

Carmelita's In-Possible Dance: Another style of Christianity in the Capitalist Ridden Caribbean¹

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Abstract

Two characteristics mark the Caribbean: capitalism and the hegemony of North Atlantic versions of Christianity. The colonization and exploitation of the Caribbean was justified in the name of profit and the dominant North Atlantic renderings of Christ's message. Having been conceived by the joint forces of these worldly and otherworldly regimes of subjugation, both equally brutal, both making unreasonable demands, both contested yet internalized, the Caribbean gave rise to a schizophrenic culture that played the two forces up against each other. By focusing on a Dominican newcomer on the bi-national island Saint Martin & Sint Maarten (SXM), a devout Pentecostal who works as a prostitute, called Carmelita, this paper demonstrates how working class West Indian² women and men on this island adapt their Christian performance to the realities of everyday life in a capitalist economy. Vice versa, by appealing to the notions of equity and justice inherent in the Christian tradition which are put forth in popular Caribbean songs, West Indians demand not to be reduced to mere human commodities put to work in the capitalist machinery. Nevertheless, adaptation is not the same as transcending the dichotomy between capitalism and North Atlantic Christianity, for though in a continuous process of change and interaction, both remain separate hegemonic forces in the Caribbean.

*So when Adam was exiled
To our Eden, in the Ark's gut,
the coiled snake coiled there for good
fellowship also; that was willed.*

*Adam had an idea.
 He and the snake would share
 the loss of Eden for a profit
 so both made the New World. And it looked good.³*

Two characteristics mark the Caribbean: capitalism and the hegemony of North Atlantic versions of Christianity. In fact, some say that capitalism and North Atlantic Christianity fathered the region (Hall 2002; Sheller 2000; Austin-Broos 1997; Chevannes 1995, 1994). Capitalism being representative of a mode of being: the *homo economicus*, the cost and benefit Man. This disciplining of West Indians—black, brown, and white—into performing the logic of the *homo economicus* coincided with their enslavement and indenture. Africans, Amerindians, Asians, and poor Europeans, were brought to the New World along with wealthy whites to fatten Western Europe and its ex-colony-turned superpower, the United States of America (Trouillot 2002; Mintz 1996). From the earliest days of colonization, the Caribbean working classes have been contesting the capitalist logic outside and within themselves. The capitalist enemy not only resided in those who owned the means of production, but also in those who sold their labour and “secretly” coveted the promises of Mammon. The role of North Atlantic Christianity, in the figure of Papal and Protestant missionaries as a whole, exceptions notwithstanding, was to save the souls of those whose backs were being broken by hard work (Jap-A-Joe 2005; Hall 2002; Sheller 2000; Austin-Broos 1997; Chevannes 1995, 1994). And most of these backs were black. Missionaries fought the wealthy whites and each other, while some even openly took up the plight of the downtrodden. But as all of the above mentioned authors argue, few missionaries escaped seeing their flock as uncivilized creatures. Theirs was a Christianity mixed with racial prejudice. Or as Catherine Hall has phrased it, “missionary belief in the brotherhood of all men, that Africans were women and men almost like themselves, coexisted with a belief in white superiority” (Hall 2005: 105). The slaves and their descendants, however, believed more than the missionaries themselves did in the radical equity and justice that God and Christ proclaimed for all “His children”.⁴ They also creolized the Christian “Word” as much as possible, making it amendable to the African and Asian sounds and rhythms that marked their lives. For the most part they did this while seemingly remaining within the fold of the established North Atlantic versions of the faith.⁵

The colonization and exploitation of the Caribbean was justified in the name of profit and North Atlantic renderings of Christ’s message. Having been conceived by the joint forces of these worldly and otherworldly regimes of subjugation, both equally brutal, both making unreasonable demands, both contested yet internalized, a schizophrenic culture was developed that played the two forces against each other.⁶ Nowadays the Caribbean working classes, most of

whom are black, accept both capitalism and Christianity in their lives while seeking to make them work in their favour.⁷ They continue to play them up against each other in an effort to reduce their ill effects and popular Caribbean music is their ally in doing so. In this music both anti-capitalist and anti-orthodox Christian sentiments are voiced, which, however, do not advocate a total renunciation of capitalism or Christianity. The music mirrors and promotes the balancing act that most Caribbean people perform (Mahabir 2002; Manuel 1998; Guibault 1996). It is the alternative space where these two hegemonic forces meet in a perennial agonistic battle. Here another style of Christianity is produced that remains markedly Christian even while being a product of the ongoing process of creolization. When asked how they rhyme their performance of being devout children of God to their (un)willing complicity with the capitalist mode of production they reply: "There is a difference between doing wrong and being wrong." Every Caribbean person negotiates the demands of both North Atlantic Christianity and capitalism in their own way.

By focusing on a Dominican newcomer on the bi-national island of Saint Martin & Sint Maarten (SXM), a devout Pentecostal who works as a prostitute, called Carmelita, this paper demonstrates how working class West Indian women and men on this island adapt their Christian performance to the realities of everyday life in a capitalist economy. Vice versa, by appealing to notions of equity and justice inherent in the Christian tradition, they demand not to be reduced to mere human commodities put to work in the capitalist machinery. I have chosen to focus on Carmelita for her life exemplifies the tenacity and balancing act West Indians perform: believers in Christ who at the same time adhere to the logic of the capitalist mode of production. Nevertheless, as it will become clear in this paper, adaptation is not the same as transcending the dichotomy between capitalism and North Atlantic Christianity; for in a continuous process of change and interaction, both remain separate hegemonic forces in the Caribbean. This paper is divided into three sections. The first relates Carmelita's trials and her effort to overcome them. The second section places Carmelita's life story and mode of performing Christianity in the broader historical context of the Caribbean. The last section is dedicated to the current sociological realities on SXM. What becomes clear in this section is that though she is an extreme example, Carmelita's style of performing Christianity is not an exception but the rule.

Carmelita: A Pentecostal Prostitute

In his Calypso classic, *High Mass*, David Rudder sang: "Our Father who art in heaven, You who have given us this ass so we can all feel a part of this earthly heaven, Amen." These words rang true as Carmelita, a self-professed Pentecostal, born and raised in the Dominican Republic, danced around a pole dressed in

nothing more than a thong. Carmelita was a “happy girl” as my grandmother euphemistically called prostitutes. She had managed to secure a three-month contract to work as an exotic dancer at what was called the White House, an adult club on the bi-national Caribbean island of Saint Martin & Sint Maarten (SXM). All the men that visit this up-market establishment are made to feel like presidents for whom beautiful women dance and entertain. But Carmelita and the others do more than just dancing. It is common knowledge that exotic dancers also perform privately. Everyone on the island is aware of this, even the civil servants and politicians who issue contracts for women such as Carmelita. In fact, to my knowledge, many of them had danced privately with such women. Such is the respect for the anti-prostitution conventions on SXM.

One evening, as I watched her dancing, it was hard to imagine that Carmelita was the same woman who only yesterday sat praying with me and told me how wonderful the Lord is. For Carmelita, there is no contradiction between her Pentecostal belief and her work as a call girl. She maintained that although God was not pleased, he understood her predicament: “*Jesu Christo perdona a los pecados de los pobres que tienen que luchar. La gente sin ching*”⁸ She had two children to feed who were, at the time, staying with her mother in the Dominican Republic so that they could receive instruction “in the ways of the Lord”. Carmelita’s story is not an uncommon one. The father of her children turned out to be a proverbial “rolling stone”. According to Carmelita, he had fathered many children but cared for none. She knew this yet she could not resist him. He was a sweet talker that conquered her heart and hijacked her mind. Her reward: two boys. What was she to do in such a situation? What future did a 23-year-old unemployed, single woman have with two children to feed? Not much in an impoverished country such as the Dominican Republic. But where there is a will, there is a way. And Carmelita is certainly strong willed. As a determined and responsible woman she decided to take a friend’s advice and come to work on SXM. So she put her pride in her pocket, prayed to God for strength, and caught a plane to SXM.

When I first met Carmelita, she had already been on the island for two months and was a favourite among the visitors of the White House. Though she admitted that she found it hard sharing her body with complete strangers, the thought of her children kept her going. It helped that she worked in a classy establishment where the customers had to respect her. No pimp forcing her to work on street corners to support his habits. No “lover boy” beating her and stealing her hard earned money. She had seen this category of prostitutes in the Dominican Republic. It was her worst nightmare. In contrast, the White House is very “professional” and Carmelita has a contract, a steady income, regular medical check ups, and colleagues whom life and the infidelity of men had dealt a similar fate. But Carmelita is a fighter. Furthermore, it would seem, God is on her side. During my interviews with her, she could quote scripture proving that Jesus

did not condemn prostitutes and believes, therefore, that ordinary men and women should also refrain from doing so. She confided in me that she wanted to use her savings to start her own business and study at university. Her dream, she told me, was to become a medical doctor and help poor women like herself who struggle to raise their children. Doctors, lawyers, social workers, and entrepreneurs, these were the professions that many dancers I encountered at the White House claimed would be their occupation when they left SXM or the life of prostitution. Many of them shared with me similar life stories to Carmelita, stories that made you want to weep were it not for the fact that their commonality made one suspicious. But perhaps this was just the frame of mind of an anthropologist, who while involved in research, seeks distance to observe society as a spectacle.

Many of the White House customers are not as suspicious. Some of the customers become “special friends” to the women employed as exotic dancers and give them extra tips towards financing their dreams of becoming doctors, lawyers or social workers. To my knowledge, some men even give extra money for their children staying with relatives back home. Some of these customers would tell me that they could not understand how low the men of the Dominican Republic and Colombia had stooped. Poverty or no poverty, how could they treat such sweet women that way? They would never do that, they claimed. It seemed to me, that if it were not for societal norms and conventions, some of the customers wanted to turn their lovers into “respectable” women. On one occasion, I witnessed a middle-aged, high-ranking civil servant cry because his lover. He was married with children. Prostitution is a complicated business for an anthropologist wishing to do justice to this phenomenon. While not condoning the trafficking and exploitation of women, it is evident to me that there is also much affection between customers and dancers at the White House but perhaps, it is all part of an elaborate game. I do not know.

What I do know is that the impact of *bachata* music, which both the customers and the exotic dancers listened to, produced a structure of feeling that made their commonly-held narratives, or life-stories, believable. Many men told me that they believed the life-stories of the dancers to be true because they resonated with those sung by the troubadours of *bachata*. *Bachata* is a musical form that originated in the rural areas of the Dominican Republic and has taken the international music charts by storm.⁹ It is comparable to the Blues except that, like most Caribbean music, its rhythmic arrangement is melodious and jolly. While the lyrics of *bachata* tell of the tragedy inherent in all love relationships, in contrast, the music itself evokes the comedy of life. Life for the poor of this world is a burden, a fact that the inhabitants of SXM know all too well, but they have learnt to struggle. They can cope, because with God's help they feel they can look tragedy in the face. They can laugh despite continuous adversity. And they can dance. *Bachata* music, always hinting at that Great Spirit that respects them regardless of their station in life or behaviour, is their existential food. This

existential food does not however categorically contest capitalism. Commodity fetishism, getting rich quick, and boasting about female conquests also feature as prevalent themes in *bachata*. The few gains that the poor achieve through their insertion in the capitalist mode of production are interpreted as a counterforce against forms of North Atlantic Christianity that tell them to live piously, work hard, and seek their heaven after death.

Nonetheless, as it has been argued before, in Caribbean music the text is often subordinate to the rhythms and the meaning-making spaces involved therein (Mahabir 2002; Manuel 1998).¹⁰ By rhythm I mean both the instrumental arrangements as well as the human voice that flows over the beats. It grants listeners, while dancing and singing, a space to create their own personal time within the existing time. In this space listeners imagine other truths than those of the artists. In the case of the male listeners of *bachata* on SXM this is doubly true. Many told me that they do not necessarily seek to fully understand the textual messages of *bachata* as their Spanish is functional but, through the act of listening, they identify with the struggle of Dominican women, women with a deep belief in God, women who have to work hard despite their intelligence and beauty. *Bachata* evokes both the happiness and sadness that they see in women's eyes. It is these powerful affects that make what Carmelita and others say truthful to their ears. The irony is that despite the misogynistic lyrics of many songs, for many of the White House customers, this music contributes to the believability of the dancers' life-stories. Moreover, perhaps, when they dance the *bachata* together love between them is born. The situation with Carmelita being no different for, at that time, she had a boyfriend who promised to support her even after she left the island. She loved beautiful clothes and fancy things, and her boyfriend supplied her with these. In many ways Carmelita's story was not exceptional, except for one thing. She knew the Bible inside out. Other prostitutes also claimed that they were Christians, but their biblical knowledge was minimal in comparison. Carmelita on the other hand was a "theologian," an organic biblical scholar who critically engaged the holy texts. And for that, she had quite a reputation.

Upper middle-class, young professionals who were regulars at the White House had introduced me to Carmelita. They told me that if I was looking for a Christian that knew the Bible and was not what they termed the "prim pusses" in church (i.e. devout and pious Christian women who condemned the worldly) I should talk to Carmelita. It is not as easy for women like Carmelita, as it is for wealthy women, to go to church and claim godliness. Carmelita was different. It was clear to me, from the beginning, that her faith was strong in the midst of her trials. She embodied the struggle that true Christians face in life. I took up their offer and, through introducing me, they were happy to enhance their reputations as *hombres importantes*, important men. The afternoon I spent talking to Carmelita about her Christian faith was remarkable as was her knowledge of the bible

which she quoted several times to convince me that women and men had to believe in something greater than themselves. When she got to heaven, she said, Jesus would embrace her while those who criticized her lifestyle without extending a hand would burn in hell. For Carmelita, the day of reckoning is close at hand and it is this future promise that keeps her going while she struggles to make ends meet. Carmelita might be waiting for paradise but this does not stop her from seeking, as best she can, to make her life paradise-like in the here and now.

Why do both, some may ask? Why not seek to make one's life paradise-like in the here and now and forget about God and the paradise to come. Why engage in such religious metaphysics? The answer is that for many of us we all believe, and for some unfathomable reason have to believe in something greater than ourselves. Metaphysics, thinking through and "feeling through" our human condition until we reach a satisfactory rock bottom/ideal plane, seems inescapable. It is a phenomenon that goes by many names: God/s, Nature, the Universal Spirit, Reason, Will, Will to Power, Sympathy, or the Principle of Principles. No one can live life without positing their notion of the ultimate constituents of reality, which guide human actions or upon which these should be grounded (Thoreau 1989; James 1985; Whitehead 1958). And, moreover, it is a notion that always relates to the social networks we participate in.¹¹ We may constantly deconstruct our ultimate grounds, partially induced due to wider societal changes, but in the very movement of deconstruction we often construct others that, in time, we will have to deconstruct again. Hence we who think of ourselves as progressive and liberal may disagree with those like Carmelita who posit God and his laws as the ultimate constituents of reality. We may consider it false and that it obfuscates fundamental inequalities or that she should be schooled in dialectical materialism and feminism; but we the critics invariably posit our own unquestionable truth when we do so. And it is our unquestionable truths, our ultimate grounds, which we need to constantly question and deconstruct even though our assessments may contain grains of truth. It is, in Glissant's (2000) terms, a question of continuously relating the "thought of the Other" to the "other of Thought". With regards to my own research, the "thought of the Other" is the moral generosity disposing me to accept the principle of alterity, to conceive of the world as not simple and straightforward, with only one truth, mine. However, the "thought of the Other" can dwell within me without necessarily making me alter course or without changing me within myself. An ethical principle it is enough that I do not violate it. The "other of Thought" is precisely this altering. Then I have to act. That is the moment I change my thought, without renouncing its contribution. I change, and exchange. It is an aesthetics of turbulence whose corresponding ethics are not provided in advance (Glissant 2000: 154-155).

By listening with an open mind to Carmelita, I understood that Christianity was an expression of her refusal to be disencharnted with the world and therewith

renounce traces of the transcendental within and without herself. Each human being contains these traces according to her: “*Somos todos hijos de Dios*” (“We are all God’s children”). In an age where much of academia has been flooded by critiques of humanism, to the point that some advocate doing away with the idea completely, Carmelita reminded me that the social sciences are but one language game and a partial one at that. I reiterate that Carmelita’s Christian belief is not symbolic of her seeing the world upside down - an ideological camera obscura. The irrefutable fact that those who are poor and dark-skinned are confronted daily with the blatant reality that not all humans are considered human enough is a lesson she and no other person in her position could completely ignore. However, these social facts which she has contested with all her might, do not eliminate her firm belief that there is more to life than that which our five senses behold. For Carmelita, the transcendent was within the immanent. This was the meaning behind her Christianity. However, as I sat watching her performing one night, the Christian in Carmelita seemed dormant. Or was it? As I watched her gyrating to Krosfyah’s hit *Sweatin’* I could not help thinking of her as a priestess blessing her congregation of attentive male customers. A priestess consumed nightly by men who had drunk potions made of carpenter grass and sea moss to strengthen their backs as they released their pent up frustrations in her. After the act she would take their confession and ease whatever guilt they had. This was the fate of many Christians like herself, beings who were knee-deep in the sins of the world, even as they recognized the transcendent within themselves.

Carmelita’s Story in a Wider Historical Perspective

Though Carmelita and other Christian prostitutes are extreme examples, they fit into the wider and prevalent mode of performing Christianity on the island. The vast majority of the islanders I encountered during my 15 months of fieldwork on SXM did all that God forebode but yet still regarded themselves as Christians (Guadeloupe 2006, forthcoming). According to the censuses 65% of the population is Christian although most of these do not attend church on a regular basis.¹² Churches are primarily filled with young children and the elderly, as the middle generations, from my observations, hardly attend. Many told me they had no time to do so as they were working or were tired after working in the tourist industry (Guadeloupe 2006, forthcoming). Their fatigue did not stop them, however, from attending fetes and discos. Violet, my landlady, a certified nurse born and raised on Aruba, said to me “on this island we like cool Christians, those who will play [the lotto], curse, but still try to live right.” And it would seem that these “cool Christians” represent the majority of the island’s believers.

But what does Christianity signify in this context where it does not mean disciplining oneself in the ways of the Lord or completely renouncing the worldly.

Notwithstanding the coolness of their Christianity, the term Christian stands symbolically for a deep belief in God, as well as a non-negotiable demand to be recognized as a human being. It means, in the latter case, that the majority of the island's inhabitants demand the right to be seen as fully-fledged members of society regardless of their station in life. In this radical reinterpretation of Christianity, to mean an unconditional assertion of being human, lies both the legacy of a horrific slavocratic past, which SXM shares with the rest of the Caribbean, as well as its far less bleak contemporary realities. Let me explain. As I mentioned in my introductory remarks, throughout the slavocratic and post-abolition period, being recognized as a human being meant being European, wealthy, and Christian. Some, such as Sylvia Wynter (2003) in her typical polemical style, argue that this is the master code of colonization, a code that was tried and tested in the Caribbean and in the wider Americas. In the wake of the West's reinvention of its "True Christian Self" in the transmuted terms of the "Rational Self of Man", however, it was to be the indigenous peoples of the militarily expropriated New World territories, as well as the enslaved peoples of Africa, that were made to reoccupy the matrix slot of "Otherness"; to be made into the physical referent of the idea of the irrational/subrational human "Other" to this first degodded (if still hybridly religio-secular) "descriptive statement" of the human in history, as the descriptive statement that would be foundational to modernity. (Wynter 2003: 5). The descendants of African slaves and Asian indentured labourers were grudgingly awarded the status of subhumans or humans-to-be, "savages" that needed to be civilized before they could be awarded full human status. The established churches, like the Roman Catholic Church, and many of the, allegedly, progressive dissident sects such as the Baptists took it upon themselves to civilize these descendants of Ham who, supposedly, had been cursed by God (Jap-A-Joe 2005; Hall 2002; Sheller 2000; Austin-Broos 1997; Chevannes 1995, 1994). But since "God is love", they reasoned, he was willing to forgive the trespasses of these descendants of Noah's wayward son. If they behaved pliantly and learnt the ways of Europe, in time they could be awarded the status of human beings. Always, however, they would only be regarded as human in an inferior position to the enlightened European colonizers.

Since most blacks had no hope of cultivating wealth within their lifetime, and becoming European was impossible and often not desirable, they contested their inferior status by capturing the God of their captors.¹³ Within and without the churches, they cultivated other ways of being Christian, a Christianity that was often tied to struggles for equal rights and justice in the kingdom of this world (Jap-A-Joe 2005; Hall 2002; Sheller 2000; Austin-Broos 1997; Chevannes 1995, 1994). Many of the post-abolition rebellions were led by blacks that seemed to accept their apprenticeship towards full-fledged membership of the human family within established churches (Hall 2002; Sheller 2000; Austin-Broos 1997; Chevannes 1995, 1994). Their piety and deep belief in God did

not shield them from the endemic racism and class discrimination in plantation societies. They were often disappointed to find out that most of the dissident European missionaries did not unequivocally support their struggle. Apparently the biblical story of the meek inheriting the earth meant something different to these priests than it did to the sons and daughters of slaves. Realizing this, some dissented, forming separate indigenous forms of Christianity such as the Shouters and the Revivalists, which partially recognized their creolized African heritage and aligned this to the worldly struggles of the black oppressed (Hall 2002; Chevannes 1995, 1994; Sheller 2000; Glazier 1983).¹⁴

Outside of the confines of churches however, in the realm of arts, specifically black Atlantic music, an even more radical reinterpretation of Christianity was occurring. The realm of arts was the space which blacks enjoyed a relatively high degree of freedom. It was equivalent to the small plots of land they were “given” to produce their food while enslaved on the plantations. Despite sentiments expressed in phrases such as, “give them their song and their dance and they will accept the white man’s rule” or “let them sing their coon music and dance their vulgar dance; it shows that they are still savages”, this “coon” music, Black Atlantic music would, ultimately, conquer the Euro-American music charts. But that took time. For most of the history of black people in the New World, the cultural space where music dominated has also explicitly and unequivocally been a space of contestation (Gilroy 1993).¹⁵ In musical forms such as Reggae, Calypso, and Rhumba, Caribbean blacks have portrayed themselves as modern day Jews, God’s chosen people, while simultaneously have brought the Christian tradition back into the world (Manuel et al 1995; Hall 1995). By this I mean that many Calypsos, those of David Rudder being exemplary, tells a story (in rhythm more than in words) that even while one seeks to be a good Christian one cannot forsake the world one inhabits. A world which, in the Caribbean is creolized and is reflected in the African congas and Asian tablas that can be heard under the Christian melody lines that make up the rhythmic bases of another style of Christianity put forth in the realm of the arts. The Caribbean has given rise to a musical base which parallels the lives of those seeking to be Christ-like in a world that is crooked; music for those who need to believe in an ultimate avenging “mover” to make sense of the absurdity of racism and class discrimination; music that accommodates their Christianity to the urgencies of everyday life; music for those in whom a reconfigured Africa and Asia lived alongside Europe and who understand that their rewards should be sought in this world as much as in the otherworldly; those who embrace capitalism while contesting it. Moreover, anyone who denies this truth is, and continues to be, lampooned. In many popular songs they are labelled hypocrites and Pharisees. For instance, in David Rudder’s popular hit *Shango Electric*, Legba is summoned to enter into the television to save the souls of Christians who wish to forget that, even in its most seemingly North Atlantic forms, their religion did not escape

the imprint of African-derived religious expressions and often contributed to the exploitative mechanisms of capitalism.¹⁶ Historically, popular Caribbean songs are replete with these kinds of allusions.¹⁷

Placing Carmelita's Story in a Wider Sociological Perspective

What I have just sketched is the historical legacy that continues in the present. How could it be otherwise in a world where race remains a guiding fiction? Most Caribbean blacks are still struggling. When they venture to North America to earn a living or a degree, as many do, they are still called "nigger" (Waters 1999). They still struggle to be accepted as humans. Affluent blacks on SXM related to me a number of humiliating situations they faced in North America. While their parents could afford to send them to private universities this meant little when police officers often mistook them for drug dealers because they were driving expensive cars. But it is exactly their class position that leads one to recognize that the historical meta-narrative of blacks employing Christianity to criticize racism and class discrimination needs to be nuanced. The situation on SXM is not bleak. SXM is not a poor island. It is not an island where one encounters black beggars on the street. It is one of the alternative post-colonies in the Caribbean that has been spared predatory capitalism by remaining, constitutionally, part of both France and the Netherlands (Rummens 1993; Badejo 1990; Monnier 1983).¹⁸

It is not that capitalism in the Caribbean has become less malevolent it is that SXM has become part of the West. And in the West, capitalism behaves more like a kitten than the ravicious cat that it really is. It is here, in the West, where the beast seems tamed, tamed only because no beast completely ravages its base-camp that the impoverished of the world long to be a part of. SXM, being part of the West, is no exception. The vast majority of the population consists of newcomers from the wider Americas, Europe, and Asia. They migrate to the island because SXM has a successful tourist industry and it receives structural subsidies from France and the Netherlands. Though the poorest of the poor can earn a decent living, this does not mean that they do not have to struggle to do so. Carmelita's story makes this clear. There is both class and racial differences, with those from "the West" usually better off than those from "the Rest." In very broad strokes, SXM resembles the global order. The upper classes are predominantly Western Europeans, North Americans, Chinese, and Indians. They are the "money people" as they say on SXM and many have enjoyed a high standard of education. But the many working-class, French, Chinese, Indians, and Pakistani who migrated to SXM and worked alongside Afro- and Asian-Caribbeans, drove a wedge into this neat characterization. They had neither money nor a high education. And they were not given any preferential treatment that translated itself into more Euros or U.S. Dollars. The few, though visible, upper class Afro-

and Asian-Caribbeans, who did not think twice to exploit their black brothers and sisters, complicated matters even further. The working-classes of SXM are aware of these complexities and voice these in their own characteristic way. They understand that on SXM bio-cultural solidarity above class distinctions is a chimera. Speaking about a poor Chinese woman called Eve, a Texaco worker from Providencia, called Nestor, explained it to me like this:

... is just like we [blacks] partner. They [the wealthy Chinese employers] does help who they want. They family and friends. You ain't see how they does treat Eve. That is why I does tell the boys to help she out. She is small people like we [someone who belongs to the working class]. Black man don't like black man, but chiney don't like chiney either, and white man don't like white man. Francio, in this world it is every man for himself and God for us all. Money runs things, that is the bottom line.

To counter the rule of money, the working-classes employ Christianity as a meta-idiom to forward their inalienable right to be treated with human dignity. Biblical teachings such as, "it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God", are employed to remind the wealthy that God is judging them. The way they treat their fellow human beings, whom God loves equally, is deemed an indicator of their humanity. The upper-classes grudgingly comply as much as possible for it is in their interests not to aggravate ethnic, religious, and class tensions on the island. After all, the working-classes do not put forth arguments against a complete overhaul of the system. The "locals," the autochthons, most of whom are black and who occupy government and middle-management positions, are the keepers of the peace among all the newcomers. It is also in their best interest to do so. Without the wealthy hotel investors from North America and the working-class immigrants from poorer Caribbean countries who tend to the tourists, the economy would collapse. On this fantasy island, all classes have a vested interest in keeping the tourist machine running.

In such a situation, the kind of Christianity conveyed through Caribbean music means something else. The privileged cultural brokers on the island, which are the radio disc jockeys, articulate the style of Christianity produced in the realm of the arts within an all-inclusive politics of belonging (Guadeloupe 2005; 2006 forthcoming). The same is done by popular politicians and businessmen. These all-inclusive politics of belonging are capitalist-friendly and do not endorse essentialist forms of pan-Africanism or Christian fundamentalism, two ideologies which are seen as "extremist" and are chided on the radio, especially by popular disc jockeys who remind the island's inhabitants of the disastrous social consequences that they

have had for many surrounding countries. On occasions when radio disc jockeys play the “radical”, Christian-infused social critiques of Bob Marley’s “conscious” Reggae¹⁹ whose lyrics preach the message of “One Love” across creeds and ethnicities, there is a tendency to emphasize a Christian-oriented version of human oneness rather than class or religious based revolution:

Be your brother and sisters keeper but do not seek to dismantle the system that structures inequality, for this will only cause confusion. And confusion is not good for the tourist industry. Therefore it is not good for anyone, especially not the poorest of the poor on the island.

This is, for the most part, the message of the disc jockeys, and it is the message which most of the islanders I encountered take from the music (Guadeloupe 2006, forthcoming). For the rhythms endorse the comic over and above the tragic, and this comical understanding of life shares an elective affinity with the political, economic, and social fields that make up SXM society. Everyone has to relate to the unspoken rule that though SXM is not an Eden, it is good enough given the global order. Every Christian on the island adapts his or her performance of religiosity to this rule. Thus, when Carmelita says she is a Christian, and God condones what she is doing, she is speaking the truth in the context of SXM. This was clearly articulated by Clem, an entrepreneur from Dominica who said:

Let me tell you something, Francio, the kind of Christians you looking for, well we don't have that kind over here so. Come to think of it, I don't think that kind of Christian Christian [true pious Christian] exists except in the Bible or somewhere where people cut off. SXM is not a place that is cut off. You hear about the Big Apple, well this here is the Little Apple. That is what the people from the neighboring islands does call SXM. Anybody on the island who receiving a paycheck can't say that he born again. If he say that he is, he's a hypocrite, a stinking dirty liar. Every month that he collect that paycheck knowing that a lot of drugs money does pass through this place he sinning. Every time he say thanks for that tip knowing that it is from people who exploiting they own people in the States, he sinning. We are all sinners, we trying to be Christian Christian yes, but we can't be it as long as this island remains being the Little Apple.

Thus, on SXM, a God that endorses capitalism can also sometimes sanction Carmelita and the other islanders' *laissez faire* style of performing Christianity

but he is also a God that is against creating static hierarchies between human beings. Perhaps, like everything else, this other style of Christianity is both transgressive and, at the same time, accommodating to the dominant though shifting capitalist and North Atlantic Christian hegemonies on SXM and the wider Caribbean. Until this dialectic is resolved, the Carmelitas of the Caribbean will have to continue dancing this in-possible/in [the] possible dance.

Notes

- 1 This research is part of the *Pionier* project headed by Professor Birgit Meyer of the Amsterdam School for Social Scientific Research (ASSR) at the University of Amsterdam (UVA). The *Pionier* project investigates the changing relationships between media, nationalism, and religion in various regions of the Global South: Ghana, Nigeria, Egypt, India, Bangladesh, Brazil, Venezuela, and Saint Martin & Sint Maarten. The author of this article, Francio Guadeloupe, is a social anthropologist who was born on the Dutch West Indian island of Aruba with family links to the French, Spanish, and British West Indies. He has lived half his life in the Netherlands where he was employed as a lecturer at the sociology and anthropology department of the University of Amsterdam. This paper is part of his recently completed PhD thesis on the manner in which popular disc jockeys on Saint Martin & Sint Maarten successfully employ Caribbean music and Creolized interpretations of Christianity to put forth an all-inclusive politics of belonging. For this study, 15 months of fieldwork was conducted employing the methods of participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and discourse analysis. Permission was granted by Carmelita and the other respondents featured in this article.
- 2 Although in scholarly articles and political tracts the term “West Indian” is often reserved for the English-speaking Caribbean, in this paper it will be employed to refer to the Dutch, French, and Spanish-speaking regions as well. The reason for this choice is that on Saint Martin & Sint Maarten the terms are used interchangeably.
- 3 Derek Walcott cited in Breslin (2001: 114).
- 4 The most convincing articulation of this point is C.L.R. James’ seminal study *The Black Jacobins* (1962). As James demonstrated, without neglecting the brave whites who did do so, few white intellectuals and men of the cloth openly supported blacks of Haiti when they radically asserted that they too were “human”. The founding of this, the first non-European governed nation-state in 1804 was unthinkable. So unthinkable that it took 50 years for the U.S.A.’s recognition. What is even more preposterous was that the Haitian government had to pay France approximately \$21.7 billion in today’s dollars, according to the estimates of Eduardo Galeano, for damages and profits lost due to the slave uprising.
- 5 In some cases this led to the development of new Afro-Christian faiths such as the Spiritual Baptists and Rastafari that still struggle for equal societal recognition. The ethnographic work of Chevaness (1995, 1994), Mansigh & Mansingh (1989), and Glazier (1983) document these marked, alternative modes of Christianity. For the most part however as the rich ethnography of Austin-Broos demonstrates, the Chris-

- tian “Word” is being creolized within the dominant North Atlantic versions of this faith. This paper argues that an even more influential space where this creolization takes place is in the realm of the arts, specifically, within popular Caribbean music.
- 6 In his seminal study, *The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective*, Benitez-Rojo characterized the region thus: “[t]he choices of all or nothing, for or against, honor or blood have little to do with the culture of the Caribbean. These ideological propositions articulated in Europe which the Caribbean shares only in declamatory terms, or, better, in terms of a first reading. In Chicago a beaten soul says: “I can’t take it anymore,” and gives himself up to drugs or to the most desperate violence. In Havana, he would say: “The thing to do is not to die,” or perhaps: “Here I am, fucked but happy” (Benitez-Rojo 1996: 10).
 - 7 Not all of the working classes in the Caribbean converted to Christianity. Particularly those whose parents came from Asia retained their religions. However they too had to relate to an explicitly Christian universe, although this universe was in a process of creolization. A thoroughly and constantly creolizing Christianity is the meta-language of the region. See Miller (1994) who demonstrates the validity of this point in his ethnographic study of Trinidad where almost half of the population is of Asian-Caribbean descent. See also Guadeloupe (2006) forthcoming.
 - 8 God forgives the sins of the poor who have to struggle to survive, those without money.
 - 9 Artists such as Aventura, Anthony Santos, and Monchy Alexandra, have become international renowned. In the American billboard charts one encounters *bachata* hits or Reggeaton artists such as Don Omar who make use of the guitar riffs and compositional style of *bachata*
 - 10 “... it is a feature of musical polysemy that audiences can react in diverse ways to different aspects of a given piece, in accordance with individual predisposition, listening contexts, and other factors. Most Caribbean popular music is in fact dance music, in which the literal meaning of the text may be functionally secondary to purely musical aspects providing rhythmic drive” (Manuel 1998: 1). In the article from which this quote is taken, Manuel demonstrates, based on participatory observation among West Indian men and women, that audiences do have some freedom in making their own meanings. In every context they exercise their critical agency - meaning emerges in use. See also Guadeloupe (2006 forthcoming).
 - 11 The connection between our propositions of the ultimate constituents of reality and the social networks we participate in is not to be neglected. The former is not possible without the latter. Nonetheless, there is a difference of degree between those networks where external anthropomorphic beings (Gods, the Universal Spirit) are posited as the ultimate ground and those that posit impersonal forces (reason) or internal characteristics (sympathy).
 - 12 See Census atlas 2001 Sint Maarten, Netherlands Antilles (geschreven en samengesteld door Sean de Boer). Willemstad: CBS, 2001. For the French side of the island I relied on interviews with civil servants, since religion is not a census category. They claimed that the figures were similar to those on the Dutch side of the island.
 - 13 The statement “capturing God from the captors” was first coined by Derek Walcott (1993).

- 14 The ambiguity of the Shouters, Revivalists, Myalism, or for that matter Rastafari, is that they can be classified as neo-African as well as neo-European cultural expressions. In the case of Rastafari, authors such as Mansingh & Mansingh (1989) have argued that Asian influences are an important part of its spiritual repertoire. Due to the ongoing process of creolization, that respects no ethnic boundaries, every classification is a political choice. In my way of thinking the truthfulness of any classification of these cultural expressions is related to the logic of the argument one is putting forward. See also the work of Roland Littlewood (1993) who makes the same point in his ethnographic research on the Mother Earth cult in Trinidad.
- 15 The popularity of Black Atlantic music, as Gilroy asserts, does not however signify that racism has diminished.
- 16 In Caribbean spiritual philosophies such as Santeria and Shango, Legba or Exu is known as the God of communication. S/he (Legba is androgynous) resides over language and the other symbolic faculties of humankind. Legba also encourages indulging in the hedonism of this world, while we remember that there is deeper spiritual plane of life operative in the immanency of our collective experience as human beings.
- 17 Going into a discussion of song texts would exceed the scope of this paper. See Guadeloupe (2006) where I discuss and analyse several song-texts showing how the demands of capitalism and North Atlantic Christianity are negotiated.
- 18 For general historical accounts of SXM describing how this island became a wealthy tourist paradise see Johnson (1994), Glasscock (1985), Hartog (1981).
- 19 Conscious Reggae is the term that many SXMers use for Roots Reggae.

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