

Identity Performance: African-Caribbean Artists as Creators of Cultural Community

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Throughout the Caribbean there are cultural groups struggling to define themselves in relation to their past and present. Colonization and slavery created a diverse ethnic culture in the Caribbean, but it also left many of these groups with questions about their identity. Peter Roberts describes this as a need to define the population outside of the terms of slavery. In other words the call for a defined national identity came from a need to separate the European, African, and Creole, but to also replace the terms of oppression such as; "slave," "master," and "freedman."<sup>1</sup> Breaking away from these past constructs to find a national identity also leads to an individual (or a groups) desire to hold on to that identity. This desire is what motivates some individuals to actively perform identity, as can be seen throughout the Caribbean, especially in the work of African-Caribbean artists, as they use their work to perform identity and create a cultural community.

Identity performance is an aspect of everyday life, and the actions that people make in their everyday life are pieces of their own identity performance; from the ways in which one chooses to present themselves in different social situations, to the larger image one fashions for themselves through their actions over time. Many performance theories, whether the subject is performing gender, ethnicity, or identity, revolve around the notion of repetitive actions. In John Clammer's article on performing ethnicity, he explains ethnicity (like other scholars do with gender and identity) as something that is not a given, but that must be repeatedly reproduced and acted out in one's everyday life. This reproduction is more prominent when the role being acted out is not merely being assigned to an individual, but actively asserted by the individual.<sup>2</sup> While for many people these identity performances are second hand nature, in some cases individuals

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<sup>1</sup> Peter A. Roberts, *The Roots of Caribbean Identity: Language, Race and Ecology*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008): 267.

<sup>2</sup> John Clammer, "Performing Ethnicity: Performance, Gender, Body and Belief in the Construction and Signaling of Identity," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 38, no. 13 (2015): 2159

recognize these performances and act them out intentionally, in order to assert a particular factor of their identity.

Sociology's agency theory, which many scholars use to break down the social constraints of different societies, correlates with the ideas discussed in performance theory. Agency theory examines the ability of an individual to act in an independent manner, and to make their own choice, freely.<sup>3</sup> In opposition to this, structure would then be the factors of influence, (such as social class, gender, and religious beliefs), which could limit an individual's decisions. Sherry Ortner examines how structure can be an incoming property of action, at the same instance that action assumes structure as a needed condition of its production, when in specific settings or social situations<sup>4</sup>. Therefore, factors such as social class can become a part of an agents action while the action is also taking on that factor as a vital component in its own production.

Marshal Sahlins work focuses more on cultural aspects in relation to these theories, and one of his concerns is that "practical reason" as a universal idea, has had an impact on our ability to comprehend the way different systems of cultural assumptions are used to organize social worlds. He deals with the way culture can take on different forms or roles, and how these can lend to the construction of self, societies, and even history.<sup>5</sup> In this situation the agent is the piece of the equation that holds the most knowledge. The action is a product of the cultural aspects being applied, which can vary from one formation to another, or even over time.

Anthony Giddens is another scholar who discusses agency and his ideas look at action as intentional and goal specific, and how action is intentionally related to structures and their production. He also examines how structure can affect the production of action. For Giddens,

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<sup>3</sup> *Theories of Agency*, <http://www.swarthmore.edu/SocSci/tburke1/agency.html>

<sup>4</sup> Ivan Karp, "Agency and Social Theory: A Review of Anthony Giddens," *American Ethnologist* 13, no. 1 (1986): 131

<sup>5</sup> Ivan Karp, " and Social Theory: A Review of Anthony Giddens," *American Ethnologist* 13, no. 1 (1986):133

structure is "virtual" and "actual," meaning that structure is a process. This process is referred to as "structuration," or the idea of a becoming rather than a being. To summarize this concept, Ivan Karp states that structure is not only the medium of action but also the outcome of action.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, using the example of social class as the structure again, an agent's social class is what motivates its actions, while the agent's actions are simultaneously deciding the agent's social class.

These ideas of agency play into the concept of performing identity by showcasing the ways in which things like class, gender, and age, relate to individuals and their actions. One point emphasized by Giddens is that action is a product of agents who are knowledgeable and self-aware. To be able to examine how societies produce structures, one must first accept that agents are aware of their actions on this level. Structure is important because it is a piece of defining identity and situation. One scholar that incorporates both the ideas of agency and performance theory into her studies is Margaret Thompson Drewal. Her book *Yoruba Rituals* focuses on performance and agency in the rituals of the Yoruba culture. She looks at how rituals work, what the performers are actually doing in certain performances, and then also listening to what these performers say about the acts--in other words what their intentions are<sup>7</sup>. Agency theory and performance theory can relate and support each other and as far as performing identity is concerned one can look at the everyday self-fashioning one does as the actions that an agent performs in order to create structure. The rituals individuals perform, which can be anything from the way one speaks to an actual theatrical performance, are a part of the

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<sup>6</sup>Ivan Karp, "Agency and Social Theory: A Review of Anthony Giddens," *American Ethnologist* 13, no. 1 (1986): 135

<sup>7</sup> Margaret Thompson Drewal, *Yoruba Ritual: Performers, Play, Agency*, (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992): xiii-xix

individuals self-fashioned perception. Identity can be performed through many outlets and many artists use their art to perform identity.

Artists express, share, and emphasize their identities through the performance of their art, whether it be dancing, singing, acting or painting. These methods of performing an art say different things about the artists and the identity that they are trying to connect with. Not only are artists trying to find an identity that they have lost, they are trying to hold on to what pieces of an identity they have already formed. African-Caribbean communities construct group identities that represent the traditions of their past and connect them to their present by including contemporary styles with the rituals and celebrations of the past. Performing different dance and music styles is a way for the African-Caribbean artists to express their cultures past while still forming a present Caribbean identity. In Trinidad, African-Caribbean artists express and maintain their identity as Africans and as Caribbean's through performing different artistic styles, such as dance and musical performances, both inside and outside the Carnival environment.

The effects of colonization and slavery still weigh on the Caribbean community, leaving many people with the sense that something is missing. Many African-Caribbean artists deal with the concept of a Diaspora in their works. Two important aspects to defining diasporas are a person's connection to their cultural homeland, and their place and relation to the country in which they now call home.<sup>8</sup> These two elements play a large role in the way many of these artists decide to perform their identity. A person's identity is the way that they conceive themselves, and their relation to a group. Identity is about a person's inner self and that is often what people are trying to express to others. For African-Caribbean communities these identities

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<sup>8</sup> Yolanda Covington-Ward, "Transforming Communities, Recreating Selves: Interconnected Diasporas, Performance, and the Shaping of Liberian Immigrant Identity," *Africa Today* 60, no. 1 (2013): 32.

are harder to define, leaving them with a need to understand their past. Petlevski argues that there is an extended self, or rather an idea that individuals bring "self-relevant others or objects" into the way they perceive their self.<sup>9</sup> This idea that people create their own image in the figure of what others perceive them as says a lot about how people see identity. The importance placed on outside perceptions leads back to this idea that people perform identity by showing the side of themselves they wish to show at a given time, or in a given situation. Petlevski also states that, "We have a sense of owning the body and the ability to author the actions with that body."<sup>10</sup> Performance art is a way for people to express these ideas of their self-identity while using their physical self.

A form of performance that is often used to express someone's identity is dance. Different types of dance have been used in various rituals and celebrations in different cultures, throughout history. Dance styles are as diverse and numerous as the culture in the Caribbean, and many cultures have different styles of dancing for different occasions, or even different meanings behind movements. Candace Thompson is a contemporary African-Caribbean dancer, and Trinidad native, who has used her art form to bring together her community. ContempoCaribe and Dance Caribbean COLLECTIVE are two of the platforms she uses to perform her art. Thompson says her goal with ContempoCaribe is to blend contemporary dance with the aesthetics of the Caribbean in order to show the audience the embodied experiences of her cultural background.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> S. Petlevski, "Beyond Identity: The Dynamic Self at the Intersection of Performance Philosophy and the Philosophy of Science," *Interdisciplinary Description of Complex Systems* 12, no. 3 (2014): 198.

<sup>10</sup> S. Petlevski, "Beyond Identity: The Dynamic Self at the Intersection of Performance Philosophy and the Philosophy of Science," *Interdisciplinary Description of Complex Systems* 12, no. 3 (2014): 198.

<sup>11</sup> Candace Thompson, *Candace Dance Fitness*, <http://candacedancefitness.com>

Thompson's performance pieces deal with ideas such as identity and popular perceptions of the Caribbean. As for her work with Dance Caribbean COLLECTIVE, Thompson says she wanted to find a place where she (and other artists) could perform their work freely. The aim of the group is to get their work out in the community so that people can see these contemporary dance styles and share in the experiences of other people who share their heritage and background. When asked about the perception of Caribbean artists in an interview Thompson states, "Caribbean artists, to a large extent--and, again, I am generalizing--see identity as being a large part of how we think about ourselves."<sup>12</sup> Thompson's desire to share her art with people of the same background is understandable when one considers the concepts discussed in agency and performance theory alike. Nick Hopkins and Ronni Greenwood examine the rituals and actions performed by religious groups. One of the things these scholars found in their case studies on religious identity is that many subjects performed certain actions or rituals, not for their religious meanings, but to emphasize that they were indeed a part of the faith.<sup>13</sup> The same thing goes for the way in which artists perform certain rituals, or actions. Artists, such as Thompson, perform these dances, not just to participate in culture but to emphasize their part in the culture.

Musical performance is also a large part of the Caribbean community and it is an art that can be widely distributed. Calypso is a popular musical form that is unique to the Caribbean, and an adaptation of calypso that incorporates rap styles, known as rapso, has become a popular contemporary musical style. Rapso is a "conscious music" that is more philosophy and belief than it is a particularly identifiable musical brand or sound. A major group that performs rapso is 3canal who first made an impact on the Caribbean music scene in 1997 with their song "Blue."

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<sup>12</sup> Candace Thompson, *Infinite Body*, <http://infinitebody.blogspot.com>

<sup>13</sup> Nick Hopkins and Ronnie Michelle Greenwood, "Hijab, Visibility and the Performance of Identity," *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 43 (2013): 441.

Many of their works and projects have strong roots in the state of their Caribbean identity, past and present, and the environment that their community has constructed. They deal with social, political, and personal matters through the performance of their music.<sup>14</sup>

3canal put on a show entitled "More Love. Life. Living." in a backyard space called the Big Black Box, from August 27-August 31, 2014. The style of this performance was different than many of their other shows due to the backyard environment, which also lends a great deal to their message; according to group member Wendell Manwarren, "The steel band came out of the backyard, the mas and the calypso came out of the barrack yard and backyards of East Port-of-Spain, Belmont and environs. That's our history. That's our legacy." The performance was inspired by the release of their song "More Love," and it deals with some of the issues of Caribbean identity and the painful past of the area, as well as a desire to keep their history alive in what they are doing presently. Manwarren also discusses the importance of the date for the project and its meaning, "August is kind of a potent month because it begins with Emancipation and ends with Independence and the conjunction of those two celebrations or movements is really too much to ignore."<sup>15</sup> Groups such as 3canal use their art to not only share their Caribbean identity and history with the community, but to preserve it and remember their past. By performing these shows the band is presenting themselves to the audience as musicians, proud African-Caribbean's, and in some cases even activists.

Performing such artistic displays through music, dance, and various combinations of these in festival environments brings the community together in a place where they are able to express themselves. Taking the same styles of art that are consistently related to Carnival and

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<sup>14</sup> 3canal, <http://3canal.com>

<sup>15</sup> 3canal, <http://3canal.com>



placing them outside of that realm is also making it possible for people to share and join in on these artistic expressions of cultural identity. The Carnival began as a way for the emancipated Africans to take their culture to the streets that were once banned to them<sup>16</sup>, so it seems fitting that to keep sharing their culture with each other, they would take performance styles from Carnival and place them somewhere they have yet to be experienced.

Artists such as Thompson and 3canal are not only trying to reach out to others and share their identities, they are trying to preserve those identities. These celebrations and art performances bring together the history of the artists homelands and combine it with the present history these cultural groups are creating in the Caribbean. Artists are taking their performances out in to the community and sharing with them what being an African-Caribbean is about, as well as opening up an environment for the discussion and growth of these cultural identities. The physical actions taking place in the performance of this art relates back to that idea that the body is the author of actions, therefore through these movements the artists are performing their identity, as individuals and as a culture.

In the larger scheme of things the actions that artists are completing are meant to be processed by the audience as a representation of who they are. Just as individuals wake up every day and decide which version of themselves to show others, artists take actions in their work to present a certain identity to the audience of that work. Identity is as much of a performance as is a dance, a song, or a play, except to some extent it is often not recognized as a performance. The studies done in performance theory, and even agency theory, provide insight in to the way individuals see their own identity, within themselves and in relation to others.

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<sup>16</sup> Adela Ruth Tompsett, "London is the Place for Me: Performing Identity in Notting Hill Carnival," *Theatre History Studies*, 25 (2005): 43.

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