

ENGENDERING THE BAHAMAS

A Gendered Examination of Bahamian Nation Making, or National Identity and Gender in the Bahamian Context

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Referendum 2002: gender and the Bahamian citizenry

On February 27 2002, Bahamians voted in a referendum to amend the country's constitution. There were several issues to be decided, but the one that caused the most debate was the question of citizenship. Under the present constitution, the way in which Bahamian citizenship is conferred on the spouses and children of Bahamian women is, to say the least, irregular. The wives of Bahamian men are entitled to Bahamian citizenship; the husbands of Bahamian women are not granted any such entitlement, and have to apply for citizenship like any other would-be immigrant. Similarly, the children of Bahamian men, whether born in the Bahamas or not, are Bahamians at birth; the children of Bahamian women have a far more complex fate. If a woman is unmarried, and has a child outside the Bahamas, her child is born Bahamian. But if she is married to a non-Bahamian, and gives birth outside the country, that child is merely *entitled to apply* for citizenship between the ages of eighteen and twenty-one, and may be refused. If offered citizenship, the child is then forced to renounce any other citizenship in order to receive Bahamian status.

The recent referendum has generated plenty of political hay, and I have no intention of adding straw to the pile. What interests me about this state of affairs is what it suggests about the way in which gender figures in the imagination of the Bahamian nation, and as such I shall use it as a case study to test the ideas I raise in my discussion. Before I do so, however, a little background about the imagination of nations, and of the Bahamian nation in particular, is in order.

Narratives of nation

In *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson discusses the “institutions of power” that solidify the nationalist enterprise. Such institutions stand atop the pervasive power of print-capitalism, which permits the conceptualization of the *nation*, defined by Anderson as “an imagined political community” whose members delineate their belonging in relation to their fellows, despite the fact that they “will never know most of their fellow-members, or even hear of them”

(1991, p6). National identity, proceeding from this imagined community, is the fictive commonality that exists among the members of a group that is too large to be otherwise linked. This commonality distinguishes the members of this group from the members of other similar groups; nations are not only imagined, but they are also “inherently limited and sovereign” (1991, p6). The trope of imagination is common throughout most theories of nationalism. The nation, together with its traditions, is “invented”; it comes into being when a conjunction of economic and social factors permit its creation; it is held together by “narratives” that identify it as a unique entity (Anderson, 1991; Bhabha, 1990; Brennan, 1990; Gellner, 1983; Hobsbawm, 1983). Indeed, the concepts of invention or imagination highlight the one assumption shared by various contemporary writers on nationalism: that, contrary to the beliefs of nationalists, the nation does not spring from some primordial origin, but is rather the result of the conscious activities of some, or all, of its members (Foster, 1995, p. 5).

In the Caribbean, settled by Europeans and the Africans and Asians they imported to work for them, nations are entirely invented. In many cases they are the creation of nationalistic intellectuals whose anti-colonial struggles laid the foundations for the nation-building that followed independence. In the Bahamas, however, self-governing since 1729, the question of a *national* consciousness was not raised much before the 1960s; what occupied the majority of Bahamians during the first half of the twentieth century was the question of *racial* equality. The imagining of the Bahamian nation began only after this purpose had been achieved.

Making the Bahamian nation

The election of the PLP government in 1967 marked a new era in Bahamian history. For the first time in three and a half centuries, the majority of the population had a government that consisted of people like themselves. The representative government that had continued unbroken since 1729 had been left intact in part because of the presence of a sizeable white minority, which meant that Britain meddled only rarely in the internal affairs of the Bahamian colony. This fact had its benefits, certainly, but ultimately resulted in a relationship between race and class in the Bahamas that was considerably different from that in the rest of the West Indies. Plantation Caribbean society is understood as being constructed in layers which marry class with race and colour, at the apex of which were a number of people of European descent, often expatriates, who governed the country. At the base were a large mass of working people who tended to be of predominantly African or Amerindian descent. In between was a buffer class consisting variously of people of mixed heritage, who were favoured over their black brethren for positions of minor influence in the society, and other groups of immigrants, such as Orientals, East Indians, people from the southern Mediterranean, and southern Europeans (Portuguese and Greeks). In the Bahamas, however, the political influence of both the black and mixed-race populations was limited. Not only were non-white Bahamians deprived of the educational and economic advantages available to middle-class blacks in British crown colonies (Craon and Saunders 1998), but the presence of a sizeable group of native whites also hindered the establishment of a significant coloured middle class. Although *social* categories were recognized in the Bahamas that mirrored the wider Caribbean model, in *political* terms racial discrimination took place along lines more common in the USA. In other words, any admixture of African blood qualified one as “coloured” and relegated one to a subordinate position in society. This discrimination was intensified

during the early twentieth century with the development of tourism and the frequenting of American visitors to the Bahamas. The victory of the PLP, then, was the outcome of a *racial*, not a *nationalist*, movement.

The PLP government, inheriting the autonomy that had hitherto existed, had one thing remaining: to imagine the Bahamian nation into being. The general election in 1972 was fought over the question of independence, and a referendum on the possibility was tied to the outcome. It is arguable that the triumphant return of the PLP to power at that time had more to do with the continuing racial fears of the majority than with any great desire for independence; the opposition Free National Movement fought the election on the grounds that the country was not yet ready for full self-government, but it did not reject the idea of independence outright. The popular interpretation of this stance was a racial one: that *black* Bahamians, led by a *black* government, were not ready for independence. Even Independence was more the outcome of racially-based competition than the result of some universal, nationalist effort.

Thus the rhetoric of nationalism that accompanied Bahamian independence in July 1973 was overwhelmingly a racist one. The perspective was binaristic, dealing with whites and blacks and making little mention of intermediate groups. The new national symbols, expressly invented in a populist way by holding nation-wide competitions for their design, were by and large meaningless to the general populace, and had to be invested with significance in the years to come. Some steps were taken to make the symbols as inclusive as possible — the new coat of arms, for instance, combined a number of images, including a miniature replica of the old coat of arms, and was inscribed with the slogan “Forward, Upward, Onward Together”. That notwithstanding, most of the nationalist rhetoric took much the same path as the Black Power movement in the USA was beginning to take; the darker one’s skin, the purer one’s status as a “true” Bahamian. White Bahamians were virtually ignored in this rhetoric, and those people of mixed heritage were increasingly marginalized. Unlike the Jamaican inclusive self-construction — “Out of Many, One People” — or the Trinidadian multicultural society, the post-independence Bahamian nationalist rhetoric created an identity that was overwhelmingly Afrocentric.

The position of women in this imagined identity, then, was crucial. It is entirely possible to read the peculiar status of Bahamian women in the constitution, their limited ability to confer citizenship on their spouses and children, as the result of a defensive position taken by a new *black* government to ensure the majority’s continued representation. After all, if that representation depends largely, if not entirely, on one’s race, then the continued propagation of that race is crucial. Women, the “reproducers” of the nation, were viewed as the vulnerable spot in the nation’s armour. By exchanging women, it could be reasoned, whites could increase their numbers, and eventually take back power from the majority. As a result, therefore their reproductive status needed to be controlled. The different definitions of “citizen” given to the children of Bahamian men and Bahamian women, therefore, could be read as crucial to the reproduction of the Bahamas as a proud *black* nation. This state of affairs was the outcome of a particular view of gender and nationhood that permitted such an understanding — a specifically masculinist, imperialistic view. This idea of woman as the guardian of the citizenry reflects a particularly nineteenth-century incorporation of women into colonial expansion — what Ann Laura Stoler refers to as the “eugenics of empire” (Stoler, 1997). In this model, the woman is regarded as the

mother of the empire/nation, and her purity is the purity of the whole. The prohibitions placed on Bahamian women's ability to pass on citizenship to their spouses and offspring may be regarded as the nation-makers' attempt to safeguard the purity of their women and, through them, the nation as a whole.

In her study of the role of gender in the invention of the Indian state, Sangeeta Ray notes what she calls "the androcentric bias of most modern national imaginings" (2000, p. 3), and observes

[i]n the variously inflected critical pronouncements on the invention, imagination, and narration of nations, the inclusion of woman under the sign of nation repeatedly lays bare the deep ambivalence of the relationship of woman to nation. (2000, p. 3)

She suggests that the uncritical incorporation of women into the construction of the nation, or indeed, of the construction of any collective, risks obscuring crucial issues of power and dominance. One way in which women are incorporated into nationalist discourses is by the use of "the ubiquitous trope of nation-as-woman" (2000, p. 3), which all too often consigns women to a system of specific and narrowly-defined roles such as the one outlined above. In this particular paradigm men are the agents of nation-making; they are active, autonomous beings, and the nation is the result of their activity. The nation as woman is *passive*, a thing that is being acted upon; it may also potentially be viewed as *mother*, the breeder of the citizenry. Here the implication for womanhood is critical: by conflating nation and woman, fundamental assumptions about what is male and what is female — that men act and women are acted upon, that men create culture and women reproduce nature — are replicated (Ortner 1974). As Ray points out, "the efficient functioning of this particular trope depends 'for its representational efficacy on a particular image of woman as chaste, dutiful, daughterly or maternal.'" (2000, p. 3)

[I]t is crucial that discourses and practices concerning the role and specificity of gender and its relation to the positions of women be analyzed when we seek to examine the proliferation of nationalisms and nationalist discourses ... I underscore the necessity of a more comprehensive understanding of gender as a category, one that goes beyond an initial commitment to the representation of a specific constituency to an inquiry that challenges the assumptions behind the masculinist, heterosexual economy hitherto governing the cultural matrix ...through which [the] national identity has become intelligible. (2000, p. 3-4)

Ray is talking about her nation, India, but her discussion has many resonances for the Bahamas. Here, it is equally imperative to integrate the question of gender into the study of the creation of the contemporary state. In this paper, I intend to examine some of the conscious symbols invoked in the construction of Bahamian national identity in an attempt first to identify, and then to challenge, the assumptions that lie behind that construction.

To what extent has the imagination of the Bahamian nation-state incorporated the images of the female? On what symbols do nation-makers draw? Perhaps even more to the point: where and when women are integrated into the vocabulary of nation-making, how are they assimilated into the overall imagination of the nation? I shall examine two symbols in detail: Bahamian literature and the festival of Junkanoo.

Taking their inspiration from Benedict Anderson, studies of national identity often resort to a comprehensive survey of the literary output of a nation to discover how it creates and disseminates its symbols (Anderson, 1991; Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 1989; Bethel, 1992; Bhabha, 1990; Dahl, 1995; Eriksen, 1994; Geertz, 1993 [1973]; Georges, 1992; Glinton-Meicholas, 2000; Harney, 1996; Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983; Johnson, 2000; Lavie, 1996; Nettleford, 1978; Ngugi wa Thing'o, 1981; Otto & Thomas, 1997; Rahming, 1992b; Ray, 2000; Strachan, 1995). In the Bahamas, however, it is not in literature that the main symbol of national culture is to be found. Rather, we must look to the annual Junkanoo festival. As Glinton-Meicholas writes, "Non-Bahamians must first learn to say this word in the same hushed tones in which they would say 'holy grail'. Many Bahamians when asked to define their culture will utter a single word with fierce pride: 'Junkanoo!'" (1994, p. 102-103). That is not to say that Bahamian writers and intellectuals do not regard themselves as the propagators of a national identity; that they do is evinced, among other things, by the creation of the Bahamas Association for Cultural Studies (BACUS), a group who "...have dedicated [them]selves to formulating new paradigms of power", who "wish to demonstrate to [their] people the power of personal discipline and work, the healing and life changing power of literature." (Glinton-Meicholas, 2000, p. 110). The difficulty is that Bahamian writers regard their calling as a hard one, fraught with frustration and failure, in a society that places little value on reading and that can recognize itself in one of only two guises — the annual Junkanoo festival, and the daily appropriation of the canned culture of the American screen.

Literature and Junkanoo, I shall argue, stand at either end of a spectrum of symbols used in the invention and re-invention of the Bahamian nation. On the one hand, Bahamian intellectuals, many of them women, follow the expected pattern of imagining their nation on paper, creating microscopic Bahamian worlds in poetry, plays and prose. On the other, Bahamian artists and working men imagine the nation in three dimensions, creating portable sculptures that provide annual commentaries for the public. By examining the place of each of these artistic endeavours in the popular and official making of the nation, by looking at their centrality or marginality in the overall context of Bahamian society, I hope to uncover a gendered representation of Bahamian national identity.

Soft women and hard men: gender and symbology in the Bahamas

To help situate my discussion in a theoretical perspective, I shall begin with a tried-and-true model of masculine and feminine: the dichotomy of Caribbean culture proposed by Peter Wilson (1969). Wilson, attempting to define specific structural principles for Caribbean society, argues that there are two fundamental models for Caribbean behaviour: *reputation*, which he associates with men, street society, individualism and personal charisma, the last demonstrated often by one's ability to best others in drinking, talking and fighting; and *respectability*, which he links with women, the home and church, the family and personal responsibility. Wilson's model may be challenged on many levels, and he has been taken to task for associating women too closely with European culture and the home (Austin, 1979; Barrow, 1986; Besson, 1993). Nevertheless, it is a good model to *think* with, and can provide a sensible starting point for this discussion. In the first place, his association of men with the street and women with the home holds resonances of the classical public/domestic dichotomy of male and female worlds (Rosaldo, 1974), and may be used fruitfully in my

examination of literature and Junkanoo.

Beside Wilson's theory I will place Bahamians' own concepts of what differentiates men and women. Bahamian society is peculiar in permitting women to occupy many positions of power normally considered men's jobs and with the public sphere, while at the same time socializing young men and women very differently. In Bahamian symbology, "hard" is masculine and "soft" feminine. Young men in particular are exhorted to be "hard" or "tough", and at all costs to avoid being dubbed "soft", which is regarded as "sissyish". A real man can hold his own, will not back down from a fight, will defend his honour and that of his "boys" or "dogs". Appropriate activities for a man include hanging out with the boys, developing the street smarts required to stay alive in the city, bedding women, and boasting about his prowess, both sexual and physical. "Hardness" is also a racial characteristic; the darker one's skin colour, the "harder" one is likely to be.

"Softness", on the other hand, is associated with pacifism, whiteness, and women. Almost everything that falls outside of the parameters outlined above is considered "soft", including excelling academically, expressing one's emotions, or becoming too removed from the street by social climbing, the making of money, or marriage; men who engage in them run the risk of being labelled "sissy" and being accused of "liking man". To be a man, one must follow a very narrow prescription of behaviour, and an intolerant one. Women, who are already "soft", have a panoply of options to choose from. Although here, too, the colour of one's skin indicates how "hard" or how "soft" a woman might be, women's acceptable life choices are far broader than men's. As one high school student, a young man, observed upon learning that the anthropological symbol for a man was a triangle: "'a man, he could only do three things'. For him, the female symbol was quite naturally a circle because 'a woman is whole, she could do many things'." (Bethel, 1993, p. 18)

It is important to note the relative stability of these concepts when applied to their respective genders. Women, who are considered to be naturally "soft", can take on almost any profession, perform virtually any activity, without losing that "softness". Being "hard", however, appears to be a far more insecure thing. Men are not naturally "hard"; they must socialize themselves to be "tough", and can all too easily slip into "softness". In the Bahamas, then, the unspoken idea appears to be that women are closer to nature and men are the products of enculturation. This is, of course, a relatively common perception of the male and female genders cross-culturally. Women's ability to bear and suckle children, their roles as creators of life, is the source of both their power and their subjugation (Keesing & Strathern, 1998; Ortner, 1974; Rosaldo, 1974; Sanday, 1981). Indeed, as Turner and Bloch have both argued, one reason for the violence and elaborate ritual involved in many male coming-of-age rites is that in order to become men, boys must be forcibly separated from the natural world of women and inducted into the cultural world of men (Bloch, 1986; Turner, 1967). In the Bahamas, where young black men come of age without any specific public ritual, it is possible to speculate that their entry into manhood is particularly precarious, and therefore throughout their life, and particularly while they are still considered "young", the actions that they perform are often carefully monitored to ensure that they remain men, and do not slip back into "softness" with "womanish" behaviour.

Way to be hard: Junkanoo and the Bahamian man

In this state of affairs, where males' involvement in "soft" activities — among them most artistic and academic endeavours — are so severely curtailed, there are few options for those men who are of a creative bent. Fortunately for them, there is Junkanoo — the Bahamian street festival that melds all but the verbal arts into one spectacular celebration.

Of all the national symbols in the Bahamas, it is Junkanoo that receives the most attention. Throughout history, it has acted as a force for the construction of many different Bahamian identities. During the early 1800s it united slaves in Christmas celebrations; during the middle of that century it was adopted by Liberated Africans as a focus for their displacement; at the beginning of the twentieth century it provided members of the working class with a forum for their grievances; and later in the century it functioned both as an emblem of race and of masculine activity (Bethel, 1991).

Like many other festivals throughout the Caribbean, Junkanoo's roots are believed to lie in slavery and the African heritage. It is one of a group of Christmas celebrations that occurred from the Carolinas to Belize during the slave era, many of which flourished until the mid-nineteenth century. Unlike these festivals, however, Bahamian Junkanoo did not disappear during the post-emancipation era. The survival of Bahamian Junkanoo is owed in part to the relative poverty of the Bahamas during slavery, and in part to the influx, during the latter half of the nineteenth century, of Liberated Africans into Nassau (Bethel, 1991; 1994). Not unnaturally, then, Junkanoo is appropriated by many Bahamians as a symbol of the African past, as well as an integral component of national identity. In addition, the parade is seen as a means of resistance for the oppressed black masses. Burnside, for instance, regards it as a symbolic struggle on the part of black working-class Bahamians against their oppression by whites:

All of a sudden black people can come over the hill and take over Bay Street and carry-on bad down the main street and do what ever they wanted to do; it was usually the strongest, the healthiest, the most revolutionary spirit of the over-the-hill people. *It wasn't the people who were the closest to the big house of the massa.* (J. Burnside, in Bain, 1996, p. 55. *My emphasis.*)

Junkanoo, then, is an occupation, an invasion of the centres of authority; it occurs at the heart of the commercial power of the white Bahamian elite. Even today, Bahamians still refer metonymously to the act of attending or participating in the parades as "going to Bay Street", the focus of anti-black discrimination, the site of legislation, and the heart of commerce. For many black Bahamians, Junkanoo embodies their best response to the dehumanization of slavery and its aftermath.

For many, too, it is a unique expression of manhood.

When discovered by the so called master, folks (the junkanoos) would create the mimicry, the mime, the buffoonery that suggested that they were making fools of themselves; and which was instead affirming their manhood; affirming their humanity; establishing a sense of dignity for a people whose dignity and whole humanity had been artificially taken away from them ... (J. Burnside, in Bain, 1996, p. 55. *My emphasis.*)

Lest it be assumed that this association of Caribbean street festivals with men and manhood is a common one, it is important to note that contemporary

Carnival in Trinidad is renowned for having been “taken over” by women (Alleyne, 1998; Miller, 1991, 1994; Sampath, 1997; van Koningsbruggen, 1997). Junkanoo, however, remains almost exclusively a *male* endeavour. Despite the fact that many women participate in various ways, from the peripherally sexy appearances of the choreographed dancers to the comparatively few women carrying dancer or beller costumes or appearing as free dancers, it is generally understood that Junkanoo is a man’s festival. All but a very few of the major leaders, designers and musicians are men, as are all the important free dancers in Junkanoo. My own position as a researcher of Junkanoo is made both more peripheral and less threatening by the fact that I am female. To illustrate, as recently as the 25th Independence celebration in July 1998, which was to be culminated by a celebratory Junkanoo parade, I was given the task of announcing to the junkanoos that it was time for them to enter the arena. That night, before I could do so, however, the responsibility was taken away from me by the musical director of the show, a junkanoo himself, because “these guys funny, they might not listen to a woman”.

Soft like a woman: the femininity of the nationalist literary enterprise

Because of its association with street culture, violence, competition, African heritage and masculinity, Junkanoo is the ultimate way for a man who desires to create to be “hard”. It is possible for a man who is also a junkanoo to be recognized universally in the society, and for him to gain power, prestige and position. On the other hand, men who want to express themselves in other ways, particularly through literature, are far more marginal to Bahamian society.

Throughout the post-colonial world, literature is seen as a cornerstone of new national identities. In the Caribbean region, Trinidad is a well-studied example of this trend. For Stefano Harney, fiction, specifically the novel, is the centre of his consideration of the nationalist enterprise in that country (Harney, 1993; 1996). For him, although they do not necessarily provide a contiguity between nation and narrative, “literary texts have a unique advantage in the interrogation of the nation.” (Harney, 1996, p. 2). Similar assumptions underlie works throughout the region, from writers as varied as James (1963 [1938]), Nettleford (1970; 1978) and Strachan, (1995).

In the Bahamas, however, to apply such an approach is difficult. This country stands virtually alone among independent Caribbean nations in having a significant absence of an internationally-recognized national literature. That is not to say that a nationalist rhetoric does not exist in the Bahamas, or that there is no Bahamian literature to speak of. Paradoxically, there are both; yet the two appear separate from one another. Unlike Trinidad, where novels abound and the proliferation of academic papers ensure that Trinidadians’ self-conceptions are constantly and consciously made and examined (Eriksen, 1994, 1993; Harney, 1996), the relation between *literary* representations of the Bahamian condition and the public conception of that condition is tenuous at best.

That this debate is endemic, part, indeed, of the national character, is apparent by the concerns expressed at the BACUS conference held in Nassau in June 1998, which took as its theme “Uncovering Bahamian Selves”. In her introductory address, Glington-Meicholas called for the exploration and promotion of Bahamian national identity, pointing out that, even twenty-five years after independence, the nation had “failed to define or develop a clear idea of who we

have been, who we are and who we want to be as a people” (2000, p. 104). Perhaps significantly, she deplored the centrality of Junkanoo, the national festival, to discussions of Bahamian identity, its function as “the very language of our culture” (p. 105). Drawing explicit connections between literacy and power, Glinton-Meicholas emphasized the place of the intellectual in the imagining of the nation, and called for the establishment of a literature which, externalizing and codifying the “covered” Bahamian activities, would serve to build a greater sense of a national self, a stronger national pride.

This concern, however, appears to be one that is particularly pressing for Bahamian women. Significant in this regard was the conference panel on Bahamian literature, which featured papers written and presented only by women. The session began with a paper presented by one of the most acclaimed contemporary writers, Marion Bethel — a particularly personal presentation detailing her frustration at the lack of *space* in the Bahamian imagination for writers, and weaving her account of her own need for time and place to write with the role of the written in the critical self-construction of the American slave Phyllis Wheatley, the first black American woman to be published. Writing, for Bethel, was presented as a tool of empowerment, a means of escaping the “barren” Bahamian social landscape — a landscape carved out by the “twin monsters” of tourism and banking, a landscape hostile to artistic creation (Bethel, 1998). Her paper was followed by Paula Grace Anderson’s close reading of the writings of three authors, two male and one female, for whom the emblems of women, money and sex were central (1998; 2000); after that came another presentation on the writings of women in the Bahamas (Rahming, 1998), and the session was closed with a consideration of the place of female artists in Bahamian society (Pratt, 1998).

The discussion that followed raised the question of why the presentations had been so dominated by females. The organizers of the conference reported, rather defensively, that the panel had certainly not been designed to feature women; but as the only people willing to present on the topic were female, the outcome was not surprising. This began a discussion on the role of women in the creation of Bahamian literature. It was suggested that, in the Bahamas, it was more socially acceptable for women to write, that writing was regarded as a feminine activity. This explanation was not a comfortable one for many members of the audience, as it placed writing in a feminized, weak position in the national imagination. For many, as for Marion Bethel, writing ought to be a path to power; thus the (accidentally) gendered presentation of Bahamian literature was profoundly disturbing. During the discussion, however, it was observed that, for the Bahamas, the spoken word, and not the written, brought power. In keeping with Wilson’s theory of reputation, Bahamian “masculine” arts were all oral. The politician’s speech, the preacher’s prayer, the sparring of the radio talk-show host — *these* were the media that were influential, that were disseminated throughout the country, and these were the media in which power resided. Women wrote, and thought about writing, and presented papers on literature, because in the Bahamas, writing was a medium for the weak and the powerless.

En-gendering the Bahamian nation

In interrogating the Bahamian nation, I have taken two symbols as representative. One of these, Junkanoo, is nationally recognized as the central emblem of

Bahamian identity, despite the fact that it is located primarily in the capital, and may have limited resonance for many Family Island Bahamians. The other, literature, a symbol which is globally taken to be the key to uncovering the identity of any nation, is relatively insignificant within the Bahamas. This insignificance can be emphasized by considering the fact that the vast bulk of official and private spending in the arts occurs in Junkanoo. A million-dollar grant from a private source provides the seed money for the prizes awarded in the parade, and the Bahamian government maintains a full-time Junkanoo Unit in the Cultural Affairs Division of the relevant ministry. When Bahamians travel internationally, it is almost always Junkanoo that travels with them. Writing is a spectacularly underrecognized profession in the Bahamas. From the fact that there is to date no national library to the struggles encountered by many Bahamian writers who attempt to market their works to the Ministry of Education for use in the schools, it is clear that Bahamian literature is largely ignored by the government and the public at large.

It is possible to explain these facts in many different ways, and indeed I have looked at them from several perspectives. In this paper, however, I am arguing that the salient difference between the two is that Junkanoo, and indeed all the activities that are promoted regularly by the government and the private sector, are “hard”, masculine activities. Literature and academics, on the other hand, are “soft”, feminine interests, and are consequently sidelined. I shall provide one final observation to illustrate my point. When Bahamian writers submit their works to the Ministry of Education for inclusion in the curriculum, or for consideration for the BGCSE syllabus, the reason for their rejection is often the question of sexual “immorality”. The officials reviewing these books suggest that their subject matter is inappropriate for the students in the upper grades of the senior high schools. At the same time, the same ministry promotes and finances the involvement of their primary and junior high schools in Junior Junkanoo, which has often been taken to task by youth leaders and church officials for the vulgarity of the children’s dancing. This double standard is incomprehensible until one places it in a gendered perspective. According to Wilson’s reputation/respectability dichotomy, unbridled sexuality is the provenance of the masculine, and men are celebrated for their sexual exploits. Women, however, who are the reproducers and are associated with respectability, are expected to maintain sexual chastity. Like the differential conference of Bahamian citizenship on the children of men and women, the place of Junkanoo and literature in the Bahamas is ordered hierarchically according to gender.

Bahamian national identity is a slippery fish to catch. It is fluid and manipulable, and its unity is submarine. The physical Bahamian archipelago is mirrored by a cognitive one that allows Bahamians to accept many possible realities with little difficulty, and navigate among several identities — tales told to the self and to the other (Bethel 2000a, 2000b). It is possible to pick a number of those tales and unpack them to reach an understanding of what constitutes Bahamian identity. In this paper, having examined some of the ways in which these migrations relate to gender I have argued that, despite the fact that Bahamians negotiate several different identities, all of them “Bahamian”, the conscious conceptualization of the Bahamian identity is above all a masculine one, and women’s contributions to and involvement in that conceptualization are consistently marginalized.

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