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DISRUPTING THE ART FORM: TOBAGO WOMEN AND CALYPSO 1960-2000



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INTRODUCTION

Calypso continues to serve as one of the main art forms through which the lived realities and concerns of Trinbagonians can be powerfully articulated. The development of calypso on the island of Tobago occurred long after the genre's emergence in Trinidad. Calypso was exclusively associated with carnival and most Tobagonians did not participate in carnival before World War II (Hall et al. 48). This rejection of carnival and its associated creative industries was due to religious doctrines promulgated by churches on the island. The church, being the most influential social institution on the island, had a profound impact on the actions of Tobagonians. To be sure, Archdeacon Davies of the Anglican church noted that any strong emotion or concern drove Tobagonians to the church immediately (Pemberton 4). Oral accounts offered by cultural practitioners such as Edward Hernandez, Cheryl Uzuro and Terrance Sandiford, highlighted the puritan influence of Anglo-Saxon churches and the small churches of the 1960s and 1970s as the key agents in dissuading Tobagonians from participating in carnival, calypso, steel pan and other cultural activities (Hall et al 48).

While some rebellious Tobagonian men ignored the admonitions against Carnival and journeyed to Trinidad to participate in these events, "the church confined Tobago women to traditional roles and forbade their participation in anything related to drama and carnival; both of which were viewed as worldly and sinful" (Uzuro). As such, calypso, like carnival, bore little significance to Tobagonians during the early twentieth century. Connoisseur of Tobago's culture, George Leacock, noted that in 1923 very little was happening in Tobago for carnival. He explained that it was merely a few men who paraded in simple makeshift costumes with pitch oil tins (Hall 44-46). During this period, the speech band as opposed to calypso, was the key feature of the festivities on the island. It is understandable, therefore, that Linden Lewis regarded calypso as rooted primarily in a history of "urbanisation, immigration and black

reconstruction in post-emancipation Trinidad” (Lewis 16). However, the propagation of the idea that this genre is the Afro-Trinidadian expression of socio-political issues has resulted in a gross disregard for the unique history surrounding the development of calypso in Tobago and the manner in which Tobago women transformed the genre.

This essay disrupts the dismissive and uncritical representation of Tobago women in the historiography of calypso. While Tobago and its women did not feature prominently in the early history of calypso in the twin island nation, by the mid-twentieth century, several Tobagonian women challenged the monopoly of male calypsonians through lyrics that contested conventional gender systems, a specialisation in social commentaries and the injection of a distinct female voice on issues of national importance. Over time, Tobago’s female calypsonians also became more self-assured and direct in their treatment of social issues. Certainly, the contributions of Linda McCartha Sandy-Lewis, Beulah Bobb, Ingrid Brathwaite, Maureen Denoon, Eastlyn Orr and Tricia Bocage-Sobers disrupted and redefined the calypso arena.

While very little has been written about the emergence of calypso in Tobago, the genesis can be traced back to the period before Tobago’s annexation to Trinidad. Banter songs which highlighted villagers’ misdeeds and shortcomings, functioned in a manner similar to the calypso in Trinidad (Craig-James 154). As such, Susan Craig-James contended that “the conscious adoption of Trinidad styles, and the emergence of chantwels/calypso singers [from the early 1900s] were grafted onto deeply rooted local song traditions” (Craig-James 154). The historical record indicates that the Tobago chantwels of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were predominantly men. The most prominent among these men included Manny Wheeler, Frederick Eastman, Quintin Hackett and Sammy Peterkin (Craig-James 157-159).

While women were not featured among this community of musicians, they were often the subject of many banter songs and early calypsos. Their alleged romantic rendezvous and sneaky tactics were the subject of much chastisement (Guillaume). In this way, the chantwels and singers of banter songs in Tobago echoed the distrust of women frequently vocalised by male calypsonians in Trinidad (Rohlehr 358). From the 1930s, men such as Quamina “Berlin King” Cupid, Samuel Peterkin, Sydney Archie and Bernie Jack led the charge in advancing calypso on the island (Titus 6). Up to the 1960s when the first organised calypso tent was opened, these men reigned supreme (Jack). When questioned about women’s involvement in early calypso, Bernie Jack responded with the proverb, “cocrico nah go ah fowl party”, which pointed to female nonbelonging and reflected the widespread view about women’s involvement in calypso (Jack). Furthermore, in interrogating the content of calypso, Linden Lewis cited Gordon Rohlehr who described the art form as an “overwhelming tradition of recorded masculinity” characterised by “images of social reality filtered through the male gaze”, and a medium through

which the male performers “tell of their sexual exploits, their fantasies and their imagined power over women” (Rohlehr 23).

The questions of ideology and power were relevant to Tobago female calypsonians' engagement in the art form in the context of male dominance and patriarchal hegemony. Indeed, calypso was overwhelmingly a tradition of masculine self-assertion, self-celebration and unrepentant misogyny (Rohlehr 328). Moreover, male calypsonians seized the art form “as a general arena of power to define the parameters of their own sexuality but quite interestingly, the sexuality of women as well” (Lewis 20). The socio-sexual ideas promulgated through calypso positioned some women as prey, others, as “sexually obsolete” on account of aging and in some instances, women were not “acknowledged or validated as persons; [they were] contemptuously nullified and discarded” (Rohlehr 358-361). These socio-sexual ideas reinforced male domination in calypso and cemented the fact that the calypso arena was imbued with nuanced considerations of power (Lewis 20). The growing popularity of calypso in the early to mid-twentieth century also meant that the wider public gave life to the male domination and masculinist ideas that were characteristic of the art form.

It was within this misogynistic environment that six Tobago women rode into the calypso arena determined to disrupt the art form and raise the status of women. Indeed, calypso was “originally considered lewd, crude and vulgar; it was regarded as not culturally ‘proper’, and ‘respectable’ people would scarcely be expected to sing it” (Lewis 16). Therefore, those women who entered the calypso arena were contesting the ideas of feminine respectability that had become entrenched in the English-speaking Caribbean since the early nineteenth century (Bloomstein 1-2). Moreover, these women were forced to creatively address issues of gender, sexuality and power in the art form. Through their music, Linda McCartha Sandy-Lewis, Beulah Bobb, Maureen Denoon and Eastlyn Orr not only addressed these issues, but sought to express their own ideas on femininity and masculinity in Trinidad and Tobago. In so doing, these women challenged notions about masculinity and the status of women that had been constructed and elevated by male calypsonians over decades.

“HER MAJESTY, QUEEN OF THE ROAD”- LINDA MCCARTHA SANDY-LEWIS

Linda McCartha Sandy-Lewis sobriquet ‘Calypso Rose’, was born on 27 April 1940 and raised in the village of Bethel. Despite her Christian upbringing, Calypso Rose refuted the idea that calypso was ‘devilish’ and ‘degrading’ and in 1955 started singing publicly (Push 1). The calypso circuit in Tobago was small and it was not until the 1960s that tents became organised (Titus 14). As a result, Rose like numerous male calypsonians on the island, migrated to Trinidad. With this move, a Tobago-born woman began redefining calypso in a more gender inclusive manner.

During the 1960s Rose was often the sole female performer among leading men such as the Mighty Spoiler (Theophilus Phillip) and Lord Melody (Fitzroy Alexander). Reflecting on her feelings about the monopoly men exercised over calypso at that time, she explained, “when I began entertaining at 15...they said: ‘Why are you singing calypso? It does not belong to a woman. Calypso belongs to the men.’ Well, I told them the good Lord has given me the inspiration to create and I will not be like the foolish virgin in the Bible. I will not bury my talent in the soil! I will be jiggy jiving!” (Brown). This defiance of the established gender ideals of the day, suggests that Rose was equipped and ready to fight all battles that came her way, and surely, the battles were numerous.

Rose faced fierce opposition from carnival authorities, male calypsonians and even church groups. In the mid-1960s, she was told by the powers that be, that in spite of the admiration and widespread enjoyment of her calypso *Fire In Me Wire*, she would not win the Road March competition simply because she is a woman (Meschino). In the calypso tent, she also recalled acts of sabotage by one established male calypsonian who despite knowing she would close the show, “would come on before me and just keep singing until the people started walking out. Many times, I didn't get to go on because of that dog!” (Meschino). However, these poorly disguised attacks by men in the industry could not stop Rose. As she would say, “them foolish and petty men, I don't worry about them, they have been trying to take me down but to the end I retain my crown” (Calypso Rose 00:03:27).

Among members of the wider public, her salacious lyrics sparked outrage and contemptuous labels such as “queen of smut” (Meschino). On one occasion she was summoned to a meeting by a women's religious group that sought to remind her about the rules of femininity and the fact that women should not be involved in calypso (Meschino). In response to their castigation, Rose recalled, “I told them God gave me the talent to write and sing and I will continue doing it as long as the good Lord gives me breath. Then I walked out” (Meschino). Indeed, Rose's many experiences with public ridicule reflected the contrasting standards of sexual behaviour entrenched in the society. Her salaciousness in the public domain challenged the social construction of sexual difference that had become a major theme of male constructed calypsos. Moreover, in her song *Calypso Queen*, Rose acknowledged that her ‘Tobagonian-ness’ was often a topic of discussion. With a tone suggesting their indifference towards her, she admitted “they use to call me small island girl” (Calypso Rose 00:03:27). Despite the myriad instances of opposition, Rose demonstrated a fierce resistance to the view that as a woman and as a Tobagonian, she did not belong in the art form.

Rose is often credited as leading the “demasculinization” of calypso (Ottley 6). To be sure, during the 1960s, Rose became the first female recording calypsonian and toured Grenada, New York and St. Thomas where she became the first woman to win the ‘Calypso King’ title (Push 1). During the 1970s, she won the calypso queen title on five consecutive occasions and ended

the decade with a trailblazing achievement; the only Tobagonian to win the 'carnival double'- Calypso Monarch and Road March King in 1978 and back to back Road March titles in 1977 and 1978 (Push 1). Following her historic 1977 Road March title, Rose celebrated her triumph over the notion that a woman could never win the Road March by releasing a powerful hit titled *Her Majesty*. With a roar of confidence and bravado, she sang the refrain, "They address me as her majesty/ they say meh music sweet, it make for the pan to beat/ It have the skip to jump on Carnival Day/ The brass taking the load/ They call me Queen, Queen, Queen Her Majesty/ Queen of the Road"(Calypso Rose 00:05:16).

Not only was Rose dominating her male counterparts, but the content of her calypsos was challenging the long-established tradition of recorded masculinity. Male calypsonians explored female sexuality extensively. Women and their sexuality were often gravely lambasted. For instance, in 1921, "Roxborough", one of Tobago's early calypsonians, sang "Clementina you whore, bring back mi dollar, yuh man in the kitchen and yuh fighting for money" (Titus 6). In another of his renditions, he denigrated a married woman who was allegedly 'friendly' with a police sergeant in the village (Titus 7). In many instances, these banter type songs aimed to impose negative informal sanctions on women who decided to veer outside behavioural expectations and simultaneously promote female sexual passivity. Calypso Rose on the other hand, celebrated a woman's sexuality and fiercely rejected Victorian ideals of womanhood. In her 1987 hit, *Sweet Side Man*, Rose cheerfully acknowledged wives who took matters into their own hands, when neglected by husbands who "looking for woman outside" (Calypso Rose 00:06:05). In a celebratory tone, she exclaimed, "Who she calls on the phone when she all alone, Sideman! Who feed d' pussy cat milk, sideman! Who pound d' nail with his hammer, sideman! Sideman sweet, sideman sweet, sideman sweet, sideman sweet!" (Calypso Rose 00:06:05).

Another of Rose's hits from the 1960s, *The Pudding*, brazenly celebrated the black man's sexuality and a woman's desire for his 'iron' or 'whip' (Calypso Rose 00:02:56). These compositions were significant because "Rose, as a woman, was treading on forbidden ground. For not only was she bringing female response and female desire into the open, but she was also singing on tabooed subjects" (Rohlehr 368). In this way, Rose was making meaningful steps towards dismantling well-established gender expectations and prompting women to take control of their sexuality. Scholars such as Gelien Matthews also identified Rose's uninhibited discussion of female sexuality as one of the major ways she disrupted and redefined the genre. Matthews contends that Rose demonstrated a bold disobedience to the idea that women should remain tight lipped about their sexual desires by placing "emphasis on the woman taking charge even to the extent of crossing traditional thresholds of well-established gender systems" (Matthews 54).

Beyond what has been parochially considered 'smut tunes', Rose also vocalised the struggles of women and offered guidance to her sisters. She touched on themes of intimate partner violence and infidelity with tunes such as *How the Bed Break Down*, *Don't Go* and *Solomon*. In her work, Anna

Gottreich, explained that Rose's calypsos embodied "a female rebellion against social ideas which have historically denied women anything but a passive role" (26). Rose herself posited that, "many of my calypsos were written from stories that women themselves told me. I try to write about the sufferings of women as much as I can" (Gottreich 26). In this way, Rose took the lead "in deliberately using calypso to craft a positive feminine perspective" (Matthews 51). Moreover, an assessment of her interviews and discography suggests that "as she matured in the art form, there was a greater consciousness of the need to use her voice to sing out on behalf of women and to expose the many disadvantaged circumstances they face in both the private and public spheres" (Matthews 51). Indeed, Rose consciously uprooted women from the denigrated position in which they were placed by many male calypsonians and crafted an alternative representation that presented them as assertive, shrewd and independent. It therefore cannot be denied that this Tobago woman not only challenged the monopoly held by men over calypso, but through her music, she inserted a much-needed feminist voice and elevated herself as an ambassador who championed better treatment for women.

"NO SAFE TOPICS"- BEULAH ELIZABETH BOBB

Calypso Rose opened the door for many other Tobago born women to invade the male dominated arena. One such woman was Beulah "Lady B" Bobb who was born on 25 March 1957 in L'Anse Fourmi. She was the fifth of eight children raised by devout Catholic parents. Beulah, like her sisters, Verleen and Kenetta, became very involved in storytelling, drama, song and dance from a very early age (Bobb). Her love for the arts was further nurtured by her involvement in the Prime Minister's Best Village Competition as a playwright, dramatist, singer and dancer. By 1974, however, Beulah was an established writer and performer of calypsos. In Tobago, she won the calypso monarch on two occasions, the first being in 1978 (Gottreich 21). Like many other ambitious calypsonians of the time, she moved to Trinidad in 1980 and joined Slinger Fransico's calypso tent (Ottley 105). This move to Trinidad was socially beneficial in multifaceted ways. Beulah was free spirited and, according to her sister Kenetta, found love and got married (Bobb).

Lady B's winning streak continued in Trinidad as she captured the national calypso queen title in 1986 with *The Queen Coming* and *True Trinidadian* (Bowman). Following this victory, Bobb appeared in the national calypso monarch semi-finals on over twenty occasions (Bowman). Some of her popular calypsos included *Fight Back*, *20 Years in Revue*, *Hostages*, *Move the Cameras*, *Sanctions*, *No Baggage*, *Dancing Time*, *Castara Kid*, *Whoa Donkey* and *Ambatalia Woman*. *Ambatalia Woman*, which celebrated the strength and commitment of women, was one demonstration of Bobb's outstanding abilities as a writer. This song, which was performed by Bobb, Singing Sandra (Sandra DesVignes-Millington), Marvellous Marva (Marva Joseph) and Tigress (Joanne Rowley), also known as the United Sisters, was highly acclaimed throughout the Caribbean. Intent on empowering Caribbean women, Bobb penned the lyrics, "we big and strong, we are

working whole day on a plantation. Ambatalia women we are full of power! Ambatalia woman we come to take over!" (United Sisters 00:04:31).

Much like Calypso Rose, Bobb's commitment to exalting women was rooted in a desire to alter their negative representation in many of the earlier calypsos. In surveying the extent of these negative representations of women in calypso, scholars such as Olive Senior argued that outside of their mothering role, women were frequently portrayed as "scheming" and were the object of verbal abuse, humiliation and negative representations in the "crudest terms possible" (Senior 168). Additionally, in his examination of over three hundred calypsos performed over a ten-year period, 1969-1979, William Aho uncovered that "one fourth of all the calypsos dealt with male /female relationships, and nearly all of these were negative to women" (Gottreich 7). Interestingly, these negative representations of women did not fully reflect the societal attitudes towards women. In Tobago, women, especially those who "blow to bring you into the world" were respected and admired (Elder 4). In spite of this, early Tobagonian calypsonians such as "Roxborough" took a stake in the negative representation of women. Beulah Bobb sought to disrupt this masculinist tradition where women were positioned as subordinate to the male calypsonian.

Through her music, Bobb also sought to challenge men's imagined power over women; an attitude that was also characteristic of male calypsonians (Lewis 23). Throughout the twentieth century, there was a culture of intimate partner violence with women being the victims. Bridget Brereton in her examination of the culture of violence in Trinidad and Tobago highlighted that wife-beating was common among all social and ethnic groups and practically went unchallenged, uncriticised and therefore viewed as normal (Brereton 11). Bobb in her song *Hostages*, captured the realities of women trapped in abusive marriages unable to escape with their children due to their financial dependence on the abuser (Ottley 109-10). Such calypsos which spoke about women and to women, were well received and often led to some women taking action to change their personal circumstances. In a discussion with Jean Telesford, she explained, "as a Tobagonian listening to that song by Beulah, I cried. She put into words what I was going through and that was a reality for many women. We were hostages and it is that message that really prompted me to get up and get and look for my own, so that I could stand on my own."

As her artistry developed, Bobb started shifting the traditional position of female calypsonians as merely spokespersons for social equality. She was one of the early female calypsonians to embrace political commentaries and tackle controversial government issues (Gottreich 34). In 2000, Bobb, who stayed on the pulse of all political affairs in Tobago, released *Dollar Waste*. This calypso captured the vexation of Tobagonians with the National Alliance for Reconstruction (NAR) government's decision to host a multimillion-dollar music festival, called Ringbang, to mark the turn of the new millennium. Lady B lamented, "adda adda Ringbang squander-mania,

adda adda Ringbang thousands and thousands of TT dollars, Hochoy give we waste, Eddy give we waste, Bindley give we waste, millions and millions of TT dollars waste, Mervyn gone with a million dollars, What Tobago will eat for dinner” (Lady B 00:05:16). Although this calypso appeared to be a simple up-tempo dancing tune, Bobb called out the then Chief Secretary of the Tobago House of Assembly, Hochoy Charles and his colleagues Bindley Benjamin, and Eddy Grant for their mismanagement of public funds. By all accounts, *Dollar Waste*, was the most popular song on the island in the year 2000 (Charles). Many also held the belief that Bobb’s response to this political crisis stirred up public displeasure with the regime which eventually led to the ousting of Hochoy Charles and his NAR government (Caribbean Insight Television 00:53:56).

In a discussion with Randolph Ottley, Bobb explained, “I noticed a lot of women every year, they try to look for a safe woman topic. The safe topics are nice, and people accept them, but then where is your creativity in the whole thing” (Gottreich 106). In many ways, these safe topics were an attempt to remain in public favour and not challenge traditional ideas of womanhood. By all accounts, Bobb cared very little about remaining in public favour. Her music not only proved that women could effectively deliver hard hitting political commentaries, but her message of female self-reliance and self-respect prompted many women to flee a life of misery.

“IN PURSUIT OF A PLACE IN TRINIDAD”- INGRID BRATHWAITE

Ingrid Brathwaite also known as “Lady IB” was born on 2 December 1960 and grew up in the windward village of Roxborough. She became a popular calypsonian on the island during the 1980s. Brathwaite, whose singing career began at the age of 12, noted that:

My mother was a Spiritual Baptist and from twelve years old she had me singing in church, leading choruses and doing musical specials. By the time I was a teenager, I was asked to join the New Heritage Culture Group based in Mason Hall. This group was the brainchild of Prince Unique who was a top calypsonian in Tobago during the 1970s. The group would go to different villages performing a variety of songs and putting on comedy shows and plays. He was the one who really introduced me to the calypso artform. At that time, in my teens, I could not write calypsos so Prince Unique and Joe Tempo Caesar were the two men who wrote most of my early calypsos.

Brathwaite, whose early calypsos were written by veteran male calypsonians, focused on themes such as nation building, childrearing and parenting. In many ways, these themes positioned her in a ‘safe place’ with ‘safe topics’ for a female. In the early stages of her career, these themes brought a different flavour to the calypso tents in Tobago which were still dominated by men like Rawle “Axeback” Titus, Joe Tempo Caesar, Gilbert “Happy” O’Connor

and Michael "Sweet Mike" Duncan (Brathwaite). However, these themes did very little to challenge the status quo.

In 1987, Lady IB joined the Calypso Rose Superstar Tent and noted that Rose and the calypsonians at this tent/ assisted her in developing her skills in writing and delivery. Brathwaite's growth as a writer allowed her to sing on issues that she was passionate about. By 1990, she broke free from the shackles of male-composed 'safe tunes' and was crowned Tobago Calypso Queen with an uncompromisingly direct political calypso, *The Vision*. By 1991, Brathwaite started taking her music beyond Tobago. In that year, she participated in Dominica's Calypso Queen of the World and placed among the top 10 performers with a riveting performance of her composition, *Mommy* (Brathwaite). This was followed by performances in Grenada and St. Vincent. However, acceptance and success in Trinidad remained out of her reach. Lady IB explained,

As a calypsonian your personal goal is to reach the big yard. However, for Tobagonians this was not easy. When you look at those Tobagonians who became well known, Rose, Shadow, Lady B, they all had to leave Tobago to really reach their full potential and get exposure. So, the idea of moving to Trinidad as an artiste was quite popular but that came with many challenges. In the instance that you were not invited to join a tent, sometimes you had to travel to Trinidad so that you could sing for somebody or play your calypso for somebody to get to perform in a tent. Sometimes you succeeded but many times you did not get through. You also have to remember that as someone living in Tobago, you have a family, a job and it was a lot of travelling back and forth on the boat. It really was not an easy task and it takes a toll on you physically and mentally. Even in your efforts to get to the semi-finals when adjudicators came to Tobago, because of poor management, sometimes you had one chance to rehearse with the band or sometimes none at all. These are challenges that almost all Tobago based calypsonians during the 80s and 90s faced. It was tough.

While Brathwaite became a regular in the finals of the Tobago Calypso Monarch and a leading woman in the Tobago circuit, she was unable to secure consistent work in tents in Trinidad or a place in the national semi-finals. As such, Brathwaite decided to create her own platform where she and other Tobago calypsonians, both male and female, could showcase their talents to Trinidadians. She explained:

I felt like I needed to take charge of the situation because many Tobago calypsonians lacked the exposure and there was very little incentive by the powers that be to introduce Tobago based calypsonians to the Trinidad public. So, I organised trips to places in Trinidad like Morvant, Gasparillo and Penal where myself and many other Tobago calypsonians such as Lady Vibes would share our music, especially around the

carnival season so that persons in the sister isle of Trinidad could get a taste of some of the selections coming out of Tobago for that year.

Brathwaite's testimony sheds light on a painful reality endured by many Tobago calypsonians who desired exposure, opportunities and success that performing in a calypso tent in Trinidad could bring. Nevertheless, her act of creating an opportunity so that Tobago calypsos can be shared with Trinidadians, demonstrated a spirit of resilience that was common among female Tobago calypsonians.

"A NEW VIBE"- MAUREEN MELVILLE-DENOON

Similar to Brathwaite, Maureen Melville-Denoon, sobriquet, 'Sister Nancy', was another prominent woman on the calypso scene in Tobago during the 1980s. Born, 23 January 1956, Sister Nancy grew up in the windward village of Betsey Hope. She noted that in the 1960s, the windward calypso scene was dominated by men such as 'Jus Come' and 'Medicine' (Melville-Denoon). Denoon, being a teen at the time, was inspired by these men to get on stage. She first stepped on stage in the early 1970s for Speyside's 'Scouting for Talent Competition' and this marked the beginning of a thirty-year career. Early in her career, Sister Nancy belted out social commentaries, such as *Tobago is a Paradise* which spoke to the natural attractions and charm of the people of Tobago. Another popular contribution, *Our Culture is Dying*, served as both an assault on the poor management of cultural events on the island and a plea to persons to become more supportive of their culture. However, by the mid-1970s, Sister Nancy began understanding the power of her platform and started carving a space of her own, a space in which she could discuss the issues that mattered most to her. She penned *Stand up for your rights*, which prompted listeners to stand up against injustice and women in particular, "to stand up to bad treatment and abusive men" (Melville-Denoon). Certainly, domestic violence was so rampant that many female calypsonians felt the need to address it.

Sister Nancy noted that although the art form was a popular recreation for men, she was never intimidated. Her relationships with her male colleagues remained positive and respectful. She also broke barriers by becoming one of the very few women to perform soca on the island during this time. Veteran Tobago calypsonians admitted that the tempo and style were different and refreshing (Duncan). Sister Nancy's popular *Soca Queen in Town* succinctly captured the reality of this 'new' movement. Denoon explains "I was the only woman on the scene doing the more up-tempo calypso, which some considered soca. I told the story of a white man coming to Scarborough and I am the soca queen, wining [rotating of the pelvic girdle in a rhythmic pattern] and having a good time" (Melville-Denoon). Sister Nancy who was always regarded as a daring performer, never shied away from anything deemed sexy. She noted, "you know men always boasted about their manhood and machoism and that was common in calypso but for a woman that was a no. I was not intimidated, I enjoyed myself, I embraced

sexiness and encouraged women to be bold, hold a man, dance and have a good time” (Melville-Denoon). Certainly, Denoon, like Calypso Rose, challenged the well-established Victorian ideals of feminine respectability. Not only were these women contesting the ideas surrounding womanhood and encouraging women to let go of their sexual inhibitions, but they were responding to a long history of performance of masculinity in which male calypsonians spoke freely about their sexuality and even dramatised their sexual fantasies. Denoon, like Calypso Rose and Lady B, contributed significantly to repositioning the female calypsonian as not merely an advocate for social justice but as a woman who was audaciously bold and sensual.

In the late 1990s, Denoon was invited by officials of Trinbago Unified Calypsonians' Organisation (TUCO) to participate in the Sprangalang's Kaiso Mas Camp in Trinidad. Reflecting on this opportunity, Sister Nancy declared,

The opportunity to perform in the mas camp was exciting and fulfilling. I really enjoyed it, the audience enjoyed it, I was supported by the other calypsonians and I felt really good to take my music to Trinidad. However, I have a family, I am married, you have to come home, you have to go to work and sometimes when you weigh the demands at home, you really could not commit to staying in Trinidad like many male calypsonians did, and going at your calypso career with full force. So, really and truly, I remained firmly planted in Tobago.

Similar to Brathwaite, Denoon's statement reveals that while it seemed like an easy decision for male Tobago calypsonians to answer the call of relocation to Trinidad, women had a lot more to consider, especially their families. In most instances, remaining in Tobago with their families was seen as the best decision.

“WOMAN RISING”- EASTLYN ORR

Eastlyn Orr, sobriquet “Lady Hotspot”, was the first Tobagonian to win the Teen Talent competition in 1986 and the first individual to win that competition singing a calypso (Ottley 155). This victory served as a launching pad for a career as a calypsonian. She was the first female to sing at the “Spectakula Forum” in Port of Spain, Trinidad (Gottreich 31). In a short space of time, she performed many social commentaries such as *Leave Woman Alone*, *I don't Know*, *The Poor Man's Cry*, *Ah want to play meh self*, and *Cry me a river*. By 1990, Orr won the National Calypso Queen competition and made it to the ‘big yard’, the Dimanche Gras- National Calypso Monarch, with *The Poor Man's Cry*. This calypso chronicled the struggles of Trinbagonians of the lower-socioeconomic strata and the social problems they face such as retrenchment, rising food prices, increasing cases of vagrancy and unemployment (Eastlyn Orr 00:05:19). Certainly, to achieve a spot in the finals so early in her career was a major accomplishment. In 1995, she recaptured the title of National Calypso Queen with two powerful social commentaries she

composed herself, *Save Our Calypso* and *My Dream*. With this victory, Orr established herself as a force that could not be ignored.

Like the many Tobago women who started before her, she too was developing a voice that spoke to women's consciousness. In one of her memorable releases, *Woman Rising*, she questioned why women in Trinidad and Tobago always seemed to be in second place. She argued that while women were once controlled by men and subject to brutal blows for not cooking and cleaning, their roles have changed. She highlighted the achievements of women in politics, medicine, business and engineering, and encouraged women to "stand up for your rights and start aiming for higher heights" (Eastlyn Orr 00:06:54). This anthem for female empowerment became the soundtrack for many social gatherings among women's groups in Trinidad and Tobago.

Orr also had a deep desire to see a change in the calypso arena, especially where the traditional misogynistic lyrics by male calypsonians were concerned. It is noted that in the 1986 Calypso Queen competition hosted by the National Women's Action Committee, she pleaded with women in the calypso arena to unite and to purposefully compose songs on men. Orr advised women "If they sing about Mary, we could sing 'bout Harry and say he sortie, sortie, sortie, sorfie" (Gottreich 22). In the words of Cynthia Mahabir, female calypsonians like Orr "seized the historical moment to initiate a challenge to the politics of manhood that was the very essence of the calypso" (Mahabir 413). However, such an advisory was not surprising coming from Orr as she maintained a track record of not being intimidated by leading men in the art form. To be sure, in an interview following her victory as winner of the National Calypso Queen Competition in 1995, she responded to questions about her plans for the next year by stating, "I am coming for the Monarch...Stalin look out for Eastlyn Orr...I sending big threats"(Gentle Benjamin 00:03:54). Eastlyn Orr continued to be a familiar face in the calypso arena until she decided to take her career in the direction of gospel music ministry.

"SAYING NO TO EXPLOITATION"- TRICIA BOCAGE-SOBERS

Tricia Bocage-Sobers was born on 26 January 1971 and raised in the village of Bagatelle. As a child, she was involved in music and dance groups and competed in popular talent showcases such as 'Teen Talent' and '12 & Under'. Her first foray into calypso was in 1986 when she competed in the Junior Calypso Monarch. Bocage-Sobers explains, "my first calypso was written for me when I was in primary school. A lady by the name of Esther Moore wrote that calypso for me and it was called 'Bring Back Morality'. That was in 1986 and in that year, I came third in the National Junior Calypso competition. The next year in 1987 I won the Tobago Junior Calypso Monarch. This was really the beginning for me as it relates to calypso" (Bocage-Sobers). Bocage's testimony highlights a little-known fact that many Tobago women such as Cheryl Duncan, Esther Moore, Umilta Roberts-Henry and Victoria Mitchell were among the

leading calypso writers on the island during the 1980s and 1990s. Certainly, Tobago women were not only involved in the performance of calypso. Given her success as a junior calypsonian, Bocage showed great promise. A talent such as this needed to be honed and exported to Trinidad. Bocage recalled,

In 1989 Opoku Ware [a leading calypsonian in Tobago] came to my grandmother and told her I had the talent and the ability to become big and they took me to Trinidad as a very young girl. They took me to the Mighty Bomber, and he gave me two songs 'Market Vendor' and 'Viva Mandela'. With those songs I auditioned to Kitchener's Review Tent and I got into the tent. I was a performer at Kitchener's Review for five years from 1990-1995. In 1990 I was picked for the semi-finals in Skinner Park and that was a big achievement for someone who had recently joined the artform.

Bocage-Sobers' undeniable talent led to quick success. Her collection of hits included *Is There Not a Cause, Save T&T*, *Man from Atlantis* and *Love Gun*. During the period 1990 to 1995 she also performed extensively in the United States. However, Bocage's career was short-lived. She explained that what was required of a young woman in the industry made her very unsettled:

After 1995 I did not sing calypso. I could no longer pursue calypso because there was a lot of exploitation of women in calypso. Issues ranging from unwanted advances by men to the actual business relations. I just could no longer do it. I went on a spiritual journey that really brought me back to focus and then from 1999 I realised I loved the artform, but I had a calling, so I started doing gospelypso. Gospelypso is really a calypso that preaches the gospel. It is about the lyrics, putting a beat to the bible and I started writing again and my inspiration came from God.

By the end of the 20th century, Bocage-Sobers, in a fashion similar to Eastlyn Orr, became a leading voice of a brand of calypso that was inspirational and faith-based. However, while the factors which led to their transition from mainstream calypso to gospelypso were varied, it cannot be denied that there seems to be a common thread of exploitative experiences among these young female Tobago calypsonians who moved to Trinidad in pursuit of a career in calypso.

CONCLUSION

Despite the fact that their contributions have only received a cursory glance by scholars, Tobagonian women made significant contributions to the development of calypso. The evidence presented in this work strongly suggests that Linda McCartha Sandy-Lewis, Beulah Bobb, Ingrid Brathwaite, Maureen Denoon, Eastlyn Orr and Tricia Bocage-Sobers delivered calypsos that challenged and disrupted conventional gender systems in the art form, injected a

strong feminist voice and in many ways sought to empower women. Without doubt, these women contributed meaningfully to dismantling the notion that this art form was not a place for women. Their testimonies of the peculiar obstacles they faced in attempting to further their careers also enhances our understanding of the varied experiences of female calypsonians.

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