



***WHOSE RIHANNA: DIASPORIC CITIZENSHIP AND
THE ECONOMIES OF CROSSING OVER***

Heather D. Russell, Ph.D.

**Under Rihanna's Umbrella: Caribbean Cultural
Production, Diasporic Citizenship and the Fantastic**

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Rihanna's Ascendancy

- Rihanna burst on the scene in 2005, with her hybrid reggae, hip-hop, R&B style, signaled by her highly successful hit, “Pon de Replay.”
- Audiences hurriedly “googled” to find information about her origins, only to discover she was from Barbados.
- Since her ascendancy ensuing discourses:
 - configurations of Barbadian citizenship
 - Barbadian national pride
 - Victorian notions of female decency
 - the global tourist enterprise
 - the global music marketplace.

Diasporic Citizenship

- I propose here to examine Rihanna in context of what Alexander Weheliye describes as “diasporic citizenship” that black popular cultural practice, translocationality, conflicting/contesting/reinforcing sites of national belonging and myriad realms of black expressivity often engender.

Rihanna: “Face of Barbados”

- Barbadian nation-state invariably feels simultaneously *proud* and *protective* of their native daughter.
- the self-same nation-state must concede the expediency of *marketing* their daughter as “Bajan” commodity.
- Rihanna’s commercial viability rests upon enduring colonial legacies which idealize and reward brown skin.
- Challenge Rihanna poses to Caribbean Victorian notions of female social propriety .
- *First* Barbadian superstar carries burden of representing the entire nation.

Whose Rihanna?

- For a diasporic citizen such as Rihanna “the problematic of belonging” concerns where “subjects locate their political and cultural affiliations” and how these are “circumscribed by various political, economic and cultural constraints.”
- In the face of such competing, national and transnational intransigence, is there a modality in which such circumscribing imperatives can be mitigated against, or at least dexterously navigated?
- Is she truly free to “locate” her political and cultural affiliations where she chooses?
- In the end, if she simultaneously *belongs* to Barbados and to her global consumers, and is thus answerable to (at least) both constituencies, then whose Rihanna is she?

Pretty Li'l Bajan Girl

- On February 22nd 2008, one month after assuming his post as Prime Minister, the Honourable David Thompson (DLP) named Rihanna, “Honourary Youth and Cultural Ambassador” of Barbados.
- To many in Barbados, the honor was long overdue.
- Whose Rihanna? The newly elected Barbados government answered with a resounding and unequivocal: “Ours.”

- Excerpts from poem which appeared in the Barbados *Nation* honoring both Rihanna's Grammy award and her new honour:

- **Rihanna**

“Pretty little Bajan island girl

You have put Barbados on the map of the world

....Your sweetness and innocence go a long way

....Keep up the good work, pretty little island girl

Keep on putting Barbados on top of the world.

... may you continue to be blessed. “

Brand Barbados

- Rihanna has never equivocated on the subject of national belonging. Upon winning the Grammy in 2008, in her acceptance speech she concluded, “Barbados I love you, we got one,”
- Most notable in terms of this symbolic/semiotic articulation of Barbadian national belonging is that fact that Rihanna has featured the Barbados flag and the trident on several of her album covers and in many of her music videos.

- Firestorm in the Barbados media in June 2007.
- Interview with *Entertainment Weekly*, the then 19yr-old musician's response to a question concerning her post-fame home excursions and criticism from the Bajan public, created a firestorm.
- For the next few months ideologically incommensurate responses to the interview dominated media.
- She was Saint. She was Sinner.
- She was a terrible role model for young Barbadian girls to emulate.
- She was the proverbial second coming.

Madonna/Whore

- This dichotomous configuration of Rihanna's identity imbricated within the conventional Madonna/whore paradigm has historical roots, in particular for black women.
- These values persist and perpetuate simplistic, over-determined, and rigid ideas about black female sexual expressivity.
- In the aforementioned celebratory poem, "Rihanna," she is necessarily constructed as a "sweet," "innocent," "girl," aesthetically and ostensibly stripped of sexual allure, sexuality, and womanhood.

- In the months leading up to the bestowal of the 2008 Barbados national honor, Rihanna was caught up in a maelstrom of controversy.
- To be publicly sanctioned in the public domain was to be necessarily stripped of all markers of womanliness -- to be forever the “pretty li’l bajan girl.”
- To be acknowledged as possessing an autonomous sexuality was to be necessarily stripped of all legitimate claims to national recognition.

Good Girl, Gone Bad

Changes in her look



By End of 2007

- Rihanna's sound, her physical appearance, her demeanor, began to reflect a hardening, darkening, anarchic quality
- Rihanna could no longer be legitimately claimed as the pretty li'l bajan girl
- Her declaration of independence!

February 8th, 2009

- Rihanna's then boyfriend Chris Brown punched, bit and choked her.
- Web was inundated with the widest ranging responses imaginable: Many were outraged; Many began blaming the victim.
- Her critics asserted everything from the idea that she had:
 - provoked Brown by hitting him first
 - cheating on him with Jay-Z (long standing false-rumor)
 - given Chris Brown a communicable disease.

Rihanna: The Face of Domestic Violence

- Barbados Press analysts attempted to place the Rihanna/Chris Brown domestic violence incident in broader context suggesting that domestic violence in Caribbean communities “reached epidemic proportions,”
- Public might “*use the heightened awareness created by the assault on Rihanna to launch a new and determined nationwide campaign against domestic violence, for which she could serve as “poster child.”*”

- Refusing to speak publicly about the case until after Chris Brown's sentencing (August 25th, 2009), Rihanna finally broke her silence in her November interview with Diane Sawyer on 20/20.
- Although naysayers have criticized her interview as mere publicity stunt designed to promote her album *Rated R* (2009), according to ABC News' records, the evening after Rihanna's interview aired domestic abuse hotlines experienced a 59% increase in calls, with the teen hotline witnessing a surge of 72%.

Their Rihanna?

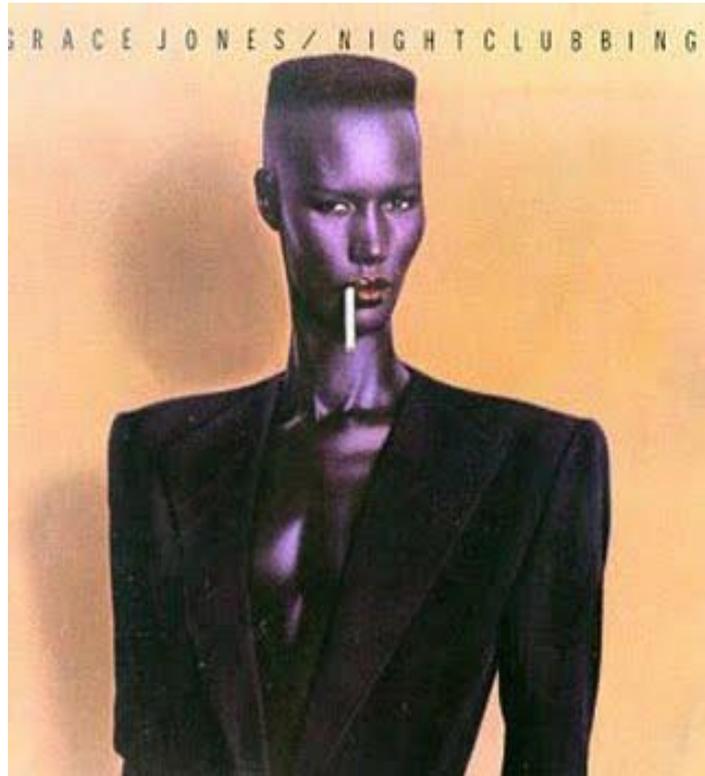
- Having thrown off the historical/cultural/religious residuals which prescribe bourgeois respectability within her nation-state, whose Rihanna is she now?
- Is Rihanna now “the face of domestic violence?” Is she now, *their* Rihanna? I think not.
- If in 2006, the shift from “good girl” to “bad” was embodied by Rihanna’s aesthetic transformations her 2009 incarnation is even more powerfully symbolic and culturally resonant.

Caribbeanity

- If one has been so publicly abused, how does one refuse to be written into, scripted by, such a hugely significant and politically-charged moment as she experienced?
- How does one publicly, metaphorically, aesthetically, inaugurate and unequivocally signal one's transformation from momentary victim to infinite survivor?
- To whom would she/could Rihanna look to find a model? In whose footsteps could she/might she walk as defiantly Caribbean woman artist on the one hand and crossover artist on the other?
- Upon whose forbearing strength might she draw to help dramatize and affirm her Caribbean woman's power?

Grace Jones

**Grace Jones:
Album Cover 1981**



**Rihanna at
Awards Show 2009**



- Grace Jones is iconic, iconoclastic, outlaw, powerful, erotic, androgynous, defiant.
- Rihanna is purposively invoking, and I would add paying homage to Jones is unmistakable.
- The August issue of *Italian Vogue*, featuring Rihanna on the cover created quite a stir in fashion circles in this regard.

“Rihanna Pulls a Grace Jones”



- Jones remains a powerful and alluring iconic symbol whose non-conformist deconstruction of traditional sex/gender roles, invocation of phallic power, hard, edgy, sexuality explodes fully the dichotomy between victim/perpetrator into which Rihanna has recently been read.
- Whose Rihanna? I am in no way suggesting here that Rihanna is merely mimetic, facilely replicating the already-done aesthetic self-representations of her Caribbean predecessor.
- But I would have to argue that if Rihanna were going to define herself alongside, or rather, read herself into a narrative of female Caribbeanity as survivor, warrior woman, baddass bitch, over and against a narrative of innocence despoiled, victim, actor rather than agent, -- her invocation of Grace Jones is brilliant!

Rated R

- Weheliye: ““diasporic citizenship” *refuses to sublimate* the fraught and violent traffic between national and global assemblages; instead it *raucously* brings to the fore the tensions that require complex ways of mediating between contradictory forces as they are scripted and sounded through the bodies and psyches of Afro-diasporic subjects.”
- In her newly released fourth album, *Rated R*, Rihanna articulates precisely such a rupturous and raucous refusal to be improperly utilized (be it globally, nationally, or sociopolitically).

Whose Rihanna?

- We should expect future incarnations.
- While we may not ever conclusively be able to define who she is, we can affirm *whose* she is.
- Unequivocally, Rihanna is today her own complex, contradictory, fluid, Bajan, diasporan, Caribbean, modern female black self.