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Abstract
Sistren Theatre Collective’s debut production Bellywoman Bangarang (1978) is considered a landmark in Caribbean theatre. When first staged twenty-six years ago in Kingston’s Barn Theatre, the play caused a stir among theatre-goers for its unmasking of social taboos surrounding sexuality, teenage pregnancy, and domestic violence. Based on the life stories of Sistren members, Bellywoman Bangarang explores the inequalities Jamaican girls face as they mature from childhood to adulthood.
Demystifying ‘Reality’ in Sistren’s *Bellywoman Bangarang*

Sistren Theatre Collective’s debut production *Bellywoman Bangarang* (1978) is considered a landmark in Caribbean theatre. When first staged twenty-six years ago in Kingston’s Barn Theatre, the play caused a stir among theatre-goers for its unmasking of social taboos surrounding sexuality, teenage pregnancy, and domestic violence. Based on the life stories of Sistren members, *Bellywoman Bangarang* explores the inequalities Jamaican girls face as they mature from childhood to adulthood. Through a series of flashbacks, Sistren members’ childhood experiences of growing up in rural communities in colonial Jamaica are told through the lives of four female characters: Didi, Yvonne, Gloria and Marie. The characters’ stories, like those of the women who formed Sistren, are intrinsically linked through the shared experiences of difficult mother/daughter relationships; violent encounters with men; having babies in their teens; and the suffocating, and often prejudiced, attitudes of the local community. Folk songs, children’s games, rituals, riddles and character ‘transformations’, described by Rhonda Cobham as ‘ritual frameworks’ (235), are used to preface episodic scenes in which the characters’ stories are enacted, and, like much Caribbean theatre, drumming sets the pace throughout the performance. During the creative process behind *Bellywoman Bangarang*, Sistren members were encouraged to re-visit their childhoods whilst participating in a series of drama games designed to elicit their personal testimonies. Trust between Sistren members was essential as each woman unburdened herself to the group in the process of creating a production that became ‘less a reflection of life than a demystification of it’ (Cobham and Ford-Smith xv). Thus, the workshop phase pre-production was, in many ways, more important for the women in Sistren than performing before an audience. However, the physical presence of the women’s bodies on stage was arguably more significant for Jamaican decolonisation than verbal disclosure behind closed doors. Sistren members, performing their own stories before mainly middle-class audiences, intervened in and contested oppressive discourses that naturalise hierarchies of power based on gender, race, and class. This essay, then, looks in detail at the sophisticated use of ‘ritual frameworks’ in *Bellywoman*, which operate as symbolic representations of naturalised hierarchies; as strategically placed disruptions which juxtapose the female characters’ ‘reality’ with its social construction; and as strategies of survival against neo/colonial control.

Sistren Theatre Collective’s debut production *Bellywoman Bangarang* (1978) is considered a landmark in Caribbean theatre. When first staged twenty-six years ago in Kingston’s Barn Theatre, the play caused a stir among theatre-goers for its unmasking of social taboos surrounding sexuality, teenage pregnancy, and domestic violence. Based on the life stories of Sistren members, *Bellywoman Bangarang* explores the inequalities Jamaican girls face as they mature from childhood to adulthood. Through a series of flashbacks, Sistren members’ childhood experiences of growing up in rural communities in colonial Jamaica are told through the lives of four female characters: Didi, Yvonne, Gloria and Marie. The characters’ stories, like those of the women who formed Sistren, are intrinsically linked through the shared experiences of difficult mother/daughter relationships; violent encounters with men; having babies in their teens; and the suffocating, and often prejudiced, attitudes of the local community. Folk songs, children’s games, rituals, riddles and character ‘transformations’, described by Rhonda Cobham as ‘ritual frameworks’ (235), are used to preface episodic scenes in which the characters’ stories are enacted, and, like much Caribbean theatre, drumming sets the pace throughout the performance. During the creative process behind *Bellywoman Bangarang*, Sistren members were encouraged to re-visit their childhoods whilst participating in a series of drama games designed to elicit their personal testimonies. Trust between Sistren members was essential as each woman unburdened herself to the group in the process of creating a production that became ‘less a reflection of life than a demystification of it’ (Cobham and Ford-Smith xv). Thus, the workshop phase pre-production was, in many ways, more important for the women in Sistren than performing before an audience. However, the physical presence of the women’s bodies on stage was arguably more significant for Jamaican decolonisation than verbal disclosure behind closed doors. Sistren members, performing their own stories before mainly middle-class audiences, intervened in and contested oppressive discourses that naturalise hierarchies of power based on gender, race, and class. This essay, then, looks in detail at the sophisticated use of ‘ritual frameworks’ in *Bellywoman*, which operate as symbolic representations of naturalised hierarchies; as strategically placed disruptions which juxtapose the female characters’ ‘reality’ with its social construction; and as strategies of survival against neo/colonial control.
African-American feminist bell hooks, in her *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, suggests that the importance of challenging race, class and gender-based stereotypes is not just a question of critiquing the status quo. It is also about transforming the image, creating alternatives, asking ourselves questions about what types of images subvert, pose critical alternatives, and transform our worldviews and move us away from dualistic thinking about good and bad. Making a space for the transgressive image, the outlaw rebel vision, is essential to any effort to create a context for transformation. And even then little progress is made if we transform images without shifting paradigms, changing perspectives, ways of looking. (4)

Sistren’s *Bellywoman* subverts ‘ways of looking’ by destabilising categories, such as race, gender, and class, which are exposed in the performance as fluid, transformable, and impermanent constructions of identity. The performativity of gender, which Judith Butler suggests is ‘compelled by social sanction and taboo’ (271), is what *Bellywoman* strives to display through its use of anti-naturalistic staging devices, such as the ‘ritual frameworks’, which lay bare the insidious effect of social conditioning on the possibilities for working-class Jamaican women’s lives. Carole Boyce Davies in *Black Women Writing & Identity: Migrations of the Subject*, extends Butler’s formulation to include the category of Black woman, which she suggests ‘exists as multiple performances of gender and race and sexuality based on particular cultural, historical, geopolitical, class communities in which Black women exist’ (8–9). In *Bellywoman* gender is performed in accordance with Jamaican society’s taboos and social codes; the female characters are expected to conform to traditional sex-role stereotypes and to remain virgins until marriage despite double standards that sanction the sexual freedoms enjoyed by young Jamaican men. In many of the play’s scenes, the female characters challenge sex-role stereotypes by questioning their mothers’ authority or by simply refusing to be restricted by what their gender role dictates. Such resistance results in violence from mothers who cannot cope and tighter surveillance of the girls’ activities. In this way, *Bellywoman* portrays the regeneration of Jamaican girls’ lives within their local communities. The lives of the four characters revolve around the four areas of community life (the church, the school, the family, and the local shops), which assume responsibility for socialising the girls as well as closely monitoring their movements.

The staging of *Bellywoman* reflects the confined existence that many Jamaican girls endured. The backdrop depicts a yard in rural Jamaica complete with a bath, pots, pans and aprons; the only other props used were a few boxes. According to Sidney Mintz, the yard is traditionally a place where adult women carry out their domestic duties as well as participating in cultural and social activities (231). In view of this, the setting of the play functioned as a gendered space where the daily concerns of the girls were dealt with against the familiar backdrop of domestic life. Masks were hung on the fence giving the yard the dual function.
of both a domestic and performance space: the rich cultural and theatrical traditions of Jamaicans living in impoverished conditions are made known, as the yard is a meeting place for friends and family and, therefore, the most appropriate setting for testifying, story telling, singing, and dancing. However, in this context, the yard also represents the impoverished domesticity that many Jamaican women find themselves trapped in and, unconsciously, trap their daughters in as well. In *Bellywoman*, the yard serves as a form of imprisonment for the girls, for it is within the yard’s walls that their domestic training is carried out and where they are hidden from the dangers surrounding their developing sexuality. When they are permitted to leave the safety of the yard, they are restricted to visiting the four areas of community life, depicted by the ‘ritual frameworks’.

The ‘ritual frameworks’, which are interwoven between the play’s narrative sequences, emphasise the significance of the oral tradition in the socialisation of the four girls, and provide a transitional stage for fluid character ‘transformations’. The technique of ‘transformations’, made famous by New York’s Open Theatre in the 1960s, is used to demolish ‘established realities’ so that ‘the audience’s dependence on any fixed reality is called into question’ (Feldman qtd in Canning 54). The deployment of ‘transformations’ in *Bellywoman* destabilises the audience’s ‘way of looking’ at the very moment in which comfort is assumed.

The actors metamorphose, in full view of the audience, from pregnant teenagers to children to mothers to men to doctors to crowds of onlookers to trains to streets and so on. Further, the actors’ bodies metamorphose to depict the development of the female body from childhood to adolescence to motherhood. The audience is confronted by the corporeality of the female body as it changes with the onset of puberty and pregnancy, and when it is battered and abused in violent encounters with Jamaican men. When *Bellywoman* was first staged, public discussion of women’s health and sexuality was taboo and, despite the ‘revolutionary’ ethos surrounding the Manley government, the issues addressed in the play were deemed ‘politically off-track’ (Cobham & Ford-Smith xiii). The ‘ritual frameworks’, particularly the game-playing and riddles, depict the social and political suppression of Jamaican women’s concerns, particularly the ambiguities surrounding sex education and the high incidence of sexual and domestic violence. Selected specifically for their relevance to the lives of Jamaican girls, the ‘ritual frameworks’ are strategically placed throughout the performance for two main reasons: to alert the audience to the insidious gendered messages that are transmitted through what appears to be harmless child’s play; and, perhaps more importantly, to emphasise the extent to which working-class Jamaican girls rely upon and find solace in Jamaica’s oral tradition in order to resist the domination of colonial models of education, religion and medicine, which are shown in *Bellywoman* to be sources of oppression, demoralisation, and control.

*Bellywoman* opens with the appearance of a larger-than-life masked figure, a Mother Woman, which is manipulated by three actors disguised beneath its robes.
The masked apparition represents a symbolic Mother figure from Jamaica’s oral tradition, whose purpose in the play is to heal and protect the pregnant girls (Hanson). Upon entering the stage, the Mother Woman mimics the actions of a midwife attending a birth before fracturing to reveal the actors hidden beneath its robes. The actors, to whom the Mother Woman has ‘given birth’, transform into the medical staff at a hospital; the actor playing the Doctor dons a white gown and stethoscope to signify Western and, by extension, ‘legitimate’ methods of healing. The audience is introduced to the four main characters — Didi, Yvonne, Gloria and Marie — who are admitted to the maternity ward of the hospital suffering severe labour pains; they each wear large cushions to signify their pregnancies. The nurses ignore the girls’ cries, treating with contempt their youth, status and situation. In fact, they chastise the girls for falling pregnant in their teens and attribute their pregnancies to the sexual antics of the working-class:

Marie: I don’t want to have a baby nurse.
Nurse 1: Next time you better be more careful when you’re dealing with a man.
Nurse 2: You girls are just too careless. Don’t you have any self respect? (1)

The actor dressed as a doctor, moves robotically from one girl to the next, her movements resembling a machine as each of the patients is treated in exactly the same way, allowing no room for individual differences. Without any display of emotion, the nurses read the chart notes for each girl as the doctor moves from one patient to the next. The doctor’s robotic actions are contrasted with the intimate details of each girl’s pre-natal condition, underscored by different drumming rhythms that denote the girls’ personal stories. By juxtaposing the nurturing practices of these representative models of ‘mothering’, Bellywoman makes explicit the polarities between Western and traditional methods of healing, and by extension, European- and African-derived cultural practices. The care and nurturing of the Mother Woman is contrasted with the callous contempt of the nurses and the robotic concern displayed by the doctor. The Mother Woman reappears throughout the play to help and protect the four female characters, most notably Marie, who, having been raped and battered by three men, experiences a particularly difficult labour. Ironically, Marie is the same character who the nurses, in the above excerpt, accuse of sexual promiscuity.

The interaction between the medical staff at the hospital and the four girls also portrays the socio-economic stratification of Jamaican society and the position of working-class pregnant teenagers within its ranks. The tensions between the nurses and the girls are made evident by Sistren’s use of language: the nurses speak in Standard English, which directly contrasts with the girls’ ‘patwah’. Moreover, this is the only section of the play where Standard English is used, and it is used to caricature the uncaring attitudes of the middle-classes towards the hardships suffered by working-class women. The masking of the voice, a
ease with which the actors switch between Jamaican Creole, Standard English also deploys masking, of both the voice and the face, costuming, and drag. The ease with which the actors switch between Jamaican Creole, Standard English and Dread Talk, which are used in Bellywoman to denote class and gender, questions the fixity of Jamaica’s social stratification, and illustrates the level of social mobility which such masking allows the actor off-stage. Rhonda Cobham and Honor Ford-Smith report that there were rumours circulating after Bellywoman’s opening night that ‘the actors were in fact university students masquerading as “the oppressed”’ (vii). Yet, the production that audience members witnessed in 1978 was performed in a Creole dialect that is situated at the bottom end of the Creole continuum: indecipherable to outsiders and rarely, if ever, spoken by middle-class Jamaicans.

The switch from Standard English to Creole in Bellywoman sets in motion a ‘ritual framework’ which marks the transition from present to past, and shifts the audience’s attention from the impersonal realm of the medical institution to the personal stories of the four girls. Halfway through reading Yvonne Scott’s chart notes, the nurse switches from scripted Standard English to a spontaneous joke in Creole which, understood and enjoyed by the pregnant girls, acts as a catalyst for their ‘transformation’ into children. The girls, joined by the nurses who have changed into school uniforms, remove their cushions and jump off their hospital beds to play a traditional children’s clapping game called ‘Hands of the 85’. The game, which links the names of girls with traditionally ‘female’ vocations, such as teaching, mothering and secretarial work, makes explicit the discursive construction of gender and the ‘naturalised’ link between biological sex and vocational orientation. The ritual framework ends with the actors transforming into the mothers of the children they have just portrayed, exiting the stage calling the names of their daughters and hunting for them within the audience. Whilst this ‘transformation’ operates as an ingenious scene-changing device, it sets the stage for a series of scenes between the girls and their mothers as well as pointing to the girls’ ‘future role as teen-age mothers, as if that too is a natural progression. The girls’ ignorance of puberty, used as a comic device to punctuate the fraught scenes between mothers and daughters, prompts them to gossip about sex whenever they are left unsupervised. The sound of Didí’s mother calling her daughter’s name is the cue for a ‘ritual framework’, which begins as the girls’ attempt to hide from parental detection by covering parts of their bodies with their hands or items of furniture. Joined by the rest of the company, the actors play a game of ‘Mirror Mirror’ which, according to Ford-Smith, shows the way ‘children explore the development of their bodies and their sexuality’ (2). The actors work in pairs; one actor transforms into a mirror by wearing a mask, while the other actor criticises her own reflection in the following way:
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The Mirror game invokes the Lacanian concept of ‘the mirror stage’ in which the child becomes a subject through interaction with its reflection in the mirror (123). Unlike the child to whom Lacan refers, the girls’ subjectivity is already socially determined prior to participating in the game. ‘Mirror mirror’, therefore, serves to reinforce the fragmentation of the Black girl’s sense of self through her desire to mimic the white Other. The desirable image (that is, the white woman) is beyond the girl’s reach and therefore the reflection of herself in the faces of members of the community is contaminated by the colonial denigration of Blackness. Radhika Mohanram posits that ‘the colonised is always suspended in the mirror stage, cohered by the master discourse of the coloniser’ (200). Whilst the girls appear to criticise their own bodies, the existence of an actor playing the mirror image works to heighten the girls’ sense of alienation as they are actively commenting upon an/Other Black woman/actor’s body. Foremost on the above list of criticisms is Black skin, the visible marker of Otherness, which positions the body within Jamaica’s colour/class hierarchy. The girls’ ‘disavowal’ of their skin colour portrays the extent to which Black skinned Jamaicans have been damaged psychologically by the denigration of racial difference under neo-colonial regimes. The other criticisms, such as ugly hands and knock-knees, reflect the internalisation of prescriptive standards of beauty, which circulate in Jamaican society via the predominance of North American media. The destructiveness of colonial/patriarchal representations of Blackness, according to bell hooks, leave ‘gaps in our psyche that are the spaces where mindless complicity, self-destructive rage, hatred, and paralysing despair enter’ (4).

With the onset of puberty comes the curtailment of the girls’ childhood freedoms, which pits mothers and daughters against each other in a battle of wills. The regimentation of the girls’ lives is depicted in a ‘ritual framework’, which theatricalises, through an elaborate game-playing sequence, the difficulty of escaping from the insidious control of social institutions. While the girls play a ballgame downstage centre, the rest of the company form ‘stations’ which represent the four areas of community life. One actor from each station wears a...
representative mask and adopts a representative action to denote ‘the mother’, ‘the parson’ etc., while the rest of the actors in the station intone representative chants, such as the lyrics to the famous hymn ‘When I Survey the Wondrous Cross’ or the weight and price of groceries, for example. The use of masking in this sequence distances the representative figures from their personification as members of the local community who, aside from being known to the four girls, are themselves indoctrinated by colonial/patriarchal ideologies, making them victims as well as un/witting co-conspirators in the oppression of the girls. The domination of colonial values pervades the lives of the four girls, theatricalised by the repetitive chanting of the masked figures and their constant interruption of the girls’ ballgame. The girls are not completely malleable — they do have agency — shown in their willingness to listen to two masked ‘temptations’ which emerge to dare them to defy their mothers and leave the confines of their safe existence:

Temptation 2: Gemini deh a loveshack tonight. You can come.
Gloria: You know my mother don’t love when me go to dance.
Temptation 2: Tell me something, you fraid a you madah?
Gloria: Anywhere else man.
Temptation 2: So where else you want to go?
Gloria: An a wha come… (18).

The girls are passed from one ‘station’ to the next, becoming the balls in their children’s game. The masked figures form a tight circle around the girls, a human pen from which there seems to be no escape. By drawing on the oral tradition of ring games, Sistren depict the girls’ struggles against the ideological control of the social institutions. For example, ‘Bull inna di pen an im can’t get out’ is a ring game played by Jamaican children. The participants stand in a circle, arms locked. One participant stands in the middle of the circle. The object of the game is for the person in the middle to break free by finding a space between the bodies through which to escape. The masked figures chant ‘An a bull inna di pen an im can’t get out’, while the girls, who are trapped inside, ask ‘An a wha kind a pen dis?’ to which the masked figures reply: ‘church pen’, ‘school pen’, ‘punishment pen’. The human pen engulfs the girls in a ring of bodies, which creates a visual image of their entrapment in a system that is perpetually recreated; a vicious cycle that strives upon the complicity of the women ensnared. However, life away from this safety zone results in rape, violence and verbal abuse. The Mother Woman appears at the end of this framework to protect two girls, who have managed to escape, as they travel from rural Jamaica to Kingston.
The presence of the Mother Woman contrasts with the threatening actions of the masked figures that encircle the two girls in a tightening ring of bodies. It is clear from the menacing actions of the masked figures that the community will not be sympathetic if the girls encounter problems whilst away from its suffocating embrace.

The human pen also represents what Paulo Freire describes as ‘a culture of silence’ among ‘the oppressed’ who internalise the opinion of the oppressors to the extent ‘they become convinced of their own unfitness’ (45). In the case of the female characters in Bellywoman, the mystification of sexuality, and the social codes that sanction sexual double standards, create ‘a culture of silence’ which, as Rhonda Cobham points out, ‘is as much an act of violence against [the girls] as the physical violation which many of them must endure’ (244). In fact, the cryptic warnings about sex issued by the older women in the community, warnings that imply the girls’ culpability for any unplanned pregnancy, create victims of the four female characters and serve to damage their sense of self-worth. In the following excerpt, Yvonne’s guardian, Goddy, is alarmed when she discovers her ward has started menstruating. The following explanation, indicative of sex education in colonial Jamaica, illustrates the level of obfuscation used by Jamaican women in discussions of sexuality and, by extension, the confusion and bewilderment experienced by pubescent girls:

Yvonne: Real, real, baby Goddy?
Goddy: Yes a real real baby. But you see yah now. I know what gwine happen you know. Because all the worries in the world gwine come down on me. But gal I have news for you, because you see if you go out on the street with you nasty self and make any of dem runted tail boy out dey trouble and give you di real baby, if you evah hitch up outa gate till one of dem do you something, den gal you goin puke!
Yvonne: Den is what dem goin do me fi mek me puke maam?
Goddy: Look here gal. Facety and fresh. Now you come on and let me show you how to fix up yourself before we go to church (Sistren Theatre Collective 1978, 12).

Jamaican playwright Pauline Matthie points out that slaves would speak in proverbs in order to communicate with each other in front of the plantation owners (Gilbert 23) and, as the entire second act of Bellywoman makes clear, Jamaican women have kept this tradition alive through their use of proverbs and riddles to educate their daughters about puberty and sexuality. Moreover, the mothers of the girls, afraid of social sanctions, punish their daughters when their pregnancies are revealed rather than acknowledge the girls’ sexual ignorance; all but one of the girls is thrown out of home. Although Yvonne confesses that she was lured into Miss Datty’s house, ambushed and raped by Teddy, Goddy tells her daughter to ‘pack up yuh tings’ (29). Didi’s mother is the exception: when she discovers Didi’s pregnancy she insists upon discussing the matter with the baby’s father, Dennis.
The male characters in Bellywoman are represented in two ways: as comic caricatures and nameless, faceless rapists. Dennis, embodied by a female actor in drag, is a caricature of a quasi-Rastafarian — described in the play as ‘slightly dread’ (24) — who works as a mechanic in Kingston. The female actor transforms herself into a male through the adoption of sub-cultural markers of masculinity associated with the 1970s Reggae music scene: Dread talk, ‘skanking’ gestures, and the use of a washcloth to wipe away sweat (Cobham and Ford-Smith xxxi). The actor impersonating Dennis is not masked, which, according to Cobham and Ford-Smith, is significant as ‘the the visual effect of the slighter, female figure playing this part without a mask creates a sense of shared vulnerability’ (xxxi). While the impersonation of Dennis triggered much hilarity among audiences in 1978, his alter ego, the nameless, faceless rapist, is frightening. In the scenes where the female characters are raped or battered, the male characters are either faceless or absent, a performative strategy that heightens the threat of aggressive male sexuality, which is sensed throughout the play, and the menacing presence of sexual predators in the community.

In the most violent ‘ritual framework’ in Bellywoman, Marie, the most naïve of the four female characters, is raped whilst babysitting for her friend, Cherry. Marie nurses a doll and sings a lullaby, echoed off-stage by the voices of the other actors, creating what Sistren describes as ‘a clichéd picture … of a Black Madonna’ (28). Three actors, whose faces are masked by stockings, disrupt the peaceful image of the ‘mother’ and child; one of the rapists is Cherry’s brother, Winston, whom Marie recognises despite the mask covering his face. The rapists grab Marie, lift her above their heads, tie her to the rafters of the theatre, and part her legs. One of the rapists moves slowly toward Marie, punching the air like a ‘mechanised boxer’ (Sistren Theatre Collective 28). His punches are aimed at her vagina. During this sequence, drumming quickens the speed and rhythm of the boxer’s movements, slowly building to a climax. The other rapists tie a cushion around Marie’s waist and throw her to the floor; they exit while she vomits on the floor. The rapists do not speak during the ‘ritual framework’; their actions and the discordant singing and crying of the rest of the company evoke the brutality of the attack. While the rape is enacted, the rest of the company surround the audience; they cover their faces with newspapers, which they rip to shreds, and bang on the theatre walls so that the building shakes. Boxing is an apt signifier of sexual violence as it is predicated on the violent domination of the weaker opponent and epimises, in this context, male physical and sexual prowess. In Bellywoman, the rape takes place on a circular dais (a metaphorical boxing-ring) positioned within the audience, which, due to their close proximity to the action, works to confront those watching the play with their complicity in upholding hierarchies of power that sanction such attacks. Cobham and Ford-Smith report that during Bellywoman’s second season in 1982, ‘the actors were threatened and pelted by men in the audience, who cheered on the rapists in the
play’s starkest scene as a way of expressing their lack of sympathy with the play’s “message” (viii). In this meta-theatrical moment, the men in the audience enacted their complicity by lending support to ‘the gang’ that raped Marie. Following the rape, Marie drags herself back to the main stage where, despite her pleas for help, the masked social institutions taunt her with riddles and ritualistically entangle her in ropes, which signify the burdens society places on young women whose childhoods are abruptly halted by the brutality of rape, and later, the responsibilities of motherhood.

African forms of expression, such as riddles and tracing, are used throughout the second act of Bellywoman to depict the violence engendered by social taboos surrounding sexuality. Yvonne is also a victim of rape. However, it is her ignorance rather than the violation that is represented in the play. Goddy notices the changes in Yvonne’s body, evoked by a riddle that compares the young girls body with an exploding cupcake, and, despite the obvious presence of a cushion tied around Yvonne’s waist, forces her daughter to confess to her ‘wrong-doing’. The pregnant body in Bellywoman is, as Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins suggest, constructed ‘in terms of disorder and/or pathology rather than invoking traditional images of fruition’ (220), because the girls neither want nor understand the process of maturation. The violence against the girls is further illustrated through rituals that depict the social ostracism and abandonment they face once their pregnancies are visible. In a series of ‘ritual frameworks’, which draw on the oral tradition of ‘tracing’ (the ritualistic exchange of insults), the girls are engaged in verbally and physically abusive encounters with their mothers, ‘baby-fadahs’, and members of the local community who deliberately shun them or create barriers that they find difficult to overcome. Yvonne’s eviction from Goddy’s house is ritualistically enacted as each of the young girls belongings, represented by shoes, is tied to an insult and thrown after her into the street. Yvonne, playing a rather awry version of the childhood ballgame, dodges objects, such as a piano, which illustrate the absurdity of the situation. During Gloria’s search for Paul, the father of her baby, the other actors physically transform into the gates and fences, the metaphorical barriers, which serve to confine the pregnant girls and, carrying out the most sinister function of all, protect the ‘baby fadah’. When Gloria finally does confront Paul, members of the local community, switching their allegiance from one opponent to the other as though watching a sporting event, support her in the ‘tracing’. However, their support is limited; once Paul starts pelting Gloria with bottles they disappear.

The final scene of Bellywoman Bangarang returns the action to the maternity ward of the hospital where the girls are preparing to give birth to their babies. Reversing the ‘ritual framework’ of the first scene, the medical staff transform into the Mother Woman after Marie suffers fits which they are either unable or unwilling to cure. Framed as an African spirit possession ritual, the Mother Woman raises Marie from her bed, guides her through the birthing process, and
removes the ropes that bind her. She then teaches Marie to walk independently and guides her to a bath prepared by the other actors (Sistren Theatre Collective 37). The presence of the Mother Woman is not only crucial for Marie’s survival; she represents the significance of the oral tradition in struggles against both imperial control and local hegemonies. The use of the oral tradition in theatrical performance is, as Elaine Savory suggests, ‘both inherently theatrical and inherently political, moving towards liberating a community from the fear which would assure their acquiescence to a brutal and hostile governing power’ (244).

The Mother Woman empowers the four girls to overcome their fear of the masked institutions who are revealed at the end of the play as ordinary women. The girls hug them as old friends. The four girls — Didi, Yvonne, Gloria and Marie — are left on stage with their newly born babies as the play ends.

Bellywoman does not construct working-class Jamaican women as passive victims of oppression; nor does it condemn them for playing into the hands of hierarchies of power. Yet, its unmasking of social taboos challenge and transform constructions of Black women’s subjectivity, thus re-imagining and expanding the possibilities for Jamaican working-class women’s lives. At the end of the play, the audience is left with some reassurance that the four female characters — Didi, Yvonne, Gloria, and Marie — will not reproduce the cycle of oppression within which their female role models were caught, and which they unwittingly perpetuated. In 1978, Sistren was not concerned so much with revolutionising women’s position in Jamaican society as they were with debunking stereotypes, changing ‘ways of looking’, and demystifying, using their own life experiences, the reasons behind their daily struggles. The importance of the play, therefore, lies not in its attempt to offer alternatives to the women ensnared in this oppressive cycle, but in its intervention in naturalised hierarchies of power, which underpin relationships between races, classes and genders in Jamaican society. Although Bellywoman Bangarang has recently been published in Contemporary Drama of the Caribbean (Waters and Edgecombe), it is still described by Sistren members as ‘a work in progress’ (Drusine), perhaps because it is still pertinent to the concerns of women in contemporary Jamaican society.

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