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## Deconstructing “The Equaliser”: Beyond a Balance of Terror

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During the Calypso season of 1998 a well-known calypsonian, Singing Sandra, presented her major offering for the year at Kaiso House; it was the calypso *The Equaliser*, which like her 1999 smash hit *Voices from the Ghetto*, was written for her by Christophe Grant. It was mainly *The Equaliser* that was responsible for her presence at the Calypso Fiesta semifinals and for her winning of the “Peoples’ Choice—Female” title in 1998 even though her memorable performance of the song was insufficient to gain her a place in the Calypso Monarch finals.

There had been twenty-seven women murdered in 1997 in incidents of domestic violence, and there had been 2,282 reports of domestic violence that year.<sup>i</sup> *The Equaliser* was condensed into four stanzas and its choruses represented the enraged outcry of women against all categories of male violence against women: rape, incest, child molestation, battering, and verbal and emotional violence such as insults, threats and terrorism. *The Equaliser* was an appeal for vengeance in the form of punishments that were meant to be poetically appropriate to each crime of violence. Among the punishments recommended were the castration, embalming and cremation of the testicles of sexual perverts; dephallicution; public execution in Woodford Square for rapists, whose rotting genitals would nourish a small percentage of the nation’s vulture population; branding the brow with 666, the mark of the Beast, the Anti-Christ; forced

copulation with a gorilla in heat for the over-libidinous; the unscrewing of the “nuts and bolts” of batterers and the feeding of their dismantled parts to hungry piranhas.

The violence and extremity of this list of suggested punishments were meant to mirror the sadistic extremity of the crimes that were being committed daily against women and young girls. According to one report, there had been 213 rapes reported in 1996, a figure that had almost doubled to 420 for the first ten months of 1997.<sup>ii</sup> *The Equaliser* celebrated the prospect of female empowerment against such acts of war, recommending that male-engendered violence, sadism and terror be met with equal and opposite violence, sadism and terrorism on the part of women who, aroused and enraged, were now exchanging their status of victim for those of rebel and vindicator.

One of the many incidents that inspired the composition of *The Equaliser* was the daylight rape of a female student of The University of the West Indies (UWI), St. Augustine, in mid-November 1997. In this case, the rapist was waiting for his prospective victim, condom and penis at the ready, in one of the women’s washrooms. The sentiments of sympathetic fellow students differed from those of *The Equaliser* only in degree.

According to one student:

Rape apparently is becoming a part of our culture and we have to stop it.

Once a rapist is proven to be a rapist, brand him. He acts like an animal...  
brand him like an animal!

We have to walk with some kind of weapon, teach ourselves in the event that we have to use it, and use it. If we have to emasculate them, then we emasculate them, so they cannot do it to somebody else.<sup>iii</sup>

Here were two of the punishments, castration and branding, recommended two months later in *The Equaliser*. The student did not say who was to do the branding, but she did reserve the joy of castration for the self-empowered, armed, trained and self-defending woman. One week later, a female journalist contributed yet another idea that would be incorporated into the calypso. Dismissing arguments then current among certain lawyers about the human rights of rapists, Suzanna Clarke outlined “drastic punishments” for those who are caught.

My irrational solution to this problem is simple and cheap. All I would need is a piece of cloth, a pair of pliers, a \$5 knife and a length of two-inch pipe with a condom on it. Now think.<sup>iv</sup>

Nothing better illustrates the extreme terror that rape itself and the very idea of rape awaken in the minds of victims and potential victims than these grotesque fantasies of retributive sadism through which aggressor and victim, victor and vanquished, rapist and “equaliser” are converted into mirror images and monstrous doubles of each other. *The Equaliser* grows out of this anguish of rage, vulnerability, crisis and terror. Its atrocious

punishments would, if enacted, transform the victim into the rapist and the rapist into the terrified and utterly ruined victim.

Singing Sandra provides an account of the circumstances that drove her to ring Christophe Grant at the outrageous hour of three, one morning late in 1997, demanding that he write the song that became *The Equaliser*. Sandra said that she had been speaking to several victims of rape and domestic violence and mentioned “the case of a fifteen-year-old girl who was so traumatised by the sexual abuse of a relative, that she now ‘jumps’ every time a man comes near her”.<sup>v</sup> The particular incident, however, that brought home to Sandra the extremity of the crisis that is rape occurred around two o’clock one morning late in 1997 while she was in a taxi returning home from a performance at the Upper Level Club:

When we reached Morvant Junction, I saw a young lady running in the street in a blue nightie, covered in blood... Running behind her was a goodly gentleman in his underwear, who didn’t find she was hurt enough and was pelting her with big stones... I told my driver to stop, and the passenger in the back seat opened the door and told the lady to jump in. We took her to the Morvant Police Station and she told us that she was from the country, and that she went against her parents to be with this man. But that still didn’t give him the right to beat her.<sup>vi</sup>

This incident, witnessed by Sandra and in which she became fortuitously involved, along with the UWI rape and the impassioned discussion that followed it, and, to crown them all, the early morning rape of a sixty-five-year-old woman while she was before the altar praying in a Catholic Church in Morvant, suggested the need for an “Equaliser” who would function on behalf of the female victim. Such a champion, the calypso stated, would need to operate outside of a law that was perceived to be inadequate or impotent to deal with such horrible crimes:

... the authorities is nothing they doing  
The law needs reviewing  
It’s time to get tough  
If they don’t really have a clue  
I know exactly what to do  
Send them by me, enough is enough.

Sandra’s “Equaliser” has given up on the Law and the Constitution whose sanctions have, in her opinion, been more readily employed to protect the human rights of the violent transgressor than those of his victims. So she sings:

But when dey hold dat son of a satan  
Doh tell me bout no constitution  
With me he don’t have a prayer  
Hang him high in Woodford Square.

Sandra's Equaliser, then, is as comfortable with lynching as was Caruso's indignant citizen in *Run the Gunslingers* (1959). Caruso then advised, as a male:

Hang them in the square  
Let everybody be there  
Beat them with the cat  
All who see boun to done wid dat.

It is clear that the rhetoric of violent reprisal transcends gender boundaries.

For her performance of *The Equaliser*, Singing Sandra wore the overalls, hard hat and utility belt of a "Home Improvement" handyman, equipped with shears, pliers, monkey wrench, knives and all the tools necessary for bobbitization or detesticulation. She might through costume, have been suggesting several things:

1. that the only answer to male violence would have to be an equivalent female violent reprisal;
2. that in the process of executing such violence the woman would have of necessity to assume and appropriate a typically male role, that of fixer, handyman, technician—the worker with tools;
3. that the end result of the woman's movement into male-dominated space and the adoption of typically "male" aggression and violence would be home-improvement via the neutering of male gender aggression against females.

The Equaliser in the television series of that name is a white-haired middle-aged Caucasian male who, retired from the intelligence agency for which he once worked, has chosen a humanitarian vocation of protecting the weak, innocent and helpless from the unfair and cruel machinations of the powerful and vicious. Singing Sandra's self-empowered female, a sturdy, strapping and darkly sullen version of Xena, subverts and appropriates the male/hero/avenger role. Her objective is not the prevention of violence, but its punishment; not so much the protection of the helpless female as her empowerment through access to and skill in plying the tools of emasculation. Relieved of the genitals around which he has constructed masculinity and exercised dominance, the male sexual transgressor becomes what he most fears: effeminated, cut down to size, in the words of *The Equaliser*. He becomes "equalised" in the sense of having been reduced—quite literally—to the role and condition of the frightened female victim, vulnerable and violated. By contrast, the triumph of Television's Equaliser over nefarious individuals or systems is always a restoration of patriarchy.

Bearing in mind that Sandra is singing her own sentiments but yet the words of another person, that person being an empathising male, we need to read *The Equaliser* carefully as a layered text in which two voices, one female and the other male, are subsumed.

Female womanist indignation at abuse is filtered through the male imagination of retributive violence. What we may be hearing, therefore, is the conscience of a male who feels some guilt by proxy for the crimes members of his gender have committed, and continue to commit in such shameful abundance, against women and children. *The Equaliser* becomes for Christophe Grant, its author, a sort of redemptive castigation; an exorcism of shame and guilt felt on behalf of his gender.

Curiously enough, the first calypso that Singing Sandra performed when she crossed over in 1984 from the Best Village stage to the calypso tent, was Dr Zhivago's *The Raper Man Coming*.<sup>vii</sup> Three years later (1987) her dynamic rendition of Tobago Crusoe's *Die With My Dignity* (or *Sexy Employers*) converted her into calypso's flagwaver for militant womanism. Her years as a Best Village singer and actress and the fifteen years that she spent in the tent between *The Raper Man Coming* and *The Equaliser*, were years that witnessed both the phenomenal increase in violent crimes against women and children and a corresponding growth of concerned and articulate feminists, including a number of outstanding journalists, whose outspokenness in raising women's and family issues was mainly responsible for the campaign in the mid-eighties for the retention in the Sexual Offences Act of "Clause 4"—the clause which made marital rape a criminal offence.

Sandra found in the calypso a means of raising crucial women's issues in a manner and through a medium that could reach tens of thousands. Male calypsonians—Tobago Crusoe, Bomber, Trini, Watchman among others—were freely employing the calypso medium to express a wide range of male reactions to legislation such as "Clause 4" and new definitions of terms such as "sexual harassment". Women too, Sandra felt, were crying out to be heard and taken seriously on issues that affected them.

Female calypsonians, however, were like voices in the wilderness. "They tired trying for somebody to hear them," Sandra complained, "and nobody listening to them."<sup>viii</sup> An embittered Sandra complained in 1998 that her failure to gain selection for the Calypso Monarch finals of that year, after the enormous popularity of *The Equaliser*, was only the most blatant evidence of the calypso judges' disregard for female singers and the women's text.

There were twelve women in the semi-final, and they were equally strong, but only one ended in the final. This shows me that calypso is still a male-dominated art form. Although women have proven themselves and made great strides in calypso, they are still being left in the back. I don't know why...we have already risen above this male domination thing. Women are involved in every aspect of life now...even on construction sites. But we, female calypsonians are still being left in the back.<sup>ix</sup>

Sandra also recorded her deep disappointment that the female calypsonians fared so badly at the semi-finals despite the presence of three women among the panel of judges. She felt that there was a bias toward both the calypsos that were attacking the Government and the party songs, many of which she considered disrespectful of women. In light of this dual bias, serious feminist songs were being sidelined. If the Singing Sandra of 1993 thought nothing of participating in the grand sexual horseplay of the performance of ***Whoa Donkey***, where substantial females rode submissive and compliant male “donkeys”, the Sandra of 1998 had become the bell-ringer for a grim militancy that no longer had a place for such carnivalesque unleashing of female sexuality. Her second song for 1998, ***No More Hard Work***, also written by Christophe Grant, was meant to be an answer to Denise Belfon’s 1997 song which said “gie meh hard wuk, round de clock.” Yet Belfon, of ***Kakalaylay*** fame had simply inherited the spirit of female sexual challenge, in which the woman openly baits and teases the male, that had found prior expression in the United Sisters’ ***Whoa Donkey*** and in the brash and sexually aggressive performance styles of popular dancehall queens such as Patra, Lady Shabba and Lady Sawh.

### **Murder in the nineties**

One must assume, then, that something had developed between 1993 and 1998, something so dire that it had converted Sandra from “donkey-dancer” into “equaliser” and changed utterly the image through which she, as woman, was prepared to represent herself on the stage. What had happened was the significant increase in crimes of violence, including violence against females, in the post-1990 years. Between 1982 and 1991, the reported instances of rape, incest, unlawful carnal knowledge and suicide—classified together as “Other Crimes Against the Person”—had risen by 80% from 336 in 1982 to 604 in 1991.<sup>x</sup> The years after 1991 were progressively worse, with 1993, the year of the United Sisters’ ***Whoa Donkey***, providing several grim examples of wives and sometimes entire families slaughtered by jealous, depressed, demented or enraged husbands; of rapes with or without murder. Nineteen ninety-three was that horrible year when Hulsie Bhaggan mobilised her Chaguanas constituents to march against crime and to form themselves into two hundred vigilante groups, in order to eradicate what she termed Bosnia-type “ethnic cleansing” being carried out by “African men” who were deliberately targeting Indian homes in Central Trinidad. “Ethnic cleansing” took the form of armed robbery and rape. Several homes and businesses had been attacked and eleven Muslim virgins had been raped.

Nineteen ninety-three, then, was a year in which any even minimally conscious feminist would have become concerned and alarmed at what men were doing to women in “sweet T and T” as we call it. Many citizens lived with a sense of total mayhem and deep social crisis. The nineties—beginning with the Muslimeen uprising, the destruction of Police Headquarters, invasion of Parliament, the wounding and murder of MP’s, the gutting and looting of many business places and warehouses along the East-West Corridor and in Port of Spain, the symbolic decapitation of the State—continued as the decade of escalating drug trafficking and its corollary: contract killing, banditry and gangland executions that at times involved literal, not symbolic, decapitation.

Nineteen ninety-three, the year of the Donkey dances of Ronnie Mc Intosh and Singing Sandra and the United Sisters; the year too of Minshall's Trojan Donkey, Cyclops and transfixed suitors, was a year when members of the Police Service demonstrated in public against the Ministry of National Security. It was also the year when the Police were being investigated by a highly paid and deeply execrated team of Scotland Yard detectives, whose damning yet inconclusive report would be rendered useless by the government's failure to legally validate the presence of the "Yardies" in the country. In 1993, Russell Huggins, the Minister of National Security, tried to get the Police Service Commission to dismiss Police Commissioner Jules Bernard by sending him into retirement<sup>xi</sup> and Commissioner Bernard startled the nation with his confession that he was "a toothless bulldog" who was ill-equipped to deal with either the growing corruption within the Police Service that he headed or the escalating crime in the nation that he was being paid to protect and serve.<sup>xii</sup>

Nineteen ninety-three, it may be concluded, was a year when the forces of Law, Order and Justice seemed to be working resolutely to negate or neutralise each other: Ministry of National Security versus Police Commissioner; Police Service versus investigating Yardies; Yardies unsupported by the Government that had hired them. The impact on public morale was devastating. The increasing sense of social crisis and the recognition of the impotence and corruption of the agencies of Law, Order and Justice, together created the hysteria that Hulsie Bhaggan skilfully and dangerously manipulated in Central Trinidad in June 1993, when she enhanced her image as a woman of action and a defender of women's rights by racializing the issue of rape. The hysteria of the early nineties would take up permanent residence in the public mind as the decade proceeded and nothing changed to make women—or, indeed, men—feel that the nation was becoming more secure or less violent.

A calypso such as Singing Sandra's *The Equaliser* is, as Hulsie Bhaggan's terrified vigilante groups were in 1993, an illustration of the grotesque extremes to which individuals and communities can be driven when they perceive themselves to be the endangered targets of violence in a context where the official agencies of Law, Justice, Public Safety and Protection seem to have collapsed. It is no coincidence that in 1997, the year before Singing Sandra's *The Equaliser*, the title of a calypso composed by Penguin (Sedley Joseph) and sung by Explainer (Winston Henry) was *Out of Control*, while the title of another one, composed by Brother Marvin (Selwyn Demming) and sung by Explainer was entitled even more ominously, *Edge of Darkness*. Of some significance, also, was Brother Marvin's (Selwyn Demming's) composition *We Need Help* which was performed by Denyse Plummer. Together these three calypsos and 3-Canal's ominous chant *Blue* divined a nation and/or a world free-falling and in a state of humanly irreversible entropy. *The Equaliser* (1998) is the product of that perception of entropy.

Nineteen ninety-three, that crucial year in Sandra's development—located as it was almost midway between *Die With My Dignity* (1989) and *The Equaliser* (1998)—was, as we said above, a terrible year for women. Even as the echo of "Whoa Donkey" vitalized the Carnival fetes, Andrew Abraham, 48-year-old vice-principal of the Penal Rock Road Presbyterian Primary School and chairman of the local board of Brothers Road Presbyterian School was stabbing Omattie, his wife of twenty years, to death, slashing his daughter Abel on both arms and setting himself on fire at his Williamsville family home.<sup>xiii</sup> Omattie Abraham had filed for divorce after a "stormy relationship" with her husband.

On April 26, a mere five weeks before Bhaggan commenced her campaign to protect the Indo-Trinidadian centre from "African"-engendered rape and "ethnic cleansing", Winston Ali, an unemployed management consultant with a fake doctorate who had been an unsuccessful PNM candidate in the 1991 elections, sank into a deep depression, which he was unable to articulate to anyone. His way out as the edge of darkness loomed was to shoot his wife, his three children and himself at his Valsayn Park residence [See Kamla Rampersad, "The Very Secret Life of Winston Ali", *Sunday Guardian*, May 2, 1993.]

Early in September 1993, three months after Bhaggan had saved Caroni from "ethnic cleansing", Deonarine Mohan, gardener of La Seiva Village, Maracas Valley, chopped three of his children—Diana (ten), Danny Boy (six) and David (two)—to death and then hanged himself. Fareeda Gill, his common-law wife of sixteen years, fearing for her own life with this quarrelsome and at times violent alcoholic and ex(?) drug addict, left the home for the twenty-seventh time and for good when Mohan began to threaten her life. One might say that she had followed Singing Francine's advice and put wheels on her heels<sup>xiv</sup>, when she left Mohan and returned to her former life as a nightclub entertainer, but in so doing she had also critically endangered the lives of three of the six children she had borne Mohan.<sup>xv</sup>

Two weeks later, Daniel "Jap" John, coconut vendor of Barataria Roundabout, cut the throat of his little son and seriously wounded his wife Ambica Dass and another child. They had lived together for six years since she was fourteen, and she had borne him six children. Jap John then climbed a mango tree and hanged himself. Jap's story is significant for this paper. In an agonized suicide message written in chalk on a concrete slab, he claimed to have loved his children and "whoring" wife very much. Ambica Dass, however, had in the spirit of Singing Francine's renegade woman, not run away, but served her husband a restraining order which she had obtained under the Domestic Violence Act. As male reactions to the Bastardy Ordinance had illustrated in the thirties, legislation meant to protect and empower (however minimally) women and children, has tended to expose the vulnerability and economic powerlessness of the otherwise falsely self-confident and cocky male, and to drive some delinquent fathers to acts of extremity that create even greater marital stress than had existed prior to the harshening of the Law.<sup>xvi</sup>

On the 27<sup>th</sup> of September 1993, Shirley Wilson, a 54-year-old music teacher of Valsayn, was chopped to death by her 67-year-old husband of thirty-one years. She too had sought to free herself from an unhappy union, in which she had emerged as the main breadwinner and mortgage payer after her husband's business foundered during the recession of the eighties. Like Ambica Dass, Shirley Wilson had made use of the Domestic Violence Act (1991) in her legal proceedings against her husband. They had duly separated, the property and assets had been divided, and she had gone back to the house in the company of a Marshall of the Court and two police officers to collect her belongings. Her husband, a soft-spoken gentleman, relic of a bygone era, had greeted the company politely, and leading her to their bedroom had locked the steel door and hacked her to death with a cutlass. He then attempted to slit his own throat, but he was not quite as successful in that venture.

Wilson's intended suicide note accused his wife of having taught their daughter dishonesty, a crime that he said he considered to be worse than adultery. His wife had approved the daughter's relationship with a man Wilson considered to be a cocaine dealer and accepted a bribe of a motor car in payment for her parental consent. The motive of sexual jealousy, so prominent in the cases of Mohan and "Jap" was absent from his suicide note, though it crept into subsequent statements that he would make at his trial where he said that his wife had betrayed him from the very start of the marriage, in that she was not the virgin she had claimed to be.<sup>xvii</sup> His suicide note, however, excludes any such hint of sexual jealousy. It does not mention either the terror and despair that Wilson, who was given the mortgage-ridden house and little else, felt at the divorce; and the necessity he now faced to go it alone. Instead, unctuously self-righteous, Wilson gives himself a "noble" motive for his mad act of violence, concluding his note with the words:

Suffice it to say that I have given up the will to live, and therefore the time has come for me to leave the land of the living and as a precautionary measure, I thought that you should leave also for if left alive you will surely destroy another man's life.<sup>xviii</sup>

Far from being jealous of the prospective rival lover, Wilson was actually protecting him from destruction at the hands of his wicked wife.

Shirley Wilson's death, the bizarre manner of it, filled women and many men too, with despair. It seemed to symbolise the true impotence of the Law when confronted with the madness, the extreme drivenness, the hurtling toward the edge of darkness that ends in such acts of rape, murder and suicide. There was Wilson, crystal clear about what he was about to do; there was the Law, Policemen and Marshall, one stone wall, one steel door away from such atrocity, and unable to stop him or protect her. Some commentators spoke of obvious flaws in the Domestic Violence Act (1991). Others contemplated the difference, sometimes an extreme one in Trinidad, between drafting and passing a law

and effectively implementing it. Yet others blamed the Act itself for the increase in violent crimes against women seeking the protection of the Act. The Leader of the Opposition, Basdeo Panday, was reported as having said that

...the psyche of a Trinidadian male was such that he would “lose his cool” when forbidden to enter a house he may have built and in which his wife and children live and in which other men may be welcome.<sup>xix</sup>

The women’s organizations that had campaigned for legislation to protect women against violence of any kind were reported to be feeling stunned and paralysed by this unforeseen turn of events. According to Roberta Clarke, attorney and member of the Caribbean Association for Feminist Research and Action (CAFRA):

There is a prevailing silence among women’s groups and it means something. They are...in disbelief that no matter how much was done, the violence continues. We feel paralysed. What more can we say? What more can we do now?<sup>xx</sup>

Singing Sandra’s answer, five years later when things were even worse, was “get an Equaliser”. Unfortunately, the Equaliser, as described in Sandra’s calypso, can become operative only after the crime of violence has been committed. What sort of Equaliser could help, say, three young children ritually murdered by their parents and offered to Kali;<sup>xxi</sup> or the young woman from the squatter settlement behind St Joseph farm whose spouse beat in her brains and the heads of her mother and sister with a plank of wood one fine afternoon? The arguments for the Equaliser are essentially the same in kind as the ones for capital or corporal punishment: that the punishment should mirror the crime and that the severity of the punishment will serve as a deterrent to prospective violators of the Law. The calypsos of the mid-forties and onwards that advocated the return of the cat-o-nine tails for crimes of violence<sup>xxii</sup> were of the same spirit as those of the eighties and nineties that have been calling for hanging; Cro Cro’s ***Hang Them High*** (1993), Luta’s ***Hang Them High*** (1993), GB’s/Sugar Aloes’ ***Twenty-four Hours*** (1994), Contender’s blunt and crude ***Bruck Dey Neck*** (1999) are examples that spring readily to mind.

### Bhaggan and the Caroni interlude

Out of the perception of extremity has come, consistently over the decades, the advocacy of desperate measures. Hulsie Bhaggan’s highly successful call for vigilante patrols in June 1993 was to a certain extent one of these desperate measures, though it was regarded by some commentators as the exploitation of Indo-Trinidadian xenophobia in the service of Bhaggan’s agenda of self-promotion. The first reports of unusual criminal violence in Central Trinidad appeared in the *Sunday Mirror* in early and mid-April 1993.<sup>xxiii</sup> The first article was headlined “Racial Drug War Brewing” and the second, “Guns Against the Indians.” The articles themselves, based on information supplied by “an underworld

source” attributed an increase in crime in Central and Southern Trinidad to a “racial” war that had begun to develop within the drug world, between the Indo-Trinidadian rulers of the Central/Southern turf and their Afro-Trinidadian subalterns.

The *Mirror*’s “underworld source” speculated that certain Afro-Trinidadian gang members who had contracted their services out to Indo-Trinidadian drug barons had become embittered when their employers organized the assassination of Deryck King, one of their bandit brethren who had been a witness to a murder committed by one of his gangland bosses. With the Chadee/Boodram clan, hub of the Indo-Trinidadian drug syndicate, behind bars, the delicate balance of terror through which an uncertain peace is preserved among cutthroats was upset in Central Trinidad, and the gang that had worked for them now sought reprisal against their erstwhile employers. These initial reports did not yet include any stories of Indian women being raped. The bandits’ focus at that time seemed to have been on bars and pubs. The bandits wore stocking masks and surgical gloves and the *Mirror*’s source could not say for sure who they were, though he strongly suspected that they were members of the “King” gang.

The second phase in this crime wave in Central Trinidad was reported in the *Express* of April 23, 1993, under the headline: “Reign of Terror in Central”. The scope of the bandits’ activity had expanded. The *Express* reported that:

Residents of Ragoonanan Road, Enterprise, and Pokhor Road, Longdenville in Central Trinidad, are now observing a self-imposed curfew following the rape of two teenaged girls, the shooting of two men and the robbery of 17 persons, including a family of 11, by three armed bandits. The bandits started their rampage around 10 a.m. on Sunday.<sup>xxiv</sup>

By early June, 1993, the areas of Munroe Road, Charlieville, Longdenville, Ragoonanan Road, Pokhor Road, Felicity, Pierre Road and Endeavour were being described as a “targeted crime zone”.<sup>xxv</sup> The bandits and rapists, operating in gangs of two or three, usually wore “ski masks, dark-coloured turtleneck jerseys, dark trousers and elbow-length gloves, reminiscent of the comic book character Phantom.”<sup>xxvi</sup> Police confirmed reports of seven rapes by hooded men. Other commentators claimed that some of the rape victims were reluctant to report their ordeal to the Police.

Hulsie Bhaggan’s achievement was to convert this gang of largely unidentified criminals—who may have been former employees and cutthroat partners of their criminal Indo-Trinidadian counterparts—into representatives of the African race, involved in “an organized assault... to humiliate Indian women.” She claimed to have interviewed eleven Muslim virgins who had been raped and theorised that “cultural jealousy and material wealth were the motives.”<sup>xxvii</sup> Bhaggan was able to do what none of the victims could: identify the rapists and determine their motives. It did not matter that her interpretation of events did not coincide with what had so far been reported to the Police, since after all, the nation had lost confidence in the Police Service.

Up to June 1993, the Police had received reports of thirteen rapes in Central Trinidad, seven of which had been committed by hooded men whose identities were as yet undetermined. Five of the thirteen rapes had been committed by Indian men, and one of the seven women raped by the masked men was of African descent.<sup>xxviii</sup> Comparing the statistics of Central Trinidad with those for the rest of the island, the Police provided the following data for 1993 up to the month of June:

Port of Spain 15; South 15; Western 16; Eastern 9; North (outside Port of Spain) 24; Central 13; South Western 13; North Eastern 17 and Tobago 8. Of these figures 91 adult women were raped, seven girls between the ages of 14 to 16 were raped, and one adopted minor and a mentally sub-normal girl were raped. There were also 14 cases of incest reported.<sup>xxix</sup>

These were chilling, frightening statistics, which verified the conclusion that the nation was in a state of deep crisis. It is easy to see how any militant woman who is faced with this sort of evidence of the terrorism that was destroying so many women's lives could become an advocate of desperate measures. In 1993, Bhaggan called for vigilante groups; in 1998 Singing Sandra called for an "Equaliser". The difference between the two demands was that while Sandra's Equaliser sought to inflict her macabre punishments on proven violators and could act only after the crime had been committed and proven, Bhaggan's vigilantes were hoping to anticipate and forestall the act of violence against women and households by the threat and execution of a retaliatory communal violence against those presumed to be of criminal intent. Acting outside of the Law and under the presumption that the Law was impotent to act on the people's behalf, Bhaggan's vigilantes were open to decisions made on "hunch", pre-judgement, gut-feeling and racial prejudice. Indeed, having simplified and racialized the issue of rape in Central Trinidad, Bhaggan's vigilantes, armed with staves but with cutlasses at the ready, were programmed to target African males who had become synonymous with the concept of "the rapist". Indian males, regular contributors to the statistics of rape and incest and robberies in Central Trinidad, Indian controllers of the drug trade in Bhaggan's and other United National Congress-dominated constituencies, whose impact on those constituencies and the nation at large had been devastating, were not the targets of Bhaggan's vigilantes. There was no outcry some months later when four members of an Indo-Trinidadian family in Williamsville were shot through the head by a gang of assassins whose Indo-Trinidadian leader was simultaneously a drug disseminator and a religious man who had built a mandir on his estate in Piparo.

The issue of violence against women was being converted into political capital by Bhaggan, who seized the opportunity to challenge the patriarchs in her own party by demonstrating that she was more "man" than her leader. For the Indian males of Central Trinidad, the vigilante patrols provided the illusion of a self-empowering masculinity; the opportunity to display their ability as men to protect their women folk from the age-old threat of the big black phallus. The actual achievements of the vigilantes were minimal. The most significant of these was that the criminal element had begun to experience

difficulty in Central Trinidad. Hulsie Bhaggan affirmed that “she had been receiving ‘messages’ of death threats from drug pushers claiming they wanted to ‘pass me out’ because the crime watch was affecting their business.”<sup>xxx</sup> This achievement was, however, short-lived and, soon enough, some vigilante patrols began to display symptoms of the very lawlessness that they were trying to curb.

A *Trinidad Guardian* editorial in mid-June 1993 spoke of a state of tension and an “explosive situation” in Central Trinidad, where the Police Commissioner himself had “encountered a group of vigilantes in Preysal armed with cutlasses and pieces of wood about to go in search of someone they believed to be a bandit.”<sup>xxxi</sup> Taking the Law into their own hands was proving to be a difficult matter, fraught with the dangerous possibility of scapegoating. The *Trinidad Guardian* warned:

This is an explosive situation that has to be defused. We have already warned about the dangers of aggressive vigilantism. Already, it seems, this kind of lawlessness has gotten out of hand and, before our worst fears are realised, we would call on leaders responsible for these communities to take the necessary steps to halt these growing bands of vigilantes.<sup>xxxii</sup>

Bhaggan, who initially claimed to be empowering residents of Central Trinidad of all ethnicities to protect their communities from crime and violent intrusion, and in so doing to achieve what the Minister of National Security had failed to achieve anywhere in Trinidad,<sup>xxxiii</sup> realised after a few days that she had initiated a process that she could not control. Vigilante groups, going well beyond the brief of protecting their households and womenfolk, had begun to arrogate to themselves the right to say who should and who should not be on the road. Some of the reported incidents of vigilante activity seemed to be the result of group hysteria, while others resembled frontier-type lynching.

The Central Trinidad interlude achieved nothing except the embittering of race relations and the illustration of the dangers of playing “equaliser” both before and after the atrocious crime. By mid-July 1993, Bhaggan was agreeing with her critics that “the vigilante situation [was] now out of control and that political intervention [was] necessary.”<sup>xxxiv</sup> Such intervention she hoped would come through the auspices of the United National Congress (UNC) and its political leader. What happened instead was her political leader’s repudiation of her as a “loose cannon”, a judgement which he reconfirmed later in the year after Bhaggan, Nariva MP Krish Jurai and members of Bhaggan’s constituency caused traffic jams by holding a demonstration on the Butler Highway to protest heavy flooding in Central Trinidad in early and mid-November. Many, including Panday, recognized in her modus operandi a quest for visibility and a play for leadership of her party. Others “saw Bhaggan as a new Indira Gandhi, or in the mould of Mahatma Gandhi or Nelson Mandela.”<sup>xxxv</sup>

### The Hulsie calypsos, 1994–1995

Such amazing events as had happened in 1993 invited and received the scrutiny of some of the nation's calypsonians, for Hulsie Bhaggan had become an "Equaliser", matching terror with terror on the basis of a false argument of racial reprisal. A vibrantly energetic and articulate woman, in the process of constructing a political image and platform of her own, she was a challenge to both the heart-sick patriarchy of the politicians in the UNC and the ethnic and masculinist chauvinism of some calypsonians.

The major calypso responses began as early as the Independence Monarch competition of late August 1993, with Watchman's (Wayne Hade's) *How Low*. That song was followed by Tallish's (Francis Adam's) *Water* (1994), Cro Cro's (Weston Rawlins's) *Respect the Law* (1993), Brother Marvin's (Selwyn Demming's) *Miss Bhaggan* (1994), Bianca Hull's *Woman to Woman* (1994), Mc Gruff's *Caroni Bacchanal* (or *Take Your Dhoti and Run*) (1994) and David Rudder's *The Ballad of Hulsie X* (1995) a relative latecomer to what Bhaggan supporters deemed "Hulsie-bashing" calypsos.

These calypsos were quite different from each other in mood, mask and style, though together they commented on nearly every facet of the Caroni interlude. *How Low*, for example, began as a witty attempt to demolish the rather unfortunately worded motivational TV advertisement of the PNM: "Let us go down the road together and get the job done." The calypso depicted a nation already travelling downhill fast, and enquired of the Manning Government "how low" did the nation have to descend before the old corruption was rooted out. It next focussed on the bandits'/rapists' reign of terror in Central, and accused Bhaggan of igniting the racial fuse when she asserted that all the victims were Indians and all the rapists Africans. It also commented on Bhaggan's highway demonstration and her opting to go to jail rather than pay the fine. Unmasking this latter gesture as a piece of theatre, Watchman savoured the prospect of Bhaggan in jail among some of the very bandits and rapists that she claimed to be fighting through her vigilante groups:

Them bandits in jail wanted she to stay  
 They start drinking sea-moss and bois bande  
 If you see how they crying when Hulsie pay.

The implied sexism of these lines becomes explicit in the calypso's chorus at this point:

Hulsie Bhaggan, how low, how low?  
 How much further down you want the country to go?  
 You better get a husband—How low?  
 An African or Indian—How low?  
 Because all I want is for muh country to grow.

The notion that is clearly intended here is that Bhaggan's misdirected feminist activism really grows out of a sex-starved condition that would have been adequately remedied by

“them bandits in jail”, but now that she has foregone that opportunity by quickly paying the fine that she initially refused to pay, her condition could still be assuaged by the marital diligence of a good husband. The recommended husband can be of either of the two ethnicities between whom Bhaggan had tried “to start a race war”. The implication here is that, unlike Bhaggan and the lynchers from Caroni, Watchman sees little to distinguish between the sexualities of African and Indian men; though it is on such a stereotypical distinction that Bhaggan manipulated the gut-feelings of her constituents when, without proof, she declared that the rash of rapes in Central Trinidad were being committed by African males.

Black male calypsonians who dealt with the Caroni interlude chose to answer what they saw as blatant sexism and racism with an equal and opposite sexism and a self-defensive race-rooted and race-protecting rhetoric of their own. This is clearly the case with Tallish’s *Water* which examines Bhaggan’s two significant moments of 1993, the Caroni interlude and the Butler Highway obstruction, through the lens of a wickedly sexist pun which achieved what Bhaggan had accused the Minister of National Security of attempting: the reduction of serious protest to “pappy show”.<sup>xxxvi</sup> Unmasking such protest as Bhaggan’s political bid for popularity and visibility, Tallish denounced her as unsuccessfully “imitating Indira Gandhi”.

In a calypso laced with sexual and sexist innuendo, Tallish outlines “interviews” that he has had with politicians of both parties who have either already given Bhaggan day-long supplies of water—a rarity in many areas in Trinidad—or are working diligently toward a future when she would be able to enjoy “pipe-borne water” both “in front and in the backyard.” Tallish also repeats Watchman’s fantasy of a Bhaggan imprisoned among sex-starved males:

Next time they lock up Hulsie, don’t give her no bail  
And let them prisoners give she plenty water in jail.

Like Watchman, too, Tallish points out Bhaggan’s unsuitability to becoming a national leader in a multi-ethnic country whose supposedly separate ethnic spaces have over the five centuries of post-Columbian settlement been subject to constant overlap, interface, interpenetration, one with the other, in processes of intercourse, negotiation, contestation and confrontation, enacted with love, hatred, negative and positive tolerance.

The Caroni interlude that Bhaggan had engineered, simplified race relations to an embattled confrontation between heartland Indians and the rest, the rest being mainly Africans; it had simplified spatial relations to an attempt to create via vigilantism a delineation of exclusive ethnic territory and an erection of boundaries, barriers and barricades that was totally alien to the intermeshing and interweaving of spaces that, along with ethnic separateness, have been Trinidad’s true national history. Tallish’s reservations about Bhaggan are an accurate reading of the fanatical spirit that had, within

two weeks, begun to inform vigilante activity. Bhaggan is indicted for being the initiator of activity that revealed the racial hostility which informed relations between sequestered Central and the rest:

If she were the political leader  
 To my country it would be disaster  
 Indians and Negroes couldn't live happy  
 Negroes couldn't enter her constituency  
 If she ketch an Indian with a Negro Man  
 She cut off she foot she two knees and hand  
 And if she ketch an Indian with a Negro lady  
 You could bet your life is castration for he.

Drawing boundaries to restrict the movement of the Afro-Trinidadian male has always led to violent verbal and physical retaliation. Such a curfew on time and movement strikes at the very heart of Trini-male machismo, which has never silently tolerated any proscription of its time and space. Consider the stickfighting bands with their frontiers and barriers and the bitter battles fought in defence of one's turf or in invasion of the next man's. Consider, too, the steelband clashes, often originating in quarrels over women, over whom the males in each band or area tried to exercise absolute proprietorship. The boundaries were impossible to defend, the male proprietorship impossible to maintain. The calypsos on Hulsie all proclaimed this truth in their different ways.

None made its statement more subtly than Mc Gruff's *Caroni Bacchanal*: Mc Gruff's calypso, which Bhaggan in 1995 described as her favourite calypso of 1994, concealed its anger beneath a mask of humour which, because it seemed to be self-directed, might have suggested to Bhaggan that she was not the object of its aggression. *Caroni Bacchanal* narrates the attempt by two Black males to visit their girlfriends in Caroni during the period of the vigilantes. They disguise themselves as Indians by wearing dhotis and turbans (which is about the surest way of their being discovered, since such articles of clothing have long ceased to be the daily wear of the Indo-Trinidadian male). The lynching patrols are suspicious and demand that they disrobe—presumably, so that the patrols can examine their “horns”, in the style of the folktale. At this point, they know that they are lost, so they sing the chorus “take your dhoti and run”. The implication is that the lynchers will be able to identify them as Africans by their penises. This is confirmed by the resemblance between “dhoti” the article of clothing and “totee”, the Indo-Trinidadian folk word for the penis that the dhoti conceals.

Mc Gruff's mocking laughter here is extremely complex. First, the disguise, the dhoti, is, as we said, no disguise at all, since it is worn mainly by very old Indian men or on religious and ceremonial occasions. In the calypso tradition, the dhoti as a disguise for the African male who seeks to enter an Indian ceremony as an uninvited guest, was twice employed by Guyanese calypsonian King Fighter: in *Indian Wedding* and *Indian*

**Party.**<sup>xxxvii</sup> In both cases the protagonist, after consuming massive quantities of roti and dhal, is discovered, disrobed and beaten within an inch of his life.

So the dhoti has never been a very effective mode of disguise to protect the much-scorned, much-feared and bold-faced Black Anansi male gatecrasher and threshold-crosser from the fearsome and self-affrighted anger of the Indian male, whose sacred space he has violated with his sub-untouchable presence. Moreover, the dhoti was an obvious and visible marker of racial/ethnic difference, and at one time, a much-ridiculed article of clothing among Blacks who in the tradition of “seasoning” famous in slave society, laughed at both the dhoti and the newcomer who wore it. One should, therefore, be immediately suspicious of the calypsonian’s intentions here. He may be invoking King Fighter’s protagonist of the embattled 1950’s in Guyana to explore a similarly embroiled racial landscape in the Trinidad of the 1990’s. Or he may be mocking at the Indo-Trinidadian Other via the comic misrepresentation of the dhoti as ridiculous article of clothing and marker of ethnic difference.

In *Caroni Bacchanal*, just as the dhoti covers and conceals the guilty-as-charged Black penis, the word “dhoti” covers and conceals the word “totee”. In both the literal and the metaphorical contexts, then, the disguise is inadequate. This calypso, employing—like Tallish’s *Water*, the earlier Sparrow’s *Congo Man* (1965) and David Rudder’s later *Ballad of Hulsie X*(1995)—the ambiguity of all deconstructive humour, simultaneously celebrates the imposed and stereotypical myth of Black male sexuality, and scornfully repudiates those who have resurrected the myth in order to fulfil their own political agenda. The laughter of Mc Gruff’s calypso, then, which so delighted Ms Bhaggan, conceals the complex fear and bitter rage of its nightmarish origins; makes light of its consciousness of the history of lynching whose macabre climax used to be the cutting off of the Black Penis in an attempt to arrest or appropriate a sexual potency which, though fictional, was simultaneously envied and feared, dreaded and desired.

There can be no doubt that Mc Gruff understands that the vigilante patrols are lynching gangs on the lookout for and at war against the Big Black Penis. The logic of the calypso’s narrative and the circumstances that engendered the vigilantes both suggest this. For if the Caroni rapists were masked from head to toe, virtually the only means of identification would have had to be their unsheathed penises. (One notes that the humiliation of Black American singer Michael Jackson, who was made to present his penis for photographing by the FBI, was also a current issue in 1994 calypsos and received the same grotesquely comic treatment as Mc Gruff accorded the Caroni lynchings. Jackson, Sheldon Nuget declared in *Free Willie* (1994), needed to learn how to keep “Willie”—another folk name for the penis—under strict control, rather than to “free Willie”. Here the grotesque was achieved in the contrast between the heartwarming innocence of the movie *Free Willie* whose theme-song was rendered by the Peter Pannish Jackson, and the gross sexual crime of which Jackson was being accused.

If Mc Gruff's mask was one of laughter, Cro Cro's was one of exaggerated violence. On the surface of things, ***Respect the Law*** reads like a near lunatic response to the November 1993 Butler Highway protest. Cro Cro, to the delight of a screaming Calypso Fiesta crowd, outlines the things he would have done to Bhaggan had she obstructed his freedom of movement:

Ah pay mih licence and you cyan tell me ah cyan pass  
 If ah was coming ah would surely lick down yuh mass.

And in stanza three:

You should be glad ah wasn't driving a truck sistah  
 You woulda end up San Fernando on the bumper.

Then in the final stanza, the climactic couplet is left unfinished, though it requires little imagination for the audience to find the appropriate rhyming word for “front”:

Whether I was coming from the back or coming from in front  
 If I was coming you would have to breaks.

“Lick down”, in the tradition of Sparrow’s ***Sixty Million Frenchmen*** and Shorty/Baron’s ***He Lick She***, suggests oral sex. “Truck” and “bumper” are obvious and grotesque phallic images here, while other words with sexual.sexist innuendos are “coming” and “breaks” both of which imply orgasm. The anal and vaginal sex suggested in Tallish’s pipe-borne water “in front and in she backyard” is repeated here with the reference to “coming from the back or coming in front.” In other words, ***Respect the Law*** is as much an expression of sexual resentment at the Caroni vigilante activities of June as it is an expression of exaggerated rage at the later November protest demonstration. Cro Cro’s aim is to demolish whatever platform Bhaggan had hoped to build for her own expanding political career, by unmasking her motives as “selfish and unfair” and her behaviour as “lawless, arrogant” and hostile to the public interest. In his chorus he poses four questions to the public:

Ah want to know if you really agree with Hulsie?  
 No! No! No!  
 Do you think she has respect for anybody?  
 No! No! No!  
 Do you think that this woman should run the country?  
 No! No! No!  
 Do you think that this was a great example publicly?  
 No! No! No!

Cro Cro's raw aggressiveness was well within the spirit of the time when verbal violence and uncouth insult had become a norm on Morgan Job's very popular 106FM talk show. It, however, evoked hostile criticism from a number of commentators, especially those who were willing to ignore the narrowly ethnic chauvinist platform of the mid-year Bhaggan and accept her as a potential and militant voice for all women; which was how she preferred to be read. Bhaggan herself, though she claimed not to have heard any of the calypsos about herself, seemed to have heard most of the three hundred others and was eloquent in her rejection of the 1994 crop of songs:

Isn't Calypso supposed to be social commentary, political satire, picong, humour etc...? For example, I have absolutely no problems being criticised but I do not consider open vulgarity, racism and blatant sexism as criticism. The calypsonians who used vulgarity to attack me merely demonstrated their lack of imagination, creativity, artistic ability, talent and a general bankruptcy of human values and human dignity. Their attacks have merely strengthened my resolve to speak out against the breakdown in our society and to work with citizens to rebuild Trinidad and Tobago.

...Calypso, therefore, is becoming a weapon and a form of violence against women. Isn't verbal and psychological abuse a form of violence? Indeed, violence against women is very much linked to the male's perception of the woman as a physical being, an object to own and control, an object of sexual gratification.

In addition to projecting the woman as a physical being, there is a feeling that assertive and vocal women must be dominated in bed, hence, the cry, "You need a man!" That is a pathetic response to women's search for equality and social justice.<sup>xxxviii</sup>

This letter/statement/manifesto was published a week before she said that she hadn't listened to any of the calypsos attacking her. It is a powerful response, but it is also a response that decontextualises the so-called "Hulsie-bashing" calypsos, which were the calypsonians' responses to what they saw as the sexism, racism, social divisiveness and unleashed, uncontrolled civic violence of the Bhaggan-inspired and catalysed Caroni interlude of mid-1993. Curiously, she responds to them by calling them racist and sexist and classifying them as an extension of the violence against women against which she had been fighting. Nothing better illustrates the point that was made much earlier vis-à-vis the violent sadism of the measures recommended in *The Equaliser*: that in situations of extremity such as the ones presented to society by rape, murder and the battering of women, aggressors and victims, vindicators of racial groups, class or gender interests and antagonists who are perceived as attacking those interests, generally end up saying

similar things about each other and wearing the same faces or masks of self-righteousness and indignation.

Bhaggan's manifesto received approval from the Hindu Women's Organization who attacked Cro Cro's and Brother Marvin's songs on her behalf:

Soon Cro Cro may be eligible for a national award, for he has inspired many other calypsonians to sing in the same crude and vulgar fashion. Brother Marvin, apparently, has even surpassed him in obscenities and disrespect for women. Of course, since the brunt of the attack is for Hulsie Bhaggan that does not warrant responses from women's groups as she is a politician and, worse, an Indian...

Finally, to Cro Cro, the Mighty Anti-Indian, if your calypso tent was situated in a different part of Trinidad, the answer to your chorus may have been different.<sup>xxxix</sup>

There are hints here that the Hindu Women's Organization felt itself excluded from the general forum of feminist discourse, such as it existed. What is, however, not so clear, is whether that organization had ever made much effort to move beyond the boundaries of specifically *Hindu* women's interests, to locate themselves in the wider context of gender issues. The rage of resentment against Bhaggan had arisen not because she was an Indian, but because she was then too narrow-minded to recognize that Caroni was not special but typical of the entire nation in the ordeal of crime and violence that it had been enduring. Police statistics on rape, as we saw, indicated that the extensive Central District had suffered thirteen rapes, in comparison with fifteen each for Port of Spain and South, sixteen for the Western District, twenty-four for the Northern District excluding Port of Spain, and seventeen for the Eastern District.<sup>xl</sup> These statistics meant nothing to either Bhaggan or the Hindu Women's Organisation who remained focussed on what they considered to be the uniqueness of their own situation. This extended platform in which they now seemed to be concerned with all women, was a new thing arising, perhaps, from Bhaggan's need of a national platform after her repudiation by Panday over the Highway demonstration.

Not everyone was impressed by this shift of position. Bianca Hull, the 1993 Calypso Queen, was not. Her *Woman to Woman* expressed disappointment that a woman of Bhaggan's obvious ability and dedication had limited herself to the defence of only Central Trinidad women:

As one woman talking to a next woman  
You defending some and not all women  
Yes one woman writing to a next woman

Dou dou you can't fight crime and make distinction  
 You could be young or old, plain or pretty  
 Black or white, the thief don't show mercy  
 So how you could only make a fuss  
 'Bout the woman in Chaguanas  
 Hulsie, who standing up for us?  
 Woman getting kick and cuss from Toco to Icacos  
 So you see  
 That's why I find you should fight for we.

Bianca Hull also questioned Bhaggan's emphasis on pursuing the enemy from outside while she ignored the enemy within. Amidst the racial polemic of 1993 there had emerged moments of hard analysis. In one of these, Suren Capildeo, an attorney-at-law and a UNC Senator, had disclosed that "over 90 per cent of Hindu women who apply for legal aid for help in divorce proceedings do so because of wife-beating alcoholic husbands and battered children." Bianca Hull reminds Bhaggan:

The most set o' wrongs, Miss Hulsie, that we women face  
 Come from men we know, Miss Hulsie, home in we own place  
 But Mr Panday  
 And three doctors say  
 Leave it so, don't pass no law  
 Or the men goh beat we some more.

Since there was little that women could expect from such male parliamentarians, they had to cling to Bhaggan despite her limitations, and harangue her, as Bianca Hull had undertaken to do, into recognizing that a more extensive platform was both necessary and possible.

Brother Marvin, not yet the bard of *Jahaji Bhai* (1996), sang his outrage against Bhaggan's declaration that Bosnia-type ethnic cleansing had been taking place in Caroni. In his calypso, *Miss Bhaggan*, the anger is not masked and the language is plain and direct and even brutally insulting as it echoes the rhetorical violence of the age. This rhetorical violence, perceptively diagnosed by Bhaggan as a "reaction to a sense of powerlessness in our society and in a world where women are fast emerging" was, however, in no way confined to insecure males or unimaginative calypsonians. Some women—witness dancehall artistes—had been quite accomplished in both the articulation and the performance of a kind of violence. Prominent politicians, ideologues with narrowly focussed commitments to race, ethnicity, religion, talk-show hosts of the early nineties, were among those who had from time to time employed either violent or strident rhetoric in making their own partisan cases or attempting to demolish the positions of their opponents.

Brother Marvin, of mixed African and Indian heritage via his Indian grandfather, and married to an Indian woman, saw in Bhaggan's partitioning of the country into Indian and non-Indian space, the antithesis of all that he understood the Trinidad national experience to mean. He read the Caroni interlude in the context of the "douglarisation debate" which had been going on at one level or another since the fifties, but had assumed almost absurd proportions during the eighties and nineties. This debate involved the nature of what had been changing and growing out of the conjugal, sexual and cultural interface of Afro-Creole and Indo-Creole societies of Trinidad. Marvin was himself the product of this interface, and was in addition, the father of "doubla" children. This is why he considered Bhaggan's unsubstantiated accusation of African males "obnoxious", "petty", "dotish" anti-black racism. If Bhaggan diagnosed the "Hulsie-bashing" calypsos to be the work of insecure males in quest of a dominance they could no longer exercise over women or their circumstances, Marvin diagnosed her racialization of the rape issue to be the result of an obsession with Black sexuality which expressed itself in what was on the surface a fear of douglarisation, and beneath the surface a desire for what she feared.

Marvin, like Cro Cro and Watchman, attempted an unmasking of Bhaggan's real motives during the Caroni interlude, pointing out that by scapegoating the African male she was simultaneously protecting the home-grown, Caroni-indigenous Indian criminal from the type of scrutiny that could well provide a truer context for understanding what was taking place in contemporary Caroni:

Racial harmony  
 Is what we really want in this island  
 But this dotish woman Hulsie Bhaggan  
 Trying to destroy this lil nation  
 As far as I see  
 She using them people in Central as a tool  
 That woman is divide and rule  
 Only making she self a damn fool

Ah wonder if she remember the Poolool brothers  
 And Boysie Singh  
 Is so much like me they kill  
 But niggers didn't talk 'bout ethnic cleansing.

Boysie Singh, fighter, fisherman, pirate, gangster, saga boy, contract killer, preacher and murderer of the forties and early fifties, was from St James, though his activities may have extended to Caroni. The Poolool brothers, on the other hand, were legendary Caroni gunmen. There were nine brothers and five sisters in this family.<sup>xli</sup> Two of the nine brothers committed suicide to end a massive manhunt. They had been wanted for murder. Another brother was shot to death at a wedding. A fourth died in an accident. A fifth was, in February 1968, awaiting trial for murder. A sixth was serving a fourteen-year jail term

for shooting a policeman. A seventh, Moonan Poolool, was on the run among the canefields. He too was wanted for murder. "In his hands was a 16-bore shotgun, and around his neck, dangling from a piece of string was a bottle of phosphono—deadly poison." Of the two remaining brothers, one was nine years old and under his mother's protection, the other, married with three children, was trying to live honestly after having been acquitted of murder charges.

Normally no one would cite people such as Boysie Singh or the Poolools as representatives of their communities or ethnic groups. Marvin, however, does resurrect them to make the point that there is a rich tradition of criminality in Bhaggan's constituency, the recognition of which might lead her to a more realistic interpretation of the current gangsterism that pervades that district. The Boodram clan is to the nineties what the Poolools were to the sixties; and the spate of revanchist crimes of 1993 needed to be related to the historical and current realities of indigenous Caroni crime. What Marvin is implying through the Poolool references is that the citizens of Central need to focus more on *the enemy within*. He concludes that Bhaggan and the other political leaders of Central are less interested in controlling crime than in:

... using these crimes  
To gain political mileage  
As leaders abusing their privilege  
Just to keep the Central fief in bondage.

He ends by asserting his right to free passage through any part of Trinidad and Tobago: that is, he resents and resists the ethnic partitioning of the country

I just hope Mr. Human Rights  
Remember my rights clearly  
Tell them people in Caroni  
Trinidad and Tobago is for all a we  
Ah see they wrote up "No Niggers After Six"  
'Cause they sharing licks  
Well, this nigger say we going anywhere  
Without fear, they better take care!  
You see, ah born here!

Collectively, the Hulsie calypsos of 1994 constituted an unmasking in which the retaliatory sexism of the calypsos was their least important element. This unmasking prepared the ground for Rudder's *The Ballad of Hulsie X*, whose method of attack was ridicule, but whose origin was anger.<sup>xlii</sup> *The Ballad of Hulsie X* is a subtle, succinct, funny and deadly encapsulation of the many issues that arose from the Caroni interlude, the Highway protest and their aftermath in 1994. This calypso is rendered against a mock-heroic parody of a heavy reggae bass-line similar to the one in *Java*, a song from the 1970's, or the beat employed by Chalice in their *See Mi Ya* album. This bass-line

conjures up the background music of several Western films, including the Sergio Leone “Spaghetti Westerns” of the late sixties and early seventies. The bass-line is part of the song’s mockery, establishing the wild West atmosphere—the “Get-off-my-land” attitude—that pervaded Central Trinidad in the time of the vigilantes during the brief reign of “the Sugarbelt Queen”.

The title “Sugarbelt Queen” is at once an allusion to a beauty contest that Bhaggan nearly won years before and to her delusions about her support in the sugar belt, Panday’s fiefdom. Bhaggan’s campaign for visibility and power, unmasked by the 1994 Hulsie calypsos, is reduced in Rudder’s *Ballad of Hulsie X* to the play-acting of a Phagwah band. Her departure in 1994 from the party position on the Corporal Punishment Bill is reduced in Rudder’s *Ballad* to “she do a dollar wine on we party line.” She had in fact done more than that. She had actually voted with the PNM Government, in support of a “Bill to Amend the Corporal Punishment Act”. The official UNC position was articulated by attorney Ramesh Lawrence Maharaj whose mask those days was that of a “human rights advocate”. Maharaj, all tenderness of heart, quoted several international reports all arguing that corporal punishment was “barbaric, inhumane and intolerable in any human society”. Maharaj also felt that the population at large needed to be consulted on the issue and asked:

Do we in 1994 consider that the problems in our society must be solved by the use of State violence? Do we consider that the example we accept as a State is to inflict violence? What message do we send to the other members of the society that our problems cannot be dealt with without the infliction of violence?<sup>xliii</sup>

In reply, Bhaggan argued that “the scales of justice are tipped in favour of the criminal and the bandit.” Citing two current cases—the murder of a young mother and her baby and the rape of a two-year-old infant—she posed these questions to party whip Ramesh Maharaj and the House: “Do you speak about the human rights of those persons? What about the rights of the persons who were brutalised, battered and killed?”<sup>xliv</sup> This, then, is what Rudder terms Bhaggan’s “dollar wine on the party-line”, the direct public challenge of its fake human rights position. Unmasked herself, Bhaggan had now become a dedicated unmasker of the party’s patriarchy. Rudder’s *Ballad of Hulsie X*, as full of politico-sexual innuendo as any of the other calypsos discussed, is a reductively comic allegory of her tragic encounter with a sick-hearted “Manday” and his side-kicks Wade and Ram.

Bhaggan, listening no doubt to Bianca Hull’s entreaty that she become a crusader for all oppressed women in a Parliament dominated by males who were indifferent to women’s issues, attempted in 1994 to create an independent base out of the fragile and fickle bourgeois-feminist platform. Her voice—reduced to a sing-song whine in Rudder’s calypso—joined the crescendo of voices calling for violent retribution, when in July 1994

two light-skinned young middle-class mothers of Westmoorings were raped and murdered by a teenager of mixed race and an Indo-Trinidadian young adult. Confronted with the demands of the white and off-white elite of the Western Peninsula for justice, the Manning Government hastened into the Glen Ashby hanging. Bourgeois rage and bourgeois hysteria were not things to be trifled with. The PNM knew it then; Bhaggan recognised it immediately; the post-1995 Panday Government also understood it.

What Rudder characterised as Hulsie X’s “dollar wine” was her mid-1994 movement toward becoming a voice for the monied class of the Western Peninsula. Toward the end of the *Ballad of Hulsie X*, Hulsie X’s whining voice joins itself to the narrator and chorus in a call to the French Creoles and the Westmoorings bourgeoisie to join the residents of Hulsie’s heartland, the good folk of Penal, Couva, Chaguanas and even the newly discovered Laventille in the Hulsie X dollar wine. Even the silent, bitter “Manday” is invited to bestir his ancient, paralysed bones and “go down, do the Hulsie.” The “dance” becomes Rudder’s way of representing and ridiculing the distinctive Hulsie style of political performance. She is the Indian woman “breaking away” from all patriarchies via histrionic melodramas of her own invention. She thus creates history in Rudder’s “strange land” and passes into legend, folklore and the immortality of the ballad that bears her name, even as she loses her moorings in Panday’s UNC and passes out—perhaps temporarily—of national politics.

### **Balance of terror**

Both the Bhaggan-inspired Caroni interlude (1993) and the Westmoorings rape-murders (1994) served to intensify the nation’s focus on violent crime, especially crimes against women. Nineteen ninety-two with its 106 homicides had been described as a “record year for murders”, most of which were “drug-related”.<sup>xlv</sup> Nineteen ninety-three was worse. Nineteen ninety-four, with 29 murders in the first six weeks and 55 by mid-April,<sup>xlvi</sup> ended just as it had begun with murders occurring every day of its last fortnight. Nineteen ninety-four had started with thirteen murders in its first eleven days, including that of one man whose head and arm were discovered in a garbage bag on the Beetham Estate rubbish dump, while the body lay behind a house in Laventille; that of a sixty-five-year-old woman, who was raped, murdered and flung into a ravine at Aripo; and the murder of four members of an Indo-Trinidadian Williamsville family who were shot in the head by a gang whose devout leader had built a mandir on the state-owned lands where, as a squatter, he kept his extensive drug-financed estate. A bitter irony, surely, for Bhaggan to swallow; the sort of irony, indeed, that would have encouraged her to broaden the basis of her campaign against crime. Nineteen ninety-four ended with the 30<sup>th</sup> of December rape and murder of a young woman on her way home from a church dinner.

The nation, however, discovered good reason for rejoicing in the assurance given by Russell Huggins that crime would soon become a thing of the past; in his plan to equip the Police Service with bicycles and so facilitate neighbourhood patrols; and in Gordon Draper’s soothing advice that the spate of murders in December was no cause for alarm since most of them seemed to have been crimes of passion. Thus assured and without

alarm, the nation stumbled into 1995 to be confronted with the now normal fiesta of chopped-up cadavers, one of which was discovered headless in the Dibe hills. Driven to the edge of darkness by such extremities of violence, the public began to call for its version of an “Equaliser”. For some, the Equaliser should take the form of a Police Death Squad; others joined the campaign to resume hanging. There were, as we have seen, a few calypsonians in this group. Retired Senior Magistrate and Independent Senator Carol Mahadeo recommended in the Senate a number of modest proposals, to address what she described as “*an extreme situation*”.<sup>xlvii</sup> Among her recommendations were the digging out of criminals’ eyes and the cutting out of their tongues, the cutting off of hands and public floggings in Woodford Square. She had been the victim of a public mugging in the Central Market in October 1993 (1993 again) when a well-dressed young man had stuck a knife to her neck and ordered her to “pass it [her handbag] up fast.”

Senators Everard Dean, the Reverend Daniel Teelucksingh, a Presbyterian, and the Reverend Dr. Eric St Cyr, a Pentecostalist, supported the Corporal Punishment Amendment Bill with various levels of enthusiasm or sadness as a desperate attempt to remedy a desperate situation.<sup>xlviii</sup> National Security Minister Russell Huggins, who introduced the Bill, when questioned about his position re the flogging of women, declared that while it was not usual to impose such sentences on women, a criminal was a criminal and there should be no gender discrimination in this matter.<sup>xlix</sup>

One suggestion was that the Protective Services themselves needed to be cleansed before the society could think of introducing and enacting more stringent laws against crime. To this end, Wayne Brown suggested that the Scotland Yard Report be acted upon and the one hundred policemen named in the report suspended; that deficient judges and magistrates should likewise be suspended; the DEA called in and invested with the necessary authority and a separate court established to deal with violent crimes.<sup>1</sup>

Replying to Wayne Brown, Joseph Toney, an attorney-at-law and former Minister of National Security in the NAR Government, suggested a few measures of his own: the dismissal of Huggins, the current Minister of National Security; the expansion and empowerment of the Police Service Commission; the purchase of necessary equipment and tools to enable the Police to function efficiently; the encouragement of the public to support the Police in their efforts to control crime; morale building campaigns to deepen police commitment to the ideals of the Service<sup>li</sup>

Other suggestions came from the Full Gospel Movement, who viewed the increase of crime locally and internationally as a sign of the perilous times of the last days, “when men will love only themselves, and will be disobedient to parents, unthankful, unholy, unforgiving, covetous, fierce.”<sup>lii</sup> Increased crime, the culture of drugs and guns, were the result of the increased desperate activity of Satan who, in anticipation of the end of his reign on earth was seeking to corrupt as many of God’s children as he could. Phenomena such as family breakdown, crass yearning after material things, narcissism,

compulsive violence and drug addiction were Satan's methods for gaining control of the hearts, minds and souls of God's children. What was needed therefore, in the words of the Rev. Carlyle Chankersingh of the Faith Centre in San Fernando, was "the transformation of human life based on the changing of the heart"; a task, he said, that required the services of the Full Gospel Church, since neither the Protective Services nor the Government had the solution.<sup>livi</sup>

Three factors emerge from this overview of the phenomenon of violent crime in the nineties. The first is the prevalence and extremity of inter-personal violence of all kinds: sexual, domestic, verbal, emotional and mental. These categories of violence were being continually enacted in a living theatre of man-to-man, man-to-woman, woman-to-man, woman-to-woman, parent-to-child, child-to-adult, student-to-teacher, teacher-to-student, parent-to-teacher situations.

The second factor is the relationship between these categories of violence, each of which is but a symptom of a wider culture of violence that permeates race, colour, class and the vestigial traces of caste. So, while the original focus of this paper was the question of responses to the extremity of violence against women, the focus quite naturally shifted to the general phenomenon of inter-personal violence of which violence against women is but a part. The suggested solutions to the scourges of rape and battering in Singing Sandra's *The Equaliser* are no different, essentially, from the sorts of remedies suggested by Independent Senator Carol Mahadeo and numerous others as means of curbing all categories of violent crime. The ethic behind both sets of solutions is the simple, primal one that violence can only be controlled or overcome by greater violence.

When the world was divided into two ideological blocs, Communist and "Free", with both violently militaristic and imperialistic in their attitude toward the rest of the world, there used to be a beautifully euphemistic phrase that summed up the violence and mayhem that both imperialisms inflicted on the rest of the world while preserving peace and stability between themselves. They called this equilibrium that was based on near equal military might, "a balance of terror". Both *The Equaliser* and the list of dire punishments that has emerged in public discourse are built on that same basic principle of the need for a balance of terror between criminal and victim. Ironically, though, nothing better illustrates the relationship between categories of violence than the ethic of a balance of terror, which inevitably converts oppressor and oppressed into monstrous doubles of each other, wearing the same mask of violence. Balance of terror has failed on the macrocosmic level to make the world a more peaceful place, and will undoubtedly fail on the microcosmic or domestic level to bring a greater measure of harmony to inter-personal relations.

The third outstanding factor of the nineties was the society's apparent impotence in the face of the rising tide of crime and violence. The legalised and recriminatory violence of the State and its officers of law seems to be a mirror image of the illegal violence of the

criminal offender but, despite the assurances of a diminished crime rate that each political regime dutifully offered the public, the tide of violence kept steadily rising, the cutlass having, between the mid- and late-nineties, made an impressive comeback in the midst of the gun and drug culture. It is out of such extremes of impotence and paralysis that desperate measures tend to be recommended. Singing Sandra's *The Equaliser* with its catalogue of sadistic punishments is the product of the same loss of faith in the Law and the protective services as Bhaggan's Caroni interlude and Carol Mahadeo's eye-gouging, tongue-cutting and hand-amputating proposals. Desperate measures for desperate times.

Almost every day the horror stories of rape, beatings and murder continue, inching society ever closer to numb acceptance of the inevitability of the Equaliser. Early in this essay, I quoted Suzanna Clarke who, reacting to the horror of 420 rapes reported in ten months of 1997, recommended castration as her "irrational solution" to the problem. In the midst of describing what she meant to achieve with her pliers, knife and length of two-inch condom-sheathed pipe, she recognised the uselessness of the Equaliser's fantasy of revenge:

We can write hundreds of stories, contribute thousands of articles and castrate dozens of men in the Promenade, but it won't mean a thing. Until men see women as their equals, human beings deserving respect, things will not change. Men must begin to see women as individuals, with lives, dreams, aspirations...<sup>liv</sup>

The problem as diagnosed here is one of the heart and vision. *The Equaliser* begins with the conviction that no amount of pleading or moral suasion has ever made or will ever make a difference to the hardness of men's hearts or the blindness of their eyes. It then declares a new testament of retributive violence, a balance of terror to fill the interim between a desperate present and a future that is likely to be as fraught with extremity. But the trap of equal violence has always transformed the victim into a protagonist who wears the same face as the thing "equalised". In the end the struggle has to be relocated in the theatre of the human heart and the eye must see beyond the perspective of a balance of terror.

## **ENDNOTES**

<sup>i</sup> Statistics taken from Ira Mathur, *Trinidad Guardian*, Thursday November 5, 1998.

<sup>ii</sup> Suzanna Clarke, “Advice to Rapists: Pump Some Iron Instead”, *Vox Magazine, Sunday Express*, November 23, 1997.

<sup>iii</sup> (No author indicated) “Brand Them Like Animals”, *Express*, Tuesday November 18, 1997.

<sup>iv</sup> Suzanna Clarke, “Advice to Rapists: Pump Some Iron Instead”, *Vox Magazine, Sunday Express*, November 23, 1997.

<sup>v</sup> Yvonne Baboolal, “Attack at Morvant Junction Led to ‘Equaliser’: No Place for Women’s Issues in Monarch Finals?”, *Sunday Mirror*, March 8, 1988, 3.

<sup>vi</sup> Yvonne Baboolal, *ibid*.

<sup>vii</sup> Rudolph Ottley, *Women in Calypso I*, (Port of Spain, self-published, 1992) 12.

<sup>viii</sup> Rudolph Ottley, *ibid*, 140.

<sup>ix</sup> Yvonne Baboolal, “Attack at Morvant Junction Led to ‘Equaliser’: No Place for Women’s Issues in Monarch Finals?”, *Sunday Mirror*, March 8, 1988, 6.

<sup>x</sup> Statistics cited in Theron Boodan, “Figures Show Steady Rise in Assault on Women”, *Sunday Guardian*, July 4, 1993.

<sup>xi</sup> Francis Joseph, “Huggins Moves Against Bernard: Minister Calls on PSC to Retire Police Commissioner”, *Trinidad Guardian*, Tuesday April 6, 1993, 1.

<sup>xii</sup> Francis Joseph, “Bernard: I Am a Toothless Bulldog”, *Trinidad Guardian*, Thursday June 24, 1993, 1.

<sup>xiii</sup> Rory Rostant, “Vice Principal Kills Wife and Himself Over Divorce”, *Trinidad Guardian*, Friday February 19, 1993.

<sup>xiv</sup> See Singing Francine’s famous feminist anthem “Runaway”.

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<sup>xv</sup> Kathy Ann Waterman, “The Mind Behind the Madness”, *Express*, Monday September 13, 1993.

<sup>xvi</sup> See Growler’s “Calypso Behind the Wall” and Rohlehr, *Calypso & Society in Pre-Independence Trinidad* Port of Spain, 1990, 260 & 267.

<sup>xvii</sup> Nicole Ghouralal “She Lied and Told Me She Was a Virgin: My Wife Was Dishonest, Deceitful Says Wilson”, *Trinidad Guardian*, Wednesday January 31, 1996, 3.

<sup>xviii</sup> *Sunday Express*, October 3, 1993.

<sup>xix</sup> Kathleen Maharaj, “Panday: Laws Cause Crime: Macho Men Lose Their Cool and Kill”, *Sunday Express*, October 3, 1993, 2.

<sup>xx</sup> Judy Diptee, “Fatal Reaction to Domestic Violence Act: Male Backlash”, *Sunday Express*, October 3, 1993, 2.

<sup>xxi</sup> Sharon Lee Assang, “Ritual Murders: Parents Held as Cops Unearth Bodies of 3 Children Killed in Human Sacrifice”, *Express*, Wednesday December 3, 1997, 3.

<sup>xxii</sup> Gordon Rohlehr, *Calypso and Society in Pre-Independence Trinidad*, Port of Spain, 1990, 369–  
374.

<sup>xxiii</sup> “Guns Against the Indians”, *Sunday Mirror*, April 11, 1993.

<sup>xxiv</sup> “Reign of Terror in Central”, *Express*, April 23, 1993.

<sup>xxv</sup> Camini Marajh, “Phantom Rapists Strike Terror”, *Sunday Express*, June 6, 1993, 1.

<sup>xxvi</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xxvii</sup> Ibid.

<sup>xxviii</sup> Ibid

<sup>xxix</sup> Theron Boodan, “Figures Show Steady Rise in Assault on Women”, *Sunday Guardian*, July 4, 1993.

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<sup>xxx</sup> Susan Gosine, “Bhaggan: I’ve not Stirred up Trouble Among Races”, *Express*, Thursday June 10, 1993, 4.

<sup>xxxi</sup> Editorial, “No Vigilante, No”, *Trinidad Guardian*, Friday June 18, 1993, 6.

<sup>xxxii</sup> *ibid*

<sup>xxxiii</sup> Deborah John, “The Many Faces of Hulsie Bhaggan”, *Express*, Tuesday, July 13, 1993, 19.

<sup>xxxiv</sup> Judy Raymond, “For Hulsie, It’s Jouvert with Books”, *Sunday Express*, February 13, 1994,

<sup>xxxv</sup> Staff Writer, “Bhaggan Stars in BBC Race Show”, *Trinidad Guardian*, Friday February 25, 1993, 1.

<sup>xxxvi</sup> Susan Gosine, “March Against Crime in Central”, *Express*, Tuesday June 8, 1993, 1 and 4.

<sup>xxxvii</sup> Gordon Rohlehr, *Calypso and Society in Pre-Independence Trinidad*, Port of Spain, 1990, 253–256.

<sup>xxxviii</sup> Hulsie Bhaggan, “Calypso Must Respect Our Women”, Letter to the Editor, *Trinidad Guardian*, Saturday February 5, 1994.

<sup>xxxix</sup> “Hindu Women Sue Kaiso All-Time Low”, *Sunday Express*, February 13, 1994, 4.

<sup>xl</sup> Theron Boodan, “Figures Show Steady Rise in Assault on Women”, *Sunday Guardian*, July 4, 1993.

<sup>xli</sup> “Tragedy of Sumaria and Her 14 Kids”, *Sunday Express*, February 4, 1968, 19.

<sup>xlii</sup> Statement of Rudder at “Semi-Lime”, Creative Arts Centre, UWI, St Augustine, February 3, 1995.

<sup>xliii</sup> Ria Taitt, “Hulsie Goes it Alone: Flouts Party Line on Corporal Punishment”, *Express*, Saturday June 25, 1994.

<sup>xliv</sup> *ibid*.

<sup>xlv</sup> Francis Joseph, “Record Year for Murders”, *Trinidad Guardian*, Monday December 21, 1992.

<sup>xlvi</sup> John Babb, “Evil Stalks the Land: Murder Every 46 Hours”, *Newsday*, Sunday April 17, 1994, 5.

<sup>xlvii</sup> Clevon Raphael (Interview) “Senator Mahadeo: Beat Criminals”, *Newsday*, Sunday March 13, 1994, 14. See also *Express*, Wednesday February 23, 1994, “Mahadeo: Off with a Limb or 2”.

<sup>xlviii</sup> Ria Taitt, “Huggins: A Good Licking Does Wonders”, *Express*, Wednesday June 29, 1994, 5.

<sup>xlix</sup> Allan Harris, “Huggins: No Problem with Flogging Women”, *Trinidad Guardian*, Wednesday June 29, 1994, 5.

<sup>1</sup> Wayne Brown, “Evening at Noon”, *Sunday Guardian*, February 6, 1994, 7. See the reply to these suggestions by Joseph Toney, a former NAR Minister of National Security, in *Newsday*, Monday February 14, 1994, 12.

<sup>li</sup> Joseph Toney, “What is Wayne Brown Trying to Inflict on Us?”, *Newsday*, Monday February 14, 1994, 12.

<sup>lii</sup> Celia Sankar, “The Born Again Solution”, *Sunday Express*, August 29, 1993.

<sup>liii</sup> Ibid

<sup>liv</sup> Suzanna Clarke, “Advice to Rapists: Pump Some Iron Instead”, *Vox Magazine*, *Sunday Express*, November 23, 1997.