

Audible entanglements: Nation and diasporas
in Trinidad's calypso music scene.

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Audible Entanglements:

Nation and Diasporas in Trinidad's Calypso Music Scene

Jocelyne Guilbault

In 1963 the Mighty Sparrow was crowned calypso king when he performed the song "Kennedy." In newly independent Trinidad, this Grenadian-born calypsonian's composition celebrated the U.S. president's stand against Soviet Premier Khrushchev during the Cuban Missile Crisis. In this competition, the Mighty Sparrow defeated a recent returnee from the United Kingdom whose sobriquet, Lord Kitchener, evoked imperial circuits traveled by the famous British colonial officer in India and Egypt. How is it that these transnational routes became nationally rooted in Trinidad as quintessential features of calypso culture?

Here, I examine calypso competitions as an instantiation of what I term "audible entanglements" to illuminate and amplify the production of nation and diaspora in Trinidad. Performed in different historical moments, these competitions render audible and visible specific constituencies, and imaginations of longing, belonging, and exclusion. I thus turn the volume up on the musical practices and specific soundings assembled in calypso competitions, attending to their distinct forms, rhythms, tempos, and affective resonances for individuals and communities. As a critical analytic, audible entanglements thus *foresound* sites, moments, and modes of enunciation articulated **[End Page 40]** through musical practices. So, far from being "merely" musical, audible entanglements through competitions also assemble social relations, cultural expressions, and political formations.¹

Critical to shaping these entanglements are the distinct political technologies informing competitions. These technologies discipline subjects and provide normative notions of class, race, and gender; they inform experiences of competitors and audiences; they generate articulations of nation and diaspora productive of identities; they encourage particular musical products and markets, and the construction of specific social and political alliances—all with often unintended consequences. In this perspective, competitions are not viewed as techniques that are used by fully constituted subjects. Rather, they are viewed as aiming to constitute particular subjects. The "political" aspect in such technologies derives from being inextricably linked with processes of exclusion, marginalization, and representation. It comes from being enmeshed with the enunciation of rights, vindications, and ownership. The "political" is not here reduced to state politicians, institutions, or practices. In Trinidad the political technologies that are deployed through competitions, in addition to being sponsored by state agencies, are imbricated with church organizations, Carnival Improvement committees composed of members of the Creole middle class, cultural entrepreneurs, American recording companies, radio broadcast personnel, and educational programs, to name only a few. As such, competitions embody different and, at times, diverging interests that are not fixed but actively staged and produced.

Both the audible entanglements and the political technologies embodied in calypso competitions help historicize three main tensions: that between nation and diaspora, that within the nation, and that within and among discrepant diasporas. In Trinidad multiple diasporas have long been entangled in the contending constructions of nation in distinct historical moments. An African diaspora generated by transatlantic slavery and an Indian diaspora generated by indenturedship together form today over 90 percent of the total population in Trinidad. (By diaspora I mean the "historically dynamic cultural relationship between a homeland and enforced dispersal"² and also the double displacement—from the motherland to the Caribbean, and then to other host countries—that many experience.)³ **[End Page 41]**

The tensions within the nation have been historically amplified by the exclusion of certain bodies in the calypso competition arena in tandem with the biopolitics that have contributed to the definition of both citizenship and national culture.⁴ In this respect, it is important to know that in Trinidad, "race" and "ethnicity" are deployed in distinct ways: while Afro-Trinidadian, East Indian, and Chinese are racialized categories, that is, they are based on what are perceived as "fixed" attributes,⁵ most Trinidadians refer to them in ethnic terms. In this context, ethnicity invokes cultural values and practices that are usefully considered more malleable than bodies—and thus, at least in official rhetoric, more amenable to ally in

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