

Carne Vale Again: A Catholic Muses on Trinidad Carnival, Female Flesh and Incarnation".*¹



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Introduction

Carnival is a Euro-Christian festival with roots in Dionysian revelry. As a religious festival it was important for preparing for the observation of Lent. Lent is a time of fasting to deepen the individual Christian's spirituality; it is a time of penance and almsgiving set up to remind Catholic Christians of "the need for acts of penance to serve as punishment for sins and acts of charity to make up for them. Basically the idea is to do good things to balance out all of the bad, as well as avoiding more bad things" (Johnson 1994, 50). Etymologically, carnival derives from *carnevale* (Italian) and *carne-le-vare* (Latin)—the removal of meat or "goodbye to flesh". Of course, it is more than the eating of meat that is in question; the indulgence in physical activities that gratify the body's desires, of which sex seems to be the most troubling, is also encapsulated in carnevale. Medieval Carnival therefore was a festival of physical abandonment—unlimited eating,

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drinking and rejecting societal codes of conduct (Noel 2009). In that concern with disciplining the body/ unruly flesh that is symbolised in and reinscribed by the excesses of carnival that I saw a hint of the problem that the body poses for Christians (Hence, the title of the presentation).

This paper interrogates Christian notions of the body and sexuality, which see the body ('the flesh') and sexuality, as problematic even sinful, as is captured in the word "carnal"/"fleshly". The body therefore is to be controlled, rejected, and disciplined for fear of its sinful potential. In some Christian perspectives, the female body is particularly problematic because of the association of the female with the carnal/body/weakness and the male with reason/mind/control. The discussion contrasts this "Christian" perspective on the body/sexuality to the potential meaning of popular displays of sexuality/the body as embodied in the Trinidad Carnival experience. It will argue that in popular culture, particularly in Trinidad Carnival, women engage in various empowering bodily performances such as donning revealing costuming and public gyrating (wining), which reject such negative valuations of the body and re-value their female body-selves.

"Performance" in this discussions refers to public physical gestures with the body for a passive viewing audience. Performance therefore implies agency; particular actions are intended to make a statement (Edmondson 2003). The cultural backdrop against which such performances take place is one where viewing female bodies in the public space has always been problematic owing to the marking of the female body as correctly "displayed" within the domestic sphere or in a particularly modest fashion within the public sphere; such public displays therefore violate boundaries and may serve to

masculinize the female (women behaving like men now through colonising the masculine public space) or pathologise her (something is wrong with her; immoral, loose) (Edmondson 2033). Many Christians take the latter position that such displays are indeed lewd and wrong and are particularly inappropriate for women. The rush to pathologies may point to an implicit discomfort with the body, especially the female body. (I say this even as I find myself reacting almost instinctively to the overtly sexual displays and the revealing nature of some of the costuming).

Yet such discomfort with the body is difficult to reconcile with a foundational Christian tenet, the incarnation, which holds that the divine became human and took on flesh, and by so doing imbues human flesh with singular dignity and worth. Christians believe that God became human in the person of Jesus Christ and through this all flesh was saved. Clearly, as feminist theologians Isherwood and Stuart (1998) argue, this persistent ambiguity of the Christian tradition towards the body is grounded in a particular ambiguity towards the female body which cannot be ignored. Indeed, feminists have argued for a long time that the devaluation of flesh contributes to the subordination of women and so it is important to work at reclaiming and revaluing the body, especially the female body (Rivera Rivera 2010). So I suppose that is what this is all about.

The Functions of Carnival in Trinidad

Today Carnival is a seminal national festival in Caribbean nations with Catholic roots, e.g., Haiti, Trinidad and Tobago and Grenada. Trinidad's Carnival is especially tied up with a sense of national identity and its meaning is therefore not uncontested (De Freitas

1999). Other nations like Jamaica have lately imported Carnival, but this is not seen as a national festival; rather it is an adoption aimed at attacking and delegitimizing Dance Hall's national "identity" (Noel 2010, p. 99). Caribbean Carnival has also been transplanted in places like Notting Hill in Britain, where it arose in the 1950s and 60s as a response to racism. Similarly, Carnival festivities in Trinidad address specific social concerns, which may differ from one historical period to another. Richard Burton in his book *Afro-Creole: Power, Opposition and Play in the Caribbean* (1997) argues that carnival in Trinidad simultaneously challenges and reinforces the status quo. It is both social protest and a method of disciplining that protest. Likewise Max Harris (2003), in his description of Trinidad Carnival, he compares it to Binche Carnival in Belgium. He identifies both celebrations as having respectable purposes. The respectable purposes which he identifies in Trinidad Carnival are: feeding the local economy, building community and diverting attention from a violent past (Harris 2003). Today's "pretty face" of Trini Carnival hides "an older body" of protest, which continues to burst forth in *ole mas*, with its traditional masqueraders and its eruption of misrule in the darkness of *Jouvay* (Carnival Monday) morning (Harris 2003). Harris sees taming, appropriation and prettification at work in contemporary carnival.

Along those lines, De Freitas argues that Trinidad Carnival has served as "a social barometer of sorts, registering the ethos, fantasies, ideals, and contests of the society" (1999, p. 5). At the same time, Carnival has an important impact on the self understanding and behaviour of Trinidadians. Each year carnival engenders some controversy, some short-lived, others more diffuse and longer lasting. "In the last

decade, the large numerical presence and behaviour of women in Trinidad's Carnival has been one such "national" controversy" (De Freitas 1999, p. 6). What behaviour are we talking about?

The Female Body in Performance

Trinidad Carnival today is dominated by what is known as fancy mas. Female beauty and bodies are on display in a fashion that has drawn critique from many quarters.

Women make up the majority of the revellers, although the calypsonians, band leaders, costume designers, etc. continue to be men. The dominant presence of scantily-clad women in Carnival has often led to it also being described as 'skin mas' (Noel 2009).

Owen Baptiste in a publisher's note in *Women in Mas'* (1988) identifies the post-carnival debate about women's involvement in Carnival coming to a head in 1988. He insists that there is more to women being involved in Mas' than vulgarity and that to view the phenomenon in that way is one dimensional and unfair. I agree. Interestingly, the concerns about behaving badly, indecently and in poor taste, is usually directed at women only; men are removed from the conversation although they behave in similar or worse fashion. BC Pires, also writing in *Women in Mas'*, argues that men have reacted to women having taken over Mas', setting the pace, and no longer being content to remain in the shadows playing adjunct to men. He is adamant that the behaviour of women during Carnival is not a reason for men to mistreat them ("they are asking for it") as is often argued (the blaming of the victim syndrome). Rather, "the tragedy is that the harassment of women will continue unless and until men (and religious women, who, it is

argued, for the most part, adopt the male attitude to women without modification) stop reacting and start looking at the reality of today's women" (Pires 1988, p. 54). The reality is that, some women argue that men play mas' 365 days of the year, and women need two days to release tension from their experience of abuse (growing numbers), harassment, unemployment, oppression and exploitation in many forms (Peter Ray Blood, *Women in Mas'*, p. 39). The involvement of women in carnival and the concerns it raises is not a "new" phenomenon.

Samantha A. Noel (2010) paints a picture of the involvement of jamette (poor, Afro-Trinidadian, marginal, low status) women in Trinidad carnival over the centuries pinpointing how cunningly such women gauged the potential of their exposed bodies for rebellion and expression of discontent with the colonial order. She recognises the legacy of the jamette woman in the writhings and displays of contemporary female masqueraders. These jamette women realised that their bodies could become spectacles:

Recognizable by their posture, their style of dress, and their disregard for spatial and temporal precepts, jamettes threatened the controlled and repressed position that women had in society....As uncouth spectacles, their bodies represented indiscretion against the repressive colonial order. (Noel 2010, p. 70-71)

It is these performances of working class women that were gradually co-opted by middle and upper class women of all races and issued into the "skin mas" of today.

Women Subverting and Rebelling

One of the widely held assumptions concerning the predominance of female masqueraders in Carnival today is that it attests to their growing economic and social power. More important perhaps was that their perceptions of their bodies and selves were impacted by the transgressive performances of their jamaican forebears. The steady increase in female participation of all races and classes began in the 1960s and 1970s and the costume aesthetic simultaneously began emphasising the woman's body (Noel 2010). This female predominance is corroborated by media representations of Carnival, which picture bikini-clad masqueraders dancing in groups or individually. Notwithstanding this, it is important to note that male participation in carnival masquerade is largely erased from media representations by eyes and lens that are focussed on the spectacle of the women performing in the streets of the capital and across the stage (De Freitas 1999).

It is possible therefore to interpret Carnival as a site where women of various socio-economic locations, political positions, and conceptions of masquerading challenge misogynist stereotyping and celebrate the female body in public through their bodily transgressions. It is therefore naïve to argue that women in Carnival are simply carrying out the roles ascribed to them by their male counterparts. In much the same way that groups like the Quakers, Methodists, and Blacks have empowered themselves by claiming and reinterpreting the epithets given them by more powerful groups, Trinbagonian women can be said to be "playing mas" with the male-generated ascriptions of them as loose, teasing, available. At the same time as there is merit to the argument that women who openly express their sexuality in public, especially in front of cameras,

are actively involved in the subverting and appropriating of male-identified forms of sexual display, it must be recognised that they may actually be reinforcing the very patriarchal structures that they are critiquing. This ambiguity inherent in their performance should not be dismissed too quickly.

Still for purposes of this conversation, I want to focus on the “jametteness” cultivated in their movements and dress, which I believe exhibit creativity and volition. As alluded to earlier, this jametteness is “a performativity that asserts both a creative and subversive impact on the festival” (Noel 2010, p. 61). Many Trinidadian women use their bodies as a tool for resistance in a form of “body protest” (Alexandre 2006, p. 178). Their bodies are transformed into means of liberation and transformation. This transformed understanding of Caribbean women’s bodies and selves can be demonstrated to be bearing fruit. Childbearing as the primary definition of femininity/womanhood in the Caribbean may be simultaneously undergoing re-evaluation among different groups of women who are shifting their conception of femininity to incorporate notions of self-fulfilment and self-actualisation—the very elements at play in the jamette performativity of contemporary Carnival. In such a process, sexual agency is claimed for purposes beyond childbearing and rearing (Kempadoo 2004, p. 24). Women refuse the identity proposed by the dominant Christian-influenced ideology and use the body as a material against morality, discipline and control. As has been unfolding in this discussion, Trinbagonian women (and by extension, many of their Caribbean sisters), in their creative, subversive and voluntary public performances of the body during Carnival, call us to a deeper understanding of the role of the body in liberation. In so doing, they

challenge certain Christian ambivalences about the flesh, which have influenced Caribbean culture.

Incarnation in Christianity

Christianity, a faith which boasts of a God that became human (incarnation), demonstrates a clear ambivalence towards the body, the flesh. Indeed, Isherwood and Stuart (1998) maintain that holding an incarnational faith is no guarantee that bodies would be treated with respect, given dignity or seen as sources of divine revelation. Yet body and physicality are basic to all social encounters.

The challenge for Caribbean theology is how to truly promote the value of the body, especially the female body. This calls for an incarnational or embodied theology, which is more welcoming of flesh, especially Caribbean woman flesh. Reflections on the incarnation too often focus and/or end with the idea of God's love of humanity unto flesh (birth-suffering-death) without truly discerning the meaning of the concrete form of divine love as a human person, Jesus of Nazareth. In becoming human God validated the human bodyself, especially the female bodyself that now has to struggle for such validation through, among others, the subversive gyrations and performances of Carnival.

African-derived religions as a site of revaluation

The need for bodily performances in the context of worship has always been a source of discomfort for many who believe that to be truly spiritual cannot involve such bodily excesses. Yet, ambivalently, the indwelling of the Spirit is oftentimes a key yet

peculiarly female rite in the Pentecostal churches studied by Austin -Broos. In fact, the description of the Pentecostal saints being in-filled by the Spirit is reminiscent of the movements of women in Carnival:

[J]ust as commonly a person leaps on the spot or convulses her body as she moves....Far more commonly than men, they undulate their bodies as they move, swinging their hips this way and that and moving both their shoulders and their breasts in rhythmic response to chorus singing....At evangelical services, women almost trot together, undulating their torsos in concert and with their arms around one another's waist, the impression of "dancing" in the Spirit is a striking, and feminine one. Saints take particular pleasure in this dance, understood as joyous engagement with the Spirit. (Austin-Broos, p. 144)

At the same time, "women...are both empowered and disempowered by th[e] association of in-filling with their lives and bodies" (Austin-Broos, p. 140). Again, the ambivalence of the flesh. Interestingly, to further the connection with the image of Carnival, Miller (1991), in describing the completion of a 'wine' by women, describes the look of rapture on their faces, a smile that acknowledges the climax having been reached and passed. He compares the expression of the woman's face to that which is seen at orgasm and during the moment of transcendence in ecstatic religion.

This is not a contrived connection as the erotic and ecstatic religion are very much a part of the Christian, particularly Catholic, tradition (cfr Andrew Greeley 2000). Priest-

sociologist Andrew Greeley argues that the Catholic faith is deeply sacramental and sees the divine lurking in the material/physical. Catholic imagination refers to the Catholic viewpoint that God is present in the whole creation and in human beings, as seen in its sacramental system whereby material things and human beings are channels and sources of God's grace. Greeley contrasts this to the Protestant imagination which he describes as seeing God as radically absent from the world, and who discloses Godself only on rare occasions (especially in Jesus Christ and Him crucified). The world and all its events, objects, and people tend to be radically different from God. This dialectic imagination is not absent from Catholicism, however. I suspect that it is particularly present in cultures that have been deeply shaped by Protestantism although that need not be the case. Contemporary Catholicism itself reveals a deep-seated uneasiness over how fleshly an imagination is too fleshly an imagination. Greeley makes this point:

The propensity to protect God from profanation, at the heart of the dialectical imagination, is very strong even among Catholics because official Catholicism has yet to make up its mind whether it really believes that sexual passion is not in itself lewd or lustful (Greeley 2000, p. 9).

Perhaps even the sacramental vision contains some inherent complex contradictions.

Interestingly, the African-derived religions like Kumina in Jamaica or Orisha in Trinidad or Vodun in Haiti present an integrative and complementary show of divine power which is the basis for a valuation of the body (Stewart 2005). The body is experienced as an

indispensable spiritual medium in these religious communities and is therefore of great value. These religious groups live out an embodied spirituality that can be observed in spirit possession. Dianne Stewart claims that this spirituality is the basis for a holistic anthropology which renders all people—male, female, elderly, minors, the disabled—potential hosts for divine power, participating again in the event of incarnation (2005). These men and women adherents of the African-derived religions demonstrate that “through the body, health and well-being are restored when the embodied living and the disembodied living demonstrate their relational interaction” (Stewart 2005, p. 161). In an unwitting contraposition to the oft-critiqued woman-centred displays of carnival, the woman in African-derived religions like Kumina are highly visible because the community’s faith testimony is dramatised through their bodies. “Theirs is a carnal [fleshy] rather than an ideational testimony which is experienced in the community’s spiritual embrace of sensuality in prepossession dance, in the rhythms of drums, in the hyperbolized circular motion of bodies...” (Stewart 2005, pp. 163-64). [Again echoes of carnival-like performance]

This revaluing of the body through the spirituality of the African-derived religions can be further illuminated by an intriguing notion of the incarnation proposed by African-American womanist theologian Delores Williams (Stewart, 163). Williams advocates a removal of sexist lens in viewing the incarnation. Traditional ways of viewing the incarnation identify the self-disclosure of the divine in the man Jesus Christ. Yet incarnation also involves divine self-disclosure in a woman, Mary, the mother of Jesus. Through Mary’s choice to give flesh to the divine in her pregnant body, she can be seen

as incarnating divinity—giving flesh to God through her woman flesh. To begin the incarnation with Mary's body, a woman's body, positions a woman's body at the centre of revelation and therefore re-values the feminine body. This is an important starting point in a Christian re-valuation of the flesh that honours the female body.

Carnivale, No More

Carnival with its roots in Christian and non-Christian festivities is itself a site of ambiguity. Women have become increasingly visible during Trinidad Carnival and their bikini-clad bodies and erotic movement has caused some consternation in that country since the 1980s. Women's engagement in such performances has been interpreted by some as re-inscribing patriarchal notions of the female body. A strongly vocal segment of the population who opposed such behaviour is Christian. The basis of such opposition may lie in Christian notions of body which devalue physical being and oftentimes view it as the site of weakness, sinfulness and temptation. Female flesh in particular is rejected, denied, subjugated (certainly not put on public display). In spite of this, it can be argued that many Caribbean women have subverted and continue to subvert such negative Christian valuations of the body by engaging in carnivalesque masquerade that re-values bodies, especially colonised female bodies. During the Carnival performance Trinidadian women may reject negative valuations of their bodies and body-selves through public eroticised display such as wining and costumery. In so doing they take steps to subvert and transform such negative or ambivalent notions of the body. Given the potent influence of Christianity on the life and culture of Caribbean people it is important to seek to redeploy Christianity in a fashion that is truly incarnational. Many important

examples exist in the indigenous religious traditions like Kumina and Vodun. Christian ways of viewing the body that are grounded in a vision of incarnation that values the female body as a site of divine self disclosure, are already evident in such popular religious forms. Further study of the incarnational value of indigenous religions in the Caribbean alongside the transgressive choices of masquerading women can be the first steps in saying, “Carnevale, no more”.

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