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MaComère: Journal of the Association of Caribbean Women Writers and Scholars

They Call Me Baby Doll: Challenging Shame in Mardi Gras and Trinidadian Carnival

Emily Zobel Marshall and Cathy Thomas

The Women in Carnival Project: Framing the Autoethnographic

In Trinidad Carnival, 'Baby Doll', dressed in frilly bloomers and a bonnet, screams at male onlookers to pay for the care of their 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.

Over in mainland United States, 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 assert their agency despite the precarity of their social condition. Whereas current examinations of the Baby Doll masking or masquerade tradition focus on regional specificity and are believed by some scholars to have developed independently of each other, the comparative approach of this article seeks to examine the connections in Baby Doll masking and masquerade performances.

We are both Carnival scholars of Caribbean heritage who participate in Caribbean Carnival and write academic and creative work on Carnival. As part of a funded international research project focusing specifically on the role of Women in Caribbean Carnival, we have conducted interviews and played the Baby Doll masquerade in New Orleans and Trinidad. Our central argument is that the connections between these masquerades lie in its interpretation as a practice of Black feminist or Womanist resistance. Both the New Orleans and Trinidadian Baby Dolls challenge misogynistic definitions of 'shame' and the deep roots of puritanical stigma, by bringing attention to the plight of the Black woman who is pregnant and unmarried, a single mother, a Black victim of rape by a white perpetrator, or a sex worker. Baby Dolls place any perceived sense of 'shame', imposed by neocolonial power structures, centre stage on the street to the public, so that what society would like to remain hidden becomes publicly paraded and lauded. It

is also a performance which deliberately breaks boundaries and defies any clear interpretation from onlookers. We ask how might the embrace of, or revelry in, 'sins of the flesh' reposition women with a sense of agency, pride, community, and pleasure? How have women in contemporaneous, diasporic Black communities developed similar modes of subversive display rooted in licentious behavior that have been nurtured across centuries and oceans?

We draw from participant interviews, intergenerational living archives, (auto) ethnographic research, and field observations to compare the Baby Doll masking traditions in the Caribbean and New Orleans Mardi Gras as part of our 'Women in Caribbean Carnival' research project and network. The project was funded by the British funders, the Arts and Humanities Research Council, and has received continued funding from the University of California to expand the work. In our initial stages, we sought to deliver dynamic, collaborative symposiums which brought together researchers, artists, performers, and other Carnival stakeholders in three different diasporic locations: the US, the Caribbean, and the UK. The key focus on each of our workshops was to better understand how women *in Carnival* use Carnival to resist oppressive forces that are co-constitutive of their domestic, quotidian, and political lives. We approach Carnival as a mode, a medium, and an embodied practice that may be shared by women intergenerationally and communally. We examine Carnival's sustainability as a way in which cultural producers and researchers as participants use history and narrative to track its future direction. As a medium of exchange, we examine gender, race, sexual expressions, and class of women in Carnival to notice similarities in their masking and rituals that may be borne of common experiences across histories, narratives, and practices.

The Women in Carnival workshops we facilitated were also focused on bringing academics and artists in conversation with one another to bridge the gap between disciplines and practices. Emily was the principal investigator, Cathy the co-investigator, and we received support from project advisor and Carnival artist Adeola Dewis (Cardiff University, Laku Neg). We delivered the three international workshops in Trinidad, California, and Leeds and each one was attended by approximately fifty attendees. We discovered that women in these three locations all use Carnival as a platform to challenge patriarchal ideas about sexuality and femininity. Our key participants were approached because of combined expertise in areas of dance, costuming,

storytelling, music and/or scholarship. We also collated a database of interviews, photographs, and film recordings of participants preparing for Carnival, reflecting on their Carnival practice, and taking part in Carnival as well as film footage of each symposium. We took part in traditional Carnival practices in Leeds as Midnight Robbers with the HB Mama Dread Troupe in August 2022, and in New Orleans as invited pre-initiated Baby Dolls walking with the Gold Digger Baby Dolls in Mardi Gras 2023. Our participation in these celebrations has given us the opportunity to reflect on the lived experience of Carnival for the symposia and research that followed the events.

Women in Carnival and The Trinidadian Baby Doll [1]

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 to 1885; the description of the mas is found in *The De Lima of Frederick Street* (1981) by Arthur De Lima. The De Lima family were well-known jewelers in Port of Spain, and Arthur De Lima explains that in 1925 his father recounted the story of a Baby Doll mas in the 1885 Carnival. 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 and Plaza?, 2020, p.48). In a 1988 interview, 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).

Trinidadian activist, scholar, and Baby Doll performer Amanda McIntyre was a key participant in our Women in Carnival project. During our field trip to Trinidad in February 2022, we were able to interview and shadow her as she prepared for her Carnival performance. The Carnival in 2022 took place during the pandemic and was reduced to 'a taste of Carnival' due to restrictions, and crowds were not allowed out onto the streets. The majority of the Carnival took place indoors in the Savanna stadium in Port of Spain, with some traditional mas performers taking their individual mas on the road. Our three key participants in Trinidad were playwright, activist and writer Eintou Springer, Whip Jap performer Renella Alfred, and Baby Doll performer, scholar, and activist Amanda McIntyre all performed their masquerades on the road (in Eintou's case, she also secured permission to perform her Carnival play 'Kambule' near the savannah stadium in the car park of the National Academy of the Performing Arts (NAPA)). Perhaps due to the lack of 'beads and bikini' bands, there was a spotlight on traditional Mas players that year. The front pages of the local newspapers such as *Newsday* and *The Trinidad Guardian* showcased traditional mas performers and focused on the cultural importance of their work in keeping the 'roots' of Carnival alive.

In terms of the role of the Baby Doll mas, Amanda explained to us in an interview that she wanted to move her mas away from the idea of 'begging' interesting and create a mas which moves beyond accountability to scrutinize and dismantle stereotypes of Blackness and Black family life. She was inspired to create her unique take on Baby Doll by Hazel Brown, Coordinator of the Network of Advancements for Women. Hazel implements the mas for gender advocacy and performs the character at rallies for women's rights and was pivotal to Amanda in terms of the development of her mas process. Amanda explained:

> In 2010 and the twenty-teens there were still Baby Doll performances that condemned single mothers and the sexual agency of women. I was dissatisfied with that. I didn't want to be in that role. When I saw what Hazel was doing, I was attracted to the fact that she was trying to reconfigure the political aspects of the masquerade. She didn't present the Baby Doll as someone who was 'begging' […].

> Hazel didn't perform the Baby Doll as a mas of extortion, but a mas of accountability. In the years of performing it myself, I wanted to move even beyond just accountability. I wanted to address the performance concept of the masquerade which, to me, was problematic. The concept of the Baby Doll relies on a stereotype of black family life and if part of our work as feminist, queer Pan-Africanist advocates is to dismantle stereotypes of Blackness, then we must address this in Carnival masquerades as well. (Long quote but well worth including.)

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 outgrown this dichotomy; women are using both ‘pretty’ and ‘traditional’ mas in ways that not only celebrate their sexuality but create a platform for social activism and social justice. Excellent analysis 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 Anna Kasafi Perkins 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 our view, playing mas normally centers around confidence building, sexual self-determination, joy and pleasure, and politics. Connections exist here between the theories of Jamaican academic Carolyn Cooper on the role of women in Jamaican dancehall culture, which she argues centers on an ‘act of self-conscious female assertion of control over the representation of her person’ (Cooper in Plaza p. 24/p.11).

In recent Carnivals in Trinidad, social activists have used traditional masquerades such as the 'Baby Doll' mas to highlight issues of sexual abuse and teenage pregnancy on the island (see Eintou Springer and the Idakeda Group). Carnival offers a space for celebrating and

emancipating women but can also replicate patriarchal systems of power imbedded within in its communities.

Amanda McIntyre explains that there is a dark irony to the Trinidadian Carnival mantra; ‘Carnival is woman’ in the wake of the killing of Asami Nagakiya:

> This woman was killed and her body was dumped in a public place. The mayor, in his response, not only implied that she was in some ways responsible for her death but also suggested a communal responsibility. He put the blame for what happened to Nagakiya, not only on her, but on the women who take part in Carnival. That’s the irony, on the one hand ‘Carnival is Woman’ and in it women are free to perform their sexuality and, on the other hand, it is another platform on which women receive unjust gendered judgments that suggest death is the penalty for the same performances of sexuality.

The history of the Baby Doll mas centres on the sexual servitude of Black women both during and after the plantation period. Similar to the dichotomy formed in the theorization of pretty versus traditional mas, there are two popular competing interpretations of Baby Doll at play inside and outside academia. One interpretation positions Baby Doll as representative of a weak, downtrodden woman, while another sites the mas as empowering. Plaza and 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 and Plaza, 2020, p.47). She is confused and can’t take care of her baby after a fling. In this reading she becomes 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 in Henry and Plaza, 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. Amanda McIntyre explains how the Baby Doll mas has been side lined and been a source of poking fun at single mothers:

> It's really unfortunate because, I think, this is why for a long time we did not see Baby Dolls on the road in Trinidad […] as a child I didn't see Baby Dolls at all. There is an illustration by Melton Prior, ‘Carnival in Port of Spain Trinidad’, of Frederick Street with the masquerades, and spectators. Even in that early illustration, the Baby Doll was on the side, just kind of peeping in. In that illustration, you see the sidelining of the Baby Doll in Carnival.

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 by '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 doll carried by Baby Doll performers in Trinidad 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.

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, children born to unmarried Black women by white men had no legal financial support structure 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. Many 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. 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' (Trotman in Franco, 2018, 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 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 avoiding their responsibilities as fathers. As Amanda explains, this is a mas which is focused on holding men accountable which links carnival, activism, and advocacy, which is why Amanda wanted to perform the Baby Doll character:

> Entering mas at that time was an unintentional personal and professional intervention that filled in for me the gap between art and advocacy. The information I got about what Hazel Brown's band was all based on Hazel's advocacy for women's rights. Throughout those years she presented a performance, called 'Single Mothers' Association' – which is an actual organization in Trinidad.
>
> In her performance, she would make the point about holding men accountable. She would raise awareness about child sexual abuse, making points about teenage pregnancy, and not just the responsibilities of parents, but the state's responsibility towards children as well.

The Trinidadian Baby Doll also responds to the development of a US naval base in Trinidad in 1941 and the sexual politics that ensued. The base caused a growth in the sex trade on the island 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 and the subsequent abandonment of new mothers by the American servicemen. These relationships were well-documented by Calypsonians at the time. In the Harry Belafonte's 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)

Baby Doll: A Jamette Mas

The framing of the Baby Doll as a ‘begging’ mas is reductive. In Trinidad the mas character is closely linked to the figure of the ‘Jamette’, 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). Jamette 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. Amanda McIntyre comments further on the links between the Baby Doll mas and the Jamettes:

> The Baby Doll masquerade emerged among the jamettes in the early twentieth century as part of Carnival culture in Port of Spain. The jamettes were an urban subculture that consisted mainly of lower-income black women who were known for their loud raucous and sometimes violent protests. They were involved, for example, in what became known as the Water Riots of 1903[2]. It was in this ethos that the Baby Doll mas was first documented in Trinidad. At that time the masquerade was performed mainly by men and performed as a parody of single mothers from the same demographic.

The Baby Dolls and the Jamette are two examples of new reenactments of the social life of women in nineteenth-century Trinidad that persists today. The satirical Baby Dolls portray mothers in bonnets who hold an illegitimate baby doll (mock child) and search the crowd for its father, embarrassing male passers-by with paternity accusations until they give her money for milk. This farce belies a history of rape, miscegenation, and the devaluing of Black women's reproductive agency. The Jamettes (or Jametes) got their name from an insult derived from the French word *diametre*, which means people living under the diameter of respectability in society. Art historian Samantha Noel (2010) unpacks the gendered etymology of the word noting that 'jamette' is feminine and 'jamete' is masculine, although the blanket term of 'Jamette Carnival' 'clearly feminizes the cultural practices of a certain class of people, and, in turn, is used by society to regulate and scrutinize the sexuality of black women' (p.63).

In one colonial newspaper from February 25th, 1871, Carnival was recorded in *The San Fernando Gazette* as '…hordes of men and women, youthful in years but mature in every vice that perverts and degrades humanity, who dwell together in all the rude licentiousness of barbarian life'. With fewer upper-class people participating in Carnival during this period, the celebration was denigrated with the catch-all phrase 'Jamette Carnival.' The Jamette Carnival should not be thought of as cohesive celebrations, because Jamette women were targeted in harsh ways because their hip gyrations, pretend and actual brawling, sexual assertion, and teasing, which was considered unfeminine, profane and vulgar. Creole women, in particular, were a double threat because of their ability to simultaneously cross race and gender play as they satirized being white planters (King 1999, 205). But it is important to note they were not trying to impersonate and deceive, but rather to entertain and provide pleasure to themselves and other revelers. Consequently, the Jamette mas is theorized by scholars who compare the Jamette, for example, to modern-day performers such as Rihanna citing how her on-stage and social media persona pushes back against the historical shaming of Black women's dancing bodies (2016: 174-5). Amanda McIntyre stresses that it's important to keep the sexualized, subversive Jamette power alive in her Baby Doll performance rather than sanitize it:

> One thing in designing the costumes that I never wanted to lose is sexualization. I often bring the hemline up to the crotch in my designs because I want the knickers to be seen and I want the crotch, even if I'm not wearing knickers, to be visible. That is because, as I

> was saying earlier about the relationship between the Baby Doll and sex work, we have to be careful that we're not condemning the sex work that is there.

Traditional characters like Baby Doll, The Midnight Robber, and Devil characters are depicted as ‘traditional masking’, although, as aforementioned, this dichotomy between bikini mas and traditional mas is reductive as it pushed us to overlook the crossovers and similarities between the two performances. While there may be distinctive and distinguishing looks that make pretty mas the face of Carnival, it is common to have the sequined and feathered revellers in a Beads and Bikini mas performing Jamette moves ‘tiefing a wine.’ These encompass the various ways participants can express themselves through play. The Jamette persona uses the street as their pulpit. She is sustained in the bold accusations of the Trinidadian Baby Doll and shows up in the attitude of the Mardi Gras Baby Doll’s ‘walking raddy’, which is a type of strutting with intermittent shaking your body down, which we will go on to explain in more detail. Rebellion thrives at the edges of centre with a forceful rejection of patriarchal, racial, and gendered power structures at play in the neocolonial Caribbean.

Amanda McIntyre’s ‘Dolly Ma’ mas is an example of the rejection of these oppressive structures that confine and marginalize women. Dolly Ma is her own individual, political mas and she’s a Baby Doll with economic and social capital who has her ‘game on lock’ and wears her home on her head–her hat is, quite literally, a house. She explains:

> I created Dolly Ma because I wanted to make a distinction between my contemporary Baby Doll masquerade and the traditional Baby Doll masquerade. I have critiqued the concept behind the traditional masquerade, in that it recreates a stereotype of black family life which can be positively used as Hazel Brown, Helen Kennedy, etc., have been using it, but it can also be further reimagined with further political interventions. The Dolly Ma persona always has her own things. She's never asking for anything, and she's always very aware of how the children are going to be taken care of. She’s also benevolent to other children. The Dolly Ma performances refer to the International Bill of Human Rights, the Rights of the Child and the Rights of Migrant Workers and Families. She's always addressing the state and advocating in the interest of children. Several of the performances until now have been in support of migrant children in Trinidad, specifically the Venezuelan children here.
>
> Dolly Ma has the game on lock. She has won the prizes. She knows what she's doing. She's not worried. All her resources go into securing [her] children. I hope that immediately on seeing the costume and on seeing the performance this is what the

> audience would get, that this is a woman who not only has her own home, she is the home.
>
> There was obviously gendered oppression of women in the acquisition of land. My intention with this year's performance [of Dolly Ma] is to subvert these oppressive ideas and policies about women's access to ownership of property.

Amanda 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). As she explains:

> The argument that I make is that while queer bodies have obviously always been present in our community the representation of queer culture in Trinidad and Tobago Carnival was suppressed. Any instance of queering in Carnival was met with backlash. An example of this was in 2016 with the amount of homophobia received by Jha-Whan Thomas who performed Ras Nijinsky in Drag as Pavlova', and the homophobia directed towards the designer Peter Minshall as well.
>
> There was this national conversation about whether the mas was penalized [and didn't win first prize] on the grounds of sexuality, because it was clearly the people's choice […].
>
> [My creation of] Dolly Ma Brigitta was another queering of Trinidad and Tobago Carnival. I developed this narrative that involves these two women who are time travelling, and shapeshifting during the time travel […]. Shape-shifting is, for me, an interrogation of sexuality, an interrogation of how gender is an embodied performance because in their time travel they transition into other genders. On the one side of the portal, one of them may be a man. On the other side, Dolly Ma may be something else. In this way, they create and maintain a family that at some locations includes same-sex parents.

Trinidad Baby Doll Today: Mas Activists

The Baby Doll in Trinidad is today 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 are re-defining themselves as in control of their sexuality and calling for societal change.

In her article 'The Baby Doll: Memory, Myths and Mas' (2021), 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-cisgender identities.

Women in Carnival key project participant, 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. 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 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. 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 across the ocean to the Baby Dolls of New Orleans; ‘we invoke the jamettes, 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 ‘Sprit 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 ‘sprit 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 homes’ such as florals and cotton prints. The sprit 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 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.

Walking Raddy: The Baby Dolls of New Orleans

The Baby Dolls emerged in the brothels and dance halls of New Orleans around 1910 and the tradition was born from a competition between women vying for business on Mardi Gras. The women took to the streets wearing bonnets and bloomers and they smoked cigars. The peak popularity of the Baby Dolls was in the 1940s, but with the rise of civil rights movement, the organization lost some of its allure and some began to look down on it because it was an organization that came out of Storyville, Vaz-Deville said. After Hurricane Katrina, however, the Baby Dolls popularity was restored. 'Bringing back the city meant bringing back our traditions, too. The storm made us aware that our roots were threatened,' Deville said in 2013, when she was interviewed about the exhibit, 'They Call Me Baby Doll: A Mardi Gras Tradition' at the Louisiana state Museum's Presbytere.

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 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 little girl dolls who dressed like toy 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, 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 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).

Black explains the important distinction between Carnival and Madis Gras in New Orleans; Madis Gras is a structured parade while Carnival is chaotic. While Madi Gras starts and stops at a certain time, Carnival happens in the African American neighbourhoods; 'it's where the grandmas can sit of 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; there we '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 maskers 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; journalist Jan Ramsey explains that the Baby Doll resurgence began 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 rigour in New Orleans and the Baby Doll mas has becomes 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 gangs, which is the term they use to describe themselves, to choose from; The Gold Diggers, The Kato Baby Dolls, The Baby Doll Ladies, The Mahogany Baby Dolls, The Red Saint Dolls, The Generation Warrior Dolls, The Sisterhood Baby Dolls, 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).

The Doll Herself

By looking at the Baby Doll's history in New Orleans and Trinidad, her performance and exposures that may or may not include motherhood, sex work, partner abandonment, domestic abuse, and her own demonstrations of ecstasy, our work is not only a critical engagement with Black feminism, but a critical interrogation of the visual archive of what Black women's activism looks like. Our interests in, interviews of, and our experiences as Baby Dolls considers the idiosyncratic image of the demure Victorian doll costume on the bodies of Black women cussing, accusing, or dancing in the streets during carnival celebrations. We are particularly interested in the simultaneity of fantasy and infantilization of her image. On one hand, the sartorial demands of the Baby Doll draw the spectator's eye to grown Black women dressed as little girls, or a doll as if a little girl. New Orleans and Trinidad Baby Dolls have similar dress details that may include bonnets, frills, gathers, lace, high neckline, high hemline, and visible bloomers. The costumes donned by grown Black women hails the visage of a white ball-jointed doll or some old photograph of a colonial planter's young children. The Black doll is not an alien face since there are records of a Black doll created by Georgian carpenter Leo Moss in the later 1800s, and later, former slave Richard Henry Boyd goes on to found the National Negro Doll Company in 1911, and Jackie Ormes brings us the Patty-Jo Doll in 1947 (coragedolls.com). But what the Baby Doll costume demands is to be regarded with the same care and regard of that originary doll whose white mould served as the template for the Black doll.

Baby Doll experts and participants cite 1912 as the beginning of the New Orleans Baby Dolls. In our interview with her, Gold Digger Baby Doll Denise Augustine recognizes wartime shortages for the popularity of the doll: 'because the war effort, all the resources, was going to the war, and there was a shortage of Baby Dolls, which drove the price up, made them precious and all of that and their pimps called them Baby Dolls'. Similarly, in *The 'Baby Dolls' of New Orleans*, Vaz Deville writes that dressing as Baby Dolls in New Orleans began when a group of prostitutes in the segregated red light district decided to show up another group of prostitutes downtown (33). Because johns and pimps would refer to them as 'baby dolls' and because dolls were a luxury

item to purchase during the 1910s and even after, the paradoxical masking tradition of the 'worldly women' (18) dressing as innocent girls conceptualizes loss, recovery, economics, and self-possession. Both Trinidad and New Orleans Baby Dolls performance repertoires are motivated by Black women's desire to have rights to their own bodies. In Trinidad, the dolls use speech acts and confrontation of random male onlookers to highlight her daily struggles of raising the baby doll she holds alone. She needs money for baby's milk. She needs to hold the father, the state, and the community to account for sexual violence and abandonment. Amanda McIntyre explains that she enjoyed dressing up as a doll and being given dolls:

> I had for a long time, ever since I was small, this fascination with dressing up as a doll. This is why, even in that first year I could just go to my closet and get a dress, because most of my dresses at that time looked very fluffy and poofy and playful. This was a personal style choice I had practiced for years before. I used to joke with my husband, when we were getting ready to go out, saying, 'I'm dressed as the sugar plum fairy'.

Hart writes that 'the word 'doll' acts as shorthand for a desirable woman' (Hart 5, *Walking Raddy* Vaz Deville 77). Hart rejects the idea that 'dolls are simple playthings—instead, [she sees] them as vehicles through which messages about class, race, beauty, history, fame, and selfhood are transferred and internalized' (10). Founding member of the New Orleans Gold Digger Baby Dolls Merline Kimble comments on the specificity of the Baby Doll look and likens the short dresses of the Baby Doll to the 'bra burning days' of feminism:

> I think what the Baby Dolls did was something similar to [the feminists] because at that time, back then, you had to kneel on the floor and your skirt had to touch the floor, and if you skirt did not touch the floor, you were considered a loose woman. So, when the Baby Dolls came out in these short dresses, I think it was a rebellious type of thing for women saying, 'You not going to tell me what I can wear. What I can't wear. I'm hanging out like this. And what?!'

Although there is no speech act associated with the Mardi Gras dolls, we still see her powerful footfalls as she is 'stepping out,' 'walking raddy,' and 'shaking down' along Claiborne (the main boulevard of Black New Orleans) as a reclamation of space. The dolls in both Trinidad and New Orleans use verbal and non-verbal enunciations of freedom and bodily autonomy. The frills and

bonnets of the costume is juxtaposed with the performance of her counter-reading. She is fierce. She is an instrument of her own pleasure as she tosses ‘throws’ (small gifts) to the crowd and flounces her skirt. As she parades along Claiborne, she is recognized as a member of the community. To this end, Mardi Gras Baby Dolls are first initiated into a group.

Denise Augustine explains that you will very rarely find a passive Baby Doll. ‘You cannot be passive and parade with a bunch of thugs. Women can be thuggish.’ In New Orleans, the counter-reading of the Baby Doll masking may be in carrying both a bottle and a switch blade. She continues to comment on this resistance through visuals and theatrics, from 1912 to the present day:

> That's why they named themselves: Baby Dolls. They unashamedly marched the street, raised up their dresses, danced provocatively, and they showed the world, no matter what you call me, I will not be subject to your insults. You cannot shame me. But now if you look since 2018, there's been signs that said, ‘all work is honest work’. In other words, sex workers ought to be respected. Baby Dolls put that out there in 1912, ‘I am a sex worker, but I still speak sexy, and look at my beauty.’ Resistance is then unashamedly standing up for yourself.

If social norms and respectability politics injures, resistance and controlling one’s image are possible when women act, if only for the carnival season, as agents and authors of their own images. They name sites of shame, violence, and/or limits—the brothel, the patriarchy, the segregated city—and turn them into opportunities to perform their wholeness.

Conclusion

From holding the baby in Trinidad to being the ‘baby’ in New Orleans, the Baby Doll masking offers particularly rich comments about women’s bodily autonomy, her sexual freedom tethered to social consequences of double standards, and the quotidian nature of sexual violence. The vibrancy of the frilled short dress on the adult black woman’s body problematizes the impulse to diminish the Baby Doll as not being as *serious* as other black masking traditions. Indeed, the Baby Doll’s paradoxical unruliness as a moving, shaking, yelling subject–dressed in a sexualized interpretation of a child’s doll’s outfit– upends trends in Black feminist theory that often speaks of Black women’s sexuality or Black women speaking of their sexuality as indexed with modes of silencing (Hammonds, pp.127-9). In the Baby Doll performances of Thomas, McIntyre,

Charleau, and Helen Kennedy, Black women's voices and concerns articulate the nature of sexual exploitation and violence even as it locates its transhistorical origins. The visual archive of what Black feminist activism looks like is necessarily expanded and challenged to include a Black masking tradition in the U.S. and Caribbean which breaks all signifiers and challenges onlookers. This mas, in both Trinidad and New Orleans, challenges onlookers and incites in men a potentially confusing smorgasbord of emotional and sexual responses; discomfort, arousal, humour, protectiveness, anger, fear, and denial. In this way Baby Doll is a confrontational and radical mas which shatters and resists patriarchal ideas of 'shame'; she airs her 'dirty linen' in public and ensures that we continually shake up our understanding of Black feminist politics before we are lulled into too-easy patterns of interpretation.

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[2] The Water Riots refer to protests in colonial Port of Spain on 23 March 1903 against the instillation of water meters and increased water rates by the colonial government which would deny citizens their basic rights to water. As a result of the riots, the Red House, the seat of the Executive and Legislative Council, was pelted with stones and then burnt to the ground. Police and colonial troops read the riot act and fired 450 rounds of ammunition into the crowd, leaving 16 people dead. Then Prime Minister Eric Williams described it as, ‘[a] war between bottles and stones on the one side and bullets on the other’ [https://blog.nationalarchives.gov.uk/the-trinidad-water-riots-of-1903/ [Accessed May 13th 2023].