BODY (IM)POTENT
CULTURE, CAPITALISM, AND THE AFRODESCENDANT’S FIGHT FOR HER BODY

by

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Abstract

In 2000, the United Nations emphasized a number of Millennium Development Goals, to include, ‘Promot[ing] gender equality and empower[ing] women.’ For women of African heritage residing in the region of Latin America and the Caribbean the promise of equity is belied by socio-political realities which propagate the marginalizing of Black women. ‘Body (Im)potent: Culture, Capitalism, and the Afrodescendant’s Fight for Her Body,’ considers the extent to which the trans-Atlantic slave trade located the Black woman’s body as a unit of work. Further, this thesis explores the ongoing disparities between the Black woman’s view of her own body, and pervading discourses which define that body according to the needs of a dominant class—a Marxist perspective which posits that the potential of human self-actualization is often sacrificed on the altar of capital. ‘Body (Im)potent’ highlights that the promise of empowerment and equality must also be considered from the standpoint of those unique West African-inspired cultural movements which informed Black resistance, and which continue to influence the self-image of the region’s Afrodescendants, maintaining a womanist view of the Black woman as a socio-political (and physical) agent. Moreover, ‘Body (Im)potent’ considers the extent to which the milieux created by globalization contribute to the evolution of the Afrodescendant’s concept of her body, and perceptions of that body by the world at large.
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1. Introduction: “Black, lazy, and slow,” myth, ‘race,’ and oppression

In conducting her research for the documentary From Codrington to Codrington (2007), presenter Josie d’Arby’s emotions become evident in her facial expressions. She transitions from bemusement, to astonishment, to sputtering shock, in clarifying the statements of historian Mackenzie Frank as he divulges that, with the advent of the British abolitionist movement, Sir Christopher Bethel Codrington (descendant of a Baronetcy awarded by King George I) proposed the island of Barbuda, West Indies, as a “nursery—”essentially, a breeding station for enslaved African peoples. As a Black woman, as a Briton, and as the descendant of enslaved peoples and those who claimed ownership over them, d’Arby admits to considering her own existence the evidence of a brutal legacy.

From my own standpoint, the basis of Black women’s existence in the region of Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) has always been—and continues to be—the reconciling of disparate realities: bodies as commodifiable (sexualized, fetishized) physical entities, and/or as the spiritual foundation on which African communities had to re-build themselves, to transcend the violence of enslavement. Those dynamics under which the Afrodescendant woman views her body are, of course, friable, kinetic, and under the constant influence of a number of socio-political and economic variables. Over the past two generations, for example, changing socio-political awareness, Black activism and culture, and global economic transition have impacted the Black woman’s awareness of her body as an agent of ‘work,’ and, moreover, as a medium through which to pursue socio-economic mobility. Indeed, Brodie (2003, 47-49) highlights those contradictions inherent in promoting globalization, while ignoring those inequities which are a direct result of capitalist market structures. (As I suggest in ‘Body (Im)potent,’ the mass consumption promoted through globalization impacts the Afrodescendant’s view of her body,
imparting the idea of her body as a means to achieve a particular physical/aesthetic/consumerist ideal (Jagodzinski 2010, 20-23).

The fight for the bodies of Black women in Latin America and the Caribbean is therefore a direct function of a market structure (capitalism), the expansion of that market structure into the multiple domains of education, media, international policy, and politics, and of those neo-liberal philosophies which inform hegemonic discourse. Indeed, Foster (2005, 166) suggests Black woman’s equating ostentatious consumption, and social mobility as a result of the inter-class “mashup” presented via electronic (primarily visual) media. Moreover, the outcome is the displacing of spiritual, holistic existence by ‘faith’ of (and in) consumerism, extending on the theory that capitalism has become its own religion (Jameson 1991, 67). Indeed, popular media is a primary conduit for conveying particular ideals to a mass audience. As Gill (2003, 192) suggests, employment of mass media is a fundamental resource for promotion of neo-liberal ideals. The resulting emphasis on the ostensible equalizing power of the free market is, in fact, an insidious mechanism for obscuring those oppressions occasioned by the privileged position of a global elite.

‘Body (Im)potent’ is an exploration of a centuries-long effort on the part of the Afrodescendant to navigate diverging views of her body. In a phenomenon which I coin the epistemic split (Fig. 1), the Black woman of LAC heritage must navigate dominant, stereotypical views of her body as a commodity, while reconciling this impression with those self-actualizing, Afro-centric convictions which enabled the survival of enslaved African peoples. Central to the tools of anti-oppression have been Afrodescendants’ reliance on those performative arts which I identify as ‘push-back culture—’ classified alternately as calypso, reggae, reggaeton, benna, soca, dancehall—founded in West African spiritual and theatrical tradition (Adesegun Dosumu
2005, 114-115; Warner and Nascimento 2007, 52). Indeed, as Dixon and Burdick (2012, 10) suggest, ‘push-back’ culture was vital to Afrodescendants’ establishing themselves in the LAC.

Fig. 1: The epistemic split: perspectives on the bodies of Black women of the LAC

As the Fig. 1 suggests, the epistemic split is informed by two particular views of the body of the Black woman: the perception of that body as a commodity, a resource to be employed in the generation of capital on behalf of the elite; the conviction of that exact body as transcending physical violation to become the manifestation of spiritual aspiration. Further, with the use of the respective symbols ‘–x’ and ‘x,’ I convey those phenomena which underpin either perspective of the Black woman’s body. The commodification of the Black woman is a product of capitalist notions in which the myth of race perpetuates. That African peoples are able to maintain a sense of self, despite systemic oppression, is a product of an innate sense of resistance, one informed by those West African spiritual beliefs which assure the potency of words, and the power of lyrical performance. The fine balance imperative to navigating the epistemic split is therefore one in which –x and x must be equal in heft. As I further propose in my theory, any
happenstance which increases the force of either quality must be accompanied by an equivalent adjustment of the obverse set of circumstances.

In considering push-back culture as a bastion of African resistance, within Latin America and the Caribbean, one must acknowledge a central irony: push-back, an Afro-centric art form, has also been (in)formed by those very Euro-centric perspectives which derided and/or discounted the value of African cultural custom (Warner and Nascimento 2007, 53). Moreover, as Saunders (2007, 19) emphasizes in her assessment of the historical origins of push-back culture, the genre provided an outlet through which African peoples were able to openly ridicule the dehumanizing system in which they were forced to exist. Indeed, performances viewed as farcical, trite entertainment, to the European gaze, were, in fact, fundamental rites, within West African performance tradition (Moran 2012, 124-127). As Miller (2000, 161) suggests, the esoteric nature of push-back performance was a definitive feature of its power as a medium of resistance against those systems which depended on Black enslavement, to accommodate capitalism (Marx 2004, 227).

My conceptualizing the ‘epistemic split’ parallels the conviction that those ontological schema vital to Afrodescendants’ survival continue to be discounted in toto as violating the tenets of ‘knowledge.’ Indeed, in exploring the extent to which ‘fact’ is maintained as a domain of the privileged and the powerful, Alexander (2005, 6-13) emphasizes Afrodescendant survival as a product of Black peoples’ deleting any demarcation of ‘factual,’ from ‘spiritual.’ She further explores that comingling of ‘tangible,’ and ‘intangible,’ which continues to impact those disparities of power which influence Afrodescendants’ participation in the strata of civic participation, and work and labour. As I see it, central to the Afrodescendant’s fight for her body is the ongoing struggle against institutions, and against those hegemonic discourses which
underpin institutional authority. Indeed, just as Alexander (2005, 228-243) analogizes private conflict (against paternalism, misogyny, and violence), and militaristic aggression, I correlate local socio-political stratification with the extent to which ‘race’ continues to impact the view of the Black woman—in her native LAC territory, and within the larger context of work, labour, and human rights, on a globalized scale.

It is interesting to me that the nebulous qualifier, ‘race,’ persists, being sufficiently powerful to connote intrinsic biology. The reality is that ‘race’ is, in fact, the product of any number of socio-political/economic/inter-State/territorial variables (Foucault 2003, 260-263; Smith, Justin E. H. 2013. “The Enlightenment’s ‘Race’ Problem, and Ours.” New York Times, February 10, 2013. http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/02/10/why-has-race-survived/?src=xps). This brings to mind Foster’s (2005, 109) declaration that ‘mainstream’ society adapts the definition of ‘Black,’ according to the social/political/financial influence of the individual being scrutinized. The experiences of Oprah Winfreys of the world, with their financial latitude and expansive celebrity, belie those prejudices which restrict the social mobility of many Black women. For those of us not possessed of wealth, and recognition, our racialized bodies continue to be impacted by those biases which are a legacy of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. My standpoint is that the effect is even more profound within territories of the LAC, fragmented, as they are, by variations in geography, demography, language, differing economic prospects, and varied relationships with former colonial agents.

The reality is that the trade in African bodies arose primarily from economic imperative. The capacity of Atlantic territories to accumulate wealth, through agriculture, was due to the protections offered by cheap—indeed, free, forced—labour (Rivoli 2005, 11). The first gaze on those Black bodies landed at ports in the Antilles, in the Guianas, and throughout South and
Central America was that of customers inspecting commodities—more accurately, consumers inspecting commodities, for African bodies and souls would be thoroughly ravaged by enslavement. (In later chapters of this work, I explore the continued consumption of Black bodies arising from the globalizing of electronic media, mass production and consumption, and the emphasis on value goods, items considered indicative of socio-economic class (Silverstone 2007, 113; Potts 2006, 156).

For today’s Black woman, she with roots in the region of Latin America and the Caribbean, continued survival requires an awareness of one’s ‘body as temple,’ in tandem with acceptance of the persistent view of our bodies as commodities. We must assess our bodies from two perspectives, essentially through an ‘epistemic split.’ Despite the challenges, my conviction is that the Black woman’s ability to maintain an holistic view of her body is due to the resistance imbued by push-back culture. Even in its modern iterations the art form hews closely to its subversive origins, as a fundamental medium of communication between enslaved African peoples, as tether for an otherwise unmoored tribe, and as a resource for the elevating of the otherwise violated bodies of Black women in the LAC. (However, as I suggest in later chapters, the appeal of push-back entering the ‘mainstream,’ is counterbalanced by those many instances in which popular exposure/acceptance resulted in dilution of the art forms anti-oppressive thrust.)

My primary postulation in this work is that push-back culture remains a potent, anti-capitalist, womanist force for the Afrodescendant. Granted, even the very application of the word ‘Afrodescendant’ exposes the paradoxes which impact the reality of Black existence in the LAC region, a situation rife with those nebulous qualifiers resulting from histories of migration, and those heterogeneities resulting from diverse colonial influences (Boyce Davies 2013, 108-127). In exploring the nascent political movement towards classification of ‘Afrodescendants—’
persons of African heritage whose ancestors were enslaved in Spanish-speaking territories—Campos-Garcia expresses a trepidation which I share. Attempts to increase political representation of Afrodescendants may ultimately result in mere platitudes: proprietary ‘naming’ of *hispanohablantes* (Spanish-speakers) without addressing those fundamental realities contributing to our continued socio-political, and economic disparity.\(^1\) Moreover, in attempting to present regional diversity, by openly acknowledging the presence of Afrodescendants, the movement may further entrench the view of Black peoples as a single, homogeneous, monolithic group. That said, throughout this work, I will employ the word ‘Afrodescendant(s),’ interchangeably with the term ‘Black,’ for the relative ease with which it conveys the experience of Black peoples in the LAC. As with my own family, the region’s Afrodescendants present a plethora of backgrounds, experiences, languages and perspectives, all of which transcend the legacy of enslavement.

As I see it, the greatest challenge to the socio-political influence, and economic mobility of Afrodescendant women remains the struggle between self and those agents (State, corporate, multilateral), which seek to maintain and justify the disproportionate influence of the privileged. In particular, my emphasis is on those globalizing dynamics which define the Afrodescendant primarily as a unit of production, within environments which accommodate the exploitation of labour in order to accumulate the greatest amounts of capital (Fioramonti 2013, 158-159). I am in accord with those scholars who declare that, throughout the centuries-long period of institutionalized slavery in the Atlantic, the Black woman’s body was defined as an entity, oppressed and suppressed through the instruments of hegemony. Further, as Bush (1990, 26) suggests, the Black woman’s womb was a physiological totem emblematic of the violations of

\(^1\) Alejandro Campos-Garcia, on discussing his ongoing research, with this writer, November 02, 2012.
enslavement, for only the Black woman could give birth to other persons destined for servitude. Further, the myth of race, and stereotypical renditions of the Afrodescendant woman would create environments replete with opportunity for exploitation of the Black woman as a sexual fetish (St. Louis 2000, 55).

Central to the reality of Black, female existence is the challenge of reconciling one’s own agency against the power of the State. (Indeed, my idea of international power includes acknowledging the dynamic of globalization as the conflation of State and corporate interests.) As mentioned, ‘Body (Im)potent’ adopts a Marxist, womanist perspective, to explore the extent to which class-based stratification occasioned by global economic structures, and paternalism, respectively, impact Black women’s bodies. Due to the convolution of class and race, Afrodescendants must tussle with their physical embodiment of Black-ness, and with centuries-long insidious efforts to lend veracity to the myth of race, the idea of African peoples being a distinct, sub-human class—another ‘race’ of beings (Tattersall and Desalle 2011, 11; Tepperman and Gheihman 2013, 322). From a womanist perspective, the Afrodescendant contends with the spectre of paternalism made even more intractable by the region’s tenuous economic circumstance and efforts to adapt standards accommodating globalized environments.

Considering the womanist stance adopted throughout ‘Body (Im)potent,’ it would be fair to challenge whether ‘womanism’ is simply ‘feminism,’ solely a matter of semantics. My response to this query would be to cite the statement of Louise Bennett, a regional historian, and folklorist: Black female emancipation and the ‘foreign’ concept of female liberation espoused by the developed world are parallel movements, but in no way identical (Cooper 1993, 49). For a group of women once considered livestock, thriving within an oppressive society must bring with it the capacity to convert ourselves from torpid to active, from neuter to human, from
‘female’ to ‘woman.’ Just as Sojourner Truth had the audacity to demand, “Ain’t I a woman?” I maintain feminism as a separate plane. None of its multiple waves, not one of its multi-cultural representations, none of its declarations is as meaningful to me, personally, as is my own insistence that I am a woman[ist], first and foremost, in a space and place, which once would not have even considered me human.

Push-back culture continues to be fundamental to the womanist perspective. In upholding the genre as an anti-oppressive agent, vital to an holistic perspective of Black women’s bodies, I fully acknowledge the conflicted view held by many of my sisters (Noble 2000, 164). Yet, the tendency of some push-back renditions towards misogynistic, violent, paternalistic, heteronormative themes does not negate the origins of the art form as a source of spiritual sustenance for enslaved African peoples. To the detractors of push-back culture, I would declare that the art form continues to transcend our ideas of all which is right, proper, and ‘clean,’ instead insisting that we acknowledge all that is unfair, unjust, unbalanced, and inequitable. As a statement attributed to reggae legend Peter Tosh declares, it is the most prejudiced, most hypocritical, most deceitful, most ‘good’ Christian people who are least likely to condemn prejudice, exploitation, violation of human rights, even as they condemn the ‘unclean’ words presented in push-back culture.

I cannot deny that the uninitiated may view push-back culture as extending the capitalist view of my ‘body as commodity.’ However, my conviction is that the art form remains a potent representation of those African sensibilities which were (and are) vital to a people’s survival. Push-back culture, with its clever use of lyrics, staccato rhythms, double entendre, and innuendo, can say, without saying; show, without revealing. As an institution, push-back culture is one which upholds the Black woman’s ‘body as an object to which one aspires.’ Granted, the view of
my body as both an ‘object’ and as a ‘temple’ can seem paradoxical. Yet, as I will illustrate in chapters following, ‘objectification’ of the Afrodescendant’s body, within push-back culture, can be an elevating function, indeed.

‘Body (Im)potent’ undertakes a study of power, and the extent to which the body of Black women of the LAC region can symbolize either a power-less entity, or an object sufficiently empowered to resist the depredations of inequitable socio-economic/political/cultural systems. This exploration is subsumed under consideration of the power of words, and of the location of institutions—political institutions, multilateral institutions, ecclesiastic institutions, cultural institutions—on either side of the epistemic split. Between the capitalist view of my body and my own perception of my ‘body as temple,’ there is a tensive dynamic. The milieu may even be thought of as dialectic. What is a certainty, is that push-back culture is the fulcrum around which all entities turn.

In exploring the ‘Afrodescendant’s fight for her body,’ this work examines, firstly, the extent to which socio-cultural, capitalist milieux of LAC territories inform the location of Black women’s bodies, from an historic context. Subsumed under this consideration is hegemony, employment of a plethora of institutional resources to validate the myth of race. As Gramsci suggests, to even begin to understand oppressed peoples’ accepting their lot, one must appreciate the power of that multiplicity of hegemonic forces controlled by society’s privileged classes (Crehan 2000, 102). Under such a dynamic, the trans-Atlantic slave trade, founded on economic necessity, would be justified through legal, religious, academic/scientific and social edict. To my mind, a most significant aspect of locating the Afrodescendant in milieux of work and labour is the reality of the enslaved Black woman’s being condemned to the role of sexual labourer and/or producer of offspring. Indeed, as Kempadoo (2004, 55-63) highlights, the Afrodescendant’s
exposure to modern markets is coloured by those historic ideas which associated Black female sexuality with wanton depravity.

The mid-nineteenth century would initiate a period of the emancipation of African peoples enslaved in the LAC region, and, as I explore, this happenstance would usher in an alteration of the view of the Afrodescendant woman’s body. The subsequent emergence of LAC territories from European colonial influence, and the ascendance of the United States of America as a global superpower would establish a new milieu of imperialism, one which would resemble former colonialist approaches, while enmeshing the LAC in a distinctly American philosophy which advocated democracy and individual liberty, while deifying markets, reducing the role of the State, and ultimately contributing to the marginalizing of Afrodescendants (Persaud 2003, 124-134; Livingstone 2009, 193). Fundamental to the relationship between the United States of America, and its LAC ‘partners’ would be a combination of coercion, and quid pro quo, the ultimate aim being beneficial circumstances for America as an international power, and for those corporate agents who exert influence over State apparatus.

The increasing presence of the United States of America in the LAC region would be marked by overt military presence (to include physical plant), economic aid, and the engagement of respective Latin American and Caribbean states in multilateral co-operation. To my mind, however, processes of multilateral engagement would continue to promote the Afrodescendant as valuable only as a physical unit of work. Indeed, as Standing 2011, 69) suggests, multilateral agents increasingly maintain education as a facility designed exclusively for providing labourers, rather than as an inherently valuable feature of human existence. By analyzing, in particular, the World Bank document, Measuring Inequality of Opportunities in Latin America and the Caribbean, I apply Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to emphasizing the extent to which even
the most impartial multilateral arrangements expand the narratives of the dominant class, as relates to the location of the Afrodescendant woman as a worker.

The conclusion of ‘Body (Im)potent,’ migrates from critical assessment of narrative, to consider globalization as an ever-greater concentration of power, in the hands of a privileged class. Jha (2006, 82-86) emphasizes globalization as enabling the coalescing of all facets of commodity production in the hands of a small, influential group, while also providing this group the means through which to drive consumption. A second fundamental aspect of globalization is policy provisions which restrict the movement of labour, and accommodate exploitation of the labour force. In emphasizing the labour-capital relationship under globalization, Persaud (2003, 125) emphasizes institutional slavery as the origin of State justification of the violation of one group of citizens over others, in order to satisfy the economic need for inordinate amounts of labour.

Globalization, the proliferation of electronic data, and pervasiveness of the visual medium suggest an age of biopower, the control of individuals by exerting influence over their bodies (Foucault 2003, 241). I propose that biopower is also evident in the power to influence consumers’ choices regarding the alteration of their bodies and/or of those symbolic goods employed to cloak/adorn those bodies, a feature especially significant to the Afrodescendant’s aspiration toward social mobility (Potts 2006, 156-157; Anderson 2009, 172; Foster 2005, 108-110). Indeed, as Jameson (1991, 313-318) suggests, we have arrived at an era in which the ostentatious display of material goods— in social interaction, and via visual, electronic media— is considered fundamental to declaring one’s socio-economic class. To expand on this idea, I also consider this age one in which celebrity image is increasingly employed as a
tool within the hegemonic milieu, one which elevates tangible goods as a mark of socio-
economic status (Potts 2006, 156).

As a medium, image underscores patterns of power, a phenomenon which ultimately
enables control over the masses. Indeed, as Chomsky (2002, 18-29) suggests, the greatest
success of visual mass media is its capacity to distract the populace from significant issues
of social justice, power disparity, and global political inequity. To examine this confluence of
image/entertainment/popular culture as a medium for expanding the influence of the privileged,
I focus on Robin Rihanna Fenty. As an artiste, Rihanna has managed to produce a sound which
is popular globally. Moreover, as an image, Rihanna, her team, social-media participants, and
the studio executives who ultimately determine strategy continue to ply those stereotypical
‘island girl/exotic baby’ impressions which impact the prospects of every Black woman of LAC
heritage.

Those globalizing dynamics which seek to engage the labour force in maintaining the
status quo must rely on image to ensure complicity of the masses. Whereas Jameson (1991, 68-
70) emphasizes the displacement of words by image as the foundation of populat knowledge,
Boyce Davies (2013, 123-127) further expands on ‘knowledge,’ as a malleable tool through
which artistes such as Rihanna are superimposed by images meant to convey particular ideas of
the role of Afrodescendants within a global dynamic. Rihanna exists in an era of mass exposure,
and constant visual surveillance. As I suggest, her background informs the exploitation of
stereotype to capitalize on exoticized ideas of the Afrodescendant woman, of Black bodies in
‘paradise,’ thus framing Rihanna’s image according to the colonialist confines (Eldridge 2007,
274; Bierra 2010, 104). Further, through the machinations of studio production, and artistic
handling by corporate representatives, Rihanna’s image continues to be engaged, with a desired
end in mind—promotion of particular modes of consumption, and of specific ideals (Jagodzinski 2010, 9).

An inheritor of the substantive context of push-back culture, Rihanna re-presents a history in which LAC artistes have been engaged in those mainstreaming processes primarily focused on maintaining the *status quo*. To my mind, the employment of Rihanna, as an artiste, and as an image/ideal re-presents mid-twentieth century efforts to exploit the ‘Belafonte Boom,’ locating tractable Afrodescendants and their artistic ‘merriment’ as a counterpoint to the stratification of Blacks in American society (Eldridge 2007, 255-284). As relates to the consumer’s view of BadGalRiRi as a hyper-sexualized, good-time loving vixen, I pay particular attention to the womanist orientation of this work, and to Audrey Lorde’s declaration that the Black woman’s sexuality should be her own, rather than a malleable product, readily converted for the purposes of those who would subjugate us (Lorde 1984, 58).

The core of the Afrodescendant’s struggle for her body in the modern day must comprise combatting the ubiquity of image—impressions and ideals which continue to be based on those historic myths which centred Black, female existence as pathology, the physical evidence of sexual deviance/licentiousness (McClintock 1995, 48-56). (In examining Rihanna’s artistic emergence, in Rated R, I explore how these ideas of sex/uality continue to be manipulated by the artist’s managers.) Further, the emerging primacy of visual media over literary text presents even greater scope for manipulation of image, in order to promote a particular set of ideals, allowing the privileged latitude to exert even greater control over the masses (Jameson 1991, 68; Markovitz 2011, 125). In the case of artistes as recognized as Rihanna, control of the image invariably extends into studio manipulation of individual sound, a practice which Crowdy (2013, 130-131) suggests as that highly digitized studio production which illustrates imposition of
imperialistic/colonizing ideals upon particular artistic formats, moreso those formats being prepared for ‘mainstream’ distribution. Indeed, one music critic suggests that popular music has become so stylized as to make the natural inconsistencies of the human voice unrecognizable/undesirable to the modern listener (Levy, Joe. 2007. “Cyborg takeover.” *Rolling Stone*, Sept 2007). Perhaps Jagodzinski (2010, 22-23) would consider this incontrovertible evidence of the erasure of human qualities, in attempts to acquire *tabula rasa* on which the privileged can etch their impression of an ‘ideal’ to which the rest of us can only aspire.)

Given those practices which I consider the insidious imposition of ‘mainstream’ on the purity of artistic expression, I consider push-back culture, even at its raunchiest, the ultimate manifestation of Black women’s bodies as that un-knowable, pure object. Again, I deliberately apply the word ‘object,’ for its provocative power, and for the jarring sense of push-back existing at a discomfiting nexus, approaching Black woman’s bodies from a number of routes: ‘the body being acted upon,’ ‘the body as a dynamic entity,’ ‘body as impacted by contemporary socio-political events,’ ‘body as currency.’ Yet, deeper exploration of the art form reveals that push-back culture *at its core* is a resource for the empowerment, revealing, as it does, those tensive socio-political dynamics which must be acknowledged, and which continue to be essential to the be-ing of Afrodescendant women. Yet, as I explore later in this work, an especial challenge to any push-back artiste is how/whether to engage efforts to enter the mainstream.

The fundamental declaration of this work is that the Afrodescendant’s existence continues to be informed by the racialize-ing of Black bodies. Resulting stereotypical representations of the Black woman, and propagation of those stereotypes within mainstream discourses, ultimately influence the minutiae of inter-personal interaction, impacting the Afrodescendant’s prospects for social mobility. As I emphasize in this work, Black resistance
continues to be informed by push-back culture, which, itself, is subject to continued pressure within socio-economic flux of globalization. The question is, given the potency of image culture, and the temptations of the ‘mainstream,’ will the Afrodescendant’s fight for her body result in embracing the power of her own form, or in the adoption of those ideals presented by the privileged (Jagodzinski 2010, 23)? “To be, or to be someone/thing else?” That, is the question. On the part of the Afrodescendant woman, resolving this query must begin with acknowledging the extent to which the myth of race continues to impact the system of racism which continues to subsume Black peoples under structures of socio-political disparity.

**Emergence of ‘race,’ and of the Afrodescendant**

In the first chapter of the academic text, Race? Debunking A Scientific Myth Tattersall and Desalle (2011, 12) present a cogent analysis of a predominant socio-political figment: those traits which we construe of as ‘race,’ in fact represent a variety of individual phenotypic characteristics vital to the evolution of every living organism. Yet, despite all genomic evidence to the contrary, the idea of race continues to be accepted as scientific reality, impacting our perception of the societies in which we live, and influencing intra-population stratification, condemning members of particular social groups to restricted opportunities for socio-political inclusion, and economic advancement (Tepperman and Gheihman 2013, 316-323).

In exploring the Afrodescendant’s navigating the epistemic split, I consider the following queries: i. How did the concept of race become accepted as ‘truth,’ thereby justifying the glaring brutality of the trans-Atlantic slave trade? ii. To what extent did this fabrication enable exploitation of the Afrodescendant woman, enabling representation of our bodies as, simultaneously, objects of hatred/repulsion and of desire (St. Louis 2000, 57)? iii. How did the
birth of push-back culture employ Afro-centric performance as a feature of subversion, of resistance against oppression?

As Montagu (1997, 41) highlights, any myth can undergo the insidious transformation from lore to truth. The success of transition depends on the extent to which such ‘truth’ is imperative to the survival and/or advancement of a particular group. To my view, in evolving from fiction to truth, the myth of race accomplished a singular achievement: the story obscured the impact of socio-economic class on the concept of ‘race.’ The myth of race was a most convenient distraction from the injustices of violating one group of human beings because of economic necessity—‘race’ as the justification for violent procurement of free labour, meant to enrich respective European empires. Yet, the socio-political rhetoric surrounding the issue of race would come to be an ostensibly academic exercise, putatively exploring the biology of African peoples to arrive at classification of the African as a lower class human being.

Notably, evolutionary biologists highlight that while Prehistoric Man sought to organize into altruistic groups, there was no distinction on the basis of ‘race.’ Division as a form of organization enabled the formation of communities, fostered collaboration and protection, and ultimately guaranteeing survival of the human species (Tattersall 2011, 11-12). However, the ‘ordering’ of social groups according to superficial physical features is a distinctly modern condition, the phenomenon of ‘race’ (Tattersall and Desalle 2011, 12). That such labour would be free accommodated the greed of the bourgeoisie. As such, every socio-economic inequity and, indeed, the very structure of oppression within the LAC is based on the phantasm of race—so profoundly, in fact, that we find it virtually impossible to distinguish discussions of race from those of class.
In considering the emergence of the myth of race, it is helpful to consider Montagu’s (1997, 42) assertion that, for human beings, the most intelligent of primates, intra-specific differences have always been met by some combination of fear, superstition, and religious zealotry. So it was that, in the aftermath of the thirteenth-century Mongol invasion of Europe, the mysteries of the east were accorded occult power, and tales of the proclivities of darker-skinned ‘savages’ would become a feature of lore, and of entertainment. This aspect of European sensibility would set precedent for the fifteenth-century Age of Discovery, during which European monarchies would envision new peoples and new lands as an opportunity for colonial expansion, and enrichment. The very onset of interaction between indigenous Latin American peoples, and European sailors and their lords was prescient of the extent to which race and class would come to intersect: administrators of Holy See deliberated on how best to reconcile salvation of Amerindians with the violence visited upon them by the brutality of European conquest. Ultimately, “…commercial and political interests would [assert] themselves over moral ones (Tattersall and Desalle 2011, 7).”

To explore the journey of Afrodescendants, the tearing of a people from their land, forcing of the group into the holds of marine vessels, and the ultimate expulsion of human beings onto hostile, foreign soil, is to consider a paradox of Black existence: order constructed from dis-order; the ‘Great Chain of Being—’ God and His angels at the pinnacle—justifying brutality, pain, and suffering. (Indeed, McKinley (2007, 78-80) explores Manifest Destiny as that mythological duty to execute God-given domain over all creatures—including sub-classes of human being.) The potency of the myth of race has been compounded by the ease with which institutions have been employed in promoting those falsehoods which I consider convenient lies.
Foucauldian theories highlight that discourses present a most potent means by which the perspectives of the privileged are enshrined as knowledge (Foucault 1972, 181-186). As I suggest throughout ‘Body (Im)potent,’ the marginalizing of African peoples in the Atlantic originated with ‘knowledge’ of Black peoples as sub-human, and therefore exploitable. Whereas the realms of science and acadaeme, respectively, present as impartial, objective, factual representations of the material world. Yet, a number of classical works (purportedly) based on science, evidence deliberate efforts to justify the exploitation of African peoples. Indeed, as anatomist Edward Tyson (1699) highlights in the Preface to his work, *The Anatomy of a Pygmie Compared with That of a Monkey, an Ape, and A Man,* “…what difficulty calling [peoples of sub-Saharan Africa] men…no doubt they are of the Quadru-manus kind, either *Apes* or *Monkeys.*” (To my view, Tyson’s work, the system of classification proposed by Linnaeus, and Darwin’s theories of evolution, continue to form a ‘scientific’ basis for building a mythology around the idea of African peoples’ as a sub-human class.)

As the preceding discussion highlights, slaveholding in the New World was qualified by myth. In the case of Afrodescendants, the system of enslavement was accepted as just and necessary for the modernization of Europe, expansion of Empire, and, more peripherally, for the salvation of Africans themselves. These developments are, themselves, evident of the Gramscian idea of civic resources being employed in the shoring up of the positions of the powerful, while exploiting the vulnerable (Crehan 2000, 102). Indeed, moral, Christian, right-thinking members of European society were able to apply religious, and academic tenets to justify the enslavement of human beings. As Chomsky (2002, 18) would suggest, privileged members of society have always been able to employ impressive resources, in order to ‘manufacture consent,’ on the part of the masses. Similarly, the success of slavery in the LAC
region was due to a class-based dynamic in which the privileged class (typically, Anglo-Europeans), were able to wield influence over civic structures to produce propaganda aimed at influencing the lower classes (other, less wealthy, Anglo-Europeans). The greatest subterfuge was that, in accepting the oppression of Afrodescendants, members of Europe’s working-class were complicit in their own exploitation, even as they were co-opted into the agenda of the continent’s bourgeoisie (Crehan 2000, 125; Marx 2004, 227).

The colonizing of LAC territories has always been a function of numbers: the amount of free labour which would be needed to alter topographies in the New World; the variety of product—cotton, sugar, indigo, minerals—could be transferred to European markets; the number of African bodies which would be needed to maintain the system. As the respective conclusions of McClintock (1995, 48-56), and Morgan (2004, 56-167) highlight, the bodies of Afrodescendant women would tolerate the dubious distinction of being objects of and subjects propagating oppression; prey to the pathological sexual violence of the slaveholding system, while also being essential contributors to the structure, by virtue of the new generation of slaves issued from the Black woman’s womb.

Within the LAC, the presence of Black women—women who could be exploited under the legal institution of slavery—created a perverse dynamic. While European society maintained its fascination with the Enlightenment-era concept of the ‘Noble Savage,’ civic structures capitalized on the idea of African peoples as inferior (Tattersall and Desalle 2011, 7). The industrial requirements of the State would supersede Enlightenment philosophies. Declarations of the liberty, equality, and fraternity of Man would be surrendered to the need for labour. Indeed, as Marx’ (2011, 221) theories suggest, in effecting her ostensible duties, the State is, in reality, a surrogate for the bourgeoisie. The conflicts inherent to such a structure presented an
especial challenge for women Afrodescendants, whose cash value would be determined by three principal characteristics: fecundity, capacity for catering to the domestic/industrial needs of slaveholders, and the appearance of docility.

In conducting an assessment of the extent to which Africans, and Afrodescendants contributed to the economic development of respective European colonies in the Atlantic, Rivoli (2005, 7) highlights the plantation economy as centered around the industrial advantage of the free physical labour provided by Black bodies. Within this dynamic, the Afrodescendant woman was located as a facilitator, ensuring a cohesive Black community. Whereas social cohesion amongst African peoples was vital to Black survival, the paradox was that African community, the sustenance of Afrodescendants, also contributed to the expansion of plantation economies, and of those structures which oppressed African peoples. Perversely, the Afrodescendant woman’s role as the foundation of Black family life would also be capitalized upon as an economic value.

Providing a stark layout of plantation-era economies, John’s (1988, 179-180) research highlights the impact of malnutrition and overwork on the mortality of enslaved Africans—including children as young as five years old, who were co-opted as ancillary field labour. Provisions, and the most basic medical care were afforded, not as outcomes of human compassion, but according to the comparative economic benefit which would be lost, if an individual slave were removed from the work force. Moreover, the Black woman who was engaged in plantation work—as either a domestic, a consort, or as field labour—would have greater life expectancy than an Afrodescendant who was not employed, evidence, to my view, that LAC societies condemned the Black woman to engaging in the injustices of the plantation economy (John 1988, 178).
I must express agreement with, and extrapolate from the perspective of St. Louis (2000, 55): the origin of Black womanhood in the LAC region is rife with commodification, sexual exploitation, and violence. The travesty is that such a system was even allowed to thrive. The triumph is that Afrodescendants were able to maintain the core of an African origin, while creating and nurturing a new class of cultural custom, which would be essential to survival. Push-back culture, to my mind, is the inevitable result of this split, the cloaking of Africanism in the fabric of gaiety—"Going along to get along—" even as our very existence depended on subterfuge. The core of African social and spiritual structures would have to be concealed, made into a completely new element, and it is this element, push-back culture, which continues to be imperative to our view of ourselves.

The people who would find themselves captured, and enslaved in the territories of Latin America and the Caribbean originated primarily from the southwestern region of today’s Nigeria. For the purposes of this work, I apply the moniker ‘Yoruba’ to that heterogeneous group of peoples—among them Fon, Ibo, Shaba, Nupe, Ife-Ife—who would come to share common socio-cultural and spiritual perspectives originating with the Yoruba Empire (pre-trans-Atlantic slave trade), and culminating in the transformed cultures of Afrodescendants. In all aspects of the transformation, there presides an overarching Yoruba philosophy: power (asé) is inherent to the melding of oral narrative and the art of dance (Adesegun Dosumu 2005, 113-127).

In observing push-back culture, as lyrical rendition and dance form throughout Latin America and the Caribbean, a number of fundamental Afrocentric components become evident, to include: the fusing of the spiritual and the sexual, through which sexuality transcends the idea of ‘sexual orientation;’ an emphasis on the cataclysm resulting from mis-use of female power; lyrical and metrical patterns aimed at introducing ambiguity; and performative dynamics in
which the presenters, and the observers/listeners are, in fact, a unitary element (Adesegun Dosumu 2005, 117; Matory 1994, 202). As I propose throughout ‘Body (Im)potent,’ push-back culture can only be truly appreciated if we examine the myriad socio-historical conflicts which brought the art form into being.

Push-back culture was conceived of by entities—not ‘men and women,’ for at the nascence of push-back culture, dominant discourse discounted the status of African peoples. Yet, the potency of the art form lay that Afro-centric capacity to imbue innocuous objects with the power of transformation, symbolic of a people’s belief in their ability to transcend enslavement (Moran 2012, 114-132). In the collision of an African awareness with the malevolent pressures of enslavement, push-back culture became a whole, new, amorphous-yet-potent element. As this work suggests, it is the fluidity of push-back culture, the ability of a single word to represent disparate perspectives, which makes the art form controversial, as it touches, simultaneously, on subjects which would otherwise repel one another: misogyny and womanism, violence and warmth, rupture and harmony. Yet, just as it would have been for those hearing the resonance of sacred African drums, it is the location of the listener which informs or transforms the performer’s message (Ajayi 2004, 575-588). As I explore in Chapter 2, the outcome of this transformation would be Afrodescendants’ creating a whole identity, from entities which would otherwise be base, fragmented parts.
2. Mother = Land: the Afrodescendants’ body as home, asé, rooted-ness

Turiel (2003, 115-130) suggests the basis of subversion as the circumventing of those social mores which are upheld as moral values but which, in fact, propagate inequity, and social stratification, on the basis of class. As such, to the perspective of the exploited, the marginalized, the oppressed, subversive action is a laudatory undertaking. For African peoples enslaved in Latin America and the Caribbean, the very physical self of the Afrodescendant woman would come to represent obverse perspectives: triumph/defeat, acceptance/resistance, spiritual/physical, self/community. As I see it, for Africans and Afrodescendants, subversion would have to be founded on reconciling, celebrating, and triumphing within, and despite, an otherwise confusing array of contradictions.

Even as I outline those distinctions: ‘physical or spiritual,’ ‘self or community,’ I am aware of the extent to which European perspectives impose themselves upon an African—specifically Yoruban—sensibilities. Indeed, as is highlighted in Matory’s (1994, 11-12) exploration of Oyo-Yoruba community structure and spiritual rites, the suggestion of distinction is disposed of and replaced with holistic, fluid views of the human experience. As such, even the categorizing of male or female is acknowledged as a function of location/situation: social dynamics and practicality, impact on a community’s definition of particular gendered elements. Within the context of Afrodescendants within the LAC, therefore, the formation of home, on behalf of the community, would depend on adapting to Euro-centric perspectives, re-forming ourselves outwardly, while maintaining that inner core of a fundamental Yoruban sensibility which enabled our shape-shifting, adjusting our location according to the requirements of our survival.
To my mind, the thrust of the African and Afrodescendant experience in the LAC region is this: our new ‘home’ did not want us, yet it needed our bodies—and the free labour which those bodies provided. In not wanting us, or in wanting us only as it did livestock, the structure could not conceive of us as sentient, intelligent, self-actualizing human beings. Central to resistance, therefore, was our own awareness of ourselves as whole. In my opinion, the Black woman’s body enabled a re-orientation of self, and re-founding of ‘home,’ for one fundamental reason: use of the body was central to Yoruban rites of spiritual possession and performance. In this new, hostile ‘home,’ in which the Black woman’s body was a denigrated entity, the ultimate form of resistance was for African peoples to re-imbue that body as the sole medium through which god-like possession could be achieved (Thompson Drewal 1998, 256-281; Concha-Holmes 2012, 243-267).

The physical brutality and spiritual trauma of institutionalized slavery, those civic structures which qualified enslavement on the basis of ‘race,’ and pervading hegemonic facilities stymied the efforts of Africans and Afrodescendants to establish a home. Indeed, as Brednikova and Tkach (2010, 189-191) highlight, the pressures of forced/involuntary migration and the ideal of home can collide to the extent that the concept of an abode must convert into a de-localized, diffused idea informed by memories of a home which no longer exists, and which can no longer act as sanctuary. For Africans pressed into the vice of exploitation, under slavery in the LAC, the formation of the home-ideal was made even more onerous by systematic condemnation of, and violence against, all things African. As practitioners of the Yoruban approach to community—the imparting of knowledge through oral histories, and the practice of cultural customs—enslaved Africans and Afrodescendants, women, would be vital to maintaining the memory of a
home in which the spiritual was elevated over the physical, and in which burgeoning art forms comprised a singular means of self-preservation.

Concha-Holmes (2012, 243-267) admonishes that Yoruban religious practice be ennobled, precisely for the promotion of an holistic view—to my mind, the inseparability of ‘spiritual,’ and ‘sexual/physical.’ In this regard, I consider the extent to which a distinctly Yoruban perspective facilitated the formation of new homes by emphasizing the spiritual, while making peace with the deprivations thrust upon African peoples, as a result of physical enslavement. Due to the nefariousness of the institution of slavery, home would come to be a nebulous space, its limits defined by a porous border through which passed both our African heritage, and the reality of forced assimilation into Afro-phobic, Euro-centric societies. The people’s survival would therefore depend on the facility with which the women could maintain core, Yoruban, knowledges. The greatest challenge of this obligation was cloaking these philosophies in the very Euro-centric ideals which informed our oppression. As such, extant African perspectives expounding the potency of womankind, singularity of spiritual/physical/sexual awareness, and the socio-political value of artistic performance would have to be concealed, while remaining central components of subversion (Matory 1994, 204; Miller 2000, 161-188).

Through sheer adaptability, persistence, intelligence, and an ongoing awareness of their origins, it was African and Afrodescendant women who were able to maintain that communal sense of be-ing, and of home. Fundamental to this dynamic, was the need to re-orient the view of the body, holding fast to African sensibility, while also yielding to existence in slaveholding societies which defined the Black woman’s value according to market need (and fetish, and violence, and degradation, and the sadistic tendencies of individual slaveholders). In the forced
migration from African soil to slaveholding territories in the LAC, the body of the Black woman itself went through a metaphorical transition. Formerly, the African woman’s body would be a tangible representation of Yoruban socio-cultural expectation. West African custom would place upon this body the expectations of potency, stability, fertility—of a community’s women and of its farmland. Yet, on being deposited in the hostile New World, this same body would be imbued with a new kind of agency, that of resisting violence against herself and against her people. The latter was more easily achievable, as each Afrodescendant would enable the psychic renewal of the community, by reconciling her own physical vulnerabilities within slavery and the spiritual potency emphasized by the Yoruban perspective of the female condition.

The Afrodescendant woman’s obligation as a home-maker for the Black community was made even more onerous by her need to navigate every interaction with those bodies which represented the greatest amount of social currency in slaveholding society—white males. Those African and Afrodescendant women who were the companions of white males, their cohorts, bearers of their children would be located in a space made even more murky by the complexities of intimate Black-white contact. True, as Morgan (2004, 2) acknowledges, such relationships could be classified as anything but the tractable ‘black-and-white.’ I do agree with her that business connections, familial links, and even love, blurred the edges of slaveholding societies, diluting the locations of respective slaveholders, and their ‘property.’ However, I insist that, whatever the relationship to the socio-political dynamic of power, each African woman was subject to the Afro-centric symbolism of her own body, irrespective of the meanings visited upon that body by others, specifically in the arena of sex and sexuality.

In conducting my research for this chapter, I sought to address a single question, “How does one present resistance, and found a home, within a structure which tells you that you are,
and have, and can own nothing, being, yourself, an owned thing?” That African peoples survived slavery, at all, is mystery. That we managed to maintain vestiges of our African heritage, even as we adapted to, and adopted Eurocentric customs is a miracle. As a central tool for withstanding the ravages of slavery, push-back culture presents, to my mind, a fundamental medium within the Afrodescendant woman’s home-creation.

To my mind, metaphorical application of the Black woman’s body to push-back culture re-presents Gramsci’s concept of subversion, as comprising a people’s capacity to navigate and define their own existence, through querulous exploration of the limits imposed by the powerful (Crehan 2000, 100). For the Black woman enslaved in the LAC region, the woman nonetheless intent on creating a home, on behalf of a beleaguered community, her own body defined any number of limits: restrictions over her choice to bear/not bear children; proscription of her intellectual pursuits; constriction of her ability to openly and directly participate in the building up of Black culture, and community. Indeed, the Afrodescendant woman would find herself constantly testing, and expanding and re-defining boundaries, to transcend the insult of enslavement, and those hegemonic realities on which the system depended.

I would propose the Black woman’s body as matryoshka: the outermost, most obvious, corporal self an economic ‘gift’ to corrupt, slaveholding societies (Nagel 2003, 18-20). Yet, within this body nested elements of resistance—against the violence of slaveholding, against the sexual exploitation of the Black women, against the derogation of Afrodescendant community. Further, for African peoples enslaved in the LAC region, the Black woman’s body offered a location for coalescing power. This perspective relates directly to the Yoruban concept of woman as centre of community, arbiter, entity of fertility or harbinger of barren-ness (Matory 1994, 204). Slaveholding society distilled the Black woman’s body into a most simple denominator:
property/commodity. Push-back culture provided a format through which that body could be transformed to become a focus in lyrical rendition and, therefore, an esoteric resource for maintaining those (Yoruban) customs on which a people’s survival depended. Of necessity, these knowledges would be en-folded with Euro-centric values, creating an entirely new push-back culture, in which the Black woman’s body would be the foundation for communicating ideals imperative to establishment of home in the LAC.

The greatest strength of enslaved African peoples was the perspective of holism, through which the lyrical represented a synchronicity between the political, the spiritual and the physical (Concha-Holmes 2012, 243-267). The Black woman’s body, as a symbolic entity, informed push-back representations in which the respective experiences of performers and viewers, the enslaved and their ‘owners,’ could be melded into a single truth: that purportedly distinct parties were, in fact, all actors in the same world—however oppressive, however unjust, and however warped (Adeyemi 2004, 589-598). Yet, due to Yoruban custom and influence, it was the enslaved who were able to appreciate the fullness of meaning, within performance; the enslaved who were able to accept the significance of be-ing, even within the most inhumane circumstances (Ajayi 2004, 575-588). In fulfilling their role as home-makers, Afrodescendant women would, of necessity, engage their bodies as symbols through which to conceal Yoruban ideals, while revealing ostensibly conformity within/acceptance of the expectations of slaveholding society. It would be this ‘hybrid’ capacity which would ensure the survival of African peoples in the LAC (Miller 2000, 161-188).

Woman Afrodescendants’ role as the linchpin of home emphasizes, in my mind, the conviction presented in Louise Schmidt’s (1995, 28-29) research. From her perspective, the tenets of feminism demand that (patriarchal) societies devise non-violent approaches to resolving
the injury visited upon women in their daily lives. I project from Schmidt’s theory to consider that, for the woman Afrodescendant enslaved in Latin America and the Caribbean, eschewing violence was imperative to creating a home, as non-violence would, itself, counteract the viciousness on which the system of slavery relied. Further, the resolve of non-violence, the ostensible acceptance of one’s status as ‘enslaved,’ was the basis of Black home-making, in my opinion. (The most interesting aspect of Schmidt’s (1995, 32-34) work, is that emphasis on West African spiritual traditions which maintain the soul as being able to escape from any physical body which comes under assault. To my mind, therefore, the Afrodescendant’s valuing the soul over and above the body would be vital to the survival of Black communities. After all, these bodies were bound, ‘owned,’ whereas souls possessed infinite capacities.)

That the Afrodescendant’s power was nested in her home-making obligations endowed the Black community the power to rely on those Yoruban ideals nested in the female form: fertility, power, and promise, and the capacity to subsume a frail physical self under the infinite possibilities of the spiritual (Matory 1994, 204; Ajayi 2004, 613-617). In creating home, the Black woman in the LAC would come to relate to her body as a battleground, territory from which the African community could launch resistance against an oppressive system. From the physical to the artistic to the spiritual, from the extreme to the subtle, from selective aborting of pregnancies, to the formation of sects in the Yoruba spiritual tradition, to the lyrical rendering of the Black woman’s body within push-back culture, the Black woman within the LAC located her body as the basis on which the people could find a new territory, a new home.

As my preceding exploration suggests, the home-making undertaken by Black women in the LAC comprised a fine balance, the constant testing limits to identify how, and where best to establish the community’s foundation. The strictures of the system of slavery, the violence
inherent in that system, and the ongoing hegemonic dynamic which propagated the myth of race were constant impediments to formation of a Black community. In negotiating the epistemic split, to arrive at a whole, the Afrodescendant woman would face the greatest challenge: surviving the sexual abuse/exploitation/fetishization which presented a chronic insult to the body of the Black woman, to her concept of self, and to her capacities as a home-maker. From a legal standpoint, the Afrodescendant woman could not even insist on ownership of her own body. The only aspect of her self which the African woman truly possessed was her spirit, and it was resilience of the psyche which most enabled the Black woman’s role as home-maker.

Within Yoruban custom, the spiritual realm over-arched all aspects of human existence. A direct product of this perspective was the Afrodescendant’s appreciation of the transitory status of human life, the, “…circulation of signs across time and space (Wirtz 2004, 409-410).” I expand on this idea to suggest that, at the zenith of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, the Afrodescendant woman possessed sufficient space in which to acknowledge that, within the epistemic dynamic of the home-making process, the spiritual sphere (to include performance, community, power over fertility—all in the Yoruban philosophy) would have to subsume the physical (which, in my opinion, marked the sole location from which ‘mainstream,’ Euro-centric, Afro-phobic, capitalistic, slaveholding societies could view the Black woman’s condition) (Wirtz 2004, 409-438; Lorde 1984, 58). As such, the greatest power of the African woman, as home-maker, was her ability to communicate to the entire community the infinite power inherent in surrendering one’s physical self to the potential of spiritual ascendance.
Subsuming the body under the spirit

In elucidating the struggle for Black women’s bodies, and in emphasizing Afrodescendant survival as a direct product of advancing the spiritual over the physical, examination of push-back culture is vital. As Besson’s (1993, 15-20) research emphasizes, a Black woman of LAC heritage invariably crashes into conflict arising from Afrodescendant communities’ expectations that women should maintain social respectability, while her male counterparts pursue the (sexual) accolades of machismo. These values are readily evident in even the most casual examination of push-back culture. Indeed, how can we reconcile womanism with those seemingly degrading themes present in many push-back lyrics (Cooper 2004, 100-110)? How can we cite as ‘emancipating’ choreography which seems to only emphasize the Afrodescendant woman as the willing subject of a gaze which is provocative, sexualized and fetishized?

To my mind, the answer to these questions lies in a single word: asé, the Yoruban conviction that music and dance, when performed in synchrony, coalesce immense powers, a choreography of creation (Concha-Holmes 2012, 243-246). In using the word ‘choreography,’ to describe the hip-thrusting, derriere-jerking, arm-waving abandon of dance movements within push-back culture, I eschew all ‘formal’ definitions of the word ‘choreography.’ (After all, as Fairclough (2010, 40-60) emphasizes, words ascribe only such power and meaning as imbued by those artificial social/cultural/historical/class-based milieux developed by us, human beings.) In the context of my argument, I mean to convey choreography as the performative end-result of a plethora of historic realities.

As I see it, the Afrodescendant woman who chooses to jerk her arms outward in abandon is, in fact, tossing away the physicality of the act, and aspiring to her own asé, while demanding (and receiving) the gaze of onlookers. The woman who undertakes such action grasps at
sufficient power to engage bystanders, thus making them subjects within the same dynamic. In gazing, viewers are transformed into performers. In assessing the cultural context of Santeria in Cuba, Wirtz insists on the practice as being evidence of las encrucijadas—the intermingling, and inter-mixing of social, historical, political, and cultural contexts which bestow sufficient power to define Santeria (Wirtz 2004, 410). So it is that even those viewers who deride Santeria nonetheless engage in, and become subject to, that meta-cultural dynamic on which the practice is centered. Similarly, those viewers who cast aspersions on the Black woman who immerses her body in push-back culture are, in fact, placing themselves on the periphery of a dynamic in which the Afrodescendant woman employs her self as a medium of resistance, to emphasize the hypocrisy of a social system which seeks to deny even her capacity to define her own person—sexually, sensually, spiritually. Indeed, Hill Collins (2004, 70-75) suggests that, for the Black woman, the thrust of liberation must be the casting away of that nebulous, subjective context which is white, middle-class moral expectation.

To my view, push-back culture elevates the Black woman’s body as spiritual (and sexual) totem, due to the following: the Yoruban concept of asé, and of divinity; the tensive dynamic created around the disparate spiritual perspectives (Yoruban, and Judeo-Christian) which inform the Afrodescendant woman’s performing within, and being informed by, those ideas/ideals surrounding her body. On one hand, Adeyemi (2004, 589-598) emphasizes that singular Yoruban perspective which highlights the inseparability of artiste(s)and performer(s), and of the spiritual/sexual and the physical. Within public performance is the asé of political declaration, as well as a socio-cultural re-affirmation of the singularity of all elements—spiritual, physical, natural and even the inanimate (Concha-Holmes 2012, 243-267).
By the same token, as Murphy and Spear (2011, 1-11) emphasize in their exploration of the historical transitions informing sex and sexuality, the Judeo-Christian world-view which underpinned the trans-Atlantic slave trade was one in which the human form could only be evidence of the base and carnal. Moreover, the Black woman’s body was in direct conflict to all ethereal aspirations. In negotiating the epistemic split, therefore, the Afrodescendant woman would have to reconcile opposing views of her body, to ensure that asé was central to her self-awareness. Indeed, the engaging of push-back culture was fundamental to the manufacturing of (Black) power.

As I suggest in my introduction to this work, the women of the Afrodescendant community survived the debasement of slavery through their ability to subsume physical violation under the strength, the asé, a spiritual perspective. The Black woman in the LAC was forced to surrender her body to a system which defined her as a commodity, to be ‘owned.’ Within dominant discourses, which adhered to the myth of race, the reality of the Black woman’s soul was an inconvenience—if the idea of such a ‘soul’ could even be considered within the realm of possibility. As a parallel, in the spirit of resistance against the insults of the dominant perspective, the Black woman’s asé had to remain intact. Indeed, in acknowledging the Afrodescendant reality as a product of cross-cultural, multi-perspective-ed meanings, Concha-Holmes (2012, 243-267) admits to the ‘hybrid’ reality which enabled the survival of African peoples in Afro-phobic societies. Within the epistemic split, as I propose it, the Black woman’s body was capital, an object—use-able, abuse-able, dispose-able. The spirit—and the asé generated through push-back culture—would create a new world, one in which the Black woman’s be-ing could be re-affirmed.
The Afrodescendant woman (or, indeed, *any* woman) who views push-back culture with apprehension is exhibiting an understandable response. The genre is, seemingly, in violation of the tenets of any womanist, subversive instrument. Yet, for the initiated among us, those willing to consider the performances from a broader, spiritual perspective, push-back culture continues to be a vital link to that Yoruban awareness which enabled the emergence of new peoples (Concha-Holmes 2012, 243-267). My argument is that push-back culture enabled a link to those West African roots which sustained us as we transitioned from our African selves, to a hybrid-ized existence. This very epistemic reality would inspire a most potent *womanist* act of resistance: the abandonment of those ‘morals’ which, in fact, formulated the basis of racializing Black women’s bodies. Central to this revolt would be employing the Black woman’s body within *asé*. Tensions of the physical/sexual/performative/ spiritual would all come to bear at a single focal point, push-back culture, the fulcrum around which perspectives of the Black woman’s body continue to turn (Thompson Drewal 1998, 263-268).

In considering the epistemic split, I adopt C.L.R. James’ conviction that the trans-Atlantic slave trade created a warped system, one which would necessitate a people’s re-invention, re-orientation, and re-creation, to birth a population of heroes, despite existing in societies which insisted that ‘African,’ and ‘hero’ were mutually exclusive (Hesse 2000, 23). Within this dynamic, a subjugated ‘race’ (African peoples) would learn to thrive in environments which threatened their very survival—mortal, *and* moral. (By the latter, ‘moral,’ I keep in mind the contradictions with which Afrodescendants continue to collide. Within our existence is an awareness that the law, an ostensibly just instrument, can be a most immoral tool. ‘Legal,’ and ‘right’ do not always equate, at least not for a population which, at one point in Western history, could be traded, bought, sold, and owned by others, all under edict.)
The resulting convolutions, collisions, and conflicts resulted in an epistemic and cultural reality in which African peoples would have to navigate a number of deceits. The dominant socio-political milieux of respective LAC territories espoused wholesome qualities: advancement, development, civilization, and wealth-building. Yet, the discourses which lauded these qualities were, themselves, built on the rot which was the trade in Black bodies. Awareness of the contradictions inherent in our existence, as Afrodescendants, continues to inform the ambivalence expressed by many Black women, in considering the ambit of push-back culture. On the one hand, we may be unsettled by the more misogynistic lyrics, put-out by the provocative dance movements of some female revellers, yet, we allow and tolerate, because we understand. We fall prey, often, to ideas of ‘decency,’ and ‘morality,’ concepts which often violate that meta-context of resilience, survival, and resistance inherent in push-back, as a cultural medium (Wirtz 2004, 410). It is from this perspective that I consider push-back culture a subversive force, as it (re-) presents my body as an object.

A reasonable query would be this: “If the Black woman’s body, raised to the power of push-back culture, equals ‘object,’ does the art form not diminish the Black woman?” My response to the question would be to insist on acknowledgement of the inherent un-wholesome-ness of LAC societies. These territories were founded upon, and grounded in the denigration of Black existence. To then expect the woman Afrodescendant to revel in expectations of ‘moral,’ ‘proper,’ (Euro-centric, class-distinguished) behaviour, is disingenuousness of the highest order, in my view. This is not an issue of moral relativism, to propose that we Afrodescendants have a right to exploit ourselves, since such exploitation can never approach the abuse meted out to us over centuries of enslavement. Rather, my resolution is to acknowledge the potency of asé, to yield to a reality which the Yoruba have always accepted: music and movement, the thrumming
of meaning, the significance imbued upon words, the to-and-fro of spectacle tossed from
performer to listeners, and back, evidences a cataclysm of power which we, human beings,
cannot begin to grasp. To my mind, this *asé* has been vital to the survival of Afrodescendants.

In considering push-back culture as centering the Black woman’s body as an ‘object,’
we must admit to a perception which equates ‘object-ification,’ and ‘exploitation.’ Yet, this
standpoint simply distills the Afrodescendant condition into two simple dimensions: the height,
and width of the letters comprising a word. Indeed, to consider push-back as a bastion of object-
ification of Black women is to confine ourselves to the narrowness of modern usage of the word
‘object.’ If we step back even slightly, perspective changes, and we approach a broader, more
complete view of that convoluted, conflicted dynamic which is the birth of Afrodescendant
culture in Latin America and the Caribbean. According to the etymology of the noun, ‘object,’
Latin roots reveal a twist which parallels the signifying powers of African (particularly Yoruban)
African awareness.

In his exploration of West African lore, cultural custom, and the impact on literary
art forms in the United States, Gates (1988, 6-10) highlights the centrality of the ‘Signifying
Monkey,’ a character imbued with wit, awareness, rapier sensibilities, but which is, nonetheless,
ascrbed the reputation of fool. For Africans and Afrodescendants in a New World, within
societies based on the myth of race, the significance of words rose to more profound, but less
pronounced dimensions. In underplaying the significance of the performance, enhancing the mis-
perceptions of hearers/observers, Afrodescendants would build upon the *asé* of push-back culture
as subversive medium, and as esoteric form.

Within the Yoruban perspective, the literal must give way to the metaphorical. Indeed, in
exploring West African students’ interpretation of the thrumming of Yoruban talking drums,
Ajayi (2004, 575-580) highlights that, of the dozen variations presented by listeners, there was no single, correct answer. The results were a product of individual custom, community, and the social construct which informed the daily lives of students. As the author informs, the drummer’s intention to sound out the message, “Who says we do not have a father?” was re-presented in a number of iterations by students, with the most popular text being, “We are no more in support of the father (Ajayi 2004, 575-580).” No wrong context to accompany text, only a different set of social expectations, interactions, and inter-relationships. The only fixed element is the engaging of ambiguity, to inform that dynamic between performer(s) and listener(s).

Considering Yoruban custom, which I think is the holistic comingling of the literal, sonorous, and kinetic informing of meanings, I aspire to the metaphorical: those Black female bodies denigrated by enslavement were elevated to objects-of-trancendence, through the *asé* of a people. Further, as Matory (1994, 11) highlights, under a Yoruban awareness in which lyrical expression is contingent on an awareness of the amorphousness of human existence, ‘subject,’ and ‘object,’ could, in fact, be considered obverse planes of the same coin. In placing the Afrodescendant woman’s body within the context of the people’s definition of an object-of-desire, an object-of-perfection, an object-to-which-to-aspire, push-back culture delivered the ultimate *asé*, the capacity of an enslaved people to transcend physical circumstances, to deliver on the spiritual promise of the Yoruban awareness from which they had emerged.

In presenting the Black woman’s body as an object, therefore, push-back culture enables the ultimate act of resistance: definition of the Afrodescendant according to those Afro-centric (Yoruban) knowledges which eschew narrow confines, to instead consider a people within the context of their experiences. As such, it is the Black woman’s body which enables that sphere in which the lyrical, the tangible, the spiritual, expressive, kinetic, and sexual translate into triumph
of the spirit over the debasement of physical enslavement. The reality is that, in navigating the epistemic split, the self-perception of the Afrodescendant woman necessitated reconciling the physical (reliance of slaveholding societies on the marketability of Black bodies), and the spiritual (emphasized by Miller (2000, 161-170) as the secrecy imperative to maintaining African traditions).

Within the functions of push-back culture as a people’s testament, the object-ifying of the Black woman’s body enhances the asé of a people, adhering to the very etymological roots of the word ‘object,’ product of a culture in which philosophical considerations were central to the idea of intellectual excellence (to wit, the application of the gender-less noun, ‘objectus,’ emphasizing a conundrum deserving of painstaking consideration). For the extent to which push-back culture presents the Black woman’s body as an object, therefore, the art form capitalizes on a potency which can only be appreciated by Afrodescendants—the imperative of considering this body, from all angles, as an element worthy of intense inspection. Indeed, as I emphasize in the following chapter, it was this body, this object, which germinated from Yoruban awareness of the significance of woman, to establish the Black population of Latin America and the Caribbean, even as it enabled the growth of a people, and the emergence of push-back culture as a potent art form. Indeed, the Black woman’s body provided the sole medium through which this art form could root Afrodescendants in their new home(s).

In postulating the epistemic split as the imperative of navigating (and reconciling) disparate views of the Afrodescendant, I remain convinced that the Black woman’s body was (and is) pivotal to securing the place of Black peoples within the socio-cultural, and political realities of the LAC region. Whereas Afrodescendants were valuable to the slaveholding structure solely on the basis of their manual contribution to a market system, it was through the
bodies of Black women that the community was able to sufficiently express itself lyrically and culturally, to the extent that it was the symbolism of these bodies which enabled the stability which allowed Afrodescendants to root themselves in the LAC region. Specifically, I maintain that the body of the Black woman is the sole medium through which push-back culture could establish, emerge, and flourish—as art form, esoteric feature, cultural mainstay, all with Afrocentrism at the core. As I outline, in illustrating the epistemic split, the success of the woman Afrodescendant has been her capacity to reconcile disparate views of her body, making a peace with even elements of herself engaged in violent opposition: ‘physical versus spiritual,’ ‘commodity versus object-of-virtue,’ ‘priced versus price-less.’

Within the conundrum which was the enslavement of human beings by other human beings, and under a system in which the Black body was vital to the accumulation of capital, it was the Black female form which attracted the least value, on a cash basis, as a unit of labour. Indeed, in highlighting the inextricable link between Black enslavement, agriculture and mining industries, and the enrichment of gentrified families (under a capitalist market structure), Davis (2006, 118-119) highlights that it was the physically strongest, most resilient, most compliant Black bodies which were accorded the greatest monetary value. I daresay that the price of any Black woman’s body was based on her ability to support this system—as breeder, consort, or ancillary—rather than on any inherent capacity for intellect, creativity, or ambition. Thus being the reality, the Black woman’s body provided the ideal basis in which to root Black artistry and community. In a lyrical twist emblematic of Yoruban sensibilities, the asé of Afrodescendants could only emerge from those bodies least valued by slaveholding society, and thus from those bodies conceived of as being least likely to nest any form of power.
From the Yoruban perspective, the body of woman was not simply a basic physical entity (nor would this body ever be considered a commodity). Rather, the physical self of the African woman presented a portal through which spiritual ascendance could be accomplished. This standpoint was vital to West African spiritual/religious practice, and, further, informed cultural custom and communal interaction. Matory (1994, 202-203) highlights the extent to which daily social interaction was influenced by the appreciation of the African woman as possessing sufficient power to represent an element of omnipotence. As he communicates, in Yoruban society, the African woman could be welcomed/loved/f feared for her ability to adopt (sometimes simultaneously) the status of maiden/wife/husband/witch. The social reverence with which any woman was approached was a product of awareness that the power of woman was at the core of the (in)fertility of the land—and of its people. Any woman could be the bringer of those atmospheric elements which watered the fields, resulting in plentiful harvest; could be the nubile bearer of children, enriching community; could be the vengeful witch causing vines to wither, while also rendering women sterile. This conception of being on the knife’s edge of spiritual power informed West African views of women, and of their contribution to custom and community.

Alpern (2011, 112) reveals the confusion which reigned in European minds, on witnessing the religious rites undertaken by combatants preparing to battle in Dahomean armies, throughout West Africa. Those French and British historians who chronicled the events seemed only to focus on the, “leaps, movement of hips and loins, violent jerking of the rear.” To the European gaze, those African women engaged their bodies in a frivolous exercise, as devoid of purpose as it was of grace and rhythm. Yet, as Matory (1994, 10-12) highlights, central to the engaging of the West African woman’s body in spiritual/cultural performance is an awareness of
the melding of universal elements in the physical form of a single human being, alight-ing on a point at which all social norms/expectations/definitions must yield to that omnipotence which is spiritual power. The author further suggests a concept which could only be most alien to a Euro-centric view of the body, and of social mores: hetero-normativeness as being friable, disposable, a false product of Man’s attempt to subscribe human-ness. Indeed, within the shamanism which is the delivery of spiritual power through the human form, the idea of a male wife, or a female husband is perfectly in keeping with the whole-ness of existence (Matory 1994, 202-206). Within such a spiritual context, the African woman’s body is a consummate font of power.

Whereas African peoples were forced into a baptism, with passage across the waters of the Atlantic, the community would re-emerge as naked, forced to re-form within a violent space. Yet, the community would be able to re-fabricate itself, through reliance on the Black woman’s body as a spiritual totem. In those the corrupt(ed) lands of the LAC, territories which relegated the asé of Black woman to worth-less relic, the Afrodescendant woman’s physical self would come to be the sole emblem of rich, arts-informed, anti-capitalist, Afrocentric resistance. That the Afrodescendant woman’s body was essential to the root-ing of Black community and culture in the LAC becomes even more evident in considering disparity between West African valuing of the African woman’s body, and the valu-ation (id est ‘pricing’) which was inherent the slaveholding approach to that exact body.

As Moran (2012, 118-119) highlights, representations of Afrocentric religious practice in Cuba by eighteenth-century European artists, comprised renderings meant to suggest comical affect in Yoruban spiritual rites/celebration. Yet, within ostensible social tolerance of West African religious practice, there existed undertones of fear, which stimulated the desire to control. In practice, tacit acceptance of West African religious customs could quickly convert
into the violent effect of criminalizing practices which were considered a focus for organizing slave revolt, and other forms of resistance (Moran 2012, 116). Within the dissonant social tenor of slaveholding societies of the LAC, the Black woman’s body would become symbolic of resistance, of the necessity to cloak the solidity of Afro-centrism in the fabric of a body—a textile considered disposable, within those dominant discourses underpinned by the myth of race, and the trade in human beings. The principle—Black woman’s body as the primary source of root-ing African peoples in the LAC—was exercised, most richly, and most effectively, through the lyricism of push-back culture.

Specifically, push-back rendition empowered enslaved African peoples, by (re-) presenting the following perspectives of the Black woman’s body: i. the conflicted power of woman—as nurturer, or as witch, with the capacity to either enrich, or ruin communities, ii. the Yoruban conviction that performance and politics were inseparable, iii. the significance of the corporeal presence of ‘woman’ to spiritual transcendence (‘the mounting’) (Ajayi 2004, 613-620). Moreover, as Matory (1994, 11-13) suggests, Yoruban religious practice is distinguished for the extent to which the socially-prescribed roles of ‘male,’ and ‘female’ are abandoned in spiritual rites. To this extent, a religious performance which could recall the act of sex (to Protestant eyes, I daresay) in fact presents the surrender of the physical self to an omniscient spiritual presence.

Just as Matory (1994, 202-203) highlights Yoruban acceptance of ‘male wives,’ and ‘female husbands,’ I suspect that enslaved African peoples elevated the body of the woman Afrodescendant to a symbol of a people’s transcendence over any number of shackles: those physical bonds of slavery which were accommodated by hegemonic milieu; those dominant discursive dynamics founded in paternalism; those elements of the myth of race which fetishized and sexualized the Black woman’s body, thus laying the groundwork for her commodification. It
was the Afrodescendant woman’s body which enabled that paradoxical Black existence: rooting a people to toxic soil, from which they would thrive.

Earlier in this work I would have introduced the Black woman’s body as the focal point of a tensive dynamic nesting two mutually exclusive equations: ‘body = object,’ and/or ‘body = commodity.’ In explicating the epistemic split, I consider push-back culture as that lyrical and choreographical element which represented those innumerable conflicts which Africans peoples would have to navigate. In representing Black women’s bodies as objects, push-back culture enabled the root-ing of Black peoples in Afro-centrism, a process as fundamental to Black existence as it was anathema to the structure of slavery. Indeed, exploring the contexts of African-derived spiritual and cultural practice necessitates acknowledgement of the status of Afrodescendants as products of a “hybrid” reality (Winant 2012, 10).

Survival of enslaved African peoples in the LAC required transformation, as result of a violent clasis, the fragmenting (but not destruction) of our African selves. Any spaces created due to vacuum were infiltrated by dominant (Euro-centric) ideals. Afrodescendant culture, custom, and social practice would therefore emerge with a deliberately esoteric tenor, employing, fully, West African customs which emphasized ambiguity within lyricism, and socio-political resistance within cultural performance (Ajayi 2004, 613-620). This milieu (push-back culture) ably employed the Black woman’s body as a revered object, and as a medium, concealing African strength within the mask of the Black woman’s body. 

Admittedly, the gaze applied to the Black woman’s body by those who accepted the myth of race was a myopic one, comprising a narrow view of the meanings ascribed to that body. As St. Louis (2000, 55) highlights, those dominant discourses which underpinned the myth of
race—thus justifying the basis of slaveholding societies—thrived on milieux which combined hatred/suspicion/confusion/forced-submission-through-violence with a level of sexual desire and/or fetishization. The reality of sexual violence as imperative to domination, in the enslavement of African peoples, makes even more evident that essentiality of the Black female body as a resistive force—through symbolism in push-back culture, and through the esoteric employment of Afro-centric approaches to spiritual practice, and cultural rites. As such, the capacity of African peoples to secure themselves in, and over enslavement, was a direct product of the Black woman’s body functioning as a people’s tether. Within the context of the epistemic split, and as I explore in subsequent sections of this work, changing representations of Black bodies, within imperialism, globalism, international development, and concepts of ‘work,’ and ‘labour,’ would continue to impact the Afrodescendant woman, her views of her body, and her capacity to locate this body within rapidly-changing dynamics.
3. Queen vs. Crown vs. ‘Yanqui:’ Black woman’s body, a unit of labour

Previous chapters of this work explore the extent to which the Afrodescendant community accepted the Black woman’s body as a symbol of a people’s survival, evidence of that Afro-centric ideal in which spiritual foci (through asé) enabled transcendence over the physical violence/violation/impediments of institutionalized slavery. Particularly for peoples subjugated under those dominant discourses informed by the myth of race, the asé offered a melding of spirituality and performance which tethered African peoples to their human-ness, enabling survival in societies in which African peoples were—for all intents and purposes—beasts of burden. Convoluting the dynamic to an even greater degree was that the European worldview of African sexuality (and of liaisons between white plantation holders, and their Black, female ‘property’) influenced the fear that “…Bastard, spurious progeny,” would come to inherit significant portions of the British estate (Newman 2011, 61). As Newman (2011, 59) highlights, therefore, the body of the Black woman was especially potent, for the extent to which it represented those tensions of ‘race,’ and class, which would necessitate the engagement of ever-more-extreme hegemonic/legislative measures to racialize the Black woman’s body, on the basis of sex—a distinction of sexual/physical and spiritual which diametrically opposed the Yoruban potential of asé.

To my mind, full revelation of the location of the Black woman within the socio-political and cultural milieu of the LAC must acknowledge the interplay, respectively, of violence and duress. To re-visit my theory of the epistemic split, push-back culture was the fulcrum around which two disparate ideas turned: ‘Black woman’s body as commodity,’ and ‘Black woman’s body as object.’ (As I would have explored in the previous chapter, within the wordplay and double meanings of push-back as a lyrical art, and, indeed, based on the etymological foundation
of ‘object,’ the objectification of the Black woman’s body, within Black culture in the LAC was an elevating function of a people’s cultural life.) In considering the transition of the epistemic split, I consider Guha’s (1997, 62, 102-143) concept of colonial domination, which, to me, represents the exercising of power along a continuum, from violent enforcement through to persuasion: the enslaved woman can be forced; the ostensibly free woman must be persuaded. To my mind, as relates to the enslaved Afrodescendant, the hegemonic tenor occupied a shorter, sharper, more penetrative wavelength: as ‘property,’ the Black woman had no choice but to be coerced/engaged in her own subjugation.

With legal emancipation of African peoples by respective colonial entities, Afrodescendants would find themselves clashing against a hegemonic dynamic which was considerably more subtle, but which continued to yield potent effects, condemning African peoples to penury. Within emancipation, the newly freed would be ‘persuaded’ into complicity with the status quo. Hunger, want, and disease, and the increasing adherence to laissez faire international economic structures would condemn the Afrodescendant woman to greater responsibilities for self and community, within a society even more fiercely convinced of African inferiority, but ever-more equipped to propagate those discourses which ‘persuaded’ Africans to contribute their labour to the advancement of a European elite (Carter 2012, 19-23).

To my view, emancipation maintained the epistemic split, while also effecting a positive shift in the orientation of push-back culture—towards greater lyrical and thematic representation of the Black woman’s ‘body as temple.’ I see this deviation as primarily due to need: as (ostensibly) liberated people, Afrodescendants were conferred responsibility for themselves—for their own survival, for achievement of their own socio-economic advancement. Yet, for people newly released from their status as property, the reality was that these practical concerns
brought on by emancipation set African peoples adrift, a situation made even more profound by the enactment of edict meant to stifle entrepreneurship on the part of African peoples, therefore binding their survival to that of the planter class (Carter 2012, 40-45). Indeed, as Mandle (1996, 19-36) highlights, emancipation made even more absolute the colonial imperative of exploiting LAC resources, in order to enrich the bourgeoisie of Europe.

Given this novel dynamic, push-back culture became even more vital to Black resistance. The art form expressed the reality of a people awash in discourses heralding individual responsibility, even as colonial administrative decision-making processes seemed to enable the communal wealth-building of the privileged (Carter 2012, 23-45). Considering the location of the Afrodescendant woman as oracle, home-maker, and spiritual foundation, emancipation presented challenges which made it necessary for push-back culture to emphasize to an even greater degree, the fundamental-ness of the Black woman’s body as an object, a temple, and an ideal.

As I suggest in this chapter, emancipation freed the Afrodescendant woman from the insular system of plantation economies. Yet, being untethered from the plantation would expose the Afrodescendant woman to the machinations of colonial markets which would increasingly define her according to the colonizers’ aspirations for economic competitiveness, at global level. This happenstance I view as the colonialize-ing of the Black woman’s body, as an agent of labour. The physical entity which was formerly cloistered, engaging in production on behalf of individual plantation owners would now be impacted upon by more expansive colonial efforts, defined by the promise of trade between respective European territories (Carter 2012, 44-45). From this perspective, within those dominant discourses informed by a capitalist structures, the body of the Afrodescendant woman would come to be defined as a unit of work which was
colonial-ized—the product of historic circumstances which focused on the accumulation of wealth on behalf of European gentry.

I consider that, post-emancipation, push-back culture shifted in composition, and in content, becoming more explicit in emphasizing the Black woman’s body as a temple. Especially from the latter standpoint, the art form provided a counterweight to the impact of capitalist market structures which were increasingly diffused, increasingly impact-ful, and which increasingly absolved the State of responsibility for the welfare of poorer citizens (Carter 2012, 44). Within these milieux, the public sector would become dis-engaged from ensuring the education, and health and well-being of members of the populace, while maintaining focus on maintaining the privileges of an elite group. Granted, the historic socio-political location of the Afrodescendant woman deflated the concept of ‘civic involvement.’ Those dominant discourses which ensured that the Afrodescendant would be defined, initially, as a unit of work—as property—further imposed upon that (racialized) body the class-based definitions of the extent to which, manner in which, and purposes for which that body could be engaged in labour.

At the origin of the African woman’s location in the territories of Latin America and the Caribbean is the historic reality that her body was a means of production/labour, on behalf of the ruling classes. This happenstance is starkly borne out by the extent to which the Afrodescendant woman’s body was valued according to the needs of agricultural production in the LAC region: during slavery, and under the plantation economy, it was considered more economical to purchase an African body than it was to commit resources to the rearing of a Black child; post-emancipation, the need for cheap labour converted the reproductive capacities of the Afrodescendant woman’s body into an economic product, as a result of which legislative and administrative instruments were designed to confine the Black woman’s work to the home—id
est, giving birth to, and rearing the next generation of labour (Cross and Heuman 1988, 142-145).

To my view, therefore, the status of LAC territories as colonial agents of production within *laissez faire*, inter-national economic systems, relegated the body of the Black woman to a colonial-ized unit of work, defining her according to particular discursive milieux. Push-back culture provided the greatest resistance to these discourses, employing a cultural form to exposing, and criticizing class-based oppression, and those injustices made more profound in being convoluted by the myth of race. Indeed, as artiste ‘Chinee’ Patrick Jones inveighed in rendition, “We are ruled with the iron hand./ Britain boasts of democracy,…But British colonists have been ruled/In perpetual misery (Campbell 1988, 20).”

During centuries of enslavement, push-back culture enabled the *asé* of African peoples, maintaining a balance which communicated the tenuousness engendered in disparate views of the bodies of enslaved Black women. Post-slavery, however, the reality of enslavement was converted into the insidious-ness of emancipation—with all the accompanying socio-political and legislative deceptions, ensuring the continued marginalization of African peoples, and the *racialize*-ing of the body of the woman Afrodescendant (Carter 2012, 44-45; Mandle 1996, 19-28). As a result of this sea-change, the messages embedded within, the themes covered through, and the tempo and metre of push-back renditions would have to adapt, to better emphasize the Black woman’s body as temple, within a system even more adept at concealing the extent to which this body would be maintained, within capitalism, as a commodity.

The emergence of the Black woman from an enslaved ‘entity,’ to status as a ‘freewoman’ would encompass alteration in the mechanisms under which her body was controlled, and
through which her body would be defined as an agent of work. During the period of enslavement the Black woman’s body would be a commodity priced according to its contribution to the economy of individual plantations, and their owners. With the emancipation of African peoples in the region of Latin America and the Caribbean, the Black woman’s body would be similarly engaged, but the strategies for accomplishing the desired ends would change. Whereas slavery presented the obligation for violent coercion of African labourers, emancipation would necessitate the engagement of discourses, to ensure a peoples coercion into their continued enslavement.

The powers of push-back culture—as subversive agent, and as medium of information—would become even more necessary to the survival of Afrodescendants. Through push-back cultures, Black women of the LAC region would be apprised of their location, within socio-political and economic dynamics which would continue to limit social mobility on the basis of ‘race.’ Yet, it would be in eschewing the morals of the bourgeoisie that the Afrodescendant woman would find sufficient latitude to define, explore, and expose her sexuality on her terms and according to the perspectives of her own people (Davis, 46). As such, push-back culture would continue to inform the core of Black resistance.

Pearse (1956, 260) documents the post-emancipation emergence of more ribald push-back lyrics, a happenstance which, to my mind, represents artistes’ reveling in the newfound freedom to expound upon the Black female body as a sexual object. (In this instance, I again emphasize ‘object,’ to qualify that ideal under which Afrodescendants have the right to define their sexuality according to their own asé, on their own terms, rather than yielding to those stereotypes, myths, and restrictions which are inherent to racialize-ing the Black woman’s body.) By the same token, the re-placing of push-back lyrics, to more closely abut exploration of the
Black woman’s ‘body as temple,’ while emphasizing that body physical/sexual/carnal fullness caused a resurgence in colonial administrative efforts to proscribe the art-form, to cite an 1884 Peace Preservation Ordinance which made illegal, firstly, the gathering of a number of persons and the engaging of individuals in any form of dancing, revelry, and drumming (Campbell 1988, 15-17).

As Marx’ (2004, 221) theories emphasize, and as I surmise, emancipation of enslaved African peoples made even more vital the relationship between the State as proxy of the bourgeoisie, and members of the privileged classes who viewed the status quo as integral to their very survival. Further, ‘survival’ of the privileged, to my view, is synonymous with their accumulation of capital, and of the socio-political currency which accrued from wealth. Given the subversive nature of push-back culture, in its mode as an anti-capitalist agent emphasizing the value of the Black woman’s body above and beyond being exploited as an agent of work, colonial administrators had no choice, save to tamp down push-back culture, while exposing/popularizing/increasing acceptance of those discourses which sought to minimize the art form as a seditious agent (Guilbault 2005, 144-152).

A seminal work of LAC scholarship, presented by Best (1976), in The Choice of Technology Appropriate to Caribbean Countries emphasizes the inextricable link between culture/history, technology, and our very conceptualizing of modes of development/under-development. The unfortunate reality is that history (based on the myth of race), unsustainable socio-political structures (based on provision of forced, free labour by enslaved African peoples), and inequitable economic policy (emphasizing depredation of LAC resources in order to enrich European countries) relegated the territories of the region to under-developed status. Indeed, Carter (2012, 23-42) emphasizes those economic and trade policies instituted by European
colonial powers, which resulted in the disenfranchisement of Afrodescendants, further limiting the capacity of Black citizens to gain sufficient traction to achieve any significant measure of economic independence. Within such hostile environments, push-back culture would form the core of populist movements, and would therefore be a definitive threat to the privileged position of the region’s elite (Campbell 1988, 20; Warner and Nascimento 2007, 156-159).

The colonial powers of the LAC always possessed some awareness of the push-back culture as central to Black existence/transcendence/actualization. However, to my mind, that ‘awareness,’ was not synonymous with ‘understanding.’ Evidently, awareness of the art form on the part of LAC administrators, precluded understanding the power of push-back culture. The Afro-centric origins of push-back culture enabled a forum for exploring and exposing the graveness of the socio-political reality, through the levity of the artistic/performative. By the same token, the dominant classes in the LAC have always either viewed push-back culture with benign tolerance, or else have met the art-form with the strong arm of violent suppression. Post-emancipation, the respective approaches would combine: control via legislative proscription, harsh suppression through the prosecution of artistes, and the martial interruption of popular celebration (Campbell 1988, 14-15).

Indeed, on the Leeward Island of Antigua, benna artiste, John Quarkoo was convicted of inciting public revolt. His crime? Seeking to reveal the deceptions/exploitations which accompanied colonial attempts to provide vocational training for the Afrodescendent women of the region (Smith and Smith 1986, 97). As Quarkoo’s lyrics communicated, ‘Me sen’ me daughter a seminary./ She come back wid a big belly.’ A girl entrusted to the care of the laity, for the purpose of formal education, would find herself puffed up, not with knowledge, but with the fruit of an unplanned pregnancy. The reality exposed by Quarkoo, to my mind, provides one of
the earliest post-emancipation examples of the extent to which colonialism would seek to define
the Black woman’s body as an agent of ‘work,’ with such work being defined according to
colonial agents’ moulding of that body—as labourer, enabler, scapegoat, or sexual fetish.

In terms of the Black woman’s body being identified primarily as an entity of work, the
post-emancipation period would even more ferociously pit the idea of ‘Black woman as object,’
against that of ‘Black woman as commodity,’ especially as the latter would become a more subtle
exercise in employing discursive mechanisms to control the work undertaken by Black women,
thereby exercising mandate over the Afrodescendant’s body (Foucault 2003, 258-261). Post-
emancipation, push-back culture would become even more central to resisting the depredation of
the European elite—colonial agents, functionaries of the bourgeoisie, and, ultimately, proponents
of the market structure of capitalism and all its ideals. Within such environments, push-back
culture provided the only forum for declaring the regalness of the Black woman, declaring her
body as sanctified. Further, we cannot discount the potency of the art form as a medium for
ensuring Afro-centric oral traditions, in environments which proscribed Black access to literary
text.

During the centuries-long period of institutionalized slavery, the literacy of African
peoples was denounced. Teaching a Black person to read was indictable. Any Afrodescendant
even suspected of being literate would be subject to extreme, inhumane, vicious violations of her
physical self. This reality, to my mind, further establishes the essential-ness of push-back culture
as a substitute for the written word. The art form emphasized African oral tradition and custom,
and provided an effective medium for popular engagement, education, and resistance. As I
emphasize throughout ‘Body (Im)potent,’ the transition of African peoples from enslaved bodies
to freed (wo)men would transform the focus of African existence in the LAC: from tacit
resistance, emphasizing asé as a mechanism for surviving physical violation, into the imperative of observing and acting upon and within dynamics of power which increasingly relied on discourse. Given a history which denied Black peoples access to the written word, it was the lyricism, the spirit, the asé of push-back culture which fostered a discursive structure founded by—and exclusively for—Afrodescendants.

Whereas formal education of the Black woman during slavery was a virtual impossibility, post-emancipation, and through to the latter day, I emphasize the content of learning as an outcome of the labour needs of particular markets (Standing 2011, 68-69). In seeking a definitive account of the activities which constitute ‘work,’ I accept Sullivan’s (2002, 144-147) declaration that the concept of work as labour-in-exchange-for-a-wage emerged in the mid-nineteenth century, prior to which point engaging in physical labour was an explicit duty of members of lower socio-economic strata. The elite only engaged in such (non-physical) work as enabled them to utilize their leisure time in pleasurable pursuits. Given this perspective, I maintain that the Black woman’s body, as a unit of ‘work’ has been, and continues to be defined according to prevailing economic need, driven primarily by a system in which dominant discourses continue to synonimize ‘education,’ and ‘work,’ moreso for persons whose (racialized) bodies continue to locate them at the peripheries of financial wealth, and political influence (Griffin Cohen 2007, 21-22).

Griffin Cohen (2007, 22) highlights the extent to which globalization superimposes inter-national dynamics on the local realities of respective states. Within her theory considering power as a function of (geographic) location—whether citizens reside in a State at the core of international importance, or within the (semi-)peripheries—it occurs to me that, for the Afrodescendant, there is a double disadvantage: from a global perspective, LAC territories are
historically, and economically placed at the peripheries, as providers of those (cheap) raw materials necessary for production. Considering the dynamics within respective LAC states, it is the Black woman who is most likely to be a peripheral actor. As a result, the work in which the Black woman’s body must be engaged will be determined according to the needs of the more powerful parties at the core of the dynamic. As such, even within the attempts at equity undertaken by multilateral agencies, the prerogatives of growth and development seemingly relegate the Afrodescendant to the margins (Standing 2011, 26-35).

Interestingly, the emergence of globalization has been accompanied by the universalizing of neo-liberal, Western approaches to development (Bakker and Gill 2003, 3-7). As I highlight in subsequent chapters, the discursive tenor directed towards the Afrodescendent woman would seek to engage her as a party to the concepts of ‘democracy,’ ‘liberty,’ and ‘nationhood,’ all the while maintaining the idea of the Black woman’s body as an agent of work, on behalf of the elite. With the shifting of global political influences from European colonial powers to that of American imperialism, push-back culture would itself come under the pressures of capitalist markets, even as the subversive thrust of the art form would remain central.

The pressures of this dynamic would cause a negative shift in push-back culture, toward the idea of Black woman’s body as a commodity. (I suggest, further, that this happenstance is a virtually inevitable result of the ‘mainstreaming’ of the push-back artiste.) As a result of this alteration in the tone of the art-form, the Black community would have to coalesce even more resolutely around the concept of the Black woman’s body, within the Afro-centric sense of that body as a source of collective (re-) birth. Given this reality, I have to agree with Potter (2004, 200-201) and his colleagues that the collective perspectives of Rastafarianism and pan-Africanism emerged as a result of the socio-political pressures exerted by shifting global
dynamics. I would add, further, that the founding of such cultural touchstones would continue to present a counterweight to the oppressions of capitalism, and would continue to create that centre of resistance on which the Afrodescendant woman relies to this day.

‘Yanqui’ takeover, and the Afrodescendant’s body

As I suggest in this work, the struggle for the Black woman’s body, throughout Latin America and the Caribbean, has been a product of shifting concepts—based initially on the artefact of ‘race’ which would, itself, inform expectations of the Black woman’s body as a unit of labour, during slavery. To my view, post-emancipation, and through the military and political emergence of the United States of America as a global power, the mid-twentieth century yielded a change in the concept of the Black woman’s body. The alteration resulted in a conversion of the Afrodescendant woman from a unit of labour to one of production, by which I mean the Black woman would come to embody an agent in which dominant ideals could be nested, and through which they could be promoted. (This idea brings to mind Baudrillard’s (1998, 85) theories emphasizing the more insidious forms of influence exerted by the elite: control through discursive coercion, rather than via physical constraint.) As it was, the most dominant ideal which would emerge from this period of history was the universal-izing of all things American, and the expansion of American expectation (dare I say ‘entitlement’) into the consciousness of nations throughout the world.

Indeed, the LAC region would come under the sway of a new form of imperialism—American imperialism—that religion of consumerism presented as the re-affirmation of democratic ideals (Schwarzkopf and Gries 2010, 3-38). Whereas the respective milieux of slaveholding societies, and, subsequently, LAC colonial territories defined the Afrodescendant
woman’s body as a unit of labour necessary to those agricultural industries on which enrichment of Empire depended, the American national psyche would re-conceptualize the Black woman’s body as a unit through which to promote those hegemonic discourses which suggested ‘consumption,’ as synonymous with ‘liberty, and democracy’ (Schwarzkopf and Gries 2010, 11-30). Within those discourses made predominant during the Second World War, the utility of Afrodescendant woman (within an increasingly American-ized system of capitalism) was the product of two primary factors: firstly, ongoing racialize-ing of the Black woman’s body; secondly, the reality of the Afrodescendant woman as resident of a geographic region which, itself, existed only to satisfy the material needs of respective Empires. Moreno (2013, 70-77) emphasizes the extent to which the American War Effort against Nazism was a battle of discourses, of ideals, of covert emphasis on the American way as the pure-est pursuit of universal human-rights imperatives—all within a system aimed at marketing consumer goods.

In an approach which would dovetail the marketing efforts of Ernest Dichter, the ‘Father of Motivation Research,’ American imperialism managed to instill the idea of consumption as counterweight to the threat of draconian, totalitarian society; consumption as apposite to liberty (Sorgo 2010, 75-90). The success of employing discursive mechanisms as a strategy for nation building—or, indeed, nation branding—would continue to impact the struggle for the Afrodescendant woman’s body, especially for the extent to which such a racialized body would continue to be employed as a unit with which to satisfy imperial need—for material products, services, and, perhaps most importantly, for popular acceptance of those ideals promoted by the elite (Aronczyk 2012, 38).

Considering the Afrodescendant woman’s body as physical evidence of a struggle taking place within diverse terrains—socio-historical, economic, cultural and psychological—and
keeping in mind my concept of the epistemic split which enables each Black woman to navigate and reconcile entirely disparate definitions of herself, I insist that push-back culture continues to be a subversive agent, albeit a malleable one. In acknowledging that the art form occasionally contributes to the racializing of the Afrodescendant woman’s body, I emphasize that push-back culture is a pliable art-form, its re-formation/transition subject to a plethora of influences: the perspective of all participants, to include performer(s) and witness(es); socio-historic influences; the venues in which performances are presented; and those compromises tolerated by push-back artistes who yield to the ‘mainstream.’ Indeed, as Eldridge (2007, 256-259) highlights, the American entertainment industry of the mid-1950s applied very deliberate pressure, attempting to mould the art form of calypso to fit the socio-political, commercial, and psychological needs of American society.

To my mind, post-World War II, all peoples of the LAC would experience a phenomenon already familiar to the Afrodescendant woman—that the necessity of eking out an existence in a space between two disparate ideals, one dominant, one a point of resistance. With the emergence of the United States of America as a global force, LAC territories would have to reconcile their post-colonial existences with the reality of a powerful nation adept at the art of invention. In this chapter, I explore the extent to which American-ization influenced the transition of push-back culture towards typifying the Black woman’s body as a commodity.

I consider the ascent of the United States as the product of a vacuum. Formerly powerful European empires were financially, structurally, and idealistically undone by the Second World War, and it would be the young nation of America which would expand to fill the void. The resulting imperialism was so subtle that it belied a reality in which the standards of democracy, individual liberty were, in fact, friable features of a nation increasingly focused on production—
of ideals, of images, of goods and services, and, ultimately, of capital. Indeed, Moreno (2013, 77) highlights a plethora of instances in which American foreign policy—anti-Nazi sentiment during World War II—was presented subliminally in advertising any number of consumer products. To my mind, such instances mark the birth of that new, American imperialism in which persuasion surpassed coercion, as a method of achieving popular co-operation (Guha 1997, 102-103).

I apply the following postulations to examining the impact of American imperialism on the Afrodescendant reality:

i. That increasing American socio-political, economic and cultural influence caused a negative shift in the content and context of push-back culture, the result of pressure to join the ‘mainstream.’

ii. That promotion of the American ideal necessitated—and, indeed, effected—greater reliance on discursive strategies to promote American ideals, within multilateral discourses focused on growth and development.

iii. That American military capacity presented tacit (and, occasionally, very overt) influence over socio-political, cultural, and economic transitions in the LAC region.

To my mind, it is no coincidence that World War II marked increasing awareness of push-back culture on the part of American consumers, nor is it coincidence that this reality yielded push-back lyrics increasingly focused on sexualized representations of the bodies of the Afrodescendant woman. Rather than ‘coincidence,’ these phenomena represent a ‘confluence—’ of American military power, of an expanding American economy, of print and electric
technologies which enabled the publicizing (and universalizing) of American ideals. As Sorgo (2010, 76-87) highlights, the genius of American emergence, post-World War II, was the alacrity with which public-sector administrators, and international diplomats were able to unify around discourses which emphasized the American market system (capitalism), and American culture (consumerism) as a bastion against the evils intended by the defunct Third Reich. The concept of mass consumerism as the pursuit of freedom would gain global dominance.

Indeed, as Jancovich (2006, 70-71) highlights, the 1950s ushered in a period of industrial production which accommodated mass consumption, to the extent that consumer goods would be readily available to any individual willing/able to make purchase. To my mind, this happenstance altered global social dynamics, such that the ability to purchase/consume particular items supplanted ‘circumstance of birth,’ as determinant of social mobility/status. Within such milieux, it would be easy for any Afrodescendant woman to think herself beyond the epistemic split, able to locate her body in a more egalitarian social space. However, I maintain that centuries of free labour provided by Black bodies enabled subsequent eras of mass production, while cementing those disparities of power which threaten the Black condition. Given these origins, I consider it virtually impossible for the Afrodescendant woman—she possessing a racialized body—to outmanoeuvre the epistemic split.

Considering Potts’ (2006, 156) theory that mass production heralded a symbolic economy, in which each individual’s social worth was ascribed according to her possessing particular types of consumer goods, it occurs to me that the Afrodescendant woman’s body would become even more subject to an epistemic split. After all, the American marketing machinery was so efficient as to obscure the reality of centuries-long oppression of African peoples. Instead, dominant discourses would emphasize liberalism, individual capacity, self-reliance, ‘pulling oneself up by
the bootstraps.’ The hypocrisy of these declarations was laid bare by those push-back artistes who exposed the extent to which the Black woman’s body would continue to be fodder within an imperialistic system of production. After all, as Lord Invader would insist in 1943’s ‘Rum and Coca Cola,’ the presence of American military staff in the LAC would result in the prostituting—literal and figurative—of the Afrodescendant woman (Funk 2007, 57-75).

In mapping the emergence of push-back culture in the LAC region, I emphasize the transition of the art form, from the lyrical subtlety engaged during the era of enslavement, and the ribald compositions which would emerge, subsequent to the emancipation of Afrodescendants. Most noteworthy is the reality that enslavement fomented the very birth of push-back culture. At its nascence, push-back culture was located at the exact centre of the axis representing the epistemic split, being that balance between Afro-centric awareness, and those oppressive Euro-centric views of African bodies. As a fulcrum, push-back culture balanced respective impression of the Black woman’s body: ‘Body = Commodity,’ ‘Body = Temple.’ As Shaw (2007, 189-203) highlights, the earliest iterations of push-back culture invoked the spirits of resistance, mockery, and celebration: resisting the dominance of slaveholding through the passing of information and the organizing of rebellion; mockery of the slaveholders, with clever lyrical turn which exposed the corruption of societies built from African bodies. Indeed, push-back culture provided the only format for celebrating a Black womanhood which was largely denigrated within dominant ideals.

The emancipation of African peoples from slavery impacted push-back culture to considerable degree. The gravity of being released from servitude, of being reprieved from ‘ownership’ by other human beings presented a psychic shift in the cultural orientation of Afrodescendants. This newfound sense of freedom imbued some artistes with sufficient temerity
to openly criticize dominant social hierarchies. (As alluded to earlier, some of these push-back performers would be prosecuted for the boldness of their lyrics, deemed by authorities as inciting riot in some cases, and as licentious and offensive in others.) As such, emancipation shifted push-back culture *towards* the concept of the Black woman’s body as a temple. Indeed, I consider that LAC territories were exposed to a kinetic socio-political milieu which would ultimately impact push-back culture.

Of the number of statutory choices confronting political leaders in Latin America and the Caribbean—federated entities under colonial administration; complete independence from colonial rule; stark anti-colonialism; pan-Africanism—I believe that each choice was coloured by the physical proximity, and acknowledged global impact of the United States of America. Moreover, each choice was a product of need—financial need on the part of those impecunious LAC territories which would come to depend on American largesse. (Taffet 2007, 48-51). As Funk (2007, 60-67) highlights, push-back culture would continue to be a bellwether of socio-political circumstances. Mid-twentieth century calypso lyrics ran the gamut from those extolling the British Royal Family (‘Coronation of Queen Elizabeth,’ rendered from Roaring Lion), to Lord Kitchener’s pan-Africanist sentiments expressed in considering the ‘Birth of Ghana,’ to the Growling Tiger’s admonishing the region to adhere to the American promise of equality and democracy, in ‘Abraham Lincoln Speech at Gettysburg (Funk 2007, 67).’

Post-World War II, there was an understandable attraction to the (ostensibly) democratic ideals of the United States of America. In contrast with the restrictions, stratifications, and prejudices of respective European states, which emphasized nobility of birth as the basis for social advancement, the emerging American nation promoted the inherent equality of all Man—a value which proved appealing to even the most intractable push-back artistes. To my mind,
however, the irony was that the true American ideal—capitalism—would subsume all other considerations, such that even push-back culture, a bastion of Afrodescendant resistance, would be depredated by the pursuit of capital.

Despite all declarations to the contrary, and as Chomsky (2002, 13-18) would remind us, American has been built on a class-based social structure, in which the elite were those with sufficient influence to determine, design, and benefit from such popular consent as they themselves managed to manufacture. Within such milieus, push-back culture—and its representation of the Afrodescendant woman’s body—would inevitably become simply another feature in the Americanized machinery of production. As a result, it was this new imperialism which resulted in the negative shift of push-back culture, to accommodate the idea of Black Woman’s body as a commodity.

As I see it, push-back culture has enabled the linking of distinct perspectives, facilitating a people’s capacity to find a stable substrate, within shifting arenas. In this regard, the art form can be viewed from a plethora of facets, each of which, to my mind, emphasizes push-back as a testament of the communal (African) experience (Saunders 2007, 14-23). In communicating the impact of American imperialism on the daily lives of LAC residents, it is ‘Jean and Dinah,’ rendered by the Mighty Sparrow, Calypso King of the World, which most thoroughly explores the socio-economic dynamic occasioned by American presence in the region. (As I consider later in this work, the physical plant of military bases, such as the Charguaramas, Trinidad facility under contention in Sparrow’s calypso, further entrenches American ideals, thus effecting change—on push-back culture, and on the expectations imposed upon Afrodescendant women’s bodies, as agents of production.)
For me, ‘Jean and Dinah’ is outstanding, firstly, for its international popularity, in a world which had witnessed the end of the Second World War just one decade prior. Yet, I daresay that, in a manner typical of push-back culture as an esoteric form of resistance, the significance of the piece is more greatly weighted for those persons whose lives presented ‘Jean and Dinah,’ as a testament rather than mere entertainment. The rendition presents the Afrodescendant woman’s body as an agent of politics—moreover sexual politics—even as it explores the new socio-economies arising from American influence (internationally), and American policy specifically with regard to the LAC, and the interactions of power occasioned/evidenced by the personal interaction between Americans—members of the military and their family, base administrators and managers—and LAC locals, some employed as civilian staff on American bases.

The very content of ‘Jean and Dinah,’ is suggestive of the shift in push-back orientation toward greater, explicit representation of the Afrodescendant woman’s body as a marketable entity. Further, the calypso introduces those themes which emphasize the Black woman’s body as a component of the American ideal of production: tolerating the sometimes-contentious physical presence of the United States of America, while remaining beholden to those dominant capitalist ideals, to wit, the promotion of the individual’s freedom to consume—even as one’s body is, itself, fodder for such consumption (Jagodzinski 2010, 23-40). The Monarch, Mighty Sparrow references the physical potential of the Afrodescendant woman (‘posing’), her location (‘on the corner’), allusion to the trade of sex-for-money (‘bet you that is something they selling’) to highlight the economic dependency which had overtaken LAC territories, within bilateral relationships with the United States of America.

Unfortunately, American declarations of equality did not deem as inherently ‘equal,’ the potential of the Afrodescendant woman as full participant in a new global socio-economic and
political order which would herald the self-actualization of peoples of African descent. Indeed, as Livingstone (2009, 218-220) highlights, the melding of American foreign policy, industry, grassroots relationships, all seemed to conclude with caricature of the women of the LAC region—according to American expectations, and based on the placing of (Afrodescendant) women’s bodies as elements within the sphere of American achievement. I continue to insist that the thrust of American ‘achievement’ is ostentation—in the production and the consumption of tangible, and intangible items. Moreover, in a Marxist sense, it is the bourgeoisie who possess sufficient resources—material, and financial—to promote a consumption-production dynamic aimed at the accumulation of capital (Marx 2004, 221).

Whereas ‘Jean and Dinah’ represents, to my mind, the successful union of light entertainment, and profound socio-political commentary, Moreno (2013, 70-79) documents efforts to impose American marketing techniques on the artistic product and local talent of LAC citizens in American propaganda projects. The Office of Inter-American Affairs (OIAA) obligated American companies to produce advertisements which emphasized an American ideal in which “…any person, from any walk of life, of any race, creed, or religion could rise to unlimited heights through his own initiative and merit (Moreno 2013, 73).” However, the veracity of such declarations were belied by a structure under which American policy regarding Latin America and the Caribbean classified the region primarily as a resource for production—for expansion of American presence (via the construction of military bases); promotion of American political philosophies (via support for the overthrow of ostensibly ‘undemocratic’ governments—even those democratically elected by the populace); of those multi-lateral economic and financial arrangements beneficial to American corporate interests (Kumar and Sharma 2003, 23-39).
Ironically, push-back culture, with its foundation in African artistry would become a product of cultural change, American style. The nudging of push-back expression toward greater declaration of the Black Woman’s body as a commodity resulted from the depredations of an American music industry intent on promoting American perspectives of ‘race.’ As Eldridge (2007, 258-260) emphasizes, in the hands of American music producers, push-back culture would shift from a medium of resistance into a mode of expression which happened to accommodate the American impression of ‘island people.’ Primary among such expectations was the idea of sex, sexuality, and licentiousness as being housed in Black bodies. Indeed the intent of American music producers was to (re-)create push-back culture as a conduit for dominant ideals, and a ballast for the status quo. As a medium, push-back was perceived of as a control-able, pliable, use-able alternative to the perceived dissension fomented by American rock. Further, within the context of American race relations, push-back artistes, with their LAC origins, presented consumers a more palatable/tolerable entertainment alternative to those Black American artistes, citizens who had been racialized in their own land, and who would be, perhaps, less tractable as artistic products.

Interestingly, Guilbault (2005, 145-151) emphasizes the mid-twentieth century impact of the American mindset on push-back culture. Not only did the changing socio-political dynamic of American imperialism introduce a new subject into the push-back repertoire, but the art form would also face pressure to court the American ‘mainstream.’ Yet, as I explore in the final chapter of ‘Body (Im)potent,’ the majority of instances of push-back yielding to the ‘mainstream’ has resulted in an altered product, one closer to the sources of commercial success, but more distant from that Afro-centric core of resistance on which push-back was founded. Further, with
‘mainstream’ presence comes a greater likelihood of propagating those stereotypical impressions of the Black woman’s body, according to (misinformed) dominant ideals.

Pearse (1956, 256-260) highlights that early push-back milieux incorporated an aura of mysticism. In a practice which would be reminiscent of the West African concept of the asé explored Chapter 2, nineteenth century push-back lyrics referenced a number of spiritual/shamanistic subjects. The history of Bodicea, a nineteenth-century anarchist who, to my view, represents the most potent elements of the location of the Afrodescendant woman’s body within the push-back genre: intractability, resistance, surrender to the spiritual in order to overcome the violations of the physical. Yet, with the emergence of American imperialism, push-back culture would drift from these roots, to become an avenue of entertainment.

Under that inevitable American tendency to convert every phenomenon into a product, LAC artistes would periodically become subject to attempts to re-create the ‘Belafonte Boom’ (Eldridge 2007, 260-263). As I see it, such attempts facilitate uni-dimensional ideas of the socio-political location of the Afrodescendant woman’s body—as a receptacle for American prejudices which continue to associate this body with racialized ideas of licentiousness, gross physicality, and a greater capacity for labour than or intellect. Considering Shaw’s (2007, 190-191) exploration of the Black woman’s body as a site of ritual, within the arena of push-back and carnival culture, I consider that American imperialism has stimulated a transition such that push-back culture—and those racialized bodies with which it is associated—continues to run the risk of becoming untethered from its seditious roots. As I explore in the following chapter, the potency of push-back culture faces an even more significant threat—the insidiousness of those multilateral discourses which qualify, rather than challenge, the status quo.
4. Locate-ing the Black woman's body in ‘post-racial’ diss-course

In *The Choice of Technology Appropriate to Caribbean Countries*, scholar Lloyd Best (1976) explores the multiple historical realities which continue to plague the peoples of the LAC. Best emphasizes the root of those challenges as: a colonial dynamic in which the territories were managed as a *source*—of labour, raw materials, and revenue—intended for enrichment of the (European) elite. As a result, there would be no financial investment in the region, no plans for assuring long-term development, and, most significantly, no establishment of centres of acadaeme designed specifically to accommodate the needs of the region’s laboring class. More recent works expand on Best’s treatise, to highlight the extent to which the post-World War II global economic discourse was driven by the opinions of experts—most, citizens of developed nations charged with managing the bureaucracies of under-developed states. Indeed, Rojas and Morales (2013, 130-134) highlight this phenomenon as a re-presenting of colonialist milieux, in which the more ‘capable’ colonizers wrest responsibility from the ‘less able,’ colonized masses. As I emphasize, discursive structures—even those employed by the most magnanimous multilateral agencies—continue to emphasize policies which reiterate, and, in fact, support, global disparities of power.

In this chapter, I consider the extent to which labour-power continues to be envisioned as the only basis on which LAC territories can integrate into global markets. Indeed, as relates to the most marginalized peoples within the LAC—a group comprising the region’s Afrodescendants—multilateral discourses emphasizing growth and development continue to revisit the impression of Afrodescendant bodies as beneficial only for the physical labour which they are expected to exercise. (In contrast, the technical, and intellectual capacity required for
development of electronics industries, for example, is promoted in dominant discourse as being the ambit of extra-LAC nations.) To my view, the emphasis on physical labour as the primary capacity of LAC citizens is the very propagation of those ideas founded on the myth of race.

Indeed, as Mandle (1996, 28) documents, the British Colonial Office, in particular, operated from the premise that small farmers (a class primarily of African descent) were incapable of advancing their trade beyond the basic requirements of planting, nurturing and harvesting crops. As a result, there was no long-term investment in such infrastructure and physical plant as would enable LAC territories to effectively pursue growth and development, post-colonialism. As I suggest in this chapter, historic reality continues to evidence itself in those multi-lateral discourses which base the context of LAC economic growth on the concept of the bodies of the region’s most oppressed group—its Afrodescendants.

In exploring the function of ‘work,’ id est, physical labour in exchange for remuneration, Sullivan (2002, 144-145) outlines that, prior to the Industrial Revolution (and, I daresay, thereafter), the elite did not participate in wage-labour. Rather, any physical activity considered ‘work’ was undertaken of one’s own volition, being primarily intellectual and/or contemplative in nature. Within such societies, it was the marginalized, the poor, the destitute, members of the lower classes who were relegated to wage-labour. In outlining economic and behaviourist theories of work, Sullivan further suggests two imperatives of work, under the realities of globalization: i. establishment of a formal arrangement between employer and employee, and ii. continued reinforcement of such agreements through the rewarding of employees by employers. (As I suggest, however, these mandates are over-arched by the reality that globalization creates environments in which power, ultimately, is the domain of those sufficiently privileged to establish the terms of any agreement(s).)
Within the framing of LAC-focused multilateral agreements, participation in the labour force is touted as a central feature of any prospect for socio-economic advancement of LAC territories, a primary means of enhancing Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (Paes de Barros, Ferreira, Molinas Vega, and Saavedra Chanduvi 2009, 120-121). However, it must be noted that even the employment of GDP as an ostensibly objective socio-economic indicator, belies those inter-national power disparities, and inequities which determined how economic performance would be measured. As Fioramonti (2013, 9-11) highlights, global acceptance of GDP as a key metric of State performance was a direct outcome of America’s need to influence market outlooks, subsequent to the deleterious impact of the 1930s’ Great Depression. As such, a more pellucid impression of multilateral institutions’ reliance on GDP must involve acknowledging the current state of global economic metrics as re-presenting of colonial impressions of those factors which are financially valuable (labour, products, arms and armaments), while ignoring those features of human existence which are not measurable, but which are nonetheless imperative to a dignified existence (tranquility, freedom, stability) (Stiglitz, Sen, and Fitoussi 2013, 12-15).

In highlighting the process of quantifying economic performance, and in framing this consideration as a product of the (in)equities impacting the existence of citizens of the developing world, Holt (2009, 146-148) emphasizes that current market assessments emphasize utility, while abandoning sustainability. To the author’s perspective, State agents, and corporate stakeholders should enhance the citizens’ capacity to be educated, trained, informed participants in the labour force—a concept which I interpret as enhancing the agency of each labourer. Yet, I maintain the view that the Afrodescendant woman’s capacity to engage in globalized markets as an agent/stakeholder continues to be impeded by historic realities which subsume the LAC under
the economic requirements of the colonizers. Those realities evidence themselves, today, in incidents of inequity and marginalization, made all the more challenging by a phenomenon which Rojas and Morales (2013, 131) qualify as the ‘invention of development,’ under which, post-World War II, the globe was divided between ‘developed’ and ‘under-developed,’ without acknowledgement that depredation of the latter enabled the success of the former. As I see it, the reality of the ‘invention of development’ lends a lie to any multilateral proposals for economic growth, and social development ceteris paribus, for within the epistemic context of any Afrodescendant woman, social inequity is the true, but unacknowledged standard.

‘Queen vs. The Word: Locate-ing the Black Woman’s Body in Discourse,’ explores my theory that, “Multilateral discourses focused on growth and development of LAC territories posit labour-power as fundamental to advancement of the region.” In qualifying this proposition, I employ Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), that group of linguistic mechanisms which maintains language as a mechanism for reinforcing extant power imbalances within any society (Wodak and Meyer 200, 20-24). A number of theorists emphasize that application of CDA must consider that plethora of socio-political, and historic realities which distinguish influential social groups from those who have been marginalized. Indeed, as concerns those circumstances which continue to impact the location of the Afrodescendant woman’s body that holistic, deictic context is imperative to a critical exploration.

At this juncture, I should highlight my deliberate employment of the verb ‘to locate,’ in the title of this chapter. By so doing, I emphasize a discursive dynamic in which the Black woman’s body is a passive instrument within a dominant milieu emphasizing accumulation of capital. Further, the Black woman’s body is acted upon (‘locate-ëd’) by the elite. Within this sphere, the Afrodescendant woman is insufficiently empowered to act as an autonomous agent.
Hers is not the adjectival state of *be-ing* located. Rather, within global economic milieux, in which the accumulation of capital is paramount, the body of the Afrodescendant woman is acted upon, is placed/*locate-*ëd by others, according the market need and/or the prevailing views of those experts charged with ensuring that the LAC region is sufficiently advanced to contribute to the global economy—a happenstance which will inevitably benefit the privileged.

Over the last generation, a number of LAC territories have found themselves engaged in multilateral arrangements, with the stated aim of advancing the region’s capacity to engage in globalized markets. The resulting projects have sought to advance technical expertise within the region, and to develop a base of financial resources with which to improve the physical plant, and re-orient formal education to better prepare citizens for the job market. (The reality of globalism, however, is one in which capital is fully mobile, while the efforts of the State are engaged to restrict the movement of labour (Jha 2006, 85-86). As such, the milieux of globalism most greatly benefit those co-operations with a presence in disparate international locations.) From the perspective of LAC citizens, multilateral arrangements are entered into due to desperation. Yet, rather than providing relief, accession results in even greater suffering on the part of the region’s most marginalized peoples.

Indeed, the documentary *Life and Debt* highlights the socio-economic decline, and political furor occasioned by the multilateral agreement framed by the International Monetary Fund, and entered into by the Caribbean island of Jamaica (Black 2003). Granted, scholars such as Kate Bedford of the University of Minnesota cite that modernity has ushered in a World Bank with a renewed commitment to including socio-political determinants, in the drafting of multilateral agreements (Bedford 2009, 38-45). Yet, for all this equanimity, The World Bank re-
presents an interplay of experts, and developing country citizens/stakeholders, and those (developed) State agents who ultimately direct the process of negotiation.

In attempting to remedy the ‘invention of development,’ a number of multilateral agencies have attempted to engage in equitable, cross-sectoral agreements which attempt to address those histories of oppression which continue to plague the developing world. However, a number of scholars continue to emphasize that such consideration is meaningless, if not accompanied by instrumental socio-political change to mitigate the historic exploitation of oppressed peoples (Alleyne 2011, 4-8; Cappelen 2005, 215-228). To my mind, the dominant discursive mechanisms of today are an attempt to maintain a fine balance, condemning inequity without challenging the status quo. Rather, growth-and-development-focused agreements engage status quo. The result is a schizophrenic structure of discourse which promotes the ‘impartial’ ideals of neo-liberalism and the free market, while ignoring the extent to which such markets have been constructed on a foundation of injustice (Persaud 2003, 125-136).

In exploring my theory that multilateral agents continue to pursue growth and development via colonize-ing approaches, I review a World Bank publication which has been lauded for its comprehensiveness and for a narrative which emphasizes the pursuit of equity. Yet, I suggest that *Measuring Inequality of Opportunities in Latin America and the Caribbean* presents a number of strategies which propagate ideas surrounding power, elevating the perspectives of those agents most equipped to effect that power, while subsuming the needs of the vulnerable. Further, by establishing the primacy of specific ‘facts,’ ‘measurements,’ and ‘indexes,’ and by identifying the most significant actors, our ‘experts,’ ‘subjects’, and ‘stakeholders,’ respectively, the document evidences the intractability of truly addressing inequity, in multilateral milieux (Foucault 1971, 182-185; Alleyne 2011, 1-17).
Measuring Inequality (Paes de Barros, Ferreira, Molinas Vega, and Saavedra Chanduvi 2009), emphasizes pursuit of equality of opportunity as a hallmark of the modern-day World Bank. Further, the authors acknowledge the issue of equity as a charged discussion, moreover for those political philosophies which posit income re-distribution as panacea. In presenting the vignette of a child born in the LAC, the authors identify the reality that, often, children are constricted by social, familial and/or systemic deficiencies which are outside their control, and which are evidence of those inequities of opportunity present throughout the LAC region. From the onset, the document is noteworthy for explicitly presenting the aims of a World Bank which emphasizes equity as imperative to development. However, as my assessment of the document’s discursive mechanisms will illustrate, for all its noble intentions, The World Bank maintains its role as agent of a status quo based on those interactions, negotiations, and agreements which are the purview of an elite group which possesses as much global reach, as it does limited awareness of the daily existence of marginalized peoples (Gill 2003, 192).

Measuring Inequality highlights ‘knowledge’ as a necessary precursor to development of project activities and goals aimed at mitigating those inequitable circumstances which impact the children of the LAC. Even at its most basic, titular level, the work outlines that it is the quantification of inequality which is the basis for the authors’ recommendations for advancing LAC society. In reviewing the document, I extrapolate backward, to establish the following: i. that particular discursive mechanisms are employed to, ii. present recommendations as ineluctable choices while iii. promoting those dominant discourses which present ‘knowledge’ as the exclusive domain of our ‘experts.’

Review of Measuring Inequality presents a number of those discursive mechanisms emphasized by Wodak and Meyer (2001, 22-30) as vital to locate-ing the writer as agent, and
the reader as stakeholder. In this regard, I consider discourse a most subtle, but nonetheless effective, strategy in illustrating how bodies are ‘valued,’ in a globalized space. Further, I am reminded of Foucault’s (2003, 258-261) concept of biopower, that strength possessed by agents who are able to define the manner in which the bodies of particular subjects are utilized. Indeed, this concept is expounded upon by Frow (2003, 26-27) in his postulating mass consumption as evidence of power within cultural dynamics: the more powerful are able to establish the template which suggests particular tangible goods as evidence of the (socio-economic) ‘value’ of particular bodies. Further, Foster (2005, 106-109) presents material consumption as an especially significant domain for the Black woman convinced that her social mobility is, indeed, a product of the items which she purchases.

In Measuring Inequality particular schema are employed to define the focus group, and, thereafter, to emphasize the authors themselves as parties with objective, impartial and holistic views of how to address any number of inequities. These mechanisms, highlighted by Wodak and Meyer (2001, 27-30) as Strategies of Nomination, and Strategies of Perspectivation, respectively, are employed in multilateral discourse as a strategy for identifying/justifying the dynamics under which decisions are made, and to qualify and justify those conclusions reached by the experts. Most notably, as Pauly (2003, 39-43) suggests, multilateral discourses continue to be led by those States which have benefitted most handsomely from the exploitation of colonized territories. To my view, Measuring Inequality must present the perspective of a multilateral agency which exercises those agendas driven by the developed world.

The discursive tone of Measuring Inequality is set in the Overview of the document, with Strategies of Nomination employed to define those persons who are victims of socio-political variables defined by the authors as “unfair,” and “toxic.” Members of the focus group are
qualified by the author as members of a group ill-equipped by happenstance to function in a modern, globalized market. For the extent to which the authors highlight marital status ("widowed"), educational capacity ("illiterate"), employment history ("subsistence farmer") and family composition ("five children") as predictors of socio-political marginalization, the document highlights the culture of wage-labour as fundamental to the process of ‘national development.’ As Stiglitz and his colleagues (2013, 12-15) emphasize, however, there is a level of deceptiveness in emphasizing wage-labour, without considering, too, whether State structures enable security, dignity, and sustainability, in the process of maintaining a functional work force. Yet, so ingrained is the idea of wage-labour as a function of advancement of the poor, and marginalized, that even the transition of family structures from extended collectives to the nuclear family is organized according to the greatest provision of man-hours to the labour market (Latin American and Caribbean Women’s Collective 1980, 50).

Indeed, a number of scholars suggest that the transition of the Afrodescendant woman’s body from provider of (forced) physical labour in the agricultural sector, to (coerced) enabler of the nuclear family at domestic level resulted from post-emancipation markets which would define the Black woman’s body as a (biological) source of cheap labour (Potter, Barker, Conway, and Klak 2004, 205-210; Lynch 1995, 30-31). As such, *Measuring Inequality* engages in that process which I consider a ‘schizophrenic’ discursive undertaking, attempting to mitigate inequality, while employing Strategies of Nomination to define a marginalized, disadvantaged group according to particular economic tenets established by more powerful parties. From this perspective, *Measuring Inequality* identifies social advancement as a direct product of physical labour.
I suggest the very physical self of the Afrodescendant woman as manifestation of Strategies of Nomination. That physiognomic affect which, historically, identified the Black woman as property, today locates the Black woman within a milieu overwhelmingly designed as market-participation-via-wage-labour. I maintain that, within dominant discourses, the Afrodescendant’s potential remains in the realm of the physical. To apply inductive process to those recommendations presented in *Measuring Inequality* I would emphasize the following: multilateral discourses highlight economic growth as key to strategies for development of LAC territories; GDP is considered an objective measurement of economic growth; within the reality of histories of oppression, exploitation, and ongoing prejudice within LAC societies, the Afrodescendant woman must navigate inter-personal dynamics in which her body is pre-judged to be, primarily, a source of labour. To my mind, such ‘labour’ extends into being an exploitable medium of exploitation, as evidenced in the ongoing fetishism, and overtly-sexualized impressions to which the image of the Black woman is subject in popular culture. Indeed, as Hawkins and Muecke (2003, 9-17) suggest, the basis of ‘culture’ is the socio-economic structure of class.

In my opinion, multilateral agencies employ discourses in a (tacit) process of acknowledging, and re-inforcing those disparities of power which have been based on the myth of race. As Wodak and Meyer (2001, 24-25) emphasize, in exploring Strategies of Perspectivation, the primary utility of this discursive mechanism is a focus on the actors. The narratives employed in Measuring Inequality, and the emphasis on the Human Opportunity Index as a strategy for assessing inequality, illustrates the authors’ attempt to quantify ‘inequality—a social reality which is, to my mind, infinitely un-measurable. Yet, theories of CDA highlight that our perception of that which is ‘scientific,’ and ‘factual’ features highly in
our acceptance of the linguistic renderings of any actor. Further, as Foucault (1972, 182-185) would emphasize, the domain of ‘fact,’ and ‘knowledge’ are an artefact of social power disparity, and, I would posit, those myths which we now come to accept as fact.

For the extent to which *Measuring Inequality* seeks to explore those social injustices occasioned by historic exploitation, modern-day marginalization, and to define as ‘successful’ those economies heavily weighted towards consumption, the work simply propagates those cultural structures which view the human body as fodder for the economic machine. Indeed, as I suggest in the following chapter, those subtleties of cultural expectation, originating with the myth of race, continue to be revealed in the renderings of popular culture and dominant discourse—even within those multilateral discourses which purport to pursue social justice, through *Measuring Inequality*.

**The world’s ‘post-racial’ superpower**

To my mind, President Barack Hussein Obama, ‘Leader of the Free World,’ ‘The One We [African Americans] Have Been Waiting For,’ ‘The Greatest Promise for a Post-Racial World,’ is the epitome of those tensions which exist in today’s globalized environment. As the son of a Black, African father and a white mother whose family resided in the United States Midwest for centuries, and as an individual whose global perspective was influenced by formative years spent in Indonesia, to *my* mind, President Obama presents a standard of hope, while exposing the stagnant structure of global socio-political influence. As I suggest in this chapter, the popular narrative is one of significant global change, a re-orienting of the idea of ‘race.’ Yet, declarations have no obvious impact on reality.
I consider any suggestion of having achieved a ‘post-racial’ state as the ultimate in subterfuge, a conclusive diss, an insult to the dynamics within which African peoples, and, particularly Afrodescendants, must exist. The offence is made even more egregious, given that the United States’ fundamental approach to multilateral relations with the LAC remains unchallenged, and unchanged. As a result, the Afrodescendant woman must struggle against local dynamics which marginalize Black citizens, and a U.S.-influenced globalized structure which promotes neo-liberal ideals which seek to deify the market, reducing the involvement of the State in citizens’ welfare, and denying the ongoing impact of ‘race’ on social disparities of power.

Jha (2006, 193-203) suggests Manifest Destiny as fundamental to the American approach to international relations. Pursuit of colonialism and conquest was accommodated by the myth of race. To my mind, the structures of power which resulted from the execution of Manifest Destiny remain unchanged, even to this day. Those privileged groups which benefitted from the exploitation of peoples, and of lands maintain their location as holders of vast amounts of wealth—wealth which is today applied to enabling globalization. As such, any idea of a ‘post-racial society’ is irrelevant for those whose privileged position has been entrenched for centuries. Pauly (2003, 37-41) highlights the challenges of unseating those political/social/cultural/economic structures which continue to operate, in tandem, to support the position of the wealthy. He further acknowledges the difficulty of challenging a dynamic which is, in fact, the basis for a global order.

As Verney (2014, 9) indicates, those discourses suggesting a ‘post-racial’ period belie a global reality in which members of the African diaspora continue to experience inequitable circumstance. The resulting limited participation in civic processes inevitably contributes to the
stratification of the Black population. To my mind, this reality is particularly germane to the experience of the Afrodescendant woman, and to those conditions of globalization which contribute to inequity, to wit: the dominance of neo-liberalism as a global socio-economic philosophy. As a result, local efforts to address inequity have become into, and often eliminated by, the larger focus on preparing LAC markets for entry into globalized spheres. Any idea that the Afrodescendant woman is today afforded greater opportunity for advancement, due to a ‘post-racial’ global orientation is the ultimate diss, an egregious slight which ignores fundamental reality: the gaze on the Black woman of the LAC continues to be exercised according to her location, as labour-contributor to the (globalized) market process, rather than as a self-affirming agent.

Granted, the respective eras of post-colonialism, and global conflict (during the Second World War) ushered in an altered dynamic between the United States of America, and respective LAC territories. While the geographic location of LAC states presented a tactical advantage, in American efforts to protect Atlantic states against the advance of Nazi-ism, Gillem (2007, 18-25) suggests the defence of democracy, globally, as a pretext under which America could expand its own colonial empire (High 2009, 198-199). Yet, couched within dominant American diss-courses promoting liberty and democracy were colonialist views of ‘race,’ which would continue to impact American decisions at multilateral levels, and which would become evident in those interpersonal interactions between enlisted officers, for example, and ‘native’ civilian workers employed on American military bases in the LAC (High 2009, 100-105).

As I suggest, emergence of the United States to a position of influence over the LAC region resulted in a conversion of the Afrodescendant’s idea of the pursuit of social mobility, primarily from the perspective of that American religion of consumption (Sorgo 2010, 86-87).
From the sixteenth century to the present day, the Black woman of LAC heritage continues to be influenced by those milieux which immediately identify her body as product. The irony, to my mind, is the extent to which these views are engaged in those hegemonic mechanisms meant to promote (American-style) consumerism, promoting the idea of *value goods* as an avenue for social mobility (Appiah and Elias 2011, 174). The promotion of ‘post-racialism’ is part and parcel of a deceit designed to coerce Afrodescendants into their own oppression.

The respective works of Krenn (2014, 166) and Li (2012, 137) highlight the contrast between discourses and reality. Whereas credentialed, recognized media suggest the reduction of ‘race’ to a footnote within international diplomacy, policy decisions undertaken in this period of ‘post-racialism’ impact members of the African diaspora to an inordinate degree. In documenting recent multilateral trade and economic agreements between the United States, and LAC territories, for example, Krenn emphasizes that current policies simply exacerbate those approaches originally founded on a distinctly colonial mindset. Krenn suggests such international incidents as evidence of the President’s unwillingness to focus on the divisive, polarizing issue of ‘race.’ I would add that, for developing and emerging states of the LAC region, any concept of the ‘post-racial’ era must consider the muddled histories which inform national perspectives on the idea of ‘race.’

Any suggestion of having achieved a ‘post-racial’ period—defined according to a predominantly American perspective—denies the multitude of variables which impact the context of ‘race,’ in the Latin America and Caribbean region (Winant 2012, 10-11). Skin colour, hair texture, hair colour, shape of the nose bridge, family origins, family professional status, formal education, and access to wealth are among that plethora of considerations which can result in members of a single family occupying different points along that gradation of ‘race,’ in
the LAC. Moreover, those anti-revolutionary movements which sought to upset structures of socio-economic class, and political orientation split the territories of Latin America and the Caribbean between the pro-US faction, and those States considered overtly communist. As such, specifically at the height of the Cold War, American strategies—overt and covert military intervention, provision of financial aid and technical assistance, and provision of scholarships to select members of the LAC political elite—would realize those colonize-ing tendencies through which the U.S. would always approach its relationship with the LAC. An ostensible ‘post-racial’ period has not changed any aspect of this dynamic, to my view.

The approach of the United States of America to LAC territories has always been defined according to American international security interests. As Yeo (2011, 7) highlights, central to any State’s alliance with the United States of America are multilateral arrangements which arrange for the ceding of territory for the purpose of American military use, whether physical plant, or the erection of communication and other ancillary equipment. To my view, those diss-courses which present American objectives as central to global security evidence Alexander’s (2005, 243-251) theory that those intra-State, local power disparities plaguing small, developing territories are, in fact, a microcosm of that military violence, and armed intervention which continues to be central to America’s approach to international relations. That economically marginalized, racialized Americans are disproportionately employed as the executors of the country’s martial intentions is, to my mind, a reiteration of those diss-courses surrounding American interventionism, during the Vietnam War, a milieu which prompted world-class athlete Mohammed Ali to conscientiously object to being drafted to military duty: “I [have] no quarrel with the Viet Cong. They never called me ‘nigger.’”
The relationship between the U.S. and LAC territories has always been one determined by the intersection of military might, economic influence, and cultural impact, all aimed at securing the location of the U.S. as a global superpower. The current era of military defence—the ‘War on Terrorism’—is an extension of the U.S. martial philosophies, and, to my mind, presents a re-orienting of American conversations around ‘race,’ to identify those whose ‘race’ identifies them as potential terrorists/insurgents. As such, even in this period of ‘post-racial-’ ism, America must still confront the divisive issue of stratification based on ‘race.’

In this new division of the globe between ‘terrorists,’ and the ‘allies,’ the Afrodescendant woman must, again, navigate a gaze on her body effected by a dominant class. Whereas the push-back artiste of the mid-twentieth century could identify the Black woman’s body as a source of entertainment/diversion for U.S. troops, the modern day brings to the fore a military perspective which seeks to engage LAC territories as economic, political, and military ‘partners’ in a new war—the ‘War on Terror.’ The US objective of territorial expansion, in pursuit of national security, and international stability, demands that LAC territories abandon any national efforts to pursue equity, in order to satisfy that inter-national requirement of alliance with the United States Gillem (2007, 16-17). As a result, those inequities which place the Afrodescendant woman at the peripheries of discourse inevitably produces the need for dis-course—platitudes which leave, unchanged, the structures which the Black woman must navigate (McKinley 2007, 78-91, 212-215).

To my mind, rather than evidencing a ‘post-racial’ global period, the structures which enable globalization exacerbate the historical reality of exploitation. The single difference is that, whereas nineteenth-century philosophies would have justified such oppression, globalization compounds exploitation by distancing respective LAC States from addressing particular local
issues surrounding inequity, while positioning inter-national participation in globalized markets as a primary function. Indeed, the most dominant discursive context maintains that the equanimity of markets counterbalances all instances of inequity. Yet, no aspect of the ‘post-racial’ considers the extent to which the global elite have constructed their own wealth on the backs of the marginalized.

Any suggestion that the Afrodescendant woman can, today, avail herself of the benefits of ‘post-racialism,’ discounts realities of neo-colonialism, and (military and/or economic) coercion which inform her location. Compounding the paucity of multilateral resources committed to ensuring development of physical plant, technical capability, and training of a qualified labour force. The reality presented in Best’s (1976, 6) seminal work manifests itself today in those dominant discourses which continue to adopt a distinctly colonial approach, emphasizing entry into globalized markets, without examining the particular makeup of LAC socio-political structures, and without considering those histories of dominance which continue to impact the region’s peoples. While American foreign policy prescribes to the social justice component of a ‘post-racial’ ideal, there is no deliberate effort to examine the origin of social inequity, and no attempt at sustained efforts to mitigate social injustice (Cappelen 2005, 218; Paes de Barros, Ferreira, Molinas Vega, and Saavedra Chanduvi 2009, 120).

Smith (2012, 93-95), and Krenn (2014, 166) reveal the frustration of those civic activists who placed their every faith in emergence of a newer, more inclusive, completely revolutionized American foreign policy approach. However, as I suggest in this chapter, the application of dominant discourses to the narrative of ‘post-racialism’ does not cohere with the the intractability of global structures of socio-political influence, and economic power/wealth. That much remains fundamentally unchanged. Although LAC economies remain dependent on
American trade, and American aid, and although American-led discourses continue to impact socio-cultural realities within the region, there is some reason for optimism. Respective LAC political administrations continue to attempt to develop policies particular to their history and cultural experience, while simultaneously seeking to address, and resolve socio-economic inequities based on the distinct idea of the superiority of one ‘race’ over another (Burron 2012, 41-43). Yet, I would temper this optimism by suggesting that such pockets of resistance are but the starting point of an onerous journey, one which should identify the reality that the injustices of the myth of race continue to inform the most dominant discourses presented in this ‘post-racial’ period of ours.
5. (Re-)presenting Rihanna; power in an electronic age

In proposing resistance to those dominant, exploitative discourses which fragment the African diaspora on the basis of national boundaries imposed in colonial times Bennett (2000, 101) highlights a significant reality of Afrodescendant (and, I daresay African-American) existence: our world view, as African peoples, has been splintered according to the dictates of colonizers. To his view, a more empowering worldview would see African peoples’ identifying with those oppressions and exploitations which unify the Black experience. As I suggest throughout this work, push-back culture arose from epistemic necessity, the imperative that enslaved African peoples elevate their spiritual selves over the brutality of physical enslavement.

One of the most deceptive notions of African-derived lyrical art forms is of an immutable distinction between the evolution of LAC formats, and the emergence of African-American musical rendition. As Davis’ (2006, 114-115) research highlights, one reality of institutional enslavement was the constant movement of peoples (and, I posit that such inter-territorial migration would include the transport of Africans) from northern to southern estates, and vice versa. In considering the emergence of ‘push-back’ culture throughout the Atlantic, therefore, we would do well to recognize distinct West African origins, firstly, as well as those constant exchanges which would come to influence the unitary focus of the art form (resistance), while enabling the development of a plethora of renditions, according to particular local variables.

The respective works of Best (2004, 24-25) and Manuel (2006, 110-111) emphasize that those ruptures, violations and injustices which arose from the structure of African enslavement fomented the resistive force of push-back culture, in all the richness of dub, ska, calypso, reggae, reggaeton, merengue, rumba, and countless other genres of the LAC region. Ultimately, these movements would impact the emergence of African-derived/urban renditions in the United
States of America. The very history of African peoples in the Atlantic, and the movements undertaken during enslavement and colonization, and throughout those economic booms stimulated by construction of the Panama canal, and the early-twentieth-century demand for labour in the larger sugar industries of the Dominican Republic and Cuba, for example, evidence that *mezcla* of influences, experiences, and dynamics of resistance which continue inform the state of African, Afrodescendant, and African-American *musics*.

In defining globalization as a phenomenon which magnifies one segment (financing, political influence, the impact of instantaneous electronic information sharing), while repressing another (the inter-national movement of labour) Jha (2006, 84-85) suggests a milieu in which the elite possess greater latitude in ongoing efforts to manipulate the masses. As I see it, the globalize-ing emphasis on the visual, and on instantaneous presenting of particular images as a format for mass consumption, presents the real possibility of exploiting impressions of even the most intractable push-back artistes. As a result, the elite become arbiters of the push-back experience, converting it from its anti-oppressive roots, to exploit the art form as a resource for accumulation of capital.

As mentioned in the opening paragraphs of this chapter, one idea of the LAC region is of a cultural backwater, a stagnant pool virtually isolated from the ‘mainstream’ of American cultural creation. (In the following chapter, I explore those dynamics under which the ‘mainstream’ comes to be defined, but at this point, I will simply synonimize ‘mainstream’ with ‘global recognition and popularity.’) Robyn Rihanna Fenty, the Barbadian-born global pop music phenomenon recognized by the mononym ‘Rihanna’ is evidence of the ease with which the boundaries of the physical body can be dissolved, and re-implanted with any number of commercial ideals (Jagodziński 2010, 23). Particularly, Jagodziński (2010, 40) suggests the
application of power, in the hegemonic process of employing electronic media to convert the consumer into a ‘worker.’ My interpretation of this perspective is that images present the consumer with an ideal. In turn, the consumer is convinced that she must apply labour/work in order to achieve this ideal. In attempting to distance herself from those stereotypes with which her body is associated, the Afrodescendant increasingly turns to symbolic goods, an effort to present onlookers with physical evidence of her (assumed) social class (Potts 2006, 156; Foster 2005, 109-116). Employment/manipulation of the image of popular artistes is yet another facet of the manipulation of Black women by the dominant class.

To my mind, Rihanna is a prime example for those extant struggles of the Afrodescendant. While society at large may be sufficiently advanced to accept our success, we nonetheless encounter limits to mobility. In my mind, the myth of race continues to inform the most unyielding stereotypes. The marketing machine which defines Rihanna is informed by those stereotypical representations which purport to communicate who/what Afrodescendant woman is—and, as Foucault (1972, 181) highlights, that which we claim to know, is simply a conceptualize-ing of those representations of power which we are taught to accept as normative. The varying locations of Rihanna the artiste—based on record company promotion, and on the narratives presented by fans and detractors alike emphasize stereotypical representations of the Afrodescendant woman as carefree, loose ably engaging her feminine wiles, to satisfy any number of sexual proclivities (Bierria 2011, 104). (The very title of Rihanna’s debut album, Music of the Sun, emphasizes the exoticising of the artistic product.)

Despite those critics who present Rihanna as a distinct Caribbean artiste able to engage the legacy of blues, she is, in fact, heir to generations of LAC performers who have engaged an Afro-centric awareness into those artistic renditions which contemporary critics define as ‘blues.’
Just as the blues provided the Black American woman a space in which to navigate her *asé*, and those social impositions on her sexuality, ‘push-back’ culture enabled Rihanna’s LAC forebears to withstand the deprivations of slavery, while engaging, exploring, and exposing, through performance (Davis 1999, 46; Moran 2012, 123-127). The image cobbled for Rihanna—by handlers, executives and promoters, and, to a degree, by the artiste herself—is a re-presentation of an historic perspective which exposes those dominant, stereotypical representations of the Afrodescendant woman’s body as a sexual totem.

In its annual power issue, published in March of 2014, *Vogue* magazine declared Rihanna its cover girl, for an attitude described by the Editor as an unconstrained, original approach to style (Sykes, Plum. 2014. “Stylin’ with Riri.” *Vogue*, March, 571-574, 643). (A twist of irony, in my mind, is that the clothing choices highlighted in Rihanna’s photo spread comprise those popular designers whose aesthetic and marketing approach emphasize *value items*—tangible goods as an indicator of socio-economic status.) Sykes’ description of Rihanna-the-person is a cordial representation of the artist as approachable, warm, and welcoming. Yet, in a classic example of the ease with which ‘Other-ing’ exposes itself, the writer suggests that Rihanna occasionally abandons the “…perfect diction of a girl transported to Connecticut at sixteen,” to betray the accent of her Barbadian heritage, as if diction and a Barbadian accent cannot co-exist in verbal delivery.

To my mind, the hegemonic tempest is powerful precisely because it frames fundamental life experiences according to the needs/desires of the powerful/privileged (Crehan 2000, 102). Rihanna has been framed/defined according to those expectations which locate her, an Afrodescendant, on the basis of physical qualities, and/or her potential as a symbolic sexual(ized) entity. Moreover, as Eldridge (2007, 273-275) suggests, an Afrodescendant artiste
presents the added advantage of absolving record companies of the social responsibility to address those socio-economic disparities which influence the lives of their African American artistes, and consumers.

Indeed, the promise of the ‘Belafonte Boom,’ as documented by the author, was the potential of Harry Belafonte as an ‘acceptable’ sort of Black artiste, being removed, as he was, from the unrest which accompanied the civil rights demands being made by Black Americans in the mid-twentieth century. The Belafonte brand of calypso was to present a tractable alternative to the rock and roll, and soul being promoted by more rebellious, less controlable Black performers. To my mind, the engaging of Rihanna, as an artiste, and as an image, affords recording companies the advantage of capitalizing on the attractions of the ‘island girl’ stereotype, while providing some distance from specifically Black American issues of inequity, marginalization, and limited socio-political representation.

In a tale of discovery which is almost apocryphal, Rihanna’s journey is framed according to those typical colonizing discourses which continue to inform Americans’ view of the LAC region. An American record producer vacationing in Barbados, hearing of Rihanna’s talents on the local performance circuit, invites her to an informal audition. While Rihanna is not the first Caribbean artiste to come to the attention of the American recording studio system, she is unique in presenting a singular opportunity to map her trajectory, via the ubiquitous-ness of electronic data. Whereas Rolling Stone commended her first single, Pon de Replay, as the outstanding output of an otherwise mediocre album, Rihanna would come to employ astute management, unique vocal skill, and a master stroke of imaging to emerge as Billboard artiste of international stature. Yet, her singular achievements have not eliminated the frequency with which narratives
surrounding Rihanna are framed according to stereotypes, with the adoption of a colonize-ing gaze, in narrative (Bierria 2010, 104).

The ferocity with which the ‘crazy island-girl’ description was applied to Rihanna, especially in the aftermath of her assault by then-boyfriend Chris Brown, was stunning for its cruelty, and for the pervasity of the idea of the ‘island girl/woman’ as ‘crazy,’ ‘nutso,’ vicious enough to ‘cut’ a man, and spiteful enough employ black magic, to ‘put roots on [harm]’ an errant partner (Bierria, 104-106). To my mind, the exposure of Rihanna as the survivor of violence at the hands of a romantic partner demanded a re-creation of her artistic image. Whereas Rihanna’s third studio album, Good Girl Gone Bad, approached themes of overt sexuality by employing the fluid metrical and tonic patterns of the blues musical tradition, escaping the relationship with Brown would produce Rated R, an album which, to my mind, presents the even more jarring tensions of sex(uality) within physical violence, overt threat, restriction, and violation. (Indeed, cover art for the single Russian Roulette, presents a Rihanna naked, and bound by barbed wire.)

For any woman of the African diaspora, the idea of our bodies continues to be informed by that disparity between the mainstream view of our sexuality, and wresting of the idea of our sexuality from the grasp of interlopers. As Lorde (1984, 58) emphasizes, the result is creation of an entirely new perspective of ourselves as sexual beings. (Indeed, ‘Body (Im)potent is an exploration of ‘push-back’ culture as subversive, exactly for its power to meld that Afro-centric idea of the indivisibility of the spiritual and the sexual.) That Rihanna (and her handlers) would promote her emergence from violence through application of her body as a physically bound sexual totem, destined to violent retribution of a dysfunctional romance trafficks in themes which resonate, even more strongly, for the Afrodescendant woman. The body acted upon (Rihanna’s)
is that of an Afrodescendant; the images promoted are produced through an American perspective of the location of the ‘island-woman’ as a sexual entity informed by the heat, the lushness, the isolation of ‘island paradise;’ the ultimate outcome, is a re-presenting of an artiste according to those histories of colonization/conquest/violence which Bierria (2011, 104-106) cites as fundamental to dominant, American (and, I would say, ‘colonize-ing’) views of the Afrodescendant woman.

Obviously, the marketing of Rihanna, the artiste, is a primary product of a culture increasing reliant on the image—and of employing that image in the machinery of mass production/consumption. For the Afrodescendant artiste, and for the woman artiste of LAC origins, the image continues to be a narrow, stereotypical focus on her body as a sexual element, without a wide-pan aimed at capturing (and, perhaps, addressing) those oppressions which continue to impede the social mobility of every Afrodescendant (Best 2004, 168-169). As I see it, employment of the image as a fundamental component of consumerist culture is an obvious mechanism for shoring up the position of the privileged, effectively determining which issues/personalities deserve our gaze, and which will remain obscured. The reality, however, is that the fierceness of the gaze, and the perspective from which that gaze is applied, is determined by the powerful (Jagodzinski 2010, 14-17). As the ongoing view of Rihanna, and other contemporary artistes, illustrates that gaze will continue to be informed by those myths which influence inequitable social circumstance.

In the previous chapter, I explored two particular narratives evident in mainstream discourses of today: continued reinforcement of the fallacy that ‘race’ is no longer a consideration of social interaction; and realiance on the metrics of new/digital/electronic/social/visual media, to exploit the medium as a hegemonic instrument, to
propagate the privileged socio-political location of a global bourgeoisie. (I employ ‘global bourgeoisie,’ to convey the idea that that power, today, is nested with those parties sufficiently connected, knowledgeable and wealthy to impact milieux within a wide network of countries. Gill (2003, 192) highlights this phenomenon as the prerogative of the wealthy to adopt the mindset of operating in “global time.”) Moreover, as Williams and his colleagues emphasize, new media multiplies the influence of dominant discourses, perpetuating stereotypes, and engaging these tropes to enhance the profit-making potential of specific products (Williams, Martins, Consalvo, and Ivory 2009, 815-834).

As I see it, the popular adage, ‘The media is the message,’ gives the impression that, with sufficient access to electronic media, any individual—irrespective of background, socio-economic status, national affiliation, or faith—can expose her message to a global audience, to ultimately gain recognition and/or acknowledgement of her particular standpoint. However, that ‘The media is the message’ is disingenuous. As Livingstone and Helsper (2007, 671-680) suggest, any benefits to be gained through access to new media must be considered within the plethora of socio-economic, class-based variables which impact young people’s capacity to benefit from electronic resources. Further, suggesting a basic link between ‘media,’ and ‘message,’ belies the extent to which citizenship is undermined by the interaction of State, and corporate resources.

In reality, respective State agencies seek to exploit new media as a resource for monitoring citizens, in the name of ensuring national security (Lauer 2012, 566-582; Lu and Weber 2007, 925-944). By the same token, electronic metrics have become vital to corporate strategies which employ the virtual space as a component of the profit-making agenda. Indeed, Scherer’s (2007, 475-496) work suggests that new media can be manipulated to influence consumer choice. For the extent to which new media is directed by
corporate agenda, I consider it the epitome of Guha’s (1997, 103) idea that the modern reproduction of colonialism is the coercion of oppressed peoples into promoting the agenda of their oppressors. To my view, new media is a most efficient tool for promoting and justifying the dominant discourses.

I apply this chapter to exploring my conviction that the liberating, democratizing potential of new media is counterbalanced by the exploitation of the medium to achieve the aims of the privileged (Portwood-Stacer 2013, 1041-1057). Further, I present the idea that the dominance of neo-liberal discourses, with its suggestion of the stark impartiality and efficiency of the market, creates a space which obscures extant realities of exploitation, marginalization, and power disparity. Emphasis on the power of the market as a socio-political equalizer directs development of inter-national policy, and economic strategies which emphasize an individual’s responsibilty for her own success. Yet, as Smith (2012, 92-96) suggests, such policies invariably benefit the privileged, ignoring, as they do those historic exploitations which continue to impair Afrodescendants’ social mobility today.

In considering the late twentieth century emergence of neo-liberalism as a dominant socio-economic ideal, within the sphere of international relations, Overbeek and van der Pijl (2002) cite collapse of the Soviet Union as a primary catalyst. Whereas the Cold War mandated a distinction between capitalist philosophies of the ‘West,’ and the socialist tendencies of the ‘East,’ dissolution of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) exposed the impracticality of socialism, and the chaos which would result from popular movements intent on replacing socialism with more viable, democratic approaches to governance. As the authors highlight, the spectre of failure and instability presented with the fragmenting of the USSR enabled promotion of two fundamental tenets of neo-liberalism: promotion of the free-market as a ubiquitous, exact,
equalizing socio-economic structure; emphasis on the privatization of State-owned firms. (To my mind, the latter is a pellucid example of the insidiousness of neo-liberalism, a system which would absolve the State of responsibility for public welfare services. The most egregious example of the failures of such a proposal is documented in Olivera’s (2004) account of efforts to privatize utility services in Bolivia.) For the extent to which multilateral arrangements emphasize neo-liberalism as the *sine qua non* of global financial systems, there continues to be an obscuring of those inequities which continue to marginalize the world’s oppressed peoples (Alleyne 2011, 15-20). Indeed, as Smith (2012, 90) reminds us, while improved economic tides may elevate all vessels, the reality is that some persons—by virtue of histories of exploitation—are relegated, over generations, to owning a boat, rather than a yacht.

In considering those dominant discourses which advocate neo-liberalism, I also highlight the accompanying phenomenon: consumerism. Increasingly, the market reality of mass consumption has come to influence the epistemic set, and behaviours of Afrodescendants, a phenomenon which brings to my mind the Foucauldian idea of *biopower*, an outcome of the evolution of State responsibility (Foucault 2003, 256-261). Whereas federal priorities during Enlightenment focused on such public-health areas as sanitation and sewerage, and disease control, the power of today’s commonwealth comprises the coalescing of technological and scientific resources to facilitate control of the bodies of citizens. Essential to *biopower*, in Foucault’s view, is employment of hegemonic resources to coerce citizens into accepting state influence over their bodies, a phenomenon which, to my view, must be considered within the reality of State-corporate collaboration.

In exploring the efficiency with which dominant neo-liberal ideals are enmeshed in State and corporate exploitation of electronic media, I also apply ‘biopower’ to define that hegemonic
sphere which ultimately controls the material choices of the Afrodescendant woman. As Livingstone (2009, 226-227) suggests, multilateral trade agreements between respective LAC territories and the United States of America create a cultural nexus which emphasizes *symbolic goods*—that phenomenon in which a particular brand of consumer item communicates individual worth and potential for social mobility (Potts 2006, 156). It stands to me as profoundly ironic that the Afrodescendant woman, whose body continues to represent a commodity, attempts to escape that history by pursuit of value through consumer goods. (Whereas push-back culture is founded on transcending histories of oppression, pursuit of symbolic goods is an attempt to obviate those insults which result from systemic racism (Kaplan 2011, 216-220).)

Given the historic transitions of the Afrodescendant’s body—a unit of labour in slavery, a unit of production under American imperialism, and as the object of biopower today—I suggest in ‘Body (Im)potent’ that the Black woman’s physical self has been defined by, and continues to be gazed upon according to, the economic market. To my mind, the depredations of enslavement as an institution placed resistance at the core of Black existence, at which point the Afro-centric emphasis on the *asé* was the focus of the anti-oppressive mindset. However, the modern-day has ushered in a period in which Afrodescendants are increasingly coerced into their own exploitation. Via an inductive phenomenon—globalism impacting markets, marketing processes influencing individual choice, individual engagement (consumerism) recorded and exposed in the electronic space—the Afrodescendant emerges less as a self-actualizing individual, and more as a member of an homogenous group intent on buying into the idea of social mobility through symbolic goods (Foster 2005, 82-85).

Anderson’s (2009, 172-173) research suggests that the emphasis on symbolic goods is so dominant as to even influence Afrodescendants’ impression of anti-oppressive resistance. As an
example, Anderson cites a series of advertisements featuring Sean ‘Puff Diddy’ Combs.’ The campaign highlights Combs’ image as a counter-mainstream, ‘Bad Boy’ rap artiste. This aspect of the artist’s personality is vital to Black Honduran youths’ devotion to the ‘Sean John’ line of products. As one participant suggest, the clothing ultimately represents, “El black power que llevamos,” “The Black power that we wear.” As I see it, collision of ‘mainstream’ objectives and the ideal of Black resistance can result in erosion of those cultural tenets which enhance anti-oppression.

In seeking to define the process of an art form entering the mainstream, Huber (2013, 8-11) applies the metaphor of tributaries. Performances migrate from the peripheries towards the source of the river according to a number of variables, primary of which is the force applied by the source. Even the most intractable artists, those who come to public attention by declaring themes of anti-oppression, human rights, and justice, find the tone of their work altered, according to the demands of mainstream recording studios. Inevitably, the expectations placed on artistes are subject to those social/cultural realities which fuel the listening audience’s desire for entertainment and/or information. Yet, to be mainstream is to be the entertainment of choice of older, midde-class listeners who, to my view, are sufficiently comfortable (socio-economically), to be able to abandon any idea of anti-oppressive resistance (King and Foster 2013, 250-262; Forman 2013, 63-67).

As I emphasize throughout this work, ‘push-back culture’ encompasses that Afro-centric musical/lyrical/performative art form which emerged from African peoples’ history of enslavement, and colonization. Yet, as Murphy (2007, 39-40) highlights the culture is not a single, homogenous, monolithic template. Rather, ‘push-back’ presents forms of expression which developed along heterogeneous lines, according to the linguistic, geographic,
demographic variables which impacted African peoples enslaved in the Atlantic. Within Black existence, therefore, I consider push-back *cultures* as those diverse, esoteric forms of resistance vital to Black survival.

To my mind, the engaging of Afro-centric art forms into the mainstream brings with it a compromising of a distinct performative dynamic, that intimate, inter-change-able interaction between the performer(s) and the viewer(s), in the Yoruban tradition. As Guilbault (2005, 152-153) suggests, mainstream involvement often results in a conversion of *image*, thus the altering/reduction of the artiste according to producers’ and studio managers’ idea of the fastest route to financial gain. The risk of mainstreaming is therefore the homogenizing of the rich origins of performances, such as those most recently classified as ‘world music.’ In considering the place of ‘world music,’ on international charts, Biddle and Knights (2007, 1-3) consider the juxtaposition of ‘local,’ and ‘global.’ The former is imperative to the development of a core audience, one which, to my mind, must hold a similar epistemic background as the artiste.

Yet, the reality is that, for performers of any local significance, mainstreaming efforts often result in an artistic product being re-purposed, to accommodate a larger, more diverse global audience. While Biddle and Knights suggest such melding as presenting the promise of ‘cultural hybridity,’ my view is that any such heterogeneity risks altering the socio-cultural orientation of Afrodescendants, to result in artistic efforts more accommodating to capitalist agenda. Indeed, King and Foster (2013, 248-262) parallel mainstream acceptance of reggae music in Jamaica with politicians’ desire to engage artistes as tools in partisan political efforts. This cognizance on the part of politicians would also come to the attention of the island’s elite, who would eventually also employ push-back renditions as a marketing tool. In highlighting the work of dub poet Mutabaruka, the authors seem to marvel at the ease with
which, “…revolutionary words [had] become entertainment,” with Jamaica developing a lucrative tourism market, building advertising campaigns around Bob Marley’s seminal, *One Love*, its original condemnation of prejudice, partisanship, and exploitation converted into a soothing *Come to Jamaica* tourist-vibe.

As I suggest, a most disconcerting feature of mainstreaming is the ease with which corporate efforts exploit stereotype, as part of marketing efforts intended to appeal to a wider, global audience. In some of the more prominent examples, the body of the Afrodescendant continues to be defined according to dominant perspectives of her body as an overtly sexual entity, which seems incongruous with modern ideals of social advancement. Indeed, in considering Brazilian society as evidence of that interplay of antiquated misogyny and/or modernity, Barbara (Barbara, Vanessa. 2014. “Life as a Brazilian Woman.” *The New York Times*, April 23. http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/24/opinion/barbara-life-as-a-brazilian-woman.html?_r=0.) explains that the average woman in Brazil *expects* and *accepts* all manner of sexist encounter, as part of her daily life, even as the country has elected a female President to office. Yet, Brazil’s own national conflicts seem to be subsumed under a global dynamic in which stereotypical ideas about the Brazilian woman—model cum sexual object cum voluptuous—are incorporated into international marketing efforts. (Here, Barbara cites Adidas’ World Cup campaign, with its employment of a woman’s backside as the central image on a line of T-shirts.)

In clarifying a Brazilian reality (which I consider just as applicable to the wider LAC region), Warner and Nascimento (2007, 156-158) highlight the challenges of addressing the implications of inequality at national level, while aspiring to international (neo-liberal) pursuits. The authors emphasize the histories of enslavement, population diversity, differentials of wealth,
vastly inequitable distribution virtually create many nations within any single territory of the LAC. Moreover, as they further suggest, in exploring Nobrega’s anti-revolutionary artistic renditions, histories of slavery, African resistance and the impact of Afro-centric influences on Brazilian culture continue to be discounted. Yet, these cultural influences come to be appropriated in efforts to market a national ideal (Knauer 2011, 15-17).

Knauer’s (2011, 14-16) research suggests that even the most anti-capitalist LAC states come under pressure to conform to stereotypical images of the Afrodescendant woman. The Cuban national administration, for example, engages in that sleight of hand, exposing Afro-Cuban culture for its educational and historic significance, while, simultaneously, contributing to and exploiting those dominant ideas around the presenting of Black bodies as totems of entertainment and/or exotic sexuality. Indeed, the Cuban approach to marketing its tourist product, internationally, exists as the comingling of two disparate ideas of *carnaval*—cultural accuracy on one hand, and spectacle on the other. The most distinctive aspect of the latter, as Knauer highlights, is the extent to which attempts are made to engage and/or manage Black bodies according to colonialist stereotypes. As such, even within the Cuban experience, Afrodescendant bodies continue to be consumed by the gaze of colonizers.

In his exposition of the ascendancy of visual media as a fundamental arbiter of our views of the world, Jameson (1991, 67) cautions the displacing of all things spiritual by items material. In assessing the Afrodescendant’s ongoing struggle to define the parameters from which her own body is viewed, ‘Body (Im)potent,’ identifies the fundamental place of Afro-centrism to a people’s resistance, while also identifying the primacy of asé—the spiritual potency engendered in the commingling of lyrical celebration, ritual dance, and theatrical performance. Today, the Black woman of the LAC, is tempted by the siren call of commodities and symbolic goods, on
one hand, as the Afrodescendant community confronts those ‘mainstreaming’ efforts which threaten the people’s cultural mores. Only time will tell how successfully the Afrodescendant is able to navigate the ongoing conflicts which seek to locate her, according to others’ views of her body.

‘Body (Im)potent is an exploration of three facets of Afrodescendant existence: ownership (over our ongoing struggle, and the artistic milieux vital to that struggle), power (and the wholism of the physical and the spiritual) and perception (of our selves, and by others). To my mind, the myth of race enabled the centuries-long ‘ownership’ of African peoples by others. The reverberations of this injustice are being felt to this day, two centuries subsequent to the emancipation of Afrodescendants from the legal structure which was the trans-Atlantic system of slavery. It is in the stratification of LAC society that power differentials are most evident, elucidated by Kempadoo (2004, 54-63) as being those modern-day milieux in which the social prospects of the Afrodescendant woman continue to be over-shadowed by those historic stereotypes which defined the Black woman according to ideas/ideals surrounding her existence as a sexual(ized) entity. Power disparity therefore continues to be a function of the perception of the Black woman, a phenomenon compounded by the coalescing of financial might and political influence enabled by globalization. Nonetheless, through the (re-)presenting of histories, the Afrodescendant’s struggle for her body continues apace, and only time will tell how profoundly asé is impacted by the material power of the elite.
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