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## With a Tassa Blending: Calypso and Cultural Identity in Indo-Caribbean Fiction

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It is only in the calypso that the Trinidadian touches reality.

V. S. Naipaul, *The Middle Passage*

Calypso occupies a privileged position in the Trinidadian cultural imagination. Given its enormous popularity within the island, regional and diasporic populations, Calypso retains strong associations with home and with “the Trini mentality.” Indeed calypso, along with Carnival, is often cited as possessing the power to convey the Trinidadian “spirit” and worldview in the way that few other cultural practices can. Associated with lower-strata Afro-Trinidadian cultural identity, calypso is a hybrid form, the origin of which has been the subject of much contestation and debate.<sup>1</sup> The peculiar creation of the Afro Caribbean urban folk, the calypso has been traditionally regarded as the lash of the small man who deploys picong and wit for boastful self-assertion and for sustained counter discourse with the hegemonic worldview, in the protected arena of the performance space. Drawing from the African tradition of the praise and blame song,<sup>2</sup> calypsonians have, by dint of struggle, created and maintained a relatively permissive platform for stinging, incisive humor, cutting criticism and for simultaneously airing and masking fear and antipathy through verbal power play and excess.

Over time, calypso has drawn from and fertilized myriad crossover music forms and has risen to prominence in the contemporary commoditization and globalization of local sound. In terms of its content and significance as a cultural practice, this shape-shifting nation-music occupies pivotal interface with literary and other textual discourses on gender, ethnicity and nation. Contextualizing a reading of the calypso in Indo-Trinidadian literature against a broader framework of gender and ethnic identity politics, this paper examines a range of symbolic associations, which attend the calypso as pointers to evolving gender constructions and as metaphors for cultural hybridity. It argues that the calypso with its cohesive links with Afro-Creole cultural assertion and identity also functions predominantly as an ambivalent trope for freedom and belonging for Indo-Trinidadian writers and protagonists.

Scholars have carefully documented the process by which a shared history of enforced labor through slavery and indentureship—with common legacies of anomie, institutionalized poverties, social and cultural dislocation, loss of ancestral heritages, and traumatic gender relations—has been transmuted into interethnic hostility and rivalry.<sup>3</sup> The tenuous nature of the nation state in the resultant, fragile, island societies is reflected in the contestation over markers of rootedness and belonging. Citing Calypso and Carnival as manifestation of both “the theatres and metaphors through which Trinidad’s social history is encoded and enacted,” cultural critic Gordon Rohlehr argues in “Calypso Reinvents Itself:”

The Trinidad experience has involved an intense expenditure of energy in a process of continuous indigenization, enacted on ground stolen from the terribly reduced though not totally erased Amerindian presence, committed to create out

of this teaming welter of ethnicities, a restless and according to V. S. Naipaul, “half-formed” society, sufficiently flexible to accommodate the paradox of homogeneity and difference, of one heart and yet multiple heartbeats; a jarring, jamming Carnavalesque collusion and clashing counter point of rhythms. (374)

Trinidadian discourses of cultural belonging have deployed tropes of hybridity and emblems of nationhood drawn from a range of icons. Seeking fluid and varied locations on a complex matrix of inclusions and exclusions, Indo-Trinidadians have for the most part rejected notions of an essentializing “creole” social fabric to which their Indianness adds an “exotic” flair. Nationalist discourses continue to revolve around questions such as: Should the steel pan, the percussion instrument created by the Afro-Trinidadian urban folk in the 1930s be emblematic of national creativity? At the time of writing (March 2005), the Trinidad and Tobago High Court was adjudicating a motion that questions the legality of State’s institution of the Trinity Cross, as the highest national award in a multi-religious society, given the symbol’s associations with Christianity. The contestations continue from decade to decade and even generation to generation, with unsullied freshness and fervor.

Calypso is another such icon. With its attendant culture of competition and performance, it is a barometer of public opinion, a reflector of collective identity and a manifestation of the construction of individual and communal identity through performance. Its seasonal projection onto the national stage hinges on a strong, obtrusive, visual presence by performers who are identified by characteristic costumes that project lavish stage personas. What would a Shadow, Black Stalin, the soca artiste Ronnie Mackintosh, or the chutney soca queen Drupatie Ramgoonai be without their trademark garments? In the performance, there is an increasing propensity to incorporate mime and playacting. Each of these elements adds to the texts to be decoded thus pushing the signification beyond the semiotic and verbal to incorporate the mimetic, dramatic and performative. This process becomes all the more contentious within the multiethnic environment. In 2003, Denyse “Saucy Wow” Belfon famed for her dizzying pelvic gyrations, crossed boundaries when she constructed the Indo-Trinidadian male as sexually desirable. Hitherto, the Indian male had been constructed in calypso, and arguably by virtue of selective representation and erasure in the mass media advertising industry, as weak, small bodied and feminized. Conservative elements within the Indo-Trinidadian community took issue with her other boundary crossing action—the use of a sari for her performance. They contended that she was thereby defiling the sacred garment.

In terms of its verbal dimension, the calypso is one facet of a diverse oral tradition, which has been used by all ethnic groups to express racial antipathy--a deep rooted self-derision and contempt for the other through music and childhood rhyming songs. Indeed the intraracial and interracial diatribes are an extension of the self-contempt and reductive laughter which Caribbean folk art forms, reflecting an historical legacy of ethnic denigration and disempowerment through naming, democratically employ within the ethnic group and toward other ethnicities. Rohlehr recalls the rhymes of his Guyanese childhood, through which children

expressed the hostilities of their elders and of their societies in verses, which groups of Indian and African children would hurl at each other.<sup>4</sup> He argues that these cancerous racial stereotypes are inculcated from childhood and hence are all the more insidious and resistant to erasure.

Reflecting this history of latent and manifest racial antipathy, calypso provides a most effective medium for race and gender stereotyping and for satirizing the other. Shalini Puri comments that the “them and us” constructions, which continue to dominate Trinidad’s discourses of cultural nationalism until today, posits notions of racially distinct ethnic parties who exist in racial antipathy and to a large extent in culturally specific spheres with a minimum of admixture. Puri contends:

... racialization of politics in post-colonial Trinidad, the persistence and active redeployment of colonial stereotypes, and the importance of stereotype in the popular national art form, calypso, result in a public discourse in which racial stereotypes are unusually prominent. What these stereotypes produce for contemporary dominant nationalist discourse is the fiction of a seamless and monolithic racial community with common interests, pitted against another seamless and monolithic racial community with common interests. (Puri 240)

Indo-Trinidadian cultural identity has been savagely satirized in calypso through mockery of mannerism, food, religious ceremonies and other cultural traditions. Conversely, there are the calypsos that offer rhapsodies about the sexual desirability and beauty of Indian women. Invariably this genre of calypso thinly disguises male-male competition with a primary focus on phallic boasting about the amazing capability of the Afro Caribbean male for conquest within and across ethnic lines. Let the implicature of phallic inadequacy fall where it may.<sup>5</sup>

This tendency surfaces also in literary discourse. George Lamming, in his address to the Cultural Studies Conference in Trinidad, January 2004, “Language and the Politics of Ethnicity,” commented on literary representations of African-Indian relations:

There are numerous examples in our literature of hostility between individuals which derive from these toxic sources of power that manipulate the original neutral difference between characters—the innocent malice for example of Masie directed at Philomen in James’s *Minty Alley*; the censoring of Pariag’s inclusion and participation by the yard in Lovelace’s *The Dragon Can’t Dance*. The strategy of ensuring allegiance by dramatizing the menace of the Indian was most effectively used by the old colonial power and it has often been called into service by both African and Indian political leadership in the new independent countries. It has been a major obstacle to the realization of an *authentic, civic nationalism* that will embrace and recreolise all ethnic types in Caribbean society. (my emphasis)

Through analysis of Indo-Trinidadian literary examples, I argue that the calypso in its broader discursive associations with ethnic dissociation and stereotyping, functions as a trope of hybridity and belonging which, nevertheless, is constructed differently depending on the gender of the writer.

The earliest mention of calypso in Indo-Caribbean fiction is in Seepersad Naipaul's *Gurudeva and other Tales* (1943?).<sup>6</sup> Seepersad Naipaul alludes to women, even those from conservative Indian homes, who took advantage of the American presence in Trinidad to enter into transactional sexual relations with the prosperous soldiers. The brief allusion is telling. While her parents are fretting about Daisy Seetohal's late nights and frequent absences, the latter laces her ablutions and denial of misbehavior with snatches of the calypso "Rum and Coca Cola," signifying that she is in fact "working for the Yankee dollar."<sup>7</sup>

A generation later, V.S. Naipaul refines his father's allusion to calypso to point to complex and diverse social movements in *Miguel Street* (1959). Calypsos offer a running unifying commentary on its vignettes, which are also united through expanded character development from story to story, temporal progression and a shared narrator for whom keen observation of the complex social history of the Miguel Street residents is inextricable from his coming of age process. In the final segment, the youthful narrator equates walking into his future with walking into his own shadow: "I left them all and walked briskly towards the aeroplane, not looking back, looking only at my shadow before me, a dancing dwarf on the tarmac" (222). The novel is both a celebration of vivacity and coping strategies of a people doomed ultimately to fail, and a lament at an inevitable creeping loss, disillusionment, and the passing of a world of innocence. In V. S. Naipaul's *The Middle Passage* (1962), whose perceiving eye and voice combines those of the journalist, the traveler/adventurer and social commentator, Naipaul ties the peculiar dynamic which characterizes Trinidad society to the calypso:

The Land of the Calypso is not a copy-writer's phrase. It is one side of the truth, and it was this gaiety, so inexplicable to the tourist who sees the shacks of Shanty Town and corbeaux patrolling the modern highway, and inexplicable to me who had remembered it as the land of failures, which now, on my return, assaulted me. (58)

Published in 1959, nine years after Naipaul migrated to England, *Miguel Street* unfolds against the backdrop of World War II (1939-1945) and the American military occupation of Trinidad. This period also coincided with increased urban-rural migration of Indians in Trinidad and the heightened pace and visibility of the acculturation process. This is the 1940s to 1950s during which Calypsonians vented their resentment at the intrusion of Indo-Trinidadians into the urban space. In this period Mighty Terror sang "Grinding Masalla" (1947), "Indian Women with Creole Names" and "Indian Politicians" (1950), all of which thinly masked fear at intrusion and enhanced competition.<sup>8</sup>

Significantly though, this is not the focus of Naipaul's *Miguel Street* where calypsos provide an underlying philosophical frame for the narratives. The texts mentions no fewer than "The More They Try to do me Bad" (1938) by Lord Caresser (Rufus Callender) (82); "The Burning of the Treasury" (91); "Cuff Dem Down" (n.d.) by The Mighty Sparrow (Slinger Francisco) which both The Roaring Lion (Hubert De Leon) and Lord Beginner (Egbert Moore) claimed to have invented (111); "Chinese Children Calling me Daddy" (1950) by The Mighty Terror (127); "Is Love Love Love Alone" (1937) by Lord Caresser (136); "All Day All Night Miss Mary Ann" (1954) by The Roaring Lion (166); "Working for the Yankee Dollar" (1943) by Lord Invader (185); "The Soldiers Came and Broke up my Life" (1944) by Lord Invader (196); "I Living with my Yankee Soldier" by Lord Invader (197); "Matilda" (1953) by King Radio and popularized by the famous American entertainer of Jamaican parentage—Harry Belafonte (210).

*Miguel Street* deals with the issue of what it means to be a "man among we men." Its characters—some of whom are transient—grapple with turbulent gender and family relations. The calypso forms an ironic counterpoint to the feverish machinations of a small world in which persons seek in vain for heroic stature, but are dogged by failure and frustration. The frustrated artiste exemplified in the Carpenter Popo does not work gainfully, preferring to strive to create the elusive "thing without a name" (*Miguel Street*, "The Thing Without a Name" 17-25). The calypso becomes an ambivalent symbol of low culture creativity for the failed artist Black Wordsworth, who strives to write "the greatest poem in the world" but sheepishly confesses that he makes his annual income by singing calypsos during the calypso season (*Miguel Street* 63). *Miguel Street* also represents frustrated careerists like the aspiring doctor turned Scavenger Cart driver in "His Chosen Calling" (*Miguel Street* 36-43), and the mechanical genius Mr Batchu who is more skilled at deconstruction than construction (*Miguel Street*, "The Mechanical Genius" 147-154). Moreover, in this world of men among men, an inordinate number meet misfortune and frustration in their pursuit of love.

Threaded throughout the narratives, the calypsos, the majority of which deal with the debacle of violent male female relations, variously amplify and undercut the action. Although the narrator is proud to affirm that Miguel Street is a cut above the barrack yard environment, the eruptive violence in male-female relations does not reflect this differentiation. The scripts are varied but with a common thread. There is the failure of one party or the other to meet expectations; the escape of the aggrieved party from the disappointing relationship; and the attempt to win the loved one back with the help of violence, often eliciting the intervention of the law.

The calypso serves to analyze and magnify the domestic dramas. It lifts the petty events out of their specific confines and makes them representative experiences. When Popo beats his wife's lover, the incident becomes the basis for the road march "Emelda"<sup>9</sup> which the popular all female American vocalists The Andrews Sisters subsequently recorded for an American company.<sup>10</sup> The smallness of Miguel Street though which a stranger could drive and dismiss as a slum, is alleviated by the notoriety of the calypso which projects the community's mundane

dramas onto the national and international stage and thereby amplifies its tragedies. In the process it lends significance and import to all. The narrator declares: “It was a great thing for the street” (22).

Naipaul also deploys reversals or spins on popular calypsos providing an alternative take on the popular lore. “The Maternal Instinct” alludes to the infamous calypso-expounding wife beating which popularizes the assumption that “women and them like a good dose of blows:” “Black up their eyes and bruise up their knee / And then they love you eternally (111). This ironically named narrative reverses the male beater/female beaten paradigm by presenting a female abuser. This woman, who is said to love her children, regularly deals them murderous verbal abuse. The lover Nathaniel, who is physically abused also, suffers from an ego-retrieving need to project the fabrication he is the beater and not the beaten. Laura is reminiscent of the matador woman, that is, the woman who provides clothes, food and lodging for her “sweet man” in exchange for his sexual favours and exclusive attention. Equipped with both physical and verbal ascendancy, she follows through on her beatings with a verbal emasculation suggestive of the African-American tradition of the dirty dozens—the male-dominated verbal power play that is a safer substitute for physical violence. In a public verbal game of one-upmanship, she emerges the victor by stripping him naked: “Yes, Nathaniel, is you I talking to, you with your bottom like two stale bread in your pants” (113). Yet the abusive matador woman is eventually stumped not by her own childbearing potential but by the prospect of the generational continuity of her impoverished lifestyle. She faces the likelihood that her daughter may follow her pattern of bearing eight children for seven men. In a bizarre double reversal, Laura’s abuse of her pregnant daughter would have been indicative of love; her terrible silence seems a form of rejection of the girl who eventually resorts to suicide. Naipaul zeroes in here on a cultural tradition that habitually greets tragedy with laughter that becomes both a palliative and a substitute for more explosive and dangerous forms of expression.

A similar reversal is deployed in the short story “Is Love Love Love Alone,” which is named after Lord Caresser’s calypso about Edward VIII who forsook the British throne to marry a commoner and divorcee. This statement on the ennobling power of love to transcend class barriers is the counterpoint to the story of a woman who leaves a sanitized, professional husband and luxurious lifestyle for a Miguel Street slum dwelling and an unkempt, drunken, abusive lover. The community disciplines the abuser with a severe beating, not because wife beating is unacceptable, but because his practices are sufficiently extreme to transgress even their boundaries. Arguably too, because the couple is unmarried, the violence does not securely remain under the category of “husband and wife business” as may be the case in George’s pink house.

In the 1940s-1950s, lower strata gender relations in Trinidad were dealt a harsh blow with the intrusion of American soldiers during World War II. The chagrin was great among calypsonians who found that prosperous American soldiers had muscled in on their turf. This move which coincided with Indian rural urban acculturation, crossed ethnic barriers so that

Indian women became complicit in the sex as commodity exchange, which left their former partners out in the cold. Culturally conservative Indians and Afro-Creole calypsonians agreed on the destructive power of cultural assimilation. In “Indian People with Creole Names” by Mighty Killer, the calypsonian decries a shift in naming conventions as evidence of an Indian takeover of naming, privilege, occupation and cultural identity. The stripping away of markers of cultural distinctiveness is seen as a threat which drives the calypsonian to seek to protect his name, status and wealth from impending “trouble:”

Now what’s wrong with these Indian people,  
as though their intention is for trouble?  
Long ago you meet an Indian boy by the road  
with his capra waiting to tote your load,  
but I notice there ain’t no Indian again  
since the women and them taking Creole names.  
Long ago was Sumitra, Ramaleela, Ramaliwa  
But now is Jean and Dinah and Dorothy etc. etc. etc.

More explicitly the calypso notes admixture in terms of hitherto taboo aggression, food and intimate relations:

Long age you hadn’t a chance  
To meet an Indian Girl in a dance  
But nowadays it is big confusion  
Big fighting in the road for their Yankee man  
And see them in the market they ain’t making joke  
Pushing down nigger people to buy de poke.

The naming to which Mighty Killer refers in “Indian People with Creole Names” is indicative not simply of a shift in cultural identification but a muscling in on the transactional sex turf. The calypso cleverly links anglicized naming with prostitution when Killer attributes to the Indian working girls, the names of Sparrow’s prostitutes (Jean and Dinah) whom the latter threatens with sexual revenge in the wake of the Yankees’ departure. This dubious form of women’s work attracts the censure of the licentious and libidinous calypsonian turned moralizer, the better to document the process of degeneration. As indicated by Rohlehr:

The American presence undermined the traditional saga boy pose of the calypsonian who had presented the woman as an easily exploitable and expendable commodity. With American soldiers there to provide both mother and daughter with a “better price”, the woman had become a sort of professional who no longer needed her parasitical saga boy. (*Calypso and Society* 365)

The Yankee soldier with his almighty dollar was instrumental in the unmasking of the Trinidadian male whose phallic boasting and control over a series of women disguised his fear of



commitment. *Miguel Street* makes fictional allusions to this in “Edward’s Wife” in which the protagonist’s pale, sickly woman leaves him for an American soldier. This is related even more directly to the issue of potency because Edward, the longing and the fearful, claims that he is constrained to marry the woman because she is pregnant with a baby that never materializes. His impotence is exposed when his wife leaves him and conceives by an American soldier lover. In this instance, life imitates the calypso, which amplifies, explains and rationalizes life. As it often is in reality, the narrator creates a seamless weave between the grim facts of characters that are grappling with crises, and the scripted fictionalized lives of characters of calypso. Hence Popo’s actions makes him the subject of a calypso which becomes the road march, while, in “Until the Soldier Came,” Lord Invader sings the calypso first and subsequently Edward’s wife mouths the calypsonian’s scripted words. When he begs her to come back to him, she responds:

*“Invader, I change my mind  
I living with my Yankee soldier.”*

This was exactly what happened to Edward. (*Miguel Street* 197)

Despite the community’s willingness to blame the wife and embrace the cuckolded husband, Edward—Hat’s brother—takes himself and his shame away from Miguel Street.

In terms of the construction of a national community, the Miguel Street dweller lives side by side, for the most part, blissfully ignorant of markers of ethnic divisiveness. The construction of ethnicity surfaces here in relation to whiteness which in this grim scenario becomes ugly because of ugly actions: “Hat said ... ‘You see what a dirty thing a white skin does be sometimes.’ And in truth he had a nasty skin. It was yellow and pink and white with brown and black spots. The skin above his left eye had the raw pink look of scalded flesh” (137). In the *Miguel Street* world, there is no contestation over national identity. Hat, subtly signalling his potency, is surrogate father to children of all ethnicities whom he proudly instructs in the intricacies of the national game—cricket. And calypso is the common repository into which all characters dip variously for reference points. Indeed, the calypso is also indicative of patriotism and the good life. Morgan the pyrotechnist turned arsonist sings: “The more they try to do me bad / Is the better I live in Trinidad” (*Miguel Street* 82).

Calypso in *Miguel Street* becomes a unifying force in its promotion of patriotism and in its construction of the nation as a shared homeland. Its barbs and balms are applied in an egalitarian manner to all ethnicities and classes. As a marker of communal identity and affirmation, it functions as an indigenous boundary marker. Naipaul comments in *The Middle Passage*:

It is only in the Calypso that the Trinidadian touches reality. The Calypso is a purely local form. No song composed outside Trinidad is a calypso. The Calypso deals with local incidents, local attitudes and it does so in a local language. The pure calypso, the best calypso, is incomprehensible to the outsider. Wit and verbal

conceits are fundamental; without them no song, however good the music, however well sung, can be judged a calypso. (75-76)

In *The Middle Passage*, Naipaul insists on the indigeneity of the calypso and its inability to travel as exemplary of its rootedness and its power to bind Trinidadians to locality, communal perspectives and worldviews. Yet, it is precisely as rooted, ethnic music that it travels so very well.

The tension between calypso as a culturally and geographically rooted form and its ability to reinvent itself on foreign terrain is explored in Selvon's short story collection *Ways of Sunlight*. In "Basement Lullaby," the inability of the musicians to get the melody of the new calypso right, is associated with their growing alienation and dissociation within a hostile environment in which they live half lives, submerged in underground burrows. The alienation operates on several levels. They are divorced from the natural environment of both Trinidad and London. They seem to be suffering lack of exposure to the energizing, life-giving sun. And access to the sun is a tall order with smog blocking out its feeble rays on the streets of London. The quality of their calypso performances is suffering because they are playing before non-discerning English audiences. The calypso symbolizes here a cultural rootedness and an inner well being which they are losing hold of, and therefore, they find themselves producing discordant, jangling music.

In Samuel Selvon's "Calypso in London," the art form is deployed as a contradictory marker of Trinidadian distinctiveness and the translocation of Anansi-style coping strategies within the metropolitan scenario. Trapped within the harsh wintry environment, bereft of employment and the support of extended community, Mangohead, the Vincentian, hones his skills as a hustler seeking to sell his lyrics to the composer Hotboy for quick money. The flash-in-the-pan creativity becomes an alternative to soul destroying, burdensome, manual work. Its financial reward is swiftly dissipated on basic necessities. More significantly, the story unveils the impulses that impact cultural production. This creation on foreign soil needs to be both distinctly Trinidadian and acutely relevant to the broader metropolitan framework, in this case the Suez Canal issue. The composition must satisfy opposing impulses—a parochial backward glance to Trinidad and its homegrown foci, rhythms and roots; and the outward oriented global appeal, which was always a facet of the traditional calypso, but becomes even more vital to its success in the new terrain. The Trinidadians as the "authentic" owners of the cultural form are proprietary and defensive: Hotboy the composer berates Mangohead as a Vincentian who should leave Trinidad calypso alone; while Rahamut the "legitimate" arbiter of the calypso's worth, berates his enthusiastic English assistant: "Why you don't shut you mouth? What you English people know about calypso" (129). Yet it is clear even to displaced Trinidadians the calypso must speak both to nationals abroad thirsty for connections to home and the growing circle of foreign consumers. To accomplish the second goal the calypso must move away from a thematic focus on the specificities of individual's lived experience. The brief story is a telling commentary

on how calypso travels and the impact of forces that shape cultural production on calypso as a commodity with increasing global appeal.

In Naipaul's and Selvon's fictions of the 1950s and 1960s, the calypso is reflective of shared experiences of poverty, social adversity, individual and communal disempowerment, and of adversarial gender relations. As Indo-Trinidadian writers who adopted calypso for their thematic and stylistic emphases, they resisted the propensity to use this nation song to signify ethnic dissociation. Instead the calypso as literary emblem was associated with belonging, rootedness, homecoming, and the formation of a common front in relation to external global event such as war, American army occupation and its paradoxical impact on the social conditions of Trinidadian life.

As already indicated the construction of the Indian woman within this male-dominated lower-strata Afro-Caribbean art form became a pivotal element of interracial tension and contestation. The early literary expressions of Naipaul and Selvon did not follow this mold. Their location on the ever-shifting continuum of discourses in relation to nationalism in Trinidad saw muted possibilities for an emerging Creole cultural aesthetic. Even for a writer of Naipaul's persistent pessimism, denigration and self-exclusion, the calypso with its vigor, inventiveness and ebullience signalled a bewildering rootedness and potential in the face of all evidence to the contrary.

Selvon's perspectives in *Ways of Sunlight* were qualified in his 1979 Opening Address to the India in the Caribbean Conference, when he called for an end to ethnic antipathy and divisiveness. He is particularly critical of Caribbean islanders in the metropolis whose diseased sense of national belonging was susceptible to a shape-shifting fluidity which readily wrapped itself around political expediency: "With no tradition, no national pride, no patriotism, lacking values but full of calypso and Carnival and what happening boy, it was as easy as kissing hand to deny their birthright" (18). And in relation to the Caribbean island dweller he comments, "in spite of the cultural growth in these islands since the last war, we are still being identified on a level which does not seem to rise above cricket, calypso, steelband and limbo" (19-20). Issuing a call for unity, Selvon cites Black Stalin's "Caribbean Unity" (more popularly known as "The Caribbean Man") as a grassroots expression of the dream of Caribbean unity, which "transcends the parochial and becomes regional rather than insular" (22). The calypso's function as reflector and shaper of mass perspectives demonstrates the potential for significant ideological intervention. Ironically such is the state of racial tension that this very calypso generated intense and sustained public dialogue much of which was focused on its racist character in its supposed exclusive identification of the Afro-Caribbean as "the" Caribbean man.<sup>11</sup>

The second part of this paper demonstrates that calypso and other predominantly Afro-Caribbean cultural forms play a divergent role for Indo-Trinidadian women writers. Indo-Trinidadian women, reflecting their secluded positions within the home, their traditional silencing, and later access to education, came to fictional expression later than both Indo-

Trinidadian men and Afro-Trinidadian women. The post-independence period gave Indian women free primary education, access to jobs in public service and in the private sector. This was accompanied by intensified urban migration, and a shift to more nuclear type families. These women writer's fictional deployment of calypso and carnival as emblematic of Afro-Creole society can be located variously on a continuum whose poles are attraction and revulsion.

Lashkmi Persaud, the first published Indo-Trinidadian female novelist (*Butterfly in the Wind*, 1990), articulates in her second novel *Sastra* (1993) the flip side of the negative ethnic stereotyping that emerges prominently in Afro-Caribbean fiction. The writer evokes a polarized position in her account of a single brutal murder of a moneylender and his family, which lacerates the entire Indian community who read it as racist in its motivation. The stereotypical “them against us” binary is trotted out when the murder is related to the Indian's economic wealth and the criminal waste of Africans seeking money for criminal frivolities. Carnival functions as a shadowy symbol of criminal waste and licentiousness, the opiate of a people who hold their participation so dear that they are prepared murder in order to steal the resources of the honest, enterprising and diligent. In the melee of voices, this is an extreme though not uncommon view.

Persaud, who is married to a prominent Guyanese and makes the topic of her third novel *For the Love of My Name* (2000) the demonic insanity and extreme racial hatred of Guyanese political life, has had first hand insight into the race wars that have fuelled the Guyanese diaspora since the sixties. Persaud reveals the sense of alienation, vulnerability and fear of defilement, which caused Indians to complain bitterly of exclusion, and yet remain constrained by their sense of distinctiveness and superiority to avoid assimilation. The emerging Creole nationalism, with Carnival as its pivotal cultural icon, becomes a troubled social framework for a besieged ethnic minority. This is not to imply that Persaud does not seek to negotiate through her fiction a space for a more liberatory female location within the traditional Hindu framework. Indeed, an overt embrace of the traditional location for women in the Brahminical Hindu framework is counterbalanced by an elaborate range of kinetic images—butterflies struggling to escape over imprisoning walls and girls being crushed under the icebergs of tradition and collapsing houses.<sup>12</sup>

The younger Indo-Caribbean women writers strike out for more transgressive representation of their position in relation to a broader, multiethnic social order. Calypso and carnival are evoked as tropes of intentional hybridity signifying a different way to be Indian and female within a Trinidadian context. The difference between the portrayal Naipaul and Selvon explored earlier and that of the younger women Joy Mahabir, Rajandaye Ramkisson-Chen and Ramabai Espinet is reflective of the nuances of Robert Young's differentiation between unconscious and intentional hybridity: the gap between between “unconscious processes of hybrid mixture or creolization and a conscious and politically motivated concern with the deliberate disruption of homogeneity” (Young 120). Participation and right of access to all of the cultural forms of all of the Caribbean peoples is the stance embraced by Ramabai Espinet

Trinidad born Canadian writer and performance poet, who claims her right to perform her “Indian Robber Talk”—her unique version of the boastful grandiloquence of the traditional African descended masquerade figure “The Midnight Robber.”

The intentional hybridity finds fullest expression in Ramkissoo-Chen’s “When the Hindu Woman Sings Calypso” which was inspired by Droopatie Ragoonie the Queen of Chutney Soca. The Chutney tradition which came to Trinidad with indentured Indians and survived in pockets in villages, represented resistance to a colonial hegemonic order which sought to nullify and demonize Hindu culture. Chutney derived from the non-Brahmanic caste and rural folk song and dance tradition associated with the Matikor ritual—that is, the exclusively female space in which women frankly instructed the bride to be on sexual matters through song, dance and ribald humor. Brinda Metha, in *Diasporic (Dis)locations*, associates “wining” with the birthing contractions of the body as it breaks free from itself and releases new life (Metha 98). This female-dominated space, Kanhai suggests in *Matikor*, served to affirm the sensuality of Hindu women but it may also have been the site of surreptitious female-to-female caresses under guise of preparing the bride for her most important traditional role. Until today, Chutney runs afoul of Brahminical notions of purity and seclusion as ideal behaviors for Hindu women. According to Metha, “the political dimensions of chutney are located in women’s contestations of class distinctions ... The suggestive movements of chutney dancing are a public demonstration of women’s efforts to defy normative codes of Hindu patriarchal morality ...” (98).

By the time chutney reached the national stage in the 1980s, some of its elements had previously been appropriated by the calypso. Acknowledgement of the Indian presence in terms of lyrics as well as musical instruments, was evident from about the 1970s onwards:

This new style of music included the Indian instruments of the tassa, dholak & sitar. It also incorporated the more Calypso flavor of the steel pan and synthesizer and even the electric guitar. The lyrics were also mostly sung in West Indian creole with maybe the exception of only a few Hindi words. However, by far the most significant change in this new style was the fact that it was almost solidly dominated by Afro West Indians during its early days. Songs such as Baron’s “Raja Rani”, Mighty Trini’s “Curry Tabanca,” Sugar Aloe’s “Roti & Dhalpourie” & Sparrow’s “Marajin” dominated the Indian Soca scene from 1980-1987. (Saywack)

The impact of this was to push chutney far more decisively and centrally onto the national stage. Many of these songs were about the sexual attractiveness of the Indian woman to the calypso persona. Given the systematic effort to construct this persona as a sexual predator bent on rake and scrape type intertribal penetrations or revenge through miscegenation, it is understandable that the conservative Indian elements in the society were not pleased with this appropriation of Indian cultural forms.<sup>13</sup>

Predictably the emergence of Hindu female chutney artists on the public stage occasioned a veritable outbreak of male censure and censorship. Ramkisson-Chen pens a poetic intervention in the dialogue in “When the Hindu woman Sings Calypso,” based on the career of Drupatee Ramgoonai, who emerged out of the rural village of Penal of South Trinidad via the Afro-Trinidadian male dominated calypso state, to enjoy international fame, at a period when few Indian men were willing to make their presence felt in this location. To appropriate this space was to violate numerous deeply intense taboos. Her intrusion can be contextualized by Rosanne Kanhai’s statement on the traditional Bhowjee, the term applied to “old fashioned” Indian ladies who had arranged marriage and who stayed “at home to take care of the children and do housework” (Kanhai 3):

Indeed the figure of the traditional Bhowjee, humming at the masala stone is familiar to the Indo-Caribbean landscape .... She hums under her breath because breaking into song is bolder than her life of repression and rigorous domesticity allows. ... A hardworking woman is likely to be docile and virtuous, and Bhowjee’s skill in grinding masala is proof of her chastity and morality; she symbolizes all that is wholesome and proper in the Indo-Caribbean community. Expressions of playfulness or waywardness are curbed, and creativity is channelled into household chores. The masala stone receives her complaints, reflections, longings, griefs, joys. ... The massala stone sings. (Kanhai 209 - 210)

The “Bhowjee” in Drupatee Ramgoonai’s initial composition “Pepper, Pepper” brought into the public arena, the hardships endured by young East Indian women in the marriage relationship. It posed a simple strategy for taking revenge by putting excessive quantities of pepper in the husband’s food.

Swift and strong censure was leveled against Drupatee Ramgoonai for her transgressive act: “No Indian woman has any right to sing Calypso,” and “Indian women have been a disgrace to Hinduism” were cries from the fraternity (qtd. in Constance 1991: 51). Mahabir Maharaj writing in the Sandesh paper added: “for an Indian girl to throw away her high upbringing and culture to mix with vulgar music, sex and alcohol in Carnival tents tells me that something is radically wrong with her psyche. Drupatee Ramgoonai has chosen to worship the gods of sex, wine and easy money” (qtd. in Constance 1991: 51). Drupatee’s defiance of patriarchal dictates has been made more visible by her dramatic success.<sup>14</sup>

Rajandaye Ramkisson-Chen’s poem, “When the Hindu Woman Sings Calypso,” traces the journey of her protagonist from the rural peasant environment and the female-only matikor prenuptial ritual to the national calypso stage. The old restrictions and symbols of enclosure are reconstituted with radically divergent meaning. Progress in the form of electric light and glaring stage light replaces the gloaming, moonlight and lamplight. The poem unfolds:

Strings of rhinestone now  
'Purdah' her forehead  
Hair frizzled to a 'Buss-up-shot'  
The long tresses of  
A long tradition  
Seared in the electricity  
Of the mike's cord length. (50)

Within the broadened social framework, purdah—the tradition of sex segregation, which functioned traditionally to restrict women to the domestic space, has been radically reinterpreted. The only purdah enclosures that the persona entertains are the ones that enhance her glamour and sensuality. Her clothing reflects her selective incorporation of her Eastern ancestry. Significantly it is not the traditional Hindu female's sari, but trousers that reflect the wealth and opulence of the rich Mogul's garb. Her long hair, emblematic of traditional beauty and that most telling ethnic marker within the Caribbean framework, is "frizzled" into a "buss up shot" (a flour and butter roti whose flakes resemble a torn shirt). This uneasy metaphor signifies linguistic, culinary and phenotypical fusions that have been enthusiastically embraced all members of Trinidadian society. Frizzling of the hair is suggestive of the admixture—a douglarization (read bastardization)—of hair quality and culture. Her disruptive and transfiguring location calls the world, even the natural world, to come and see. The sleeping "fowl cocks" of the villages are replaced by the silenced night insects who stop their churrings to pay obeisance to the chutney artiste's resounding voice. Her act includes a signifier of the brotherhood of the boat or ocean crossing—the limbo, which has traditionally been emblematic of the burial and re-emergence of slaves from the survived the middle passage to arise to a new life in a new land:

Her midriff 's bare  
Looped white with pearls  
Her body sinuous  
With the dance of muscle  
She stoops as for a 'limbo' number  
Head held backwards from the rod-fire  
Leaves of flame  
Play on her bodice. (51)

Ultimately the poem is about the power of border crossing and the potential and release that can be afforded by hybridity. Her music remains rooted in the oral tradition of the matikor, but it reinterprets traditional socially restrictive conditions.

Even moreso than Ramkisson-Chen, Joy Mahabir evokes associations between Indian female sensuality and Afro Caribbean cultural expressions. In "Fire and Steel," Mahabir explores potentiality and ambivalence in relation to pan as a symbol of spontaneous cultural fusion:

Steel bursting into song  
Sticks clenched in sweating hands  
...  
I remember only intense union  
freeing uplifting minutes of living  
and after I forget. (45)

The passionate sensuality offers momentarily the possibility of a near orgasmic union, but this is swiftly supplanted by a deliberate forgetting of the process and of the possibility. The protagonist is condemned subsequently to an amnesiac existence, conveyed as lacking, or existing in happenings I forget (45).<sup>15</sup> The transitory intense nature of the possibility begs the question how to sustain or crystallize the potential and the enrichment; how to cause the minute of heightened living to be sustained, to endure, to remain and not to be relegated to oblivion. Persistent images of bodily heat, of fever and passion are translated into energy that, in turn, fuels the beating of the pan and internal compulsion that produces sweating hands. In contrast to this transitional ecstatic moment is the absence and lack that endures. The persona sets up a tension between the brevity of the remembering which is entrenched by frequent repetitions: “I remember only one night ... one moment ... intense union” (45). This is counterbalanced by the persistence of the forgetting. Yet the narrative inscription of the experience disputes the dominance of the forgetting and privileges the fire and the steel and it is this, which the reader remembers. This formulation recalls Lamming’s poignant statement of the power of such remembering as the tongue probes the space left by an extraction and intensifies the memory of loss all the more (*In the Castle of my Skin* 279). Highly sexualized orgasmic pulsation becomes the barely veiled metaphor for creative awakening and cultural hybridity. Why is the persona of “Fire and Steel” constrained to forget the orgasmic moment? Amnesia is indicated because the potentiality of the ecstatic moment to give way to a lifetime of communal dissociation and disconnectedness. Not to forget may be to court disaster.

Ramabai Espinet’s novel *The Swinging Bridge* makes the connection between the matrilineal ancestor the indentee Gaider, the entertainer of the Hindu feast, and her progeny who seek cultural and sexual autonomy in the contemporary framework of Trinidadian cultural nationalism. The Trinidadian born Indian family migrate to Canada only to discover a peculiar inability to cut their navel strings, which remain buried in the former family lands in Manahambre Road, Princess Town. Spatial rootedness, ethnic identity and sexual citizenship are the issues confronted by Mona the protagonist as she explores a dark hinterland of female cultural and sexual oppression, and the grim outcome of desire judged inappropriate on the basis of ethnicity and gender. The eldest son, who unknown to the majority of the close knit family is dying of AIDS in a discrete Toronto hospice, is insistent that his sister, who has been unable to thrive in Canada, should return to Trinidad to repurchase the family land. A submerged theme in the narrative is the dark, unbridled sexuality which is paraded in the Carnival festivities, but which intrude in veiled forms throughout the narrative. Mona and her father sneak off like secret



sharers every J'Ouvert morning to gaze at the raw passions, which are powerful enough to drive men to gyrate against lampposts in a flouted hunger for release. It surfaces initially in the new arrivants, the indentee Gainder, whose upwardly mobile Presbyterian husband cuts her off from the role of the village entertainer; whose insistence on her right to sing and dance in public signals her availability to men, who perhaps sings the vulgar snatches of songs to invite them in, or who sings the sacred bajans to ward them off. In the shadowy interstices of the narratives we are never certain which truly obtains. The legacy passes down to generations of women who experiment in art and / or in sex with the potentiality of making hybrid connection in this land of their migration.

Rich potentiality and violent oppression assault generations of women and men who gravitate towards hybridity. This is the fate of Grandmother Lill whose fierce love for the offspring of the Creole overseer culminates when her father beats her lover's burgeoning seed out of her nubile body. Alienation settles deep in Mona's spirit after she dares to love a black man Bree, for which wantonness her father constrains her to cross the gravely yard on her knees. Indeed undercutting assumptions of the value of intentional aesthetic hybridity is the haggling over the possession of Indian women's fertility as the repositories of ethnic distinctiveness. The threat is so menacing that to marry a Creole is to invite sure alienation and to risk insanity. "It good for she! Who tell she to marry Creole?" (260). Potentiality and oppression are the fate of the closeted homosexual, whose intent of re-establishing the family's rootedness in Trinidad is matched by his intention to carry his secret sexual practice with him to his imminent grave. Underlying the scenario is the magnetic appeal and equally compelling fear of the consequence of unbridled sensuality, the passions and spiritual energies that are figured in the narrative most prominently by Carnival.

In conclusion, "With a Tassa Blending" argues that calypso with carnival as its encompassing ritual context originated in Afro-Caribbean resistance and cultural affirmation in the face of Eurocentric denigration and repression. Despite the fact that it has been a creative vehicle of African towards Indian diatribe and racial stereotyping, it emerges in Indo Caribbean literary expression as emblematic of the possibility of raising a common voice against Eurocentric hegemonic discourses and asserting shared cultural belonging and national pride. It is not at all surprising that the explosive, spiritual energies of calypso and carnival should fuse with the eruptive, reproductive energies of the low caste matikor folk ritual to usher chutney and chutney soca unto the national stage. The musical and literary allusions and blendings reveal both the impulse towards intragroup competitions and communalism, and the inevitability of its fusions, all of which proceed simultaneously in the Trinidadian project of feverish hybridization which Rohlehr describes as in "Calypso Reinvents Itself" as "a jarring, jamming Carnavalesque collusion and clashing counter point of rhythms"(374). These rich energized fusions now coexist comfortably on a public stage.

Indo-Trinidadian women writers like Ramkisson-Chen and her real life model Drupatee Ramgoonai, have moved beyond the confines of a deliberate forgetting and an oblique testimony

of erased ecstasy. For Indo-Trinidadian writers, calypso has always signalled belonging to the multiethnic social order. For the earlier male writers, it signifies an unintentional hybridity. For the younger female writers, it signifies an intentional trope and a liberationist aesthetic associated with sensuality and sexual autonomy. Notwithstanding legal contestation among conservative Indian elements in the society in respect to national symbols and emblems, today's Bhowjee has laid claim to a densely textured, inclusive narrative of intentional hybridity and "... she sings and '*winds*' / To calypso and '*pan*' / With a '*tassa*' blending (Ramkisson-Chen 51).

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>The origins of calypso have variously been traced to the West African praise blame songs which utilized litany or call and response forms. See Gordon Rohlehr, *Calypso and Society*, J. D. Elder, “Evolution of the Traditional Calypso of Trinidad and Tobago;” and Errol Hill, *The Trinidad Carnival*.

<sup>2</sup>Rohlehr indicates:

African music often served the purpose of social control, and the roots of the political calypso in Trinidad probably lie in the African custom of permitting criticism of one’s leaders at specific times, in particular contexts, and through the media of song and story. The leaders of society recognized the value of such satirical songs in which the ordinary person was given the privilege of unburdening his mind while the impact of his protest was neutralized by the controlled context in which criticism was possible. (Rohlehr, *Calypso and Society* 2)

<sup>3</sup>See Brinsley Samaroo, “Two Abolitions: African Slavery and East Indian Indentureship” and Kusha Haraksingh, “Control and Resistance among Indian Workers.”

<sup>4</sup>The Indo Guyanese children would tease:

Black man salla pound massalla  
Who is yuh daddy  
Coolie is yuh daddy.

The Afro Guyanese children would tease:

“Coolie water rice  
pork and spice  
get some cow dung  
to make it nice”

And both groups would intone variously:

Nigger / Coolie is a nation  
very botheration  
Go to police station

Reflecting the stereotype of Indian husbands as jealous vengeful wife-beaters, the Afro-Guyanese children interpreted the message of the tassa drums which heralded the Hindu wedding procession thus:

Bum bum bum  
Ra taa taa taa  
Lil lil gyal me going to marry to yuh  
And if yuh take another man  
Ah going to cut off yuh neck.

Unpublished interview with Gordon Rohlehr. UWI, St Augustine, February 2005.

<sup>5</sup>Klass, in his study of an Indian village that he names Amity, notes the assumption of overwhelming sensuality of the young Indian girl which needed to be strictly policed to avoid the disgrace of pregnancy out of marriage and, even more so, vulnerability to the excessive phallic prowess which was the boast of Afro Caribbean populations as represented through the calypsonian.

<sup>6</sup>V. S. Naipaul dates the first publication of *Gurudeva and Other Indian Tales* as 1943, in his Foreword to the André Duetsch edition in 1976. No date is recorded in the original publication.

<sup>7</sup>The original lyrics to “Rum and Coca Cola” were composed and sung by Lord Invader (Rupert Grant) in Trinidad in 1943. This calypso was subsequently recorded by The Andrews Sisters with Vic Schoen & His Orchestra, October 18, 1944. Credits for the words and music were given to Morey Amsterdam (words), and Jeri Sullavan (music) and Paul Baron (music). The dispute over ownership was settled in court in Invader’s favor.

<sup>8</sup>These are not the earliest calypsos focusing on the Indian presence. Rohlehr notes: “Consciousness of the East Indian presence would begin to emerge in the twenties, and by the thirties calypsos such as Executioner’s “My Indian Girl Love,” Lion’s “Bhago Pholouri,” and “Ara Da Da,” Tiger’s “Gi Rita Ram Gi” and King Iere’s “Madras Wedding” would be sung” (*Calypso and Society* 40-41). No recording information is available for the calypsos “Grinding Masalla” (1947), “Indian Women with Creole Names” (1950) and “Indian Politicians” (1950).

<sup>9</sup>I have not been able to trace a calypso on this topic named “Emelda.” John Thieme in *The Web of Tradition: Uses of Allusions in V.S.Naipaul’s Fictions* indicates the same and surmises that it may be an invention on Naipaul’s part (Thieme 205). This calypso is not to be confused with Young Killer’s “Emelda’s Nightmare” (1959) which is about Emelda’s night long attack on the persona’s “little finger” and his inability to find a police man to rescue him.

<sup>10</sup>The Andrews Sisters were an extremely popular all female trio who maintained their impact on the entertainment industry for about thirty years. According to their official web site, they sold over 90 million records, recorded approximately 700 songs and earned nine gold records. Their energy, virtuosity and harmony helped to brighten a dark period in American history. The Andrews Sister popularized the calypso “Rum and Coca Cola.”

<http://www.cmgww.com/music/andrews/about/bio3.html>. Accessed December 2005.

<sup>11</sup>For a detailed study of the media debates surrounding “The Caribbean Man,” see Ramesh Deosaran “The ‘Caribbean’ Man: A Study of the Psychology of Perception and the Media.”

<sup>12</sup>For a fuller discussion of this text see: Paula Morgan “East / West Indian / Woman / Other: At the Crossroads of Gender and Ethnicity.”

<sup>13</sup>For obvious reasons the thought of Afro Trinidadian male and East Indian female sexual relations was disturbing for most East Indians. Saywack notes that Sparrow’s “Marajin,” where he describes his love interest for a Pandit’s (Hindu Priest) wife, was banned in Guyana for several years, after a huge outcry from the Hindu community in that country. Puri mentions the outrage that greeted the nani songs. This term which means grandmother on the mother’s side is in Trinidad, is also a vulgar name for vagina. It therefore lends itself to the double entendre so well, so that it became the subject of the popular Crazy’s “Nani Wine,” Scrunter’s “Nanny” and Becket’s “Nanny Revival.” The uproar was great when Drupatee Ragoonai sang the chutney soca song “Lick Down Me Nani,” thereby disrupting the “idealization of a desexualized Indian grandmother” (Puri 257-262).

<sup>14</sup>Drupatee made history as not only the first female chutney soca artist to hit the national stage, but the first Indo-Trinidadian to successfully crossover into the Soca charts and to have a number 1 hit.

<sup>15</sup>The full text of “Fire and Steel” reads:

I remember only  
One night  
Nights of fever and beating  
Brought us to his place  
Voices, stilled passion  
Movement in anticipation  
I remember only  
One moment:  
Steel bursting into sound  
Sticks clenched in sweating hands  
Now lacking, existing,  
In happenings I forget.  
I remember only:  
Intense union  
Freeing, uplifting  
Minutes of living  
And after, I forget (*Creation Fire* 45)

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