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Folk and Fantasy: Colonial Imaginations of Caribbean Culture in Mid-Century Calypso Album Cover Art

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ABSTRACT



This article explores the reflections of Caribbean culture found in mid-century calypso album cover art. Calypso cover art offers important documentations of Caribbean folk life and cultural identity pre-independence, but at the same time, facilitate the exportation of colonial fantasies about local life to attract tourists. The images examined invariably construct Caribbean islands as “places to play” (Sheller, 2003) and its people as carefree and even childish natives. We use semiotics and critical visual analysis to analyze mid-century record album cover characterizations of the primordial rhythm of folk life and caricatures of native culture, as well as the ways touristic esthetics adapted Calypso, including the figure of the Coconut Woman, as a soundtrack for colonial fantasies and fuel for the colonial gaze. This article reveals how minor, even peripheral, objects such as Calypso records promoted as fun and festive consumer goods reveal powerful, yet relatively unnoticed, insights into visual communication.

KEYWORDS

Calypso; record albums; graphic art; visual culture; Caribbean; identity; popular culture; postcolonialism

The Caribbean has been a fertile creative space on many fronts, including music. From reggae to rumba, Caribbean music is world-renowned, influencing other musical genres and circulating ideas about the islands and its peoples. Importantly, Caribbean popular music has long been enmeshed with ideas of identity and nationhood.

By the 1950s, Calypso had become *the* music of the Caribbean (Liverpool, 1994). Calypso gained cultural currency both locally and internationally, and this musical form carried out into the wider world ideas about the region’s culture and the identity of its inhabitants. Vinyl records constituted an important aspect of Calypso’s popularity and wide distribution. Calypso records disseminated Calypso music, often as dance music. In addition, eye-catching Calypso album cover images of “Caribbean” life suggested stories about the origins, current existential dilemmas, and future incarnations of self and place. These images also created visions of desire, sites to be visited, and unfamiliar delights and rhythms to be experienced. Calypso record albums promoted tourism, and were often given away by travel companies as a means to prepare for and anticipate a holiday. Such record albums also served as post-vacation souvenirs (Borgerson & Schroeder, 2017). Thus, with Calypso’s popularity in view, both Calypso music and Calypso album cover art are important conduits and repositories of Caribbean

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material culture. However, vinyl record covers' significance as cultural artifacts has remained largely undocumented and under theorized.

We argue that the illustrations and photographs of mid-century Calypso record cover art offer telling representations of Caribbean folk life and cultural identity pre-independence, and at the same time facilitated the exportation of a fossilized idea of everyday life to attract the tourist gaze. We explore reflections of Caribbean culture found in Calypso album cover art and apply a semiotically informed method of critical visual analysis to a selection of Calypso record covers. This approach provides a framework for describing and critiquing visual elements as well as analyzing the socio-cultural processes by which meanings emerge and circulate.

Calypso's ability to entice visitors was aided by visual strategies that helped communicate what tourists might expect. Along with airline posters, postcards, and tourist brochures, popular Calypso album cover art helped represent the Caribbean to the wider world. Before the audience encounters aural experiences of the Caribbean through the vinyl grooves, the images visually ensconce the listener in the landscape. The images adorning mid-century Calypso albums were as much a part of a soundtrack to leisure as the music. In this respect, album cover art served as a prime promotional engine of this mid-century tourism project.

Caribbean art and identity

Historically, a discourse about invention, about self and authenticity, resonates within Caribbean art, given the region's and its people's history of dislocation from Africa and the vicissitudes of European colonialism that ensued. Referring to its colonial past and ensuing processes of creolization, Nettleford exposes the dual occupation of the Caribbean as a geographical as well as a political space (Nettleford, 1989). Indeed, because of these encounters, "the stage was...set very early for the quest for self-definition in what came to be ahistorically labelled the New World" (Nettleford, 1989, p. 236). From a physiographical point of view, the Caribbean constitutes a chain of islands and archipelagos stretching along the Caribbean Sea, inclusive of the Greater Antilles, the Lesser Antilles, the Bahamas, and the islands of the southern Caribbean or Southern Antilles (Blair et al., 2019). Geo-politically, the region is part of the Global South, a term that prejudicially marks its members as peripheral, "third world" and wholly inferior to Europe and North America.

The arts have cemented their role in shaping Caribbean societies and fighting against cultural erasure. However, these noted entanglements among art, nation and identity do not exist without tensions, and the process of identity negotiation or reclamation does not escape the production of myth. The real and the fantastical are often inextricably linked; as memory becomes selective or obscured, some things become silenced so that others may speak (Hall, 1995). In this sense, articulations of culture and identity sometimes emerge as ossified visions of people and place. The forms they take in various artistic expressions seem to suggest that the fate of identity and culture, in some cases, is to become consumed by the fiction they inadvertently create.

Paradise forms a core of many Caribbean nation branding efforts (Gordon, 2019). These portrayals conjure notions of authentic experiences awaiting tourists when they encounter a natural, unspoiled landscape—familiar, too, in the paradisaical discourse

around Hawaii and other island resorts (Costa, 1998). This depiction masks the fact that authenticity is usually based on myth and fantasy about cultural ideals (e.g., Sharpley, 1994). Frequently staged, such “authenticity” involves visual productions that reimagine the anthropology of the region’s colonial past as innocuous and even natural (Gordon, 2019).

Calypso in the Caribbean

Calypso, or *Kaiso*, as locally known in parts of the Caribbean, is a musical genre that emerged during plantation slavery. Rooted in West African musical forms, Calypso absorbed elements of European, East Indian, Latin American and North American musical traditions (Liverpool, 1994; Rohlehr, 2001). Liverpool, formerly the “Mighty Chalkdust,” and five time Calypso Monarch, describes Calypso music as topical songs of “praise, derision, protest and celebration based on a West African rhythmic pattern, using cut time, and a blend of European and African melodies” (Liverpool, 1994, p. 179), historically performed under a tent with a live audience. These songs were traditionally performed by a “chanteuse” or griot, and offered social commentary on plantation life via praise or satire (Ramm, 2017). Performances usually took the format of a caller response, creating a dialectical musical experience for the audience that was at once entertaining and politically challenging.

Not unlike other forms of popular music that emerged in the region, Calypso has a high degree of political and social value (Guerron-Montero, 2006). While listening to and looking at mid-century Calypso records, “it is crucial to keep in mind, then, that as Americans went crazy for calypso, the *birthplace* of Calypso, like much of the rest of the Third World, was clamoring for independence from its colonial masters.” (Eldridge, 2005, p. 13). In fact, Liverpool invites us to “see calypso against the backdrop of protest” (1994, p. 181). While its entertainment and performance elements are used to mask its aggressive satire, the political intent of calypso songs is often not lost on local officials and social elites, who have used various mechanisms to curtail if not ban Calypso altogether.

Calypso emerged in Trinidad and Tobago, but the genre has long spread to other Caribbean islands, as well as internationally. During Calypso’s golden age, the music was perhaps best known through and associated with American performer Harry Belafonte. (Belafonte, although from New York, spent time in Jamaica growing up, as both his parents were from the West Indies.) He made history with his 1956 album *Harry Belafonte: Calypso*, the first record by a solo performer to sell a million copies. Belafonte remains indelibly etched in the narrative of mid-century Caribbean music as a result of his commercial success with Calypso. Belafonte’s rendition of Calypso music were less about signaling native Caribbean life, but rather selling imagined folk life to a predominantly White audience.

Calypso music on record

Calypso music album covers present an overlooked aspect of visual culture in the Caribbean at mid-century, as well as important components of the tourism industry. After World War II, the Caribbean emerged as a popular destination spot. Calypso,

with its affective power as the music of the local masses, was a perfect lure to seduce tourists looking for an exotic escape. In the US, Calypso seemed poised to challenge the rise of rock and roll (Funk & Hill, 2007; Vogel, 2018). Performers from across the musical spectrum released “Calypso” records, including folk singer Burl Ives, jazz artist Dinah Washington, and writer Maya Angelou. However, music was not the only component of Calypso.

Visual images signify meanings, intentionally and otherwise communicate everyday experiences, and provide a vital means of reflecting upon the social world (Barthes, 1977). As such, “art serves as a reservoir of unofficial knowledge, critique of history and culture, and an affirmation of life” (Young Choi Caruso, 2005, p. 72–73). Fine art, in particular, has been examined to explore the ways in which such artistic works reflect and interact with cultural values.

Vinyl record albums and their covers “typically find a place in popular culture, rather than fine art,” but as authors argue, the representations found on record covers are “no less evocative and telling than those in painting or photography (Borgerson & Schroeder, 2021, p. 2; see also Spampinato & Wiedemann, 2017). Album covers are useful objects for visual analysis for several reasons. First, they are durable. Unlike most mid-century media forms records were—and are still—collected and coveted by consumers, and displayed in stores and homes. Calypso records circulate through used record stores, charity shops, and internet marketplaces, serve as icons on music streaming services like Apple Music and Spotify, feature in online on album cover fan sites, and appear in both popular and scholarly publications about record cover art (e.g., Borgerson & Schroeder, 2017; Denis, 2016; Yglesias, 2005). Further, record cover design was a leading purveyor of graphic images during the decades after World War II. Many leading artists and graphic designers produced record designs; some of which are considered collectible classics. As material artifacts, records play a role in crucial identity forming practices, such as the building and sharing of expertise, leisure activities, and self-reflecting nostalgic reverie.

Music and dance serve complicated functions as “intangible cultural heritage” (e.g., Luker, 2016). Research on commodified identity in music industry representations has examined identity representations in Caribbean music videos as the music industry sought out transnational markets (Balaji & Sigler, 2018). In this article, we argue that an earlier visual form, mid-century Calypso album covers, operate in similar ways at intersections of commodification and resistance.

The cover art investigated can be largely organized into two categories: illustrations and photographic images. Politically, each form communicates aspects of reality that commands different readings from the audience. For example, photographic images tend to encourage the viewer to equate what we see in photographs with what is real (Davey, 1992). Illustrations or drawings suggest a reliance on the artist’s interpretation or subjectivity. Such graphic design tends to communicate peoples’ held subjective beliefs about or impressions and perceptions of persons, places, or things encountered (e.g., Hunter, 2011).

The discussion now turns to a review of an appropriate methodological framework for evaluating visual elements contained in Calypso album cover art. Methodological principles of critical visual analysis are discussed in relation to their relevance for identifying and assessing visual attributes of the artwork investigated.

Critical visual analysis

Visual texts create subject positions or identities for those they represent as well as for those who use them. Visual narratives, such as those produced by the cover art of mid-century Calypso albums, are part of the flow of messages and images in modern society that contribute to dominant modes of argumentation about culture. As Castells (2000, p. 507) concludes, “image making [becomes] power making,” and critical visual analysis allows identification of the power constellations and political interests that might be at play via particular visual hegemonies (Ludes et al., 2014). According to Schroeder (2006, p. 303) “[c]ritical visual analysis offers researchers an interdisciplinary method for understanding and contextualizing images—crucial concerns, given the cultural centrality of vision.” This approach therefore offers a lens through which to examine the “poetics and politics of images” (Schroeder, 2006, p. 319) as a representational system possessed with historical and rhetorical presence and power. These poetics may very well be denoted as the specific cultural codes or conventions that imbue social actions, artifacts, behavior, mannerisms and in this case, images, with meaning in a given society.

Critical visual analysis affords new perspectives for investigating specific cultural and historical references in contemporary images primarily through its attention to the “semiotic landscape” (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006, p. 35) that characterizes a particular cultural space. Similarly to Buchanan, Alcime, and Morrison’s work (2020) on comic book imagery, we draw upon semiotics to interrogate album covers as cultural texts. When we consider visual images as cultural and semiotic artifacts, a range of nonverbal meanings become available analytically, that are unavailable through verbal analysis (e.g., Martin, 2017). Critical visual analysis provides us with a means of understanding the semiotic landscape that attends the images being investigated (see also Buchanan et al., 2020).

Analytical procedures

For this study, we engage in a critical visual analysis of 214 Calypso mid-century album covers. The album covers were derived from internet database searches using a combination of the terms “Caribbean music 1950s” and “mid-century Caribbean music.” From this initial search, two databases, namely Discogs and the Smithsonian Folkways Recording, emerged as authoritative sources and were used to obtain the album cover samples.

Discogs is a crowdsourced database cataloging information about millions of audio recordings, including vinyl releases from a wide variety of musical genres. Since its inception in 2000, “Discogs has built one of the most exhaustive collections of discographical information in the world, with historical data cataloged by thousands of volunteer editors in extreme detail” (Sisario, 2015, B1). Discogs provide a valuable research resource given its comprehensive cataloguing of world music.

The Smithsonian Folkways Recording is the nonprofit record label of the Smithsonian Institution, founded in 1948 to “document “people’s music,” spoken word, instruction, and sounds from around the world” (<https://folkways.si.edu/mission-and-history>). Their website provides digital access to more than 2000 music recordings and their accompanying album cover art.

Using both sites allowed the researchers breadth of coverage as well as rigor in our search for artifacts that fit the descriptive category of music under investigation. After removing images that were not cover art (e.g., images of the vinyl record itself) as well as duplicates across both sites, 214 album covers made up the sample

Next, the researchers engaged in a critical examination of the cover art. This included noting meanings conveyed by the thematic, formal, and stylistic qualities of the images present and scrutinizing the potential ideological function of the visual images and the ideas they seek to communicate. Every sign supposes a code, including a stock of stereotypes such as schemes, colors, gestures, and expressions that cue the audience to the preferred or dominant reading of the conveyed message (Barthes, 1961). As part of the analytical process, critical attention was paid to these criteria outlined by Barthes, as well as certain established “building blocks” of images (Schroeder, 2006) including subject matter, genre, style, medium and color, all formal components of an image.

Pictorial elements—style: Primordial rhythm of Caribbean folk life

From the point of view of style, the featured cover art, both photographic images and illustrations alike, exhibit a typically Afrocentric folk eclecticism. Identifiable African cultural artifacts, such as drums, headdress, and clothing predominate the visual repertoire of the collection examined for the study. In particular, the world of mysticism and folk religion as well as traditional folk musical and carnival references stand out (Figure 1).

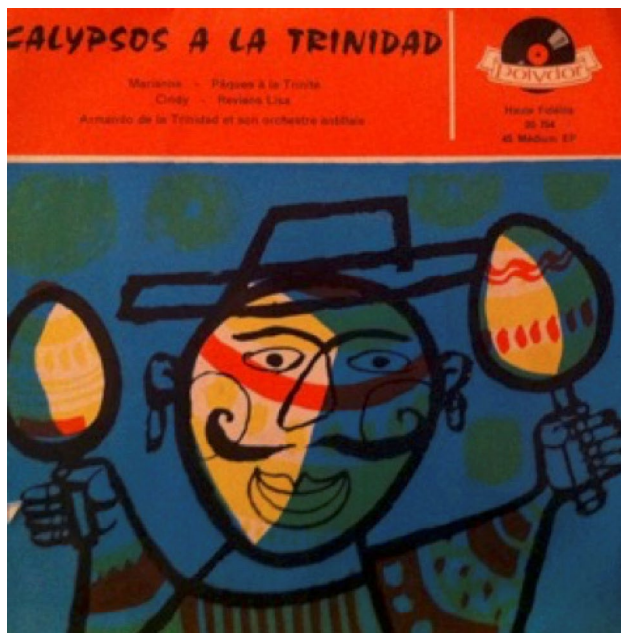


Figure 1. Armando De La Trinidad Et Son Orchestre Antillais, *Calypsos A La Trinidad*, Polydor, 1956. From Discogs Online Database. <https://www.discogs.com/Armando-De-La-Trinidad-Et-Son-Orchestre-Antillais-Calypsos-A-La-Trinidad/master/930459>.

Stylistically, the application of African folk topographies and motif in the cover art is visually striking. Vibrant colors, geometric themes, and dynamic forms of presenting human subjects typical of Afrocentric artwork, command the audiences' attention. They act as potent lures to fix the onlooker's attention to the core business at hand, that is, Calypso music, the product being sold through the art. The art also functions to conjure in the audience's mind, ideas about the place that produces such a product. What stories then, are being told through the album covers, not just about Calypso but also the Caribbean? And, to whom are these stories directed?

The latter question will be explored later in this article, but to the first, Calypso album cover art during the mid-20th century represented a strategic mobilization of Caribbean and African derived folk sensibilities to concretize a narrative of native music produced and performed in a neo-primitive space. Calypso appears as an intuitive, rustic musical genre performed for entertainment purposes. Calypso's nativity is emphasized in the various depictions, encouraging the viewer to think of the music as primordial, quaint, and exotic. Similarly, the geography within which this music materializes is also articulated as primal or pastoral. These themes appeal to the countrified and idyllic, palpably displayed in the preponderance of scenes that feature the natural landscape, peopled with barefooted "natives" in indigenous dress (Figure 2).

Together, these elements recall what Pratt (2007) refers to as the "imperial eye," a creative style of imagining formerly colonized spaces that relies on certain imperial codes derived from Europe. This style is further characterized by binary representations of place and space that perennially casts Europeans and their cultural lifestyles in opposition to colonial and eventually, post-colonial subjects (Gordon, 2019). Specifically,

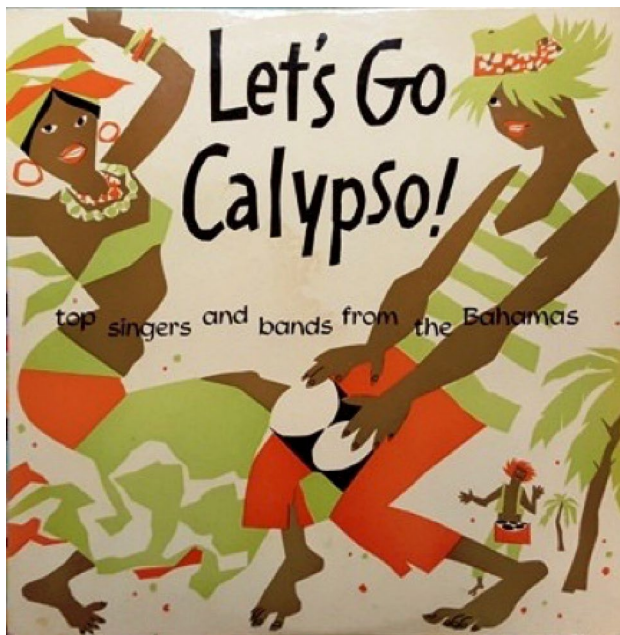


Figure 2. King Scratch (2) and the Bay Street Boys, *Let's Go Calypso*, Somerset, 1958. From Discogs Online Database. <https://www.discogs.com/King-Scratch-2-And-The-Bay-Street-Boys-Lets-Go-Calypso/release/6340713>.

this dichotomy operates according to codes of civilized versus uncivilized, developed versus underdeveloped, enlightened versus ignorant, and so forth.

The Caribbean folk imaginary, as cast through the imperial eye, quickly establishes a sense of place for viewers. The images tell a story of a way of life, painting a picture of the basic rhythms of Caribbean culture. Hidden from this animation of everyday folk living as displayed on these album covers, however, is that these representations are but an editorial of folk life, reflecting particular standpoints. Many midcentury Calypso records and attendant album cover art were made outside the Caribbean. For example, American recording companies Victor and Columbia are reported as making the first calypso recording for commercial consumption as early as 1912, initiating an overseas recording trend that continued well into the twentieth century (Liverpool, 1994). As recorded by Liverpool, in the 1990s, over 70 percent of Calypso records were created in the United States, New York in particular.

With much of the album cover art produced outside the Caribbean, one wonders what specific perspectives inscribe these conjurings of mid-century West Indies. Through what prism is Caribbean culture being presented via its music? Since records are typically created for commercial consumption, it makes sense that the creators of these goods, for example, the recording companies, would be in control of their marketing arrangements. The ways in which album covers are designed would be part of this marketing strategy. Marketing also implies intentionality, meaning that whatever esthetic values are employed in the creation of the art are done so consciously. What sensibilities, therefore, inform these renditions of the Calypso imaginary? One would be hard pressed not to imagine the imperial eye at play, given historic relations between the Caribbean and Euro-America.

Pictorial elements—content: Caricature and native culture

What tends to be most prominent in the cover art examined is a visual linguistics that expresses that which is native as primitive and unsophisticated. Much of the pictorial content of the cover art analyzed reflects this dichotomous ethos of the imperial eye. As such, the imperial eye utilizes a reified European cultural worldview as the yardstick by which to measure and engage with non-European societies. This view denotes a patent colonial gaze, a constitutive process that not only wields a self-assigned right to represent what is gazed at but also to intervene and alter the object of the gaze (Ram, 2018).

The colonial or imperial gaze is “fueled by distinct existential imperatives that imply different levels of intimacy and distanciation” (Ram, 2018, par. 1). That is to say, it sets up a system of classification that differentiates who or what is most like the image of the colonizer and who or what is least similar (Schroeder & Borgerson, 2012). Ideologically, such a scheme paves the way for the othering of non-Whites. Illustratively, the content of the cover art seems to reproduce such colonial relations. In doing so, the art acts as a mediating tool, establishing imaginary relations to the subject/object that, as Eileraas (2003, p. 811) puts it, “constitutes an illusory effect of self-identity.”

In the visual arts, subjects tend to be differentially constituted along various identity categories including race, class, gender and nationality among others (e.g., Eileraas, 2003). The imagined relation between images and identity therefore creates formative

aspects of difference. Caricature constitutes the primary way that Calypso album covers establish a visual esthetics of difference. Caricature emphasizes the grotesque or uses exaggerations for comic effect. Illustrations and pictorial images alike are beset by what can only be described as a distinct dialectics of caricature art. A disproportionate number of the album covers examined display subjects in parodic and hyperbolic fashion. Lord Invader, for example, is depicted in almost cartoonish fashion, with bulging eyes and a garish get up. The album *Cavalcade* features a literal clown, with clown-like face paint. By presenting Caribbean figures as comically inelegant spectacles, these caricaturized depictions have the effect of infantilizing their subjects (Figures 3 and 4).

Other covers such as *Mister Calypso* and *Calypso: As Played at Tower Isle, Jamaica B.W.I.*, invoke stereotypical tropes of People of Color, many of which were developed during the height of the trans-Atlantic Slave Trade to help commodify black bodies (National Museum of African American History and Culture, n.d.). Typical stock caricatures that were created include the Uncle or the smiling Sambo, identified by stereotypically “oversized teeth” and “impossibly large, open-mouthed smile,” (Cooks, 2007, p. 440).

The character featured on the *Mister Calypso* cover spectacularly embodies the spirit of these stereotypes. Essentially, they appear to be in Blackface, an imagery codified through the translucent Black skin, coattails, top hat and exaggerated posture, all of which are signature features of Thomas Dartmouth Rice’s creation “Jim Crow.” Jim Crow was the first popularly known blackface character created by Rice in 1830 (National Museum of African American History and Culture, n.d.) and became the model for future caricatures of Black figures.



Figure 3. Lord Foodoos and His Calypso Band, *Mister Calypso*, Elektra, 1959. From Discogs Online Database. <https://www.discogs.com/Lord-Foodoos-and-His-Calypso-Band-Mister>.



Figure 4. Sheet music cover image of the song 'Jim Crow', Sheridan Libraries/Levy/Gado. From the BBC News Online. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-47125474>.

Jim Crow was a central character in popular minstrel shows performed by Whites in Blackface, who often claimed they were mimicking Black folk they saw on plantations dancing and singing (e.g., Pitner, 2019). In performing this character, Whites would “dress up in ill-fitting clothes, rags or approximations of tuxedos” (Pitner, 2019, par. 16), accompanied by their painted skin, not unlike the persona on the *Mister Calypso* album cover.

As staged by White performers, one of minstrelsy’s main purposes was to create a narrative of Black existence that established difference and inferiority. The invocation of minstrelsy that this illustration represents marks the performer on the album cover, as well as the place from which they hail, as being outside the norms of Euro-American culture. This jarring juxtaposition helps to create a visual grammar of otherness and normalizes problematic conceptualizations of Black people in the Americas and beyond.

While it is true that illustrations and photograph images are not expected to communicate an equivalent degree of verisimilitude to the realities they aim to represent, they still contain certain codified meanings directed by some universal symbolic order that warrant interrogation. Art, particularly caricature art, is often invested with the emotional, cultural, social and political concerns of their creators. From Upton’s

Golliwog¹ to Mark Knight's Sambo-like depiction of Serena Williams,² stereotypical caricatures have contributed to a history of "visual imperialism" (Wanzo, 2020).

Historically, such caricatures have painted a narrative of Black identity as "other" and as having a fixed (lower) place in the social order. When we "read" into the implied relation between image and identity, we start to see how discursively, the artwork adorning the album covers engage in a politics of representation. In ways both subtle and obvious, these album covers suggest that the native is also the primitive. Such ideas tend to command a dominant reading from the audience that serve to entrench and perpetuate stereotypical views of the Caribbean that resonate with colonialist paternalism.

Multivalently, these portrayals solicit the tourist eye. American and European tourists constituted the main market for mid-century Calypso music. In this embodied market, the functions of the pictorial elements discussed above coalesce sharply. That is, a visual arrangement of the Caribbean that represents it as rustic, its inhabitants as aboriginal and its culture as different and quixotic effectively transforms this space into a figment of white imagination for entertainment purposes. This visual discourse also held unparalleled appeal for the mid-century tourist gaze: paternalistic depictions of the Caribbean establishes it as a place of escape as well as a space outside of modernity that harkens to some cultural and social ideal unattainable in the geo-political West (Gordon, 2012).

Calypso—and its exotic neo-primitive attributes promised through the album cover art—becomes that perfect vehicle for transporting tourists into this dream world and sending them home with souvenir vinyl soundtracks of their adventure. Caricatured native culture and a local space visually constructed as a colonial relic, becomes a Caribbean life likeness that tourist might expect to encounter.

Touristic aesthetics: Calypso as a soundtrack for colonial fantasies

The Caribbean has historically been depicted as a space where tourists can expect "sand, sun and sex" (Gordon, 2012). Island culture, since the era of colonialism, has been framed as pleasure giving and accommodating (Milne, 2001; Wald, 2012). During the mid-twentieth century the rise of Caribbean tourism coincided with the rise of Calypso as the music of the region. Simultaneously, the idea of musical tourism began to emerge as a distinct form of cultural tourism (Bilby, 1985). Accompanying this enterprise as its central marketing strategy was the use of, in Bilby's (2014, p. x) words: "exoticizing imagery, cultural othering, cultural commodification and exploitative economic practices that had been commonplace for ... decades, as part of long histories of institutionalized tourism." Much of the fascination that the Caribbean and Latin America held for the American and European tourist lay in entertainment, the age-old customs or rituals, and the indigenous qualities found in the music and dances of the island (Neely, 2014). Predictably, these themes saturate the cover art of the Calypso albums that appeared during that time.

By the mid-century, Calypso was firmly entrenched as the soundtrack for Caribbean tourism. Indeed, at the time, Calypso was stereotypically thought of as music for tourists and a primary conduit of the region's cultural tourism. Calypso functioned as part of the grammar of "music tourism: the dynamics attendant to music prepared

for the purpose of performance or sale within tourist networks and, by extension, ... the musicians, audiences, communities, and media involved in these networks” (Rommen, 2014, p. 7).

As inserted into these tourism circuits, music such as Calypso acts as a sonic signifier of otherness and mobilizes the consumption of difference. The exotic soundscape separates the tourist as a visitor, and therefore a non-native, from the eccentricity of the locals as entertainers who are not White. This “sonic branding” of geographical touristic resources was successfully deployed in a number of locations, including Hawaii and the large market for Hawaiian record albums (Borgerson & Schroeder, 2002; 2012).

However, not just Calypso records’ sonic elements perform these functions. The images embellishing album covers are also part of this creative process that offer tourists an easy and immediate sense of expectation and place. Ostensibly, the image of the Caribbean represented by Calypso album cover art denotes a folk-scape fashioned for fun and recreation, an “earthly paradise,” in the words of Nobel laureate Derek Walcott, where “the Caribbean is a blue pool” and “local troubadours in straw hats and floral shirts” [beat] “Yellow Bird” and Banana Boat Song” to death at sunset (Walcott, 1992)³. Walcott describes the stereotypical White imaginary captured through the tourist gaze, which constantly reinforces colonial fantasies of otherness and desire. This ideology fixes the Caribbean and similar spaces as perennially pleasure giving (Gordon, 2012; 2019).

True to form, we see this theme of pleasure, desire, and fantasy repeated across mid-century Calypso album covers. These ideas all climax in the figure of the “Coconut Woman,” a potently recurring persona in the narratives woven by the photographic and illustrative images found on a substantial number of the album covers examined. The “Coconut Woman” embodies Calypso’s touristic esthetics, emblematic of the “racial and sexual fantasies at play within nationalist and colonial imaginaries” (Eileraas, 2003, p. 810) Part of the soundtrack, as the well-known self-titled Calypso song suggests, but also the ultimate symbol of encounter, expectation and yes, Walcott’s “earthly paradise.”

The “coconut woman”

The image of the “Coconut Woman” that we meet via mid-century Calypso albums presents the Caribbean as a decidedly sexualized terrain. Geographically then, the islands are to be perceived as places where one will inevitably encounter sexual pleasure. As apparent windows looking in on Caribbean culture, album covers, in their voyeuristic representation of Caribbean Black women as simultaneously “inherently primitive-and-sexually-available” (Ponzanesi, 2005, p. 165), primes the onlooker, in most cases American and European tourists, for indulgence (Figure 5).

In colonial visual parlance, the “Coconut Woman” is an incarnation of the Black Venus, “a strongly eroticized and often overtly pornographic” representation of local Black women by Western colonizers (Ponzanesi, 2005, p. 166). These depictions were often disguised as ethnographical work, a strategy that tried to deflect colonial desire for the other and naturalize the hegemonic relations between power, sexuality, culture, and representation (Eileraas, 2003). In her multiple depictions on Calypso album covers



Figure 5. Various, *Vacances Aux Caraïbes*, Vox 6, 1958. From Discogs Online Database. <https://www.discogs.com/Various-Vacances-Aux-Cara%C3%AFbes/release/6230802>.

as the racial sexual other, the “Coconut Woman” is the pleasure principle personified. Her function as such becomes operationalized through her scantily clad body and the hedonistic or convivial expressions she sports in the vast majority of the art in which she appears. In many of the album covers, the female persona is presented as a tantalizing or beguiling figure, a provocateur hiking her skirts, as in the case of the character on the sleeves of records such as *Cook’s Tour*, or a bosom-baring enchantress on the cover of *Calypso: Wilmoth Houdini and his Orchestra*.

Apart from the colonial production of the “Coconut Woman” as an icon for sexuality, her image also functions as a synecdoche for the landscape itself. Through her, the Caribbean becomes an erotic setting, a product of an emotional geography that naturalizes the region as inherently pleasure giving. Through an esthetic investment in a caricature of native self-presentation, that is, a local woman who happily goes about half clad and perpetually poised to entertain, the region and its culture are adeptly mobilized as an antidote for all things repressive. Several album titles even bear the names of popular mid-century hotels and resorts, such as the Arawak Hotel, Emerald Beach, and the Tower Isle, many of which featured their own Calypso bands or “orchestras.”

While it is expected that tourists go elsewhere, beyond home and the familiar, for a holiday, how is elsewhere to be experienced and therefore consumed? In touristic situations, is “elsewhere” a docile space that underscores the centrality of bodily displays in experiencing difference (Gordon, 2012; Camal, 2014)? During the mid-century, the Caribbean was largely a colonial zone—most islands had not attained political independence from their European or American overlords. As a result, the period’s touristic esthetics peddled pleasure as a form of “leisure imperialism” (Camal, 2014),

where tourists are construed as “the rightful occupants and users of local spaces in a way that echoes the colonial seizure of foreign lands” (Smith, 2017, p. 173).

Leisure imperialism not only establishes touristic pleasure as a natural right with which visitors are imbued, but also envisages the islands as places where “exotic, sinful, sexual delights” inevitably await (Sardar, 1999, p. 6). Pleasure then, from this point of view, is constructed and consumed as a reinforcement of the hierarchy of place. Calypso album covers communicate this social order. They are taut with the understanding that while pleasure awaits, it is of a particular kind, that is, it is predicated on the enjoyment of the exotic other. This type of indulgence can only happen in a place that is somewhere else and outside the bounds of Euro-American cultural normalcy. By political necessity, therefore, the cover art maintains the binary between the colonizer and the colonized, the modern and the primitive. In the Calypso album cover art from this time, related notions find visual expression in the recurring appeal to big band, jazz, and orchestral imaginings, all emblematic of tasteful and refined entertainment.

High class entertainment: Tasteful exoticism

In the words of then Jamaica Tourist Trade Commissioner, F.H. Robinson, “[w]hen tourists go to a resort for a vacation they are looking for and expect high class entertainment” (*The Daily Gleaner*, 1945, p. 9). By the beginning of the 1950s, many colonial governments that were still intact in the Circum-Caribbean began recognizing the economic potential of tourism in a post WWII epoch. For example, in 1945, a group named The Anglo-American Caribbean Commission ordered an extensive survey to explore “the possibilities of tourism or travel development” (*The Daily Gleaner*, 1945, p. 7).

To successfully tap into tourist markets, colonial authorities needed to convince visitors that, not only would they be enjoying exotic entertainment but also that they would be experiencing classy leisure. The natives were well trained, benign, polite and accommodating—a mid-century version of the noble savage. “Classing up” Calypso provided an effective avenue for selling an exotic but refined earthly paradise.

Calypso album cover imagery was often supplied by airline companies, hotels, and tourist bureaus. Although some big stars exerted considerable control over their cover imagery, most record companies dictated what appeared on mid-century album covers. Locals are rarely depicted in these cover illustrations and when they do appear, they are presented in Western style clothing dress, the latter denoting the triumph of colonial reformation over the supposed coarseness of nativity. Also absent is the grammar of caricature that usually characterizes representations of local inhabitants when Calypso music is being branded as “native” sound (Figure 6).

On her 1956 album *Hi Fi Calypso, Etc.*, Enid Mosley is not presented as the typical half-clad, Delilah-like “Coconut Woman.” She wears a whimsical, as against sensual, expression on her face and is dressed in a classy white outfit, not a revealing native costume. Additionally, she isn’t the focus of any male gaze, since all the male members of the band are looking away from her, in a striking deviation from the regular visualization of native women as sexually available and therefore object of colonial desire and fantasy. The men too, are dressed anomalously in white tuxedo shirts and black



Figure 6. Enid Mosier and Her Trinidad Steel Band With the Clarence Williams Trio, *Hi Fi Calypso, Etc.*, Columbia, 1956. From Discogs Online Database. <https://www.discogs.com/Enid-Mosier-And-Her-Trinidad-Steel-Band-With-The-Clarence-Williams-Trio-Hi-Fi-Calypso-Etc/master/538187>.

trousers, communicating the classy nature of their gig. An all-white background offset by chic plantation shutters tops off this scene. Absent is the virgin landscape that usually serves as the setting for an illustration of native music and the cultural tourism it peddles. The imagery here is of sophistication and elegance, not raunch and primal pleasure. The intention possibly, is to make the point to potential tourists that Calypso and the Caribbean by extension, offers the dual experiences of exoticism and refinement.

Perhaps to emphasize that point, allusions to jazz pepper a number of the album covers designed to deliver the idea of a simultaneously tropical high class touristic places. Jazz metaphors readily connect Calypso to a recognizable musical form associated with refined taste. Linking Calypso with jazz through the use of key symbolisms sets the tone for selling the Caribbean through a sophisticated sound. We see this idea for instance, visualized in Figure 7, where the iconic Calypso song, *Banana Boat*, floats up through the mouth of a saxophone like a jazz note, giving the impression that it is culturally very similar to jazz.

Belafonte offers a powerful example of this aspect of Calypso music and island folk life. He released a series of Calypso albums and was bestowed the title “King of Calypso.”⁴ Belafonte’s success as a Calypso artist lay in his suave and charming image. He was also an American film celebrity at the time, adding to his commercial appeal. With his cool persona and elegant aura, Belafonte stood in contrast to images of native performers, which positioned him as the embodiment of “high class entertainment” promoted by mid-century Calypso albums (Figure 8).

In her 2017 entry on Belafonte’s *Calypso* album for the US Library of Congress’s National Recording Registry, Smith claims that Belafonte’s Calypsos, “absent the island



Figure 7. Noel Harrison and His Calypso Band, *Banana Boat*, The Red Record, 1959. From Discogs Online Database. <https://www.discogs.com/Noel-Harrison-And-His-Calypso-Band-Banana-Boat-/release/7896527>.



Figure 8. Harry Belafonte, *Harry Belafonte*, RCA Victor, 1958. From Discogs Online Database. <https://www.discogs.com/Harry-Belafonte-Harry-Belafonte/release/13767653>.

costumes, enabled him to represent calypso as parts of other forms of [B]lack and non-elite culture, repositioning the music away from colonial associations with “native” inferiority or tourist-driven exoticism” (Smith, 2017, p. 2).⁵ Uncritically, this summation of Belafonte captures the basic function of his album cover imagery—to glamorize Calypso. His Calypso album covers invariably portray him dressed in a button down shirt, partially undone to reveal portions of his upper body—a sex symbol but a dignified one. Moreover, he is customarily depicted in a photograph composed like a glamorous Hollywood headshot.

However, belying Smith’s essay is an undercurrent of the colonial hierarchy of place. It bespeaks a continuation of the discourse of native inferiority in the contention that Belafonte’s rendition of Calypso songs are somehow superior—in that they are “clearly articulated.”⁶ Not only does Smith’s observation perpetuate colonial discourses of indigenous inferiority, it also assumes wrongly that Calypso music was created for the sole purpose of entertaining White audiences. It misses the point that the Caribbean “accent” is at the root of its genesis and therefore to Anglicize it would essentially rob it of its authenticity.

Smith suggests: “Buying and playing his records may have provided audiences with a tangible connection to the combination of Black and multi-racial and international cultures he and his music represented” (Smith, 2017, p. 3). However, we argue that Belafonte’s Blackness cannot do the work Smith hopes it does to connect White audiences to other forms of Black and non-elite culture.

Belafonte’s positionality as an American artist is what elevates a native sound, in Smith’s eyes, to the category of world-class music that transcends culture and defies racial categorizations. In fact, his version, sung in a pseudo Caribbean accent, does sonic violence to the music itself. Belafonte emerged later as a potent civil rights activist. He often tried to distance himself from Calypso. But as a leading figure of the mid-century Calypso moment, his image, if not his person in Calypso music marketing, often marked a colonialist vision of Caribbean life.

Conclusion

This article has revealed how “minor, even peripheral, objects—often moldering in basements, gathering dust at charity shops, or in more recent times, offered online as campy collectibles on eBay and Discogs—reveal powerful, yet relatively unnoticed, lessons” in understanding the role of visual communication in popular culture (Borgerson & Schroeder, 2017, p. 1). We have analyzed how mid-century record album cover characterizations of the primordial rhythm of folk life, caricatures of native culture, and touristic esthetics adapted Calypso as a soundtrack for colonial fantasies. We have shown how mid-century Calypso record imagery, including the figures of the Coconut Woman, the Native, as well as glamorous images of Harry Belafonte helped shape the imaginings of modern Caribbean identity.

Mid-century Calypso album cover art communicates ideas about Caribbean culture and folk life as construed under the colonial gaze. These record cover representations embody persistent themes about non-European cultural identities and resonate with

colonial discourses about domination and otherness. For the most part, Calypso album covers offer an editorial of Caribbean culture designed specifically for the tourist eye. They emerged in tandem with a historical time in which regional colonial governments were beginning to recognize the economic potential of tourism in a post WWII world. Using indigenous music to lure vacationers to Caribbean shores was a key marketing strategy as it helped to sell a vision of the islands to tourists that was already familiar—the Caribbean as exotic, accommodating and pleasure giving. Album covers visualized romantic ideals about native spaces and identities that were in line with colonial fantasies of desiring and consuming the neo-primitive other. These images invariably construct the islands as “places to play” (Sheller, 2003) its people as carefree and even childish natives.

Vinyl records delivered the sounds and rhythms of exotic places and populations, raising awareness of cultural capitals (and hidden villages) at home and abroad, even as these were becoming more visible through increased access to visualizing technologies. What the album covers do not reveal are the complexities that attend the material culture of tourism. As much as local residents are eroticized through colonial discursive practices, they also strategically engage in performances of localized otherness while entertaining tourists at home. The images also elide the political militancy of Calypso music as an art form.

Since its origin, Calypso has been the music of the people, used to make local government authorities and elites “ketch hell.” This defining characteristic of Calypso remains. The names of many Calypso artists says it all. There is a certain audacity in naming oneself Lord, Mighty, or King, as was, and still is the custom among many Calypsonians. Doing so was a way to reclaim ones dignity but also to defy the colonial narrative that insisted on defining Afro-Caribbean people as lesser and of ill esteemed lineage.

Notes

1. See the Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia <https://www.ferris.edu/jimcrow/golliwog/>
2. See Australian Cartoonist's 2018 depiction of Serena Williams, a Black, woman tennis player after the latter's altercation with tennis officials and following penalization during the 2018 U.S. Open Finals <https://twitter.com/damonTheOz/status/1039312474942492672>
3. As written about in the works of Caribbean poet and Nobel laureate, Derek Walcott. See Walcott, Derek. 1992. *The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory, the Nobel Lecture*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
4. This is a title usually reserved for the winner of the longstanding Carnival completion birthed in Trinidad and Tobago. Giving this title to Belafonte arguably constituted cultural appropriation, in line with colonial ideologies that marked the time.
5. Historian Judith E Smith's 2017 entry on Harry Belafonte's 1956 *Calypso* album is one of the “short, scholarly write-ups about selected titles” in the National Recording Registry.
6. Coded in this sentiment is the idea that Caribbean speech patterns are incoherent, unrefined and perhaps less desirable, echoing long established patterns of European derogation of vernacular languages. Historically, locally derived languages have been “marked by a social bias according to which non-Europeans were incapable of learning European languages adequately” (Mufwene, 2016, p. 348), an argument used to buttress the notion that native peoples were substandard.

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