



# Gender and Performativity: Calypso and the Culture of Masculinity

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## Abstract

The calypso is one of the greatest cultural contributions of the Caribbean. Originating in Trinidad and Tobago, it has grown over the last century to be part of the cultural experience of most of the Anglophone countries, and even some of the Spanish-speaking parts of the Caribbean littoral. This article explores the many ways in which the calypso reveals much about the construction of masculinity through its lyrics. It examines how this aspect of Caribbean popular culture conceives of what constitutes manliness, the burdens this imposes on men, the way men define their sexuality and address issues of desire, and the way the male gaze informs how men view and relate to women. The paper also uses as its point of departure, the calypsos of the 1960s, with particular reference to the songs of The Mighty Sparrow and The Lord Kitchener, two of the greatest exponents of the art form. This essay therefore represents one way of looking at the reciprocal relationship between the artist and the people in the construction of masculinity.

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The calypso is one of the Caribbean's best-known art forms. Originating in Trinidad somewhere between the end of the eighteenth century and the turn of the nineteenth century, it is seen by most Caribbean people as an undeniably important part of their culture. Though the subject of competing nationalist claims, this art form's hybrid origins in the polyrhythms of West African highlife music and African practices such as the tradition of the griot are widely recognized. This hybridity likewise pervades contemporary calypso, which incorporates American soul music into Soca, fuses Jamaican reggae into Ragga Soca and turns Indian Punjabi music into Chutney music.

Gordon Rohlehr, the leading authority on the calypso, says its history is one of "urbanisation, immigration and Black reconstruction in post-Emancipation Trinidad" (1990, 1). Indeed, calypso's history has become very familiar to students of this musical genre as a result of the work of Gordon Rohlehr that spans over a quarter of a century; J. D. Elder (1966, 1995, 1973); Errol Hill (1967, 1971, 1972); and Keith Warner (1985, 1992), *inter alia*.

The calypso has had a curious history of marginalization and censorship. It was originally considered lewd, crude and vulgar; it was regarded as not culturally "proper", and "respectable" people would scarcely be expected to sing it. Part of the reason for the calypso's unpopularity was its working-class origins, and its association with the Carnival, which in turn was associated with the steel band — both of which were viewed by polite society as the site of tension, conflicts, gang fights and general lawlessness. Indeed, the calypso began among the social outcasts called the "Jamette". "Jamette" is a French patois word used to refer to people of low social standing. In addition, calypsonians sang about boasting, violence and sexuality, and therefore incurred the moral opprobrium of the bourgeois and religiously respectable. The calypso, then, is a product of society, and given its working class origin it reflects the structural constraints, frustrations, challenges, and unequal power of this stratum of society. Sentiments may be expressed via an individual calypso singer, but that singer conveys or speaks on behalf of the collective experiences

of his/her class. What appears on the surface to be the calypsonian's individuation may have more to do with the material context within which he or she operates, from which he or she draws his or her raw material, and which ultimately contains a message(s) that resonates with an audience at some significant level.

Over the years, however, the calypso has gradually shed the deadweight of this inauspicious beginning, appealing to a much wider audience among all social strata in the region, and attracting all classes of individuals not merely as consumers of the cultural product but as artists and performers themselves. This paper explores the ways in which calypsonians construct notions of masculinity in the lyrics of their calypsos. It investigates how one aspect of Caribbean popular culture conceives of what constitutes manliness, the burdens this imposes on men, the way men define their sexuality and address issues of desire, and the way the male gaze informs how men view and relate to women. These issues are critical, particularly because they are fundamentally rooted in the culture of the region and have become an important part of the popular consciousness.

This work essentially examines calypsos of the period of the 1960s with few exceptions. There are so many calypsos produced by so many calypsonians in one year that it would be unrealistic to try to cover all of them. Indeed, this paper is concerned only with the theme of masculinity in the calypso. In any given year, calypsos and calypsonians cover such topics as race, nationalism, politics, social events, culture, crime, and so on. This paper will focus, with some exceptions, on the work of The Mighty Sparrow (Slinger Francisco) and Lord Kitchener (Alwyn Roberts); Sparrow and Kitchener are sobriquets adopted by these two calypsonians. Almost all calypsonians have sobriquets. The sobriquet is part of the persona of the calypsonian. It is part of assuming an identity other than one's own, in order to comment on the politically explosive, the socially delicate and morally questionable subjects of the texts of calypso. At times then, the calypso provides the artist a liminal space, where the persona he or she

inhabits allows the calypsonian to separate him or herself from the message being delivered, and therefore the calypsonian operates with a certain impunity, rather than being hamstrung by the judgments and criticism of others in society.

Sparrow and Kitchener are among the most outstanding exponents of this art form and a history of the calypso could not be written without mention of the contribution of these two men. They, along with others, have been responsible for taking the calypso to a higher level, for improving its creative capacity, for helping to bring respectability to the art, and for internationalizing the music. Both artists have been in the business for decades and have been prodigious in their output of calypsos on a variety and range of topics. Lord Kitchener died in 2000, three months shy of his 78<sup>th</sup> birthday. Sparrow, despite some health problems in recent years, continues to perform throughout the Caribbean and in North America at the age of 79. These two men are largely responsible for setting the standards in calypso that many follow. They are the consummate artists and performers, since performance<sup>1</sup> is a crucial factor in the calypso. Indeed, performance is the site of the intersection of masculinity and the culture of calypso.

### **Performativity**

The issue of the relationship between gender and performance is one that has been eloquently articulated by Judith Butler (1990). Butler argues that the analysis of gender has to extend beyond constructivist explanations to embrace a notion of performativity. She maintains that we make sense of gender as it manifests itself in learned behavior. Gender is, therefore, not merely about who we are as men, women, some combination of these two hegemonic categories, or some alternative category; it is equally about what we do. It is about how gender is acted out or performed. These manifestations or ways of acting out or performing gender provide us with important insights as to the

ways our behavior is overdetermined by norms of acceptability and notions of appropriateness. Though Butler's point is well taken here, one can argue of course that not all of gender is performance. Gender is also evident in writing, intonation of speech, aspirations, expectations, and realization of goals, all of which are in fact influenced by institutional differentiation by gender, power and culture.

Butler, however, subsequently revisited this concept of gender as performance, adding an important caveat about reductionism:

It would not be enough to say that gender is only performed or that the meaning of gender can be derived from its performance, whether or not one rethinks performance as a compulsory social ritual. For there are clearly workings of gender that do not "show" in what is performed as gender, and the reduction of the psychic workings of gender to the literal performance of gender would be a mistake.

... what is exteriorized or performed can be understood only through reference to what is barred from the performance, what cannot or will not be performed (1995, 31-32).

Butler's caution here is quite useful, for what is being argued is not that one could accurately describe the Caribbean male by examining the lyrics of the calypso. It is, rather, that given the popularity of the calypso, and the consistency of the messages about gender contained therein, one can gain some sociological insight into the ways masculinity is constructed and negotiated in the context of popular culture. It stands to reason, therefore, that other dimensions of masculinity, for example, certain dimensions of power, political participation and spatiality of gender, cannot necessarily be read off from the textual analysis of the calypso. The concept of gender as performance, however, offers important analytical insights not only in terms of

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understanding some aspects of masculinity but also with regard to the presentation of the calypso.

If we concede that a lot of what constitutes masculinity is preoccupied with socio-sexual notions of performance, then it helps to explain the domination of men in the public sphere of the calypso. This is not to suggest that there are no women who sing calypso. From the early days of the chantuelle or lead singer there have been female calypsonians such as Sugar Alice, Lady Trinidad, Cariso Jane, and Lady Irie. Of the contemporary female calypsonians, Calypso Rose, Singing Francine, Denyse Plummer, Destra Garcia, Denise Belfon, Singing Sandra, Fay-Ann Lyons, and Ella Andall are among the best-known. The overall picture that emerges, however, is one in which men define the cultural landscape of this art form. There is a need for further research into the ways in which female calypsonians deal with the issues of gender and sexuality, as well as the way they articulate their own constructions of femininity and masculinity. Moreover, the performative space of the calypso has to be regarded as a site that men largely seize as a general arena of power to define the parameters of their own sexuality but quite interestingly, the sexuality of women as well, as is evident in the texts of the calypsos that follow. The point here is that calypsonians, through their lyrics and performance, construct scenarios about their own sexuality and sexual prowess, while mythologizing and fantasizing about women's presumed desires for them. This is not to deny any agency of women with regard to determining their own sexuality; rather it is to underline the fact that the performative dimension of the calypso is not a gender neutral space. It is a space that is infused by specific understandings of power.

It should be noted also that the sexual bravado is largely African-Trinidadian and African-Caribbean. Men of African descent dominate the calypso in the Caribbean. Though from time to time men of Indian descent also sing calypso, the genre of music known as chutney has become the preferred performative option for Indian men. A different type of boasting is emerging in this arena, though still laced with sexuality, in that male chutney singers tend to

brag of their capacity to consume alcohol in such songs as 'Rum Till I Die' [Adesh Samaroo], 'Rum is Meh Lover' [Ravi B], 'More rum for Me (Mr. Chankar)' [Neeshan Prabhoo], and 'Bar Man' [Rikki Jai] who manages to combine the notion of sexual prowess and rum drinking in his chutney song. In addition, most of these songs, whether calypso or chutney, operate out of a decidedly heterosexual, hypermasculine culture of braggadocio. On this issue, Rohlehr notes, "Masculinity is here, as elsewhere, associated with championship. Its ethos is that of the gladiator. Love-making occasions are bouts, fights; the penis is a powerful fist, its thrust has the force of a knock-out punch" (2004, 340). Equally important, however, is Rohlehr's observation about men's boasting: "All of this boasting — made more obvious through the protagonist's repeated denial that he is boasting — is done not only to attract the woman, but to rile and triumph over rival males..." (2004, 340). Rohlehr captures very pointedly here the fact that masculinity is not merely performed for women but seeks the approval and recognition of other men; it is a source of validation of one's maleness. The heterosexism in the calypso can also be seen in the derision that is reserved for homosexual men. Calypsonians would taunt each other in song about homosexuality, but by comparison, calypso is not generally as homophobic as much of dancehall music, even though disdain for homosexual men is clearly expressed in such calypsos as Merchant's 'Norman is That You,' Young Exposer's 'Pepper in the Vaseline,' Calypso Rose's 'Man Doing it Too,' Bomber's 'Ma Ma Men' and perhaps the most popular song of this genre, Lord Shorty's 'Man for Kim,' which was sung by other male calypsonians.

The calypsonian's performance adds dimensions to the song that can often only be performed and not verbalized. A classic example of this would be Lord Funny's calypso about a 'Dumb Boy and the Parrot' in which, to the listener, the chorus of the song was made up of simulated and incomprehensible sounds of a person who is unable to speak. These sounds were, however, made understandable when Funny demonstrated in live performances on stage what this speech-impaired young boy had been seeing and was trying to communicate. Part of Funny's performance of the calypso had to do with the

gestures, the glances, the facial expressions, the gyrations, and the unspoken choreography that were demonstrated on stage at a tent<sup>2</sup> by the calypsonian. There are many calypso fans who go to the tents to hear and see their favorite artists perform with the full knowledge that they may never hear that song on the radio, see it on Youtube or hear it on a compact disc. Not all calypsonians record their songs; nevertheless, they remain enormously popular among the knowledgeable calypso audiences, who go as much to see the performances as to hear the lyrics. To the uninitiated, Lord Brigo's songs may not be particularly appealing, but to see Brigo's facial contortions when he is delivering his calypsos is the only way to appreciate what this calypsonian does for his lyrics. He is referred to in jest as the ugliest calypsonian today.

Other calypsonians have other attributes: Crazy has his crazy antics, Trinidad Rio's physique is very cleverly incorporated into his performance, and Sugar Aloes and Baron's stylish dress, excessive gold jewelry and mellifluous singing voices add luster to their performances. The Mighty Sparrow and the Lord Kitchener are both impressive on stage. Though having different styles, they both demonstrate great showmanship, stage performance and control of the audience. In addition, their calypsos are skillfully crafted, witty, analytical, yet rhythmic and engaging.

The contribution of women to the performative aspect of the calypso should not be ignored. Though not all women condone the messages contained in the calypso, many of them who patronize the tents respond positively to the songs, encourage the calypsonian to elaborate on his theme, and engage in risqué repartee with the singer. Many an exuberant female fan has been known to leave the audience to join the calypsonian on stage in a display of sexualized simulations. There is, therefore, a need to investigate the ways in which women, both as artists and as audience members, participate in and contest what Anne McClintock, writing in another context, describes as "the male fetish rituals" of performance and calypso (McClintock 1996). The behavior of women in this context also points to the extent to which they may



indeed be responding in terms already predetermined by the dynamics of male power and sexual response discussed above. These activities also point to the fact that the female presence, approval and participation in the live performance of the calypso all contribute to this issue of gender and performance. Moreover, the centrality of women to the performance and subject matter of the calypso foregrounds this art form in many ways. In short, in the context of the calypso, performance is as much an act of manifesting gender as it is about creativity.

To ignore the performance of the calypso is to miss one of the truly important aspects of this art form. Audiences play an important part in quickly evaluating the performance of the calypsonian and have over the years developed a battery of responses to mediocre and poor performances, not all of which are polite, that they then offer as “feedback” to the artist.

How then does all this relate to notions of masculinity? Gordon Rohlehr mused that the calypso is an overwhelming tradition of recorded masculinity (Keynote address, 1996). Not only is the calypsonian mostly male, but images of social reality are also filtered through the male gaze. The calypso becomes a medium through which men tell of their sexual exploits, their fantasies, their imagined power over women, their vulnerabilities, as well as inform the nation of the ills of the government; through it they are generally provided the space to do and say that which they could not otherwise say in public. One of the more interesting aspects of the calypso is that it provides a medium through which men explore what they consider to be important to their own subjectivity.

### **Male Preoccupations**

In ‘Man Like to Feel,’ the Mighty Sparrow expresses some of the concerns that men have in their relationships with women. Interestingly enough, his first concern is with the question of size, both in terms of physique and in terms of

sexual endowment. He expresses these concerns not so much as part of his own preoccupations but in terms of offering to women a blueprint for maintaining relationships with men.

I am outlining a simple plan  
How every woman could tie up deh man  
A man like to feel big although he small  
A midget does want to feel ten feet tall  
So you could keep him under your heel  
Just let him feel how he want to feel

In his next verse Sparrow becomes more explicit about the preoccupation with this question of size and sexual performance. He notes:

A man like to feel he is a big wheel  
Big in every way  
And he like to feel that he girlfriend feel  
He greater than Cassius Clay

Penis size is perhaps a universal male preoccupation, but it is also a concern of some women. Caribbean men are in no way immune from such concerns. The popular culture is replete with anecdotes about penis size. In the emotionally charged context of sexuality and male virility, many men seem to be convinced that bigger is infinitely better. The calypsonian, therefore, returns to this subject continually with greater and taller tales about the fear, amazement or incredulity that the size of the penis elicits among women. Rohlehr's observation here is again quite telling:

The calypso ['Man Like to Feel'] maintains that any man who seriously believes in any of the popular constructions of masculinity, from the warrior-hero to the dandy, lover, saga boy, cocksman and domestic slave-master, is a fool living in a world of illusion (2004, 355).

Kitchener's 'Dr. Kitch' focuses on this very topic, with Kitchener assuming the role of a doctor who has to administer an 'injection' to a young lady:

I am not a qualified physician  
And a don't want to give this injection  
I am not a qualified physician  
And a don't want to give this injection  
Dorothy is begging for trouble  
She insist I should give her this needle  
But darling one thing I want you know  
Don't blame me for where the needle go

Chorus:

I push it in  
She pull it out  
I push it back  
She start to shout  
Doctor Kitch, is terrible/  
I can't stand the size of your needle.

What is remarkable is that even when the calypsonian employs the use of allegory, he finds a way to address the issue of penile dimension. In 'Animal Beauty Contest,' Sparrow rather humorously and cleverly conjures a situation of an animal beauty competition in which the monkey assumes the role of judge and proceeds to evaluate the contestants of the pageant. What follows with respect to the judge's (monkey's) decision requires no explanation:

So he throw out peacock, he say he too vain  
And disqualified lion with his long flowing mane  
But he watching donkey, in one particular spot  
Ladies and Gentlemen, monkey say  
Look what beauty this fellow got

He give donkey first, second and third  
And the judge tell lion flat  
If you was the king of the beast  
You would've been toting that

Rohlehr aptly describes this phenomenon of figurative speech in the following manner:

The calypso outwitted censorship and spoke about sexuality behind its thin mask of metaphor, thus maintaining a tradition of primal discourse even as it emerges from the controlled spaces of gayelle and tent into the "moral light" of the public forums, where overt acknowledgement of celebration of sexuality has long been censored (2004, 341).

To return for a moment to Sparrow's 'Man Like to Feel,' the concerns that are being expressed here have to do with the fashioning of a particular male subjectivity that begs for the overlooking of mental and physical flaws that normatively define an ideal masculine image. This issue becomes even more compelling in the following verse:

Man like to feel that he is superior  
And feel that woman should feel they are inferior  
He feel he should talk things he ain't know about  
And feel very hurt if yuh buss he mouth  
So when you feel he lie and feel he fooling you  
Let he feel that you feel what he say is true  
Always let him feel he is your ideal  
And anything he feel let the damn fool feel

The Mighty Duke approaches the preoccupations of Caribbean men in a rather more subtle way. He uses irony to convey male anxiety in his calypso 'Trust Yuh Wife.' On the surface, it would appear as though Duke is venerating the character of women, but it becomes noticeable rather quickly that this

discourse not merely plays on the fears of men but confirms their worst nightmares. He starts off with a mild rebuff of men's lack of trust:

Some big men does wreck their life  
Because they don't trust their wife  
Big, big, big men does mash up their life  
Because they don't trust their wife  
They leave for work  
They wife fast asleep  
Round the clock they making bopeep  
If she have to go to the lavatory  
They handing the toilet paper for she

Duke argues that this type of supervision is useless because you cannot control a woman in this way. His remedy would appear to be to place more trust in one's partner.

For happiness in life  
You have to trust your wife  
Newsmongers making strife  
Trust your wife  
Your marriage last for life  
As long as you trust your wife

Yet despite this assurance, Duke seemingly berates men for their poor judgment. In fact, Duke's use of irony while appearing to chide men ends up impugning women's fidelity.

You wife expect you home at four  
What right have you in the house before  
You want to surprise yuh wife you say  
Ah bet you get a bigger surprise one day

Duke then seeks to reinforce his point in the next verse in which he says:

Some of them in mental shock  
They pull the door before they knock  
The worse thing any man could do  
Is go back home when you wife not expecting you

'Trust Yuh Wife' fans the flames of male anxiety. This theme is repeated in the Mighty Shadow's 'Crazy Computer.' The theme is also a constant concern in the construction of masculinity and becomes crucial to an understanding of male performance, both in terms of men's roles and their sexuality. How men deal with this anxiety depends on how they negotiate their masculinity. Some men seek to confront their fears in an attempt to transcend them, while others retreat unto themselves for greater security. In 1990, Explainer pointed to one such self-help solution in the calypso 'Miss Palmer.'

I love Miss Palmer  
In her arms I feel better  
I love Miss Palmer  
She lights up my fire  
I don't have to fear any AIDS or herpes  
Nor any kind of sexually transmitted disease  
Neither no heart ache  
Neither no heart break  
Like milk and sugar we stick on together

In his masturbatory revelry, Explainer's friend Charlie addresses what is at the heart of male anxiety: preoccupation with competition from other males, as well as control over their partners. In this calypso Charlie says, "I don't have to fear if she's cheating on me." He elaborates:

He say Miss Palmer so loyal to me  
No other man could take she from me  
She's always with me wherever I go

That's why I say how I love her so  
I don't have to care bout no maintenance fee  
Because she's always there to lend a hand to me  
Oh what a woman, a happy creation  
I have the secret inside of meh hand  
Oh, I love Miss Palmer

Explainer's alter ego in this calypso not only wants to fashion a particular type of female submissiveness but to restrict her mobility, while making little or no investment in the relationship. This type of scenario is so highly unattainable that it is small wonder that Charlie has to resort to pleasuring himself in flights of fantasy.

The most definitive response to these male preoccupations is articulated in Penguin's 'Soft Man.' 'Soft Man' is in effect a manifesto of a narrowly constructed hegemonic masculinity. Reflecting on this calypso, Gordon Rohlehr argues that "no other calypso offers a clearer delineation of the patriarchal mind set" (Keynote address, 1996). In this 1983 calypso, a friend of Penguin's, who is contemplating settling down and raising a family, seeks him out for advice on the best way to proceed in matters of maintenance of a relationship and treatment of a woman. Penguin counsels as follows:

I tell him to treat them kind  
And they will love you till death  
But one thing you have to bear in mind  
And never, never forget  
Woman don't like  
Woman don't like  
Soft man.

Soft man is a play on words in which the idea of a spineless and wimpy man merges with the image of a firm erection. Penguin makes this quite clear to his friend when he mused:

They want a man not a worm  
Responsible and concerned  
A man who lays down his terms  
A man who could stand up firm

Penguin also advises his friend on how to be on guard against the type of woman who would 'mamaguy'<sup>3</sup> and fool him, spend his money wantonly, and when he runs out of money, "She gone with a macho man." He also admonishes his friend to assert his authority and to be diligent about fulfilling his sexual responsibilities:

A man is supposed to lead  
Supply all his woman's needs  
Never make the yard get weeds  
Dig the soil and plant the seeds

In the final verse of this calypso, Penguin offers what must be the ultimate construction of machismo to resonate in the masculine imaginary.

A man should be like a tower  
Protect his household at any cost  
Got to show strength and power  
And show that he fit to be the boss  
His children he must control  
Don't make his woman look small  
And if he live to a hundred years old  
She wouldn't leave him at all

Among the most outstanding preoccupations of the Caribbean male reflected in the calypso, is his sexual prowess. This recurring theme will be discussed in the following section. Suffice it to say that this concern is conflated with essentialist conceptualizations of Caribbean masculinity. In 'Warning to Men,' Kitchener, in a direct discourse with Caribbean men, cautions them about



the physical conditioning necessary to achieve sexual satisfaction with their mates.

Well the men today  
Must be fighting fit  
Because, the women say  
They not putting up with it  
They complain strongly  
Lack of energy  
And now they out for war  
They ain't standing for it no more

According to Kitchener, the consequences of lack of preparation and physical conditioning are the loss of female companionship and a life of loneliness.

So I am warning you gentlemen  
Take it serious too, as a friend  
If you can't respond  
She's going to leave you, leave you, leave you all alone  
You alone going to moan  
And boy if you don't watch your case  
Somebody going take your place

In a parting shot, Kitchener implores: "So fix your business right/ And start the ball rolling tonight." Kitch is not the only one to conflate sexual performance with the hegemony of heterosexual masculinity. Sparrow is one of the leading exponents of this discursive practice of masculinity. Note that in 'No Kind of Man,' this discourse on sexual performance or lack thereof by men is reflected through the agency of the woman. Indeed, such discursive practices underline the ways in which masculinity is always negotiated among men, as well as between men and women.

He ain't no kind of man at all  
So why you wasting your time with he

If a woman ready and she out for blade  
 And the man lay down there, he can't make the grade  
 She should leave him  
 I say leave him  
 If he start with dou dou<sup>4</sup>, I ain't in the mood  
 What you doing with that man who refuse yuh food  
 You should leave him  
 Girl, leave him  
 He ain't no kind of man at all  
 No kind of man at all  
 Come on, enjoy yourself with me

Here Sparrow has no sympathy for indolent masculinity. Unlike Kitchener who in 'Warning to Men,' alerts other men to the consequences of their inaction, Sparrow counsels women to take corrective action and opt for a more virile man such as himself.

If you young and you strong  
 And you built for speed  
 And the fool can't give you the thing you need  
 You should leave him  
 I say leave him  
 When your eye get red and you in a heat  
 And he telling you he tired and he want to sleep  
 You should leave him.

As with Penguin's 'Soft Man' cited earlier, Sparrow rationalizes that penile erection is an all-important masculine signifier and, therefore, by extension, the absence of an erection results in what Carolyn Cooper calls 'diminished masculinity' (Cooper 1993).

Well any time he try to get your head confuse  
 By making a set of lying excuse  
 You should leave him

I say leave him  
And if he drinking tonic for days and days  
And no time at all the dead can't raise  
You should leave him  
I say leave him  
He ain't no kind of man at all  
He ain't no kind of man at all  
So you, wasting yuh time with he

The one-dimensional view suggested in this calypso reduces the complexity of Caribbean masculinity to the act of sexual intercourse, excluding other features of its construction and disregarding any consideration of other forms of sexuality or other dimensions of a relationship. Having so indicated, however, one must hasten to add that it is in precisely the realm of heterosexuality that the calypsonian is at his most prolific, inventive and boastful. If performance characterized Caribbean masculine preoccupations, then exaggerated claims of sexual prowess in the calypso represent the corporeal reality of heterosexual manhood as seen through the lenses of the calypso.

### **The Calypso and Sexual Prowess**

Sparrow's 'Village Ram' represents the ultimate in male braggadocio even though he tries to deny it in this song. Not only is he indiscriminate but he also envisions himself to be sexually competent beyond contestation.

Is me the Village Ram  
I ain't give a damn  
Is me the Village Ram  
I ain't give a damn  
Ah cutting down black is white  
Man ah working day and night  
If you have a job to be done

### See me I ain't making fun

To the above assertion Rohlehr opines, "The Village Ram is a cock for hire. He is inexhaustible, aggressive, even violent..." (2004, 340). In the chorus, however, Sparrow's claims of sexual prowess assume unimaginable proportions.

Not a woman ever complain yet, with me  
I ain't boasting but ah got durability  
And if a woman ever say that I  
Ever left her dissatisfied  
She lie, she lie, she lie

The question that one is forced to ask after reading the above lyrics is why would any man feel motivated to enter such a claim? Perhaps men entertain such a thought due to the pressure they place on themselves, in conjunction with what must at some level be communicated from women to them, about the true measure of manhood. This is one of the ways both men and women participate in the construction of this particular type of mythology that inhibits the range of our contributions to relationships and structures our gendered behaviors. As part of the popular consciousness, it is then returned to us in the form of popular culture. There is a sense in which the calypsonian is both the conduit and purveyor of our sexual fantasies, beliefs, taboos, anxieties, transgressions and fears.

The assertion of sexual proficiency on the part of the Caribbean male is in no way diminished or compromised by physical disabilities, or at least this is part of the lore. Sparrow tells us in 'Fat Man,' for example, of how a particular woman had been misled into believing that because the man was overweight he would not be competent as a lover. She ends up being exhausted by her encounter with the 'fat man' and begs for relief. In 'One Hand Man' Sparrow also demonstrates how this disability was turned into an aphrodisiac that had women "running wild," and this, according to the calypsonian's account, occurred even though the 'one hand man' had a "face like a frying pan." On the

attraction of women to the 'one hand man,' Sparrow concludes, it was "the short piece of hand that they want in their possession"; it was this new turn-on that they were fighting for. That disability poses no handicap to sexual performance is also underscored in Sparrow's 'Benwood Dick.' Here, Sparrow is referring to a penile curvature, which is a medical condition described as Peyronie's disease. In Sparrow's comment on this medical condition, the protagonist proclaims this particular defect is part of his sexual identity, which he is convinced has left a lasting impression on at least one woman with whom he has had a sexual encounter and with whom he now wishes to reconnect.

A complement to the sexual prowess discussed above is the insatiability of the sexual appetite. 'More Cock' by the Mighty Sparrow is a calypso about a friend of his who started rearing a set of game cocks and whose live-in lover Judith began to complain about how "so much cock in the house had she basody."<sup>5</sup>

Wrong or right — Is cock  
In the middle of the night — More cock  
Sun or rain — Is cock  
Sickness or pain — More cock  
Tell you friend when you see him for me  
This kind of thing wouldn't work  
And if he don't to want to stop  
I go kill the cock

Kitchener also addressed this theme of sexual insatiability and by extension durability. In 'Kitch Have No Season,' he tells of a female lover who complains to his mother about the excessive nature of his sexual demands:

At night when I sleeping  
The beast wouldn't stop  
If is one o'clock in the morning  
He waking me up

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Don't care how a plead to the fella  
 Don't care what I say  
 He would just ignore me completely  
 And have his own way

Having made the complaint, this woman attempts to persuade Kitchener's mother about how unreasonable his sexual desires are by reference to mating practices in the world of animals:

Cow had it season  
 Goat had it season  
 Cat had it season  
 And it stand for reason.  
 I coming like Rumpelstilskino  
 Plus a getting small  
 Mamayo, this dog Kitchener  
 He ain't have no season at all

This calypso is as much a boast about extended sexual stamina as it is a man's fantasy about making women beg for mercy and relief from male sexual power. In this calypso, the conjuring of this illusion takes precedence over the negative implications associated with appearing more unreasonable than the animals in the wild. This voraciousness recurs in Sparrow's 'Elaine, Harry and Mama' and in another of Kitchener's calypsos, 'Handy Man.' Here, the emphasis is on male preparedness for sexual activity.

Because I'm a handy man in the morning  
 Handy man in the night  
 Madam I'm a handy man, anytime I see work  
 Handy man 'round the clock

However, sexual preparedness is only one of the attributes allegedly held by the Caribbean male, at least in the calypso. Kitch points to a reservoir of infallible

knowledge, which he possesses as a presumably representative male, about the female anatomy:

She say, Kitch, I don't think it's right  
Tell me why you like to work at night  
I say, madam, you see when the weather cool  
It's easier to use me tool  
She say, but Kitch, you can't see to do it neat  
I say, madam, I don't have to see to eat  
And for the time I using this broom  
I could shut me eye and clean out your room

In the calypso, eating is almost always a sexual metaphor. Sparrow uses this metaphor in 'No Kind of Man,' cited earlier. He also uses it more extensively in the 'Congo Man' and 'Sixty Million French Men' and again in his 'Elaine, Harry and Mama.' This metaphor can also be found in Mighty Terror's 'Yankee Woman ain't Cooking Sweet.'

In addition to the store of information about the female anatomy mentioned above, some calypsonians, like other Caribbean men, also presume to possess a more generalized knowledge about women, the Mighty Sparrow being chief among them. In 'Bag ah Sugar' his boast is rooted deeply within the folk culture of the Caribbean and in many African countries, and appears to offer his reflection some legitimacy.

Even a fortuneteller  
Couldn't tell you more bout woman than me  
Don't care how a woman clever  
I sure I smarter than she  
I could size up any woman in here, or on the street  
Even though we have never met  
I could tell you if she sour, if she salt  
If she sweet, if she easy or she hard to get

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Note that this knowledge of women's disposition is not based on any scientific information but on hunches gleaned from folk beliefs that stereotype, caricature and fetishize certain physical characteristics of women as being important to an understanding of their sexual proclivities.

For if her eyes start becoming kind of sleepy  
When you watch she fix  
My advice is to take it kind of light  
Maybe she is out for tricks  
But if she smile with dimples on she cheek  
And then she laugh and she got open teeth  
Don't let she get away  
She have a bag o' sugar down deh

This objectification of women is richly encased in Caribbean humor emerging out of the folk culture of the region. In this calypso, the pursuit of the 'bag ah sugar' becomes an all-consuming passion that supersedes the exploration of other social and intellectual interests that could be developed out of meaningful relationships with women. What is evident in this calypso, as in some of the others cited in this paper, is how the discourse on masculinity and/or sexuality takes place among men directly, with no other interested party addressed in the communication. Conversely, the discourse could be directed toward women in the form of an apparent critique of male behavior that, however, simultaneously communicates to women information designed for the benefit of the former. The alternative format is to address other men, while affording women the opportunity to eavesdrop on the conversation. In short, what we have in the calypso is a public space in which men construct, negotiate and dislocate different notions of masculinity by recounting stories and using the folk narratives, some of which no doubt are autobiographical, but all of which take place within the context of this unique art form of the Caribbean.



## Conclusion

In the themes explored in this essay, there is some consistency in their construction of masculinity, as seen through the prism of the calypso. However, there is already some indication that different constructions of masculinity will become a part of the discourse of this art form. This change can already be seen in the work of such calypsonians as Mighty Chalkdust and Black Stalin, among others. Feminist contestation of the objectification of women in the calypso, as well as a growing political awareness of gender issues, will ultimately affect the way men think about women in song. This is not to suggest, however, that the kind of calypsos men make in the future will be entirely free of sexist stereotyping and misogyny but rather to suggest the possibility that a greater range of constructions of Caribbean masculinity will emerge in the future.

It is important that we bear in mind that despite the themes explored in this paper, they do not exhaust the range of topics addressed in the calypso even though they may constitute a particular core. Neither should one conclude that these are the only ways in which men view themselves, their sexuality and their relationships with women. The themes explored above do represent fairly popular ways in which these issues have been treated in the past and continue to be explored and debated in song in the wider Caribbean society. If gender is related to performance as suggested by Butler, then the calypso provides men with an arena for display and role rehearsal, and over the years calypsonians have certainly taken the opportunity it offers, to imagine who they are as gendered subjects. As stated earlier, the views expressed in the lyrics of many of the calypsos cited above may not be representative of all Caribbean men but they are formed and fashioned in the context of the popular culture of the region. Popular discourse is not without a material base, it is the product of sustained interaction of individuals in the process of social reproduction. To the extent that the calypso continues to have such a base, one must conclude that these ways of approaching masculinity in the calypso bear some resonance among Caribbean men and should not be discounted as

having been created entirely for the purposes of entertainment. Rather what is being suggested here is that the calypso should be mined for sociological and anthropological insight into Caribbean masculinity.

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<sup>1</sup>Indeed, performance in calypso had an early link to the theater, in so far as calypso skits were part of this art form during the 1920s (see Hill, 1993). Among the calypsonians involved in this aspect of the art were Atilla, Lord Executor and Lord Inventor. These early shows developed into calypso dramas, which were performed between 1933 and 1966, but, according to Hill, never constituted a major aspect of the general performance (Hill, 1993: 149).

<sup>2</sup>The Calypso tent is the venue where concerts or calypso shows are held. This site could be a school, a public auditorium or a specially constructed arena. According to Donald R. Hill (1993), the calypso tent was established around 1899, "in the masquerade camps of the major social unions of Port of Spain and the large towns of Trinidad" (p. 64). The Tent in this sense does not refer to a portable shelter made of canvas.

<sup>3</sup>"Mamaguy" is a French Creole word that means to flatter, mislead, manipulate, deceive, and/or misrepresent.

<sup>4</sup>"Dou dou," sometimes spelled "doo doo," is a Caribbean Creole term of endearment.

<sup>5</sup>A Caribbean Creole word meaning to confuse or to disorient.

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