

## **#LeaveSheAlone: Feminist hashtag activism and Carnival popular culture in the Caribbean**

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### **Abstract:**

In 2017 Caribbean activists initiated the campaign #LeaveMeAlone and #LeaveSheAlone in response to a high-profile murder and peak in violence against women. The hashtag refers to the song 'Leave Me Alone' marking the comeback of the iconic calypsonian Calypso Rose, who has denounced women's oppression throughout her career. Feminists have used the hashtag to campaign against gender-based violence and raise awareness on issues of consent. This paper firstly discusses how Calypso Rose's symbolic power unfolds and is appropriated in the local negotiation of trends such as popular and celebrity feminism. Secondly, the focus lies on the visual media practices of young women who have used the hashtag. #LeaveSheAlone's strong presence on Instagram invites investigation of how visibility is negotiated in terms of both the objectification of female bodies, and the body as a site of agency in Carnival. Calypso Rose as signifier and the diverse forms of user participation, also give insights into how the increasing incorporation of Caribbean Carnival into neoliberal regimes structures the wider context for the hashtag, thereby magnifying, contesting and marginalising different feminist voices.

**Keywords:** Caribbean feminism, cyberfeminism, hashtag activism, Caribbean Carnival, #LeaveSheAlone, visual practices, visibility

### **Introduction**

Hashtag activism has become an established tool for feminist activists and movements. Since #MeToo was trending in 2017, this form of digital activism has received much public attention as well as media coverage, often promoting the belief that hashtag feminism is a strategy easily accessible to women worldwide and suitable to voice their experiences of oppression and resistance. However, recent research has highlighted inherent inequalities in

hashtag campaigns and movements. Their focus on selected phenomena as well as the dominant role of celebrities who become associated with them often obscure the efforts invested in earlier, predominantly local and grassroots movements paving the way for online and global campaigns (Arriaza Ibarra 2019; Paiva 2019). Furthermore, many women are excluded from participating in hashtag campaigns based on class, ethnicity, racialised and other intersecting identities, as well as lack of access, skills and support in using technologies, including the fast changing language and online practices of feminist movements (Mendes et al. 2019: 20).<sup>1</sup> In particular, power asymmetries have been revealed in campaigns including social actors of the Global South, who often become submerged into neo-colonial and imperialist discourses (Khoja-Moolji 2015; Maxfield 2015).

In the Caribbean, young women's participation in global and local hashtag campaigns is situated in complex power dynamics generated by the region's history of a forceful incorporation into early globalisation processes. As a researcher and digital activist herself, Tonya Haynes points out that Caribbean cyberfeminists' practices can be seen as interventions in 'dominant configurations of both feminism and digital spaces as Northern/Western, white and bourgeois' (2016: 10). Thus, feminist digital activism reflects an acute awareness of positionality as well as racialised and geopolitical marginalisation, which can be related to awareness of interconnectedness as a general trait of globalisation (Eriksen 2007: 6). In this regard, it can be said that 'the world has become more Caribbean' (Pertierra and Horst 2009: 107) and the cultural practices that constitute Caribbean media worlds are emblematic for globalisation (Ibid: 101). Our understanding of hashtag activism benefits from a contextualisation that considers historically generated cultural practices and dynamic negotiations of technology in the local context.

Based on a media anthropological approach, I will discuss an example of a Caribbean feminist hashtag campaign and its inherent negotiation of wider trends in contemporary feminist movements, such as celebrity feminism, the (new) centrality of popular culture and trafficking in feminism (Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer 2017). This paper focuses on the Caribbean campaign #LeaveSheAlone/#LeaveMeAlone, which emerged in the 2017 Carnival season. Trinidadian feminist activists used the hashtag to raise awareness of gender-based violence in Carnival spaces and mobilise support for the annual march on International Women's Day. The campaign refers to a song by iconic calypsonian Calypso Rose and Soca star Machel Montano, which subsequently has been called a 'feminist anthem' in media and public discourses.<sup>2</sup> By drawing on the irrefutable symbolic power of Calypso Rose, who is the female pioneer in a male-dominated genre and looks back on an almost 70-year-long career, it sought to bridge differences between age groups, generations of feminists as well as social divides. While feminist activists initially mobilised for participants to share personal experiences in the form of testimonial hashtags, #LeaveSheAlone/#LeaveMeAlone took another direction and the caption was widely circulated as a slogan in form of a poster, its hard-copy and T-Shirt prints. As I will argue, visual aspects and visual performativity tied to the Carnival space became foregrounded, corresponding with the preferred social media platforms of participants that reflected a trend towards using Instagram for activism.

As Kaitlynn Mendes, Jessica Ringrose and Jessalynn Keller state in their recent landmark study of digital feminist activism including hashtag campaigns, an approach solely based on digital artifacts is insufficient (2019: 6). Following their orientation towards understanding digital feminisms ‘through social and cultural processes and their entanglement with technologies’ (Ibid), this paper will contextualise the results of content analysis and in-depth textual analysis of Instagram posts through a discussion of celebrity power, wider public discourses and ethnographic research on digital media practices.<sup>3</sup> By documenting the development of the #LeaveMeAlone/#LeaveSheAlone campaign, it also seeks to contribute to the ‘mapping’ of Caribbean Cyberfeminisms as proposed by Haynes (2016). The analysis gives insights into how young women have used the hashtag and whose voices are magnified, contested and marginalised.

### **Caribbean feminist movements and hashtag activism**

Caribbean feminist movements have incorporated a wide variety of online media and practices from blogs and Facebook groups to online petitions and YouTube campaigns. In her seminal paper ‘Mapping Caribbean Cyberfeminisms’ (2016), Haynes highlights the diversity and multiplicity of voices in online feminism. The Caribbean in the context of digital networks can be all at once ‘regional, national, and global, or transnational and diasporic’ (3). In contrast to this heterogeneity, Haynes also identifies a predominance of feminist academia as a power divide that is evident in Caribbean cyberfeminisms. Digital and academic spaces overlap to a large extent and inequalities based on class are thereby often reinforced (Ibid: 7f). This can be seen as a continuation of the dilemma that feminist activists have faced in mobilising across the stark social inequalities characterising the region.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, it also indicates the culturally constructed meaning of activism and political participation in social media platforms (Sinanan and Hosein 2017), which differs considerably from the otherwise enthusiastic embrace of digital technology and social media across social groups (Pertierra and Horst 2009; Miller and Slater 2000; Miller 2011).

Generally, hashtag campaigns have mainly been used by young women as a tool for their activism. Similar to the dismissal often experienced by young feminists using digital technology in other local contexts (cf. Keller 2015: 48ff), this generation of feminists in the Caribbean has been struggling for acceptance. Especially regional hashtag campaigns have brought these generational differences between age groups as well as within feminist movements to the fore. Up to date, the most visible hashtag campaign in the Caribbean context is #LifeinLeggings. The caption refers to leggings as a piece of clothing that signifies youth and their specific experiences of sexism. It was started by Ronelle King in Barbados in 2016 and spread to other parts of the Caribbean, including Trinidad and Tobago, Jamaica, Belize, Antigua and Barbuda, Saint Lucia, Grenada, Guyana and The Bahamas.<sup>5</sup>

Hashtag campaigns and especially #LifeinLeggings have considerably contributed to an acceptance of digital activism within Caribbean feminist movements. Using the hashtag, participants shared their daily experiences of sexual harassment and violence in personal accounts on Facebook and Twitter. On the one hand, the campaign followed the global

trend towards testimonial hashtags. On the other hand, it was speaking to the context of the Caribbean as users highlighted culturally specific forms of sexism and often drew on implicit shared knowledge and linguistic markers.<sup>6</sup> Framing his discussion with King, researcher and activist Amilcar Sanatan (2017) refers to #LifeInLeggings as an example of youth-led organising. He emphasises that many young voices turn to alternative and popular sources to develop their feminist consciousness, often online. Reflecting on the impact of the hashtag campaign, Sanatan concludes that such initiatives have the potential to reach beyond academic spaces due to their immediacy: 'Whether young people are gaining political consciousness online or offline and policy makers respond to each sphere differently, there is an unquestionable impact made by those who use all fronts to meet Caribbean people where they are' (2017: 340).

Moving beyond the dichotomy of online and offline activism also allows to consider the manifold activities that digital campaigns and movements entail. Haynes highlights WOMANTRA as a significant example of a Caribbean online community that started with a Facebook group and moved to internationally funded mentoring projects for secondary school students with their partner organisation Sistah2Sistah (2016: 3). The #LifeInLeggings campaign inspired activities such as an exhibit of the St. Augustine Campus of the University of the West Indies titled 'Wall of Justice #LifeInLeggings' as well as the founding of various non-profit organisations continuing the activism on the ground (Sanatan 2017: 32).

Hashtags and the publics they created have also been used to mobilise for feminist events offline. #LeaveSheAlone was launched to raise awareness of gender-based violence in Carnival spaces as well as to mobilise for the annual march on International Women's Day 2017. The campaign was a collaboration between the three organisations Say Something, TogetherWI and CariMAN. The first announcement on the Facebook site 'Say Something Space' stated that Calypso Rose had given permission to use her song. Following #LifeInLeggings and other movements, users were invited to share personal experiences of street harassment and violence in Carnival spaces, as well as positive memories of feeling safe and protected by communities: 'LeaveMeAlone & LeaveSheAlone are rallying cries against those who harass or want to control women, and they are also serious calls to all of us, especially men, to step up and help us create safe spaces and a safer Carnival for women' (Say Something Space Facebook, 7 February 2017). The campaigners shared a number of videos featuring interviews with citizens, artists and celebrities who supported the cause. Subsequently, a poster displaying the captions was shared more widely. It was also made available as a screen saver, printed on t-shirts, bags and other merchandise, and distributed in daily newspapers in the run-up to the Women's Day march. Thus, the offline presence of the hashtag campaign in public spaces and at Carnival events expanded.

Significantly, the campaigners combined the lyrics of 'Leave Me Alone' by Calypso Rose with the phrase 'Leave She Alone' in the captions, which was continued in the printing of posters and T-Shirts. This intentional twist to the original song lyrics refers to Trini variation of English and reflects the consciousness of activists about their marginalisation in the wider global and digital sphere. While posts with the hashtag #LeaveMeAlone are

submerged in a wide pool of campaign-unrelated content, they might have made users beyond the Caribbean aware of the campaign. The second caption #LeaveSheAlone displays a clear identification with Caribbean identity emphasising difference through the linguistic marker. Based on her research on blogs, Haynes argues that strategies of Caribbean cyberfeminists in response to experiences of marginalisation in feminist and digital spheres reflect ‘an understanding of themselves as speaking across a divide that contains differently identified feminists and a sensitivity to communication as key to emancipatory practices’ (2016: 11). The second caption of the hashtag campaign can thus be related to insisting on qualifiers as a key practice for rhetorical empowerment.

Based on my content analysis, content related to the Women’s Day march (promotion, preparation, participation and memories) and the poster together make up the largest number of posts with the hashtag #LeaveSheAlone on Facebook and Instagram. A considerably smaller number of posts with the hashtag are related to other feminist issues, such as high profile kidnapping or murder of women<sup>7</sup> and a case of cyberbullying.<sup>8</sup> Another marginal phenomenon is the use of the hashtag by Carnival Mas’ bands, who were promoting their costumes and packages (unlike those bands using the opportunity of the campaign to express solidarity and their commitment to provide safe spaces for participating women). The last two categories can be understood in terms of the ‘slippery-ness’ that is quite common in hashtag campaigns. Mendes, Ringrose and Keller discuss a variety of ways from users adapting to current events to ‘hijacking’ a hashtag for their own purposes (2019: 69ff). While it is common for Mas’ bands to use song lyrics as a promotional strategy online, the use of #LeaveSheAlone exploited the reach of the campaign beyond their established target groups for commercial profit. In contrast, the slippery-ness of content related to feminist issues in the widest sense but not directly related to the campaign, rather illustrated the spectrum of women’s oppression and the interrelation between different forms of gender-based violence – from the liberation sought by a female Caribbean travel writer to street harassment and murder cases of women in the region.

For #LeaveMeAlone, it is significantly more difficult to determine the number of posts due to the sheer number of content shared every day under the hashtag. Generally, activists and participants tended to share their posts with both hashtags. In the following I will discuss two aspects in more detail, firstly the role of Calypso Rose and how the use of her symbolic power for the campaign can be related to celebrity feminism, and secondly the shift towards the visual and how hashtag activism is negotiated in cultural practices of the local context.

### **Carnival and the symbolic power of Calypso Rose: contextualising the ‘popular’**

Feminism in popular culture and more recently popular feminism have become central to understand contemporary feminist movements. As Sarah Banet-Weiser points out, there is a variety of feminisms circulating in popular culture embedded in hierarchical relations of

the attention economy (2018: 1). The popularity of feminism today is intertwined with the increasing impact of celebrity feminism as well as digital networks (Ibid: 18; Hamad and Taylor 2015: 126). Celebrities such as Beyoncé, Emma Watson or Taylor Swift Pop who claim a feminist identity have been discussed in terms of the neoliberal feminism they represent as well as the unprecedented number of young women reached thereby – including research that shows how the latter negotiate the meaning of feminism and celebrities in their responses (Keller and Ringrose 2015).

In hashtag activism, public figures and celebrities play a crucial role in amplifying campaigns. Their impact has been critically examined, showing the problematic that their privileged position in the attention economy often results in drowning out voices of activists with less access and marginalised based on class, race, gender and other factors. The most prominent example is the attention primarily white female celebrities received in the #MeToo campaign, while the phrase had been used by Tarana Burke, an African American woman who had spent a decade in grassroot activism for the empowerment of young women. Drawing on this example, Banet-Weiser discusses the relation ‘between a consenting popular feminism and one that is more resistant’ (2018: 16) displaying the struggle taking place in the sites of the ‘popular’. Similarly, global power inequalities manifested in the twist the #BringBackOurGirls campaign took when Western celebrities joined the campaign and the Nigerian originator was replaced by an US American based activist in dominant media discourses (Maxfield 2016; Loken 2014). Situating these power dynamics of hashtag campaigns in the wider context of the ‘economy of visibility’, the concept of ‘traffic in feminism’ by Sarah Banet-Weiser and Laura Portwood-Stacer (2017) is useful to highlight how specific iterations of feminist ideology are reproduced in the context of increased visibility and popularity: ‘the traffic in feminism does more than just turn feminism into a product; it shores up the ideological nexus – ‘meritocratic’ neoliberal individualism, white supremacy, etc. – that allows some women and their version of feminism to achieve visibility and rewards in the market’ (886).

While these trends towards celebrity and popular feminism have a significant impact in the Caribbean, it is indispensable to consider how they are embedded in cultural practices and a multiplicity of power relations. In his groundbreaking ethnographic research in Trinidad, Daniel Miller has shown how consumption, technology and hegemonic cultural products are negotiated in complex ways (1995; 2011). Similarly, Anna Pertierra argues that forces such as neo-liberalism and postfeminism can only be unravelled by grounding the analysis in the local context and power relations, which entails both ‘broadening out’ and ‘narrowing in’ on examples of practices in specific communities (2015: 195). Therefore, my media anthropological approach firstly focuses on the historically generated configuration of the ‘popular’ in the local context and Carnival as the immediate frame of reference for Calypso Rose’s celebrity power.

For centuries, popular culture has served as an alternative public sphere in the African diaspora of the Americas. For enslaved Africans, music, dance and performative practices were an essential means of communication and resistance in the face of

oppression and racial segregation (cf. La Rose 2019). After Emancipation as well as Independence, they continued to provide political participation to large parts of Caribbean societies who remained marginalised from arenas of formal politics. In the postcolonial nation of Trinidad, the yearly festival of Carnival carries the legacy of this subversive power of popular culture (Ibid). As one of the most prominent Carnivals in the region, it also stands out due to its characteristic promotion of diversity and inclusion rooted in the multi-ethnic constitution of the island's society.<sup>9</sup> The genre of Calypso is known for outspoken and critical social commentary that has shaped political discourse – Black Stalin called the calypsonian 'the people's watchdog/elected for life'.<sup>10</sup> It has also been a central site of gender politics, reflecting ongoing debates and changes in society. In her discussion of gender politics and Calypso, Patricia Mohammed shows that despite the abundance of sexist tropes in the male-dominated genre, artists as well as audiences have also contested patriarchal power. Moreover, she highlights how calypsonians have played an important role in sharing information on women's legal rights and how especially female artists have represented the experience of gender-based violence in public discourse (Mohammed 1991).

Calypso Rose is a female pioneer of the genre and has shaped it fundamentally throughout her 65 year-long-career. Entering the scene as a teen in the 1950s, she has won every prize the competition-oriented Calypso community awards. Her success culminated in repeatedly winning the people's choice Road March, which forced the committee to rename the title of Calypso King to Calypso Monarch. As Hope Munro argues, her upbringing and personal experiences played an important role in becoming a critical voice on sexism, racism and other forms of oppression. As Linda McCartha Sandy, she was born in Tobago to the family of a Spiritual Baptist preacher, but grew up with relatives in Trinidad where she had access to a better education and the bustling cultural scene of the capital Port-of-Spain. As she revealed only recently, she was raped in her teenage years and as a survivor ceased all sexual relations with men (Munro 2016: 96ff). In 2011 the artist also identified as a member of the LGBTIQ community and publicly acknowledged being married to a woman.<sup>11</sup>

Calypso Rose's songs and performances express female sexual desires, thematize women's experiences of gender-based violence and highlight the situation of disadvantaged groups such as domestic workers (Ibid.; Guilbault 2007). According to Jocelyne Guilbault, the artist has never explicitly referred to herself as a feminist but has been 'acting as a feminist' throughout her career (2007: 105). This can be considered as a 'vernacular feminism' promoting women's rights and autonomy in and through Calypso and Carnival culture (Ibid). Based on her study with popular women musicians, Munro concludes that calypsonians 'participate in a vernacular feminist project that resists domination while at the same time inspires audiences to question the relations that cause domination in their own lives' (2004: 50).

Based on the significance of social commentary in the calypso genre and the role of popular music to negotiate gender politics, it is not surprising that gender-based violence was in the spotlight of the 2017 and 2018 Carnival season. As the authors of a study

documenting the peak in the cases of sexual violence and murder of women note, music and Trinidadian popular culture showed an almost immediate reaction, commenting on the political issues and social aspects of violence (Prakash et al. 2019: 373). Furthermore, the high-profile murder of a Japanese steel pan player on Carnival Tuesday of the previous year led to intense debates on 'victim-blaming' and protest against the mayor of the capital, resulting in his resignation and a general shift in public discourse (Haynes 2016: 1).<sup>12</sup> Consequently, the focus of the #LeaveMeAlone/#LeaveSheAlone campaign was on consent and bodily integrity of women in Carnival spaces. The lyrics of Calypso Rose's song speak to these issues: 'Boy doh touch me/ Like you goin crazy/ Let go me hand/ Lemme jump up in d band/ I don't want nobody/ To come and stop me' (Leave Me Alone, 2016). The hashtag LeaveMeAlone/LeaveSheAlone encapsulated Calypso Rose's symbolic power drawing on decades of struggle for women's rights and autonomy in Carnival and beyond. Thus, it served to further legitimise online feminist activism and to situate hashtag activism as a relatively new form of protest firmly in the local context.

On the other hand, the success and outreach of the song relied heavily on the celebrity power of another artist, namely Soca star Machel Montano. While calypso and other elements of traditional Carnival are increasingly under pressure to survive in a commercialised, tourism-oriented cultural industry, Soca music is the dominant contemporary genre. Machel Montano impersonates the current assemblage like no other artist. He is not only looking back on a highly successful career since he began performing at the age of 9, but also owns various brands and ventures related to Carnival. His persona seamlessly shifts from partying Mr.Fete to spiritual monk and at some point Bollywood musical hero.<sup>13</sup> Thus, he appeals to a wide range of audiences and his feature contributed to 'Leave Me Alone' becoming one of the top hits of the season. Although Calypso Rose celebrated a comeback based on her international cooperation with Manu Chao, Montano's support propelled her into the field of younger audiences who were less familiar with the calypsonian.

However, this also meant that as an iconic figure Calypso Rose has been incorporated as never before into the neoliberal order. The commodification of Carnival culture has substantially weakened its subversive legacy, and forms of protest are increasingly appropriated by commercial interests. Nevertheless, the 'theme of resistance' can still be found in the way women claim public space and contest patriarchal control in today's masquerades (Henry and Plaza 2020: 12). Similarly, Gabrielle Hosein, the head of the Institute of Gender and Development Studies in Trinidad, stated in her comment on 'Leave Me Alone': 'It's the largest movement of women in Trinidad and Tobago seeking autonomy and self-determination around their sexuality and their bodies, in opposition to a particular kind of respectability politics... purely for the joy and pleasure they experience. One can see those goals as highly political in our world today' (Washington Post, 26.02.2017).<sup>14</sup> In the course of adapting to the contemporary commercial events of Carnival, Calypso Rose hosted her own concert 'SoCalypso – Rose in Concert' in the Queens Park Savannah on 24 February



2017, sharing the stage with Machel Montano as well as feminist activists of the #LeaveSheAlone campaign – an unexpected combination.

Discussing her memories of the night, an activist emphasises in conversation that the moment felt like an acknowledgement and sign of impact of her work. As a self-identified feminist, Renelle is involved in a wide variety of online and offline movements.<sup>15</sup> In her reflections on digital feminism, the negotiation of generational differences takes centre-stage. Before we turned to discuss the hashtag campaign, she mentioned the scepticism on behalf of mentors and older feminists towards her long-standing engagement with digital media that made her doubt the ‘authenticity’ of her activism. In recent years, she has witnessed a fundamental shift in attitudes and a broad acceptance of social media. Another theme in our conversation is the translation happening between online and offline spaces. In her experience, hashtags can ‘jump out’ of social media onto paper, which was the case with #LeaveMeAlone and #LeaveSheAlone:

Also when there was the march and I made my sign and all of that, I included the hashtag (...). That is how I do my activism, because I really try to keep it relevant. So when I do a sign, I would probably use a Soca lyric or probably something that happened from Carnival and have that on my poster (...). I made a sign for [my friend], and I told her, tell me your experience. I don’t wanna just make it for you and give you it to hold, you tell me (...). I felt that it was part of our messaging and our stories of sexual harassment and what we know of it that connected that hashtag and that movement to the everyday regular experiences of young women.<sup>16</sup>

References to songs as well as hashtags can be read here in terms of immediacy and grounding in the local context. Furthermore, International Women’s Day is tied to Carnival due to the closeness in the annual calendar, also resulting in the seasonal limitation of the campaign.

Carnival as the wider environment evidently has shaped the hashtag campaign. The typical quick response to social issues such as violence against women as well as the temporal practices of the seasonal event comply with its goals. On the other hand, the current process of commodification and incorporation into a neoliberal regime are also reflected. Notably, the meaning of Calypso Rose as the central signifier of the campaign is negotiated along gendered notions of class and race according to the logics of the cultural economy. Calypso has long been associated with working class culture as is the vernacular feminism discussed above. However, moving into Carnival spaces that are increasingly characterised by an exclusion of large demographic groups and the demarcation of public space based on consumption power, her celebrity power is redirected to middle- and upper-class audiences. While hashtag campaigns seemed a promising way of reaching beyond the limitations of academic feminist spaces (cf. Sanatan 2017), class divides tend to be

reinforced as Calypso Rose's celebrity power is recontextualised and detached from its working-class legacy.

Intersections of power dynamics structuring Caribbean Carnival and feminist activism also become visible in the poster segment of the campaign. Initiated by the group TogetherWI, the launch of the poster as a visual aid for the hashtag brought another celebrity-like figure into the spotlight. The fashion designer and entrepreneur Anya Ayoung Chee became a highly visible activist as a public figure in Carnival and popular culture. In 2011, she won Season 9 of 'Project Runaway' and competed in the 2008 Miss Universe beauty pageant. During her participation in the pageant competition, an explicit video was leaked. The following scandal forms part of her celebrity persona and can also be seen as a powerful subtext in the campaign protesting against gender violence. Using her substantial follower base, she contributed to the visibility of the campaign beyond established feminist groups. Her first post about the #LeaveSheAlone has 6475 views. Subsequently, more visual content referring to Anya Ayoung Chee was shared, including photographs of her meeting Calypso Rose, still frames and extracts of TV interviews with her on the campaign and other promotion. Moreover, international press coverage frequently highlighted her as an activist and quoted from interviews. This is significant as it complies with the foregrounding and privileging of the light-skinned, ethnically ambiguous female body in globalised Caribbean Carnival (Gugolati 2018: 248)). In stark contrast to Calypso Rose as an Afro-Trinbagonian woman who has continuously emphasised her personal and artistic African roots, this results in a racialised re-configuration of the celebrity signifier in the campaign.

Further, the t-shirt segment of the campaign can be related to global trends of the commodification of feminism. Comparing t-shirts and hashtags to the growing market for books and brands in this regard, Banet-Weiser and Portwood-Stacer (2017) argue that these products are not problematic in themselves. However, the feminists who directly benefit from them are usually from a privileged background that enables them to successfully navigate capitalist and gender regimes. Although it does not protect representatives from being affected of violence themselves, the traffic in feminism advantages popular feminism 'that seems to explicitly recognize that inequality exists while stopping short of recognizing, naming, or disrupting the political economic conditions that allow that inequality to be profitable' (886). The authors identify white cisgender women as the privileged who are more visible and earn rewards. In the context of the Caribbean, however, it is important to note that the market is rather limited and in highly diverse, postcolonial societies like Trinidad power axis and racialised identities are more complex. As is evident in comments on posts by TogetherWI and others, the distribution of t-shirts and other merchandise in local retail shops was announced. Users also questioned how profits would be used, such as 'Hey I love the message! Are any of the proceeds going to women's foundations or charities?' (TogetherWI Instagram, 03.03.2017).<sup>17</sup> The combination of Ayoung Chee's public visibility and the poster and t-shirt campaign might have reproduced an iteration of feminism in the local context that is perceived as elitist and privileged in its proximity to whiteness. Thereby, the subversive potential of activism can be undermined, as Haynes

argues with regard to the proximity of feminist academia and Caribbean cyberfeminism that often reinforces rather than challenges asymmetric power relations (2016: 7f).

In conclusion, the #LeaveMeAlone/ #LeaveSheAlone campaign is embedded in the contemporary Carnival assemblage and its power dynamics that are reflected in the celebrity power of Calypso Rose, Machel Montano and Anya Ayoung Chee. Their symbolic power is a resource in the struggle of young women engaged in the politics of visibility. Calypso Rose's song continues to be used by activists and women's rights campaigns, one of the latest example being a YouTube campaign entitled 'Leave us alone' by the United Nations to stop street harassment, featuring young women from a variety of backgrounds who share their personal experiences.<sup>18</sup>

### **'Leave us alone': visibility and vernacular feminist practices**

Initially, #LeaveMeAlone/#LeaveSheAlone was intended as a testimonial hashtag campaign, but the testimonial mode did not take hold. In the beginning, campaigners published video messages of support by celebrities as well as by citizens. The launch of the poster further solidified this use of the hashtag as businesses and individuals shared it to express their support of the campaign. It also offered an opportunity for men to show solidarity, which had been a declared goal of the campaign (Say Something Space Facebook, 7 February 2017). However, the call for personal accounts did not resonate and in contrast to #LifeInLeggings hardly any stories were shared with the hashtag. Moreover, Twitter and even Facebook became secondary to Instagram as a preferred platform of participants. This shift towards the visual also enabled vernacular practices in the use of the hashtag by young women (or those identifying as such in the digital sphere), which provide insights into how technology and digital activism are negotiated in the local context.

As the majority of research on hashtag activism focuses on the Global North and in particular the Anglophone regions (Arriaza Ibarra 2019), there is a tendency of universalising 'effective' strategies and means of political participation. Rosemary Clark-Parsons argues that hashtag feminism differs from other forms of personal politics due to the way of telling and connecting stories online: 'a hashtag's narrative logic – its ability to produce and connect individual stories – fuels its political growth' (2016: 2). While this might apply to some of the most successful and visible campaigns, it is also based on a Western logocentric perspective. As I discussed with regard to #LifeInLeggings, the testimonial mode can also contribute to the marginalisation of young women's voices who lack a feminist support network or are exposed to the scrutiny of competing patriarchies in online spaces.<sup>19</sup> Testimonial hashtags can be particularly challenging for participants in small societies, such as most island states of the Caribbean, and activists have to find ways to make their campaigns effective in these conditions.

Similarly, political participation and activism is often conceptualised within one-dimensional frameworks. In their assessment of digital activism in the Caribbean, Pearson Broome and Emmanuel Adugu conclude that in the Caribbean no powerful digital movements have emerged comparable to the Arab Spring and Occupy Wall Street. The

authors identify prohibitive policies and lack of information infrastructure as well as institutional structures for implementing changes as reasons, but also ‘a culture of path dependency and a lack of civic and digital literacy’ (2015: 16f). However, this lens of formal politics often dismisses the significance of vernacular practices for political participation. In contrast, ethnographic research has shown how political participation and the use of social media is negotiated in the local context. Hosein and Sinanan (2017) argue that Trinidadian users, especially in rural areas, tend to deliberately withhold participation in political causes on social media, which is rooted in the rejection of the hypervisibility of being an activist. In navigating visibility online, maintaining ‘good relations’ is prevalent to participating in political action in the context of small and tight-knitted communities. Adversely, activism is associated with ‘the logics of carnival and bacchanal, the legacy of colonial biopolitics and spectacle’ (Ibid: 8). Although these insights cannot be directly applied to other social groups, it highlights the cultural construction of activism and how it is situated in social relations. In a comparative study on the use of Facebook, Miller and Sinanan argue that subversive practices of Trinidadian users are located in visual display and ‘the body is used as a site of resistance in social and political movements, riots and protests’ (2017: 162). In Trinidad, visibility and visibility are thus crucial constituents of protest. Therefore, the shift towards Instagram in the #LeaveSheAlone campaign implies the suitability of the platform for the ‘visual language in which Trinidadians are entirely fluent’ (Sinanan 2020: 48) as well as the increasing role the platform holds in Carnival’s digital life.<sup>20</sup>

In the following two examples of Instagram posts the visual spectacle of the female body takes centre stage. The first example shows a video of three masqueraders on the road, who sing along to Calypso Rose’s song.<sup>21</sup> Similar to shared pictures of women dancing in the crowds of Carnival spaces wearing the ‘Leave Me Alone’ shirt or publicly visible figures like Anya Ayoung Chee in full costume with campaigners, the video of the masqueraders is characterised by immediacy. Users thus mediate a performative visibility tied to the ephemerality in Carnival culture. In the second example, the curvy body of a woman is depicted walking away from the camera and the (female identified) user who shared it asks for respectful admiration of her body using a variety of hashtags, including #LeaveSheAlone. The male gaze and its trajectory of respectability politics are disrupted explicitly in such posts. While this example employs a female subject position and way of looking, others are featuring a male perspective expressing appreciating or protective dispositions towards women’s autonomy in Carnival spaces. The close analysis of the two posts shows how visibility is negotiated in terms of objectification and the female body as site of agency for women.

In the video post, various strategies are used to relate the immediate experience of Mas’ and Carnival to the hashtag campaign. Hashtags specify the context and mediate the Carnival space. Firstly, time and space are established by the location indicator stating Queen’s Park Savannah, which is one of the major hubs of Carnival in the capital Port-of-Spain, as well as by the hashtags #carnivalmonday and #carnival2017. Visual elements in the video underscore the direct participation, most prominently the sound system in the

background that is typical for the Mas' band trucks. Secondly, the recording starts with the sound of the lines following Calypso Rose's 'Boy doh touch me...', with the three women singing along. The calypsonian and Machel Montano are also referred to by hashtags. The meaning of the song is not only related to the campaign through the explicit reference to #internationalwomensday, #leavemealone and #leaveshealone, but major themes such as consent, women's autonomy and bodily integrity are also mediated in expressive hashtags such as #triniwomensweeet, #handsoff and #lookbutdonttouch, as well as the caption of the user that reads 'we doh wuh nobody... to come and touch we... oh how I love this clip'.

Although the Carnival Monday costume is less spectacular than the ones for the final day, the masquerader's appearance in the video identifies them as participants of the so called 'bikini-and-beads' Pretty Mas. This contemporary and dominant form of Mas' is primarily associated with young women. As Frances Henry and Dwaine Plaza point out, it forms a central element of Caribbean Carnival's commodification, including the use of images for touristic promotion. At the same time, this display of the female body is intrinsically connected to the socio-economic rise of women since the 1980s, primarily of middle-class background with access to education and well-paid occupation, who demonstrate their empowerment and financial independence through playing Mas'. The authors argue that the body is the site of resistance and dance, performance and visual display are the expression of a feminist movement (Henry and Plaza 2020: 13). Within this framework, the use of the hashtag can be seen as an appropriation and reconfiguration of this digital form of activism in the existing practices of feminist protest in Carnival spaces. It relies on a performative visibility that is not only created by the display of the female body in visual content, but also in the comments of digital onlookers. Similar to the spectators and bystanders on the road offline, the participation of other users plays a significant role. Thus, for example, comments on the video post signified the shared experience of singing along together 'Jus leave we alooooooooooneeeeeeee!!! Lol!!!'. The spectacle of the female body is addressed by the desiring gaze of a (male-identified) user asking 'Who is the sexy guh ina red', while another (female identified) shows appreciation by tagging her comment with #JustGoregous.

Consequently, performative visibility is a strategy of using #LeaveSheAlone to express protest and demands of the campaign through visibility. It shows the potential of hashtag activism with the body as the central site of resistance and meaning making, which nevertheless follows the principle of the feminist personal politics of the testimonial mode. Based on her extensive ethnographic research on Pretty Mas', Maica Gugolati argues that 'bikini and beads' costumes signify a fundamental shift from playing an external character under the theme of the carnival band towards 'play yuhself': 'the claim 'to play yuhself' reacts to the enactment of a labelled representation of the costumes, and becomes a claim of self-authorship and the self-narration of a personal story' (2018: 169). However, it is important to note that this self-expression is reserved to those who can afford to participate in the 'bikini and beads' Mas' bands – once access to the parade is gained through the

purchase of a costume the bodies on display are guarded by a private security apparatus and increasing militarization carving up public space (cf Guilbault 2017).

In the second example, the display of the female body can also be framed in performative visibility as a cultural practice. However, it differs significantly from the masquerader's video post in mediating the Carnival space online and establishing scopic relations. In contrast to the first example, this post does not include any specifiers of time and place. The picture was shared in November 2017, which means it could have been a throwback memory or the experience of another site of the Caribbean Carnival annual cycle. The use of the hashtag is therefore removed from the immediate context of the campaign, but its meaning remains situated in online Carnival spaces. Elements of the photograph provide signifiers of the road, such as the costume of the woman in the foreground, a drinking cup in her hand that is usually provided by Mas' bands, the rope of security and spectators in the blurry background. The hashtags in the caption mediate the soundscape of the Carnival site, referring to the lyrics of a song by Kerwin Du Bois, reading 'dat #bumpa is too real, #itdangerous'.

However, in this case the image is not a self-representation of the user in this setting, but the perspective of the onlooker. The gaze is directed at the body of the masquerader and, in particular, her buttocks through a series of hashtags: #bottomallovaderoad, #bigbattygyal, #sexybamcie, #curvy, #hippy. Further, the pleasure in looking at the female body on display as part of the Carnival experience is signified by the following #derealing and #Carnivalsweetness. The beholder of the gaze thus identifies as a participating insider, which is reinforced by linguistic markers in the hashtag ('all ova', 'gyal', 'de real ting') as well as the shared embodied knowledge of previous seasons in the song references. While the song lyrics of 'Too Real' by Du Bois comply with the male objectifying perspective on the female body frequently featured in Soca music, the following two hashtags pose an intervention. With the underlying meaning of the feminist campaign and Calypso Rose's symbolic power, the hashtags #leaveshealone and #dontboddashe assert women's autonomy and power through visibility. From the subject position of a female-identified user they also signify the solidarity and shared space that Pretty Mas' constitutes, where women take pleasure in looking at each other, being looked at and wining with and on each other.

Without the opportunity to discuss the post in detail with the user, it is impossible to know how closely this intervention is tied to knowledge about and experience of the campaign. What is for certain is that the hashtag #LeaveSheAlone has become part of Carnival's symbolic repertoire and is used to re-create the celebration and protest of Carnival 2017, similar to songs of previous seasons. In this example, the hashtag is a tool to disrupt the objectifying male and Western gaze in the mediation of the female body as visual spectacle. The respectability politics that women rebel against in Pretty Mas' are historically rooted in colonial discourse and European notions of beauty and lifestyle forming a normative heterosexual, middle-class culture in the local context (cf. Brereton 1979). Furthermore, digital platforms such as Instagram and Facebook govern visibility

through contemporary conceptions of what is deemed appropriate or against user guidelines. In recent years, the marginalisation based on Western standards has manifested in the blockage of Carnival pictures by and of women.<sup>22</sup> Performative visibility as a feminist practice is directed against respectability politics in Trinidadian society as well as the power inequalities structuring the use of social media platforms.

In conclusion, unravelling the structural forces as well as agency of users in the two examples shows how hashtag activism is renegotiated in the local context. My analysis focuses on performative visibility as an alternative to the testimonial mode, which narrates through the body as site of resistance and is grounded in historically generated cultural practices of Carnival. Although the examples are not representative of the majority of #LeaveMeAlone/#LeaveSheAlone posts and rather pertain to a marginal phenomenon in the context of the campaign, it is essential to recognize such renegotiations and 'vernacular' feminist practices that go unnoticed when the lens of formal politics and normative forms of political participation is applied.

## Conclusion

Due to the fact that digital activism has become a firmly established part of feminism worldwide, it is crucial for researchers to consider how the role of social media and digital platforms in movements differs according to cultural context, global and social power relations as well as historically generated media practices (cf. Mendes et al. 2019: 43). As the discussion of #LeaveSheAlone showed, there are dynamic renegotiations of the meaning and modes of hashtag campaigns in the Caribbean. Calypso Rose is the living reminder that 'the popular' has been the site of feminist struggle long before the current trends of popular culture's centrality and celebrity feminism. As an icon of Caribbean popular culture, her career, songs and personae form the powerful foundation for the #LeaveMeAlone and #LeaveSheAlone campaign – signifying resistance against patriarchal as well as colonial and racial oppression.

One of the major achievements of the campaign is that it created a space shared by different generations of age groups and feminists. Since hashtag activism is considered as youth-focused, it is remarkable how the campaign accommodated a wide variety of more established forms of protest, such as vernacular feminism in Calypso, the collective march on International Women's Day and the distribution of a poster in hard copy as well as on t-shirts. Although hashtag campaigns promised a means to move beyond academic spaces (Sanatan 2017), the underlying asymmetric power relations causing these limitations tend to be reproduced rather than challenged, as has been the case with other cyberfeminist movements (Haynes 2016). This is evident in the use of Calypso Rose's celebrity power in the politics of visibility of contemporary attention economy, whereby feminist meaning-making moved from the calypsonian's roots in Afro-Trinidadian, working-class identities towards privileged spaces and proximity to whiteness. I used the concept of 'traffic in feminism' to describe this process under consideration of the neoliberal regime governing contemporary Carnival and the Caribbean's marginalised position in global power dynamics.

My approach also highlights historically generated cultural practices relevant to hashtag activism in the Caribbean as well as how they dismantle or add to the exclusion of users in movements. The close analysis of two Instagram posts, focusing on a media practice I have referred to as performative visibility, shows the significance of visual language and visual spectacle to Trinidadian users. In contrast to research results highlighting the reliance of hashtag activism on the narrative logic and the culture of disclosure in text-centred platforms (cf. Mendes et al. 2019; Clark 2016), the general trend towards Instagram and the synergy of hashtags with visual practices constituting the Carnival space online raises questions about how to move beyond this lens. While the testimonial mode encouraged by campaigners at the beginning of #LeaveMeAlone/#LeaveSheAlone was hardly adapted by participants, the visual display typical of Instagram seemed suitable. The female body on display is a site of objectification as well as agency in this context, enabling a different narrative logic for feminist personal politics grounded in the concept of ‘playing yourself’ in Mas’ (Gugolati 2018; Henry and Plaza 2020). #LeaveSheAlone serves to disrupt the male and Western gaze, however, the narratives and voices who can ‘speak up’ are those who can afford to participate in Pretty Mas and are guarded by a security apparatus. The insights gained by narrowing the analysis on the practice of performative visibility and how young women make meaning of visual spectacle might also contribute to a better understanding of the impact that platform architecture and affordances have on feminist movements (Mendes et al. 2019: 71).

### **Biographical notes:**

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## Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Elsewhere they argue: 'although it may be technologically easy for many groups to engage in digital feminist activism, there remain emotional, mental or practical barriers which create different experiences, and legitimate some feminist voices, perspectives and experiences over others' (2018:237).

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the\\_americas/leave-me-alone-trinidads-women-find-a-rallying-cry-for-this-years-carnival/2017/02/26/3888f116-f9e6-11e6-aa1e-5f735ee31334\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the_americas/leave-me-alone-trinidads-women-find-a-rallying-cry-for-this-years-carnival/2017/02/26/3888f116-f9e6-11e6-aa1e-5f735ee31334_story.html), <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/music/features/calypso-rose-womad-festival-bob-marley-harry-belafonte-trump-a9002366.html>, <https://slate.com/human-interest/2017/02/how-leave-me-alone-became-the-feminist-anthem-of-carnival-in-trinidad-and-tabago.html> (last accessed 26.06.2020)

<sup>3</sup> This project would have benefitted from the opportunity to conduct more empirical research and conduct interviews with participants of the campaign. Due to the scope and limitations of the project, the data is primarily content based. However, in the analysis I draw on the ethnographic knowledge or archive developed during 18 month of field research on media practices in Trinidad.

<sup>4</sup> For example, as a leading second-wave Caribbean feminist Patricia Mohammed reflects on the challenges campaigners faced due to the social divide in the 1980s (1991: 42f).

<sup>5</sup> Subsequently, various related offline initiatives emerged such as the non-governmental organisation with the same name based in Barbados or the Tambourine Army in Jamaica combatting gender-based violence.

<sup>6</sup> In my paper at MeCCSA 2019 titled 'Speaking Up – Speaking For: Practices of Voice in Young Women's Use of Testimonial Hashtags' (09.01.2019, Stirling) I discussed how young women used local specificities in their #LifeInLeggings posts, for example, in references to public spaces, situations in taxis or Maxi taxis indicating how the precarious transportation conditions result in vulnerability for women, etc.

<sup>7</sup> High profile cases such as the murder of the young Police Constable Nyasha Joseph and TV talk show host Marcia Henville by their (ex-)partners were tagged with #LeaveSheAlone.

<sup>8</sup> Some users modified the hashtag and their variation #LeaveKuntiAlone served to defend Kunti Deopersad, who feigned her own kidnapping to be with to leave her husband and was subsequently bullied online.

<sup>9</sup> Trinidad and Tobago is often referred to as 'callaloo nation' comparing the multi-ethnic constitution of the society to a national dish, a stew of mixed vegetables. Apart from the two largest ethnic communities, Indo-Trinidadians and Afro-Trinidadians who each make up about 35 percent of the population, there are smaller communities of Syrian, Chinese and European origin. Carnival can

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be understood as a cultural form facilitating a sense of community across cultural differences – a trait that has become particularly prominent in the context of multi-ethnic Trinidad, as argued by Milla Riggio (*Carnival: Culture in Action – The Trinidad Experience*, Routledge, London, 2004).

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20171010-the-surprising-politics-of-calypso> (last accessed 28.06.2020)

<sup>11</sup> 'Calypso Rose: Lioness of the Jungle' (Pascale Obolo, 2011)

<sup>12</sup> Feminist organisations including representatives of the online group Womantra demanded the resignation of the capital's mayor, Raymond Tim Kee, after he declared the murder of Asami Nagakiya as a result of 'vulgar' behavior during Carnival and stated that women are responsible for their own safety (cf. Haynes 2016).

<sup>13</sup> In 2016 the movie *Bazodee* was released with Machel Montano in the male lead role. The romantic love story and musical film style refer to Bollywood culture in the local context, which is associated with the large Indo-Trinidadian community.

<sup>14</sup> [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the\\_americas/leave-me-alone-trinidads-women-find-a-rallying-cry-for-this-years-carnival/2017/02/26/3888f116-f9e6-11e6-aa1e-5f735ee31334\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/the_americas/leave-me-alone-trinidads-women-find-a-rallying-cry-for-this-years-carnival/2017/02/26/3888f116-f9e6-11e6-aa1e-5f735ee31334_story.html) (last accessed 26.06.2020).

<sup>15</sup> Renelle White identifies as a feminist, activist, and academic theorist. Currently, she works for The Silver Lining Foundation Trinidad as Director of Gender Affairs.

<sup>16</sup> Interview Skype, 08.06.2020.

<sup>17</sup> The group answered by thanking the user for their support and stating that at the time all revenues were used to cover production costs, but planning to generate funds for organisations: 'We are open to partnerships to facilitate this happening as swiftly as possible' (TogetherWI Instagram, 03.03.2017).

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FF1bXWt4X4k> (last accessed 28.06.2020)

<sup>19</sup> In the conference paper 'Speaking Up – Speaking For' (see endnote 6), I argued that the testimonial model excludes young women who cannot or do not want to share personal experiences. This is evident in the strategies participants of #LifeInLeggings employed to show solidarity but not tell a story on their own.

<sup>20</sup> Daniel Miller and Jolynna Sinanan provide a detailed discussion of Facebook's role in Carnival, situating the use of the digital platform in 'Trinidadian cosmology and values' (153). They reported that in the case of Facebook it used to be the norm to share photos before and after but rarely of playing Mas'. Comparable in-depth ethnographic research on Instagram or more recent features such as Stories is needed to understand immediacy and ephemerality of the digital Carnival experience.

<sup>21</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/p/BRJ9CepDazV/>

<sup>22</sup> Posts of Carnival celebrations have been repeatedly censored by Instagram based on their community guidelines. This led to protests by users, including #unblockmyculture which was blocked shortly after ([https://www.vice.com/en\\_uk/article/7xg5dd/instagram-apologises-for-blocking-caribbean-carnival-content](https://www.vice.com/en_uk/article/7xg5dd/instagram-apologises-for-blocking-caribbean-carnival-content), last accessed 28.06.2020).