

CaribFunk Technique: Afro-Caribbean Feminism, Caribbean Dance and Popular Culture

by

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Abstract: CaribFunk technique, by definition, is a 21st century mutation of foundational dance, fitness, and somatic paradigms. CaribFunk explores the power of the hip wine, female strength, liberation, sensuality and virtuosic ability. I attempt to redefine Black femininity by establishing the relationship between the technique and Caribbean popular culture, and addressing why it is important to Black women in academia. This includes, establishing the Black Caribbean female body and its translation, surveying Caribbean popular culture in pedagogical practice and reinforcing the marriage between Caribbean dance, sensuality, strength and eroticism.

Keywords: Caribbean, Dance, Feminism, Popular Culture

CaribFunk technique, by definition, is a 21st century mutation of foundational dance, fitness, and somatic paradigms. I have taken elements of classical ballet, modern (Martha Graham, Lester Horton, and José Limon), Pilates, yoga, fitness, and Afro-Caribbean (traditional and social) techniques and created a system of movement that has several entry points that dancers and non-dancers alike can access. CaribFunk explores the power of the *hip wine*, female strength, liberation, sensuality, virtuosic ability and eroticism. I will discuss how these elements translate into an actual technique and doctrine. Junkanoo, Carnival, and the Dance Hall experience take precedence in the genesis of this nuevo technique. In this article, I will identify the marriage of aesthetics termed *The Trinity*, which includes European, African, and Caribbean influences. Readers/dancers are introduced to a technique that is anchored in classical ballet and modern dance forms, also recognizing the rhythmic, earthy and uninhibited Afro-Caribbean vocabulary that is Pan African in its proclivity of derivation. Taking the premise of *The Trinity*, the ideology of the juxtaposition of traditional versus nontraditional and the explorations of the vertical versus the horizontal, I argue that CaribFunk needs its place as a respected genre besides ballet, modern, and jazz techniques and that it is an important contribution to Pan African and Women and Gender Studies.

Dancers participating in a CaribFunk class are not only engaging in a movement study, but it is also an interdisciplinary approach including historical, cultural and ethnographic experiences that incorporates mind and body connections and reflections. CaribFunk technique has global representation and influences of popular culture through the channels of ethnomusicology, anthropology, ethnochoreology, and history, thus uniting dancers through a nuevo movement language-a patwa. I will also attempt to redefine Black femininity by establishing the relationship between the technique Caribfunk and femininity, addressing why it is important to women in academia and identifying terms that are inherently connected to the ideology of CaribFunk. This includes establishing the Black Caribbean female body and its translation, surveying Caribbean popular culture in pedagogical practice and reinforcing the marriage between Caribbean dance, strength, sensuality and eroticism.

The notion of femaleness, strength and sensuality are concepts that are often not congruent or interrelated. My interest centers upon defining Black femininity, which for decades, has been ignored. Black and feminine by European definitions was "...grotesquerie as dark-skinned, anatomically excessive, and sometimes even as physically strong in a Europeanized context that equated femininity with weakness" (Hobson 12).

Therefore, I explore the power of the *hip wine* and how it is used as an intersection between *The Trinity*, aesthetics, and culture. This virtuosic ability denotes promiscuity and is often deemed as erotic and unrespectable.

Conversely, this article demonstrates how CaribFunk technique empowers women and encourages them to reclaim their bodies and sexual identities. CaribFunk is used as an agent to build confidence and feminine expression. CaribFunk redefines Black femininity kinesthetically, thus promoting discourse concerning femaleness, sensuality, sexuality and strength. As a Black, Caribbean woman living in the United States, it is important for me to acknowledge identity, and to express my views on these issues through channels that are relevant to me and the population of women I teach in academia. My Caribbean-ness, nationalistic expression and feminist essence reign supreme in my educational domain as I analyze popular Caribbean culture in my pedagogy. Conversations concerning this ideology frequently pose questions that challenge decency and family values and expand the Western-colonial gaze. Canvassing the 1800's, I will acknowledge the image of Sara Baartman, the "Hottentot Venus," and its impact on today's culture. These images evoke a variety of negative feelings, perceptions and insecurities about how society views the Black female body, "this presentation of the unfeminine black female body as grotesque links back to the spectacle of the Hottentot Venus, whose body is presented not in terms of this hyper-muscularity but in terms of hyper-sexuality, or excessive femininity through emphasis on her supposedly prominent buttocks" (Hobson 13). Sara Baartman, or the "Hottentot Venus," is arguably the most dominant representation in literature on the subject matter. This South African, Khoisan woman's body was placed on display in England and France, thus rendering her the motif of Black sexuality and ugliness or grotesquerie. Her steatopygia and enlarged labia were of particular interest, obsession, and mutilation, even after her death, as she was used for scientific experimentation.

Lastly, I will examine 21st century Dance Hall and Carnival Queens who advocate sexual dominance and promote female empowerment through invitations to *dutty wine*, chanting, "roll it and control it" and informing audiences "how wicked inna bed" they are. I will analyze and deconstruct the lyrics of Tami Chynn's "Neva Know", Destra's "I Dare You", Alison Hinds' "Roll it Gal," and Patrice Roberts' "Looking Hot;" These women advocate for control, embody strength, invite and critique men's sexual game and are sexy! These Caribbean women's sexual agency describes the feminist perspective that permeates throughout the technique. I do believe this is the *gray* area that Joan Morgan addresses in her rude gal vernacular in the book, "*When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost*" where she challenges the Feminist Movement.

What does this mean for the 21st century woman or the 21st century woman in academia? How does she respond to, acknowledge and access the devices CaribFunk promotes? When a woman giggles as I start "speaking with my pelvis," dynamically dipping and suspending the rotation of my hips, it is confirmation that there is a level of distress and tension, particularly when I discuss sensuality, sexuality and eroticism as a means of expression. I teach a population of women between the ages of 19 -25, and these are my observations.

I most often use myself as an example of stereotypes and prejudices that people experience when they look at my body. Quite often, adhering to the conservative decorum and aesthetics of business attire, I am donned in a classic button down shirt and trousers; one would be disillusioned by the cloaked body canvas that is tattooed, pierced, surgically enhanced, sexually articulate and empowered; I am symbolically referencing my European and African heritage. I teach that CaribFunk is an exploration of sensuality and expression with little emphasis on sex. Students discover the difference between sensuality and sexuality and how they both have strong roles in the technique. Tania Isaac states, “accepting of the sensual body without the intrusion of sex” (Sloat 262). This statement truly encompasses my ideology, but how do you communicate this message to a group of women who are insecure about their bodies, their hips, breasts, thighs and derrières? They view these gifts as fragmented symbols that they only associate with negative sexual experiences. I am not selling sex or “hot pu#\$y,” CaribFunk technique educates and empowers young women to find their voice and encourages them to free themselves from insecurities about their bodies.

The idea of the Black female body as being hypersexual, erotic, freakish, and grotesque by colonial imperialist and western culture has severely affected the perception of how women of African descent view their bodies in the 21st century. Illustrations of this doctrine date back to the 17th century where the “Hottentot Venus” was on exhibit in England and France; exploiting her anatomy specifically her derriere and labia; notably the body parts that are used to define Black women and their sexuality i.e. “her fat a#@ and hot p#\$y”. It is profoundly evident through enslavement in the Caribbean and North America that Black women were demoralized and brutally beaten, raped and left to breed for and become the mistress to the plantation owners. These *wounded black bodies* have been told for centuries that they are less than their Caucasian counterparts, deemed as “other,” by being relegated to animalistic terms and treatment. This Western conceit has been engrained in Black women. I believe this has affected the way in which Black women view their own bodies and express themselves sexually. I see myself not as an icon, but as a tangible and accessible image and representation of the sensual, confident, independent, empowered, sexually sophisticated and intelligent Black woman representing the Caribbean, North America, and academia.

In the essay, *Coming Out Blackened and Whole: Fragmentation and Reintegration in Audre Lorde’s Zami and the Cancer Journals*, Lorde contextualizes the mind, body, and soul connection:

Audre Lorde’s work focuses on the physical existence, emphasizes the literal meaning of incorporation, of putting one’s self into a body, or in this case, of speaking of one’s self in one’s own body. The intellect lives and operates in the body. The heart and soul express themselves through the body. The body manifests the ills of an oppressive world that is especially punishing to women and poor people and people of color (Alexander 233).

Her comparison of language to kinesthetic vocabulary is stunning. This concept and familiarity does not exist in the lives of the women whom I teach in academia. I aspire to impart this awareness in my CaribFunk course. Our *bodily truths* and *biomythographies* are transcribed through the CaribFunk technique, though rarely translated with clarity and confidence. I define biomythography as the integration of life stories about others and ourselves, that are either factual, contrived or embellished.

The lives of the young women I teach, many experiencing and enduring a host of episodes, delight in the opportunity to express their hearts and souls in a safe space. I offer loving critiques that encourage and nurture when they transcribe their stories. Conversations of sensuality, femaleness, and what that means are included in each session. They intently listen and attempt to recreate my story and *bodily truth*. I encourage these women to tell their own stories and include their own concepts of *biomythography*. Admittedly, I confess that this is a process that is not easily achieved. Oppression is usually the source of resistance that I encounter. This plays out through the rigid, stifled and stoic responses that are both verbal and non-verbal. Encouraging oppressed, young women to accept their bodies, claim their sexuality and sensually and articulate discourse through the pelvis can be a daunting task. Family values, pop cultures' definition of the Black female body as being hyper sexual, the over exposure of the Black female body, slavery, and colonization have impacted these women and affected how they express themselves kinesthetically. The CaribFunk class is not just a movement experience, but it is also a social, cultural and historical exploration. We discuss the history of the Caribbean, enslavement, colonization, the dances and their significance, and how popular culture has been influenced by these elements. The term culture of dissemblance is of particular issue, especially when confronting female oppression. In a sense, one is misrepresenting themselves to a certain degree, and masking and concealing inner turmoil concerning their sexuality:

...This term is used to describe a seemingly prevalent mandate for African American women's silence about their intimate lives in response to historical overexposure of black female bodies in public spaces (e.g., the side show stage and auction blocks). This practice of 'dissemblance' also encouraged black women to create masks and facades of openness while concealing their own sexuality...by dissemblance, I mean the behavior and attitudes of black women that create the appearance of openness and disclosure, but actually shielded the truth of their inner lives and selves from their oppressors. (Hobson 58-59)

Addressing these issues is often challenging. These wounded, Black, female bodies are products of slavery and colonization; factored in with the images of the Black Venus, Sable Venus and Sara Baartman, recovery and healing are imperative and ongoing but, not before the true comprehension of what occurred is brought to the forefront of people's consciousness.

Who are these women, and what exactly is their role in today's obsession with the *derriere, batty, or bungy*? Medically defined as steatopygia or protruding buttocks, and dissafectionally referred to on the streets by men and women of various races as "fat a#\$," causing women to have various relationships with their butts. How has this effigy impacted the thinking and representation of Black women decades later? This is the image that has and continues to define Black beauty. This colonial, puritanical credence pervades our culture; a legacy that challenges Black women to take a second look because what society deems as beautiful does not include us.

In order to introduce the origins of CaribFunk, it is imperative that I outline my history, influences, trials, and confusion that comprise this journey. I was born in Freeport, Bahamas, and raised in Nassau and Miami, Florida. I was sensitized and aware of the colossal and profound disparities between Caribbean and American culture. Raised middle class and afforded a supreme private school education, schooled among the children of dignitaries and prominent businessmen and women. Surrounded by educated and professional men and women, I lived in the Bahamas, a country that was Black in population, power, and identity; I grew up strong and socially empowered. Here is where I received my first introduction to classical ballet. My teachers' approach to dance was militant and greatly impacted my pedagogy and work ethic. Crossing the ocean, I arrived in the states, unaware of my Caribbean-ness and identity until I was enrolled in elementary school, something was different. There were lots of lighter skinned people that seemed to think I was uncommon. I spoke colorfully, highlighting my accent and word choices, and wrote in the King's English.

Maintaining my Caribbean identity, I went home to the Bahamas for spring, summer, and Christmas breaks to the smell of fish frying, the tangy taste of conch salad and the sweetness of guava duff. I loved going home. I eventually moved back to the Bahamas for high school and I was soon thrust into a less blissful experience. There was an interminable discussion on respectability and order, which resulted in the cessation of all dancing. I was never given a concrete answer on the decision and I was shattered. The only kinesthetic conversations I engaged in were at *bashments, fetes* or parties. While attending social affairs, I was incessantly bombarded with Tania's Isaac's question, "to wine or not to wine...and if we do wine, how far do we go?" (Sloat 251). I asked myself this because I always seemed to encounter lots of negative responses from my performances.

One incident occurred when I was sixteen years old and was in love with life, dance, and music. I attended a sweet sixteen party, never known to be shy; I was always the first on the dance floor to showcase my expression and artistry. My interest was always in aptitude and artistry, rather than the impartation, or invitation of sex or eroticism as defined by a Western patriarchal, society.

How was I going to maintain my deep second position, *juk*, roll, rotate, dip and undulate? In doing so, eventually, I was asked to stop dancing. Does that response confirm Cynthia Oliver's description of calypso "...spiritual, sexual, proper, and improper" (Sloat 6)?

Why was I asked to stop dancing? I was demoralized, devastated and embarrassed. This question has followed me throughout my adulthood and forced me to further investigate colonial influence on a country that is saturated with imperial ideologies and practices. Could this have anything to do with obsession with puritanism and virtuous demonstrations? I also questioned if I was at fault or if I really did do something wrong:

...Black female batties are let loose and uninhibited in glorious celebrations of flesh and sexual energy. Even though such displays have historically been characterized as 'riotous and disorderly,' such movements of the batty, invite a public discourse that challenges colonial constructs of 'decency' and 'white supremacy' (Hobson 89).

Another equally demoralizing incident occurred during a high school assembly. My best friend and I both performed solos. He emerged from a white sheet, and wrapped his sinuous legs around his neck. It was definitely a provocative and erotic performance and more memorable than mine. My performance, which was hardly sexual or sensual, displayed the classical training in which I studied at the time. I had not been introduced to CaribFunk or the sensual conversations of the *hip wine* at that point. After the performance, a female administrator informed me that my performance was inappropriate and women/ladies should not dance in that manner. Once again, I questioned my role in this attack and blamed myself. This woman had placed her own insecurities on me, which denounced my Black womanhood, sexual expression and visibility. I carried that prosthetic with me for over a decade. How do the politics of prostheses manifest in an academic setting, in the studio and or classroom where women in positions of power and influence are jurying and castigating young women who are uninhibited and visible? As a culturally enslaved puritan, how does one navigate this attitude? The question posed involves expression of self and identity, and whether engrained and traditional ideologies on appropriateness are representations of others. Audre Lorde addresses this, "discussing the politics of prosthesis, she talks about carving one's physical self to someone else's idea of correctness rather than to one's own sense of symmetry" (Alexander 227). Now, as a mature, educated, and sexually experienced woman; I propose that the response of the administrator to my performance is based on her own sexual repression, jealousy, and struggles with sexual politics. But, is this not how women respond to each other anyway? That has been my experience as an adolescent and continues into my adulthood. Tattooed, pierced, double d's and confidant, my hips sway in deep conversation with the earth as I repeat my mantra, "speak with your pelvis and own your sensual self."

How is that wrong? How is being free and liberated translate as inappropriate and vulgar? Shayne Lee quotes Evelyn Higginbotham in his book, *Erotic Revolutionaries: Black Women, Sexuality and Pop Culture* by stating that she “identifies as the ‘politics of respectability’ in which black women suppress or deny erotic expression and advise those around them to do the same” (Lee viii). How irresponsible is that?

Digging deeper into the psyche of a woman who would not or could not offer what bell hooks identifies as a loving critique to an impressionable sixteen-year-old girl infuriates me. She also neglected to address the issue of inappropriateness and respectability with the male dancer. Was she imposing her 2nd wave feminist views and ideas of patriarchy on me? Are women harboring so much hurt and resentment concerning their own sexual histories and the impact slavery and colonization has and still has on their bodies that they cannot reach out to their younger students, friends, sisters and daughters and help instead of hurt? This Black female administrator projected her own lack of sexual agency and identity on to me and, she could not view the Black female body in a positive context. “... Slavery instituted a momentous assault on black sexual identity” (Lee ix). Even if her comments were legitimate, why not lovingly approach me with insight that is meant to encourage growth instead of castrating my dreams as an artist and my expression of my femaleness. Where does this hate come from? Lee equates this system of belief to the profound impact of slavery:

Put simply, the politics of respectability is prevalent in nineteenth –century black feminist thought and influences black women to accept sexual chastity for the greater good of social responsibility. Such sexual sanctimony has roots in slavery, when slave masters consigned black women to the position of slave breeders and objects for sexual gratification; in response to such oppressive conditions, black women learned to de-emphasize their sexuality (Lee ix).

Fast forward to 1999 and the genesis of CaribFunk; I created CaribFunk over 10 years ago when I was a young teacher and choreographer living in Miami, Florida. I am classically trained but as a mover, I always had a non-linear, circular and aquatic rhythm to my vocabulary. I was unaware at the time why I innately moved this way, not realizing that I am a Caribbean woman who grew up around soca, calypso, and reggae and later was introduced to Haitian and West African dance forms when I entered college. I was always interested in fitness and the physical demands that were required of the body in yoga, Pilates, step aerobics, muscle madness, kickboxing, and dance fitness classes; It was a natural progression to incorporate these elements into a system of movement that reflected my interests and what was uniquely a representation of myself.

I was not just a classically trained technician, Afro-Caribbean dancer or fitness buff; I was all of those elements, and I needed to identify and claim each component when developing a nuevo movement vocabulary. It was imperative that this new vocabulary could articulate this. When describing oneself and the multiple layers and textures that contribute to identity, it is crucial to embrace all the elements that distinctly contribute to one's development. Like Audre Lorde who "extorts her readers to recognize how each of them is multifarious and need never choose one aspect of identity at the expense of the others" (Alexander 218); I could not exist artistically with no voice and no method of communication.

CaribFunk is an amalgamation and hybrid combustion of traditional and non-traditional values, theories and practices, femininity, sensuality, feminism, empowerment and raw physicality; a technique that promotes all of these elements is uncharted space. There was nothing that I have experienced that provided all of these components. Lorde created her own genre, *biomythography*, to articulate her complexity, as I have created CaribFunk to represent the 21st century Black woman and mover. CaribFunk is *biomythography*; *Biomythography* is defined as "...neither autobiography, biography, nor mythology, biomythography is all of those things and none of them" (Alexander 219). CaribFunk is my history, the history of other women and myths that have been created, envisioned, lived and told through movement. These are *bodily truths*, as defined by Lorde. The body speaks what cannot be expressed verbally. These conversations spoken and translated through the *hip wine* are often the hidden and repressed desires of the participants I encounter in my classes. Sexual discourse, whether spoken kinesthetically or orally, often generates immense emotion and frustration. It is taboo or forbidden ground in various settings, families, academia or relationships. Discourse on sexuality is a topic rarely embraced in Black communities. "Sexuality is broad and frequently forbidden discursive terrain for many Black women in both writing and other sorts of public lives" (Alexander 235). I encounter a similar response daily with the women whom I teach in academia. These women in my classes do not appreciate their bodies, cannot define or articulate sensuality and sexuality, and are often confused with the definitions; they are shy, feel devalued as women in a patriarchal society that does not respect women (Black women specifically), and they have difficulty finding their voice. American and European sensibilities would rather offer voyeurism as a solution. Is this why there is judgment and these kinesthetic conversations are deemed as obscene, as prescribed through the colonial gaze? "...Obscenity is socially defined, and obscenity laws support patriarchal power relations within society" (Lee 15).

Caribbean culture embraces the *batty*, songs instructing women to "cock up ya bottom and ride," translates as, stick out your butt and gyrate, evoke a certain respect and homage to the derriere. Caribbean culture respects and desires the *batty*, and empowered women "roll and control it." These women invite any man to come test their wine and sexual virtuosity.

Women express sexual agency in Caribbean popular culture by showcasing skills involving the rotation of hip and derriere, demanding and inviting men to gaze. This is not the sentiment in Western culture. In Western culture, Black women have been compared to animals, referred to as “other” and “savage.” Europeans viewed the Black female body as excessively female in comparison to White females, referencing the buttocks and breasts, equating this difference to a relationship to the earth, being Black and exhibiting animalistic traits. “...In their constructions of the ‘Other,’ European men would form connections between land, femaleness, animals, and blackness—all designed to distance white explorers, who remain in the equation civilized, reasonable, and highly evolved in human form—from identification with these beings who are defined as ‘nature’ or as ‘savage’ (Hobson 29). This disparity that was fueled by racial deviation eventually secured the notion that Black female beauty was invisible, which in turn further denied Black female desirability. In addition to being compared to animals, the hierarchical ordering created by Aristotle termed *Aristotle’s Great Chain of Being*, and implemented by imperialists, suggested that the “Hottentot” was the missing link between humans and apes, which led to the scientific scrutiny and dissection of her body. “...And it was the Hottentot...[whom many scientists] considered to be the missing link between apes and humans” (Hobson 29).

The effects of colonization, the exploitation of Baartman and the women affected are colossal. The iconography of Baartman is displayed throughout pop culture in music videos, magazines, and the Internet, and remains in feminist discourse today. Images showcasing the Black female body as hyper-sexed and overly female, with emphasis on the buttocks, challenges Black female identity. “The challenge for post colonial and Black feminist discourse in the face of such cruel history subsequently remains in the continued struggle for restoration of human dignity of Baartman and Others who preceded her or followed her path” (Hobson 54). The question of “is Black beautiful?” is common in my teaching space. Women, in my CaribFunk class, also struggle with how to navigate their curvaceous bodies without being labeled as hyper-sexed, savage or lascivious. CaribFunk’s doctrine, which promotes and embraces the Black female body, is juxtaposed with images of women in pop culture being objectified. Women are under the surveillance and scrutiny of the male gaze and the Black female gaze with emphasis on the *batty*. The exploitation and idolizing of the buttocks has been a racial signifier for decades.

This history—a history of enslavement, colonial conquest and, ethnographic exhibition- variously labeled the black female body ‘grotesque’, ‘strange’, ‘unfeminine,’ ‘lascivious’ and ‘obscene.’ Such negative attitude toward the black female body target one aspect of the body in particular: the buttocks (Hobson 88).

Black female sexuality as a topic for conversation with young women in an academic setting is an alien concept, and frightening for some. These women may be singing about sex, watching it, reading about it and even engaging in some form of sexual activity, but they are not intellectually discussing, nor are they kinesthetically expressing those emotions in an artistic and holistic manner. There is a certain level of fear surrounding the discourse of sexual politics and the Black, female body in American culture. The Black female body is feared, scrutinized, eroticized and dismissed. Surrounded by negative mythology concerning the body, comparisons to other species and referred to as masculine is not an identity I think Black women would like to be associated with. "...Black female bodies are feared and found fascinating not only because of their so called excessive female traits but also due to their possible masculine characteristics" (Hobson 30). "Excessive female traits?" I speculate that this is where the term "hot pu#\$y takes its root? If the "Hottentot" had a pronounced derriere and the term "fat a#\$" was birthed, maintaining its place in pop culture, then, the "Hottentots" pronounced labia must have influenced the term "hot pu#\$y." I have heard this term throughout my adolescent years, and more recently in 2011. I want to connect the two, since I would argue that there is a correlation. When the representation of the Black female body on the screen is provocatively clad and engaging in activity that may raise a few eyebrows; my students sometimes question my proclamation that the Black female body is indeed sensual, sexy and strong. I make this statement all while caressing my thighs and outlining my breasts. Red flag, and call da police, I make no excuses for my love and appreciation of my 6'2 frame, and I welcome every opportunity to embrace and touch my flesh. By expressing myself in this manner, would I be viewed as sexually deviant in the 1800's along with the "Black Venus?" Am I viewed as that now? ...But it also shaped the ways in which black female bodies are viewed: with emphasis on the rear end as a signifier of deviant sexuality. As a result, such associations of black female sexuality with animalistic characteristics emerge not just in pseudoscience studies of human anatomy but also in popular culture" (Hobson 46).

CaribFunk, in a sense, is a form of recovery from these antiquated imperial notions of the Black female body. CaribFunk promotes femininity, sexual empowerment and freedom. Acceptance of your sexual, human self and the language vocabulary to convey that is what CaribFunk offers, a redemption of our Black beautiful selves.

My students' video list for my CaribFunk class introduces them to the world of Junkanoo in the Bahamas, Trinidad and Tobago Carnival, the infamous Jamaican Dance Hall Queen contests and Congolese Soukous dancers gettin on bad (dancing with great ferocity). For the students', the most shocking images are of the Dance Hall Queen contests. The students' levels of respectability and morals vary, and the opportunities for judgment lend itself to inner reflections that are reminiscent of Victorian ideals of female expression. I always find these conversations ironic.

My pedagogy samples and dubs what these women in the videos present in a raw, unabashed and uncensored configuration. What makes my technique, which includes elements of the *dutty wine*, *tick-tock*, and *butterfly* more decent and respectable? Is it the discourse surrounding the movement or its intent, focus, and fusion of European forms with Caribbean cultural dance that make CaribFunk acceptable or more appropriate? I carefully explain the movement influence and its connection to the earth, the marriage between *The Trinity*, which is interplay between the vertical and the horizontal, while the break ya back rhythm of Alison Hinds “Faluma” plays in the background—there is beautiful synergy; The hips and pelvis meet at the intersection of sensuality and sexuality, presenting a serious dilemma for the dancer. Do you move forward and pass into the next zone, which includes being open to all possibilities the technique offers?

I instruct the class to bring “da fiyah” during the tendu combination, which is not the usual commentary in other dance forms. Why does certain music dictate specific etiquette? I do not ever recall wining my waist at the barre with the hottest Caribbean tunes lick off or playing. I have never experienced a Carnival, Junkanoo, or Dance Hall vibe in a technique class. Junkanoo, Carnival, and the Dance Hall experience evokes such a powerful hypnotic eruption in the body that it became clear that I needed to include these cultural expressions in my pedagogy and methodology. I am interested in transferring that energy into a studio setting, without containing or censoring the movement vocabulary or the lyrics that established an environment of female sexual empowerment and sexual control. I want to recapture that raw, cultural ambiance, and train dancers to quickly access it efficiently so, that they may apply it to the technique that thoroughly exploits the tendu, pliè, and contract/release theory while chippin down de road or dancing down the street.

What are the social ramifications when dancing in a particular way and in a specific manner? This issue of respectability never really vanishes, and the colonial gaze is pervasive. Both Cynthia Oliver and Tania Isaac allude to the notion of respectability and the ramifications of wining up in Sloats’ text, *Making Caribbean Dance: Continuity and Creativity in Island Cultures*. Oliver represents St. Croix and Isaac, St. Lucia, share parallel commentary on the subject. There is a division of social class based on the exhibition of Afro centered movement, and engaging in African influenced dance translates into having loose morals. This imperialist, oppressive imposition still prevails throughout the Anglophone Caribbean. “In the Anglophone Caribbean, such as Jamaica and Trinidad, their dances fell under constant imperialist and elitist surveillance” (Hobson 92). That persecuting gaze was a part of my history in the Bahamas, and was the impetus for me to create a vocabulary that challenges an antiquated doctrine. American Society placed little value on the African presence and contribution on Black culture. In fact, systems of class have been instituted to further separate, socially impoverish, and culturally disenfranchise Blacks of many societies. As women, we question our Blackness, beauty, decency, and value. Tania Isaac states:

Embedded in the culture are patterns of separation between classes that are the entrenched remnants of the historic lack of value placed on the very central African presence in 'The New World.' We argue over what is sophistication, what is classical, what is valuable, what is creole and what is not, what is African, tribal or European, civilized, modern. What is vulgar or not (Sloat 251).

I surmise that CaribFunk promotes sexual agency. The movement vocabulary empowers women and engenders positive body images and a renegotiation of their sexual memoirs. Afro-Caribbean popular culture is essential in my pedagogical practice and discourse on female empowerment. Soukous, reggae and soca permeate the movement vocabulary, which unite participants kinesthetically. "...I draw heavily on the cultural movement that defines my generation..." (Morgan 61). Using popular Dance Hall and Carnival divas to support this proclamation is key to my Black Caribbean feminist position. I advocate that sensuality, strength, and empowerment are achieved through the *hip wine*.

I agree with Shayne Lee when he states, "my central concentration is that popular culture can function as a location for feminist politics by affording women access to subversive sexual scripts and new discourses of sexuality to renegotiate their sexual histories" (Lee 8). CaribFunk encourages the inclusion of Caribbean women in pop culture and invites Black women in academia into the conversation, two areas that have been underrepresented. Therefore, this arena for Black, Caribbean feminist discourse is crucial.

When first listening to "Neva Know" by Jamaican diva, Tami Chynn, you are immediately drawn into the scene by the introduction that includes a challenge for sexual play. Tami sets the scene with authority; thus, heightening your interest and increasing your desire to join the challenge. The sweet pulse dictates an authoritative and confident position; never straying from the sensual undertones and soft melodic timbre of her voice. The chorus is a glorious declaration of the failure and shameful attempt of her sexual encounter with her male counterpart:

Bet ya neva know
Seh mi woulda wicked inna bed (bed)
Seh mi woulda wicked inna bed (bed)
Seh mi would be mashin up ya head (head)
Seh mi would be mashin up ya head (head)
You waan see the look pon him face
When mi bubble pon mi head

Watch him tear up the spread
Neva know
Seh mi woulda wicked inna bed
Seh mi woulda run the same
(Chynn, Tami. "Neva Know.")

When I first played this song for my students, they vibed to the track because of the rhythm, but the choreography had no texture. This opened the door to discourse on female sexual agency, sensuality and male subordination by women. I informed my class that the artist was actually telling this man how he underestimated her sexual skills and virtuosity. When she stood on her head and gyrated, he nearly lost his mind. The class conversation, at this juncture, deals with sexual expression, virtuosity, and confidence. A second run of the choreography sets the stage for various degrees of translation and interpretation of the lyrics. The choreography matched the intensity of the statement, "Seh mi woulda wicked in the bed." The dancers sat in a deep second position and isolated their torso, reminiscent of a percussive contract/release phrase, finishing the phrase with body rolls that eventually bring the dancers to a standing position. Do they understand the implication of Tami's lyrics? I believe they grew to have an appreciation of what sexual agency is and that it is achievable in different ways. Tami renders her suitor motionless and complicates his efforts to gain sexual control over her, "him neva know mi wild when me bubble pond dat/now him all a bawl bout mussle contract." (Chynn, Tami. "Neva Know.") Her suitor cries out in pain and complains of a muscle contraction due to her wildness when she subdues his manhood. He is conquered and left to wallow in his own miscalculation and judgments about her and her sexuality.

Destra invites a man to come her way so she can show him what she can do. She tells him not to waste her time and seals-the-deal by daring him to come and bring it, this is a different type of sexual agency. Destra is assertive, clear and aggressive. She charges him immediately, and informs him that he can take her from behind to sample her smooth moves:

Boy bring de wine,
Doh waste my time,
Come test my wine (I dare you).
Come from behind,
Boy I doh mind
Come test my wine (I dare you, I dare you).
(Destra. "I Dare You.")

The second verse of the song is a sensual and erotic interlude, displaying feminine power and control; executed and negotiated with the pelvis. Destra informs her male counterpart that she is aware he has been eyeing her all night, plotting. She, once again, invites him to do what he wishes; but if he hesitates or expresses a moment of uncertainty, she is moving on to the next:

Baby, ah kno you waitin a long long time (mark-in-it)
Front or behind, ah still have to take de grind
Do wha yuh want to do honey I don't mind (make it quick)
If you only hesitate, wheres de next in line!
(Destra. "I Dare You.")

Black women representing Caribbean popular culture are trailblazing in their proclamation of sexual agency; these women are feminists who represent a brand of feminism that is appealing to women in the 21st century. "Rather than portraying sexy Black divas of popular culture as victims or mere objects of the male gaze, I depict them as feminists who create new scripts and carve out new space for female sexual subjectivity by exerting distinctive brands of sexual empowerment" (Lee 8). Lee concisely encapsulates my focus on creating a new space for discourse on female sexual empowerment. As previously stated, my interest centers on adding a new Caribbean voice, and layer to the conversation, while including a population of young, Black women. These Caribbean female artists are feminists with very distinctive messages surrounding sexual empowerment.

Alison Hinds is promoting female unity and independence; expressing control and liberation, she informs women that they should roll their pelvis and control it. Metaphorically speaking, she is instructing women to take control of their lives. Spoken through and with the pelvis, she states:

Roll is gal, roll it gal
Roll
Control it gal, roll it gal
Roll
Roll is gal, roll it gal
Roll
Control it gal, roll it gal
(Hinds, Alison. "Roll it Gal.")

Proclamations of strength and independence are translated through the pelvis. The pelvis is the central point and the conduit for empowerment. Alison encourages unity and pride, good health and exudes a certain panache that is desirous to her listeners, she tells them once again that they are in control and they run things:

Independent and ya strong gal
And you set di pace
Fit and healthy living long gal
Free yaself gal, you got class and you got pride
Come together cuz we strong and unified
(Hinds, Alison. "Roll it Gal.")

Alison is promoting sisterhood and declaring empowerment on multiple levels. How often are women told this? When are women encouraged to live healthy and strong lives and that we, as women, have class and pride? Those lyrics dictate a certain decorum that is rarely articulated in pop culture by men or women. Therefore, this song is valuable for the brand of feminism it encourages.

Alison promotes education, motherhood, and independence. Never loosing sight of her femininity, she encourages women to show off their sexy bodies and let the world see how beautiful they are, without letting abuse surround, or embody our spirit, energy or space:

Go to school gal, and get ya degree
Nurture and tek care of ya pickney
Gal ya work hard to mek ya money
Roll it gall, roll it gal
If a know ya smart and ya sexy
Neva let dem abuse ya body
Show id off gal and let di world see
Roll it gal, roll it gal
(Hinds, Alison. "Roll it Gal.")

Patrice Roberts' track, "Looking Hot," embraces sensuality and sexuality; she longs for men and women to look at her. Her requests to check out her wining skill, technique and virtuosity are of great importance. Patrice identifies herself as the wining queen, ordering men to step back because they will learn something. She declares her independence and intelligence for those bourgeoisie and imperialistic viewers who castigate from the sidelines. Patrice asserts her sexual independence, and challenges her suitors. She is confident and secure with her sexuality, and imparts a specific script that encompasses strength, control, and liberation:

Good riddim is all I want to keep me looking real sweet
When I start to wine and stick
Boy you can't stand de heat
Let move it slow, I'll show ya
And tremble it so, I'll show ya
I am da wining queen
I can't get defeat
Hold on to the sexy ride
I hope you don't slip and slide
(Roberts, Patrice. "Looking Hot.")

What is it about the pelvis that allows these women to present and articulate their strength and liberation? Each of these women are not afraid of their sexuality. They are sensual and sexy, confident, assertive, and independent. They demand their suitors to look at them as they navigate their sexual interests. In terms of sexual liberation, there is a definite connection to Black, Caribbean feminism and the *hip wine*. There is a language that is taught in CaribFunk that encourages sexual liberation and exploration on myriad levels, this language is not often embraced. There is beauty in the body, the body is beautiful, specifically the pelvis, which is often ignored due to fear.

Women are afraid to touch themselves and embrace the things that make them uniquely women. Touching your thighs, breasts, hips, vagina and lips are a form of expression and should be a daily occurrence. Why are the women I teach in academia afraid to embrace their sexuality and sensuality? The fear of expressing these aspects of their sexuality translates into timid and ungrounded movement. Fear creates a challenge for the dancer. I encounter bourgeois sentiments and puritan family beliefs that are held hostage during my class.

It is important for me to introduce Black feminist theory into my class because the technique is so dependent on the concept of female strength, empowerment, and liberation. It was crucial that I included women into the conversation that were relevant to me and to the technique. I incorporate Caribbean pop culture into my methodology and pedagogy since it is what makes up my theory and practice. Caribbean culture represents who I am as an artist, and as a Black woman. These women paint a different picture of feminist theory; these are Black, Caribbean feminists. Feminism and the power of the *hip wine* are congruent; this kinship has been overlooked and misinterpreted. These Caribbean women articulate that the pelvis is the medium for empowerment, sexual renegotiation, freedom and redemption. “When black women relate to our sexuality, in ways that place erotic recognition, desire, pleasure, and fulfillment at the center of our efforts to create radical black female subjectivity, we can make new and different representations of ourselves as sexual subjects” (hooks 76).

My role is a Black woman, professor, scholar, mentor and Caribbean feminist. Having feminist representation in popular culture, such as Alison Hinds, Beyoncé, Destra, and Janet, is wonderful; but, the women in academia have no accessibility to them. These icons cannot engage them in discourse that is relative to their culture. By the age of 35, a woman should be unambiguous in regard to her feminist voice. How is this possible when there is no mentorship and connection to or from feminists to educate and encourage young women between the ages of 19 -25? Who are preparing these women? Who are the relevant forces that can open the door for discourse on the subject? Most importantly, who can they connect with that represents their medium of interpretation and connection? What form of feminism are they connecting to? Are they even aware that such expression, movement and ideology exists? Black, female students in academia are seeking a voice, which represents them, looks like them, and one who speaks with relevancy and authenticity. “More than any other generation before us, we need a feminism committed to ‘keeping it real.’ We need a voice like our music—one that samples and layers many voices, injects its sensibilities into the old and flips it into something new, provocative, and powerful” (Morgan 62). I accept the term *new feminist chic*. Shayne Lee defines *new feminist chic* as, “strong, smart, edgy, ambitious, socially-conscious, independent women who implicitly encourage new generations toward sexual agency, exploration and empowerment” (Lee xiv). I am seeking a feminist script that represents me. Is it possible many women feel that same way? I believe that feminism comes in various sizes, forms and styles. *New feminist chic* women walk and present themselves differently in comparison to the women prior to the 21st century. Unorthodox in their performance, language and aesthetic, they are still feminist; I am unorthodox and always have been; there is no one voice or doctrine that defines feminist theory and practice, CaribFunk embraces this ideology.

The lives that are changed and the new awareness that is revealed indicate the impact and effectiveness of my work. Hip-hop remixes, dubs, and samples elements from previous decades, fusing it with contemporary voices and ideologies thus, resulting in a style that represents many generations. CaribFunk and the brand of feminism Joan Morgan speaks on is centered on these same principles:

We need a feminism that possesses the same fundamental understanding held by any true student of hip hop. Truth can't be found in the voice of any one rapper but in the juxtaposition of many. The keys that unlock the riches of contemporary black female identity lie not in choosing Latifah over Lil' Kim, or even Foxy Brown over Salt-N-Pepa. They lie at the magical intersection where those contrary voices meet—the juncture where 'truth' is no longer black and white but subtle, intriguing shades of gray (Morgan 62).

There are three terms that ripple through the veins of CaribFunk, those terms are sensual, strength, and the erotic. Sensuality is the awareness of one's sexuality and senses and knowing your body without shameful expression; this includes navigating that awareness with confidence and freedom. That freedom is liberating. I am a sensual mover, and I attribute this deep awareness to Oshun, the goddess of love and sensuality. As Oshun adorns and honors her body, CaribFunk participants are encouraged to do so also, as the sensual movements that replicate the flowing rivers awaken their senses. Phrases incorporate José Limon's elements, combined with undulations and sensual shifts of weight that could easily fit right into any Lovers Rock concert. The Congolese hip toss, inspired by Soukous is dominant and includes jumps, isolations and pelvic thrusts and rolls; folklore influenced turns and spirals summon Oshun's spirit, and a break out tribute to Ron Brown (the ball change dip with a syncopated body roll) makes several appearances in the floor work. These dancers steer the course on a voyage from Europe to Africa and into the Caribbean, including all the facets of movement that have influenced the technique. This is never an easy task, but layered and textured with the sweet rhythms of the Congo, Jamaica, Trinidad and Brazil, the journey is magnificent.

CaribFunk endorses the investigation of sensuality while maintaining and building athleticism and strength. Physical and emotional strength are achieved through the CaribFunk technique. CaribFunk technique is fitness based, combining elements of kickboxing, aerobics, various components of Pilates and yoga, classical ballet, modern and Afro-Caribbean traditional and social dances. This integration trains bodies that are fit, strong and agile. Most classes begin on the floor and includes a strenuous sequence that is floor barre inspired with developpe's and ronde jambes, cobras, side planks with leg extensions, pushups, leg pulses and crunches. My goal is to activate all the muscle groups while on the floor because upon standing, students should be ready for the road march.

We are going hard and we are going strong. Strength is being built internally and externally. Dancers are making historical connections, researching the influences of Caribbean popular culture on the technique, engaging in feminist discourse and learning to love their bodies. They become powerful women; CaribFunk builds strong, sexy, and powerful women, termed *power chick* by Shayne Lee. "...The reinvention of the female athletic presence as competent, strong yet sexy... 'power chick'." (Lee 61)

What is eroticism exactly? What does it mean? Does this term fit into feminist theory? In Audre Lorde's essay, "*Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power*," she states:

We tend to think of the erotic as an easy, tantalizing sexual arousal. I speak of the erotic as the deepest life force, a force which moves us toward living in a fundamental way...when I speak of the erotic, then I speak of it as an assertion of life force of women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our work, our lives. (Lorde, on line essay, *Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power*)

Lorde speaks of the erotic in terms of feminine sustenance that breeds strength and power. It allows women to be empowered about their life, work, and bodies. Eroticism equips women with a deep awareness and confidence that prevents them from settling; this is the brand of women that CaribFunk cultivates.

A woman who takes my CaribFunk class approaches the work on several levels; she must engage kinesthetically, enabling her to translate her *bodily truths* through her pelvis. She must also find Oshun, awaken her senses, and physically and emotionally challenge herself in order to find power. Empowerment is achieved through honesty and revelation; when Black women acknowledge and embrace their *biomythography*, then they can move forward to love and accept the body image that has been disrespected, assaulted and abused for centuries. CaribFunk students are 21st century, *power chick* women; they are sensual, strong, erotic and informed about the Black female experience, and there is liberation in those discoveries.

My CaribFunk class varies in age, gender, and race. It is important to note that I teach a wide variety of students, and they all have positive experiences. Many women's lives have been changed through CaribFunk technique. Watching their bodies transform, and their consciousness and confidence build, is the motivation for my interest in Black Caribbean feminism in academia. The conversations that I had with these women have revealed numerous truths, and confirmed the enormous need for this discourse. CaribFunk embraces Caribbean popular culture, thus acknowledging the importance female reggae and soca artists play in embodying Black Caribbean Feminism. CaribFunk is a viable dance technique in academia, with ties to Pan African and Women and Gender Studies, and the anthropology, ethnomusicology and history disciplines.

CaribFunk welcomes dancers and non-dancers alike to experience a cultural adventure. Pan African structures are built on the premise of community; this system welcomes and encourages all participants. CaribFunk is based on this African ideology. It has several entry points, welcoming students with various interests and skill levels of Afro-Caribbean, ballet, fitness, Pilates, modern, or yoga; CaribFunk has something to offer everyone. Ashe!

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