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CaribFunk¹: A Mélange of Caribbean Expressions in a New Dance Technique

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Abstract

This article investigates rasanblaj, a reservoir of knowledge that explores the sensual and spiritual in performance and praxis. I examined my own work as an artist/scholar and how I was instituting "assembly, compilation, and enlisting and regrouping (of ideas, things, people and spirits)." I also reflected on how this term integrated with the dance technique CaribFunk that I originated. The technique is "essentially a breaking and joining, and ambivalent movement within and without that results in the creating of new and often imagined spaces for cultural and social engagement" (Hope 2006b, 127) and addresses the politics of identity and subversion through the exploration of the hip wine (circular rotation of the hips) often found in the stylistic and virtuosic performances of Jamaican Dancehall and Trinidadian Carnival. Recognizing histories, memory, and embodied knowledge, I will demonstrate how Caribbean sensibilities, the

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erotic as power and CaribFunk serves as a framework to discuss Rasanblaj.

Introduction

When I first read the word *rasanblaj* in the Hemispheric Institute's call for papers, I experienced a kinesthetic response. Repetition, undulation, and an unconcerned notion of time captivated me as my kinesthetic pronunciation of the word formed my dance. Naturally, I wanted to physicalize the pronunciation and articulation of the word ras-san-blaj. My hips found a rhythm, while my pelvis supported the groove. Once I was comfortable with the cadence, my torso followed the rotations that were summoned by this lyrical entrée. Rasanblaj is defined as “assembly, a compilation, enlisting, regrouping, of ideas, things, people and spirits” (*e-misférica* 2014). I went through my own mental checklist of how I connected with each word through performance. I examined my own work as an artist/scholar and how I was instituting assembly, compilation, enlisting, and regrouping (of ideas, things, people and spirits). I also reflected on how this term integrated with the dance technique CaribFunk that I originated. The technique is “essentially a breaking and joining, and ambivalent movement within and without that results in the creating of new and often imagined spaces for cultural and social engagement” (Hope 2006b, 127).



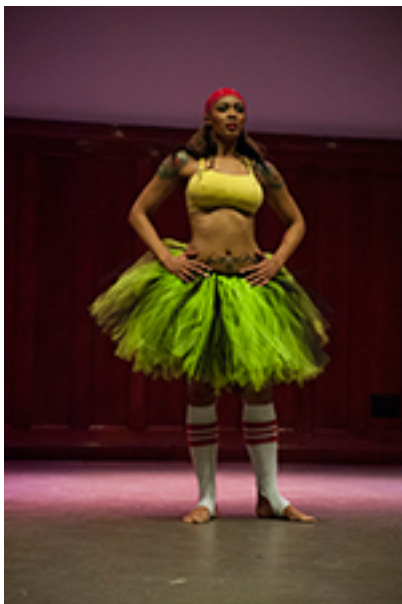
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Employing *rasanblaj* as an entry point, I examine commonalities, hybridity, erotic agency, and aesthetics in Caribbean performance suggesting that the terms used to define *rasanblaj* also describe CaribFunk. CaribFunk is a 21st century mutation of foundational dance, fitness, and somatic paradigms (Carey 2011). CaribFunk is a fusion of Afro-Diasporic and Euro-American principles of movement and epistemologies. The technique is rooted in an Africanist aesthetic and expression. It employs Caribbean popular culture, particularly Trinidadian Carnival and Jamaican Dancehall phraseology, as a methodological and pedagogical practice. The technique aims to assist students in connecting, embracing, and engaging with their hips, translating life experiences, biographies, and mythologies through their pelvis—essentially learning to speak a new language (Carey 2011). CaribFunk coalesces the vertical and horizontal, embodies Caribbean performance and politics, and explores

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Jamaican Dancehall and Trinidadian Carnival as a reservoir of knowledge that explores the sensual and spiritual. I assert that CaribFunk technique is an example and mutation of rasanblaj. It is also a technology and method of conditioning (mind, body, and soul) that can promote (female) strength, liberation, sensuality, and virtuosic ability. The technique addresses the politics of identity and subversion through the exploration of the *hip wine* (circular rotation of the hips) often found in the stylistic and virtuosic performances of Jamaican Dancehall and Trinidadian Carnival. This notion of identity and becoming is erotic, and the erotic is power.

Black feminist writer Audre Lorde uses the term erotic to describe how women achieve empowerment and knowledge through a creative energy that provides an awareness of self, history, and our bodies. Through this summation and re-definition of the term erotic, Lorde asserts that the erotic is power (Lorde 1984). The hip wine is a practice of erotic power, “It analyzes the empowering and liberating potential of selective manifestations of a ‘dancehallized’ identity which is transmitted from within the disempowering and socially darkened spaces of . . . depressed communities” (Hope 2006b, 127). I am interested in how one ascertains this erotic expression within policed environments, how particular spaces and places provide erotic mobility, how citizenship is performed corporeally, and how “Caribbean forms of erotic agency address fundamental issues regarding the praxis of embodied freedom” (Sheller 2012, 16), specifically through the hip wine.



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Jamaican scholar Carolyn Cooper discusses this idea of the erotic as a performed identity in the Dancehall; participants (women) are able to express themselves in

contrast to the restrictive roles that are assigned to them due to their status (Springer 2007). In this social space, women “embrace their sexual selves and appreciate the erotic power of their bodies without ‘feeling shame’” (Springer 114). This power is a revolt against oppression and repression rooted in colonialism; this agency is inclusive of a subversive energy that is an expression of an Afro-diasporic reading of what Mimi Sheller (2012) calls *citizenship from below*. Sheller states, “Citizenship from below addresses the deeper constitutive struggles over embodied freedoms and embodied constraints within unequal interpersonal and international relations” (2012, 22). I argue that the hip wine functions as an embodied performance of citizenship and is an expression of erotic agency that is “the antithesis of enslavement” (Sheller 2012, 245). The erotic in this context empowers women to reclaim their lives, kinesthetic and cultural language, and bodies from oppressive constructs in society (Lorde 1984).

Power is sourced from many different venues. I posit this notion of the erotic as power as a central modality in my research, investigating how this dynamism is manifested in Caribbean cultural performance in which the hip wine serves as the corporeal declaration of this phenomenon. Women of all nationalities, shapes, and sizes can plug into this source. It does not discriminate against, castigate, or reject its participants. One may recognize this power and incorporate it into their existence. One may acknowledge the power but not know how to access it, or one may have no knowledge of such power (Lorde 1984). How can a woman plug in? How can she conjure up this power—safely? The erotic is found within each woman and consists of spirituality and consciousness. The erotic and spirituality are dichotomous, existing on the same metaphysical plane, providing incomparable strength to the fearless conscious woman, usurping ideologies and philosophies that manipulate and subjugate women. Lorde provides a provocative manifesto for women to honor, respect, avow, and perform this power. When I reflect on the Dancehall Queen Competitions² in Jamaica and worldwide, I can identify these attributes in the participants’ performances. Though some may find that “this feminine persona is more so actively engaged in the promotion of a capitalist-influence sexuality for the benefit of men” (Hope 2006a, 69), I am reminded that these competitions are representations of women recognizing their power. They are women who boldly celebrate abhorred movements, constructs, and value systems that are in direct conflict with the “normalized” culture. Women who perform in these competitions graph, define, and negotiate their own ontologies, providing counter discourses to social standards that valorize the “disembodied body” (Niaah 2010, 136). This disembodied figure conflicts with Western standards, and these women posture the dancing body that wines as a transformative, powerful, and free agent of resistance (Niaah 2010).

Rasanblaj...CaribFunk...Caribbean Performance as Praxis

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As Congolese Soukous superstar Tshala Muana's upbeat song "Banda Yango" plays in the background, I instruct the dancers in my CaribFunk class to find the rhythm by moving their hips side-to-side in a swaying motion, with their hands in a free-style groove that matches the coolness of the hip sway. The dancers are asked to imagine themselves at Carnival, playing mas,³ dressed in their elaborate costumes and feeling "di riddim." I ask them to envision the array of costumes, colors, the pulsation and vibration of the music, the smells of the food, and the feel of the sweat on their skin. The dancers' cool sways transition to slow figure eights with hands akimbo⁴ for two counts of eight. The dancers deepen their pliés⁵ and wines. This slow wine increases to a fast circular wine, down to the ground for four counts and back up for four counts. The dancers repeat this lowering and rising movement. I watch hips find the rhythm and backs arch, allowing the hips to open and speak. Now the party begins. The CaribFunk phrase commences with two bouncy walks forward, torsos parallel to the floor. The right leg lifts to thrust the hip open, and this repeats on the left side. The tailbone salutes the heavens, bouncing on the beat. The phrase travels side-to-side with two folkloric-inspired turns—right and left, emulating the flowing rivers that Oshun, the African goddess of love and sensuality, adores. Salsa side and salsa back, right and left, transitioning the dancers upstage, moving their arms backwards in a carving motion to match the movement of the feet. The dancers place themselves in a comfortable position in the room with finesse and grace, placing their feet in first position, turned out. Their hips rotate in a circular motion. The body continuously lowers to the floor. The knees rotate in an inward and outward rotation. The dancers' imaginary baskets are balanced on their heads; they dare not spill their contents as their torsos undulate, shifting side-to-side. Hips wine smoothly, delighting in the instrumentation of the orchestra. These movements intersect, expressing the torso-hip-knee connection and articulation, the circular rotation of the hips, and the inward-outward rotation of the knees that are dominant in Afro-Caribbean movement. I have taken elements of both Soukous and Mutuashi to structure the vocabulary of CaribFunk, retaining the Africanist aesthetic and the erotic as power: rasanblaj.

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Courtesy of the author.

This performance geography is rooted in a praxis that investigates kinesthetic creolized expressions of the erotic and sexual agency. It is configured with liberatory implications and bodily techniques invoking arousal of the senses, spirituality, and an embodied freedom. Extending through cultures and histories that are practicing sexual citizenship, the technique redefines “normal” and redresses the politics of the body, sexuality, and respectability through the lens of the abject and marginalized body. Corporeal techniques that communicate intersections of sensuality, sexuality, vulgar, and slackness are introduced into the performance sphere (the dance studio), circumventing the political and controversial criticism of the colonial ideologies.

Why You Winin’ Gal?



Courtesy of the author.

My interest in the body, particularly the hip, has been long-standing due to my specialized interest in Caribbean music and dance and popular culture. Researching movement for CaribFunk, I observed similarities between the movements performed in Jamaican Dancehall, wining at Carnival in Trinidad, and movements that are performed to Congolese Soukous and Mutuashi. Through this discovery, I had an “aha” moment, deciding that this needed further exploration not only within the context of movement derivation, but for my own interest in cultural identity, citizenship, and commonalities, and how these ideas also ground CaribFunk technique. Layering this movement epiphany with my own experiences of how I identified with

the wine and the conversations held with many of my students, I concluded that it was important that the notion of agency and empowerment needed to be included in discourse surrounding the technique. Quite simply, I was proclaiming that the hip wine can be a liberatory practice, contributing to the pleasures and fantasies of imagination that aid in creative expressions of identity. This notion of creating identity through the imagination has been posited by many scholars focusing on Afro-diasporic bodily expressions. Sheller's theorization on "citizenship from below" encapsulates my understanding of this concept, not only as a theorist, but also as a movement practitioner. Sheller suggests that for one to enact citizenship, she or he must then assume the position of the "gendered, racialized, and sexed subject" (2012, 26). This body participates in a corporeal conflict. My understanding is that the aim is to reorganize history as it relates to the exclusion and repression of the marginalized individual. She performs an embodied freedom that is not only political, but also a spiritual and sensual regime resurrecting ancestral memories and bodily practices (Sheller 2012); this is an imagined freedom articulated through the body.

I assert that these women are enacting a subversive energy and "the erotic as power" through the hip wine in multiple (Caribbean) performance spaces. Along with Cooper (1993, 2004) and Niaah (2006, 2010), my aim is to reclaim this maligned movement, engaging with it in a positive sense, re-inscribing Lorde's "erotic as power" as a tool for circumventing and usurping the negative politics associated with the articulation of the hip and the spaces in which this power manifests. Deploying and recognizing this power and the subversive nature of the hip wine, toying with decency, and rebelling against the politics of respectability, Lorde's argument supports Cooper's claim that this expression of culture and identity in the Dancehall demonstrates that power is actualized through the body, specifically the hips. Sheller states:

The embodied corporeal performances associated with Caribbean music not only potentially support personal agency and sexual objectivity, but they also have been described as constructing autonomous counter-spaces and collectively shared-counter-ideologies of freedom. (2012, 265)

The Caribbean cultural performance of the hip wine connotes an erotic agency produced by the citizens of the bottom. Re-reading and re-imagining colonial history, I place this bodily technique as the central focus of CaribFunk, arguing that this technique, which is a *mélange* of histories, identities, and expressions, navigates the socio-political terrains of respectability politics, race, class, and patriarchal assumptions and expectations of female expression and womanhood. The technique usurps colonial repressions by the incorporation of the bodily parts that have been reviled. Through the term *rasanblaj*, I brazenly enter the gates of erotic agency. I find efficacy and voice through Dancehall and Carnival culture; through this voice, I am also able to develop a praxis that acknowledges the subaltern as a principal actor in this performance. These celebrations serve as a space for liberation and empowerment, not only for myself but for many of the students that I teach. My aim is to articulate and expose colonized dance curricula in higher education to this Caribbean epistemology that exemplifies *rasanblaj*.

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A'Keitha Carey is originally from the Bahamas. She received her B.A. in Dance from Florida International University and an M.F.A. in Dance from Florida State University. She completed her Certificate in Woman's Studies from Texas Woman's University where she is currently working to complete her PhD. A'Keitha created CaribFunk technique, a genre fusing ballet, modern, Afro-Caribbean, and fitness principles. Her research attempts to redefine Black femininity, establishing the relationship between the technique and Caribbean popular culture, addressing why it is important to WOC in academia, and reinforcing the marriage between Caribbean dance, sensuality, strength, and the erotic as power.

Notes

- ¹ CaribFunk is a registered trademark of the author.
 - ² A competition which showcases the virtuosity of women dancing to Jamaican dancehall.
 - ³ Those costumed participants in carnival who are dancing through the streets
 - ⁴ On the hips
 - ⁵ Bending of the knees
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