African Desire (in excess) and The Female Stage-Body: Interrupting The Popularity of the ‘Popular’ in Black Popular Culture

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This paper returns to a discourse of navigating the concept and context of the ‘popular’ within the late 20th Century African Diaspora (the Caribbean in particular). Specifically, the paper re-engages Hall’s framing of the ‘popular’ within the context of black popular culture, and the ways in which his argumentation works against or is challenged by particular nodes of black body-performance in the popular culture arena. The central argument that the paper will make is that given Hall’s conceptualisation of the ‘popular’ within the contemporary site of black popular culture, what I will call African desire (in excess), as the manifestation of the folk-life of an imagined Africa, becomes victim to a visual and stage narrative of black popularity that cannot adequately recognise or accommodate such a desire on stage. But the fact of this un-recognition, or the inadequacy of recognising and enabling public life for the articulation of this desire, does not in any way modify the degree to which the intensity of this dimension of the vernacular inscribes itself onto the visual and stage narrative of black popularity.

The contention is that the intensity of African desire (in excess), (that is, the penetrating tenacity of the African religious and spiritual sensibilities that constitute part of the vernacular traditions of the diaspora), remains an interruptive political aesthetic. Such an aesthetic in the life of the stage-body calls into question the political usefulness of the ‘popular’ in the late 20th Century African Diaspora. I therefore use the artiste Ella Andall of Trinidad and Tobago as an example of a stage-body that characterises African desire (in excess) in the popular culture of Trinidad and Tobago. The intensity of African vernacular traditions that is to be equally found in Andall’s stage-life (now as visual text) is read as the subjective-imperative of her music-life; and precisely through this imperative, we are offered a body-poetics that strategically interrupts/discontinues (even if momentarily), dominant pleasures of black popularity in visual, audio and conceptual appeal in Trinidad and Tobago’s cultural expressions. How to better navigate the political/survival coordinates of being ‘popular’ at ‘home,’ that is, in the Caribbean, is the larger critical question the paper invites us to engage.