Creating a Caribbean Sense of Place: Calypso, Spoken Word and the Oral Tradition
THE BABY DOLL:
MEMORY, MYTHS AND MAS

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Midnight in Belmont: St. Margaret’s Lane 1
The Baby Doll is traditionally a triad representation of a doll, a girl and a woman in a single performance that is established with references to feminine codes of dress, speech and movement. The masquerade can be interpreted as either one, two or all of these three femininities. The performer carries a doll child and identifies male spectators as being the father of the child while scandalously demanding financial support. The Baby Doll, like other traditional female masquerades, was primarily performed by men in the late 19th century. Their parodies were meant to ridicule single mothers for having children without first being married and for not knowing the paternity of their children.
This male centred politics of respectability is dismissed almost entirely in contemporary Carnival presentations of the Baby Doll in Trinidad and Tobago. The masquerade has developed within contemporary Caribbean socio-politics and is used as a tool in gender advocacy in Trinidad and Tobago. The Network of NGOs for the Advancement of Women has for over a decade presented Baby Doll performances that highlight social issues related to the welfare of...
mothers and children. The Network’s coordinator, Hazel Brown, is an annual entrant in the Traditional Mas Competition, and outside of Carnival, she performs the character at rallies for women’s rights. “Leslie the Lesbian Baby Doll” was performed by feminist Stephanie Leitch in 2010. This work was a queering of the Carnival platform through the projection of a queer identified character mothering the doll child and looking for a wife. Helen Kennedy, in affiliation with the Family Planning Association of Trinidad and Tobago, has been presenting a quadruple pram near overflowing with dolls in her masquerade campaign for sexual health that includes the distribution of condoms to spectators. In 2020, traditional mas creator and advocate, Tracey Sankar-Charleau’s Crick Crack traditional and folklore mas band “Baby Dolls, The Red Thread Cycle, All the Dead and All the Living” dealt with themes of child sexual abuse and the role of individual action in the process of interrupting generational patterns of violence. I began performing the Baby Doll masquerade in 2011, and it has become a part of the work I produce for the She Right Collective, a Caribbean feminist organisation that focuses on sexual and reproductive health and rights. In this essay I will discuss my utilisation of the Baby Doll with discussions of the negotiations between the intersecting spheres of memory, myths and mas that are projected through performance, politics and personhood.

This essay features the photo series “Midnight in Belmont”. It is a composition of images that I conceptualised and styled, and which was photographed by Jason Audain in February 2020. With this series, I commemorated a decade of performing in Carnival. “Midnight in Belmont” spans three centuries. It is a performance of the 19th century masquerade first documented in the Carnival of St. Pierre, Martinique and embodies the phenomenon of single black motherhood represented by the Baby Doll. It is also my original fiction, set in Trinidad during World War II, of Marie who went out one night to walk her infant child and never returned home. The town folk say she ran away with an American soldier whom they also suspect is the child’s father. Some suspect that both she and the child were killed. It is the story of the ghost of Marie which continues to haunt Belmont. The Jumbie Baby Doll is trying to find her way back to her mother’s house. She can be seen sometimes at midnight in Belmont with a baby/doll child which she cuddles lovingly. “Midnight in Belmont” symbolically centres the suppressed narratives of single black mothers. This includes narratives of migration, sex work and of missing women and children.
The emergence of the Baby Doll masquerade in Trinidad and Tobago was intended as a reprimand by male performers for the vulnerable demographic of black single mothers whom they parodied in the presentations. Notwithstanding these early associations the masquerade is, in contemporary Carnival practices, performed primarily by women with, sometimes, clear woman centred politics. In 2016, I handmade the Siparee Mai doll drawing inspiration from a myth I first learnt as a child. Siparee Mai is a Trinidadian cultural reference to a reported apparition of a dark-skinned Virgin Mary in Siparia, a town in southwestern Trinidad. The name also refers to the statue that continues to be venerated in honour of that apparition. The
The statue is revered by Roman Catholics as La Divina Pastora, The Divine Shepherdess. According to church records, the statue was brought to Trinidad from Venezuela in the early 18th century by a migrant Capuchin priest who documented in a journal that he believed the statue saved his life during a shipwreck between Trinidad and Venezuela. He was the only survivor. The statue was on the bow of the ship, and he identified it as the source of his survival. The statue was believed to have divine powers and from then on was revered by Roman Catholics. This spiritual association is also acknowledged by Hindus who consider the statue as a manifestation of the goddess Kali. It is from this religious group that the title Siparee Mai or Mother Siparia came. Other groups that venerate the statue are the indigenous Warao Nation, the Orisha, Spiritual Baptists, the Bahais and Rastafarians. Siparee Mai is revered mainly by women who often pray to her for good marriages and the well-being of children.

As a child, I was fascinated by the myth of Siparee Mai. I gave the name to the first cloth doll I made and which I later included in a Baby Doll performance. Though the La Divina Pastora/Siparee Mai is not styled with an infant Christ, it is part of the larger Christian myth that includes the image of the mother and child, as well as the question of paternity. I used the Siparee Mai doll in 2017 after I produced an ole mas about the women’s rights movement in Trinidad and Tobago. Ole mas is a satirical mas performance that includes a great amount of humour to relay serious messages or social critiques. Since the second half of the twentieth century the terms ole mas and traditional mas have been used interchangeably. The character I played was the Baby Doll with a message about the end of child marriage. I was at that time a director of Womantra, a feminist organization that was part of the core team that petitioned the state to amend the Marriage Acts to discontinue the legal marriage of persons under the age of 18. That same year the Marriage Acts were successfully amended. This masquerade was a celebration of this change. For the performance I was awarded the title Ole Mas Champion by the Bocas Literary Festival in conjunction with the National Carnival Commission of Trinidad and Tobago. My Siparee Mai doll was a Marian invocation of the symbol of the young mother, not according to a religious framework but rather a cultural one out of which I reconceived this myth and presented it in the Baby Doll performance in defence of girls. It was a commentary on the injustice of child marriage and an insistence on the state’s responsibility in holding the people who facilitate child marriages accountable.

“Midnight in Belmont” was a Jumbie Baby Doll mas performance that utilised folklore and oral histories to engage in a process of mythmaking. This performance was staged as an apparition of the Jumbie in different locations around Belmont. In folklore a Jumbie is the spirit of a dead person that is perceived by the living. In “Midnight in Belmont” the Jumbie Doll appears at midnight. I used this costume for my “Dolly Ma” performances during Carnival 2020 and restyled it further as a Jumbie for the “Midnight in Belmont” project. The series is a tribute to the many Belmont residents who have supported my engagement in Carnival over the last ten years.
A contemporary utilisation of the Baby Doll is as a protest masquerade using Carnival as a platform for political action in solidarity with queer and feminist justice. The 2019 performance “You are worthy” was a collaboration with researcher Jarula MI Wegner. We began organising a traditional masquerade performance in 2018. After I co-founded the Belmont Baby Dolls band in 2019, I collaborated with Wegner on the creation of a queer Baby Doll family which we presented on the two days of Carnival that year. In this performance we were both Baby Dolls parenting the same doll child. The audience perceived us as two women, thus affirming lesbian family life. Closer inspection showed that one of the two Baby Dolls was a man dressed as a woman involved with a woman thus affirming transgender, non-gender binary and non-gender conforming family life. Although queer bodies have always been present in Carnival and although in the early movement of Trinidad and Tobago’s Carnival in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the traditional female masquerades engaged transvestism as they were performed by men, until recently queer culture in Carnival was promoted only minimally. The “You are worthy” performance was in solidarity with the legitimacy, inclusion and visibility of marginalized sexualities in Carnival. This intervention was not only predated by other queering in Carnival but also by extensive work in LGBTI+ advocacy that took place for years before in Trinidad and Tobago geared towards the visibility, protection and support of gender and sexuality minorities.

The queer Baby Doll family presented possible structures of queer family life as part of Trinidad and Tobago’s Carnival with reference to queering that was previously engaged in Carnival such as Peter Minshall’s 2016 presentation “The Dying Swan, Ras Nijinsky in Drag as Pavlova” performed by Jhawhan Thomas and the LGBTI+ advocacy of Jason Jones who successfully
challenged the Sexual Offences Act in the constitution of Trinidad and Tobago in 2018. Sections 13 and 16 of the Act, that criminalised sex between people of the same sex, were ruled as unconstitutional. Before this any type of queer sexual practice was liable to criminal prosecution with a penalty of up to twenty-five years in prison. These efforts not only sought the repeal of the Section 13 buggery law; they also addressed Section 16 of the Sexual Offences Act that specifically criminalised the stimulation of genitals by persons of the same sex and thereby made illegal all sexual acts between people of the same sex. “You are worthy” was a subversive mas intervention in the private and public discourses concerning gender identification, same-sex unions, queer family life and transgender politics. The Baby Doll masquerade was used to mitigate the politics of queering within Trinidad and Tobago’s Carnival and within the broader scope of Caribbean cultures of gender, sex and sexuality.
Midnight in Belmont: #37 Norfolk Street 2
The contemporary exploration of and innovation with the Baby Doll expand beyond the traditional artistic and sociological enquiries of the masquerade to address contemporary phenomena through the perspective of the individual performer. “A Short Story Re: Presenting Every Creed and Race” (2019) which I also co-created with Jarula MI Wegner was a performance welcoming migrants, refugees and asylum seekers to Trinidad and Tobago. This work illustrated the connections between migration, myths and mas, addressing the then heated national debate concerning Venezuelan immigration to Trinidad. In January 2019, a national debate on migration unfolded in Trinidad and Tobago after Venezuelan migrants protested industrial exploitation and other abuses related to their migrant status. While this discussion continued, a family in Gasparillo, a town in south-western Trinidad, gained media attention after reporting that they were being harassed by a buck. The performance presented the story of the 2019 Gasparillo buck from the perspective of the migrant and examined the connections between the public, the media, the state and religious functionaries in the revival of this folklore. To depict the position of the migrant, the narrative focused on the myth of the buck in Trinidad folklore which holds that bucks are Guyanese spirit beings who are brought into Trinidad “illegally” by businessmen who exploit their labour. The myth in Guyanese folklore positions the buck as a utilitarian spirit that is so small it can be imprisoned within a bottle and is committed to doing the biddings of its owners.
Furthering the thematic concerns of the piece was the utilisation of the Baby Doll masquerade that developed within Caribbean migrations. The Caribbean Baby Doll traditional masquerade was first documented in the Carnival of St. Pierre in Martinique in 1888 by the journalist Lacadio Hearn. Later the masquerade was identified in New Orleans, and by the early 19th century, the Baby Doll masquerade was among the Port of Spain jamettes in Trinidad’s Carnival.

Like the buck of folklore, the Baby Doll masquerade also moved from one place to the next during interisland migrations and between the region and the United States. Throughout the performance, the buck continued to rely on the supportive presence of the Baby Doll. The image of the Baby Doll and the buck dressed in a primary schooler’s uniform recreated a loose but still easily identifiable image of the Baby Doll and her child. However, this enactment did not entail the woman and child going from one observer to the next begging for assistance in the form of child support, as was the original characterization of the Baby Doll figure, but instead it was a dynamic, resourceful and successful partnership that resulted in the buck’s triumph. The performance utilised these figures that emerged within Caribbean migrations to highlight the irony of negative ideas about migrants and to illustrate cross-cultural exchanges within Caribbean migrations.
In 2020 I introduced the persona “Dolly Ma” to my Baby Doll masquerade repertoire. I performed this persona for the first time at the Traditional Mas Competition held at Adam Smith Square in Port of Spain. It was dedicated to migrant children in Trinidad and Tobago with reference to the International Bill of Human Rights, the UN Convention on the Rights of a Child and the Convention on the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Their Families. The “Dolly Ma” persona continued my exploration of the possibilities for Carnival to foster socio-political
negotiations. The performance engaged the phenomenon of migration with specific attention to the concerns of children, using the traditional Baby Doll masquerade as a cross-cultural ambassador. For this performance I danced with the doll child to “The Islands”, a 2005 soca hit by Bunji Garlin and Patrice Roberts that welcomes foreigners to Trinidad and Tobago. The concept of the “Dolly Ma” persona was introduced by a speaker along with the music and dancing:

Dolly Ma birthed a baby at home on a Sunday and said to the infant, “I will cherish you.” She welcomes all children to her home. They are safe and secure. They are respected and treated well. Every night she dances to a lullaby of lessons about surviving hurricanes, tying knots that don’t break and how to make happiness last. She tells stories from the always open book of her dreams. Stories like the time she made her way safely on a moonlit night through a dense forest after defeating all the monsters that lived there and how she built a house with her name. Her words weave a blanket of care, tenderness, love and compassion. Dolly Ma is calling on the state to ensure the protection of migrant children and secure their access to educational, medical and legal resources in Trinidad and Tobago.

In this same competition were also two Baby Doll performers who had, over the last decade, substantially influenced my understanding and performances of the character, Helen Kennedy and Hazel Brown. Helen placed first, Hazel second and I came third.

“Midnight in Belmont” is a performance art piece that intersects mas and folklore with reflection on what the Baby Doll means to me politically and personally after a decade of performing the masquerade. It explores nostalgia and modernity as the Jumbie Doll between 19th – 21st centuries with the details of the architecture and infrastructure of Belmont showing continuity in the elaborate details of the gingerbread architectural style of the 19th century on many of the homes. This work celebrates the Baby Doll masquerade with reverential reference to the women who were chastised through parody and reclaims their narratives through a process of myth-making that interweaves traditional mas with folklore. The photo essay is an invocation of these centuries of Carnival movements through an embodiment of the Baby Doll Jumbie character in various sites throughout Belmont. The temporal and geographic placement of the doll invokes the repeated appearances and countless transformations of the masquerade with its contemporary proponents steadfastly resisting erasure and embracing innovation, just as the Belmont landscape steadfastly resists gentrification while also embracing modernity.
My work with the Baby Doll traditional masquerade developed within and contributed to my Caribbean feminist scholarship and advocacy. In this work I noted a movement from the personal to the political, as well as movement within the intersection of the personal and the political. This continued work with the Baby Doll masquerade engages the complexity of movement beyond performance. It is a case study of the continuity and change of a specific masquerade in Trinidad and Tobago’s Carnival and an investigation of the potential of Carnival as a platform for political action. It is also a commentary on phenomena that includes: the socio-historical movement of the Baby Doll masquerade as a cultural item in Caribbean migrations, and the progression of the traditional Baby Doll from being male-centred and misogynistic to being woman-centred and in solidarity with feminist justice. In my engagement with the Baby Doll masquerade I continue to examine the possibilities that Carnival presents for individual and communal determination. My work with the Baby Doll masquerade began as a reconciliation of issues in my private life, and it later became an extension of my public work as an advocate. The Baby Doll was the first mas I played in 2011 when I began working as a Carnival artist. I did not grow up with my parents, and I can see how the Baby Doll was, in that first year, a projection of my desires for mothering and motherhood; a narrative in which I was both a child and a woman; a performance in which I searched for a father and a partner. My contemporary Baby Doll masquerade engages communal and individual memories, myths, folklore, oral histories and new narratives. The Baby Doll masquerade progressed from being simply a projection of my personal life to an extension of my public work as a Caribbean feminist and the nexus of my portfolio as a woman in Carnival.
Midnight in Belmont: Layan Hill

Works Cited

