

Answering the Blue Devil Call: Performing a repertoire of Resistance, Disruption, and Inspiration

Natalie Wood

Abstract:

This paper explores performance, disruption, and the decolonial forces of the Caribbean Carnival and the Blue Devil masquerade. The Blue Devil performance can be linked to African cultural traditions (Dabiri, 2019) which emerged within the pre and post emancipation Trinidad Carnival and the Jab Jab or Molasses devil masquerade (Mas). Both Carnival and Devil Mas symbolize resistance, ritual and rebellion as practiced by enslaved Africans and their descendants (Hill, 1972; Liverpool, 2001; Bakhtin, 1968). In this paper I discuss the performance of the Blue Devil in resisting and disrupting historical and contemporary forces of oppression. I tie the 'erotic' energy of the Blue Devil to decolonial and abolition practices of imagining, creating, and inspiring strategies to change the world.

Inspiration

"Blue Devils. (Masqueraders) Entirely covered in blue mud and spewing red drool in imitation of blood. Blue Devils typically act berserk, sexual, and ravenous. To a degree their costumes are open to personal preference and can include pitchforks, various kinds of masks, wings, and horns." (Martin, 1998, p. 222).

"This is the Blue Devil Call! Where meh jab jab? Where Meh Jab Jab! De devil woke! We are unbeatable! Unstoppable! We are resistance! Transformation! The grotesque! Power! Pleasure and Sexuality! De devil is on de stage tonight howling, wining screaming and threatening to mark all ah allyuh and what we want to know is allyuh woke! Allyuh woke?! Wake up!"

(Natalie Wood-Devil calling all the Devils performance at Toronto Pride Blockorama 2017).



Structures of Oppression

As a Trinidad-born Canadian, Black, lesbian, feminist, artist, and mother, I am acutely aware that discrimination, and ongoing structural violence in Canada and the US have led to quantifiable premature deaths and impacted the ability of Black subjects, to live lives unfettered by the physical, emotional, and social experience of institutionalized and systemic oppression (Maynard, 2017; UN General Assembly, 2015). Anti-Blackness and the brutalizing of all Black lives is a global project which the UN International Decade for People of African Descent (2014–2024) was meant to address. This worldwide promotion of the need for recognition, justice, and development for African descended citizens, has been met with limited response (UN Human Rights Council, 2017). This failure provides proof of Hartman's (2007) claim that it is impossible to overcome the violent rupture of enslavement (Hartman, 2007); McKittrick's (2011) argument for the ongoing existence of plantation logics, and Walcott's (2021) proposal that all Blacks still live in a long emancipation time, and freedom is yet to come.

This extends to living while Black and queer. In Canada, queerness has been legalized since 1969, however Ajamu and Cummings (2020) and others (Dryden et al., 2015) report that the absences and exclusions of Black and Caribbean diasporic queers still riddle the dominant narratives of Canadian queer histories and homonationalist imaginations. Countering and bringing a Black queer abolitionist perspective is the Queer activism of Black Lives Matter (BLM) Toronto, which acts to "rupture the violent way that Canada attempts to absent us" (Diverlus et al., 2020, p. 7). Their shut down of the Toronto Pride Parade in 2016 clearly and dramatically highlighted the discrimination and struggles of Queer, Trans, Black, Indigenous, People of Color (QTBIPOC) Torontonians. The rise of the #Blacklivesmatter global movement showcases the need for urgent action. There are now 13 chapters in the US and three in Canada. (Asmelash, 2020) and one in Trinidad that joined forces with WOMANTRA, an intersectional feminist organization in 2020 (Steuart,

2020; Nixon, 2020).

Decolonial and Abolition Praxis

Decolonial praxis began in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries at the beginning of colonization and the settler state. Hoffman (2017) quotes Walter Dignolo who in an interview says: decoloniality means first to delink (to detach) from ... a [Eurocentric, white supremacist and racial capitalist] overall structure of knowledge in order to engage in an epistemic reconstitution ... of ways of thinking, languages, ways of life and being in the world that the rhetoric of modernity disavowed and the logic of coloniality implement (p.1.)

Epistemic reconstitution calls on Black, Indigenous, racialized, queer, impoverished subjects, artists, and activists to imagine and act together to create alternative forms of knowledge, being, and power and to change the world. (Maldonado-Torres, 2016). Similarly, "abolition is not primarily about dismantling, getting rid of, but it's about re-envisioning, it's about building anew" (Davis, 2020). As Moten and Harney argue, the challenge is [n]ot so much the abolition of prisons but the abolition of a society that could have prisons, that could have slavery, that could have the wage, and therefore not abolition as the elimination of anything but abolition as the founding of a new society (2004, p. 114).

Both abolition and decolonial theory call for reflecting, questioning, dismantling, imagining, and creating new and alternative caring relationships, knowledges, institutions, and futures together. Black Marxist scholars such as James (1967), Kelley (2002), and Moten (2003) agree that hope and imagination are intricately linked to a Black Futurity. In *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Tradition* (2002), Kelley links imagination to creating new visions that can build into a more hopeful future. This is done with the glance back (Muñoz, 2009)—a linking to the past to open to a future that Fanon (2005) says can seed and create a basis of hope and invite action. I hold that a Black liberatory future can embrace abolition and decolonial strategies present in the generative, replenishing, and provocative power of





the Carnival and the Blue Devil. Witnessing and performing the Blue Devil is connecting with the erotic, “a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling” (Lorde, 1984, p. 53). Maldonado-Torres (2016) identifies Rage and Love as two feelings that if recognized and expressed can act as a bridge to unleash the creative imaginings and actions to change the world.

Carnival, Resistance, Disruption, and the Blue Devil

The birth of creative forms of Black diasporic resistance exists wherever there was the institution of slavery such as in the Caribbean, South, Central, North America, and Canada. African slaves would engage in marronage, poisonings, Obeah, and Voodoo plotting, lighting fires to destroy crops (cannes brulés), murder, and suicide, and anything to disrupt the commodification of enslaved Africans and further their quest for freedom (Liverpool, 2001). The creative power to disrupt had to be performed and the desire to be

free had to be enacted, shared, and made visible. According to Taylor (2003), performance is a system of learning, storing, and transmitting knowledge vital to one’s identity, memory and being. The actions of the enslaved and oppressed to disrupt, form a “repertoire” of embodied practice of resistance, collective catharsis, and the quest for freedom (Taylor, 2003). Cedric J. Robinson (2000) defines this embodied practice of resistance as an ontological experience. He says Living while Black calls for “the continuing development of the collective consciousness informed by the historical struggles for liberation and motivated by the shared sense of obligation to preserve the collective being, the ontological totality (p. 171). This ontological totality has given birth to new cultural expressions like Carnival and Devil mas.

Carnival as a form of public action or performance developed on the cusp of emancipation in the early 19th century and was the syncretization of European, Asian, and African traditions. According to Benítez-Rojo (1996, p. ix). Carnival “expresses the strategies that the people of the Caribbean have for speaking at once of them-







selves and their relationship with the world, with history, with tradition, with nature, with God." It was a way for African and other groups to "express their sense of life, their sense of freedom and identity" (Liverpool, 2001, p. 487). Like Liverpool (2001), Keith Nurse (1999) relates Carnival closely to resistance against slavery, racism, and colonialism. He says Carnival was "born out of the struggle of marginalized peoples to shape a cultural identity through resistance, liberation and catharsis" (p. 662.) Liverpool (2001) successfully argues that the shaping of this cultural identity has facilitated the exportation of Carnival wherever the Caribbean diaspora is located. This creative ritual of protest continues to be performed in diasporic communities living in cities such as Toronto and London, as Afro-Caribbean peoples continue to struggle against white supremacy, economic discrimination, and social inequality (Liverpool, 2001; Nurse, 1999). Whether thought of as a vernacular art form (Tancons, 2016), a Caribbean theater (Hill, 1972) a modern-day art practice (Cozier, 1998; Minshall, 1995), a ritual, or an expression of joy and spirituality, Carnival's origins in emancipation, decolonial, liberatory, and abolitionist struggles clearly call for deep participation in inventing new worlds (Lorde, 1984).

Devil Mas

In this crucible of struggle and performance of resistance, the "erotic" bridging function of Carnival inspired the birth of Devil Mas. By the early 19th century and up to the middle of the 1920s it became one of the most popular masquerades in Trinidad and was seen as an opportunity for rebellion (Liverpool, 2001). Its popularity attests to the awareness that Blackness was often equated with evil and with the Devil. Fanon (1986) when discussing his theory of the release of collective aggression, a psychological state he identified mostly in European subjects, he analyzed European magazines and comic books pointing out that they often displayed "the Wolf, the Devil, the Evil Spirit, the Bad Man, the Savage [as] symbolized by Negroes or Indians" (p. 113.) Walter Rodney in *How Europe underdeveloped Africa* (1973) also declared that any "African ancestral belief was equated with the devil (who was Black

anyway)" (p. 401). Robinson (2000) and DeLoughrey (2007) add that Christian missionaries were the first to assign the Yoruba trickster god of the enslaved Africans, Eshu-Elegba, to the role of the Devil. Africans became associated with the Biblical Old Testament story of Ham whose descendants were cursed to be enslaved forever (Goldenberg, 2005), justifying slavery and assigning evilness to the enslaved and their descendants. Blackness as curse, Devil, and beast had for centuries filtered into the dreams and imaginations of the English and subsequently became "the grammar of the Church" (Robinson 2000, p. 86).

For enslaved Africans and African Caribbean peoples, the performance of the Devil was meant to mock Christianity and European fears of the Devil. According to Hollis (Calypsonian Chalkdust) Liverpool (2001), these Jabs or Devils are expressions of rebellion. He says, "they mocked Christian teachings, and collected money on Carnival Day from onlookers since the Christian Church ... which was the real devil in the minds of the masqueraders, collected money all through the year from the faithful" (p. 409). As mentioned before, the Blue Devil emerges from the Jab Jab and Jab Molasse. The Jab Molasse or Molasses Devil masquerader covered themselves from head to toe in molasses, referencing, re-appropriating, and ritually enacting commodification, enslavement, and enforced labor on sugar plantations. Later in the 19th and early 20th centuries these Devil performers began to cover themselves in tar, grease, mud, and colors of red and blue. The Blue Devil emerges from this experimentation. They covered themselves in blue body paint made from ground up blue cubes used to whiten dingy clothes; they wore horns, tails, and carried pitchforks; they performed the mocking of the real Devils in power, and they danced provocatively moving their bodies to the deep rhythms of biscuit pans; they collected money, threatened to paint onlookers, "ate" fire, and sometimes walked with snakes. They are also associated with homoerotic performance. Forbes-Erickson (2009) argues that their display "grounded in slavery and emancipation, asserts sexual freedom and transgression against the symbolic emasculation ... feminization [and the]





slave experiences ... [of being] hypersexualized in colonial imaginations" (p. 239). Protest/rebellion, performance/play, spirituality/history, and freedom, transformation/catharsis are present in the performance, embodiment, and meaning of the Blue Devil.

Blue Devil Posse

I have had several encounters of the Blue Devil performance as an onlooker. First as a child observing my father playing Blue Devil and as an adult on a trip to Paramin in Trinidad, the mountain that is home to many Blue Devils. My connection to Blue Devil Mas in Trinidad inspired me to form the Blue Devil Posse in 2006 in Canada which is made up of artists, activists, queers, racialized, Black, non-racialized and Caribbean inspired folk who have a strong decolonial and social justice core.

Our first performance at Caribana in 2006 was chaos, rebellion, resistance, political, humorous, playful, spectacle, ritualistic, trance inducing, and transformative. The Caribana parade (now called the Toronto Caribbean Carnival) was the Caribbean Carnival celebration that has taken place in downtown Toronto on a Saturday at the

end of July or beginning of August since 1967. The parade itself is made up of costumed masqueraders who belonged or played with sections in a theme-based Mas band. The Mas band was produced by a designer who would design and then build costumes around specific themes which could be political or could reference elements, historic and contemporary events, nature, or folklore. The goal of these costumes was to look pretty, to create a spectacle of moving bodies with costumes glinting in the sun, transforming the Lakeshore highway into a mass of moving dancing masqueraders and their friends and onlookers. Joining the Mas bands were music trucks with live international soca performers or steel pan groups. Mas bands competed to get on the Lakeshore and to be judged as the best band of the year. According to Caribana Toronto (2022) every year over one million people would attend, flying in from the Caribbean, the USA and really all over the world. These bands are considered to be the "Pretty Mas" bands and formed one part of the two distinct Carnival spaces, "one for the upper and middle classes and one for the outsider, "low' class" (Forbes-Erickson, 2009, p. 239).

The Blue Devils are one of the outsider bands, considered an Ole (old) Mas and Jouvert (the opening of Carnival at daybreak) tradition band,



which meant we crossed the stage early in the morning. The Blue Devil Posse this first year of performance in 2006 chose to protest the presence of Canadian peace keeping forces in Afghanistan as we were concerned about abuses against prisoners and the shifting role of Canadian forces from peacekeepers to combatants. We called ourselves the “Blue Devil Piss Keeping Forces” to bring critique, to educate the public on the trauma of war, and to address coloniality and war making. The devils were mostly woman identified, either queer, lesbians, or trans folk. We joined Theatre Archipelago’s Ole Mas band put out by actor Rhoma Spencer and spent fruitless hours before the Saturday parade day practicing to somehow march in formation as we went on stage—fruitless, as once the Devils hit the stage they were in their performance and moving with the spirit of the devil. We had props such as a yoga ball with the world continents painted on it, that we either put our booted feet on or sat upon, we kept rubber worms and bugs in our mouths, and we attached placards with witty statements to our bodies. Some of the statements were “Officer peeping tom,” “Khandahar, Khanda Harper, Can the Harper,” “Prisons 4 Profit,” “War: Terrorism with a Bigger Budget,” and “Weapons of Misdirection.” Other props included bandanas, painted targets, a variety of masks, horns, and dildoes. We had whistles and painted our bodies blue. We also walked with blue body paint to paint unsuspecting onlookers.

We almost did not make it on the parade as police officers doing guard duty tried to stop us. After tense negotiations which involved explaining the role of protest and rebellion in the history of Carnival and the value of free speech, we were reluctantly allowed on the parade. As the blue paint went onto bodies and the chaos of the music, and whistles began, our movements became jerky, jumpy and zig-zaggy. We began to yelp, scream, and pant noisily. We wine-d up on police, and the audience. We climbed barricades to get at the VIP seated guests. We put our blue handprints on trucks, on buildings, and on people’s hands and clothes; and we ran after friends and onlookers who seemed happy to be chased by the Devil. Parents brought their kids to be frightened by us saying to their kids that, “you have

to stand your ground, do not flinch, and look the devil in their eye, and they will leave you alone.” If they could do that, we left them alone. Our performance combined the erotic, protest, laughter, education, play, sexuality, catharsis, and freedom. In effect we disrupted the regular consumptive experience of Carnival.

In conclusion, the Blue Devil goes beyond disruption, intervention, and being a channel for abolitionist and decolonial practice, to become a character of voice, hope, and inspiration. Through its performances and gestures the Devil encourages refusal and rebellion against Black and Black queer subjectivity, provides a container for the expression of Black rage and healing, queers race, gender and sexuality, and concocts an alchemy of release and transformation. By embodying and performing the Devil, “a language—a poetics of the human body” (Ford-Smith, 2019), a transmitted epistemology (Taylor, 2003), becomes a strategy for challenging us to change the world.

For more information on the Blue Devil Posse

<https://www.facebook.com/bluedevilposse>
<https://youtu.be/JV5dKViRx8I>





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