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## THERE GOES THE TRANSNATIONAL NEIGHBORHOOD Calypso Buys a Bungalow

by Michael Eldridge

Sly Mongoose . . . Wouldn't stop and he reach America

—Trinidad-born vaudevillian Sam Manning's  
1925 version of an old Jamaican mento

I live in a place where, in the early 1900s, the Craftsman ideal took hold as it did in few other places in North America. Today, a good seventy years after its heyday and its eventual eclipse by postwar ticky-tacky, the California Bungalow is still the state's pre-eminent style of domestic architecture. From one end of California to the other, craftsman cottages blanket the urban and rural landscapes; in Pasadena and the Berkeley Hills, Greene and Greene's showpieces—apotheoses of the genre—have become holy shrines for Arts and Crafts pilgrims; and in my small college town, way up north behind the Redwood Curtain, well-preserved bungalows are so prized by a certain breed of middle-class refugee from the south that they fetch sums well above their already-inflated asking prices.

From its inception in William Morris's industrialized England, of course, the Arts and Crafts movement was about nostalgia for a lost organic past; and so the bungalow, avatar of this Arcadian never-neverland, has for several generations symbolized an escape, albeit a rather compromised and disingenuous one, from the depredations of the modern world. Its calculatedly homey appeal may be largely what my new neighbors (not to mention those legions who were so recently snapping up "Mission Oak" repros everywhere from upmarket Restoration Hardware to downscale K-Mart) are buying into, then. Still, the northerly flight of these migrants of means—from something they euphemize vaguely as "congestion," or if pressed, "crime"—points indirectly to another, less homespun, of California's late distinctions: its much-ballyhooed ballot measures of the 1990s restricting immigration, rolling back affirmative action, and (briefly) ending bilingual education. Thus, with the Golden State in the vanguard, did the American nation begin working through another in a series of demographically-inspired identity crises.<sup>1</sup>

The nature of the work being carried out here, and the sometimes hysterical tone of its execution, invite us to be careful readers of similar moments in the past. Since the underlying anxieties of this latest crisis are often expressed publicly as worries over broadening (and, it's implied, divisive) *cultural* differences, for instance, it

should be instructive to recall how America's relations with an earlier generation of dark-skinned immigrants were mediated precisely through the transmission and reception of culture—specifically, and surprisingly, through calypso, an urban vernacular performance genre whose sophisticated poetics have not been widely appreciated outside the Caribbean. In this essay, however, I'm interested not so much in calypso's poetic pedigree as in its elucidation of a forgotten, cross-cultural episode, a critical moment in the evolution of modern mass culture when calypso was at the nexus of another odd conjunction of racial tension, immigrant paranoia, and nostalgia for bungalows. I'm concerned, that is, with interpreting calypso's attempted intervention into American pop culture of the 1930s, and its mixed success in getting a grip on the slippery process by which people—particularly immigrants—of color are assimilated into the American body politic.

In the spring of 1934, two relatively obscure Trinidadian entertainers, who'd come to New York City to put the carnival season's top calypsos on wax (for the first time ever), suddenly found themselves flirting with international celebrity. Their co-sponsors, a radio and phonograph merchant in Port of Spain and a Trinidadian bandleader based in New York, had formed a long-distance partnership to exploit what they hoped would be a dual audience for recorded calypso: a well-heeled "colored" bourgeoisie back home, and a sizeable pan-Caribbean emigrant class in New York. For its part the American Record Corporation (soon to become the quasi-independent U.S. arm of British-based Decca), having leapt into the "race" records market just when it and the record trade in general had rather precipitously bottomed out, was attempting to revive sales by focusing on more urban styles of black music and by taking risks on other genres with as-yet unknown potential.<sup>2</sup> Calypso, it may have felt, fit both of those strategies. Whatever the reasoning, the experiment was a qualified success: quite by accident (or so the apocryphal story goes), crooner Rudy Vallee overheard the calypsonians—who performed under the sobriquets Atilla [*sic*] the Hun and The Lion—from the studio next door and invited them to perform the following night on his NBC variety show, the most popular network radio program of its day.<sup>3</sup> (By some accounts, they also dined with Lion's idol Bing Crosby at Vallee's Hollywood Cafe, and may even have been enlisted to entertain FDR at the Waldorf Astoria.) Just how their performance registered with the American public isn't known, and it's possible that its effects were felt most strongly back in the Caribbean, where the broadcast had been relayed, weakly, by shortwave. Indeed, Lion and Atilla were greeted on their return to Trinidad as conquering heroes, and local sales of their calypsos (and of gramophones and radios on which they might be heard) helped their shopowner-sponsor expand his chain of "emporiums" considerably over the next several years. For its part Decca would invite a contingent of calypsonians back to New York annually for most of the next decade, and Vallee booked them again on at least the first of these return trips. The émigré bandleader, Gerald Clark, meanwhile, would bolster his local career by accompanying the calypsonians on record, and by taking advantage of their annual junkets to arrange still more radio appearances and club dates for them in the New York area, sometimes for months afterwards.<sup>4</sup> It seemed a cozy arrangement, a modest success for all parties concerned.

For Lion and Atilla, though, there was nothing modest, let alone accidental, about any of it. For years afterward, they eulogized their hobnobbing with Vallee as an historic occasion, a glorious vindication: after a long trial run in the provinces before an insufficiently appreciative audience, calypso, as they saw it, had kept its appointment with destiny and arrived to take its place upon the world stage. In a calypso-lesson on the "History of Carnival" the following year (1935), Atilla lectured sententiously on the shrovetide festival's teleology in the Caribbean. In the not-so-distant past, he lamented—pandering to the good burghers of Port of Spain who'd been sounding this same theme for decades—carnival had indeed been a "hideous," scandalous affair, full of half-naked women, drunken masqueraders, obscenity, violence, and lewdness. Today, by contrast, it was wholly and "gloriously" reformed, nothing at all like it had been—perched, in short, at the pinnacle of respectability. The (somewhat elliptical) proof, which Atilla laid forth in the refrain as though it needed no gloss: "today you can hear our calypso / On the American radio." Calypsonians, naturally, were the sherpas who had quietly carried Trinidadian culture to such himalayan heights; but ironically, Atilla added ruefully, only foreign observers had had the acumen to discern their achievement—Trinidadians being too slow-witted or perhaps too prejudiced by tired stereotypes to appreciate their sudden elevation. Back home a calypsonian might still be treated as a "hooligan," he crowed, but "In New York you're an artist and a gentleman, / For instance take the Lion and me, / Having dinner with Rudy Vallee." Henceforth, if New York was, as he insinuated, the crucible of everything splendid and new, the self-evident global standard of *chic*, then certain Trinidadians, at least, were ready to measure up.

Indeed, in Atilla's eyes Vallee had effectively issued Trinidadian culture an overdue invitation to sit at the banquet-table of modernity. For the (paradoxically) remarkable thing about Trinidad, went another of his 1935 calypsos, was how much it had changed, changed utterly in recent years, despite the apparent handicap of its insularity: "How different is the island we know / To the Trinidad of long ago," it began.<sup>5</sup> No longer a provincial backwater, Trinidad now had industry and wealth, electric lights and refrigerators, radios and telephones. "With motor-cars runnin' up an' down," Atilla insisted in the refrain (with all the gee-whiz authority of one of Aimé Césaire's "been-to's"), "Trinidad comin' like-a New York town." The tropics, went this thesis, reprising and amplifying Claude McKay and W. A. Domingo's 1920s tagline, were not just in New York; New York and all it represented were in the tropics, too. In fact, one gets the sense that just under the surface of Atilla's simile hides an even more hyperbolic promotional claim: that The Tropics *are* New York; that the two places have become virtually interchangeable; that Gotham has been irrevocably inflected with Caribbean culture, and that Trinidad is at the same time thoroughly up-to-date, happily incorporated into the cultural empire emanating from that North American center. And if the calypsonian is a spurned prophet (as the final stanza of "History" has it), then what his unheeded prophecy foretells is the advent of a rough Trinidadian beast: despite the fact that the first of Atilla's historical-minded sermons had set out to advertise carnival's alleged gentrification (and the calypsonian's respect for middle-class decorum), both calypsos ultimately slouch toward conclusions that emphasize not cultural decency, but cosmopolitan *currency*. More than anything else, that is, the calypsonian is the herald of Trinidadian modernity.<sup>6</sup>

Atilla could trumpet Trinidad's modernity all he wanted, but the general mood and particular events in New York in 1935 left such an announcement open to severe misinterpretation. To understand the nature and extent of his tactical misstep, however, requires a brief review of the historical context of his proclamation.

To be sure, throughout the 1920s the nascent mass culture industry had succeeded in manufacturing a certain vogue for black culture in the parlors of white America—especially for the culture of the so-called “New Negro,” the one who wrote distinguished literature, sang venerable spirituals, or performed polite concert music in tie and tails. But towards the culture, especially the musical culture, of the *other* “new” negroes, the faceless masses who had lately swarmed to the northern cities, white America was considerably more ambivalent (though every bit as fascinated). About Afro-Caribbean people there were particular doubts. West Indian emigration to New York had begun in earnest after 1900, and had increased appreciably during the decade following World War I, when Harlem's growing reputation as *the* Black Metropolis made it a cosmopolitan mecca for blacks from across the diaspora.<sup>7</sup> Some decades later, as Malcolm Gladwell and others have remarked, industrious West Indians might more frequently be held up by whites as exemplars for their shiftless, native-born cousins. But in the 1920s, long before that stereotype was fully formed, prominent voices in the xenophobic national debate over immigration policy argued that the country's race problem was already vexed enough without admitting still more unassimilable negroes (some of whom, like the notorious Garvey, might well be troublemakers, to boot). And anyway, relations between native-born and West Indian-born blacks were famously thorny, especially in New York City, which by 1930 had some 40,000 to 50,000 first-generation Caribbean immigrants—at least 25% of the black population of Harlem—and perhaps another 80,000 or so of the second generation. Culturally, the West Indian presence was not yet so keenly felt: although a handful of émigré bandleaders, vaudevillians, and even one slightly second-rate calypsonian had been playing and recording West Indian melodies in New York since about 1915—usually disguising them as “Latin” tunes or as comic novelty songs—their success had mainly been limited to the immigrant and export markets. West Indians' prominence in the business, professional and political spheres was all out of proportion however, and this made them the targets of considerable resentment and scorn (bizarrely, one of the taunts hurled at them was “Jewmaican”)—as did their reputation for haughtiness and their habitual chafing at the unaccustomed crudeness of American racism. Robert L. Vann, special assistant to the U.S. Attorney General and publisher of the (black-owned) *Pittsburgh Courier*, apparently spoke with some authority when he inveighed against West Indians during an address on “The Colored Man and the Administration” at the 135th Street branch of the New York Public Library, just days after Lion and Atilla's arrival in 1934. “If you West Indians don't like how we do things in this country,” he allegedly snarled, “you should go back home where you came from. . . . We are good and tired of you . . . there should be a law deporting the whole gang of you and failing that you should be run out of Harlem.”<sup>8</sup>

African-American popular music was scarcely kinder. If they were fortunate, West Indians might appear phatically in song titles (cf. Ellington's “West Indies Stomp”),

but they were more apt to show up as the butts of ridicule and derision, as in Clarence Williams's "West Indies Blues," a wishful novelty song about a homeward-bound Jamaican immigrant that was covered repeatedly during and after 1924, the peak year of West Indian immigration (and the year in which immigration restrictions were finally imposed). Even when well-known vaudevillians and recording stars of the late 1920s such as Phil Madison and Sam Manning occasionally capitalized upon their West Indian provenance, they usually did so self-mockingly, performing songs in exaggerated accents that reinforced the popular "monkey-chaser" cliché.<sup>9</sup>

Perennial calls for harmony and solidarity between the two populations had it that if the chasm between them were ever to be bridged, West Indians would have to accept the plain fact that in white America's eyes, a Caribbean Negro was still first and foremost a *Negro*.<sup>10</sup> And an unstated corollary to this axiom, I think (though it was never explicitly voiced in 1935 or at any other time), was that in white America's ears, Trinidadians' particular brand of music was liable to be heard first and foremost as *Negro music*—not the dignified concert music and sorrow songs of which the nation had become so anachronistically enamored, but the less sedate forms that had gained ground over the preceding decade: blues and (especially) jazz. By 1935, *pace* Ken Burns, jazz had not yet been wholeheartedly welcomed into the American mainstream. Even thrill-seeking white enthusiasts were more likely to imbue it with the wanton and unruly qualities that they associated with the African-American masses who, riled by racial injustice and economic desperation, were growing increasingly insurgent in cities throughout the north. On the very heels of the first recording session of Atilla's return visit of March 1935, in fact, rather serious riots and looting broke out in Harlem—alarming enough, for instance, to prompt eight-year-old Harry Belafonte's West Indian mother to send her children to Jamaica for a few years—and white New Yorkers, according to one newspaper account, were "panic-stricken . . . as a nightmare of Negro revolt appeared to be a reality" (qtd. in Ottley and Weatherby 275). White America, then, was unlikely to be impressed by the boast of a dark-skinned West Indian (with the sobriquet of a barbarian marauder, yet) that the tropical island whose musical ambassador he claimed to be was "comin' like-a New York town."<sup>11</sup> In the fading light of the Harlem Renaissance, that is, *all* of these so-called "modern" Negroes appeared to white eyes more shadowy than ever. Pass modernity through a black filter, after all, and it comes out as the Jazz Age, with all of that epithet's ambivalent overtones of rampant sensuality and barely-contained pandaemonium.

Atilla had unwittingly struck exactly the wrong note, then. According to his wishful thinking, carnival and its music might now be suffused with middle-class virtue—sanitized, as it were, for international consumption. But for wary American whites, the whole business was liable to reek of the unwashed carnivalesque: not play-anarchy, but genuine, unreconstructed anarchy. So even if Atilla had clearly meant to pitch Trinidad as a sophisticated center of urbanity, it must have come across the plate as one more urban jungle. Though recorded calypso continued to sell steadily to Trinidadians and West Indian expatriates, it would spend several more years in the wilderness before a larger audience really began to take heed. When they did, it was for reasons that the prophet could never have foreseen.

In 1937 the four calypsonians visiting New York had come, as usual, with several numbers calculated to appeal to North Americans (“The Louis-Schmeling Fight,” “Roosevelt in Trinidad”), but it turned out to be a royal theme—the sensational abdication of Britain’s Edward VIII for the sake of an American divorcee—that quite unexpectedly caught the prurient imagination of the downtown nightclub set.<sup>12</sup> All four calypsonians composed or improvised on the topic—one reportedly had patrons at the Ruban Bleu standing on their chairs, applauding his *extempo*—but it was the version recorded by The Caresser, with its haunting, dirge-like refrain (“It was love, love alone / That cause King Edward to leave de throne”), which emerged as the popular favorite, eventually becoming the year’s top-selling calypso outside Trinidad. By a fluke, Decca suddenly found itself sitting on gold—if not in terms of dollars, then at least in terms of publicity and marketing potential. (The record industry had begun to rebound in 1937, and calypso might now conceivably aid its resurgence.) Finally, it seemed, calypso *had* arrived, and calypsonians seized the next opportunity, their recording session of 1938, to resume the public relations campaign they’d had to abort three years earlier. They would be careful not to make the same mistake twice, though: if America was in fact searching for a *new* “New Negro,” a less threatening, more assimilable one (one who’d emerged not into jazzy modernity, but into bourgeois respectability), then calypsonians would be happy to assume that role.

“I’m sure you are expecting something will be said by me / About the sweet land of liberty,” Atilla and Lion obligingly began their showpiece offering of 1938, “Guests of Rudy Vallee.” The duet rosily rehearsed (and embellished) their triumph of four years previous, when America’s foremost whitebread entertainer had given them his stamp of approval, and when, in case anyone’s memory needed jogging, they had “broadcasted on the WEA / [and] The American public of their reason was bereft.” Caresser, meanwhile, reprising the old “prophet spurned” theme (“So you see my name figures everywhere / I mean in England, New York, don’ talk ‘bout here”) and concluding that living well was nevertheless the best revenge, signified on his own rather more recent celebrity by cataloguing the purported fruits of his newfound fame: fine cigars, tailored suits, luxury sedans, an attractive girlfriend, the latest in electrical lighting . . . and a bungalow in suburban Port of Spain (“The More They Try to Do Me Bad”). In contrast to Atilla’s up-to-date inventory of three years before, however, such creature comforts were no longer to be parsed as signs of Trinidad’s accession to the modern world. And it’s the final item on Caresser’s list, which to American ears must have seemed an incongruously modest component of an otherwise swank fantasy, that drives this point home.

The bungalow already had a brief history in calypso as a recurring motif: two years earlier, for instance, in the middle of a fairly formulaic *lavway* (a simple, antiphonic form that harkens back to calypso’s roots in carnival stickfighting songs, and that typically expresses defiance in the face of aggression—this particular tune, in fact, was the B-side of a calypso castigating Mussolini for his invasion of Ethiopia), Radio and Lion had chanted this throwaway couplet: “I mean to buy a bungalow, we got plenty money / Boy-oy-oy, tell them we ain’t fraid nobody” (“We Ain’t Fraid”).<sup>13</sup> As in Caresser’s catalogue, the figure makes for a slightly bizarre boast, and since

lavways aren't noted for their thematic development, it remained for the moment isolated and unelaborated. But once they'd piqued the interest of white New York, calypsonians figured out how to put this folksy trope to work—and in 1938 it was fairly working overtime. Growler opened with "I Want to Rent a Bungalow"; Lion and Caresser upped the ante with separate versions of "I Am Going to Buy a Bungalow"; Atilla demurred ironically with "I Don't Want No Bungalow"; and dance-orchestras followed up with instrumental covers. In all of the sung versions, the speaker breezily lays forth his ambition to take occupancy of his dream-home and install a catalog of standard amenities: a pretty companion, some musical instruments, and plenty of brand-name merchandise like Simmons beds and Zenith radios.

Gordon Rohlehr, who is perhaps the pre-eminent scholar and historian of calypso, fits this spate of compositions squarely within a tradition of wishful, self-glorifying fantasies, extravagant boasts of the good life accruing to calypsonians as a result of their supposed power, prestige and material success (Rohlehr 239–43)<sup>14</sup>—and in the context of a domestic audience in Trinidad, that explanation makes good sense. But something else is clearly going on, as well. For in all of these numbers, the calypsonians take inordinate pains to flaunt their international currency, particularly their experience and familiarity with the United States. (Lion: "I want a trip to America / But me liquor mus' be from the Mermaid Bar.") Heretofore a foreign stamp of approval might have been just one more way of lording it over the clodhopping hicks back home. But in the preceding year, after all, calypsonians had finally hooked a much bigger fish, and this year they'd reeled it in all the way to Trinidad. (In 1938 Decca condescended to come to the Trinidadian source—so as to mine more efficiently the raw material to be processed in its U.S. plant, one suspects—and a carpetbagging RCA Victor showed up to stake a claim, as well. The arrival of the American record companies created a local media sensation.) So calypsonians may indeed have been flinging old boasts towards the folks at home—but now, acutely aware of a second, more prestigious, and potentially more lucrative audience, they also spun them in a different direction for export consumption.

In this light, their fetishizing of the bungalow was supremely canny, as it couldn't have resonated more deeply with the yearnings of depression-era Americans, who had just concluded a thirty-year-long mania of bungalow-building.<sup>15</sup> Gustav Stickley's *Craftsman* magazine and a slew of house-plan books had made "bungalow" a pop-culture buzzword by at least 1910 (about the same time that *Good Housekeeping* poetically immortalized it in a "Bungal-Ode"), and well before the mid-1930s, its initial incarnation as a leisure-class holiday haven had been thoroughly suburbanized—thanks in large part to developers' well-orchestrated promotional campaigns all across the country. (One of these included a catchy jingle declaring California the "land of the bungalow.") Sears, Roebuck and Montgomery Ward, meanwhile, took responsibility for transforming bungalows into a truly mass-market phenomenon, shipping hundreds of thousands of them as mail-order kits while pitching them as the repository *cum* proving ground of all of the newfangled consumer goods (sold separately, of course) that must surely fill modern living with ease and contentment. In short, the bungalow embodied America's anxious longing for domestic comfort, security and seclusion—or at least it cloaked the country's infatuation with machines and gadgets in a mantle of homespun simplicity. This was just the kind of cozy



sentiment that Tin Pan Alley had exploited again and again over the preceding decade or so, most notably in Gene Austin's syrupy 1927 signature tune, "My Blue Heaven," a multi-million-selling hit that was covered throughout the 1930s by popular singers both black and white (including Bing Crosby, a particular idol of The Lion). "Bungalow of Dreams," recorded by Frankie Masters in 1928, paints the picture succinctly:

Our little love nest  
Beside a stream  
Where red, red roses grow  
Our bungalow  
Of dreams

Far from the city  
Somehow it seems  
We're sitting pretty in  
Our bungalow  
Of dreams<sup>16</sup>

Against such a backdrop, the calypsonians' seemingly humble desire to settle down and share in this dewy-eyed, apple-pie dream invited a charitable interpretation: if jazz and the blues were still somewhat unruly and in need of a healthy dose of domestication, then here was evidence that calypso had been domesticated *already*.<sup>17</sup> It could be understood, naturally, that their bourgeois ambitions were being advanced in a fanciful sort of way; if calypsonians had seriously proposed that Afro-Trinidadians integrate Long Island or Westchester County *en masse*, the conceit would never have flown. Never mind, too, that wholesome romance was undoubtedly the farthest thing from their minds, and that their semi-transparent bachelor fantasies of mooching off housebound sugar-mamas—far more scandalous than Edward's ultimately boring marriage to Mrs. Simpson—could easily have backfired by playing into white America's more lurid stereotypes about black men. The genius of these calypsos is that they used the coded language of class as a diversionary tactic to draw attention away from race. In this way their composers could and did get away with mimicking a suburban lifestyle to which they weren't necessarily aspiring.

And at any rate, the popular press considerably spread more benign impressions. By August of 1938, calypso had attracted enough attention that *Time* boldly proclaimed a calypso "boom" in New York, noting that records previously found only in the darkest depths of Harlem were now available at four midtown shops. A year later, *Newsweek* reported that sales had reached "fad proportions," and the *New Yorker* and the metropolitan dailies also weighed in on the trend, with *Life*, *Billboard* and *Modern Music* bringing up the rear.<sup>18</sup> And if these accounts occasionally tended, unhelpfully, to dredge up the louche image that calypsonians had been simultaneously cultivating and disowning back home, they also graciously seized upon a kind of familiar difference that set calypso apart from any black music known in the States. American journalists were particularly delighted by the "rich British" accent "peculiar to West Indian negroes," which gave them an odd but disarming whiff of gentility. (In

particular, one suspects, it provided a comfortingly audible illusion of their obeisance to the civilized authority of the British Empire.) These negroes and their peculiar ditties might be faintly curious, such amused condescension seemed to say, but you had to admit that they possessed at least the trappings of refinement—a quality which could only make them seem all the more unlikely to stir up the sort of trouble their their rawer American cousins had been brewing.<sup>19</sup>

This distinction was crucial—though it had been a close call. A slightly earlier story in *Collier's*, belatedly surveying the “race music” phenomenon just weeks before the calypso “boom” was officially sounded, had quite blithely (and unconventionally, in terms of the orthodox schema of record-company segregation) lumped calypso together with other sorts of *domestic* “race” records, categorizing it in passing as an eccentric branch of the same “colored” clan to which all savage peoples (including cajuns and hillbillies) evidently belonged. The bizarre family tree was elliptically sketched over several paragraphs:

The best colored singer since Bessie Smith is said to be Georgia White, and it is in this field that some of the most remarkable records are made. There are colored numbers so strictly African and special that nobody but a Negro could understand them or appreciate them. When Sleepy John Estes does his own Negro compositions, they seem to be in another language. The melodies are strange, the words are like something out of a voodoo chant and the manner of delivery is such that they make no sense whatever to the untrained white mind. . . .

Among the novelty records are those made by the Calypso people in the West Indies [that primitive tribe!], the Cajuns of Louisiana and Corny Allen Greer and his band (Crichton 25).

So if West Indians in general had long resisted the cajoling of their American counterparts to accept their lot as “Negroes”—if they had resolutely ignored, as Malcolm Gladwell has put it, the categories on which American racism depends (Gladwell 75)—then it was now correspondingly imperative, under the circumstances, for calypsonians to distinguish their musical and poetic production from that of black Americans, in order to dodge the incoherent marketing category “race music.” (Never mind the “ethnic” or “foreign” market, which as things then stood occupied a kind of commercial no-man’s land.) The events of 1935, if nothing else, had obliquely taught them that they could afford very little blurring of the boundary-lines, let alone such extreme foreshortening as *Collier's* had done. They couldn’t be African-blues-jazz-voodoo-cajun-hillbilly-negroes; they had to be something else. And luckily the complaisance of the journalistic pack, its smarmy identification of calypsonians as *West Indian* negroes, helped them to become that something else. By embracing calypso, then, mainstream America could temporarily displace its fear of a black planet onto a quaint, exogenous culture that it then saw happily “bungalowed”—suburbanized, domesticated and contained for mainstream consumption.

And consume, the mainstream did. Beginning in 1938, midtown Manhattan record shops hastily assembled calypso albums for the throngs of bewildered neophytes. (It

was still too early—but only by a couple of years—for pseudo-authoritative liner notes by white know-it-alls.). Several new labels mushroomed overnight, scrambling to get into the act both by poaching established calypsonians from Decca and by pawning off inexperienced West Indian expatriates of questionable talent as authentic calypso stars. One genuine (though derivative) calypsonian, Wilmoth Houdini, who'd been toiling in relative anonymity in Harlem for a dozen years, was profiled in *The New Yorker* (Mitchell) and invited to sing at the opening of the 1939 World's Fair. Finally, in September of that same year, Max Gordon hesitantly booked a bevy of calypso singers for a short gig at his up-and-coming nightclub, the Village Vanguard. (See Johnson, as well as Hill *Calypso* 161–62 and Hill "I Am Happy" 79–83.) Nightly receipts doubled in ten weeks, and calypso remained a fixture there and in other clubs, uptown, downtown and out-of-town, for much of the next decade. Over the same period, one local calypsonian provided radio commentary for WNYC on the 1940 Democratic convention; Caresser presided over a Caribbean music program for several years on CBS Radio; pop stars like the Andrews Sisters, Ella Fitzgerald and Louis Jordan all scored huge hits with calypso (or ersatz calypso) covers; two calypso extravaganzas (featuring dancers Pearl Primus and Katherine Dunham, respectively) had short but notable runs on Broadway; and calypsonians played several well-publicized and critically successful dates at Town Hall, Carnegie Hall, and the Brooklyn Academy of Music.<sup>20</sup> By the time calypso finally caught the attention of Hollywood in the early 1940s (Lion's "Ugly Woman," a number he'd sung on the Vallee radio show in 1934, was the first to make it to the screen), the U.S. was by one estimation the genre's biggest exporter, by another its biggest export market. Either way, it had become the crucible of what Paul Bowles, writing in *Modern Music* in 1940, doubtfully labeled a "hybrid novelty for Pan-American consumption" (154).

While Bowles' sniffiness might be attributed to his well-documented preference for exoticizing his ethnic Others, calypsonians themselves had reason to be equivocal about attaining such a "hybrid" status. For one thing, some of their initial American reviewers had been taxonomically lax. The same writers who'd been so gratified by the quasi-British accents were often eager to toss calypso in with a string of interchangeable exotic diversions like tango, rumba, hula, or (after Carmen Miranda's celebrated arrival in 1939) samba—a misapprehension that the calypsonians, who ordinarily prided themselves not merely as entertainers but as serious wordsmiths, were for the moment somewhat reluctant to dispel. When they played along, however, it was not entirely under duress: they repeatedly capitalized on cartoonish representations of their country's folkways (in such a way as to clarify how far beyond such backward superstitions they themselves had evolved), and they cheerfully colluded in the production of generic, idealized images of Trinidad aimed squarely at the tourist trade (see, e.g., Rohlehr 179–82). And no matter how much it may have galled them to be passed off as This Year's Novelty Act, it can only have flattered their self-styled sense of worldliness to be viewed as "Pan-American." Indeed, what Bowles had intended as a lament for a lost purity in the calypso form (a presumptuous sentiment seconded by Gama Gilbert in the Sunday *New York Times*) ironically echoed a wonderfully baroque and debonair fantasy recently spun by Caresser ("Ruby Canera"). In a mile-high party in a luxury airship, he and his sweetheart would drink

champagne in the company of movie stars, nimbly dancing the Continental and the Suzi-Q while being serenaded by the likes of Ellington, Armstrong, and Crosby. An astonished Fred Astaire, meanwhile, would stand agape on the sidelines, while “at las’, we’ll dance an’ sway / Back home in a Pan America airway.”

Less than a decade after their initial embarkation in New York, then, calypsonians effortlessly spanned the continent and the hemisphere; and in hindsight, at least, that had been their master plan from the start. The first wave of West Indian migrants had entered America during an era of profound anxiety over race and its role in national identity, a time when anti-immigrant paranoia rose to dizzying heights. But that same era had also been marked by the vibrance, visibility, and vitality of black cultures—with whose labor the very notion, not to mention the machinery, of mass culture was engineered and built. The first cohort of calypsonians, by contrast, arrived just as that cumbersome machinery was in dire need of maintenance and adjustment: when the record industry—especially the “race” record industry—had collapsed, and consequently when all sorts of experiments in the cultivation of audiences, the manipulation of tastes, and the manufacture of markets for new products were being conducted in the twin capitals of mass culture, New York and Hollywood. Lion and Atilla, calypso pioneers, had cannily anointed Vallee (who after all had a foot on both coasts) as their shepherd across this parlous terrain. He was, they averred, “so charmed with our ethnic harmony” that “[h]e took us in hand immediately / ‘You boys are wonderful!’ by Rudy Vallee we were told / ‘You must throw your voice through the radio to the whole wide world.’” They responded to his exhortation, and cleverly. By broadcasting their “charming” ethnicity<sup>21</sup> while simultaneously exploiting a powerful metaphor in America’s symbolic lexicon—professing what could at least be mistaken for unobtrusive middle-class aspirations—calypsonians managed to short-circuit the cultural machinery by which black people’s ambiguous status within the American nation was then being decided.

They were, arguably, victims of their own success. As it happened, almost all of calypso’s landmark achievements in the 1940s, in clubs, on screen, on wax, and over the airwaves, were also stages in its makeover for a paler American audience. To fill a sudden overwhelming demand in New York, for instance, the bandleader-entrepreneur Gerald Clark built a stable of local calypsonians who could be on hand full-time and year-round; they were second-raters for the most part, but most Americans wouldn’t be able to tell the difference. This precedent opened a Pandora’s box for later generations of promoters and record producers who would take calypso farther and farther from its geographic roots. One of Clark’s creations, in fact (an admittedly *sui generis* case named Sir Lancelot), influenced Harry Belafonte—who, for better or worse, would after 1957 forever stand in the American mind as calypso incarnate.

From one point of view, then, it might look as though American mass culture unwrapped calypso as flavor-of-the-month, chewed it till the taste was gone, and stuck it to the underside of its chair (or worse, swallowed it whole). But it should be remembered that Lion, Atilla and the other calypsonians of the 1930s had their own agenda, as well. True, they were out to “get paid,” and they were no strangers to the financial perils of migrant labor. But they were also out to finesse the process whereby blacks of all nationalities were warily, selectively, grudgingly, integrated into the

American nation. They were jockeying, that is, to position calypso as one of the many (black) genres shaping American culture, all the while charting a course across the somewhat unpredictable racial schemas of the 1930s and steering clear of the problematic status that blacks had been assigned in the U.S.

Now obviously, there were complex social, cultural, and economic explanations for the fizzling of the Harlem Renaissance and the doldrums in the race records market. But part of the problem, I think, was that culture-industry moguls hadn't quite known how to exploit what was even then shaping up to be a *mixed* black vernacular. What calypsonians did—both as migrant cultural workers and self-professed cosmopolitan (but also “organic”) intellectuals—was to help American enterprise refine an experiment it had conceived only dimly. The key lay in the Pan-African dimension of the Harlem Renaissance, an idea to which participants and commentators alike had mainly given lip service. Calypsonians' cultivation of a *Caribbean-American* identity, that is, was an ingenious attempt to make good on the “Tropical” assets of New-Negro New York. Ideally their scheme would let them both reinflate the stock of black cultures in general (by diversifying transnationally, as it were), and make an end run around the dead-end nativist categories on which the failed—or at least stalled—idea of “race” records had been built. If domestic black vernacular culture was even in the mid-1930s still a trifle too hot for a truly mass market, then calypso (along with other “exotic” imports) might create a sort of international buffer zone.

Granted, as Michael Rogin puts it (in speaking of a rather different group of immigrants), such achievements, far from serving as successful examples of “cross-over culture,” ordinarily “[move] settlers and ethnics into the melting pot by keeping racial groups out” (qtd. in Seymour 35). But that sober assessment doesn't fully fathom the cross-cultural motives of the exceptionally heady affair under consideration here. Calypsonians were not exactly aiming to “cross over,” but rather to cross things up. Mainstream America, as I've suggested, may indeed have temporarily adopted a racially-different Caribbean cultural form as an anvil on which to hammer out certain unsettled aspects of its national identity. But in turn, calypso's sophisticated class of migrant workers aimed to use their art as cultural capital with which to influence, deflect, and negotiate all such appropriations. By acquiring a small franchise on the cultural kitchen that increasingly set tastes and menus for large portions of the world, they decisively changed the flavor of its melting-pot stew—however bland and denatured record companies were determined to make things by the late 1950s, when even the Norman Luboff Choir had a calypso album or two. That is, calypsonians slyly fulfilled Atilla's proleptic tropical prophecy of 1934 by pouring Caribbean culture into the American mix, quietly ensuring that the latter's brand identity thenceforth be relabeled as *Pan-American*. Calypso, moreover, would eventually have to be reckoned as one of a slew of black genres, domestic and foreign, fuelling what had already become a transnational American pop culture. Having briefly but effectively worked the levers of an in-house entertainment machine whose arms extended across the globe, calypso—decades before the coining of the term in the mid-1980s—had the dubious and redoubtable distinction of engineering a commercial market for “world” music.

Such phenomena are of course not immune from questions of power, struggle, and co-optation.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, in view of the history of the intervening years, we can now scarcely utter such hoary terms as “world music” (never mind a mouthful like “transnational American pop culture”) without also muttering “cultural imperialism.” That calypso underwent its first vogue in the U.S. at just the moment Roosevelt was scheming to take over Britain’s possessions in the Caribbean is a complicating irony that didn’t escape calypsonians’ notice; and it should remind us once again that the dusky modernity Americans hadn’t wanted to hear about from Atilla in 1935 (let alone DuBois in 1900) had always, for peoples of color, marched in lockstep with racism and empire. During and after World War II, in particular, the “world” music that calypso had helped midwife became increasingly complicated by geopolitics. (Calypsonians hadn’t exactly crossed any *international* color line, either, as it turned out; they’d merely hashed it up, as well.) In fact, on the political futures charts, calypso was a leading postcolonial indicator. The Andrews Sisters’ profitable wartime fencing of stolen calypso goods (not to mention the takeover of Trinidad’s economies—fiscal, cultural and sexual—by resident American G.I.s, a conquest that the original “Rum and Coca Cola” blisteringly lampooned) neatly prefigured a postwar changing-of-the-guard, whereby America would become caretaker of the waning British Empire while Trinidadians would continue to work for the Yankee dollar. Atilla may once have been eager to claim Trinidad’s ticket to the modern world, yet at the end of the war it was he who presciently analyzed that world’s imminently neo-colonial character: the Americans, having traded fifty derelict destroyers for some of the choicest real estate in Trinidad (on which to construct their naval bases), “did as they pleased” for a number of years, then unceremoniously decamped, “[leaving] blue-eyed babies behind.” And having thus scored—and scored a bargain—America would thereafter perpetuate not a military but a consumer-cultural hegemony. In retrospect, that is, the soldierly presence was only a crude prototype for the periodic, transitory invasions of *tourists*, often sex-tourists, who were now coming to purchase pre-packaged photo- and phonographic fakeways to take back home. Today, Atilla glumly concluded, “we don’t know who are masters in this land / If it’s the English or the American.” In the blank interior of what Gordon Rohlehr dubs a “transitional space between imperialisms” (360), Atilla’s calypso—bleakly entitled “No Nationality”—maps the bumpy terrain of a would-be “post”-colonial identity, whose dominant sensibility reads like a migrant, transnational version of DuBois’s double consciousness, crafted over a decade and more of sailing back and forth to America, dextrously navigating the reefs of its popular and commercial forms.

Now that my story’s done, I’m not altogether sure what lessons it offers for the present day; my initial claim that the whole affair would be somehow “instructive” was perhaps just a way of warming to my subject. Yes: migration, as Philip Kasinitz reminds us, has historically been not just a crucial survival strategy for West Indians, but a primary means of building a pan-Caribbean social selfhood (19–20). And insofar as entertainers can be counted as “activists” in the public sphere, calypsonians undoubtedly played a vanguard role in articulating, via mass-cultural channels, such a usable public identity. But in some ways I think this episode is just as important for

how it deepens our understanding of calypso's formal history. Every generation of commentators both in and outside the Caribbean—including present-day scoffers at “world music”—has ritually clucked its tongue over calypso's supposed betrayal of its authentic folk roots, its self-sullyng absorption of non-indigenous commercial influences. Yet calypso in its modern incarnation (from roughly the turn of the century onward, that is) has always been commercially-oriented, always creole and cosmopolitan, always “compromised,” shaping and re-shaping itself according to bourgeois imperatives and market forces; this is in great measure what *made* it “modern” (see, esp., Cowley). From at least the moment that promoters moved calypsonians out of the streets and barrack-yards of Port of Spain and into admission-charging tents, their emphasis was on exploring and exploiting the commercial possibilities of an erstwhile folk form. Making calypso a “world” music was merely the latest stage in that process. Lion and Atilla (along with King Radio and Lord Beginner) had first been sent out in search of markets in 1933, touring the Caribbean in what looks, in hindsight, like a warm-up for their foray into America the following year. And as for the U.S. market, calypso had been cultivating it since the first luxury-liners put into port in Trinidad in the early 'teens. Since the preceding century, moreover, calypso had casually sopped up all sorts of American musical influences, from spirituals and minstrel tunes to vaudeville, popular song, and jazz. So if, by the end of World War II, calypsonians had figuratively speaking bought the bungalow (as West Indians did quite *literally* two decades later, when they snapped up not only the row houses of Flatbush and Crown Heights, but also the cottages of western Long Island), then buying into a dodgy proposition like “world music” amounted to just one more mortgage payment.

Such payments, furthermore, needn't come at the expense of structural or formal impoverishment, especially seeing as how calypsonians, adept in the art of the double-entendre, routinely played formal device against functional sense. Consider, by way of analogy, that the interior accoutrements of the bungalow, however rustic things might appear from the outside, were in point of fact *très civilisés*; and that like the calypso, the craftsman cottage itself eventually morphed into a craftily-designed, mass-market ware. The bungalow might be regarded an ironic talisman of modernity, then, representing that aspect of the modern which is historically, vestigially—perhaps schizophrenically—*anti*-modern. And irony, commercially and poetically speaking, is calypsonians' stock-in-trade. Forswearing his usual role as modernity's cheerleader, Atilla uncharacteristically begins another duet from the late 1930s, “Modern Times,” as the spokesman for a lost organic past. Trotting out two stanzas' worth of chestnuts about biblical centenarians and the degeneration of the species, he primly ponders whether, all things considered, life wasn't richer when “man lived closer to nature,” before the advent of “electricity and trains, radio and aeroplanes.” But it's his partner, Lion, who has the last word—or rather, word-from-our-sponsor—with a string of advertisements for ultramodern living that deflates Atilla's solemn hand-wringing with plummy, understated wit:

King Solomon in all his glory  
 Wasn't happier than me  
 (Why? Because) He couldn't take a diesel truck and travel far,  
 He couldn't drink at the Railway Bar  
 There was no new appeal[?] in any serious case  
 And Green Pastures butter he couldn't taste  
 So Atilla, say what you may,  
 But give me the modern times every day!

Between the two of them, then, Lion and Atilla walked both sides of the street. And to Lion's mind, Trinidad most definitely *was* comin' like a New York town. The tropics really *were* in New York. And welcome or not in this new-fashioned neighborhood (prefabricated in America with the help of migrant labor), they were planning to settle in and stay a while.

#### NOTES

1. *Mutatis mutandis*: the bungalow's origins are in British Bengal, where colonial officials adapted and expanded upon an indigenous style of dwelling, transforming it into a private, single-family retreat where delicate English sensibilities could sequester themselves from the barbarous ways of the very "natives" whose vernacular architecture they'd seen fit to appropriate. And well before its migration across North America, the bungalow stood as a shelter from the adverse circumstances of modern living: the noise, stench, and mechanization—and, of course, the denizens—of the urban metropolis.  
 In the wake of 9/11, of course, nativist ire (and Justice Department persecution) has been directed overwhelmingly at Arab nationals and Arab-Americans, not Blacks, Asians or Latinos. It's relevant to recall, however, that in Spring 2001, when census figures confirmed that white Californians now constitute a simple minority of the state's population, many national news stories expressed thinly-veiled alarm that the same trend would soon overtake the country as a whole.
2. See, e.g., Ginell, as well as Oliver 281. Since British Decca had already built an independent empire of international music beginning in the 1920s (consisting of roughly a dozen different genres, precision-targeted at as many different colonial markets), U.S. operations may simply have been the next logical step in their imperial plans. Ronald Foreman notes (199–200) that another urban black genre with which Decca had recently begun experimenting, double-entendre "erotic blues," had reportedly sold quite well among whites, much to the company's surprise.
3. The anecdote is repeated in many sources; in this instance, as with many other factual details throughout this essay, I'm indebted primarily to the excellent research of Gordon Rohlehr and Donald R. Hill. (Hill's helpful survey of calypso in mid-century New York, however, appeared in 1998, after this essay was first drafted and all primary research was complete.)
4. Atilla allocated an effusive stanza to the bandsman in a 1935 calypso, "Sa Gomes' Emporiums," devoted primarily to praising his principal sponsor, Eduardo Sa Gomes: "Our accompany [sic] is a clever lad / Mr. Gerald Clark from Trinidad / Who has organise' an orchestra / That is tearing brass in America."
5. "Iere Now and Long Ago." Iere is an archaic appellation for Trinidad.
6. From one point of view, Atilla hardly had to insist. Paul Gilroy's well-known argument in *The Black Atlantic* has it that if alienation and dislocation are the principal features of the modern condition (and slavery and empire, the preconditions of Euro-American modernity), then Africans and their descendents in the Americas have long had an intimate and privileged knowledge of that condition. Others such as Stefano Harney have gone on to claim that Caribbean nations in particular were "born modern," with migration and displacement their



- defining, normative experience. Like so many creole forms, calypso, the quintessence of Trinidadian culture, is a cultural practice born of continuous circulation—first folk, then urban, then transnational.
7. I've gleaned these facts and many others in this paragraph from Kasinitz (esp. Chapters 1 and 2)—and from Kasinitz's principal source for such material, Reid. The most thorough study of early Caribbean immigration, and of relations between African Americans and Afro-Caribbeans, is Watkins-Owens.
  8. The incident was widely reported and bitterly protested; I have relied upon the account in the *Philadelphia Tribune* ("West Indians"). Vann flatly denied having made the remarks, and was apparently never reprimanded by his superiors, who said only, in response to formal objections, that he was "one of our best men in this department" and that he had merely been "misunderstood" ("Vann Denies Affront").
  9. This previous generation of tomming West Indian entertainers would have furnished the calypsonians an ambiguous education on how to cash in on their ethnicity in the American market, then. A more instructive example was provided by an earlier expatriate bandleader, Lionel Belasco. As Hill makes clear in *Calypso Calaloo* (170ff.), Belasco had a prescient understanding of the promise of mass culture and a well-developed talent for merchandizing Trinidadian folklore—especially for claiming authorship and copyright of what were in fact West Indian folk melodies, and for stealing lyrics and tunes composed by performers less sophisticated than he in business law.
  10. See, e.g., Floyd J. Calvin's series of 1928 symposia on West Indian-American relations, begun in the *Pittsburgh Courier* for March 17 and syndicated in all the major black weeklies.
  11. Of course, inasmuch as violent labor riots were also flaring up across the West Indies in the mid-1930s, Atilla's refrain had an unintended resonance: New York town was, from this perspective, coming shockingly like-a Trinidad. The Caribbean strikes were rooted largely in black oilfield workers' poor working conditions and their pointed exclusion from massive oil profits. Yet while Atilla was scarcely unaware, politically or poetically, of either the dark side of modernity (industrial pollution, economic depression, personal alienation) or the inherent ambiguity of his chosen symbols of material progress (even in the triumphalist "Iere Now" he notes cryptically that "Pointe-A-Pierre, which is lost in obscurity / Now possesses a giant oil refinery")—and while, moreover, he maintained throughout his career a sharp internationalist sensibility—such issues were scarcely what he wanted to foreground as a savvy international self-promoter.
  12. It should be noted in passing that this crowd was no longer composed of the genteel class who had rendezvoused in pre-prohibition "night-clubs." According to a *New York Times Magazine* story on the remarkable rebirth of nightclubs in the city, patrons now consisted largely of randy businessmen from the sticks whose travel was facilitated by low depression-era train fares, in addition to the "slummers" who had trekked uptown to Harlem for illicit thrills throughout the 1920s (Crowther 1937). (Ads in both the New York dailies and the Harlem weeklies confirm that black female burlesque dancers, usually with faux-exotic stage names, featured prominently on the showbills of the new clubs.)
  13. Legendary discographer Dick Spottswood has recently borrowed this tune's title for an accounting of calypsos recorded on Decca in the 1930s and 1940s.
  14. Materially, anyway, such success was almost wholly imaginary, not least because the record-shop impresario Sa Gomes retained the royalties from all record sales. Calypsonians did leverage their 1934 record deal into a doubling of tent admission fees in the run-up to Carnival, however. And as Rohlehr points out (123), recording represented (at least in theory) the fulfillment of a kind of American dream for the calypsonian: a dream of at last becoming self-sufficient, of making a living as a professional instead of laying-about and cultivating the image of a hard-living dandy. In this respect, Rohlehr concludes, the calypsonians really were losing their lower-class loyalty and re-orienting themselves towards the bourgeois ideal of individual success.
  15. My account of the rise of the bungalow in America owes its details to three fine sources: King, Duchscherer and Keister, and Winter.
  16. Jerome Kern had also notched an early hit in 1917 with his improbably-titled showtune "(A Little) Bungalow in Quogue." It's perhaps of passing interest to note that there are striking rhythmic and melodic echoes of "My Blue Heaven" in Lion's "I Am Going to Buy a Bungalow"; the latter, a jaunty foxtrot unlike most latin-tinged, minor-key calypsos of the day, could almost be sung in counterpoint to the former.
  17. That the bungalow stood for the anti-urban was in this instance doubly important, since riotous negroes, obviously, were indelibly linked with urban ghettos.

18. Sales of calypsos reportedly amounted to some 30,000 for 1938. By any standard (including that of just a few years earlier), this was hardly phenomenal, but in the desperate slump of the late 1930s, it was indicative of a hopeful trend. For the articles mentioned, see, under Works Cited, Bowles, "Calypso Boom," "Calypsonian Crescendo," Mitchell, and "Old calypso songs."
19. One is reminded of an anecdote in Claude McKay's memoir *A Long Way From Home* repeated by Irma Watkins-Owens. Caught in a police dragnet of alleged African-American vagrants in Pittsburgh, McKay testifies before a magistrate after a night in jail. Upon hearing that McKay is Jamaican, the judge dismisses all charges and reprimands the arresting officer for his lack of discrimination. Henceforth McKay dryly resolves "to cultivate more my native accent" (qtd. in Watkins-Owens 5).
20. A long-lost recording of one of the Town Hall Concerts, promoted by folksinger Pete Seeger's left-leaning "People's Songs" cooperative, was recently unearthed and issued on CD by Rounder Records ("Calypso at Midnight" and "Calypso After Midnight").
21. Don Hill ("I Am Just Happy" 77) hears the line as "rhythmic" rather than "ethnic" harmony, and there is sufficient ambiguity in the somewhat unintelligible phrase to support his version. Obviously, for my purposes, "ethnic" yields the more suggestive reading.
22. For a later variation on a similar theme, see Michelle A. Stephens' illuminating "Natural Mystic," about the posthumous marketing of Bob Marley. As a "natural mystic," says Stephens, "Marley offers an image of blackness that has helped to preserve a *North American* identity built on the [imagined] integration of racial differences" (142, *emph. in original*). "[T]he central thrust of twentieth century American popular music," Stephens quotes the epigrammatic Charles Shaar Murray as saying, is "the need to separate black music (which, by and large, white Americans love) from black people (who, by and large, they don't)" (151).

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