sexuality and gender relations for the region he contributes some of the metaphors that may now have lost their frequency of use but were compelling in their time. A generation of Caribbean folk, especially those in the diaspora who grew up in the Sparrow era still quote his verses as if they present home truths about life and love in the Caribbean tropics.^{xvi} The sustained affection for his verse, despite the sometimes politically incorrect allusions was also owed to his skill at word play. Sparrow is the master of the sustained *double entendre*. His wit, salaciousness, accompaniment of sounds and vocal gutturals, a wicked glint in the eye and his lines delivered poker face to an audience, has allowed him to relay graphic metaphors and practices of sexuality without being censored. One YouTube listener in 2012 responded to his song "Ah afraid pussy bite me" with this comment: "If you study and teach English Literature you will marvel at the genius - the puns, analogy, double meaning- straight poetry that puts you on the spot! Is it literal or subliminal? Then the moral dilemma stares you squarely in the face as you snicker at the humour."^{xvii} This tradition of wordsmith has of course continued in the calypso, soca and chutney arena. Unfortunately wit and *double entendre* are often absent, as if the lack of censorship and freeing up of sexual mores have also diminished the gift of intelligence that one read with delight between the lyrical sentences of Sparrow's calypsos.

Among the sustained *double entendre* of Sparrow that has entered the realm of folk classic are:

Big Bamboo (1957)

I asked my woman what must I do,
 To make her honest and keep love too,
 She said Sparrow all I want from you,
 Is a little little piece baby of the big bamboo

60 million Frenchmen (Date unknown)

You say that you love and you'll give your heart,
 But you have a whole body why not give each part

When a love is true there ain't nothing that you wouldn't do

The French people know the trick so they have everybody licked

Ah fraid pussy bite me (Date unknown)

From since I small I hear them say

With pussy cat you mustn't play

A pussy cat always look vex vex vex

You never know what they will do next

Ah fraid ah fraid pussy bite me

Saltfish (1977)

Saltfish stew is what I like

So doo-doo, give me day and night

I like your food, so don't find me rude

My favorite, I sure every man in here already eat it

Sparrow also ingrains the implicit archetype of Caribbean masculinity that reveres sexual male prowess in:

The Village Ram (1964)

Is me the village ram

I eh give a dam

Is me the village ram

I eh give a dam

I cutting down black is white

Man I working day and night

If you have a job to be done

See me, I eh making fun

And not a woman ever complain yet

With me

I eh boasting but I got durability

And if a woman ever say that I

Ever left her dissatisfy

She lie

She lie

She lie

Beware when I drinking rum

I eh like to done

And I bad like a cobra snake

Doh try to escape

When I put you in a clinch

Don't care how you bite and pinch

And I got meh hand on your mouth

The way I does lock you neck

You cyar shout

And not a woman ever complain yet

With me

I eh boasting but I got durability

And if a woman ever say that I

Ever left her dissatisfy

She lie She lie She lie

The idea that sexual performance takes precedence over all else in a relationship, the act of boasting about one's sexual "durability" or exploits, the explicit violence "The way I does lock you neck you cyar shout" - one cannot in all honesty dismiss the critique that the calypso has been used as form of control over women, as it has over all miscreants of one sort or another, the politician and priest alike. Gottreich (n.d.) sums up the contradictoriness of the calypso form with regard to Caribbean femininity: "In virtually every subject area, such as politics, unemployment, or social injustices, the (male) calypsonian seeks to tell the truth, to reflect the public sentiment. Curiously, it is only in the domain of female representation that woman has been chauvinistically distorted, fabricated, constructed and fictionalised in ways that do not reflect reality."^{xviii}

What is *reality* for femininity and masculinity? What is this ideal male/female equity and balance that exists out there somewhere to which we aspire? Sparrow is no philosopher asking the question. He is the bard singing the conundrum into our subconscious. He knows that the power relations between masculinity and femininity are waged on every level. His renditions are an honest representation of his encounters, the psychoses and fears that each sex has of the other, the need for gender relations to be constructed on so many layers of truth and half-truths, the mutations in arrangements between the sexes again in many forms. Think for instance of the meme song "I go be single forever" that won Kris Veeshal Persad, sobriquet KI – chutney soca monarch of the year 2012 in Trinidad and Tobago.

I don't have to stay at home

I don't have to answer phone

I could have any girl in my card ...

When meh partners have it hard

I doh have to clock no card

I go be single forever.

The battle continues, women versus men, even unto a new generation..

Whether we admit to it or not, there are home truths in Sparrow's songs that undergird any sexual relationship, as for instance in "No Money no Love" (1969), where the true pathos of sexual desire and economics meet up.

No Money No love

Ivy pack up she clothes to leave

Because John was down and out

All alone he was left to grieve

She had a next man in South

She said openly

She say I really love you Johnny

But you ain't have no money

So what will my future be Even though you say you love me?

Chorus

We cyar love without money

We cyar make love on hungry belly

Johnny you'll be the only one I'm dreaming of

You're my turtle dove

But, no money no love

If you hear how he plead with she to get her to understand

Listen, mister, she tell Johnny

Leggo me blasted hand

And make up your mind

We got to break up this lime
She said poverty is a crime
You got no money
Still you tanglin` me all the blinkin` time

Chorus

Gentleman let me tell you plain
She say I don` t want to make a scene
But if you only touch me again
The police got intervene
You ain` t got a blasted cent
I couldn` t even pay the rent
I had to give up me apartment
You give me nothing to eat
Now you want me to sleep on the pavement?

Chorus

Johnny nearly killed she with blows
Poor Ivy bawl like a cow
Rip up she wig and he tear down she clothes
The South man ain` t want she now
Oh, Lord, what a fight
They roll until broad daylight

Charlotte Street was hot that night

She get some good lick but she let go kick and some bite

The arrangement of this song is almost dirge like. The calypsonian's pathos extends to both men and women. Poverty is the crime and one that contributes to the violence of sexual relations. In the last verse, with the usual Sparrowdian twist, Johnny nearly kills Ivy with blows, and she ends up worse for the wear, even losing the south man because of this brawl. Love in the urban tropics is lived out in the streets where much of life takes place, outside of small and overcrowded rooms. As the narrator says, "Charlotte Street was hot that night, She get some good lick but she let go kick and some bite." Women are never only victims, men are rarely absolute winners.

I hope this bird's eye view of The Mighty Sparrow has convinced you sufficiently that Mr. Slinger Francisco's extensive catalogue deserves much closer scrutiny for its literary value as well as its complex representation of gender. Behind the mischievous smile and wicked pelvic thrust, Sparrow represents one of the best attempts of Caribbean men to serenade women and to express the *tabanca*^{xix} of unrequited love. He recognised the transitory nature of existence, that many relationships must part because we remain temporary residents and travellers in islands too small to absorb all of its talent, indiscretions, desires and ambitions. In the tradition of the old folk songs like "Jamaica Farewell" (1957),^{xx} and "Come back Liza, Come back Gyal" (1952),^{xxi} we also have Sparrow's legacy of love ballads like "Rose" (in which he confesses "Girl ah want you bad Girl, ah want you bad! I'm going staring mad," (mind you characteristically still promising her blows for leaving and deceiving him) and "Maria" (1959). These two songs from his repertoire speak to the pain of love and loss and have become, like many in his richly varied repertoire, classics to be recalled and sung by generations past and those to come. Let Sparrow have the last word on the ubiquitous bittersweet pathos of love and man/woman relations.

Maria

Maria darling I must go

But remember I love you so

Unfortunately, we must part

Girl you don't know how it breaks my heart

I wish I coulda stay with you

And gie you what is yours dou dou

But until we meet again

I know, right now we got to say ayo

Woa oh oh oh oh Maria

Woa oh oh oh oh Maria

I like the way you walk Marie

And I like the way you talk Marie

I like the way you smile Marie

You know you have me going wild Marie

It's very plain to see Marie

How much you mean to me Marie

I don't care if I starve Marie

You'll get all the money I have Marie

Woa woa woa oh oh oh Maria

Woa woa oh oh oh Maria

I went home to Marie last night

But somebody nearly out meh light

I don't know what was his reason

Now the police have him in prison

I don't know if what he says was true
 He says he love Maria too
 But now I cyar see what to do
 Because he have meh eyes black and blue
 Woo oo oh oh oh Maria
 Woo oo oh oh oh Maria

ENDNOTES

ⁱ See Gordon Rohlehr and J. Cowley. 1996. *Carnival, Canboulav and Calypso*. UK: Cambridge University Press and Everard Phillips. 2005. *Recognising the Language of Calypso as "Symbolic Action" in Resolving Conflict in the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago*. PhD diss., London School of Economics.

ⁱⁱ I thank Dr. Sue Ann Barratt for her assistance with the research on discography of Sparrow for this paper.

ⁱⁱⁱ Gordon Rohlehr. 1990. *Calypso and Society in Pre-Independence Trinidad*, Gordon Rohlehr, Tunapuna, Trinidad, p. 216

^{iv} Think of T. S. Eliot's line from *The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock* (1915): "In the rooms the women go, speaking of Michelangelo" and compare this with Sparrow's similar capacity in verse making.

^v *Trinidad Guardian*, 2 October 1966, Interview Sparrow with Wayne Brown.

^{vi} Rohlehr, Gordon. 2005. "Carnival Cannibalized or Cannibal Carnivalized: Contextualizing the "Cannibal Joke" in Calypso and Literature," *Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal*: Vol. 3 Iss. 2, Article 1. Available at: <https://scholarlyrepository.miami.edu/anthurium/vol3/iss2/1>

^{vii} Louis Regis. 2013. "From Apocalypse to Awakenings" *Tout Moun, Caribbean Journal of Cultural Studies*, 2 (1): 4, October.

https://journals.sta.uwi.edu/toutmoun/papers/oct13/Tout_Moun_2_REGIS.pdf

^{viii} Chaucer's poetic language has been well documented and I am certainly no expert in this area. This reference is primarily to stimulate more imaginative interpretations of Sparrow's poetry in song into this discussion, but certainly not a definitive or fully informed set of statements.

^{ix} See "Sparrow and the Language of the Calypso" by Gordon Rohlehr, in *Caribbean Quarterly*, 14(1-2), March-June 1968; *The Future in the Present—Selected Writings by C.L.R. James*. Westport, Connecticut: L. Hill, and London: Allison & Busby, and Edward Kamau Brathwaite. 1984. *History of the Voice: Development of Nation Language in Anglophone Caribbean Poetry*. London: New Beacon Books.

^x Some of this replaying of calypso-created characters are already found in the theatre of Tony Hall. 2002. *Jean and Dinah*, Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, and in crime fiction by Laurence Waldron 2015. *Gypsy in the Moonlight*, Floodwood, Minn: Four Rivers Press.

^{xi} I discuss the retaliations of these female calypsonians to the masculine gaze of calypso in a paper entitled “Reflections on the Women’s Movement in Trinidad: Calypsos, Changes and Sexual Violence” *Feminist Review*, 1991, No 38, pp. 33-47.

^{xii} See Raymond Quevedo. 1983. *Atilla’s Kaiso: A Short History of Trinidad Calypso*, University of the West Indies Extra-Mural Studies. Atilla had a series of calypsos that deplored what he considered the modern trends of women, their new fashions in “The Modern Girl” p.138 and “Women is not the weaker sex” p. 159. In his 1935 calypso “Women will rule the world” he demonstrates a prescience of the future: “Long ago their one ambition in life, Was to be a mother and wife, But now they mean to be males, Smoking cigarettes and drinking cocktails.”

^{xiii} Harris, Mark and Carmel Buckley. “Calypso Picaresque: The Particular Genius of Mighty Sparrow” <https://archive.ica.art/bulletin/calypso-picaresque>

^{xiv} *Ibid.*

^{xv} Reshma Ragoonath Tue Feb 18 2014

<http://www.guardian.co.tt/article-6.2.378745.4d68585640>

^{xvi} I should also note that this is not just restricted to Trinidadian or Caribbean-born peoples. Many colleagues and friends who have visited Trinidad or were exposed to Sparrow’s wit still recall and sing verses of his songs as an identification with this culture. And then of course there is a new second and third generation of listeners and fans who discover Sparrow through You Tube and in other digital media.

^{xvii} Sandy Bradshaw, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jUJ-yTp0-Os>; Accessed January 3rd, 2020

^{xviii} Anna S. Gottreich “Whe she go do”: Women’s Participation in Trinidad Calypso. Undated paper <https://ufdcimages.uflib.ufl.edu/CA/00/40/01/29/00001/PDF.pdf>

^{xix} Caribbean/Trinidadian word to describe lovesickness, sadness as a result of unrequited feelings for someone.

^{xx} The origins of this song are unclear although credited to Irving Burgie (American of Barbadian birth) who admitted that it was culled from a Jamaican mento song. It was recorded and made popular by Harry Belafonte in 1957. See <https://mudcat.org/thread.cfm?threadid-61495> for a conversation thread on the possible origins of this and other folk songs.

^{xxi} *Ibid.* Specific origins of “Come back Liza” in Jamaican dialect, with musical score and chords, edited and arranged by Tom Murray, 1952, *Folk Songs of Jamaica*, Oxford University Press. Sung by Edric Connor and the Caribbeans, 1952, *Songs from Jamaica*, track 6. Revised and arranged by Irving Burgie and William Attaway, *Come Back Liza*, sung by Harry Belafonte 1955.

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