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Who Going to Take Care of the Baby?" Diasporic Baby Dolls and Carnival Activism

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Abstract

In Trinidad carnival 'Baby Doll', dressed in frilly bloomers and a bonnet, screams at male onlookers to pay for the care of their illegitimate baby and thrusts a white doll into their arms. This traditional carnival masquerade has long been implemented as a form of social commentary on absentee fathers, racial mixing and the rape of black Caribbean women by white men. While the Baby Doll mas has been less visible in Trinidad carnival since the 1930s, it is now being reused and reinterpreted by social activists such as Amanda McIntyre, Eintou Springer, Tracey Sankar-Charleau, Makeda Thomas and others as a way of highlighting feminist concerns, exploring queer sexualities and tackling issues such as teenage pregnancy and sexual abuse.

Over in mainland America, in the New Orleans Mardi Gras, large bands of women dressed as Baby Dolls representing the role of segregated black sex workers under Jim Crow, take to the streets to proudly 'walk raddy' in defiance of sexual, economic and racial oppression to strengthen the bonds of sisterhood.

This article will examine the complex ways in which the Baby Doll mas has reflected, resisted and challenged capitalistic sexual and racial politics. It will outline the history of the mas in New Orleans and Trinidad and explore the multiple manifestations of Baby Doll as a form of political activism in contemporary carnival culture.

Key Words: Baby Doll; Carnival; Masquerade, Caribbean, New Orleans; Madi Gras; Feminism, Sexual Politics; Gender; Activism.



Figure 1. Amanda McIntyre, *Midnight in Belmont: St. Francis Church 2*. Photographer, Jason Audain (*Tout Moun: The Journal of Cultural Studies*, 2021)

Introduction

The Trinidadian Baby Doll: Origins

Baby Doll was a popular figure in French influenced carnivals in the Francophone colonies. An *en bebe* character and mas was first documented by the journalist Lafcadio Hearn in the Carnival of Saint-Pierre in Martinique in 1888 (McIntyre and Wegner, 2020). In Trinidad Carnival, the character was an important mas figure to Martinican immigrants who relocated to the island after the French revolution. In late nineteenth-century Trinidad there are 'reports of men and women parading in women's nightdresses, sometimes short and frilly', although the name 'Baby Doll' came later (Franco in Vaz-Deville, 2018, p.67).

The earliest recorded Baby Doll mas in Trinidad dates back to 1885; the description of the mas is found in the book *The De Lima of Frederick Street* (1981) by Arthur De Lima. The De Lima family were well-known jewellers in Port of Spain, and Arthur De Lima explains that in 1925 his father recounted the story of a Baby Doll mas in the carnival of 1885. De Lima's father described how uncomfortable the mas made him feel:

I did not enjoy the 'old mas' women with cloth babies in their arms who stopped to claim me every time as the father of their child. They embarrassed me, and I quickly paid up the shilling they demanded.

Six children were pinned on me by these money makers.

(De Lima, 1981, pp. 47-48)

In 1930 the Baby Doll mas is also described in Michael Anthony's book *Parade of the Carnivals* (1930) under the headings 'ole mas' and 'mothers with babies in their arms seeking fathers' (Anthony in Henry, 2020, p.48). In a 1988 interview with Trinidadian carnival bandleader Stephen Leung describes the mas as a 'begging mas' popular with women from lower socio-economic backgrounds as it allowed them to make a bit of money during carnival (Leung in Vaz-Deville, 2018, p.68).

Baby Doll: Symbol of Empowerment or Desperation?

There is clearly much more to the Baby Doll mas than simply 'begging'. In Trinidad the mas character is closely linked to the figure of the 'Jammed', a woman considered under the 'diameter of respectability'; an 'unruly body', who, from the late nineteenth-century 'retaliated against her dehumanizing position in society' (Henry and Plaza, 2020, p.5). The Jammed character is brought to life in Tony Hall's 2002 play 'Jean and Dinah, Who Have Been Locked Away in a World Famous Calypso Since 1956 Speak Their Minds Publicly', 'inspired by the title of the Calypso song 'Jean and Dinah' sung by Mighty Sparrow. The play was performed by Susan Sandiford and Rhoma Spencer who proudly describe themselves 'modern day Jammeds' (Hall in Riggio, 2004, p.166). Jammed women can be interpreted as a disruptive force who call for a revaluation of the role of women in Trinidadian society by refusing to ascribe to social etiquette and patriarchal power structures.

Carnival scholars often identify two competing ideologies in Trinidad carnival; traditional mas, to which performances like Baby Doll belong, and pretty mas, which is the beads and feathers bikini-style mas. We have now clearly outgrown this dichotomy; women are using both 'pretty 'and 'traditional 'mas in ways that not only celebrate their sexuality but also to create a platform for social activism and a social justice.

The contemporary critics of 'pretty mas 'are numerous, however; carnival scholar Dwane Plaza, in *Carnival is Woman: Feminism and Performance in Caribbean Mas* (2020) calls pretty mas the 'overrepresentation of the female carnival body', a body which is 'excessively sexualized 'and therefore supports patriarchy, objectification, misogynistic treatment and 'persuasively affirms the Caribbean as a sexualized paradise where certain exotic Caribbean women are available and willing to denigrate themselves in order to be noticed and celebrated '(Henry and Plaza, 2020, p.9).

Caribbean feminists such as Anna Kasafi Perkins strongly challenge this type of conservative view and argue that women on the road in carnival are 'revaluing their formerly owned and colonised bodies ' (Perkins, 2011, p. 373). Perkins insists that the masquerade of sequins and bikinis is in fact a progressive one - one which celebrates the female body in public through bodily transgressions, and assaults conservative notions of a woman's 'proper place '(Perkins, 2011, p. 368). In my view, playing mas normally centers around confidence building, sexual self-determination, joy and pleasure, and importantly, politics. Connections can be drawn here between the theories of Jamaican academic Carolyn Cooper on the

role of women in Jamaican dancehall culture, which she argues centres on an 'act of self-conscious female assertion of control over the representation of her person '(Cooper in Plaza p. 24/p.11).

The history of the Baby Doll mas, however, is not rooted in liberation politics but in the sexual servitude of black women both during and after the plantation period. Similarly to the dichotomy formed in the theorisation of pretty vs traditional mas, there are two popular competing interpretations of Baby Doll at play both inside and outside academia. One interpretation positions Baby Doll as representative of a weak, downtrodden woman, while another sites the mas as deeply empowering. Frances and Jeff Henry explain that traditionally Baby Doll is depicted as a young, shallow, unthinking, promiscuous female who has a child with a man she has briefly met '(Henry & Plaza, 2020, p.47). She is confused and can't take care of her baby after a fling. In this reading she becomes symbolic of the 'ultimate symbol of the oppression of African women '(Henry and Plaza, 2020, p.47).

Pamela El Franco also demonstrates that that in Trinidad the performance of the Baby Doll 'categorized her as promiscuous and immoral', as she was an unwed mother searching for her baby's father (Franco, 2018, p. 68). The mas could be interpreted as enacting the role of a woman who slept with several men (with possible hints towards prostitution) and as a result cannot identify her baby's father.

However, an alternative reading of Baby Doll in Trinidad sees her as symbolic of upholding one aspect of the ethics of a society. Baby Doll is asking for support; she loves her child, she is an innocent mother drawing attention to her vulnerability and abandonment. In the

Caribbean motherhood is central; there is a strong expectation, traditionally, to run the home and often no choice but to do so alone due to the persistent abandonment ‘baby fathers’. In this reading, Baby Doll is re-positioned and forms a part of the moral compass of Trinidadian society (Franco, 2018, p.69).

Despite the numerous conflicting readings of the Baby Doll mas as either empowering or symbolic of desperation, the white baby Baby Doll carries delivers a clear message. This is an unambiguous comment on the rape, sexual abuse and power relations between black women and white men on the island.



Figure 2. Belmont Baby Dolls, ‘Carnival Baby.’ Photographed by Arnaldo James. Carnival Tuesday, Port of Spain, Trinidad, 2019. (Thomas, 2020).

Stay Home and Mind Baby: Child Support Legislation

Key to understanding the role of Baby Doll in Trinidad are the changes to child support legislation on the island. In both the pre and post emancipation period, illegitimate children were fathered with Black women by white men and no financial support structure was in place to support either mother or child. Black women were at the very bottom of the social and economic

hierarchy; they were stereotyped as overly sexed and of loose morals. White French Creoles in particular in Trinidad had black ‘concubines’, fathered children with them and offered them no financial support.

In Trinidad there is a clear link to the beginnings of the Baby Doll mas and the 1880 ‘bastardy’ ordinance survey, which called for child support to be paid by men to illegitimate children. This was initially defeated by French Creole men in power, but finally passed in 1888, despite strong resistance from the white male elite. Dr De Boissiere, a prominent planter, doctor and member of the legislative council, spoke on behalf of the French Creole elite and victim blamed. He said that unmarried mothers were the ‘root cause of the problem, ’and there were no deserted children as these women ‘had intercourse clandestinely with several men ’and seduced them – as ‘seduction, in the full meaning of the word, is rare in our midst ’ (Trotman in Franco, 2020, p. 249/p.51).

In 1927 the Legitimation Ordinance in Trinidad No. 8 did allow the courts to track down fathers and ask them to pay child support for their offspring, but mothers would need proof or a marriage and birth certificate, as well as verifying the address of their abode. Many men made it hard for the women to collect this information and single mothers often ended up on the street, homeless, and with no financial support (Franco, 2020, p.70). We can conclude that Trinidadian Baby Doll mas is a clear demonstration and protest against men sexually exploiting black women and their avoiding their responsibilities as fathers.



Figure 3. Baby Doll Meets Midnight Robber', Idakeda Group. (Springer, 2010).

Workin Fuh Deh Yankey Dollar: American Airbase in Trinidad

The Trinidadian Baby Doll also responds to the development of a military base in Trinidad and the sexual politics that ensued. In 1941 a US naval base was developed on the island. The base caused a growth in the sex trade on the island, in particular in bars, brothels and clubs in Port of Spain. In the 1940s the blue-eyed dolls carried by the Baby Dolls represented the sexual relationships and exchanges that ensued between the servicemen and the local Trinidadian women. These relationships were well-documented by Calypsonians at the time, for example in the Harry Belafonte Calypso, entitled 'Brown Skin Girl' (1947), Belafonte sings:

Now the Americans made an invasion
We thought it was a help to the island
Until they left from here on vacation
They left the native boy home to mind
their children

[Chorus]

Singin', "Brown skin girl, stay home
and mind, baby
Brown skin girl, stay home and
mind, baby"

I'm goin' away in a sailing boat
And if I don't come back
Stay home and mind, baby

A cutting response to the patriarchal politics at the heart of Belafonte's calypso can be found in this version of the song in a booklet of 15 calypsos entitled 'Jamaican Calypso Songs' published in the 1950s:

Brown skin gal stay home and mind
yo' baby.
Brown skin gal stay home and mind
yo' baby.
Papa's gone to sea in a sailing boat.
And if he don't come back, *throw 'way
de damn baby.*

(Garnice 2013)

Calypsonian Lord Invader also documented the sexual politics on the island during this period in the famous calypso 'Rum and Coca Cola' (1945) which describes mothers and daughters 'workin Fuh deh yankey dollar';

And when de Yankeys first went to
Trinidad,
Some ah de young girls were more
than glad,
Deh said that de Yankeys treat de
nice
And deh give dem the better price.
Deh buy rum and coca-cola, went
down point Cumana,
Both mothers and daughters,
Workin Fuh deh yankey dollar.

In the Calypsos that use the presence of the air base as a source of 'cheeky' mirth and social analysis, the male singer, as a conduit for a deeply sexist Trinidadian society, positions the women as responsible for either their poverty, their professions as sex

workers, their naiveté or their sex drive, rather than holding the American sailors accountable for abandoning their sexual partners and children. The most problematic calypso responding to the sexual politics of the airbase is aforementioned ‘Jean and Dinah’ (When The Yankees Gon) (1956) by Mighty Sparrow. When carnival Theatre Practitioner and Director Tony Hall responded to Sparrow’s song with his 2002 play ‘Jean and Dinah Who Have Been Locked Away in a World Famous Calypso Since 1956 Speak Their Minds Publicly’, he fleshed out the characters of Jean and Dinah and showed their power, vulnerability and humanity. Mighty Sparrow’s carnival road march is a comment on the prostitution that the bases supported and the desperation of female sex workers following the closure of the bases. The girls are feeling ‘bad’ as there are no more ‘Yankees in Trinidad’, but this leads to, much to the singer’s delight, a fall in their prices for local men who can now ‘get it all for nothing’:

So when you bounce up:
 Jean and Dinah, Rosita and Clementina
 Round the corner posing
 Bet your life is something they selling
 And if you catch them broke
 You can get it all for nothing
 Don't make no row!
 When the Yankees gone,
 the Sparrow take over now

In the 1940s the blue-eyed, blond haired white doll the Baby Doll mas player carried on the streets in carnival carried yet another layer of symbolism in the history of Black female sexual and economic exploitation at the heart of the mas. Having lost the financial support of US servicemen, the

1950s Baby Doll took to the streets accusing local Black men of being the father of her ‘white’ child.

Similarly to the mas in New Orleans, however, there was a decline in the popularity of Baby Doll in the late 1950s and 1960s as Black nationalist and anti-colonial politics took hold on the island. The 1980s saw a resurrection of traditional mas as a resistance to the rise in popularity of female-dominated ‘pretty’ mas, and Baby Doll returned to carnival. Franco argues, however, that ‘this time she was ‘passive, a shell of herself, even if the ‘memory’ of her radical performance



persisted (Franco, 2020, p.71).

Figure 4. View of the 1st Bombardment squadron based at Waller and Carlsen fields, 1941-1945.’ (*Flight Spirit Magazine*).



Figure 5. A promotional still from Tony Hall's play, ‘Jean and Dinah.’ Photographer, Abigail Hadeed (2002).

The Baby Dolls of New Orleans

Today Baby Doll mas is thriving in New Orleans, and its most prolific scholar is Kim Vaz-Deville, Professor of Education and Associate Dean at Xavier university. As both New Orleans and Martinique were French colonies, it is likely that the mas tradition was brought over from the French Caribbean to the US. The New Orleans Baby Dolls do not usually carry dolls and their costumes could be described as a vaudeville-cum-doll outfit, with a frilly apron, a frilled umbrella, silk stockings and garters. There is no thrusting of plastic dolls into the arms of a 'father' figure in the crowd, and no demands for accountability – she does not have a vocal or speech element to her performance. She does ask men in the crowd for money, however, which, when received, is tucked inside her garter belt.

In her book *Walking Raddy: The Baby Dolls of New Orleans* (2018), Vaz-Deville carefully chronicles the cultural history of the mas in New Orleans. 'Walking raddy' is a type of strutting which she describes as a 'flamboyant display – claiming space and one's body and using improvisational strategies to create an unforgettable character', which is typical of the New Orleans Baby Doll mas (Vaz-Deville, 2018, p. 103).

The Baby Doll mas in New Orleans has its roots among the women working in the 'quasi' red light district close to the notorious Storyville red light district in the city. Here 'gambling, drinking and sex for pay were readily available to both black and working-class white men' (Vaz-Deville in Ramsey, 2021). Black and brown prostitutes from this area self-named themselves 'Baby Dolls', an appellation also used by their pimps and 'Sugar

Daddies' to address them. These women were not recognisable immediately as prostitutes as they came from a slightly better part of town than Storyville itself. As a result of its beginnings among sex workers in New Orleans, Baby Doll became closely linked to prostitution as it did during the years of the American air base in Trinidad in the 1940s.

Vaz-Deville draws from an interview with Beatrice Hill, a sex worker in New Orleans who is attributed with starting the first Baby Doll group in 1912. Hill explains that the New Orleans Baby Doll tradition was a result of the competition between her uptown group of sex workers and a downtown group of women working in Storyville itself. Another Baby Doll performer and sex worker told investigator Robert McKinney that she always dressed as a Baby Doll during this period and other women began to emulate her. Vaz-Deville does not push to prove either claim, but demonstrates how by the 1930s the Baby Dolls have their own 'gang' (the New Orleans term for carnival bands or troupes) and had become fully integrated into Black Mardi Gras traditions alongside other traditional New Orleans carnival bands such as the Skeleton gangs, the Indian gangs and the Zulu Social Aid and Pleasure Club parade.

Pamela Franco explains that the early mas fell into two categories, the 'sexy' Baby Dolls (*bebe*) who would dance and sing bawdy songs and the women who dressed prettily and emulated 'little girl' dolls (Franco, 2018, p.67). According to Vaz-Deville, some sex workers playing the Baby Dolls mas would also 'turn tricks' during the carnival parade.

In a 2018 radio interview, Cinnamon Black (Resa Bazile), who plays with the famous Million Dollar Baby Dolls,

explained the appeal of the mas. When she was growing up, she explains, little girls were supposed to be ‘seen and not heard’, while the Million Dollar Baby Dolls she saw for the first time in 1972 in the Mardi Gras parade were wild and rowdy – unruly bodies – and held the promise of liberation from having to be a ‘good girl’ (Black interviewed by Jackson, 2018).

Cinnamon Black explains the important distinction between ‘carnival’ and Mardi Gras ‘in New Orleans; Mardi Gras is a structured parade while ‘carnival’ is chaotic. While Mardi Gras starts and stops at a certain time, carnival happens in the African American neighbourhoods; ‘it’s where the grandmas can sit on their porches with the children and the people who didn’t have the money to go downtown’ (Jackson, 2018). Black loved watching all the different Baby Dolls in the parade and in carnival in her neighbourhood; the re ‘were prissy ones,’ ‘pretty ones,’ ‘wild dancers, some ‘walking raddy,’ and some accompanied music made from banging pots and pans and, later, with a band.

The first Baby Dolls she saw, Brown remembers, wore garters and stockings and asked men to put money in their garter belts. This demonstrates the direct link to the mas and sex work in New Orleans, compared to the mas as a means to highlight the sexual abuse of black women and the need for money to support illegitimate children in Trinidad. It is this strong connection to the sex trade that made it difficult for more ‘respectable’ women to play Baby Doll mas in New Orleans, Brown explains, and the Baby Dolls received a great deal of ‘bad press’. The tradition declined as masqueraders grew older as well as a result of its association with prostitution, becoming particularly unfashionable (as it did in Trinidad) with

the rise of the civil rights and Black Power movements in the 1960 and 70s. There was a push in the 1980s to try and dissociate the mas from prostitution, but the mas saw its big revival post-millennium; ‘the revival of the tradition began in the millennium’, explains journalist Jan Ramsey, with the efforts of three women, Antoinette K-Doe, Geannie Thomas and Eva Perry. Antoinette was apparently very vocal in dissociating her group from ‘the reputation of the Baby Dolls, reminding everyone that the new Baby Dolls were strong, independent women working in legitimate professions’ (Ramsey, 2021).

Since 2016, increasingly elaborate, ornate and flamboyant costumes for Baby Doll competitions have become de rigueur in New Orleans and the Baby Doll mas has become a vehicle of escapism for women. According to Cinnamon Brown, through the costume, performance and dances, women can become ‘other’ to what they are during the week; they can transform. There are a wide range of Baby Doll gangs to choose from who play different versions of the Baby Doll mas; to name a few. The gangs often have a male escort for protection (‘big papa doll’), which echoes the roles ‘pimps’ or ‘sugar daddies’ would play for the original Baby Dolls working in and around Storyville.

The Baby Doll gangs today also enjoy get-togethers; they celebrate each other’s birthdays, exchange Christmas gifts and undertake charitable work in the Black community – as well as ‘celebrating each other’ (Jackson, 2018). A less radical element of the dolls is the teaching of domestic etiquette to younger dolls by the older dolls, which include housekeeping skills, such as how to lay a table, ‘how to get a stain off the floor, how to sew a button, how to hem a pair of pants’, and practical

advice on how to take care of a businesses (Jackson 2018).



Figure 6. The New Orleans Baby Dolls held their annual “Blessing of The Streets” on Saturday, May 1, at their annual gathering on the North Peters side of the New Orleans Jazz Museum. (*Offbeat*, 2021).

Trinidad Baby Doll Today: Mas Activists

While many of the Baby Dolls of New Orleans celebrate their Black sisterhood, their liberation from their daily lives as mothers or wives and undertake important community work, Baby Doll in Trinidad is used as a vehicle for political activism. Many contemporary Trinidadian women mas players are educated, well-travelled, proud of their bodies and have some disposable income, a far cry from the disenfranchised Baby Doll represented in the 1940s mas. In Trinidad carnival, women



Figure 7. Stephanie Leitch, ‘Leslie the Lesbian Doll’; "Ah lookin fah she". Parade of Characters. Traditional Mas Competition, St James Amphitheatre. (Leitch, 2013).

are re-defining themselves as in control of their own sexuality and calling for societal change. There have also been changes to Baby Doll’s costume; no longer is she in a long white dress, but a shorter one in which she assumes a more sexualized and assertive demeanour. In her article ‘The Baby Doll: Memory, Myths and Mas ’ (2021), Trinidadian activist, scholar and Baby Doll performer Amanda McIntyre argues that the mas is now a ‘triad representation ’of doll, girl and women in a single performance.’ According to McIntyre, while the mas may have started as a parody of single mothers, these ‘male-centred politics of respectability [are] dismissed almost entirely in contemporary carnival presentations of the Baby Doll in Trinidad and Tobago ’(McIntyre, 2021, p.4).

The contemporary Baby Doll is not being laughed at or pitied for her situation, but is continuing to be implemented to call attention to the sexual exploitation of women as well as to highlight the taboos of incest and rape. The mas is also a platform through which to explore lesbian, gay, transgender, bisexual, queer and non-gender identities.

Playwright, Actress and Poet Eintou Springer directed and performed in a short film produced by Idakeda, an arts group founded by Springer with Actor and Choreographer Dara E. Healy and Writer and Cultural Consultant Attillah Springer, exploring safe sex and sexual behaviour entitled 'Midnight Robber meets Baby Doll' (2010). Since the film was released, Springer explains that women have been coming to her asking how they can develop the Baby Doll figure and use it for activism.

Hazel Brown, Coordinator of the Network of Advancements for Women, also implements the mas for gender advocacy and performs the character at rallies for women's rights. Another manifestation of the mas was developed and performed by feminist Stephanie Leitch in 2010 through the creation of her mas 'Leslie and the Lesbian Baby Doll', a queer identified character mothering a doll and looking for a wife (McIntyre, 2021, p.5).

Helen Kennedy, in a 2018 Baby Doll mas in association with the Family Planning Association of Trinidad and Tobago, presented a quadruple pram overflowing with sixteen dolls as part of a sexual health campaign and distributed condoms to spectators. In 2020, Mas Designer, Performing Artist and Teacher of traditional mas and folklore Tracey Sankar-Charleau created the Crick Crack Baby Doll mas, 'The Red Thread Cycle – All the

Dead and All the Living', which focused on intergenerational patterns of sexual abuse and violence, while Amanda McIntyre performs the mas for the 'She Right Collective, 'a Caribbean feminist organisation focused on sexual and reproductive health and rights (McIntyre, 2021, p.5).

McIntyre also created a queer Baby Doll mas with researcher Jarula M. I. Wegner in 2019. The mas, entitled 'You are Worthy', saw a Baby Doll couple dressed as 'women' parenting the same child, one of whom was a man dressed as a 'woman'; 'thus affirming transgender, non-gender binary and non-gender conforming family life' (McIntyre, 2021, p.8). Until recently, McIntyre argues, queer culture in carnival was minimally promoted; the 'You are Worthy' performance was in solidarity with the 'legitimacy, inclusion and visibility of marginalized sexualities' (McIntyre, 2021, p.8).

Trinidadian Choreographer and Designer Makeda Thomas forms a part of the Belmont Baby Dolls. Their 2019 diasporic mas was shaped around the ethos of reclaiming and asserting control of their womanhood and connecting back to the history of Baby Doll as well as across the ocean to the Baby Dolls of New Orleans; 'we invoke the jamenttes, the women of Storyville, those women who for themselves define their womanhood, motherhood, and sexuality. And we reject the idea that if we are all of those things, we are not precious' (Thomas, 2020).

The Belmont Baby Dolls also created a series 'Spirit Dolls' to reinterpret the Baby Doll mas in a way that 'subverts the usual presentation' (Lindo, 2019). Makeda Thomas explains that the subversion of the mas is vital, as it was

‘about a mother who is trying to hold someone accountable for a child, and can be played very pitifully.’ She explains that the reaction to the mas in Trinidad has been ‘very disdainful’ (Lindo 2019). She believes that there is a ‘lack of agency and deep critical thinking’ in Trinidadian carnival performance, but hopes to create space of agency for the performer to connect them to ‘their real lives’ through the mas; ‘so it’s not a parody, it’s not funny, so we can talk about what this mas means’ (Lido, 2019). Thomas’s ‘spirit dolls’, created in collaboration with Trinidadian artist Brianna McCarthy, are dolls that combine diasporic materials; African textiles, European lace and fabrics ‘commonly found in Caribbean home’ such as florals and cotton prints. The spirit doll as a diasporic doll is a vessel through which Black women connect with their ancestors as well as with their unconscious selves.

The post-millennial Baby Doll in Trinidad and New Orleans is a vehicle for social activism, sisterhood and change as well as an embodiment of a history of profound gender inequality and exploitation. She is being used by women in carnival to carve out new radical and dynamic political and social spaces. She has become central to the toolkit used to dismantle longstanding patriarchal and colonial legacies. This new Baby Doll does not need taking care of; she can take care of herself and is active in her demand for agency and accountability. Her protestations will not cease.



Figure 8. Makeda Thomas and Brianna McCarthy’s spirit doll. Presented for “Fluid Black: Dance Back”, the 4th Collegium for African Diasporic Dance Conference at the Rubenstein Arts Center at Duke University, 21 February 2020. (Thomas, 2020).

“A girl’s doll is herself”

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