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Guadeloupe, F.; Romero, I.

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Thou Shalt not Kill! Or Notes on Caribbean Music as Literary Text on Being Human

Francio Guadeloupe

(University of St. Martin, Philipsburg, USA;
University of Amsterdam, Netherlands)

Ivette Romero

(Marist College, Poughkeepsie, USA)

Abstract One of the important things that we who share in the human condition do when we write, read, interpret, and discuss written works, is relate to death; the death of the unruliness of Life. We are referring here to that counter, that unforeseen, that chaos, that deconstructive constant, that *je ne sais quoi* that perpetually undoes all the certainties and structures and truths we hold dear in our attempt to master and colonize our existence. Let us call this the *aesthetic-real* understanding of death that, at its best, is ethical in character. But – and this is crux of our argument – Caribbean literature, as it is also expressed in the musical production from the region, reminds us that this *general aesthetic-real* of relating to death is inextricably bound up with *the specific historical-real* of non-Europeans, and those who Europeans deemed lesser creatures, being murdered by overwork, guns, disease or poverty as a result of western greed and anti-human humanism. Again, to repeat, in this essay, we explore this and its summoning of an alternative conception of being human via the literature housed in Caribbean music: those written, sung, performed, and sometimes, danceable texts.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 *The Aesthetic-Real and Historical-Real* in the Caribbean. – 3 Caribbean Literature and the Question of the Human. – 4 *Human Identity* in Caribbean Music.


Keywords Aesthetic-real. Historical-real. Caribbean music. Caribbean songs. Caribbean literature. Embodied reading.

1 Introduction

In this essay, or rather brief set of notes, we explore an alternative understanding of what it means to be *human* inspired by the literature housed in Caribbean music. We wilfully conflate the two art forms literature and music, as for us, the beauty of every art is that it can manifest another art; be another art. Some may read this as a hip provocation in the spirit of Bob Dylan winning the Nobel Prize for Literature. We prefer to see it in the vein of Kendrick Lamar winning the Pulitzer Prize for music – as an invitation to other ways of seeing/reading/understanding. We who know

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209

that some of the first books that we *read with our whole bodies* were the albums of Bob Marley, Rubén Blades, Ismael Rivera, and Willie Colon are not surprised that this Caribbean wisdom is becoming more common. For us, the literatures – those written and sung discourses – of Caribbean musicians are just as important to us as the books in which Kamau Brathwaite, Maryse Condé, Edwidge Danticat, Junot Díaz, Robert Antoni, Lasana Sekou, and the late Aimé Césaire, Derek Walcott, Antonio Benítez Rojo, Stuart Hall, and Édouard Glissant house their prose and poetry. Nevertheless, we are not speaking of music-as-literature, underlining the centrality of the language of popular culture, or examining the relationship between literature, orality and music. These aspects have been explored amply through the decades, and we are indebted to many Caribbean thinkers (Carolyn Cooper, Kwame Dawes, Mervyn Morris, Gordon Rohlehr, Emilio Jorge Rodríguez, Hanétha Vété-Congolo, along with the aforementioned Brathwaite and Benítez-Rojo, among others) whose works have enriched and expanded our conceptions of literature in its myriad manifestations as it interplays with other modes of cultural production. Instead, we entertain a comprehensive consideration of Caribbean music/songs, in which an embodied reading – a reading that involves lyrics, music, performance, and active (often collective) participation – becomes a life-affirming act. At times, we may refer to a particular ‘message’ or formal elements of the songs we chose, but we do not see the latter as a collection of discursive forms independent from the material emplacement and interpretative engagement of the body – our bodies. We begin, however, by clearing the ground in a more general sense.

Academic common sense of the orthodox kind would consider that to appreciate Caribbean literatures we need first to know what literature is. We have to delve into the commonalities and differences between poetry, short stories, drama, plays, and novels in their most basic form, and then zoom in on their regional variations. To us, this is not a useful exercise, as there is no such thing as literature, only specific literatures.

If we subtract the adjectives – e.g. *African, African American, Caribbean, Chinese, Indian, Western European, Women’s*, etc. – from the noun literature, we are left with little to talk about. Yet we cannot abstain from entertaining the question – ‘what is literature?’ – in some way. We cannot endorse that Plato is dead. We have to contend that it is only by keeping the idea of literature alive, engaging in a wilful abstraction, that we can acknowledge Caribbean literatures, and have them speak to one another and to the manifold forms of cultural expression on our planet. Therefore, the right question for us is not what literature is, but rather what literature does. One of the important things that we (who share in the human condition) do when we write, read, interpret, and discuss written works is relate to death; the death of the unruliness of Life. We are referring here to that counter, that unforeseen, that chaos, that deconstructive constant, that *je*

ne sais quoi that perpetually undoes all the certainties and structures and truths we hold dear in our attempt to master and colonize our existence.

Let us call this the *aesthetic-real* understanding of death that, at its best, is ethical in character. But – and this is crux of our argument in this essay – Caribbean literature as it is also expressed in the musical productions from the region, remind us that this general *aesthetic-real* of relating to death is inextricably bound up with the specific *historical-real* of non-Europeans, and those who Europeans deemed lesser creatures, being murdered by overwork, guns, disease or poverty as a result of western greed and anti-human humanism. Again, to repeat, in this essay, we plan to explore this and its summoning of an alternative conception of being *human* via the literature housed in Caribbean music: those written, sung, performed, and often, danceable texts.

2 The *Aesthetic-Real* and *Historical-Real* in the Caribbean

For obvious historical reasons that the spirits that inhabit the bottom of the Atlantic and Indian ponds and the official and unofficial burial grounds of plantation America will not allow us to forget, Caribbean literary artists at their best dance both with the *aesthetic-real* and *historical-real* realities of death. Moreover, they do so referring to what we today have come to call a ‘multicultural setting’. The world lives here. Thus, the ethical understandings of what it means to be *human* that they put forth matters to all who share in the human condition.

If we wish to demolish colonial racisms while recognizing their continuing (detrimental) force, it is best to state that this archipelago of ours is inhabited by the ancestors of the band who left Africa to populate the planet and who eventually misrecognised each other in the Caribbean, engaging in the most horrendous forms of dehumanization. The words *Middle Passage*, *Asian indenture*, *Amerindian genocide*, *the Irish plight*, *Jewish persecution*, *white European supremacy*, *patriarchy*, *Christian imperialism*, *capitalism* and *colonialism* cannot truly ever express the carnage that took place here. Wrongs and the miracles of human emancipation that somehow emerged from our man-made inferno are too great for words, and yet we must use words too.

We use the vocabularies we inherited, mindful of the proposition that colonial racisms are our common socialized ways of thinking and acting, whereby most take for granted an imperially fabricated world of bounded continents, sub-continents and regions, peopled (supposedly) by civilizations, with their incommutable somatic norm images and world views. This dead logic of destruction and carnage must always be handled with care (for we must unspeak it as we speak, and unwrite it as we write about it, to be heard and to contribute to a more just planetary conversation). In

this respect, we call into question the ‘powers’ of reason that have been immersed in this process of socialization and stress the importance of non-rational forces implicit in our corporeal participation in these histories as well as our acts of resistance to them. Therefore, our acts of speaking and unspeaking, writing and unwriting must be informed by the written/sung discourses as well as our emotional and physical enactment; let us call it our ‘dancing’ of/to the vocabularies. After all, as Stuart Hall asserts, “identities are formed at the unstable point where the ‘unspeakable’ stories of subjectivity meet the narratives of a history, of a culture” (Hall 1996, 115).

Our use of the ‘we’ pronoun is both an invitation and an entreaty to remember our elemental humanity. By that term, we mean the undeniable real of our being anchored to specific bodies. In somewhat cryptic terms, one can state that we are bodies, have bodies, and do bodies in a body politic. Everybody, which is every body and every face, is specific; yet, we resemble each other enough to mate, relate, cohabit and, of course, fight and subjugate; yet, nevertheless, we recognize each other and provisionally call ourselves a species: humans.

In his documentary, *Residente*, Puerto Rican singer-songwriter René Pérez Joglar (better known as Residente, from the duo Calle 13) says:

Music is full of blood, and that blood is also nomadic because it runs through the veins of the world, that blood that feeds on meat and covers itself with animal skin. They say music cures, that it takes away our pain, that it saves lives and helps us remember those moments we are about to forget. Music carries with her everything she has lived in the past and with every millisecond, she tells us something new. We are everything that sounds, and our contribution is infinite, like the sound of silence. (*Residente* 2017)

In his ruminations, he captures the undeniable real of our being anchored to bodies of flesh, bone, and blood, while linking us, as a species – humans of the globe (with blood that “runs through the veins of the world”) – indissolubly to music, to sound (“We are everything that sounds”). Our human condition is tied to blood – the blood of menstruation, birth, wounds, battles, and death – as well as sound – in every one of our modes of expression and communication. But it is always blood-in-movement: flowing, running through veins, channels, fissures and furrows.

Note that Residente set into motion his exploration of the body (his body, his DNA) in the body politic through a global voyage in search of his roots, documented through film. His traveling cinematic project was inspired by the results of a DNA test, and was both a journey to become acquainted with all the regions of the world reflected in his genetic mapping and a quest for musical inspiration. A constant thread running through the documentary is blood: the blood of hunting for survival, cooking, war, and

music-as-blood connecting us all, the blood that links us and leads us to recognize ourselves in the face of the other, in sum, the blood of various spheres and modes of perception, including the *aesthetic-real* and the *historical-real*.

We are aware that the term *human* has a bloody history. Its hegemonic interpretation cannot be separated from the last 500 years of colonialism, imperialism and capitalism. We are also deeply aware of the deep anthropocentrism embedded in our ways of seeing, reading, thinking, speaking, and being; of our dream or desire to position ourselves as the central subject of knowledge and to feel separate from and superior to nature. For now, we will focus on cultural production/interpretation and our understanding of what it is to be *human*. However, since any hegemony, when carefully scrutinized, points to contesting voices and conceptions, other genealogies of what it means to be human can be explored.

3 Caribbean literature and the question of the Human

We will make an attempt to present a Caribbean-inflected alternative version of what it means to be human that contests the racist ideas associated with what black activists term “the Man” and with what in poststructuralist talk is called “Man.” We are encouraged and humbled by the fact that renowned social theorists of the likes of Katrine McKittrick, Achille Mbembe, Patricia Saunders, and Gary Wilders, among others, have begun doing this work by exploring the rich inclusive humanist thought of Caribbean literary artists such as Nicolás Guillen, NourbeSe Phillip, Maryse Condé, Aimé Césaire, and Sylvia Wynter. We will not take that route, but instead turn to known and lesser known cultural producers of the wider Caribbean as our sources – artists such as Jacob Desvarieux (Guadeloupe); Ismael Rivera and René Pérez Joglar, aka Residente (Puerto Rico); Peter Tosh and Bob Marley (Jamaica); Edwin Yearwood (Barbados), Sundar Popo, Ras Shorty I, Calypso Rose and the Mighty Shadow (Trinidad and Tobago) and from our rock, King Vers, Shakiya, and Shadowman (St. Martin/St. Maarten).

Again, you might question why we choose to focus only on musicians, singers and composers, instead of/also on novelists or poets. Our point is more radical. We appreciate Caribbean songs (including lyrics and music) as unfinished discursive fragments that only truly take on meaning when read by a body that dances and sings along with other bodies. In engaging in that particular form of “reading,” a reasoning emerges. This constitutes a rehearsal of a liberating way of being where all bodies recognize the higher synthesis of which they are both expressions and co-creators.

For us all, the arts – music, dance, literature, architecture, theatre, sculpture, painting, cinema, and other visual arts – are present in each other and in conversation with each other. Literary pieces have a rhythm

to them that entices an internal dance as we paint images in our minds, therewith talking back to things we read or heard elsewhere, and sculpting - with our remade bodily aesthetics and politics - a place with others. What we produce, subsequently and often almost simultaneously, finds its way in social media, the surveys of cultural industry magnates, and sometimes in our own creative pieces or scholarly articles, which in turn might influence artists. What we are referring to, in other words, is the blurring, without a thorough negation, of the distinctions between the categories of receptive and disruptive audiences, active artists, the culture industry, and reflective scholars. Everyone and every art is implicated.

And, of course, there are performers that cultivate the blurring between artistic categories, and make it problematic to state unequivocally that we are speaking of musicians instead of writers. For Rita Indiana (Dominican Republic), who went from writing novels and short stories to writing songs to sing on stage and back to writing 'literature', it is difficult to separate the arts. Music and lyrics are interwoven in her written production. Referring to her decade-long singing career in an interview with Dominique Lemoine Ulloa, Indiana says, "My project as a singer was a kind of performative fiction. A lived novel". About her music, the writer/singer explains, "The process of composing and producing is very similar to writing. I love this part and that's why I'm still producing music for movies". What she defines as the main difference between writing (literary) texts and singing/performing (musical) texts is the bodily effort required, in her words, "hay que trabajar con el cuerpo, sudar" [one has to work with the body, one has to sweat] (Lemoine Ulloa 2015). Indiana is also poignantly mindful of the legacies of slavery, our shared histories of colonization and domination. She underlines the *affect* that music and literature conjure up as an *effect* of our historical groundings: "I have a special fascination for music and literature from the southern United States. Blues, jazz, work songs. Richard Wright, Faulkner, Mark Twain, Carson McCullers. This art is a product, like mine, of the plantation culture, of the slave trade, and it is easy for me to identify with it".¹

If the struggle for freedom - freedom from and freedom to - means anything in the Caribbean, it is a happening in which the downpressed and those who downpress are equally involved. Sometimes, individuals that we structurally position as victimized and victimizers resemble each other in their vices and virtues, a resemblance that does not erase, however, their individuality, specific socio-economic locations, and privileges. The arts in the Caribbean are an avenue through which this manifold truth can be discerned.

Moreover, in the Caribbean, the arts are symptomatic of super-creolization in the sense that the various traditions and contemporary cultural

1 English translations are made by the Author.

heritage of the planet are alive within them – they are Old and New World, Old and New School, black, non-black (i.e. usually on the receiving and issuing end of power), and future and past oriented, without being fully one or the other. The supposed original cultural source of the arts is mortally stabbed during Caribbean artistic performances, while being simultaneously resuscitated to keep the transaction going.

What better examples of how these manifold truths and simultaneous (inter)actions are expressed than through our feasts and festivals: Carnival, Carnaval, Mas, Crop Over, Junkanoo, and Fiestas de Santiago Apostol? Here, the tensions between the downpressed and downpressors, Old and New Worlds, black, non-black, and everything in-between are joyfully, *playfully*, musically *played* out, contrasted, blended, in a syncretic *play* – through these rituals, games, and processions our language, rhythms, and bodies keep the transactions going while concurrently questioning them as we move through equally syncretic spaces. We repeat the word ‘play’ because, in Caribbean music, especially in this type of event, dance and humor come together as ways of warding off Death, and fear of Death, from our everyday existence. Our various types of masking/masquerading to the beat of the drums are ways of ‘playing’. The enactments, performances, rehearsals of life allow us to disguise and temporarily reinvent ourselves, moving in and out of diverse, and sometimes contradictory, roles. At the same time, we stage enactments of agency and sovereignty to the beat of songs that sometimes become anthems – think *Leave Me Alone*,² performed by Calypso Rose, with Machel Montano and Manu Chao.

The soca tune *Leave Me Alone* became a feminist rallying cry for women festival-goers during Trinidad’s 2017 Carnival. Written and composed by Calypso Rose (née McCartha Linda Sandy-Lewis, AKA McCartha Lewis) and Manu Chao in 2016, the song represents a stand against misogyny and gendered violence. Many, especially women, adopted it as a reaction to the murder of a professional musician from Japan, Asami Nagakiya, who had played at several Carnivals with a Trinidadian steel pan orchestra. She was found strangled in Queen’s Park Savannah the morning after Carnival ended. According to Michael E. Miller (*The Washington Post*), after her death, the mayor of Port of Spain, Raymond Tim Kee, blamed the musician’s death on the lack of dignity and the “vulgarity and lewdness” of women’s behavior at the yearly event. Trinidadians were enraged at the way the mayor blamed the victim by claiming that the musician’s skimpy outfit had led to her death. Among the reactions to his words, several organizations – led by feminist activists such as Attilah Springer, Angelique V. Nixon, and others – sprung up to work against gendered violence. In Martine Powers’s article, “‘Leave Me Alone’: Trinidad’s women find a rally-

2 Cf. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KQ0otZhMXTk> (2018-11-30).

ing cry for this year’s Carnival”, Springer explains what the song meant to women at that moment: “It’s like a rallying cry for women who just want to be able to have the option of enjoying their Carnival – Carnival being that space of freedom. And then you have to deal with people who are trying to control how much freedom you feel”. At the end of this quote, you may add: Springer put into words what women were demanding through this song—the right to participate fully in the Carnival celebrations, to wear any outfits they desire, to play music, to march, and to dance without repercussions, threats and danger to their bodies. If Carnival is a space where strict categories are suspended, where people of all social classes, ethnicities, and beliefs are free to celebrate together, then it should be no different for gender. Springer, and other feminists, were saying that regardless of what women wear or how they ‘wine’ (dance) during Carnival, their actions are not an invitation to be sexually assaulted, abused, punished, or attacked in any way. In the song, Calypso Rose sings about a woman trying to dance in the streets and participate fully in the Carnival celebration, rejecting advances or any type of control by men, simply demanding that they leave her alone and let her enjoy the music:

Boy doh touch me like you goin crazy | Let go me hand, lemme jump up
in de band | I don’t want nobody to come and stop me | Leave me, let
me free up, myself let me jump up. (Rose 2016)

In the song’s corresponding video, a woman sneaks out of the house to take part in the Carnival festivities. Not finding her in bed when he awakens, her partner searches through crowds of people dancing in the street. When he finds her, he reacts angrily, but after some coaxing, he decides to stop fighting and join in the collective dance. In contrast to the circumstances that made the song ‘go viral’ and become so important for women claiming agency and demanding safety, the video maintains a playful, humorous storyline, focusing on the potential to come together in a communal celebratory gesture.

4 *Human identity in Caribbean music*

Now to end, let us turn to the cultural producers we mentioned before. Their work presented us with literature on being *human* via the medium of music. We read their ‘books’ with our entire body. We can only be sketchy here, expressing what these works summoned in us in our coproduction while singing along, studying the lyrics, watching the music videos, discussing the artworks with others, and dancing. Do not expect biographical details on these artists but an account of the lessons of what it means to be *human* that we drew from their works.

Many Caribbean artists enact myths of relation to the Old World settings of their ancestors. Growing up in a Caribbean that was considered and still considers itself Dutch, we nevertheless learnt to acknowledge *Mama Africa*³ through Peter Tosh as others learnt to appreciate Mama India via Sundar Popo's hits like *Nana and Nani*.⁴ These are examples of Pan Africanism and Pan-Indianism in the Caribbean arts whereby the loss and the hardships faced by the descendants of Africans and Asians are continuously highlighted. Nevertheless, there is another way. Instead of focusing on what the wicked did – think, for instance, of Bob Marley's *Redemption Song*⁵ – some legendary artists actually us to privilege the pleasure of belonging to the African Diaspora. Ismael Rivera comes to mind, as does Jacob Desvarieux of the Zouk band Kassav'.

In Rivera's interpretation of *Las caras lindas (de mi gente negra)*⁶ [The Beautiful Faces (of My Black People)], a *guagancó* composed by Catalino 'Tite' Curet Alonso, he sings about "his black people" as a "molasses parade" that carries everything – beauty, sweetness, sadness, pain, laughter, truth, and love:

Las caras lindas de mi gente negra/son un desfile de melaza en flor/
que cuando pasa frente a mí se alegra/de su negrura, todo el corazón.
Las caras lindas de mi raza prieta/tienen de llanto, de pena y dolor/son
las verdades, que la vida reta/ pero que llevan dentro mucho amor. [...] Melaza que ríe, melaza que ríe, jajajaja/ay, que canta y que llora/y en cada beso [es] bien conmovedora.

[The beautiful faces of my black people | are a parade of molasses in bloom | which, when passing before me, my entire heart is overjoyed by its blackness. | The beautiful faces of my black race | which carry weeping, sadness and pain | are the truths, that life challenges | but they hold so much love inside. [...] Molasses that laughs, molasses that laughs, hahahaha | Ay, that sings and cries | and in each kiss [is] very moving.] (Rivera 1978) (Transl. by the Author)

In one rendition of this song, Rivera – in the improvisational segment that is expected in Afro-Latin American genres like *guagancó*, *salsa*, and *son montuno*, among others – adds a line about the black faces beyond Puerto Rico. The original song mentions Panama, another country where the com-

3 Cf. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=buVm-D3eChM> (2018-11-30).

4 Cf. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=73FVMjFXFGE> (2018-11-30).

5 Cf. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0FGgBT_VasI (2018-11-30).

6 Cf. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t9gsjztx3f8> (2018-11-30).

poser (Curet Alonso) has fallen in love with “a beautiful black face”. In his improvisation, Rivera calls out to Llorens Torres – an urban, public housing sector in the San Juan, Puerto Rico. From here, he moves on to the beauty of the beautiful black faces of people of all Latin America – a shift from the particular to the plural. We also see this in songs by Pérez Joglar, such as *La Perla* (featuring Rubén Blades) and *Los de atrás vienen conmigo* (Those in back are coming with me). In the first song, the slum known as La Perla becomes a focal point (as emblem of fierce Puerto Ricanness) from which other similar communities in Latin America and around the world are interpellated, establishing a broader community and creating a conversation: “Esa risa en La Perla la escuché en el Chorrillo | y de Tepito hasta Callao y donde se acallan chiquillos” (That laughter of La Perla, I heard it in El Chorrillo | and from Tepito to Callao and where children are kept quiet). Thus, he links all those who live on the margins: from La Perla (in San Juan, Puerto Rico) to El Chorrillo (in Panama City, Panama), Tepito (in Mexico City, Mexico), and Callao (in Lima, Peru). Similarly, in *Los de atrás vienen conmigo*, the singer calls for all of Latin America to march along (for the drumming is distinctly a marching/procession tune) with the “underdogs” (*los de atrás*). Here, Pérez Joglar mentions all the impoverished urban areas of Puerto Rico, calling out to those living in similar conditions in Panama, Peru, Mexico, Argentina, Chile, Colombia, Paraguay, Uruguay, Brazil, and Venezuela – all linked by hardships and the shadow of Death, all linked by a recognition of blackness, and all marching to a *cumbia villera* or *bloco afro* rhythm.

Now we will focus more comprehensively on Jacob Desvarieux. The mid-tempo beat in Desvarieux’s hit *African Music* allows us, in the springs of our existence, to sway from left to right as he refers to the numerous repertoires of the music of Africa and its Diaspora in a way that makes us feel happy to be part of that community of practice. As scholars, we are of course always mindful, as we swing to Desvarieux, that Death brought the trans-Atlantic community that many others and we herald into existence. But we enjoy the dance nevertheless. As this is a community of practice and not an everlasting phenomenon immutable to change, the exchange between the two symbolized worlds in Desvarieux’s music – Africa and the African Diaspora in the New World – has to constantly take place. Every time we download the song via YouTube these days, that bond comes alive. It is not about a pure Africa meeting the, say, impure African Caribbean Diaspora, but about two historically specific, yet related, creolizations transacting. We learned to appreciate this more fully via Desvarieux’s collaboration with the Angolan Creole music artist Nelo Carvalho, in *Mamã Falou*, with the latter singing in Portuguese-Angolan while Desvarieux sings in Guadeloupean/Martinican Creole.

In the accompanying music video to *Mamã Falou*, a new factor that is usually associated with Europe enters the equation: the Catholic Church. What to make of this? As we watched the video several times, and dis-

cussed the matter, we found ourselves acknowledging the ambivalent role the Church played in the lives of Africans and their descendants in the Caribbean. Desvarieux and Carvalho’s video prompts a study of the ways in which, despite racial prejudice and institutional discrimination, Catholic canonical law, as opposed to civil law, was the venue for the victimized to assert their personhood in legal terms (as members of fraternities, sisterhoods, husbands and wives, etc.) when they were deemed nothing but slaves and indentured servants – as lesser humans undeserving of equal concern and supposedly unfit to govern themselves or decide what they considered the good life. The ambivalence with which we were invited through *Mamã Falou* to approach Catholicism of course also holds for Protestantism and its evangelical offshoots. We have come to appreciate Christianity in the Caribbean as a particular working out of justice through creolization: the traditions of the subjugated and subjugators melding and blending while somewhat retaining their specificities under inhuman conditions. Visually, through this video, we are reminded of how and where two (and echoes of more) historically specific, yet related, creolizations transact. We see our two musicians on the stage, which is set in front of the altar. In some scenes, we see the figure of Christ on the cross in a central position but we also glimpse a brown Madonna to the right. Given the syncretism displayed in the dancing, the repetition of the chorus, the modes of dress, the dugout canoe, the landscape, and objects in the church, the phrase “Eo verbo se fez carne”, shown on a light blue banner, becomes much more than a biblical quote. Does the red candle (prominent at the beginning of the video) only represent the transubstantiated blood and body of Christ or does it signify much more? If the church is venue for the victimized to assert their personhood, they also assert the plurality of related beliefs. The red candle may just as well represent the flesh (blood and body) in other ways, just as it may represent love, passion, courage, fertility, vitality depending on the participant in this space.

It is in the music that came to life in these houses of worship that insightful existential truths can be found. We learnt from Caribbean music never to confuse the necessity of humanism with its ultimate sufficiency. Man makes his and her world, yes, but we do not make the world. As Edwin Yearwood of the Barbadian Soca band Krosfyah exclaims, we must believe in *Something Greater* than ourselves.

Man still tries to separate | His own brothers with class and creed | Upper class, middle class and lower class | With the lower following lead | Separation shows like a sore thumb, aye | And it spreads out rapid and fast | Man on dying bed need a donor’s blood | Does he request a certain class? (no no) | But now who am I just to wonderer | Passing judgement and kicking fuss | Because death is a crucial part of life | When man returns to nothing but dust | Now I wipe my tears and I start to

fear | Smiling off the class and creed game | 'Cause when rich and poor
convert back to dust | So I must believe, That there's something greater
than me. | To keep up the fight I just got to see, That there's something
greater than me | Take your head out the clouds and look till you see,
That there's something greater than me | Jail me wrongfully and I'll
still be free, Cause there's something greater than me | Jah Jah Jah Jah
Calling | Jah Jah Jah Jah (Calling)...back to dust we shall all go, for all
man is equal. (Yearwood 2005)

In the *Mamã Falou* video, “Eo verbo se fez carne” reminds us of all the ways in which survival, celebration, and affirmation of life are expressed in this song: a mother lovingly pours holy water on her child’s head, girls dance. The affirmations of our being in the world are expressed through work – shown in the people transporting goods on the dugout canoe – and through play – boys play football, girls splash water on one another, our two performers “air-guitar” the rhythm using the oars in their shared canoe, and then we see them dancing with the community. And yet, in its textual reference, the phrase reminds us of “something greater than ourselves”.

When we do not show that reverence and, to use Ras Shorty I’s title of his classic, *Push the Creator Out*, the result is anomie and a perpetuation of the worst of colonialism. This is how Ras Shorty I skilfully interprets the behavior of renegade youngsters in crime torn Trinidad and Tobago. Reminiscent of the heydays of formal colonialism, many youth violently treat those who inhabit the twin islands as expendable means to their ends. Yet, Ras Shorty I hearkens his generation remember that they are not without blame. In refusing to acknowledge ‘something greater’, and therefore, by implicitly privileging a crass colonially derived way of being, they have fostered the current malady:

How my country overnight | get you angry and uptight | I searched out
the answer | And this is what I discovered | All you push the Creator
out | you didn’t want His name in your mouth | so you take Him out of
the school curriculum | No knowledge of God for your children | Look
around you | All you have is teenage bandits | Their minds have nothing
in it | But Os and As and CXCs [Here, Ras Shorty I is referring to
students who may be bright in mathematics and economics, but lack
morals and spiritual wisdom.] | But no knowledge of the Almighty. Just
because you pushed the Creator out | ...You’re living the fruits of your
action | So tell me | Weh [why are] you bawling for | don’t bawl | we all
you crying for | don’t cry | ... It’s you who pushed the creator out | Every
generation that comes | is nothing more | than a reproduction of the
ones gone before | all you double standards | and your false value | come
back and catch you off guard | and confusing you | what you seeing is
yourself | manifesting nothing else | check the children performance

and then look deep in your conscience | you gone see | All you push the Creator out.

[...] Don't condemn the children for their inequity | Because it is all you made them and shape their mentality | What you did in secret they doing openly | Don't run away from it | it's your own cruelty | A mango can't bear a fig | a donkey can't make a pig | you sow seeds of darkness | Now you reaping wickedness. Just because you push the Creator out. (Shorty I 2000)

Listening and dancing to that highly influential song of Ras Shorty I, we find ourselves acknowledging Death in our societies without falling into despair or nihilism. We realize in all profundity that nothing goes harmoniously when we do not seek His face in the face of every other we encounter (to whom we must utter the primal mystical Rastafari greeting "Give thanks", despite what they do, for seeing, being, and becoming with us in concord with 'Cosmic Love').⁷

This quest to recognize his Face in every other face led us to connect *Push the Creator Out* to the Mighty Shadow's latest tune *Doh Mix Me Up*.⁸ Shadow's song was a warm awakening that though we may revel in the African and African Diasporic community of practice summoned by Jacob Desvarieux, we must never lose our singular sense of *moi* in the belief in a collective *Us*, as different from a *They*. Taking a substantive approach, we come to realize that we can never be black without being specifically ourselves, meaning, encumbered in our particular black way of being connected to context and personal histories. And paradoxically, in a non-disturbing way, we also appreciate ourselves as an unencumbered self that can and must don identity labels - black, brown, woman, man, hetero, professional, etc. - in order to be, but can never to be reconciled with any of these. In *The Repeating Island*, Antonio Benítez Rojo speaks of "supersyncretism" and how our being/acting "in a certain kind of way", through polyrhythm, improvisation, and other modes of expression, can conjure away Death (although his words are "apocalypse" and "violence"). In his introduction, he explains how we, "in a certain kind of way" - which we may read as "in our particular black way" - may come together, while differentiating ourselves from one another, expressing our desire to sublimate apocalypse and violence:

7 Cosmic Love - what some call the Creator, the Unmoved Mover, the Most Moved Mover, God, Brahman, etc. - can be conceived as a he, she, or it, but is none of the above. Rather awkwardly put she/he/it is best understood as an impossible possibility that the human mind in a variety of cultures and ways of life has imagined, imaged, and intuited, as that which enables the emergence and disappearance of phenomena.

8 Cf. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G9Uqwc5psPY> (2018-12-01).

The peoples of the sea, or better, the Peoples of the Sea proliferate incessantly while differentiating themselves from one another, traveling together toward the infinite. [...] If I were to put this in two words, they would be: performance and rhythm. And nonetheless, I would have to add something more: the notion that we have called “a certain kind of way,” something remote that reproduces itself and that carries the desire to sublimate apocalypse and violence; something obscure that comes from the performance and that one makes his own in a very special way; concretely, it takes away the space that separates the onlooker from the participant. (Benítez-Rojo 1996, 16)

To echo his words, through performance and rhythm, “in our particular black way”, we may preserve both our singular and collective sense, and be both onlooker and participant, encumbered and unencumbered.

In this state of being, specifically encumbered and simultaneously unencumbered, we have been able to wholeheartedly sign on to the radical equality promoted by Shakiya, the young Sint Maarten Soca artist from our rock, in her anthems such as *None Better than the Rest*. We join her in her quest on and off stage for all to recognize that the social and factual deaths caused by poverty, political indifference, and general indecency in our society and the world, are unacceptable.

But, at those moments of missionary zeal, another beat luckily interrupts our concentration. We sense the very real danger of a possible form of camp-thinking emerging, namely, that of a morally correct minority (Shakiya, us, and those we regard politically) versus an immoral majority. It is then that we come to truly appreciate why most of Caribbean music is apolitical, if we think politics as always involving non-contradictory and static appreciations of *Us* versus *Them*.

We recognize why artists from our rock (Sint Maarten/St. Martin) like King Vers – following in the footsteps of the country’s legendary Soca star, Shadowman – is the Lord of bacchanal. In Vers’s music he summons us, as his more widely known Caribbean counterparts Machel Montano, Destra, Peter Ram, Skinny Fabulous, and Tall Pree do, to acknowledge that all we can do, if we do not want to fall into camp-thinking, and yet infuse our ethics of singularity into political moves, is to continuously exorcize our indecent tendencies to think in terms of clear-cut friends and enemies, by collectively *Getting on Bad*, as King Vers heartens us to do in his 2015 Carnival jammer. Like Rivera does in *Las caras lindas (de mi gente negra)*, the *Getting on Bad* video also reaches beyond one island, presenting the communal bacchanal in St. Maarten, New York, Jamaica, and Barba-

dos – waves of bodies of all shapes, colors, and ages collectively wining.⁹ None can be said to be stealing our coveted enjoyment and transgression of that enjoyment as we routinely release ourselves from stiff regimes of colonially derived respectability and societally sanctioned forms of rudeness! We are simultaneously advised and enticed (to use another of King Vers's hits, his collaboration with the Aruban band Tsunami) to give each other *Pressure* in the way that dances with Death: meaning to perform acts of radical truth telling about the inextricable bond of the *philosophical-real* and *historical-real* manifestations of death in the Caribbean and the world after the colonial nightmare without anyone having to literally die.

Thou shalt not kill!

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9 As Lisa Allen-Agostini explains in "Wining words: a Trinidad Carnival wining dictionary", "To wine, if you don't know, is to move your hips and waist in a 'winding' motion, hence the name. The dance is peculiar to calypso, although someone with real skill and dedication could wine to any kind of music".

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