Copyright Statement

The digital copy of this thesis is protected by the Copyright Act 1994 (New Zealand).

This thesis may be consulted by you, provided you comply with the provisions of the Act and the following conditions of use:

- Any use you make of these documents or images must be for research or private study purposes only, and you may not make them available to any other person.
- Authors control the copyright of their thesis. You will recognize the author's right to be identified as the author of this thesis, and due acknowledgement will be made to the author where appropriate.
- You will obtain the author's permission before publishing any material from their thesis.

General copyright and disclaimer

In addition to the above conditions, authors give their consent for the digital copy of their work to be used subject to the conditions specified on the Library Thesis Consent Form and Deposit Licence.
Transformation and Continuity in Trinidadian Carnival: 

The New Face of Mas’ 

Sparkle Anne Marjella Gibbs

Abstract

Trinidad and Tobago makes the bold claim of being home to the Caribbean’s original carnival. As such, it has provided a template that has disseminated throughout the islands of the region. Since the mid-20th century the exportation of carnival from Trinidad has extended far beyond the boundaries of the Caribbean, leading to the establishment of Toronto’s Caribana and the Notting Hill carnival in central London. While both of these festivals have clearly been influenced by the Trinidadian pattern, they have also departed significantly, developing into events that recognise their own locales and celebrate the identities of their participants.

This thesis examines past and contemporary articulations of carnival and engages with the discourse of ‘anxiety’ that surrounds its carnivalesque forms of play. The analysis begins by tracing carnival’s history in Trinidad and the Caribbean, accounting for the syncretic society that plays host to the event. This is followed by three chapters that each focus on a single literary text. Mustapha Matura’s Play Mas’, Nalo Hopkinson’s Midnight Robber and Earl Lovelace’s The Dragon Can’t Dance are read alongside a range of calypso and soca lyrics. The discussion this analysis generates points not only to the ways in which such texts relate to Trinidadian carnival, but considers the effect that genre and medium have on the discourse that emerges at the intersections of these creative practices. Of particular interest is the way in which literary texts utilise carnival as a motif and tool for advancing or critiquing pervasive narratives in the communities that they describe and serve. In each text carnival is presented as a form of ideological ‘labour’.

The final chapter scrutinises the theatre of carnival and concentrates on the variety of music, costuming and lyrical ingenuity that lend it such a unique character. The advent of soca music and bikini mas’ will come in for particular attention as practices that have been victims of their own successes. By dominating carnival’s land- and sound-scapes they have provoked a broader exploration of contradictory tensions that speak to carnival’s storied past. The unease inspired by new forms of popular revelry highlight the need for Trinidad’s festive communities to account for and preserve the history of an ever-evolving carnival.
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the following people for helping me to complete this thesis:

Firstly, I would like to thank my main supervisor Claudia Marquis. Claudia helped me to initiate this project. Her encouragement, knowledgeable critiques, and steadfast support and friendship have been fundamental to this thesis. I also appreciate all of the guidance she offered, which led me towards the areas that ended up being of most interest to me. I would like to acknowledge Michael Cole for being utterly unwavering and for all of his time, energy, care, commitment and hard work. This simply would not have been possible without him. I would like to thank both him and Claudia for not abandoning me, even with good cause. Their persistence ensured that I saw this through to the end.

I would also like to thank Roger Nicholson for his sage advice, enthusiasm and sustained interest in my work and Michael Neill for acting as my original co-supervisor. He gave invaluable advice during the earliest stages of my proposal. I would also like to thank Alex Calder for offering me personal and administrative support while generously stepping into the role of second supervisor and being a wonderfully attentive reader.

My family: I am grateful to my mother for being endlessly patient over the years along with my sisters Kerry and Stephanie. Special thanks go to my Aunt Colleen and Uncle Michael for their hospitality and care during my visit to Trinidad and, of course, thanks to my cousins Colin, Michelle and Nigel ("Doddles"). Thank you for your kindness in helping me navigate my way through my first mas’ and introducing me to the practical realities of a carnival.

I am also grateful to Andrew Forsberg and John Fox for their friendship, while offering the ‘safety valve’ of intelligent conversation. I am also appreciative of their offers to help me with my thesis in any way they could.

Finally I would like to acknowledge each and every person that I have referred to, cited and read.
Contents

Abstract ............................................................................................................................... iii
Acknowledgements ............................................................................................................ iv
Introduction ...................................................................................................................... 1

CHAPTERS:

Chapter One: The Origins of Trinidadian Carnival ........................................................... 27
Chapter Two: Trinidadian Carnival and Statecraft ........................................................... 70
Chapter Three: Dragons, Devils and How to Play Mas’ .................................................... 106
Chapter Four: A Tale of Two Carnivals ........................................................................... 167
Chapter Five: Where to From Here? ................................................................................ 237
Conclusion ....................................................................................................................... 318
Bibliography ................................................................................................................... 375
Introduction

Carnival is an annual public event with medieval European roots that typically assumes the form of a two-to-three day sequence of festivities. The celebrations centre on processions and competitions given over to colourful revelry and a light-hearted ethic of inversion that lampoons not only social mores but the formal hierarchy of the wider community. Mockery and foolery abound. Traditionally, carnival has also been a time, place and space in which pointed social commentary occurs. Covert muttering and whispers that would usually be curbed are fully voiced in the light of day, while the powerful elite are subject to scrutiny and satire. During carnival, everything that is sacrosanct is overthrown while institutions are subject to critique. The socially marginalised move from society’s periphery to the centre as they assert themselves within carnival’s proceedings. Flux prevails over stability, misrule over order. In keeping with this theme, it is also an ephemeral and thus temporally constrained period in which the body, in all of its flawed weakness, flagrant grotesquery, beauty and abundance is both lauded and flaunted in direct contradistinction to European Christian doctrine. As the revelry reaches its carnivalesque climax, the festivities end with the onset of the austere Lenten season with a return to discipline and order.

A mainstay of the Trinidadian social calendar since the late-18th century when it was imported by a new class of French plantation owners, Carnival has grown to represent one of the cultural focal points of the island nation. As such, Trinidadian history and the history of Trinidadian carnival have intersected so intimately and so often in the last 250 years so as to be difficult to distinguish and impossible to untangle. The impulse to prepare each year for another performance of the ongoing tradition drives an economy that is as much cultural as economic. Regularly provided with a mass platform for narrative and aesthetic expression, carnival has
become a stage for showcasing the island’s most compelling politics, rhetorics and styles. In this context, carnival becomes at the very least an urgent subject in any effort to understand Trinidad’s current condition as a small place attempting to maintain some kind of purchase with its very mobile citizenry, its Caribbean neighbours and an always inattentive, often hostile world. This thesis is an attempt to understand some of these relationships through the unique lens that carnival offers.

In any encounter with Trinidadian carnival, two terms are inescapable. The first, ‘carnavale,’ provides the festival with its name, and is derived from a Roman expression that translates into ‘farewell to the flesh.’ The other is the popular carnival catch-cry, ‘bacchanal,’ which is clearly associated with the ancient Greek deity Bacchus. These key expressions in the festive lexicon tie Trinidadian carnival to other pre-Lenten traditions that have Ancient Mediterranean, medieval French and Iberian roots. In particular, many points of reference are shared between Mardi Gras in New Orleans and carnival in Rio de Janeiro. These two examples indicate just how important the influence of West African masking festivals are to iterations of carnival in the Americas. It is also no accident that they share a history of Catholicism, as do most communities that celebrate events in the Lenten calendar.

Both the romantic ideal and the lived material practice of carnival have provided scholars, writers, artists, musicians and participants with a rich source of creativity and critique. Masking, theatre and performance are central to carnival whether it is the ornate display of an 18th century Venetian masquerade or a contemporary, 21st century parade. Traditions of creative play continue to this day in the diasporic carnivals of Toronto, Rio and Notting Hill and are particularly well-represented in what is known as Trinidadian ‘mas’. At the heart of
Trinidadian carnival is the practice of ‘playing mas,’\textsuperscript{1} which is wholly reliant on a confluence of music and costuming. Mas’ is played in bands that are comprised of costumed musicians and revellers, or ‘masqueraders,’ who attempt to convey a specific concept or theme in order to articulate a social, political or aesthetic statement.

Mas’ can be described as a veritable ‘callaloo’\textsuperscript{2} of song, dance, street theatre, storytelling and visual spectacle. ‘West Indian’ carnival, however, has many different forms and exists not only on most of these islands but has also migrated to North America and Europe. It can be found in Canada’s ‘Caribana’, formally known as ‘The Toronto Caribbean Carnival Caribana’ while The United Kingdom also has its own carnival in Notting Hill. The latter, in particular, exists as a contemporary counterpoint to Trinidadian carnival. It is an innovative, hybrid festival that re-articulates Trinidadian traditions of masquerading while drawing on cultural and musical influences from Jamaica. While it shares some similarities with Trinidadian carnival, it also radically departs from it.

\textsuperscript{1} The terms ‘mas’ and ‘playing mas’ are a specifically Trinidadian colloquialism and abbreviation that alludes to ‘masquerading’ or the act of dressing up, parading and performing in the streets (and on the stage). In his article, “To Play Mas’” acclaimed mas’ designer Peter Minshall poses the question: “What is a mas?” and immediately concludes that: “There is no dictionary, encyclopaedia or any other authoritative piece of scholarship to which we can refer. No universally accepted definition. We can only look empirically, examine what mas is and has been in all its many manifestations in order to arrive at an understanding.” (30) He then goes on to emphasise the structure and materiality of ‘playing mas’ by referring to costuming and to the physical locale of the streets.

\textsuperscript{2} The term ‘callaloo’ (or ‘kallalloo) refers to a West Indian dish of West African origin, comprised of a mixture of crab and seafood. The primary ingredient is the leaf of the amaranth plant which is often referred to as ‘callaloo leaf” or bhaaji. Taro or dasheen leaf and even water spinach is sometimes used in its place depending on which island the dish is made. Okras may or may not be added to the mix. The dish is sometimes compared to gumbo, which is popularly consumed in the southern states of the U.S.A. It is often connotative of a fusion or mixture. As a result, the word ‘callaloo’ is used as a metaphor to describe something that is a compelling mixture created by combining seemingly disparate ingredients or elements. One of the foremost academic journals of West Indian literature also bears the namesake of this dish.
I have singled out Trinidadian carnival as the central focus for my thesis for several reasons. I am interested in this particular form of carnival because it is marked by a history of multiple migrations that involve diverse populations and cultural practices. Trinidadian carnival, its performances, aesthetics and symbolic values are all underpinned by an historical and contemporaneous narrative of migration. The migration in question is multi-directional and complex. It refers, on the one hand, to both the importation and syncretisation of African, European, and Asian cultures into Trinidad, yet also refers to the later exportation of Trinidadian culture throughout the West Indies. This is further complicated through a process of globalisation which has led to aspects of ‘West Indian’ carnival being adopted and exported to locations throughout the world where it invariably functions as a transnational event.

The context and the far-reaching effects of globalisation and transnationalism are highly salient factors in contemporary Trinidadian carnival. Because the festival takes place in a region that hosts a variety of different carnivals across an array of islands, Trinidadian carnival seeks to distinguish itself from other Caribbean events. The local population makes the critical but not uncontested claim that Trinidad was the site of the region’s first carnival, and thus seeks recognition for providing the original ‘blueprint’ for the Caribbean. It is a bold assertion, as West Indian carnival is currently performed on a plethora of islands and thus exists in a multitude of forms. The celebrations may share fundamental similarities, yet costuming, music, masking, characters and performance significantly differ in accordance with each island’s local folklore. It is, however, important to note that Trinidad and Tobago is largely regarded as the first Caribbean island to feature ‘carnival’. The festival gradually evolved in Trinidad and was subsequently adopted in neighbouring Tobago, which has developed its own version of the festival. Tobago’s carnival is notably smaller than Trinidadian mas’, is less acclaimed but is
culturally distinct. As the Trinidadian ‘model’ of the festival gained popularity throughout the West Indies, it gradually became a cultural export that was widely adopted and then adapted throughout the region.

This claim, however, is not only a matter of national pride. It is also deeply implicated in the politics and commerce of globalisation, where the ability to ‘trademark’ culture is of paramount importance, particularly to a small island economy that is beholden to tourism. Trinidadian mas’ is not only in competition with other carnivals in the immediate area, it must also contend with financial juggernauts such as Rio de Janeiro’s carnival, which has approximately two million participants annually and also a significantly longer history. The diminishing line between local articulations of Trinidadian carnival and the international spectacle that it has gradually morphed into will be discussed in this introduction and in the fifth and final chapter of my thesis.

It is little surprise then that Trinidadian carnival has been exported to other islands. In turn the event has been subsequently modified by immigrants who have flocked to Trinidad from other parts of the region such as Grenada, St. Vincent, and Jamaica. The contributions of these groups have added to the culturally syncretic layers that constitute the festival. These patterns of circulation have also extended beyond the boundaries of the Caribbean, with carnival having

---

3 The exact date when Rio de Janeiro Carnival began is hotly contested since the term ‘carnival’ only began to be applied to the festival in Brazil towards the end of the 19th century and the turn of the 20th century. There is evidence, however, to suggest that the first ‘Entrudo’ in Brazil was held as early as 1600. In ‘The Micareta and Cultural Identity’ Benoit Gaudin refers to the seminal work of Isabelle Maria Isaura Pereira de Queiroz. He observes that she divides Brazilian carnival into “…three stages characterized sociologically in terms of the social groups organizing them: the traditional entrudo (a Portuguese-style masked ball characterized by practical jokes) within the family or among families of the same social level, the Venetian Carnival (also known as the bourgeois or grand Carnival), organized by middle-class clubs, and the street Carnival of the lower classes, best known for the bands of revellers known as ranchos, blocos, and escolas de samba.” (80)
been adopted and subsequently modified in locales as far flung as Toronto and Notting Hill. While the event has diffused throughout the Caribbean and across the globe, the new carnivals have nonetheless retained a connection to Trinidadian mas’. With this in mind, I not only wish to consider the festival’s mobility, but will also analyse it as a musical form of ‘street theatre’. I will simultaneously examine its influence on written art as represented in two novels, a literary play and a series of songs. By examining these works in light of the history of mas’ my thesis will consider carnival not only as a literary motif, but as an actual cultural performance.

Another central concern of this thesis is the indelible effect that histories of slavery and colonisation have had on carnival. With this in mind, in the first chapter of my thesis I will briefly account for the profound influence that ‘waves’ of migration have had on Trinidad’s social milieu while also tracing the musical traditions that have arisen from slavery. Trinidad is particularly famous for a form of carnival that is constituted by the twin pillars of costuming and calypso or ‘soca’ music. I will examine how political aesthetics have been expressed through ‘playing mas’, then contemplate the ways in which calypso music and its modern progenitors express a new ‘body politics’. Any account of Trinidad’s resistance against and liberation from slavery is impoverished without an acknowledgement of these two traditions.

The colonial British administration in Trinidad had a reputation for sophisticated and ‘benign’ rule. This was born of a tendency to impose its authority with subtlety compared to the overt violence that characterised much of the racism in North America, particularly in the United States. While a more sanguine perspective would regard the event as an entertaining

---

4 Soca’ originated during the 1970s as the modern derivative of traditional Calypso music. The term was often regarded as an amalgam of the words ‘soul calypso,’ although there are alternative and corrective explanations of the origins of the word, which I will elaborate on in chapter five.
culmination of visual art and street theatre, it has also been theoretically framed as a form of social critique and political resistance by the likes of Mikhail Bakhtin, Barbara Babcock and Victor Turner. I would argue, however, that notions of ‘resistance’ ought to be carefully qualified. The idealised carnival of yesteryear, safely contained in the pages of a literary or academic text, is an altogether different event to the continually morphing and elusive face of a contemporary, material carnival. This then raises the question: Does carnival truly qualify as a form of resistance to oppression, particularly in its modern incarnation? And if so, does the term ‘resistance’ need to be qualified and perhaps, redefined?

In terms of literature, I will first examine representations of carnival in Mustapha Matura’s *Play Mas’* in chapter two. This will be followed by a reading of Earl Lovelace’s *The Dragon Can’t Dance* in chapter three and discussion of Nalo Hopkinson’s *Midnight Robber* in chapter four. I will closely scrutinise how *Play Mas* critiques the fraught relationship between carnival and the state. Matura is a Trinidadian-born playwright who gained critical acclaim for the biting satire of *Play Mas’* (1982) as well as for his incisive critique of state politics and the popular rhetoric around debates about ‘the nation.’ The brief, two-act play not only satirises carnival and bluntly critiques claims of its ‘cultural inclusivity,’ but also analyses carnival as a tool of manipulative and even sinister statecraft. Lovelace is another Trinidadian author who routinely uses carnival as a theme in his novels, plays and short stories. His seminal novel *The Dragon Can’t Dance* (1979) historicises Trinidadian carnival and examines the festival at a specific historical point of transformation. Hopkinson, a Jamaican-born science-fiction writer and literary editor who currently resides in Canada, is also interested in carnival. Her science-fiction novel *Midnight Robber* (2000) casts a futuristic gaze on the event by examining the migration of carnival and how its transplanted practices evolve and survive. As such, *The Dragon Can’t Dance* and *Midnight Robber* each discuss areas pertaining to carnival that I wish to scrutinise.
In *The Dragon Can’t Dance* the novel’s protagonist Aldrick Prospect suffers from an existential crisis regarding his own role in a shifting social order. This is mirrored in his unease about the future prospects for ‘the Dragon’ that he ritually plays in a recurrent, but gradually ‘prettified’ carnivalesque theatre. It is important to note that alongside devils, dragons are amongst the most symbolically powerful characters in what is known as ole mas’.

The novel focuses on the evolution, or perhaps devolution, of carnival as it charts the painful transition from ole to fancy mas’. *The Dragon Can’t Dance* problematises the tension between older definitions of carnival and newly emerging, re-fashioned forms of mas’ that have characterised 20th and even 21st century debates about the nature of masquerading throughout its history. In the specific case of *Midnight Robber* I am interested in carnival’s migration and how the festival functions in new locations in unexpected ways.

It is of critical importance not only to examine how carnival is discussed, analysed, presented and situated in two 20th century texts and in one 21st century text, but to also examine contemporary carnival as a ‘text’ in its own right. With this in mind I intend to look at the way in which popular social narratives emanating from social media, media discourse (newspapers and television) and political and economic narratives of the state and of corporations converge in order to produce an account and vision of this event and set of practices known as ‘carnival.’ This also raises the question of how the festival operates as a set of traditions and cultural

---

5The central dividing line in terms of masquerading is the difference between ole mas’ and fancy mas’. Ole mas’ refers to the earliest roots of Trinidadian carnival in the 19th century whereby characters were derived from African folklore and European literature. It also refers to a stable of characters that originated in carnival itself as well as characters drawn from Indian and Chinese mythology and characters who existed as a commentary on national and international politics. ‘Fancy mas’ by contrast, refers to a critical shift in masquerading practices where the existing characters of ole mas’ were gentrified to suit the proclivities of a growing bourgeoisie that had begun to take both a cultural and commercial interest in carnival in the middle of the 20th century.
practices on the one hand, yet simultaneously exists as a highly lucrative ‘product’ to be parcelled, bought, sold, branded and disseminated around the world.

One of the aspects of carnival that is of great interest to me is its multiple cultural inheritances and influences, its mobility in terms of immigration and emigration and its status as a ‘transnational’ festival or event. As a result, I draw a distinction between the way in which playwrights and novelists include it as a backdrop or setting, deploying it as a symbol or recurring motif and using it in order to anchor their texts, and the way in which the festival in practice is enacted off the page and on the streets. Throughout this thesis I will also examine how academics attempt to define carnival and subsequently theorise it. At the same time, I will ‘read’ the actual spectacle of a carnival and consider how it is staged and performed and how it exists beyond the parameters of literature.

In the specific case of the literature that I have chosen to examine, each text offers important insights into carnival as a concept, carnival as a ‘tool’ and carnival as a set of practices. Matura Mustapha’s *Play Mas’* is a critical text for my thesis as it allows me to directly interrogate a highly politicised and explicitly nationalist discourse that is generated through the medium of carnival. A critical field of inquiry arises as readers are invited to observe how political rhetoric simultaneously shapes and manipulates how carnival is defined, who participates in it, why it is held and to what ‘end’ or purpose. The political mobilisation of carnival also allows for a brief exploration of Trinidad’s national post-Independence politics while examining the intimate relationship between carnival and statecraft. The play also considers how the festival is deployed in order to articulate a burgeoning postcolonial, national identity. Furthermore, *Play Mas’* initiates an interrogation of carnival that is specifically tied to ethnic identity. This connection functions as a social and cultural borderline that delineates ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’
status primarily on the basis of ethnicity. Carnival’s instrumental utility and ‘function’ in relation to the mythos of the state becomes a central focus of Matura’s play, which creates tensions that I will re-visit towards the end of my thesis. This text is of particular interest in terms of the way in which it partially adheres to Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of the carnivalesque. Indeed, dramatic social reversals unfold and fuels much of the comedy that underpins Matura’s satire. At the same time, however, I tend to agree with Adrian Stevens’ observation:

One of the chief problems…[is] Bakhtin’s tendency to absolutize the liberating potential of carnival and to insist that the reversal of social, ethical and behavioural norms is necessarily comic results in a view of carnival that is too idealized, and a definition of the comic that is too undifferentiated, to be acceptable. Although reversals of the kind which Bakhtin links with carnival can be comic, they can equally well be experienced as horrifying or tragic. (1)

While there is certainly much humour, satire and mockery in Play Mas’ which aligns with the carnivalesque, there are also darkly sinister overtones and outcomes which result in a text that could be accurately described as tragicomic. The play operates as a political satire and a critique of carnival by specifically foregrounding ole mas’ and using a cast of ole mas’ characters in order to portray a political theatre of masking and inversion. Matura explicitly problematises the hegemonic narrative of mandatory creolisation6 in his play and scrutinises the way in which carnival is all too often deployed by the state as a mouthpiece for this rhetoric. Thus Matura provides my thesis with the necessary space to contemplate how and why this narrative was

---

6 According to Matura, ‘mandatory creolisation’ refers to a nationalist and assimilationist rhetoric which frames Trinidadian society as an ethnically unified community on the one hand, but a nation that possesses an Afro-Creole history and culture at its base, on the other. The clear contradiction of this claim and its competing tensions will be discussed in the second chapter of my thesis.
constructed while making the specific role that carnival has played in its dissemination and normalisation visible to readers. New Historicism is a critical part of my methodology when analysing this text as it not only permits me to contextualise Matura’s text but to also examine his highly pointed and scarcely veiled critique of Eric Williams’ administration, which served as Trinidad’s first post-colonial government.

In *Rabelais and his World*, Mikhail Bakhtin discusses the interlocking polarities that create the characteristic set of balanced binaries that ultimately structure carnival. These include the sacred and the obscene, high and low art, excess and contained ritual, and the melding of the popular and official (6-10). This last polarity is not only highly evident in *Play Mas’* but is also particularly relevant to *The Dragon Can’t Dance* where the protagonist experiences this binary as more of an incoherent clash between the popular and the official. The result of this confrontation is a bureaucratisation of carnival which then threatens to overshadow any potential for subversion or liberation. Lovelace acknowledges Matura’s highly cynical positioning of carnival as a ‘tool’ that is available for macro-level interventions in statecraft; however, he also deviates from this perspective by considering how carnival is also a platform for smaller and more intimate expressions of identity which include the micro-levels of community and personal identity.

While Lovelace is attuned to the looming spectre of the state, he proceeds to examine carnival through the lens of the personal, the specific, and the highly local rather than reducing carnival to a ‘concept’ or a theoretical abstraction. Like *Play Mas’, The Dragon Can’t Dance* also reflects upon the troubled relationship between carnival and its concretised constructions of racial and ethno-cultural identity. The novel is highly useful as it permits me to revisit Indian identity in Trinidad and to further consider how it is positioned in relation to carnival. I am
most interested in the way in which Indian identity maintains and is, at times, *forced* to maintain its discrete socio-cultural borders. The visible separation or exclusion of Indians from carnival subsequently disrupts and even ‘vexes’ obfuscatory rhetoric around carnival’s ability to house and fully articulate all communities and ‘the nation’ at large. At the same time, Lovelace’s work is not only useful for interrogating national identity, but also for its detailed consideration of how carnival plays a critical role in the local and personal articulations of identity which occur throughout the novel. Consequently, the third chapter of my thesis will consider the various ways in which these identities are often occluded by the state or stand in direct and disconcerting contradistinction to formulations of national identity.

Both Matura and Lovelace are deeply cognisant of the ways in which class division and material access to carnival specifically inform carnival’s aesthetics, its cast of characters, the narratives in which those characters are embedded, and how these are performed. Indeed, the question of how class and race structure carnival is of paramount importance to both texts. Yet, each author demonstrates divergent interests when it comes to the question of carnival’s structural and cultural barriers which dictate who is embraced by or shunned from the festival’s proceedings as well as who chooses to remain separate from it all. Matura, for example, focuses on the ability of social groups to reject carnival as a cultural foundation or reference point and carefully considers a refusal to participate in its festivities as a platform for critiquing the logic of an assimilationist discourse that is integral to a nationalised carnival.

Lovelace, too, is highly sceptical of the state’s co-option and commoditisation of carnival but is far more optimistic about the festival’s ability to house and express multiple identities across class and race. Individual and small local communities of revellers face having their intimate readings of carnival pitted against the encroaching might of national, and eventually
transnational, definitions of carnival. This results in a far more sympathetic and complex portrayal of the event when compared with Matura’s play. For Lovelace carnival is both a victim and victimiser, with the ability to imprison and calcify individual identity even as it offers liberatory potential. Consequently, the third chapter of my thesis will consider the multiple and contradictory roles that carnival plays as the festival migrates from its local, racial, and working class roots and extends its reach to potentially include participants who have previously been disinterested or excluded from its ranks. Carnival indelibly morphs a new aesthetic and set of practices as it traverses safely established lines of class and race.

Carnival’s mobility and flexibility is also investigated in the speculative fiction novel *Midnight Robber*. Author Nalo Hopkinson charts and analyses a series of successive migrations on the fictional earth-like planet of Toussaint. The narrative begins by tracing the lives of a prominent family on Toussaint, which has been colonised by a technologically advanced Afro-Caribbean diasporic community. As the novel develops, attention turns to the settlement of New Half-Way Tree, the shadow twin-world of Toussaint. The novel’s protagonist, in the midst of the transition from Toussaint to New Half-Way Tree, becomes both fugitive and exile in her own home as she suffers her father’s drunken decline and subsequent violence. Consequently, she shifts from the role of a domesticated and dominated politician’s daughter to that of an exiled ‘Robber Queen’ living in the wilds of New Half-Way Tree. Through imaginatively re-articulating the ole mas’ character of the Midnight Robber, Hopkinson ensures both the survival of her protagonist and her ole mas’ alter-ego. I would suggest that a similar ‘crossing’ or migration of ideas occurs at the authorial level as Hopkinson brings West Indian mythology and creolised language into the realm of speculative science-fiction. The migration of culture and characters in *Midnight Robber* and the way in which traditional folklore and myth influence the style of narrative seem to inform Hopkinson’s own writing process. This not only enables
an analysis of carnival’s hybrid and migratory history but also leads to an examination of how this hybridised history subsequently provides Hopkinson with the apex for her own literary experimentation, which fuses science-fiction with fantasy. I will also consider how themes of migration and cultural cross-pollination, which are central to her novel, are similarly salient to my own exploration. In the fifth and final chapter of this thesis, I will pose and then attempt to answer the question of how a ‘transplanted’ carnival survives, and even thrives, in Notting Hill and at Caribana respectively.

Hopkinson and Lovelace are part of a literary migration in which carnival extends beyond the traditional texts of dance, costume and music, passing into the canons of the historical and genre novel. But what is the effect of confining the ‘performance’ of these carnival ‘texts’ to the page? The suspicion is that a purely novelistic account would be totally inadequate. In order to move beyond the limitations of literature, I will also analyse carnival’s music, drawing on an assortment of popular calypso and soca lyrics. Furthermore, I will examine various media that record carnival events, including official DVDs, Youtube footage and documentaries. This will include a broad perusal of the academic literature dedicated to West Indian-derived carnival. I will take a feminist, post-colonial and discursive approach in this thesis, focusing on how renewal, ephemera, innovation, and structure are essential elements to contemporary carnival in the New World. Barbara Babcock’s famous, or perhaps infamous, assertion that what “…is socially peripheral is often symbolically central” (32) will serve as a touchstone for the thesis. By highlighting this tension, I hope to sketch some of the ways in which carnival is positioned in relation to the nation-state and note the degree to which this ordering influences which revellers occupy the heart of carnival and which are relegated to the margins.
Babcock’s dictum is not only applicable to the protagonists in *Midnight Robber* and *The Dragon Can’t Dance*; it also offers insight into how the festival as a literary and a social event has come to be performed on the streets. In the fifth chapter I account for two international street-festivals that are directly descended from Trinidadian carnival. While my thesis acknowledges the earlier history of carnival in the first chapter, I specifically focus on articulations of carnival since the mid-20th century in Trinidad, including Notting Hill and Caribana respectively. In many respects, recent developments in the culture of carnival would be as unrecognisable to their 19th century predecessor as they would be to earlier forms of revelry in Africa or Europe. Notting Hill carnival and Toronto’s Caribana are not only descendants of Trinidadian mas’ but are hybrid festivals with distinctly diasporic moorings. In the case of Notting Hill, followed later by Caribana, the process of cultural fusion and hybridisation has continued as festive practices are adapted to the social, cultural and political conditions in London and Toronto. Notting Hill’s Carnival is now regarded as “the largest street theatre event in Europe” (Ferris 519), while Caribana has become one of the central tourist attractions in Toronto, not to mention a highly lucrative event.

Althea Prince notes that Caribana “…is constructed within a distinctly Trinidadian cultural tradition” (80) but also problematises this cultural framework. She describes Caribana’s Trinidadian roots as a ‘given’ but also suggests that it is an inheritance that ‘African Canadians’ must continually negotiate and ‘grapple’ with (Prince 80). I will consider the ways in which both Caribana and Notting Hill carnival simultaneously eschew yet flirt with a

---

7 Althea Prince uses the term ‘African Canadian’ to describe black Canadians of Caribbean and American descent while authors such as Amoaba Gooden define ‘African Canadians’ as Canadian-born blacks who are descended from the United States and who have a longer history of settlement in Canada. She then uses ‘African Caribbean’ as a distinct term in order to distinguish black migrants from the West Indies and cautions against conflating the two groups or regarding Canadian ‘blacks’ as a ‘cultural monolith’ (Gooden 416). For the purposes of this thesis I will use Gooden’s distinction when referring to the two groups.
nationalist framework. It will be noted at the same time how these festivals also struggle with questions of a vexed and existential nature. Who is the festival for and who is served by it? What is the driving force or rationale behind this street-festival? Is its primary objective merely economic? Who participates and who is excluded from participation? Are there economic dividing lines or a form of generational marginalisation that blocks participation? Who benefits from it? Which articulation or articulations of ‘Caribbean’ culture dominate the proceedings? Whose criteria or judgment deems a carnival a failure or success?

Arguably, Bakhtin’s notion of the carnivalesque looks towards a much earlier history of carnival and tends to focus on carnival’s temporary inversions, its ephemerality its mobility and ‘flux’. I would suggest that this once revolutionary but now conventional framework cannot fully account for contemporary articulations of carnival in the West Indies, which seem to express and solidify an existing social order and seldom focus on the transgressive or the grotesque. Satire is no longer the central apex on which contemporary carnival rests. Furthermore, as Terry Eagleton notes, carnival tends to function as a licensed affair which requires elite sanction and monitoring while functioning as safety valve for the “permissible rupture of hegemony” (qtd. in Stallybrass & White 13). Edward Muir similarly draws on the anthropological observations of Victor Turner and Max Gluckman and summates what is commonly referred to as the ‘safety valve’ theory as it pertains to carnival:

One common thesis sees Carnival acting as a safety valve for the tensions that build up in any hierarchic, highly structured society. The metaphor comes from a valve on a steam boiler that releases excess steam when the pressure builds too high. From this point of view, Carnival is merely an interlude in normal life, a cyclic release of social pressures, or what [social anthropologists call] rituals of rebellion: Such rituals allow...
subjects to express their resentment of authority but do not change anything and, in fact, strengthen the established government and social order…The absurdity, paradox, extravagance, and illicit behaviour of rituals of rebellion provide an emotional release, but since such behaviour is set apart from everyday life by the ritual calendar, the ritual rebellion actually demonstrates the coherence of the social order as it is. (Muir 98)

This state of affairs is quite evident in the case of Notting Hill carnival, which was originally housed and contained within in a town hall before the local and state government allowed processions of revellers and parades to move into the streets. Elite domination and regulation of carnival is a reality that cannot be ignored but can also be overemphasised to the point of suggesting that the event is entirely predetermined and thus, predictable. In the final chapter of my thesis I analyse the containment, the increased barricading and the sheer policing that characterises Toronto’s Caribana and argue that notions of fixity and containment are essential in order to fully comprehend how 21st century ‘West Indian’ carnivals actually operate. Despite this acknowledgement, I also think that it is equally important to avoid overstating or underestimating carnival’s ability to alter the social landscape. Establishing a balanced framework in which to comprehend carnival is therefore one of the central goals of the fifth chapter of my thesis.

In Trinidadian carnival there also appears to be an inherent contradiction in the apparent centrality of the female body, which seems to be critical for the physical embodiment of mas’. In both the final chapter and the conclusion of this thesis I note that the female form increasingly provides the visuals or ‘optics’ of the event. This is compounded by the fact that women are the predominant participants in contemporary mas’ as its main body of dancers and revellers. Furthermore, female artists and performers have certainly become a more visible
presence in contemporary 21st century carnival and, like their males counterparts, also command the carnival fête tent and stage. Yet, despite increased levels of participation both as revellers and performers, for the most part, women have yet to achieve a similar level of influence over the event as songwriters, producers, performers, costumers, storytellers and mas’ designers. Men have continued to dominate the aforementioned areas (de Freitas “Disrupting the Nation” 20).

Calypso lyrics are a primary text for analysis in chapter five. Contemporary forms of calypso such as soca (soul calypso), rapso (rap calypso), chutney soca⁸ and Jamaican reggae play a central role in conveying the pleasures and politics of carnival’s revelry. The connection between the images of women contained in the lyrics and narratives of smut calypso and the way in which these images are then materialised and enacted in bikini mas’ is of particular significance to these chapters. Historian Max Harris, for instance, argues that carnival traditionally deploys sophisticated masking strategies that at once resist and yet negotiate with official structures of power such as government and media. If so, how does this dynamic of resistance and negotiation play out in newer forms of calypso and in bikini mas’? Arguably, the lyrics of ‘smut’⁹ calypso, which are present in the specific sub-genres of soca, rapso and chutney soca, have combined with bikini mas’ parades of the mid-1990s to create a controversial and highly sexual spectacle in Trinidadian carnival.

---

⁸ Soca, Rapso and Chutney Soca are contemporary and hybrid forms of Calypso. Soul Calypso is a form of party music that can be easily differentiated from traditional Soca in terms of its pace and lyrical content. Rapso is a fusion of African-American hip-hop and soca music, while Chutney Soca combines the Indian rhythm of the tassa drum and Hindi lyrics to produce a new type of carnival music.

⁹ ‘Smut’ calypso refers to a long-standing tradition of lyrics which are sexually bawdy and explicit and may or not rely on witty double entendre.
It is noteworthy that, while women perform and dance to calypso and soca music, they are still less likely to be writers and producers of calypso and soca texts. By the same token, the most renowned mas’ designers as well as the most acclaimed novelists and playwrights who specifically meditate on carnival are men. The late-19th century jamette\(^{10}\) and the contemporary winer woman\(^{11}\) may be ‘symbolic’ of carnival’s revelry, bacchanalia and licence, yet their position in wider society remains relatively marginal. Indeed, this contradiction is further emphasised by female performers who have achieved relative prominence in carnival’s male-dominated music industry. Both the music of popular soca artist Destra Garcia and the work of chutney soca artist Drupatee Ramgoonai, for example, highlight a new kinetic order. Both performers express themselves via an explicitly sensual, female-narrated form of soca that is firmly situated in the international dance scene. At the same time, however, both Garcia and particularly Ramgoonai have faced public criticism as performers, orators and narrators. In particular, Ramgoonai’s sexualised lyrics have been simultaneously denounced and valourised for destabilising traditional genderised notions of Indian female proprietary.\(^{12}\)

Thus carnival presents the dilemma of the female soca artist who assumes artistic and monetary control of her craft and image but is keenly scrutinised and often problematised in prevailing social and academic discourse. The female calypsonian or soca artist is then juxtaposed with the ‘auxiliary-yet-central’ figure of the female reveller who is performatively ‘unruly’ yet ultimately contained and disciplined by the male-dominated and constructed music, narratives

\(^{10}\) In Trinidad the word ‘jamette’ (sometimes spelt ‘jamet’ in its masculine variant) was a French-patois term that was originally an indicator of ‘class,’ rife with moral judgement. The term was derived from the French “diametre” and demarcated a class of people who were considered to lie beneath the diameter of respectable society (Campbell 10.)

\(^{11}\) The winer woman refers to female participants in carnival who ‘wine’ or perform a sexually titillating dance where the hips, waist and buttocks gyrate in circular fashion.

\(^{12}\) Both soca artists will be discussed at length in chapter five.
and ‘rules’ of carnivalesque play. It is nevertheless apparent that both the role of the female soca artist and the winer woman, male-defined as they are, provoke speculative anxiety, critique and even condemnation. With the emphasis on revealing costumes during road marches in the last few decades, the unmasking of the female body in bikini mas’ and its role in gesturing towards notions of sexual liberation and transgression deserves consideration. When overt sexual display in music and dance becomes the normative code not only within carnival but also within a wider, media-saturated society, it is only logical to question how this then affects the transgressive potential of new calypsos and bikini mas’. How can sexualised bodies defined from without find opportunities for self-expression? Some argue however, that these bodies are not only a site of titillation, but also a source of transgression that inspires genuine astonishment.

Andrea Shaw, for instance, asserts that this is particularly evident in the spectacle of the large, black female body in motion. In her article “‘Big Fat Fish’: The Hypersexualization of the Fat Female Body in Calypso and Dancehall,” Shaw notes that fat, black women have become a stock figure central to bikini mas’. She argues that both the social marginalisation and the ‘excess’ of the fat, black, female body—both in its material corporeality and the outrageousness of the hypersexual performances enacted—embodies a disruptive, even subversive potential:

The carnivalesque aspects of carnival and dancehall activities—the elaborate hair, makeup and costumes—comprise a sort of role-playing or pretence at being part of the

---

13 “Soca lyrics & moral decadence revisited” is a 2009 blog post penned by Dr. Kwame Nantambu that exemplifies a deep resistance to and even abhorrence of female winer culture and is not at all unusual in terms of the complaints that it voices against prurient sexual display by women during Carnival. Critically, the comment section clearly express the public face politics of sexual respectability and policing, resulting in a debate that is projected upon women’s bodies.
upper class. The fat black woman neatly fits into this inverted order because she is not beautiful according to contemporary Eurocentric aesthetics just as the carnival/dancehall participants are not wealthy. This is why the large female body is such a dominant image in these performative spaces; it encapsulates the inverted essence of the space. (4)

Such assertions, however, do not go unchallenged. From the nuanced articles of ethnomusicologist Gordon Rohlehr to the public commentaries that fill ‘news blogs’ there is notable scepticism. As a result, a wide-ranging dialogue over the licence and limits embedded in soca lyrics and performance has ensued. Concerns about how these issues pertain to female revellers and artists have inevitably featured as a central preoccupation. In response to this critical interest, the final chapter of the thesis will discuss whether celebrations of ‘non-normative’ bodies in Trinidadian carnival can be transgressive and the degree to which such displays are potentially transformative. I am especially interested in how salient the aesthetics of grotesquery, lewdness and ‘dread’ are when applied to a society that is both informed by and resistant to Western aesthetics.

Female-dominated bikini mas’ is now one of the dominant forms of masking in Trinidadian carnival. Its visibility is a function of the sheer number of participants, and amplified by the discursive interest that circulates around and through the performances. As such, it reflects the shifting demographics of those who participate in carnival. In response, the thesis will raise the following questions: Does the dominance bikini mas’ represent an existential crisis which involves the ‘usurpation’ of ole mas’? Or does it simply mark the continuation of an existing tradition of playing mas’ that extends as far back to the 1950s? It is possible that the point may be over-stated, but it seems to me that while the crisis narrative may in fact be potentially
hyperbolic it does, nevertheless, exist even if it is merely a popular perception surrounding carnival. But before I make my case, I will provide a clear historical outline of the participation of women in carnival after the demise of jamette carnival.

The reason why I seek to distinguish bikini mas’ from fancy mas’ and identify it as ‘sub-set’ of the latter is because critics and authors have been highly critical of the eventual dominance of fancy mas’. Lovelace has expressed particular regret over the displacement of ol’ mas’ as the representative face of carnival during the 1950s. His descriptions of the introduction of new forms of masquerade directly correspond to what Max Harris describes as the ‘prettification’ of carnival in “The Impotence of Dragons: Playing Devil in the Trinidad Carnival” (114). Clearly, Lovelace does not allude to bikini mas’ at this point in time, but is instead critical of ole mas’ characters being re-articulated, glamourised and stripped of their potential to menace, satirise, subvert, and represent the grotesque. It is the domestication, taming and the subversion of an existing canon that is of concern to Lovelace. Harris describes fancy mas’ as its own masquerade system, yet still finds a distinction within the category between the ‘aristocratic’ costuming, which emphasises voluminous regalia, and the bikini mas’, which he links not only to a separate aesthetic but a separate type of performance.

Fancy mas’, on the other hand, resembles the aristocratic Carnival of slaveholding days, providing an opportunity for the well-to-do, including in this category the expanding professional and middle-classes, to “dress up” in ornate and showy costumes…The effulgent get-ups of the kings and queens, exploding [like a bursting star] from the central face of the masquerade and weighing so much they must be supported on wheels, far exceed in gaudy splendor the aristocratic costumes of the past. (Harris 115)
He then goes on to make a critical distinction:

_The briefer costumes cover no more flesh than a bikini._ Sensuality is most openly expressed in winin’, a dance movement involving the “winding” of the hips and pelvis. Winin’ is performed alone, in pairs (with the man behind the woman), or in an extended single file resembling a kind of erotic conga [emphasis added]. (Harris 115)

His own analysis of an aristocratic costuming in fancy mas’ is supported by Pamela D. Franco’s later work on both historical and present female masking traditions. In “‘Dressing Up and Looking Good’: Afro-Creole Female Maskers in Trinidad Carnival,” Franco documents an extensive history of elaborate female masking and examines, in-depth “three nineteenth- and twentieth-century examples of mas in Trinidad Carnival” (91). Bikini mas’, by contrast, elicits a related but ultimately different response: “Without the moorings or “roots” to which one could anchor this novel masquerade style, critics, culture brokers, and scholars turned in the late 1980s to the familiar, the male-centered traditional mas, hoping that to make sense of this new phenomenon” (‘The Invention of Traditional Mas’” 25). Author and editor Carol Martin uses Franco’s phrase (“dressing up and looking good”) to refer to a specifically female practice of masking and extends to phrase to encompass bikini mas’:

Today’s dominant form of masquerade emphasizing beautiful costumes with elaborate decorations. To some extent, pretty mas developed as middle-class participation in carnival increased, although the Afro-Creole carnival also emphasized “dressing up and looking good,” from early on in the 19th century. Some feel that growth of pretty mas has led to the decline of traditional characters, the eclipse of ole mas, and
commercialization of carnival to the point. Many pretty mas costumes are now decorated bikini-style garments. (232)

A specific narrative exists around bikini mas’ that identifies it as a distinct form or subset of fancy of mas’. This form of mas’ is often singled out as a catalyst or, depending on the critic’s perspective, even a scapegoat for the supposed ‘degeneration’ of carnival. Regardless, the advent is understood not only as a shifting away from ‘authentic ole mas’, but even a diversion from the incoming ‘fancy mas’ that Earl Lovelace is so critical of in *The Dragon Can’t Dance*.

To better grasp the relationship between these masquerading styles, I will specifically focus on how carnival as a whole is seasonally performed once I have discussed how Trinidadian carnival is presented in literary forms. This will involve an analysis of the twin pillars that constitute mas’ in the 21st century—namely, ‘calypso’ lyrics and the now ubiquitous performance of ‘bikini mas’. My particular interest is in identifying the range of roles that they offer female revellers. In *Trinidad Carnival: The Cultural Politics of a Transnational Festival*, Philip Scher and Pamela Franco both argue that bikini mas’ represents a positive development. The average reveller is no longer the prototypical figure of the black Trinidadian working-class male and is far more likely to be female and middle-class. Furthermore, they note that one of the longest standing associations of carnival is now defunct; one can no longer conflate carnival with black Trinidadian culture and identity (18-21). Recognition of the changing social dynamic of carnival has also entered popular discourse; comparisons between jamettes and the modern winer women abound as both assume centre-stage in carnival.

Finally, I will briefly examine how ‘kiddie’s carnival’ serves as a stark counterpoint to and rejection of the aesthetics and values of modern bikini mas’, painstakingly preserving the
characters and lore of ole mas’. I also want to explore the less contentious yet under-theorised role that ‘kiddie’s carnival’ has had in relation to wider carnival. Established in 1976 in order to preserve the traditional characters, narratives and performances of carnival (Bonterre 00:24:33-59), ‘kiddie’s carnival’ has so far evaded critique in spite of its problematic goal of linking nostalgia for a disappearing form of revelry with the public display of children. Nevertheless it does offer a stage for the charms of ole mas’, especially those represented by a plethora of characters ranging from the West-African derived Moko Jumbie, the Spanish Burokeet, the French-inspired Dame Lorraine, and locally conceived figures such as Midnight Robbers and Guaharoons and the various folkloric bats, mythical dragons and various ‘Jab Jabs’ (derived from the French ‘diablesse’) that comprise carnival lore.

These figures once featured as the canonical stars of what could be described as a ‘street’ or ‘folk theatre.’ Such performances articulated a complex set of social and historical narratives (Harris, “The Impotence of Dragons” 122). They are also rich in social significance, rendering Trinidadian carnival a polysemous and diasporic text. Children’s carnival exists as an adjunct to mainstream and adult-dominated carnival yet also flourishes as a separate, vital microcosm. It includes its own junior parade of the bands, Junior King and Queen and Junior Soca Monarch, allowing participants ranging in ages from as young as two and as old as seventeen to revel and compete. I hope to analyse the way in which it has been positioned as a parallel festival to adult

---

14 Mako Jumbies are masked carnivalesque characters that are renowned for walking on stilts that may be anywhere up to 10 to 15 feet high covered by long pants or a skirt. Carol A. Martin describes the origins and the character in the following manner: “A Moko Jumbie is the spirit of Moko, the Orisha (god) of fate and retribution who emphasizes that even as he endured centuries of brutal treatment he remains “tall, tall, tall”” (290).

15 The Spanish Burokeet (sometimes spelt as ‘Burroquit’) is one of the many animal figures to be found in carnival. In this case the Burokeet is a donkey who performs a dance during mas’. Dame Lorraines are transgressive figures insofar as they are usually played by men dressed as elaborately costumed women. Guaharoons are a carnivalesque interpretation of indigenous Indians.
mas’ while problematically serving as a self-conscious bastion of creativity. Indeed, kiddie’s carnival is looked upon as an oasis of visual and thematic plenitude in the midst of Carnival’s creative decline.
Chapter One:
The Origins of Trinidadian Carnival

A Timeline of Migrations

Much is made of Trinidad’s racial heterogeneity and cultural hybridity. This can be explained, in large part, by briefly outlining the island’s turbulent history. From the early period of successive colonisations to the ongoing waves of migration that occurred after Emancipation and on to the postcolonial era, Trinidad has served as a crossroads in the network of trans-Atlantic traffic. It is important to note, however, that in the pre-colonial era, migration was already a way of life in the Caribbean. Due to the proximity of Trinidad and Tobago to modern-day Venezuela, Amerindian migrations routinely occurred between the two locations as residents settled and re-settled over a seven-thousand year period. 1498, however, is the critical date that marks the beginning of Spain’s initial colonisation of Trinidad. Social historian Bridget Brereton describes Spanish involvement as a form of ‘nominal’ colonisation marked by a relative absence of settlement for around one hundred years (Brereton “Trinidad, 1498”). This was then proceeded by two centuries of modest Spanish immigration. After almost three-hundred years of relative neglect, in the face of widespread competition among emerging imperial interests, a full-fledged commitment to the process of colonisation began in earnest in 1783. The Spanish marked this new phase by “…offering free lots of land to citizens friendly to Spain, provided they were Roman Catholics” (Guilbault 24). The Decree of Credula encouraged a small number of new arrivals and a modest increase in bush clearances as a plantation economy began to take shape.
The second critical wave of European colonisation on the island occurred directly after the French Revolution. This resulted in a large influx of settlers from nearby French territories and caused a dramatic shift in the French social landscape. As revolutionary politics made their presence felt in the French Caribbean, aristocratic and bourgeois privilege came under pressure. In direct response to a less favourable social clime, many French plantation and slave owners opted to emigrate from the Francophone islands. They left Martinique, Guadeloupe, St. Lucia, Dominica, St. Vincent, and Grenada, seeking the relative respite offered by the Spanish administration in Trinidad. Seeking to establish themselves as quickly as possible they arrived en masse, “…bringing with them as many black slaves as possible, since for each slave the owner was given a parcel of land” (24).

As Trinidad also served as a refuge for Saint Domingue royalists over the period between 1791 and 1804, the sheer weight of French migration had the effect of countering Spanish colonial authority. This intensified as landowners continued to flee the consequences of their failed attempt to subvert the Haitian Revolution. The sudden insurgence tipped the demographic balance in favour of Francophone speakers. As a result, while the island retained traces of Spanish influence, it came to be culturally and linguistically dominated by the French. During this period, the authorities and elites in Trinidad made concerted attempts to maintain their positions by reasserting the clear division between free whites and black slaves that characterised most New World societies. However, they were unable to prevent the emergence of a third tier or class of citizens that had been emboldened by events throughout the French Empire.

---

16Saint Domingue, now known as Haiti, was France’s most lucrative West Indian colony. Saint Domingue loyalists were French European colonists who fought against the only successful slave insurrection and revolt in history. This led to the founding of an independent nation ruled by former slaves (C.L.R. James ix).
‘Coloureds’—people who were of ‘black and white’ or ‘mixed’ descent—were regarded as a distinct social group. This contrasted with the less flexible and more notorious form of racial stratification observed by colonists in the United States. In early-19th century Trinidad, it was not at all uncommon for coloureds to be free, to hold the franchise and to operate within the social and economic order as an independent class in their own right. Indeed, free coloureds were so successful at establishing themselves that they enjoyed near population parity with black Trinidadians at the time of abolition (“Trinidad & Tobago Independence Celebration Committee” 1). While they had neither the economic resources, nor the political clout of the governing white elites, they had considerably higher social status than the black populace. In some cases, particularly among the French free coloureds who had been settling Trinidad since the 1780s, mixed-race citizens owned large estates, had slave holdings and were able to indulge in the traditions of planter hospitality that they shared with white Creoles.

The presence of such a large ‘coloured’ population served as a buffer against the black majority. This was by no means unique to Trinidad and was a common social feature throughout the Caribbean. In Francophonic West Indian territories, for example, a class of free ‘coloured’ citizens that was known as gens de couleur served to mediate the social and political threat of the enslaved masses. This pattern was reproduced in Trinidad to the degree that, as British interests came to power in the early-18th century, there was a significant middle class comprised of a population free coloureds. Indeed, the relative flexibility of this racial hierarchy had unforeseen effects, ensuring that as the colony entered post-Emancipation in the first half of the 19th century, some newly freed black people were well positioned to take advantage of the shifting political situation. Leveraging whatever education they had received on the plantations or in a public school system that had been partially opened to them in 1835, a small number of black families were able to accrue significant amounts of wealth.
With an extant group of well-to-do coloured people already enjoying bourgeois privileges, these freed blacks could not be excluded from the ranks of the middle-class. However, it was not upwardly mobile black people who created the greatest anxiety for white elites at the time. The French free coloureds with their aristocratic bearing shared many cultural traits with white planters. These commonalities were a threat, raising the spectre of kinship, and as a result they became “the least unacceptable of all non-whites” (Brereton, Race Relations 89). In the following century it would be this population that would play a critical role in the gentrification of carnival.

Trinidad was annexed by the British in 1797, which was followed by the Spanish ceding control over the island in 1802. Despite this critical shift in the balance of political influence, the competing white colonial elites were pragmatic in terms of their willingness to share power. As pretenders in a well-established social order, the British refrained from aggressively asserting their prerogative and sought instead to alleviate tension amongst the different ranks. While they claimed Trinidad as a territorial property, the island nevertheless remained in the firm grip of a Spanish bureaucracy during the first forty years of British colonial rule. By accommodating the various claims of wealthy and influential interests, they managed to diffuse animosity and rivalry amongst the European powerbrokers on the island. In the atmosphere of political pragmatism that prevailed at the turn of the 19th century, carnival was not only able to survive the initial outrage of a puritanical British regime, it came to serve as a unifying force among European residents.

This cautious approach to imperial politics may have eased the transfer of sovereignty, but this is in no way to suggest that Trinidadian political life was not immediately and deeply
interrupted by the advent of British rule. Relationships that had been fostered in other parts of the empire were quickly brought to bear on the island. 1806, for instance, marked the first significant influx of East Asian immigrants into Trinidad. Chinese labourers were actively courted by the British, who had established contacts in South East Asia as a result of proliferating branches of the East India Company. Commercial interests in Singapore and Penang provided access to labourers and artisans from Southern China. These same networks opened up viable ports from which immigrants could embark at a time when the Chinese government was pursuing isolationist policies. The interest in introducing a Chinese workforce is explained in an article titled “The Chinese in Trinidad, 1806-1838” written by scholar and historian Barry W. Higman. It highlights the prevailing dominance of Malthusian ideology during the early-19th century which represented the Chinese as endemically more industrious than their ‘sedentary’ West African counterparts (22). It was also believed that they would provide Africans with an example “…of rational liberty and help avert rebellion” (23). Consequently, they were regarded as a potential and suitable replacement for African labour as the prospect of abolition slowly became a certainty. Throughout the article Higman alludes to an ongoing apprehension among elites in Trinidad over the polarisation of the island into a two-tiered society consisting of black slaves and white governing elites. As a consequence of this anxiety, various attempts were made to artificially create a Chinese middleclass that would be superior to enslaved blacks yet willingly subordinate to a European planter aristocracy (23).

To achieve this goal, the colonial government distributed land grants and government assistance to the Chinese who began arriving towards the middle of the decade. Despite their relative largesse, these efforts failed to convert the new population into docile plantation workers or the ideal middle-class that officials predicted. Instead, they ‘defected’ to various trades away from the plantations or chose to “…quit Trinidad altogether … [seeking] return
passages to Bengal or China.” By 1808 the majority of Chinese immigrants had re-emigrated away from Trinidad (33). In the aftermath of this costly misadventure, the colonial authorities resolved for the meantime to shy away from efforts to control the racial demography of the island.

It was in this context that the long-anticipated abolition of slavery by the British Government occurred with the passing of the Emancipation Act in 1834. This resulted in the liberation of twenty thousand enslaved black people with the stroke of a pen. To the dismay of the authorities, the vast majority of non-white Trinidadians chose to identify as ‘black’ rather than ‘coloured’ when given the opportunity to determine their own identity in a post-slavery society released from strict racialisation. This preference reinforced the status of people from the African diaspora as the overwhelming majority in Trinidad (Guilbault 25). The black population was further bolstered from 1810 to 1860 when “…Trinidad received almost one thousand black immigrants for the British West India Regiment; eight thousand Africans rescued by the British navy from illegal slave ships; and a small number of people of ‘Spanish-African-Amerindian’ descent from Venezuela, popularly called ‘peons’” (25).

In the post-Emancipation era one of the most pressing issues facing the British colonial government was the need to replace the productive labour force slavery had provided. Without compulsion, planters were constantly seeking solutions to an ongoing shortage of labour. As a result, Trinidad received a significant number of indentured workers from India in the mid-19th century. From 1845 onwards immigrants from the sub-continent were employed as labourers on sugar plantations (Brereton, Race Relations 10). Interdisciplinary social scientists such as Lomarsh Roopnarine demarcate the period from 1838 to 1917 as the era that saw the most intense influx of workers from East India into the West Indies. During this time, the traffic in
labour fundamentally shifted the demographics of the entire region, finally realising the earliest ambitions of the British. This particular influx was a direct response to “…failed immigration schemes from Africa, Europe, Asia, and from within the Caribbean” (31) that had little impact on the makeup of an overwhelmingly black population. Unsurprisingly, just as Africans and Chinese before them had sought to move away from the sugar plantations, repudiating its back-breaking labour, poor conditions and social stigma, Indians also sought to distance themselves from agricultural work, instead seeking alternative employment. To stall this flight from the plantations, East Indian emigrants were policed to such an extent that they were effectively detained:

East Indian emigrants were required by law to be physically bound to their plantation environment during indenture, and were not allowed to move freely beyond a 2-mile radius without a pass from their employer. Violations of these regulations were often meted out with fines, imprisonment and flogging… (Roopnarine 32)

The colonial government’s scheme for East Indian immigration shared similarities with the offers made to Chinese immigrants. Like the Chinese, Indians were promised grants of land and other benefits to incentivise their indenture. However, they were also subject to their own specific terms and conditions:

The indenture service required each East Indian labourer to work with one employer/planter for five years. In return, the employer was obligated to provide indentured East Indians with fixed wages, free housing, medical services, and other amenities. Upon completion of the contract, the indentured servant had three options:
re-indenture for another five years and thus claim industrial residence, return to India, or become an independent farmer. (32)\textsuperscript{17}

Despite these penalties and provisions designed to tie Indian workers to the plantations, many succeeded in moving away during the 1860s, relocating to rural areas such as Caroni and Oropouche where they “…began the cultivation of wet (padi) rice” which became “…an important peasant crop” (Brereton, \textit{Race Relations} 21). Jacqueline Guilbault adds yet another chapter to the story of immigration in Trinidad, referring to diverse “…groups of immigrants, including Portuguese, coloreds from Venezuela, Chinese, Corsicans, Scots, Swiss, Germans, and Italians” who also migrated to the island during the 19\textsuperscript{th} century (\textit{Governing Sound} 25-6). This diverse and extensive listing of ethnicities does not, however, account for ongoing patterns of migration from neighbouring islands to Trinidad. People from around the West Indies and the wider Caribbean were also attracted to the island by its reputation as a regional economic powerhouse and a cosmopolitan centre.

Nor does Guilbault include the immigration of Christian Maronites from Greater Syria in her survey, an exodus from contemporary Syria, Iraq, Palestine and Lebanon that began in the early years of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century. Guilbault’s omission is a significant oversight as the Syrians as an ethnic group are widely regarded as belonging to the last significant wave of newcomers to

\textsuperscript{17} Roopnarine goes on to argue that there was a deep-seated fear that Indian labourers would seize on the third option and becoming independent farmers (particularly of cane crops). There were fears within the sugar industry that even small scale growers would create competition for the plantations. She observes that there was also a concerted attempt to “turn the indenture system into a settler colonization scheme in order to avoid repatriation costs and retain seasoned labourers. As a result, East Indian settler communities were formed around a fifteen mile radius of the sugar estates only after the 1870s in Guyana and Trinidad and much later in other colonies” (32). In response to these concerns about labour supply, the colonial government attempted to closely control the movements and activities of Indian agricultural workers.
Trinidad. Syrian immigration to the island marked the end of an extended period during which rapid and successive waves of migration and subsequent cycles of cultural syncretism distinguished the island and its cultural milieu. This history has resulted in a society marked by exceptional diversity. Even in a region that is often characterised as ‘migratory,’ ‘diasporic’ and ‘creolised,’ Trinidad is distinguished by its exceptional heterogeneity and cosmopolitanism.

It is worth noting that words such as ‘creolisation’ and ‘hybridity’ are liberally applied as descriptors of Caribbean culture. The term creole has multiple meanings, not only varying from island-to-island but also in a global context. Within the Trinidadian milieu ‘creole’ refers to an individual born on the island who is of European descent, African descent or of both European and African descent (Brereton, *Race Relations* 1-2). In the introduction to *Race Relations in Colonial Trinidad 1870 – 1900*, Bridget Brereton posits that nativity is the key qualifying factor for an individual to be regarded as Creole. She then goes on to complicate this straightforward definition by demarcating different categories of Creole identity. Race becomes a complicating factor as Creoles are white Creole, Indian Creole, and Spanish Creole. Further qualifiers such as ‘foreign-Creole’ refer to ‘coloured and black persons’ born on other islands. Afro-Creole describes a blend of African and European cultural practices, adding another dimension of meaning that resists any stable definition of the word (3). Creoles are then further divided into French and English varieties, but the distinction between these two groups in the face of British dominance has faded over time. Furthermore, there were the Portuguese immigrants from Madeira who primarily settled in places like Guyana but also found their way to Trinidad. Although they were regarded as ‘white’ they were nevertheless excluded from Creole society.

---

18 Bridget Brereton notes that those of ‘Spanish, Irish, English, Corsican and even German descent’ who were born on the island could also be regarded as ‘French Creole’. (3)
thanks, in large part, to their imperfect English. Being conversant in spoken and written English and French gave one access to ‘Creole’ status (5). The other critical marker in terms of Creole identity was class. French Creoles were not only land-owners but were also proud of having aristocratic roots and being descended from France’s ‘ancient’ nobility. Ultimately, Creole society evolved into a tripartite structure consisting of a white elite, a coloured and black middle-class and ‘masses’ of the lower class who were primarily black but by no means homogenous (7).

Barbara Powrie also attempts the difficult task of defining the racial and class-based structure of Trinidadian society:

The population of Trinidad can only be defined as segmented, for it is not split horizontally in the sense that there are homogeneous upper, middle, and lower strataums which cut through the entire society. Instead, there is a complex pattern of self-contained, parallel, social hierarchies—each with its own upper, middle, and lower classes. Broadly speaking, these hierarchies are one of two types: the first, and it is applicable to one large segment only, is based on colour, this is the white-coloured-black structure; the second is of a purely ethnic type, and contains such segments as the East Indians, Chinese, Portuguese, and Syrians. (225)

At this early stage, I hope to have established the multiple migrations and social groups that constitute the island’s population. While I feel that it is a necessary task I am nonetheless...

---

19 One of the critical distinctions that Brereton draws within ‘black’ society is a difference between black Creoles who were native to Trinidad and blacks who came from Barbados or directly from Africa. She suggests that the latter sub-groups were often marginalised and found it difficult to integrate into black Creole society (4).
partaking in a pragmatic analysis. My goal is to highlight that, while multiculturalism and ‘hybridity’ have profoundly informed the creation of events such as Trinidadian carnival, I also wish to emphasise that they are deeply ingrained and highly normative features of a wider Trinidadian society. My inclination is to approach hybridity as a frankly unexceptional condition that is a feature of all human societies to varying degrees. This stance echoes the more measured perspective of writers and scholars such as Sten Pultz Moslund, Shalini Puri and Katharyn Mitchell, all of whom argue against the discursive trend that romanticises and tokenises hybridity by making too much and thus too little of it all at once.

**Normalised Hybridity:**

Trinidad’s history, its admittedly complex demographic make-up and the diversity of cultural expressions available to its communities are often attributed to a unique process of ‘supersyncretism’ (Benítez-Rojo 12). This process is supposedly indicative of a shadowy liminal third space that exists betwixt and between ‘other’ spaces that are presumably solid and ‘non-hybrid’. Liminality of this type is presumed to be an inherent quality of ‘hybrid’ spaces. It distinguishes them from ordinary spaces that stolidly flank sites of liminality and dutifully serve as a constitutive ‘other.’ As a result, these allegedly normative spaces are characterised as fixed, sealed, fortified and homogeneous (Moslund 34-6). Consequently, non-hybrid spaces are comparable to an infamously mythical ‘leviathan’ insofar as they are often portrayed or actively constructed as unitary or hegemonic, sovereign, indivisible and impermeable. More often than not, these spaces are reductively conflated with official or state culture.

Hybridity, in turn, is lazily equated with freedom and transgression even while it may, in reality, reify an existing status quo (11). It seems to me that a curious insistence on purity operates on
both sides of a fictitious and oppositional binary that seeks to valourise hybridity by consciously constructing implausibly ‘pure’ and non-hybrid spaces. Hybridity and its effects are exaggerated to such an extreme that they seem only to exist on a purely theoretical, rarefied level and in an ultimately rootless, intangible state. In effect, both sets of implausible spaces are a necessary fallacy that enable a hyperbolised discourse around hybridity to flourish. We hear enthused accounts of hybridity’s apparent boundlessness and the limitless bounty of its virtues. This romanticism is highly evident in Benítez-Rojo’s lyrical statements describing the Caribbean as

- a culture of the meta-archipelago: a chaos that returns, a detour without a purpose, a continual flow of paradoxes; it is a feedback machine with asymmetrical workings, like the sea, the wind, the clouds, the uncanny novel, the food chain, the music of Malaya, Godel’s theorem and fractal mathematics. (11)

Unfortunately, this tells us very little, if anything, about the lived realities of the people of this region. Nor does it have any practical account to offer of the often fraught politics of production that occur in island nations such as Trinidad. While I wish to acknowledge and account for this process, I do not wish to inadvertently reduce Trinidad’s populace and its carnival to a mere symbol of an intangible ‘hybridity’. I wish, instead, to question an almost unreflexive, celebratory triumphalism embedded in the very concept. Perhaps notions of migration, syncretism and hybridity require an appraisal that is more rigorous and circumspect. A shallow apprehension of hybridity is, more often than not, accompanied by an almost aggressive hyperbolisation around the idea of a pluralistic nation that possesses a culturally syncretic festival. Both the nation and the symbol of the nation (in the form of carnival) are said to exist in a state of ‘continual flux’, whether expressed through a history of migrations or through an
idealised notion of carnival. In either instance, a spurious notion of carnival’s perpetual dynamism is promoted while movement of almost any kind or quality is regarded as a defining characteristic. ‘Movement’ in and of itself is equated with ‘revolution’. But while all revolution is a form of movement, the axiom does not follow that all movement qualifies as revolution. What I propose in the following chapters is that carnival’s stasis needs to be emphasised. To fully apprehend a carnival it is necessary to acknowledge and very carefully analyse its roots, its continuity (across time and space), its repetition (in terms of annual renewal and recycling), its commitment to structure and even regimentation and its enduring stability (even while it changes).

Otherwise carnival is relegated to ‘contact zones,’ which in turn are treated as stages upon which hybridity parades about in spectacular fashion. These zones are to be lauded on the understanding that ‘contact,’ in and of itself, is a transformative and thus positive process that should be courted or actively pursued. Indeed, Mary-Louise Pratt’s sage identification of the asymmetry that is often integral in the cross-cultural exchanges that occur in ‘contact zones’ is blithely swept aside. Human struggle is minimalised and the physical, intellectual and political act of ‘grappling’ with historical processes such as slavery and colonisation and their resultant, enduring inequalities are conveniently elided from view (Pratt 34). Instead, these less-than-pleasant realities are effortlessly transcended in an attractive, free-floating but ultimately depoliticised discourse. Or as Kathryn Mitchell observes in relation to exhausted terminology:

The overuse of abstract metaphors […] often leads to thorny problems of fetishization. As concepts such as hybridity become disarticulated from the historically shaped political and economic relations in which identities and narratives of nation unfold, they take on a life and trajectory of their own making. Second and third readings,
borrowings, interventions, elaborations – all can contribute to conceptualizations that are not only completely removed from the social relations of everyday life, but which also, because of this very abstraction, become ripe for appropriation. (534)

The discourse is subsequently Adamic insofar as it has the ability to identify then categorise the juxtaposition of cultures, but has far less to say about the actual politics of cultural interaction. As a result, I tend to follow the lead of Sten Pultz Moslund, who casts a sceptical eye on the discourse surrounding hybridity and actually considers “…how the supposed uncertainty and multiplicity of hybridity is contaminated by forces of discursive centralisation, significantly reducing its proposed radicality and destabilising capacity” (11). With this in mind, I will give an account of the different strands that constitute a carnival insofar as these cultural layers help to create a ‘hybrid’ spectacle. But rather than drawing dramatic conclusions about the integral ‘nature’ of a carnival, I will look at the ways in which the Trinidadian variant of the festival is mobilised for any number of purposes.

**Carnival’s Composition across Class and Race:**

As outlined above, Trinidad is made up of a diverse people of multiple ethnicities. They share a national history that refracts into multiple, often harrowing accounts of migration, culminating in struggles of integration when they finally arrive. Taking these difficulties into account, it is unsurprising that the origins of carnival, the nation’s ‘national event’, are just as syncretic. In the specific case of contemporary Trinidadian carnival where the popularity of fancy mas’ is emphasised, the cultural hybridity of the festival is specifically marketed not only to a global audience but to the nation at large. Much is made of the constituent parts and influences that come together in the mix. Emphasis is placed on the fact that the festival
contains references to Trinidad’s pre-colonial, indigenous population: the rituals and masking practices of indigenous Warao and Guaharoon Indians\textsuperscript{20} are still visible through the presence of the “Wild” and “Fancy” Indian” bands that play mas’. Allusions to an indigenous presence coincide with the acknowledgement that the festival has elements that find their roots in Europe, Africa and Asia respectively.

Wild or Authentic Indian mas’ is important insofar as it evokes the roots and history of indigenous Indians of the Caribbean. Art historian and anthropologist Daniel J. Crowley has refined much of the complex taxonomy of Indian bands and notes that “…the most archaic form of Indians is usually termed Wild Indians, or as Red, Blue or Black Indians” which is a direct reference to costuming “…rather than the colour of their skin” (Crowley, “The Traditional Masques of Carnival” 205). This colour coding extends beyond mere costuming, however, as the Red Indians of contemporary carnival are linked to a history of barter that existed between Trinidad and Venezuela. Historically, ‘Red’ Indians who resided in the Orinocco Delta have been described as “…aboriginal Indians of the Guarao, Guarajo, or “Warrahoon” tribe…” who migrated from Venezuela and “…brought beads, parrots, hammocks, and other products to Trinidad to barter until the 1920's when they were prohibited” (205). While prevented from trading, descendants of these populations continue to live remote parts of the island: “There are settlements of mixed-bloods who claim Warahoon ancestry throughout Trinidad, particularly south of Siparia” (205).

\textsuperscript{20} In general Trinidadian Indian Mas’ is demarcated into two distinct categories: ‘Wild’ or ‘Authentic’ Indians and Fancy Indians, although Carol Martin points towards ‘the fluidity of terms’ and notes that Fancy Indian masqueraders may, at times, interchangeably refer to themselves as ‘Authentic’ Indians too (Martin 220). Nevertheless, despite this slippage, Martin insists that a clear distinction be drawn between the two categories. More will be said about the Indian influence on mas’, later in this chapter.
Black Indians, in turn, are regarded as predominantly ‘African’ as well as Indian, with an emphasis on the former. According to Crowley, the costuming of Black Indians specifically highlights their African heritage and stereotypically toys with narratives of ‘savagery,’ thus distinguishing them from their Venezuelan counterparts. The Blue Indians are of vaguer provenance, but they too are symbolically and imaginatively tied to a notion of indigeneity. Each group not only has their own distinctive costuming aesthetic, but has also formulated their own distinctive dialect. These carnival languages form an important part of the roleplay that effectively differentiates them from one another (206).

Fancy Indian mas’ by contrast refers to creative, fantastic and, above all, extravagant portrayals of Indians. Magnificent headdresses and glamorous costumes abound. Even though they are a direct ‘off-shoot’ of Red Indians, they nevertheless extend an external rather than an internal gaze as they look towards North American Indian costuming and culture for inspiration. Arguably, North American Indians have a long-standing tradition of global media representation both in film and television and are thus firmly entrenched in a transnational popular consciousness that informs carnival performances. This is compounded by the integral position that Indian roleplay takes during Mardi Gras in New Orleans. It offers not only an opportunity for African Americans to ‘transform’ into Indians within their own communities, connecting them to broader carnival traditions (Sands 82), but ensures that the dominant imagery associated with North American Indians remains current in carnival representations. Indian mas’ is also performed in Dominican carnival where revellers pay homage to the indigenous Taino people.

Successive waves of immigration in the form of indentured labourers from India and China have also had, and continue to have, a significant impact on the visual aesthetics and themes
which propel mainstream carnival. Both its institutions and its traditions of performance
deliberately dramatise carnival’s hybridity, incorporating elements of whatever material
culture comes into contact. The aesthetic and cultural influence from both Spanish and
particularly French colonisation during the 19th century cannot be overlooked as both countries
have provided stock characters\textsuperscript{21} that are integral to Trinidadian carnival whether it is
performed in the streets or presented in a calypso, poem, play or novel.

While Trinidad was never officially a French colony, the impact of French migration radically
altered the social landscape, culture and even language, “with French linguistic traces
remaining easily detectable in everyday speech” (Campbell 2). Carnival’s inception is usually
understood to have emerged out of the social calendar of a French plantocracy with its seasonal
concerts, balls, dinners, hunting parties and fêtes. Carnival season in Trinidad is structured
around Lent but begins much earlier in the festive calendar. Pre-Lenten celebrations such as
Saturnalia, an ancient Roman festival that was held in December, have informed Trinidad’s
own extended pre-carnival celebrations. They are also held in December and are a precursor to
Christmas.

Since medieval times in Europe, archaic rituals have been incorporated into an assortment of
oppositional ideologies to create a distinctive festive amalgam:

\begin{quote}
In European culture, carnival is a synthesis of pagan rituals that share the philosophy
of opposites, like the Greek Dionysian festivals, Roman Saturnalia and the grotesque
realism of medieval carnivalesque and baroque theatre…The Dionysian festivals are
essentially spring or harvest feasts celebrated at the end of the winter, dedicated to
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{21} Many of these characters will be discussed in detail over the next three chapters.
Dionysus, also known in Latin as Bacchus, the Greek god of wine, excess and sensual pleasure…The Roman Saturnalia is associated with…the Roman new year festival of the Kalends of January which spread throughout the Roman empire and was celebrated by the relaxation of all ordinary rules of conduct and the inversion of customary social status… (Nurse 664)

European celebrations came to Trinidad via France in the 18th century. The Spanish, who at that time were governing Trinidad, invited French settlers to immigrate to the island. Naturally, the French brought their own cultural traditions with them. As French Creoles established great houses and successful businesses in Trinidad, they began to introduce celebrations that involved holding elaborate masked balls during the pre-Lenten period. These parties continued despite the political and military upheavals that resulted in Spain ceding ‘ownership’ of Trinidad to Britain in 1797. The ostentatious balls were also witnessed with great amusement by enslaved Africans on the plantations and estates, who began to have private celebrations of their own. These ceremonies incorporated their own sacred West African traditions, with masking and funerary rituals central to proceedings. They also used these occasions to mock and lampoon the lascivious conduct of the masters and their wives. By parodying them, the slaves found themselves responding to a pervading popular discourse. Newspaper editorials of the day often commented on the masked balls of the French elite, praising and publicising the ingenuity of the various costumes and disguises. In particular French convois became a fundamental part of pre-Emancipation Lenten celebrations.

These convois were regimental processions that coincided with the beginning of the carnival season that was celebrated by the French elite. Headed by a mock king, queen or some other notable public figure of rank, the convois were composed of black slaves and freed coloureds
who paraded through the countryside parodying the aristocratic airs favoured by the French planters (Campbell 3). What is interesting about the earliest descriptions of these processions is the way in which they entered the public discourse. The first accounts feature in reportage about a slave revolt in 1805 that was triggered while the *convois* were parading. The articles that introduced these events to the public record also acknowledged that these regiments were already well-established by the time of the riots and had been tolerated prior to the 1805 in the belief that their function was purely social. While the coverage of the insurrection was one of the earliest recordings of widespread masquerading, costuming and carnivalesque revelry, it dates the practice to a much earlier time. This glimpse of the longstanding racial and social stratification of early carnival is noteworthy and supports the observation that Trinidadian carnival, from its inception, was neither free nor egalitarian:

> It is necessary to observe that in those days the population of the Colony was divided into the following categories, Whites, Free persons of Colour, Indians and Slaves...The free persons of Colour were subjected to very stringent Regulations and although not forbidden to mask, were yet compelled to keep to themselves and never presumed to join in the amusements of the privileged class. The Indians kept entirely aloof, and the slaves except as onlookers, or by special favour when required to take part, had no share in the Carnival which was confined exclusively to the upper class of the community. (Pearse 181)

From the time of the early 1800 through to the emancipation proclamation the traditions of carnival were still maintained by white planters and freed coloureds, despite the instability that characterised the period. From Christmas until Lent, they would indulge in “genteel house-to-house visiting *en masque*, street promenading, dancing, and playing practical jokes” (8). While
freed blacks were not welcome in the homes or allowed to keep social company with coloureds and whites, their own forms of masking and revelry were tolerated. Slaves by contrast were “completely ostracized from Carnival” (8). With emancipation, the black population embraced Carnival *en masse*, and within a decade had transformed the celebration’s respectable air of aristocratic conviviality into a charged affair that harked back to ancient revels (8).

The British colonial administration throughout this period was integral in shaping the festival through ongoing attempts to suppress and curtail it. Carnival provoked a great deal of moral approbation in the early-19th century not only from the government but also from white upper class and ‘coloured’ middle-class Trinidadians who looked upon the event with distaste, derision and growing fear (E. Hill, *The Trinidad Carnival* 17; Cowley, *Carnival, Canboulay and Calypso* 61; Dudley, “The Steelband “Own Tun”” 14). John Cowley, author of *Carnival Canboulay and Calypso: Traditions in the Making*, charts the changing perspectives of the island’s white elite with respect to carnival as British sensibilities came to prominence.

In a critical chapter titled “‘Pain Nous Ka Mange’, 1783-1869,” Cowley sifts through an array of archival records in order to construct a compelling portrait of Trinidadian carnival during a highly critical period in the festival’s development. Noting the cultural and aesthetic evolution of the festival, Cowley also documents a series of clashes between carnival’s revellers and the police, and provides a brief account of The Shand Estate Revolt in 1805 (12-5) which stands as one of Trinidad’s most notable slave rebellions. Susan Campbell also confers with Cowley’s research and offers the following account:

On December 10th several leaders of the planned rebellion were apprehended by the authorities and tortured for information. Eight days later four *convois* kings were
hanged and beheaded, their bodies hung in chains and their heads displayed on pikes as examples to their fellows. Lesser rebels were mutilated or flogged and then sold out of the country. After this aborted revolt regulations were enacted requiring all free blacks to carry lanterns when out at night while slaves had to carry written permission to be abroad at any hour. The slave-owners, however, were never relieved of their fear of insurrection. (Campbell 3)

What is significant to note is that the view of carnival radically shifted from one of amused and indulgent paternalism to overt hostility and even fear once the island moved from French cultural dominance to British colonial rule. Another supposed plan for a slave rebellion, discovered in the autumn of 1823, adds weight to this assertion. It also confirms that black dancing societies, like those identified in 1805, continued to flourish in the same vicinity. The once playful mimicry of slave societies which emulated the military stratification of white slave owners were now regarded as suspect while convois22 were viewed by white colonials as a deceptive guise that obfuscated the potential for militant rebellion:

Plans for what was believed to be a slave insurrection in the plantations between Carenage and Diego Martin were discovered on 25 October 1823. The revolt was to coincide with the Feast of All Saints (1 November) when slaves had a holiday. An official enquiry quickly discovered that sacrifice of a cock and sprinkling of its blood over ceremonial drums was part of an Ibo (or Igbo) ritual of purification. This practice was usual prior to a dance of religious significance. Eight slaves who had been arrested

22 Later in this chapter, when I discuss masking practices, I will re-visit the use of convois and discuss the specifics of their costuming and regalia and their overall importance in terms of instituting class parody. I will also make reference to the way in which convois helped to structure social and communal life beyond carnival, in a post-slavery context.
were acquitted of ‘intention to revolt’. Judge L. F. C. Johnston found, on 21 November, that ‘various societies or meetings of slaves for dancing...are referred to [as]... “Regiments”...synonymously with or for the word “party” or “society”...to be used on the occasion of Dances on Holy days.’ The slaves had been overheard talking about a ‘regiment’ and a revolutionary purpose had wrongly been assumed. (Cowley 18)

Cowley stresses the attitudinal shift of the white elites towards carnival once the ‘jamette’ element began to rule over carnival. It is at this stage in carnival’s history that it is no longer perceived as light-hearted entertainment allowing white elites and black subalterns to peacefully co-exist in parallel social spheres. Gone were the days when the communities indulged in a playful but fleeting inversion of the social order as they took turns parodying one another. It became a site of potential rebellion requiring containment and was treated as a matter of ‘law and order.’ Cowley and Campbell both demonstrate this by detailing a series of legislative acts and ordinances that were passed by the colonial administration in their quest to systematically criminalise carnival.

In 1834 the Emancipation Act was passed, which partially democratised carnival by opening it up to a new demographic. The ex-slaves were highly conversant in carnival’s mores and were eager to participate in what they had once merely been an audience to. As a result, they proceeded to organise their own independent processions. As soon as freed slaves began to openly participate in carnival, however, the tone of newspaper editorials became hostile rather than indulgently amused. There was considerable scrutiny and critique of the inclusion of ‘inappropriate’ African dances and masking, while others used the media as a powerful platform on which to demand the end of their participation in carnival:
We will not dwell on the disgusting and indecent scenes that were enacted in our Streets—we will not say how many we saw in a state so nearly approaching nudity, as to outrage decency and shock modesty—we will not describe the African custom of carrying a stuffed figure of a woman on a pole, which was followed by hundreds of negroes yelling out a savage Guinea song [we regret to say nine-tenths of these people were Creoles]......but we will say at once that the custom of keeping Carnival, by allowing the lower order of society to run about the Streets in wretched masquerade, belongs to other days and ought to be abolished in our own. (qtd. in Cowley 30-1)23

The puritanical reaction to public displays of sexuality and licence combined with an even greater fear of reprisal from oppressed ex-slaves. Growing paranoia resulted in the belief that carnival celebrations would be used as grounds for seeking vengeance and visiting violence upon former slave owners.24 Furthermore, white elites were overtly angered by any legal amendments that appeared to redress the situation of blacks at the time abolition. As a consequence, reparations were given to former slave owners in order compensate for their loss of property and to appease them for their relative decline in social status. Punitive legislation was simultaneously passed, including harsh vagrancy laws which specifically targeted blacks, and later Indians, who were not attached to any plantation.

These laws were most rigidly upheld during carnival time while an ‘aggrieved’ planter class perpetually demanded the imposition of martial law. Plantation owners even took it upon themselves to form their own militias. Much of their fear and paranoia was predicated on the

---

23 This is an excerpt from a disgruntled letter to the Port of Spain Gazette credited to an anonymous ‘Scotchman’. (Cowley, Carnival, Canboulay and Calypso 30)

24 Carnival was shifted to August 1st to coincide with the ending of chattel slavery. It was only at the close of the 19th century that carnival was reintroduced to the pre-Lenten period.
fact of their own minority status in relation to an ex-slave populace. Through the types of masquerading that black Trinidadians engaged in, it was also quite evident that despite experiences of slavery and colonisation many black Trinidadians wilfully gravitated towards African folklore, traditions, aesthetics and spiritual beliefs and even went so far as to create African-centred support groups and secret societies. In “Carnival, Calypso and Class Struggle” Susan Campbell identifies these groups as “key areas of cultural life” (8) and goes on to document in detail the attempts of the British colonial government, both in the pre-Emancipation and post-Emancipation era, to control, discipline and ultimately disrupt private groups and societies that were associated with obeah or shango or ‘Shouterism’—otherwise known as the Spiritual Baptists.  

Associations with obeah in particular were violently punished with whippings, amputations and imprisonment. In more extreme cases, some adherents were even executed under the notorious reign of Trinidad’s first British governor, Thomas Picton (7-8). Sustained attempts were made to repress all three forms of religious expression through a litany of direct legislation which Campbell effectively catalogues. Obeah, Shangoism and Shouterism were all organic developments in the black Trinidadian community and were targeted because they represented a form of spiritual expression and community solidarity that became an essential part of building an extended, protective ‘homeplace’ (Hooks 384).

Members of the Shouter church were not only disdained by the white elite but were a source of embarrassment to middle-class coloureds and blacks who aspired towards European notions

25 Campbell provides a condensed definition of Shangoism and describes it as “... a syncretic cult which, like Haitian vodoun, combines elements of Roman Catholicism with traditional African (in the Trinidadian case, Yoruba) religion” (8). Shouterism was an interpretation of the Christian Baptist faith.
of public respectability and legitimate Christian practice. By contrast, the Shouters were unrepentant in their disinterest in the politics of respectability. The display of the Shouter Baptists which tended to be vocal, dramatic and physically demonstrative drew censure and considerable ire. Consequently, they were marginalised for their poverty, their ‘ignorance’ in terms of their ‘mis-reading’ of the Christian doctrine and for their lack of political access. In the context of the general ill-will towards the Shouter Baptists they found themselves positioned as a part of Trinidad’s social underclass (Monagan 303).

Inevitably, the tension fomenting between black ex-slaves and the colonial government erupted, culminating in the Canboulay26 riots of 1881, resulting in an armed confrontation between the police and the jamette element of carnival. The exact origins27 of the first Canboulay procession cannot be pinpointed but it was a celebration that involved former slaves carrying “flambeaux (flaming torches) in procession through the streets” (Campbell 10). The flaming torches commemorated the sporadic fires that occurred on plantations:28

Whenever fire broke out on an estate, often no doubt due to sabotage by arson, slaves from neighbouring plantations…mustered by drivers blowing conch-shell horns. Gangs of slaves were urged ‘with cries and blows to their work’, cutting and grinding the cane before it soured. (Campbell 10)

26 The word Canboulay is a creolisation of the French cannesbrulées which translates into ‘burnt canes’. The word ‘Kambule’ is coincidentally the Kikongo word for ‘processions’ (Funk, “Rituals of Resistance”).

27 J.D. Elder asserts that the origins of the ‘first enactment’ along with its participants are unknown (Elder 38) John K. Gudza, by contrast, traces the ‘annual tradition’ back to 1845 (Gudza 2). Given the depth of Elder’s scholarship on the topic, I will confer with his judgement.

28 Campbell suggests that the fires were often the result of deliberate arson and sabotage on the part of the slaves (10). One of the significant boons of Canboulay is that it gave slaves the opportunity to congregate across plantations.
Post-Emancipation Canboulay processions functioned as “an act of black remembrance and a reminder to the white elite of the horrors it had inflicted on its slaves” (qtd. in Gudza 2). It also highlighted the reversal of the fortunes of ex-slaves as they could roam the streets at will and freely fraternise. Furthermore, Canboulay was initially distinct from carnival and was originally celebrated from the first to the third of August before it was incorporated into the Lenten calendar. Nevertheless, there were strenuous objections against Canboulay by the British government and British society, which took place on Sunday, the first day of carnival. The government felt that a ‘pagan’ celebration of the nature of Canboulay desecrated the Sabbath while inciting anti-colonial sentiment towards their rule (Elder 40).

Consequently, in 1881 the government attempted to ban drumming which was an essential component of Canboulay. The police, however, failed to employ sufficient numbers to successfully subdue the festival and its participants which incited the ire and resistance of the latter. The direct result was the Canboulay riots in which hundreds were wounded. Despite the Indian community’s tentative relationship with carnival they also stood in direct and vocal opposition to this ban, since drumming was an essential component of many of their celebrations and ceremonies, including Hosay (Mansingh & Mansingh 25). While Canboulay and carnival was the central target of colonial censure, there is also clear evidence that the festivals of the Indian community were also affected by colonial legislation that specifically aimed to regulate the public use of percussive instruments:

In 1884, the year of the first Hosay after the legislation was enacted, Indians in their thousands resisted the colonial authorities and in San Fernando the confrontation with the colonial police resulted in the death of many Indian labourers (estimated at about
eighteen. In addition to those who died on the spot, about one hundred (100) more were injured. (Parmasad 68)

In 1884 the government tentatively reintroduced carnival sans Canboulay, reducing it to a two-day festival. Drumming in street processions and kalinda bands was banned, and despite the success of carnival revellers in preventing violence during the years 1881 to 1884 troops were called upon to enforce the ban. Additionally, various masquerade characters were outlawed or could be played only after a license had been obtained. Carnival survived, but in truncated form. Calypsonians continued to lead the masquerade bands, but the ban on drumming altered the sounds of the festival, and the elimination of Canboulay restricted its exuberant expression. Within a few years, the outlawed drums had been replaced by tamboo bamboo bands, which consisted of tuned lengths of cured bamboo. The introduction of tamboo bamboo marked the beginning of a type of ‘toning down’ and domestication of carnival’s music.29

Historical accounts of 19th century and early-20th century carnival often characterised a newly arrived population of East Indians as socially aloof and peripheral to the festival. They were largely detached from African cultural customs and practices which structured black life in Trinidad. There is evidence to suggest, however, that during the 1860s and 1870s Indian male labourers were attracted to specific elements in the celebrations. In particular, Indian Trinidadians were drawn to the stick-fights or kalinda competitions held every year and actively participated in them, taking the chance to express a developing ethnic rivalry between blacks and Indians (Cowley, Carnival, Canboulay and Calypso 66).30 However, immigrant

29 The changing nature of carnival’s discussion will be periodically referred to throughout this thesis and revisited in chapter five.

30 History is indeed written by the victors or, in this case, the dominant group resulting in shamelessly hegemonic narratives. As a result, historical accounts of the rivalry between the two groups were shaped, controlled and
communities from India at this time tended not to participate in the wider celebrations and the
division between revellers and non-revellers became clearly demarcated along lines of race and
class. Although these divisions have diminished in recent times, racial barriers and, in
particular, class stratifications are still a visible feature of carnival in the 21st century.

Costuming and Masking across Continents:

Despite residual class and racial barriers Trinidadian carnival is, nonetheless, marketed as a
global and hybrid phenomena that spans across three continents—namely, Africa, Europe and
the Americas. The prevailing imagery of carnivalesque revelry in sites such as Trinidad, Cuba,
Brazil, Notting Hill, Brooklyn and New Orleans is that of wild and colourful celebrations that
take place in the lead-up to Ash Wednesday. As engaging as this spectacle is, however, the
more interesting point is that, for a brief period of time, carnival actively resisted colonial
domination and white supremacy. Conventional historical accounts posit 1783 as the year in
which masquerade balls were introduced to Trinidad. 1834 marks the next milestone in the
canonical narrative of carnival’s history, when emancipation was proclaimed and the direct
participation of former slaves was allowed. 1838 is identified as a critical point of
transformation where carnival’s culture shifted from being primarily dominated by French
mores and customs to being shaped by the black urban working class.

________________________
disseminated by white elites who inevitably drew upon race-based and racist frameworks that stereotyped both
‘Africans’ and ‘Indians.’ In accordance with the race-based hierarchy of the day, Indians or ‘Hindoos’ were
described as the physically inferior but more wily and strategic of the two competitors, while ‘Negros’ were
physically powerful but inevitably outwitted. These insidious narratives and their respective stereotypes have been
adopted and echoed in both Afro-centric and Indian-centric narratives well into the 21st century (Cowley,
Carnival, Canboulay and Calypso 66; Day 124).
In the 19th century, notions of play and performance were embodied in a range of ‘characters’ available to performers. Carnivalesque characters were often derived from oral folklore or literature and arrived in the Caribbean embedded in historical narratives. These stock figures usually made references to slavery or commented on its conditions, simultaneously expressing some form of social critique or, at the very least, concern. Characters such as Negue Jardins provide an interesting example of the process of mimicry, appropriation and subsequent re-appropriation that resonates with the carnivalesque practice of playing a character. The figure of the ‘black gardener’ first originates in the French planter class and represents an ‘approximation’ of the dress and customs of plantation slaves. It proved to be a highly popular form of carnivalesque roleplay amongst Trinidad’s French aristocracy. The character is not only emblematic of a particular historical milieu but also points towards the social proximity between white aristocrats and black slaves. There was a tacit concession that planters, by intimately sharing their living and working space with enslaved black people, assumed a first-hand knowledge of their human property.

Yet, it is also deeply suggestive of division and dominance insofar as the aristocrats were free to impersonate, comment on and temporarily ‘occupy’ the identities of their slaves while insisting that the latter remain in their own social stratum. The segregation of the races and the scrupulous division maintained between free and enslaved Trinidadians was maintained even as the slaves were permitted to have their own adjunct but separate carnival. After emancipation, however, the character of the negue jardin was ‘taken over’ and adopted by the freed slaves as a stock character in their own carnival. This then resulted in a ‘chain’ of simulacra in which they mimicked their former master’s mimicry of them. Max Harris analyses

---

31 Negue Jardin is sometimes spelt as ‘nègre jardin.’
what he describes as ‘cross-racial marking’ and suggests that the practice offered its own reward:

Such cross-racial masking indulged two ‘‘convenient white fantasies,’’ drawn from the men’s belief that their slaves were ‘‘sensuous’’ and ‘‘hedonistic’’ and the women’s dreams of being desired by their husbands as were the men’s ‘‘mulatto mistresses.’’ Slaves also imitated their white masters. The wife of a British plantation owner noted how on Christmas morning the slaves used to ‘‘flour each other’s black faces and curly hair, and call out, ‘look at he white face! and he white wig!’’’ No doubt, more pointed mockery took place in private. (‘‘Devils and Decorum’’ 190)

At this point the negue jardin shifted from being a figure of flagrant fun that offered the white elite an opportunity to ridicule blacks. The repurposed character allowed black revellers to satirise and subvert the mockery heaped upon them by the plantation owning class, reversing the roles. The character of the ‘piss-en-lit’32 became popular during the 19th century amongst the jamette class but was equally reviled by middle-and-upper class Trinidadians. Historian Max Harris observes that “[d]uring the second half of the 19th century, Carnival was increasingly dominated by canboulay, ritual stickfighting, and pissenlit bands, in which men dressed in white masks and women’s nightgowns (or even soiled menstrual cloths) indulged in sexual horseplay” (Harris, “The Impotence of Dragons” 111). Characters such as negue jardins, and the notoriously scatological ‘piss-en-lit’ are no longer played in 21st century carnival and are thus deemed ‘extinct.’

32 The piss-en-lit which literally translates to ‘wet the bed’ is a notorious ole mas’ character with a costume that is derived of soiled rags.
The *piss-en-lit* fulfilled the Bakhtinian notion of the grotesque insofar as bodily fluids housed in the body (piss, shit, menstrual blood) were not only externalised but then publically displayed for all to see. Like the *Dame Lorraine*, the *piss-en-lit* was considered to be a particularly transgressive character as it flouted and inverted gender norms. The *Dame Lorraine*, in turn, often provoked complaints of impropriety and transvestism. They were customarily played by men who enacted a deliberately vulgar dance that served as a subversive, parodic mockery of upper-class women.\(^{33}\)

The masking and roleplay of women in carnival captured the public’s attention and the eye of the existing media of the day. In 1868, the *Trinidad Chronicle* noted that *jamette* women organised themselves into flamboyantly titled bands such as the “Black Ball, Dahlias, Don’t-Care-A-Damns, Magentas, Maribuns (usually Maribone), Mousselines and True Blues,” all of which were seen in the 1868 Carnival, wearing fantastic dresses” (qtd. in Noel “De Jamette” 63) for canboulay, often engaging in revelry or armed combat. Costume and attire was critical in enabling the latter activity as “the concealment of weapons was a common practice in these (female) bands as early as 1864, and many of these women armed themselves with horsewhips, stones and razors” (63). The *jamette* class was widely regarded as both an underclass and a sub-culture separate from respectable society. They thoroughly dominated carnival, however, and are attributed with creating the earliest known form of ole mas’ in Trinidad. *Jamette* women, in particular, were infamous for engaging in armed stand-offs with the police. *Jamet* men, by contrast, engaged in the more contained and regulated arts of stick-fighting and *kalinda* dancing, although they too were often involved in physical combat outside of the ‘gayelles’ or

---
33 While *negue jardins* and *piss-en-lits* became largely ‘extinct’ by 20th century carnival they currently exist as ole mas’ specimens who have been revived in the ‘Viey la Cou,’ otherwise known as the ‘Old Yard’ which I will revisit in the conclusion of this thesis.
stick-fighting arenas. Consequently, the jamette female bands and the jamet male stick-fighters garnered reputations for violence and were considered an inherently disruptive menace. They also indulged in genderised roleplay during carnival that was at times fairly conventional and at other times flagrantly transgressive.

As post-Emancipation carnival progressed the West African inheritance of black Trinidadians came to bear on the festival, informing ideas around music, masking, performance and characters that substantively differed to what the French, Spanish and English had to offer. It also offered poor black Trinidadians an opportunity to articulate their own experiences of interaction with these respective cultures. Carnival became a stage on which they could freely interpret cultural practices that had, until recently, been denied them, allowing ex-slaves to partake in French forms of dancing, music, masking and regalia. When the British colonial authorities attempted to curtail this access, resistance became one of the primary interests dramatised by the festival. Ensuring its own survival became a signature of its form. As a result of these pressures carnival “...developed in the Caribbean over the following decades as a vibrant and at times embattled occasion of resistance art” (Ferris 520).

While music, lyrics and percussion functioned as a form of resistance, costuming and masking also provided carnival’s participants with the ability to articulate or comment upon an identity, be it actual, mythical, parodic, or aspirational. The roots of Trinidadian carnival boast a rich inheritance from both French carnival and Nigerian egungun masking traditions which have been juxtaposed with traditions forged in the New World. The festival is further enriched and complicated by retaining references to an indigenous Central American and Caribbean history.

---

34 In chapter three, I will briefly revisit jamette carnival when I analyse a jamet male character in The Dragon Can’t Dance.
It is important, however, to draw a distinction between carnivalesque masking in the West Indies as compared to West African traditions of masking. Performers in various West African nations, including Ghana and Nigeria, donned animal skins and heads with the explicit aim of becoming whichever deity or totem their costume represented, subsequently adopting the attributes of their totems.

Performers also took on the task of directly channelling the spirits of their ancestors. In effect, African masqueraders did not don masks in order to adorn or glamourise the body or to represent fantasy-based conceptions of the self. Instead, dramatic and often distorted masks were used in order to embody supernatural beings. Robert Wyndham Nicholls notes that while Trinidadian mas’ draws on traditions of African masking, these themes were applied at a remove: “African masks were not regenerated in the Caribbean because they were too provocative for the colonial classes. The archetypal African mask is carved from wood or constructed of fibres, is worn on multiple occasions and is relatively long-lasting” (53).

By contrast, masking is used pervasively in West African cultural life “…appearing in ancient funerary rites, yam and rain festivals and the initiation rites that constitute the Egungun festival in Nigeria as well as similar events held in Senegal, Benin, and many other parts of Africa” (Gilkes, “Afri-Caribbean Resistance”). Furthermore, characters in those festivals have been transported and re-invented in Trinidad. Thus, we see the earlier echoes of African characters re-articulated through the moko jumbie stilt walker, the Dame Lorraine, griot court singers and jab-jabs. Yet, it is not just the influence of West African masque and costume that informs carnival, especially in its earlier incarnations. According to historian Temjumola Olaniyan the contribution is fundamental:
The older traditions are mostly non-scripted, improvisatory, and performed in indigenous African languages. Their conceptions of theatre space is fluid, and stage–audience relations are not governed by inflexible rules: any space can be turned into a performance stage, while the audience, within acknowledged boundaries, is free to interact with the performers and performance in a variety of ways and even move in and out of the theatre space during performance. The performance is often public and the audience non-fee-paying, though performers could be rewarded in cash or kind for their artistry. (37)

Arguably, this description may have applied to the mores and traditions of Trinidadian carnival at an earlier point in its history, suggesting at some form of common ground between the practices of African theatre and those of a bygone West Indian carnival. In the 21st century, however, Trinidadian carnival’s public space is routinely regulated and actively policed. Space is clearly demarcated between audience and spectator and the respective roles of each tend to be solidified. Rather than emerging playfully from the unpredictable and flexible roleplay that Olaniyan tantalisingly alludes to, the relationship between audience and masqueraders is foreclosed in defined spaces.

Despite the concrete realities of Trinidadian carnival, one must still account for the different spaces that it occupies and consider how it symbolically operates. Revellers and audiences are engaged in a type of literary play that accompanies the performances in corporeal spaces such as the street, the fête tent and the stage. Such an acknowledgement permits a discussion of carnival that takes into account its competing and even contradictory aspects. We are presented with a festival that is at once highly local, peculiar to a small relatively isolated island, which is nevertheless embedded in a specific history of migration, slavery, cultural hybridisation and
folklore. Yet, it simultaneously functions as an international enterprise with a distinctly commercial imperative. This stands in direct contradistinction to West African festivals:

Organized around certain deities or spirits, or to mark generational transitions or the passage of the seasons whether of climate or agricultural production, festivals are sprawling multimedia occasions—that is, incorporating diverse forms such as singing, chanting, drama, drumming, masking, miming, costuming, puppetry, with episodes of theatrical enactments ranging from the sacred and secretive to the secular and public. Festivals could last for a few hours to several days, weeks or months. (37-8)

What is critical to note, however, is the clear presence of core communal narratives which are passed down and preserved with each festival. Whether these narratives pertained to a specific deity, a season or a focus on critical events in the community, they were integral in audibly and visibly articulating the values and concerns of the community. While the time frames and the specificity of the narratives may differ, it seems that West Indian carnivals, like West African festivals, also have their own narrative impetus. Myths are narrated, folkloric characters are embodied while topical or critical events are critiqued during carnival. In the specific case of Trinidad and Tobago, these myths represent the confluence of West African, European, and East Indian mythologies. However, these influences are by no means ‘equal’. Nor is it possible to quantify or ‘measure’ the impact that each cultural contribution has had on carnival. The other important aspect of West African masking to note is the collapse or, perhaps, irrelevance of the distinction between the sacred and the profane that typifies European carnivals. In her seminal study on West African masking, anthropologist Sydney Littlefield Kasfir suggests that masking in West African contexts “was clearly perceived as both play and ritual” (Kasfir, “Masquerading as a Cultural System” 3):
It becomes possible to view masking as a transformational process which, when enacted as ritual, reflects the cosmic order, and when enacted as play, belongs to the social order… It is more accurate to say that mask performances mediate between play and ritual. (5)

Kasfir also emphasises the social pragmatics of West African masking and details the judiciary, regulatory, punitive and mediating functions of the masks. Masks were utilised by village elders or those with sufficient status to institute law and order and settle disputes. John Picton also outlines the way in which specific masks accrue spiritual power or potency:

Over the years, an ekuecici can become well-known in this respect, and an assemblage of sacrificial and magical material may be built up on top of the mask in order to enhance its powers. The mask in this way becomes a fetish object served for its own inherent magical power, distinct from the ekuecici. (41)

Nevertheless, scholarship on Trinidadian carnival inevitably gives a more detailed account of the influence of the customs and mores of the French plantocracy due to the fact that written accounts of carnival revolve around white elites. West African traditions of masking, music, and call-and-response performances are invariably mentioned, however, and are critical in positioning the festival as a distinctly New World phenomenon. Indian contributions to the festival are not dwelt on with nearly the same degree of detail. Their historical place in carnival

---

Picton identifies and differentiates the following forms of masking: “ekuoba, masquerades which impersonate individual deceased elders; ekuecici, the slaves or servants of the world of the dead; ekurahu, the singing masquerades which perform in the night of Ekueci.” (38)
as peripheral latecomers who remain aloof from the event oddly mirrors popular narratives surrounding their immigration to Trinidad which emphasises their cultural marginalisation from mainstream ‘black’ Trinidadian culture.

All of these cultural threads, nonetheless, have contributed to an enduring carnivalesque tradition of ‘dressing up’ and ‘dressing down’ which has a complementary binary between ole and fancy mas’ which I will now discuss. To do so, I will refer to the work of Pamela R. Franco and Robert Wyndham Nicholls to consider how carnival revellers choose what form of mas’ they wish to play. ‘Dressing up’ and ‘dressing down’ are two distinct approaches to masquerade. This ‘division’ however, is neither discrete nor wholly impermeable. As a result, many ole mas’ characters also display elaborate regalia or intricate costuming while many ‘fancy mas’ characters are merely an update or an extension of existing ole mas’ characters.

‘Dressing up’ specifically refers to a form of masquerade in which the participants seek to enhance and embellish the body and to wear clothing that is “socially and culturally recognized as different from everyday attire and that help to mark an event or occasion as special” (Franco, “Dressing Up and Looking Good” 63). Dressing down, by contrast, has its own set of objectives and contains its own innate ideology around playing mas’. Or as Nicholls observes:

Dressing up uses a form of exaggerated realism and often involves the adoption of prestigious positions and elaborate hierarchies such as mock military or mock aristocracy (for example, Carnival Queen). In contrast, in dressing down, the disguise is normally more thorough, the intent is often to affront people’s sensibilities or challenge social norms. The costumes may be more informal or abstract and may involve wearing rags, patches, raffia, sackcloth… (46)
Both forms of mas’ ultimately seek to uplift those who play mas’ while temporarily inverting the social order. What is important to note is that courtly and military regalia imply principles of ‘structure’ and hierarchy rather than carnivalesque freedom, rebellion and ‘flux’. The ‘structure’ is twin-fold: Firstly, this is apparent in terms of physical regalia. Elaborate costumes require a material structure in order to convey a sense of pomp and circumstance as well as status. Secondly, not only is the actual fabric and the materials that constitute an individual costume ‘regimented’ but so too is the carnival procession which features the costumes. The presence of ‘aristocratic courts’ during pre-carnival celebrations were also another way in which a disempowered and disenfranchised class could assert their visibility and worth, while challenging a social order that sought to strategically place them on the lowest rungs of the social ladder.

While not at all ‘identical’ Trinidad’s *convois*\(^{36}\) of the past are, nevertheless, directly comparable to Cuban *cabildos* or Brazilian *escolas de samba* in terms of the vital function they played in the community. These groups did not merely mimic the structure of the European societies in their midst or replicate an *ancien regime* or monarchy from a distant shore. Instead, they referenced the aesthetics and trappings of aristocratic life and innovatively refashioned them in order to express their own existing social hierarchy (Bettleheim, “Negotiations of Power” 68). They were invaluable, not only in terms of their symbolic significance but also because they had a material, pragmatic effect. Aside from ‘regimenting’ carnival they also provided the means to organise the community and regulate in-group tensions on a daily basis.

\(^{36}\) John Cowley also notes that 19th century *convois* or regiments were named after animals, local areas, or other islands and were deeply hierarchical in structure. Furthermore “[f]lags and uniforms…were part of the paraphernalia. The groups used them as symbols of parody and power” (*Carnival, Canboulay and Calypso* 13-4).
operating as an informal, independent and less punitive form of community policing than appeals to official state power.

All of the aforementioned groups were intimately embedded in local neighbourhoods and in the specific case of cabildos and escolas de samba, their structures have remained largely intact and still have a contemporary presence in their respective carnivals. Indeed, associations that revolved around dance and music played a central role in social life whether in West Africa or amongst diasporic black populations in the Caribbean, North America and South America. Cuban cabildos, for instance, are identified as a “…type of corporate club [that] owned its own land and buildings, administered inheritances for the slave population, disciplined its members, and provided neighborhood police services” (67-8).

While ‘dressing up’ is fully accessible to both genders as is evident through the practice of convois bands, Pamela R. Franco notes that women were still more likely to opt for extravagant regalia than men with a marked preference for ‘dressing up and looking good’. This particular approach to playing mas’ permits female participants to fully enter into the complex social coding involved in colour, fabric choice (such as velvet and satin) and the sheer voluminousness and ostentation of a costume. Luxury is signified through both the expense and the expanse of the fabric, as a playfully pointed politics of excess abounds (“Dressing Up and Looking Good” 62; 67). Franco focuses her attention on the appropriation of “elite indicators of wealth and status” that are expressed through the minutiae of costuming detail. This attention to aesthetic detail is then skilfully re-contextualised in an allusion to West Africa. This was the precise genius of Martiniquan mas’ which was a staple feature of Trinidadian carnival. Female masqueraders alluded to the grandeur of European aristocratic fashion while remaining firmly rooted in West African styling that clearly indicated their belonging and

65
commitment to their own community (64) while simultaneously referring to the specificity of their Martiniquan roots. In effect, the costuming expressed a form of heteroglossia.

Both Franco and Nicholls describe an intricate architecture that resides at the heart of dressing up as layers, additions, and enhancements are emphasised. Intricacy and spectacle were paramount in the construction of these costumes as the objective of many of them was to shock and surprise an audience. Or as Nicholls notes: “Attention is generated by inventive juxtapositions, bizarre combinations of colours, and the clustering of symbols and artefacts” (52). He defines this practice as evidence of a ‘pluralistic orientation’ that is directly attributable to West African aesthetic preferences (50). He also suggests that “the multipatterned, multitextured, layered assemblage that constitutes a masquerade’s apparel” (50) is clear evidence of a form of masquerading that stands in contradistinction to French aesthetics and principles around masking and costuming.

Dressing down, by contrast, involves a distinct ideological approach to masking that allows for the creation of anti-social characters that attempt to disrupt the status quo rather than institute and showcase an alternate social order. Anti-social characters can range from the mythical and glamorous such as dragons and devils, to the overtly grotesque as in the case of the infamous piss-en-lit. Nicholls observes that while the dichotomy between dressing up and dressing down may be vital to the structure of Trinidadian carnival, it is “less applicable to West African regions, where other dichotomies may exist” (47). He also argues that dressing down loses

---

37 A direct example that supports Nicholls assertion are the Lega initiates of the Congo who “…have no difficulty in replacing one visual symbol by another…They take delight in the unusual combinations and manipulations of objects to heighten the element of surprise” (Biebuyck, qtd. in Nicholls 52).

38 In place of dressing up or dressing down dualisms may include ‘purity and pollution’, or in the specific case of Sierra Leone ‘fanciness and fierceness’ (Nunley 128). The polarity may also centre on gender. For example,
much of its significance in some West African societies in the face of a relative absence of the stringent class or race-based stratification that tends to characterise ‘Britain and the Caribbean respectively.’

Rather than portraying opulent royal courts or distinguished regiments, folkloric animals such as bulls, raffia bears, and Spanish Burroquets were more likely to be portrayed through dressing down. Dressing down also proved to be more effective in terms of abstract portrayals that sought to represent “…the more surreal world of the spirits” (49). Abstract representation is one of the key principles in West African masking and stood in contrast to British expectations of direct and recognisable representation in the form of mumming or pantomime. As a result, black Trinidadian carnival was not only disdained for its unruly ‘jamette’ elements, with its attendant cacophony of drumming, singing and ritual chants, but also for a failure to meet the aesthetic standards of British masquerade. Sometimes the ‘failure’ was discovered in the materials used, particularly textiles such as raffia, which were ubiquitous in the construction of costumes. At other times the outrageous and incongruous juxtaposition of materials and layers elicited scorn and were regarded as a clumsy, misguided approximation of European carnival fashion rather than as a purposeful deviation from their norms and an attempt to express a set of aesthetics that corresponded with their own aesthetics principles and artistic values.

The result has been a unique style of masquerade that departs from the principles of secrecy, total transformation, and obligatory masking, while no longer requiring men to be the pre-

Nicholls also refers to “two classes of Igbo Okoroshi masqueraders: light delicate masks that manifest female spirits, and dark grotesque masks that manifest male spirits” (Nicholls 48).

39 In place of a class-based hierarchy or an emphasis on insider versus outsider status, Nicholls suggests that in West African festivities there may be other motives for ‘dressing down’. He singles out the Igede in Nigeria who dress down when they masquerade in order to portray pollution (47).

40 While the British associated raffia with poverty and a lack of refinement, in West Africa raffia is generally considered to contain spiritual forces connected to the natural world (49).
eminent performers. Trinidad's pre-Lenten carnival, introduced by French immigrants in the late 18th century, presents a primary example of this paradigmatic shift, particularly in the degree to which women were, and still are, involved as maskers. Yet, the literature on modern carnival tends to foreground the male performer. These processes of cultural syncretism that characterise Trinidad’s history, with its overlapping cultural inheritances of narrative, folklore, music, dance, instrumentation and masking and intersections of class and race are somewhat suggestive of Mikhail Bakhtin’s definition of the ‘carnivalesque’. Carnival is intrinsically structured by a series of collusive and colliding binaries. In the case of Trinidad, the tension arises from the intermingling of allegedly ‘low’ narratives of African oral folklore and percussion with the supposedly ‘high’ inheritance of French Creole masking and instrumentation. This not only characterises 19th century carnival but is also attributable to Trinidadian carnival in the 20th century. These oppositions routinely intersect during carnival creating temporary spaces that are then marked out as official:

Carnival embraces an anticlassical esthetic that rejects formal harmony and unity in favor of the asymmetrical, the heterogeneous, the oxymoronic…Carnival’s ‘grotesque realism’ turns conventional esthetics on its head in order to locate a new kind of popular, convulsive, rebellious beauty, one that dares to reveal the grotesquerie of the powerful and the latent beauty of the ‘vulgar.’ In the carnival esthetic, everything is pregnant with its opposite, within an alternative logic of permanent contradiction and non-exclusive opposites that transgresses the monologic true-or-false thinking typical of a certain kind of positivist rationalism. (Shohat and Stam 302)

While carnival cannot be neatly bound by a singular definition, scholar Renate Lachman refers to Bakhtin’s seminal work *Rabelais and His World*. He uses Bakhtin’s idea of the carnivalesque
to generate a set of descriptive ‘paradigms’ that describe how carnival operates as a concept, if not an actual practice:

The language of the carnival (a system composed of signs which, when selected according to particular rules and combined in sequences, produce cultural meaning) has at its disposal a certain number of paradigms determined by the principle of laughter. These paradigms are: gay relativity, instability, openness and infiniteness, the metamorphotic, ambivalence, the eccentric, materiality and corporeality, excess, the exchange of value positions (up/down, master/slave), and the sensation of the universality of being. These paradigms determine both the semantic qualities and the form acquired by all facts of the culture of laughter: even those elements which intrude into the culture of laughter from other realms are subordinated to them. (36)

In the next chapter, I will look towards Trinidadian carnival in the 20th century and examine how ‘the exchange of value positions’ is centralised in Mustapha Matura’s Play Mas’. On the one hand, the text playfully deploys Bakhtinian oppositions and utilises them to comedic effect. Unlike the ambiguous spectacle of a contemporary Trinidadian carnival, the play’s precise, two-act structure draws upon the aforementioned paradigms and easily lends itself to a classical Bakhtinian reading or analysis of carnival. On the other hand, its dramatic reversals and resulting comedy also abound in a specifically Trinidadian and postcolonial context that permits the author to discursively reflect on the broader issues of ethnic and national identity in relation to state power.
Chapter Two:

Trinidadian Carnival and Statecraft in Mustapha Matura’s Play

Mas’

On Mustapha Matura

Finally, it is imagined as a community, because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship. Ultimately it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings. These deaths bring us abruptly face to face with the central problem posed by nationalism: what makes the shrunken imaginings of recent history (scarcely more than two centuries) generate such colossal sacrifices? I believe that the beginnings of an answer lie in the cultural roots of nationalism.

—Anderson 50

West Indian playwright Mustapha Matura hails from Belmont, which he describes as a “rich and poor multiracial suburb of Port of Spain, Trinidad” (Owusu 276). He speaks positively of his childhood describing it as “exciting and wonderful” musing that he “…couldn’t have hoped for any better.” Like many Trinidadians, part of this nostalgia is cultural and he lists the various ethnic groups that constitute Trinidad’s diverse populace: “Chinese, Indian, Black, Portugese, Spanish and so forth” (276). He dismisses, however, the notion that a deeply embedded and institutionalised form of racism exists in Trinidad. Instead, he suggests that at the time of his childhood racism operated primarily on a social and rather superficial level and that is was an
expedient tool for name-calling or levelling personal insults. By contrast the overarching experience of white colonial domination was, more often than not, held in common amongst non-whites, and thus inadvertently levelled the social terrain that they occupied. In effect, what Matura describes is a form of colorism or ‘pigmentocracy’ that is, in fact, a critical auxiliary to institutionalised racism. While there may be some partial truth to his observation, it is impossible to discount Trinidad’s history of a radically racialised society, a history largely reflected in its economy. In 1962 Matura immigrated to England and made the following observation:

When I came here I could not believe the ignorance of the people—their lack of sophistication and behavior towards other people. To us it meant good manners, consideration for other people, a sense of the arts, an ambition and aspiration for learning—enlightenment, evolving and bettering oneself as a human being. That is what we perceived England to be. Whether we were fools or not is another question. But I don’t think so. What finer conditioning to have—these are great values to aspire to. Better than robbing people or disliking them simply because of the way they look. A lot of Caribbean people of my generation grew up with these values…Our perception of the English was therefore largely from the media, the colonial institutions, our parents or peers. It was accepted wisdom that the English were fair, just and civilized.

---

41 ‘Pigmentocracy’ or the stratification of a race of people along ‘colour lines’ is simply another term for colourism. Both terms allude to social hierarchies in which people are ranked and are granted socio-economic opportunities, educational access, social status and an array of institutional privileges (such as better housing and healthcare) in accordance with their skin-tone or ‘pigment,’ with lighter or ‘fairer’ skinned people usually being beneficiaries. I both agree with and disagree with Matura’s account of how colourism tended to operate. While on the one hand it did exist on the social level that he describes I think that he tends to minimalise how existing institutions and laws were imbricated in upholding and practicing this form of discrimination.
So you can imagine the culture shock, to come to England and realize that all these values were just myths. (qtd. in Owusu 276)

These observations conform to a rather standard process of idealisation followed by disillusionment over or the ‘de-idealisation’ of an imagined ‘parent’—in this case, a ‘mother’ or ‘father’ land. It is in no way an unusual lament, issued by any number of West Indian authors who travelled to the cosmopolitan centre between the 1950s and 1980s, whether for economic motives, educational purposes or artistic opportunity. This critical migration underpins the work of established writers such as George Lamming or contemporary authors such as Andrea Levy, with Levy’s work giving an often humorous account of the experiences of what is known as the Windrush generation.42

In terms of a historical context Matura was also highly aware of both the United States Civil Rights movement of the 1960s and Black Power movement in the following decade, which provided an instructive ideological backdrop for activists and cultural practitioners in an emergent Black arts movement in Britain. They would experience what the first wave of post-war immigrants had to endure as ‘dark strangers’ in a hostile racial climate (274). In 1972 Matura returned to Trinidad a decade after his migration to Britain and observed that: “Post-Independence Trinidad was in a world of its own… As an exile, it was quite a wonderful journey to make. I was particularly fascinated by how multi-layered the place was—all the

42 The ‘Windrush Generation’ alludes primarily to Jamaicans, Trinidadians and other West Indians who migrated to England. The first group of immigrants sailed on the “SS Empire Windrush” and arrived in Tilbury near London on 22 June, 1948. Immigration was actively encouraged and there were no restrictions on immigration between the Caribbean and England. Subsequent immigrants were referred to after the first ship that arrived and the term became synonymous with post-war immigration from West Indies. Like Matura, these immigrants had highly romantic visions of what British identity entailed and what they perceived to be ‘the motherland’.
cultures and peoples” (qtd. in Owusu 276). On returning to England in 1972 he was inspired to write *Play Mas’*, finally publishing the play a decade later.

To paraphrase Matura’s description of his work, *Play Mas’* explored the social and political vacuum that arose in the transition from white colonial rule to subsequent dominance by the Black bourgeoisie. Furthermore, *Play Mas’* also explores the significance of a hegemonic notion of carnival that is embedded in an explicitly nationalist, patriotic framework. In the early-1950s, the People’s National Movement otherwise known as ‘PNM’ Emerged. The party’s main platform involved campaigning for Trinidad’s independence from Britain, which was eventually granted in 1962. The main opposition party, the Democratic Labour Party (henceforth referred to as the ‘DLP’) attracted a primarily East Indian constituency. PNM, by contrast, gained its following from Trinidadians of African descent who, at that particular point in time, constituted the largest ethnic demographic on the island.

At this particular historical juncture racially motivated voting prevailed, revealing sharply delineated political loyalties and a stark disparity in voting patterns on the basis of ethnicity. This continues to be an ongoing feature of Trinidad’s national politics, reflecting the reality of a multi-ethnic polity. This of course stands in direct contradistinction to the feel-good, multi-ethnic, harmonious ethos of carnival that celebrates inclusion, fusion, *communitas* and other more positive ideals. However, as Calypsonian David Rudder wryly observes in his calypso anthem “Trini to the Bone”: “How we vote/is not how we Party” (Rudder “Trini to the Bone”). PNM’s success was partly attributable to demographics, with the majority black constituency ensuring the victory. However, Matura also believes that in addition to superior support there was also another critical factor to consider in the form of civic engagement and education when

43 I will refer to the People’s National Movement as ‘PNM’ throughout the rest this chapter.
“[f]or the first time a party actually explained political issues to the population and so its success at the polling booth was a foregone conclusion” (Matura “Author’s Note”). As a result, *Play Mas* was written in order to recreate the heady impact of the political momentum generated by PNM, thus serving as a scathing critique as he scrupulously avoids entering into a politics of nostalgia. Consequently, he joins a list of prestigious playwrights who deploy carnival as a literary motif in order to examine the political. As Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins note:

> Since the 1960s, a period which marked the last vestiges of colonial rule in much of the region, Carnival has emerged as one of the primary influences on Caribbean drama. Even if it is treated ambivalently, it still permeates a number of levels of theatre practice and criticism. Not only do Carnival motifs appear with great frequency in the work of well-known playwrights such as Errol Hill, Earl Lovelace, Mustapha, Matura, and Derek Walcott, but they have also featured in Marina Maxwell’s experimental Yard Theatre in Jamaica, in Trinidad’s Village Theatre, and in other community-based projects. (Gilbert & Tompkins 88)

**Trinidad’s Social and Political History:**

Demographically, Trinidad’s black population was smaller than those that existed on other islands in the region, particularly Tobago, Jamaica and Barbados. From 1845 to 1917 the nation encouraged immigration from East India, resulting in a sizeable influx of indentured labourers who primarily hailed from the Gangetic Plain. Within a relatively short period of time, their numbers substantially increased and began to rival a newly liberated slave population. Of these arrivals, over two-thirds permanently settled in the Caribbean once their indentureship lapsed,
“while the remainder returned to India” (Roopnarine 31). However, the Indian settlers were marginalised, finding themselves socially situated outside the tripartite structure of Creole society. Part of this exclusion was logistical, arising from the physical characteristics of the economy, structured around a demand for labour on plantations. But there were also other drivers, with many Indians seeking to escape the oppressive regime of the plantocracy with its foremen and overseers and restrictive rules about where indentured workers could live. Some, however, remained attached to the sugar plantations and were subject to considerable scorn for their apparent willingness to take on additional labour that ex-slaves had struggled to free themselves from. Furthermore, as non-Christians and predominantly speakers of Bhojpuri rather than English, they were treated with derision. They were subsequently viewed as alien to a social landscape that was informed by British culture and social mores on the one hand and numerically dominated by blacks on the other. It was under such hostile conditions that Indians first established their roots in Trinidad.

With these strictures in mind, this chapter will be dedicated to examining in detail the relative absence and detachment of Trinidadian Indians in relation to carnival at this period in the nation’s history. *Play Mas’* provides an opportunity to stray from the conventional narrative of carnival that reads the festival primarily as an expression of ‘black’ and working class culture, history and artistic expression. By embracing this opportunity, I intend to consider the role of ‘other’ ethnicities have played in the history of carnival who were initially excluded and have subsequently maintained an ambivalent or even suspicious stance towards the festival. Indian scepticism about carnival which is clearly articulated in the play indicates that the way in which the nationalistic rhetoric and narrative around the event needs to be interrogated to better

---

44 See the preceding chapter for more detail on Indians strategic relocation into rural areas and swampland.
understand how the values and practices surrounding the nation’s key festival have often sat squarely at odds with their own sense of an ethnically based ‘Indian exceptionalism.’

Historically, the population of Trinidad and Tobago has been divided according to separate ethnic narratives that have competed for primacy over one another in their quest to define themselves and the nation at large. Bridget Brereton (“Contesting the Past”) identifies the existence of European colonial narratives in the French-Creole and British-Creole accounts of Trinidad which were subsequently displaced by resistant post-colonial histories, evident in the Afro-Creole, Afro-Centric and Indo-Centric narratives that emerged. They not only jostled (and continue to jostle) and collided on the stage of national discourse, but are also distinct from Trinidad’s celebratory ‘Afro-Creole’ narrative. The Afro-Creole narrative stands apart from the rest and was the dominant political discourse in post-Independence Trinidad. The rhetoric of the Afro-Creole operates on two distinct levels. It effectively mythologises Trinidad as a poly-ethnic ‘rainbow’ nation of intersecting cultures on the one hand, while simultaneously viewing Trinidad’s history as coterminous with the enslavement and emancipation of Blacks and “Coloureds” on the other.

Both they and their descendants were credited for their resilience and creative ingenuity which ultimately furnished the island with its culture and its national character, as expressed through a national carnival and its attendant practices. The host culture then extended an invitational welcome to Trinidad’s other ethnicities, clearly signifying their primacy and dominance in the nation-state. They were also the group who

---

45 Again, see chapter one for a definition of ‘creolisation’ including its various categories. What is important to note in this chapter is the exclusion of Indians from the ‘creole’ narrative.
had been in the island for the longest time, who had suffered from slavery and endured the “ordeal of free labor,” who had produced educated leaders in the 20th century fight for self-government and trade unionism, who had forged the indigenous cultural forms of the island – and who enjoyed the moral and historical “right” to succeed the British in the governance of the new nation. (175)

According to this perspective, suffering and ‘seniority’ combined to grant them a mandate to inherit then administer the post-colony. Neighbouring Tobago, by contrast, may share a physical proximity with Trinidad, but has generated its own distinct narrative that renders ‘creolisation’ irrelevant to its social make-up and resists the lure of an Afro-centric framework. The dominant ideology in Tobago explicitly rejected the edicts of negritude that many black Trinidadians would come to embrace during the 1970:

Tobago’s people are overwhelmingly of African descent, with small groups of local “Whites” and mixed-race individuals; the few Indians are quite recent arrivals from Trinidad. The poly-ethnic character of the larger island is not to be found in Tobago. Culturally, nearly everyone in Tobago is a Christian, the great majority Protestants (Anglicans, Methodists, Moravians, Pentecostals); the cultural mix is African-British, with virtually no influences from Spain or France, unlike Trinidad. (180)

Consequently, Tobago has chosen to place greater emphasis on the uniqueness of its flora and fauna than other islands and to stress the desirability and value of its landscape. The island was a coveted, contested site that was wrangled over by warring European colonial powers in a stalemate that saw the territory repeatedly annexed and ceded (180).
Play Mas’ is written at a time when an ideological shift occurred as the nation transitioned from a Creole-centric identity to a more explicitly Afro-centric perspective informed by the rise of the Black Power and Negritude movements and beginning of Rastafarianism. Within this framework the narrative of creolisation, which had been advanced by Eric Williams and PNM, was no longer sufficient to meet the demands of Black Nationalism. The post-colonial moment had passed and was now subject to rigorous critique. Part of the appeal of creolisation was that in the alleged absence of indigeneity, Trinidad’s black population were portrayed as ‘magnanimous’ enough to assume the role and responsibilities of a makeshift indigenous population. Nevertheless, Afro-centric frameworks that attempted to posit the nation as historically and culturally ‘black’ chafed against enduring inheritance of hierarchic divisions, comprised of ethnic stereotypes:

Indians place themselves before the Blacks, and Brahmins disdain the low castes who converted to Christianity. Portuguese and light Venezuelans consider themselves superior to most of the Coloreds by virtue of their skin color, while middle-class Coloreds look down on them and the Chinese because they keep “grubby little shops.” The old French Colored families consider themselves with some justification to be Trinidad’s aristocracy, and disdain both the parvenu foreign whites and the upwardly mobile Negroes and Indians. Each of these groups is conscious of its distinctness in one or more aspects of culture, and preserves attitudes and customs which set it apart from the other groups. (Crowley, “Plural and Differential” 819)

Matura’s play foregrounds the cultural antagonism and political rivalry that exists between the two groups who, in the post-colonial era, emerged as the nation’s dominant ethnicities; namely, blacks (or ‘Afro-Trinidadians’) and Afro-Indians. The play implies, rather than explicates the
existing colonial stereotypes that were generated by the Spanish, French and particularly the British then strategically attributed to each group. Arguably, these stereotypes were absorbed as truisms by blacks and Indians alike, ultimately colouring their view of the ‘opposing’ group. The process of interpellation was so deeply ingrained that these inherited stereotypes were not only embraced but were weaponised then wielded against one another resulting in a rhetorical and political kalinda between the two sparring parties.

**Play Mas’ and Structure:**

In terms of the play’s structure audiences are presented with a two act play divided into five carefully crafted scenes. Matura consciously balances the structure of *Play Mas’*, creating a mirror-effect in order to reflect the classical topos of *mundus inversus*. The two acts neatly illustrate the reversal of power relationships. In the play, the critical point of social inversion occurs in the second carnivalesque scene that occurs towards the end of the first act (Schaffner 187). The second act is both post-carnival and pre-carnival, situated between carnival-past and carnival-to-come, occupying a markedly liminal space. Ideologically, the play’s social and political reversal is rather pointed, somewhat didactic, and even borders on allegory. Arguably, it is somewhat reminiscent of the likes of George Orwell’s bitterly satirical *Animal Farm*.

In *Play Mas*, however, political reversal is specifically achieved through carnival which is not only ‘political’ but is expressly politicised by the play’s characters. Thus, carnival functions as the platform on which instances of death, political upheaval, and orchestrated state violence unfold. Furthermore, it functions as a site which permits Matura and his audience to consider the often troubling and contradictory process of identity construction—be it of individual or collective identity. Furthermore, the play also contradicts Victor Turner’s observation
regarding the critical difference between initiatory passage rites and seasonal rites. Carnival falls under the latter category and is usually characterised by the transient elevation of “those of low status” before their inevitable return to “permanent humbleness” (“Liminal to Liminoid” 57). In the case of the play, however, the ritual reversal in question calcifies into a decidedly new order which permits Matura to toy with motifs of misrule.

This process is immediately apparent in the play’s opening scene in which Matura introduces us to four emblematic central characters: the servile Samuel; Ramjohn Gookool, an entrepreneurial, ambitious tailor; Miss Gookool the stern pragmatic widow and mother of Ramjohn whose ambition is the equal to her son’s; and last but certainly not least, Frank the local spendthrift and ‘starboy’, who spends his days evading his debts and adroitly sidestepping marital ties as he symbolically and physically cuckold “the man on the hill.” Samuel is the play’s central protagonist—a hybrid between a man-servant and assistant tailor who is objectified and ‘passed’ between Miss Gookool and her son Ramjohn much in the same manner as one would pass around a hammer or a useful household appliance. The Gookools display a patronising, proprietary attitude towards Samuel and a tug-of war ensues between mother and son over access to Samuel’s time, attention, and labour as they compete over whose needs take precedence. As a result, he is the apex upon which a comedic if somewhat stereotypical power struggle ensues:

Miss Gookool: (calling out) Samuel!

---

46 In casual conversation a ‘starboy’ is Trinidadian and Jamaica patois term to refer to a stylish, popular male who attracts a great deal of attention and is akin to a ‘celebrity’ in his circles. In “The Traditional Masques of Carnival,” Daniel J. Crowley traces the etymology of the word to a specific type of type of extinct cowband mas’ which involved a battle between a bull and a ‘jènèl’ or bullfighter. Crowley suggests that term jènèl was a creolisation of the French general which translates into ‘king of the band’ or “starboy” (Crowley ‘Traditional Masques’ 199).
Ramjohn Gookool: Wat yer want im for?
Miss Gookool: A want him for something
RamJohn Gookool: But I want him more
Miss Gookool: He en’ go take long. (Matura, Act I, Sc. I: 5)

Samuel’s speech in the first act is deliberately curtailed: “Yer wanted me fer something?” It is also responsive: “Anything else?” and often monosyllabic: “Yes” (Matura, Act I, Sc. I: 3). The dialogue in the second act by contrast is dominated by Samuel and contains borderline soliloquies as he privately negotiates how best to use his newly acquired status and authority. Assigned a series of frustratingly trivial, menial tasks in the first act which range from fetching soap, to emptying bathwater, switching off irons, unpicking untidy seams, Samuel is at the beck-and-call of both mother and son. What is of critical importance, however, is that the play’s introductory scenario establishes a humorous, yet ultimately harsh power-play—one that reveals the rather rigid lay of a social landscape in which Samuel occupies the ungratifying lower end of the socio-economic pecking order.

Initially, his status becomes even more precarious when he is fired by Miss Gookool for ‘insubordination’ by attempting to leave work early in order to attend a PNM rally. Indeed, political rallies and carnival alike are thematic backdrops in this play both operating as agitating forms of ‘micro-theatre’ contained within the overarching theatre of the play itself. By firing Samuel, Miss Gookool who regards herself as well-versed in social reality attempts to educate and instruct both Samuel and her son Ramjohn on the exigencies of ‘the black condition’ which, in her view, is feckless, irresponsible and irrevocably rooted in the pleasures of the flesh. She instructs Ramjohn on the correct way to treat ‘them’ by offering this sagacious, corrective advice: “dat Samuel have ter learn, wen he get hungry he go come back…You tink

Colonial imagery of ‘Negros’ and Indians haunt the text. Even though the action of the play is situated in a modernised urban spatiality, the disturbing echoes of a racialised ideology, founded in the chronotope of the plantation are easily discernible and all too audible. In “Colonial Images of Blacks and Indians in Nineteenth Century Guyana,” Robert J. Moore analyses and differentiates the respective stereotypes attributed to each ethnicity. He argues that the charge of ‘congenital laziness’ was levelled at blacks and was the rationale to justify coerced labour to support the plantocracy. In the era of Post-Emancipation the alleged ‘indolence’ of blacks was touted by plantation owners in order to justify the retreat of ex-slaves from the plantation and to explain away their pragmatic attraction to lighter and more seasonal forms of work such as “woodcutting and charcoal making” (129). Congenital laziness was then re-framed as ‘circumstantial laziness’ as the white elite shifted the blame to Emancipation. Blacks also failed to meet Victorian standards of thrift and sexual chastity as “unstable sexual liaisons as well as stable common law marriages” were regarded as characteristic, unfortunate but inevitable (129).

In turn, the imagery produced around Indians in the colonial imagination was also connected to the plantation and revolved around the perception that they were indispensable to maintaining the sugar industry. Interestingly enough, the narrative of Indians’ necessity to maintaining the economy have persisted well into the present. This narrative has been amplified and re-cast as a heroic narrative in which Indians rescued “Trinidad from impending ruin after emancipation when Europe, America, and Africa failed” (Munasinghe 5). They were deemed physically inferior to their ‘Negro’ counterparts but were twice as industrious and more open
to instruction due to a more docile “oriental” temperament (143; 149). As is always the case with racial taxonomy, contradictions occurred as they were simultaneously regarded as “excitable and demonstrative” (144). Furthermore, a combination of deference to and distance from whites made them the ideal form of secondary settlers. As the demographics began to shift in favour of Indians, they began to construct their own narratives in the 20th century intertextually incorporating narrative strands from the 19th century to support an image of the Indian as pioneer:

The Indians…began to change the face of this land. Defying all efforts to confine them to the cane estates Indians began in true frontier style to open up undeveloped areas of Trinidad…above all the Indians had brought with them the stabilizing factors of a strong family system, thrift, a penchant for savings and enthusiasm for hard work and a burning zeal for education. The Indians have not only rescued Trinidad in no uncertain manner but have laid the foundation for its future transition into a modern model nation-state. (5)

By contrast blacks were identified as feckless and thriftless, lacking in the necessary discipline to abstain from feting, “dancing, carnival and expensive clothes” and mature into productive citizens. Blacks, in turn were highly critical of East Indians, regarding them as avaricious and devious (Lowenthal, *West Indian Societies* 161). These images and ideas resonate in the text and are used to construct a racially coded interaction between the characters. At this particular point in *Play Mas’* Miss Gookool is not only supremely secure in her relatively elevated position and assured of its stability, but she is equally as confident in Samuel’s ‘fixed’ ontology in the greater social schemata and the utter predictability of his behaviour. However, her own attempt to discipline Samuel combined with his off-stage attendance of the PNM rally serves
as the catalyst for the dramatic events that quickly follow. From sweeping the floors of the 
Gookool’s tailoring shop Samuel quickly becomes a minor campaigner for the PNM campaign. 
He is charged with securing funds from local businessman, and over a period of years works 
his way up to being the Chief of Police in what amounts to socialist fairy tale or, perhaps, 
nightmare. In the space of two acts—bridged by an ellipsis of several years—he transforms 
from a repressed, bumbling protagonist to a Machiavellian, oppressive villain.

To reiterate, the critical apex of transformation is a scene of carnivalesque revelry that 
concludes the first act. It is contextualised and set against the drama of history as the nation 
shifts from a colonial to post-colonial order. As this occurs, masks are donned and the world is 
indeed radically inverted. A framed narrative opens up as a ‘play within a play’ ensues and the 
formality of Matura’s text is disrupted by carnivalesque revelry or what Errol Hill terms the 
“theatre of exuberance” (qtd. in Balme 42). Mas’ is enacted and actors switch from mimetic 
stage costumes and assume the glamour and methetic menace of carnivalesque regalia. Both 
Samuel and Frank who are characters of African descent fully participate in playing mas’ while 
the East Indian Gookools, who are both marked by the play as cultural and ethnic ‘others’, 
stand firmly outside of carnival’s order, thus reifying the image of carnival as primarily male, 
working class, and ‘black. Yet, carnival is not only linked to an opaque if attractive ethos of 
unity and national belonging which is oft expressed in the ecstatic, universalist catch-cry of 
‘all-a-we-is-one,’ but in Matura’s play it is also firmly associated with upward social mobility. 
It is no accident that those characters who refuse to be swept up in carnival’s visual allure,

---

47 According to Johan Huizinga, ‘methetic representation’ refers to the innovative (rather than merely imitative) 
element in play, whereby the player imaginatively seeks to actualise their potential rather than mimetically 
reproduce their reality. Huizinga also suggests that ‘metheticism’ is the critical element that is responsible for 
games, art, and culture and regards it as one of the ruling principles of play.
multicultural rhetoric and nationalist ideology are excluded from its transformative power and fall to the wayside.

By contrast, active participants in carnival such as Samuel and Frank who enter the festival’s fantasy and are willing to engage in playing mas’ later ascend to positions genuine social and political power. Beyond carnival’s roleplay Samuel becomes the chief of police while Frank works his way up to the rather unlikely position of Secretary of Commerce. Furthermore, this stunning reversal of fortune is cannily foreshadowed by the carnivalesque roles that Samuel and Frank elect to play during mas’. On the one hand, Samuel’s Americanised and militaristic fantasies are materially manifest in his costume of a gun-toting, cigar-inhaling US Marine with requisite Yankee drawl. On the other hand, Frank assumes the canonical role of the ‘Midnight Robber’ a cultural amalgamation that is partly the *il capitano* of *commedia delle’arte* and is also partly rooted in the storytelling traditions of the West African griot.

The figure of the Midnight Robber also draws upon the imagery of the law-enforcing American cowboy and gunslinger who simultaneously transcends the very law that he enforces. The Midnight Robber’s currency lies not in bullets or the speed of his trigger-finger but in his verbal dexterity and the volley of his wit. As Errol Hill outlines:

"Essential attributes of this terrifying desperado include his absurd costume, numerous weapons, a pipe, a wooden, coffin-like money-box, hyperbolic, metaphoric, bombastic language accompanied by wild gestures and movements, malapropisms, long panegyric, empty threats, and intimidation of the audience with the aim of extorting money." (qtd. in Schaffner 195)
It is of critical importance to note that the alter-ego the Midnight Robber is not far removed from Frank’s daily reality as the local ‘star boy’—a smooth-talking, unemployed womaniser who flatters his way into other people’s good graces and finances. Furthermore, both Frank’s and Samuel’s masked roleplay proves to be prescient, even methetic (Huizinga 43) in a theatre of the real where “the appearance in the mirror is more real than the object it reflects” (S. Smith 153) and the characters experience an intoxicating form of self-actualisation. In effect, they don masks that reconfigure the world as they wish it to be, rather than the world as it exists.

While Frank functions as the archetypal rogue of *Play Mas’,* Samuel ‘plays sailor’ or more specifically an American marine that is directly inspired by a romantic love-affair with American cinema (such as *The Sands of Iwo Jima* which is directly referenced in the play) and the imagery of power presented. Samuel’s mas’ is also decidedly aspirational and hints at his future role in Act Two as the island’s Chief of Police—a role which involves lock-step collusion with U.S. military power. Likewise with Frank who plays the Midnight Robber. During carnival he enters a roleplay and enacts stick-ups of tourists and by-standers for petty cash. Later as nation’s Secretary of Commerce he cheerfully robs the nation of far more exorbitant sums with no less enthusiasm.

Indeed a blend of folklore, satire and fantasy are the generic markers of carnival’s regalia in the play. However, both parody and satire in particular are dependent on a solid, real-world referent and are rendered meaningless without it. The *Dame Lornaines* and *Pierrot Grenades* 49

---

48 To ‘play Sailor’ refers to the act of playing ‘Sailor masquerade’ where one dresses up like a sailor. Sailor mas’ bands are popular due to the fact that the costumes are often not as elaborate or as expensive as some of carnival’s more fantastic characters. As a result it is a popular choice of character for the working class.

49 The *Pierrot Grenade* is regarded as the “supreme jester of Trinidad carnival” and “…the satirical descendant of the Pierrot—a finely dressed masquerader and deeply learned scholar…His name shows his strong connection to Grenada.” The National Commission of Trinidad and Tobago writes the following entry on the character: “His costume is made by attaching multicoloured pieces of cloth to his gown-like outfit. In the old days, he wore a wire
of the late 19th century and early 20th century lampooned people who were, more often than not, highly ranked public figures and provided barbed social commentary. While the satire of the Pierrot or the Midnight Robber can be hyperbolic and high-flown it nevertheless remains wedded to the practical exigency of speaking truth to power. Neither Samuel nor Frank, however, are particularly interested in satire, critique, social commentary or the more subversive political opportunities that carnival presents. Instead, their form of masking is embedded the play of fantasy and the articulation of private desire rather than political satire:

The role Samuel assumes during carnival does not so much have comic, parodic, exotic, erotic or demonic implications. Rather, his disguise fulfils a psycho-hygienic function insofar as it releases him from all the constraints and conventional hierarchies of everyday life and permits him to forget his social self. Without having to fear social or legal sanctions, the exchange of roles permits him to articulate both his wish for a different life and his political hopes. (Schaffner 188)

The dramatic real-world shift in Samuel and Frank’s social roles challenges Gonzalo Frasca’s division of play into ‘ludic’ or rule-bound play as distinct from ‘paedia’ or the free, spontaneous play of children. Johann Huizinga’s succinct yet lucid description of play as ‘voluntary,’ participatory, creative yet constrained also helps to establish the conflict that occurs between free imaginative play that enables motion and continuity and the structural requirements of rules or ludus which provide the boundaries, an underlying motivation or purpose to the activity and above all, structure. Conventionally speaking, carnival’s play is usually categorised as

mesh mask over his face, and old hat with shrubbery attached, or simply tied his head with a handkerchief. Nowadays, however, the face is painted instead of the mask and a hood worn over the head. The Pierrot Grenade delights in displaying his knowledge and ability to spell any word. He prances and twirls about carrying a whip made of guava or hibiscus” (“Pierrot Grenade”).

87
‘ludic’ insofar as it is structured by consensually decided-upon rules, and play occurs in a
discrete, bound, and temporal space while the mores of external reality are temporarily
suspended. Samuel and Frank’s carnivalesque roles however, perforate and ultimately collapse
the understood boundaries between contained play and suspended reality. The play that occurs
inside the constrained boundaries of mas’ continues, unrestricted, as their carnivalesque
identities eerily seep into real life. Consequently “[p]ower fantasies have turned to cruel
realities” (Schaffner 189). For the Gookool’s in particular, the demarcation between play and
reality merge so as to become indistinct, creating an effect that is simultaneously humorous yet
horrific much like a distorted fun-house mirror.

Samuel, who joins in the mas’ revels within the licensed bounds of carnival and stages a mock
armed attack of the Gookool’s with dire results. Both Ramjohn and his mother thoroughly
disdain carnival, regarding the practice of playing mas’ as an alien and decidedly undesirable
affair, and thus hold themselves aloof from the revelry. As a result, while they have a distant
awareness of mas’ they are not sufficiently conversant with the rules of play or familiar with
the imagery, verbiage, mimicry and representation that confronts them. Instead, the Gookools
proceed to grossly misrecognise Samuel’s intentions and thus misread his masked rhetoric
entirely. After reducing Ramjohn to a state of genuine terror and inducing a seemingly ‘minor’
physical collapse in Miss Gookool, Samuel boasts, and then instructs them in turn with what
he regards a masterful demonstration of carnival’s affective truth: “Samuel: “I get all yer, yer
see, dat is Mas, all yer do’ know how to play Mas, dat is Mas’ yer see” [emphasis added]
(Matura, Act I, Sc. II: 21).

While Miss Gookool’s heart gives out due to the shock of Samuel’s mock-assault, Ramjohn is
unable to locate a doctor since carnival’s all-encompassing misrule reigns. Even doctors
masquerade and assume the role of ‘authentic’ Ashanti witch-doctors modelled on ‘genuine’ tribal photographs. Ramjohn’s wish to bury his mother by Ash Wednesday, in accordance with Hindu law, is hindered as the social and cultural order is entirely subordinate to playing mas’ and is bound by its attendant values. Farce and parody conclude the final scene of Act I when Ramjohn cannot discern whether the undertakers who finally appear for his mother’s body are there in a professional capacity—or if they are merely revellers playing mas’. Eventually he flees and takes refuge in carnival, chanting the obligatory social and cultural mantras that he had previously rejected, in order to fend off the undertakers. At this point, carnival ceases to be a ‘liminoid’ phenomena that is characterised by optation and shifts into the liminal. Or as Victor Turner observes:

Optation pervades the liminoid phenomenon, obligation for the liminal. One is all play and choice, an entertainment, the other is a matter of deep seriousness, even dread, it is demanding, compulsory…Carnival is unlike a tribal ritual in that it can be attended or avoided, performer, or merely watched, at will. It is a genre of leisure enjoyment, not an obligatory ritual, it is play-separated-from-work not play and ludergy as a binary system of man’s “serious” communal endeavour. (“Liminal to Liminoid” 74)

The final scene of Act I alludes to the affective power of staged mas’ where play and reality inform one another. Significantly, these scenes also challenge tamer conceptions of carnival that regard it as a ‘safety valve’ whereby temporary misrule leads to an inevitable return to order. Here, carnival is cruelly affective and the world of the Gookools’ is irrevocably altered by the ushering in of an alternative, post-colonial value system. Not only do the Gookools stand outside of carnival’s order, but are also positioned outside of the new political order. Not only
do they refuse to participate in festival’s proceedings but they also explicitly reject the values of carnival which they often felt were antithetical to their own cultural inheritance:

Ramjohn: I do’ play Mas, dat is fer idiots, dat is for people who have money to trow away, I en’ have no money ter trow away so I go watch on…jumping up all say an getting tired and drinking a lota rum, an fighting, yer call dat enjoying yerself? (Matura, Act I, Sc. I: 16)

Excess, exhibitionism, hedonism, disorder, and above all an enforced creolisation or ‘douglarisation’\textsuperscript{50} of the nation’s inhabitants are values both critiqued and rejected by the play’s East Indian characters. The historical roots of Indian antipathy towards canboulay run as far back as carnival’s inception in Trinidad. Historically, few indentured labourers were part of Canboulay processions. Because of sharp cultural differences, the East Indian indentured labourers had no sympathy with the Carnival, and were often informers on the clandestine movements of Canboulay masqueraders (Anthony, “South Canboulay’s Riots”).

In Trinidadian literature, be it plays, novels, poems, calypsos, Indian characters feature and their presence in the text often questions, disrupts, vexes, and problematises the smooth homogeneity and complacency of Afro-centric frameworks, be they cultural or nationalist in nature. The industrious and similarly marginalized Pariag in Earl Lovelace’s novel \textit{The Dragon Can’t Dance}, which will be discussed later in this thesis, performs a similar function. Unlike the Gookools, however, Pariag actually wishes to participate in carnival yet is ultimately

\textsuperscript{50}‘Dougla’ is a perjorative term that refers to a Trinidadian who is African and Indian descent. ‘Douglarisation’ is a local and highly specific form of creolisation that refers to a demand for the syncretic fusion of African and Indian culture on the basis of creating a unified national identity for Trinidad.
prevented from carving out his own cultural space within carnival’s framework thanks to narrow presumptions about the festival’s ‘innate’ cultural, ethnic and national identity.

In this specific text, the Gookools stand defiantly outside the borders of carnival’s nationalist discourse and disciplining order and reject a nationalist project of creolisation or douglarisation which would result in the dissolution of their Indian identity and separateness. Throughout the play there is an underlying sense of Matura’s own skepticism towards carnival’s transformative power, as well as its espoused multiculturalism. In this specific text, the Gookools stand defiantly outside the boundaries of carnival’s nationalist discourse and disciplining order. Or, as Matura observes, “[i]t also shows how culturally and politically isolated the people of East Indian descent had become… Independence changed everything. The Indians were Indians no more; suddenly overnight they were Trinidadians” (Matura, “Author’s Note”).

Ramjohn’s modest tailor shop provides the discursive space to systematically unpick and unravel notions of personal, ethnic, and national identity. Samuel’s complacent assumption of his own ‘indigeneity’ rests on his belonging to the island’s black majority and is further reinforced by his association with carnival and his comfortable participation in mas’. Thus Ramjohn is innately alien and foreign not only because he is an ethnic other and member of the (then) minority, but also because of his problematic relationship with carnival and his refusal of mas’. Samuel identifies Indian customs that are deemed by him as ‘foreign’ and assigns an Indian identity and a political affiliation to Ramjohn. Ramjohn explicitly rejects Samuel’s attempts to assign him a foreign, ethnic-based identity in favour of a national identity:

Ramjohn: Not me, man I en’ no Indian.
Samuel: Wat yer is?
Ramjohn: I is a Trinidadian.

Samuel: You en’ no Trinidadian, man if you is a Trinidadian how come yer do’ play Mas’, eh how come? (Matura, Act I, Sc. I: 12)

Ramjohn’s objections to mas’ remain defiantly fixed in place, even as he continues to claim Trinidadian identity and rejects Samuel’s attempts to discipline him and position him within a very narrow ethno-political schema. He rejects not only ethnic categorisation but political assignation refusing to be either Samuel’s exotic ‘Indian’ or forcibly affiliated to the nation’s ‘Indian’ party, the DLP. Later, Matura effects a neat reversal when Ramjohn mirrors Samuel’s own tactics by using a deliberately exclusionary and divisive of ethnic identity, levelling at the Samuel the charge that he is ‘African’. Despite Ramjohn’s pithy arguments, Samuel remains adamant about where Ramjohn belongs in a stratified yet contradictory schema. It is left to Ramjohn to highlight the absurdity of Samuel’s stance:

Ramjohn: What kinda name yer have?

Samuel: I have a Trinidadian name.

Ramjohn: You have an English name.

Samuel: Yes. Trinidadian, we does speak English.

Ramjohn: But you en’ English.

Samuel: Of course I is English, I does talk English so I is English, we is English, all o’ we is English man.

Ramjohn: I taught yer was Trinidadian.

Samuel: Yes, but Trinidad is English, man. (Act I, Sc. I: 17)
This scene reflects the tangled, often complex, identification with Britain and the conflation of the West Indies with England that was characteristic of both pre-Independence and early post-Independence. Furthermore, a torturous, circuitous logic is on display in this exchange as the sharp distinction of the ‘I’ versus ‘you’ binary that Samuel initially constructs in order to mark himself as an indigene and Ramjohn as an outsider unravels and eventually collapses into the messy, undifferentiated and collective ‘we.’ While Samuel’s assertion (‘we is English’) is indicative of patois English, it nonetheless serves as a safe haven that allows Samuel to retreat from the fissures hinted at in his exchange with Ramjohn. The lurking presence of a white, British colonial identity that signifies Trinidad’s past haunts Samuel’s attempt to create an unproblematic and unitary identity as a ‘Trinidadian.’ Furthermore, the divide not only in terms of culture but cultural inheritance is highlighted in this scene. While both characters can freely converse with one another in English, Ramjohn points to the fact that as a descendant of African slavery Samuel alone is limited to embracing an enforced colonial cultural framework which results in England serving as his central point of reference. As an Indian, however, Ramjohn is fully aware that he has options that transcend a mandatory embrace of all things British. ‘[W]e is English’ also contains echoes of carnival’s unreflexive catch-phrase which simultaneously operates as the national mantra “all-o-we-is-one.”

Samuel attempts to dissolve the contradictions and anxieties of national identity once it threatens to disrupt his mono-ethnic frame of reference and is perhaps reflective of the modernist drive for unity, cohesion and order, in the face of post-modern fragmentation.

51 The catch-phrase ‘all-o-we-is-one’ is Trinidadian vernacular that expresses the idea of solidarity across class and ethnic lines. It espouses a multicultural ethic and reflects the mythos of Trinidad existing as a ‘rainbow’ nation thanks in large part to ethnic plurality. The phrase is often attached to carnival as the festival is regarded as an expression of national unity.
Other than the hidden or elided role of East Indians in carnival, the play also brings overlooked, yet vital spaces to the foreground. Indeed, it is not at all accidental that the initial ‘mundane’ action of the play occurs in a tailor’s shop. This is significant in terms of highlighting those hidden preparatory spaces—the steel pan yard, the work-shop, the calypso rehearsal tent, the dance studios and the tailor shop—that are the seams of carnival that make the event possible and skilfully complements the play’s costuming and ‘masking’ motifs. Yet, these are somewhat overlooked and even when mentioned they are not fully analysed in theoretical musings on the event. Most notably theorists ranging from Barbara Babcock, Victor Turner, Mikhail Bakhtin, Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins, and Christopher Balme. Critics, for example, pointedly emphasise the political potential of carnival by praising specific characteristics of the event—namely its fluidity, flux, flow, openness and spontaneity—stating that carnival is a protean event that “militates against any kind of stasis even in the face of commercial pressures” (qtd. in Gilbert & Tompkins 83). Cynthia Peters similarly observes that “[c]arnival is a time of transgressions and playfulness, filled with exuberance and festivity…It dishes out the non-rational, heterogeneous, bizarre, grotesque, exorbitant and so forth” (22).

By repeatedly heralding carnival’s characteristics of flux, fluidity and kinesis lies the very real danger of eliding the structural and material reality which enable the qualities of kinesis and flux. Trinidadian carnival, in particular, is a highly segmented, sectioned, solid and coordinated event that is nowhere near as fluid or ‘messy’ as many standard theorisations would suggest. In its most modern incarnation, carnival relies on immense physical structures be it the trucks, the floats, the gargantuan, puppet-like costumes (which are sometimes described as ‘dance mobiles’), the steel pans and steelbands divided up into various sections or the way in which mas’ bands operate. A mas’ is divided into different ‘bands,’ a ‘band’ being a creative congregation of musicians, costume designers, organisers, sponsors and entrepreneurs who
unite in order to articulate a specific annual theme or statement through a confluence of music, lyrics and costume. The costumed revellers and musicians, who perform in a band physically constitute the face, body and voice of carnival. Bands further branch into ‘sections’ or blocks of revellers that are visually demarcated by uniform costuming. While the costuming within each section is uniform, each section in turn must differ from—yet simultaneously complement—all the other sections in the band. Bands (and sections within a band) are also economically and socially stratified, with some forms of mas’ being more expensive and the entry fees charged by different bands varying.

The sober reality of a highly structured and commercialised carnival, which I will explore in the final chapter of this thesis, belies more romantic notions of carnivalesque spontaneity rebellion and uprising. Bands are thus the surging particles that constitute the ‘rainbow ethic’ of a carnival mas’ as each band negotiates between the values of uniformity and diversity (within the band) and addresses the challenge to both cohere with yet differentiate itself from the general mas’ (and mass). It centres on structure and the ‘freedom’ is a result of perpetual planning and structure. So much so that even the free-flowing extempore\(^{52}\) of calypsos are, in actuality, the result of long rehearsal. If one were to attempt to find a ruling ‘metaphor’ for the event, perhaps West Indian carnival is more centipede than river. By choosing to set the play a few days before carnival and in a space that is critical to the practice of masking Matura foregrounds at least one of the imaginative, creative, and productive sites where imaginative planning is materialised. These sites are the confluence of ethereal dream and material work. Arguably, the embodied materiality of carnival in terms of its regimentation and its structure

---

\(^{52}\) ‘Extempore’ refers to one of the earliest forms of calypso that relies on the calypsonian’s ability to spontaneously improvise on the spot and answer back to fellow calypsonians, as opposed to a written calypso.
needs to more closely considered, more boldly emphasised and even centralised in any account of carnival.

The play’s masking motif extends to Ramjohn’s fantasy about building the perfect suit as well as owning the largest tailoring store in Trinidad—one that is distinguished by the complexity of its various sales sections and the diversity of its wares. Ramjohn’s vision for his store is ironically informed by mas’ logic. His fantasy vision of his future store is just as structured, preparatory and regimented as a mas’, consisting of diverse yet organised sections:

Ramjohn:…one section fer lightweight clothes, anodder section fer heavyweight, an anodder fer pants cutters…An anodder one fer jacket cutters an anodder one fer waistcoat cutters…(Matura, Act I, Sc. I: 13-4)

Despite Ramjohn’s disapproval of and adamantly resistance to the very notion of playing mas’, even he adopts carnival day-dreaming by osmosis, secretly planning an elaborate costume in the private space of his store. Ramjohn’s primary fantasy of constructing a perfect suit on par with Hollywood film icon Robert Mitchum’s seamlessly aligns with the play’s masking motif and gestures towards carnivalesque costuming. It is no accident that the opening scene of the play takes place in a tailor’s shop and that it is in this space that Ramjohn provides what amounts to a treatise on good or efficient design that is part tailoring, part sculpture and part architecture, part construction. Like any carnivalesque performance, however, his elaborate vision requires an audience which Samuel provides as he offers specific instruction: “start wid de shoulders straight and broad like the front of a boat” (Act I, Sc. I: 4). In this case shoulders are a prelude to the rest of the suit and are a necessary preliminary that creates the necessary berth for the rest of the suit to proceed. “De sleeves must bend like a piece of iron…” (4). It is
at this critical juncture that Samuel disrupts Ramjohn’s account questioning the materials that Ramjohn uses to furnish his vision:

Samuel: But iron do’ bend?
Ramjohn: What does bend?
Samuel: Steel, is steel does bend not iron. (4)

When questioned on where he obtained this knowledge Samuel is opaque and evasive: “I do’ know, a just know it do’ bend, it does break” (4). At this point the audience is provided with a veiled allusion to slums and to pan-yards such as Laventille where lower class black Trinidadians experimented with an array of materials including steel drums that were cut, heated and percussively hammered into the shape of steel pans. Through a process of trial-and-error, steel became the material of choice. It is steel that is flexible, steel that bends and that has the ability to accommodate Samuel and is thus the appropriate metaphor for Ramjohn’s fantasy construction. It is noteworthy that steel also provides the percussive structure of carnival’s music—the music that allegedly moves, empowers, houses and effectively represents a multi-ethnic, multicultural society that is stratified along deep class lines. Yet the embrace of steel becomes rigid and all-encompassing as ‘pan’ music also articulates the carnival nationalistic catch-cry of ‘all-o-we-is-one.’

Later in the play, the capacity and ability of ‘steel’ to provide diverse cultural representation is transmogrified and begins to assume more sinister connotations. Carnival’s ‘steel’ not only results in the production of pan-music and its associated revelry and freedom, but it also manufactures the steel-trap of an enforced assimilation. Carnival, with its masking rituals and steel band music demands fealty to national identity and the notion of ‘the Trindadian.’ It is
one that Ramjohn struggles to reconcile himself to and that Miss Gookool heartily rejects in 
favour of retaining her own distinct Hindu identity rather than the enforced creolisation or 
‘douglarisation’ of the post-independence vision. Conformity ensues as carnival, and its 
cultural mores shapes, disciplines and confines participants and non-participants alike as their 
identities are defined in relation to their relation with carnival.

The durability of Ramjohn’s suit alongside the play’s organising metaphor by contrast, hinges 
on its flexibility. Flexibility is the critical factor in Ramjohn’s discourse on how to construct 
the suit, the mask, and even the nation that is able to accommodate all. Matura’s question, it 
would seem, is whether the local ‘steel’ drums of Laventille (which is the perfect foundation 
for a black, masculine and working class festival) is the appropriate material or metaphor of 
choice for a the scope of a nation-building project—one that requires finesse, craftsmanship, 
subtlety—one that needs to be stitched together rather than hammered into place. Ramjohn 
cautions both Samuel and the audience not to underestimate the complexity of costume 
construction:

[D]o’ tink de seams is just dere ter hold up de suit yer know, nar de seams is dere ter 
say slim, long, short, fat, broad, all dem kinda tings de seams does say French, Italian, 
English an Yankee, all dem kinda tings de seams does say so yer have ter learn ter place 
yer seams an ter let dem say wat yer want ter say, yer seams can say fat, when dey is 
on a tin man yer know, dat is why I could always tell wen a man borrow a suit. (7)

It is the seams or the very details of construction that reflect a specific, tailor-made or 
‘fashioned’ identity which allows us to acknowledge carnival as a highly constructed event. 
Through the presence of the tailor and the use of carnival’s masking as both motif and extended
metaphor, *Play Mas’* hints at the difficulties involved in occupying a part or role that is fixed rather than chosen—that of the borrowed, ill-fitting costume.

**Greater Concerns: Debunking a Romance**

Clearly, *Play Mas’* is not simply interested in carnival *per se* or in how it is structured and performed. Rather, it uses the festival as a way to meditate on deeper social concerns, including the specific role of Indians in Trinidadian society and where they have been strategically positioned or elided in relation to the prevailing creole narrative that has dominated the society in terms of serving as the nation’s founding myth. Undoubtedly, Trinidadian Indians have fought to have their own festivals, customs and rituals (Divali and Hosay) to be given national recognition and equal status to carnival. Theoretically, at least, since independence, Trinidad has promoted the image of a ‘rainbow’ nation. Ecstatic carnival catch-cries of ‘all-o-we-is-one’ reflects the national motto that accompanies Trinidad and Tobago’s flag: “Together We Aspire: Together We Achieve.” Of course, the complexity and difficulty of nation-building is far from unique to Trinidad and Tobago and is, in fact, characteristic of the Americas as a region. Belinda Edmondson compares Caribbean nations’ attempts to stitch together island nations from disparate people with distinct, overlapping and, at times, competing histories to the pluralism that is present in the United States:

> Similarly, the rhetoric of United States-style democracy, embodied in the “E Pluribus Unum” inscription on its coins, is utilized in several Caribbean nations’ discussion on class, race, and democratic rule, thereby reaffirming a New World mythology of racial harmony and consequent democratization. (Edmondson 6)
The figure of Eric Williams looms large over the play and lingers in the national narrative the nations’ first Prime Minister following the end of British colonial rule. He is lauded as an accomplished scholar, historian, author and political campaigner, who possessed “an unparalleled instinct for organising urban public gatherings, initiating public debates and organising rallies” (46). Though reserved and dignified in demeanour, he demonstrated an uncanny apprehension of the logistics of carnival and was astute in opening, ‘taking over’ and ‘running’ public spaces such as Woodford Square.\(^{53}\) At the same time, he successfully persuaded Trinidadians of the need for ‘men of letters’ who “were so obviously equipped for leadership” (Rohlehr, “The Culture” 851) which mirrored a global trend of electing intellectuals that swept across newly liberated post-colonies.\(^{54}\)

However, Williams also drew considerable criticism for clearly privileging expressions of black culture over Indian, while attempting to indigenize the former at the expense of the latter. The centrality of carnival to nationalist discourse positioned it as a threshold to be crossed in order to gain entry into the promised land of true citizenship. Rather than democracy, an ‘adhocracy’ prevailed (187) leaving Trinidadian Indian identity stranded in an ambiguous liminality situated between the definitive contours of national belonging and their enduring attachment to their own ethnic grouping. The attempt to construct a unified nation is, however, nowhere more apparent than in Eric Williams’ seminal prime ministerial address to the nation on the eve of its independence in its deployment of a multicultural rhetoric:

\(^{53}\) Woodford Square which was a park situated in the heart of Port-of-Spain became affectionately known as ‘Woodford University Square’ as Williams utilised its grounds to host discussions and debates all the while educating and constructing a core constituency for PNM.

\(^{54}\) The desire for intellectual leaders was evident in the election of Nigeria’s first Prime Minister Kwame Nkrumah. Like Williams, he spearheaded a nationalist, anti-colonial Independence movement that was highly successfully. He subsequently became the nation’s Prime Minister in 1957 then President in 1960.
Together the various groups in Trinidad and Tobago have suffered, together they have aspired, together they have achieved. Only together can they succeed. And only together can they build a society, a nation, a homeland. There can be no Mother India for those who ancestors came from India. There can be no Mother Africa for those of African origin, and the Trinidad and Tobago society is living a lie and heading for trouble if it seeks to create the impression that Trinidad and Tobago is an African society. There can be no Mother England and no dual loyalties. There can be no Mother China; and there can be no Mother Syria or Mother Lebanon. A nation, like an individual, can have only one Mother. The only Mother we recognise is Mother Trinidad and Tobago, and Mother cannot discriminate between her children. All must be equal in her eyes. (278-9)

While Eric Williams is never overtly mentioned by name, it is fairly evident that his politics and particularly his rhetoric around nation-building informs the play. His presence is inescapable as one of the ‘founding fathers’ of a newly independent nation and also as PNM’s most historically famous leader. *Play Mas’ is both a counter to and an analysis of the myth of Eric Williams and debunks his ultimately vain attempt to impose a unified and, arguably, national identity over individuated and separate ethnic groupings:

Initially PNM ran on a platform of ‘pan-Caribbean’ politics that promoted regional unity above all else and was fully committed to the project of West Indian Federation. The party, however, was sage enough to simultaneously attend to the construction of a national identity that focused on the local identity with a clear emphasis on ‘musical, folkloric, and Carnival traditions distinctive to Trinidad (and not even Tobago). (Birth 46)
Rex Nettleford also notes the intractability of the carnivalising narrative which is curiously resistant to Indianisation despite their significant population and their myriad contributions to national culture. This then suggests that douglarisation is ultimately a monodirectional, assimilationist project as only Indians are required to ‘adjust’ in order to be absorbed into the national polity, whereas ‘Creoles’ are free to retain their culture in its entirety. As Nettleford wryly observes: “Carnival and Jonkonnu are unashamedly Afro-Creole or Euro-African expressions, claiming a particular authenticity over Divali (Festival of Lights) and Hosay as genuine ancestral Caribbean expressions” (193). Peter Manuel not only concurs with this view but is also mindful of the way in which creolisation not only excludes Afro-Indians but also tends to reject more pure or ‘extreme’ articulations of blackness:

This Trinidadian “creole” culture-English-based, syncretic, and “Afro-Saxon”-is traditionally upheld as the national mainstream culture. “Creole” culture thus largely excludes, on the one hand, neo-African forms like Shango worship and, on the other, Indo-Caribbean music, which again is seen as the foreign import of a particular ethnic minority, whose increased presence in public culture represents an essentially divisive “special interest.” By contrast, the mainstream creole culture, although largely the province of Afro-Trinidadians and mulattos, has traditionally been celebrated as a national, cosmopolitan, and essentially universal idiom to which other groups have been expected to integrate. (323)

The seemingly benign rhetoric that positions cultural syncretism and a simplistic notion of ‘hybridity’ as the necessary glue to form the nation, is rigorously critiqued by the play which queries: When does the romantic rhetoric of multiculturalism become a conservative tool that
is deployed by the state to obscure, rather than amend, the inequities, rivalries and tensions between ethnic groups? At what point in history are attempts to assimilate into white colonial culture replaced with the unspoken assumption that all Trinidadians, regardless of ethnicity and history, assimilate into a critical aspect of black Trinidadian culture that has been hyper-nationalised in order to represent the nation in its entirety? The Afro-Creole narrative also offered a distinct challenge to Indian exceptionalism, evident in the idealised notion of a distinct Indian history of harsh migration, restrictive indentureship, membership in a ‘special race’ (Munasinghe 4).

Through the Gookools, Matura satirises carnival and subversively questions whether or not citizens have the legitimate option of non-participation as they refuse to be co-opted by and inducted into the ranks of carnival while remaining sceptical of the prevailing national narrative. The play also offers incredibly fertile grounds for examining reductive notions of ‘hybridity’ simply by refusing to take it as a given that the process is inevitable, ‘natural’ or automatically empowering to its participants. It also identifies an all-too-common tendency for theorists and scholars to take poetic flight about the virtues of hybridity that all too often produced of series of false equivalences in which all the ethnic groups, histories, cultures and experiences are metaphorically presented as a ‘chain,’ a soup of signs (Benítez-Rojo 12) or a “structure of undecidability” (312). Again, these descriptors evoke my unease precisely because of their lack of specificity about the region as a romantic haze is confected around Caribbean identity, diaspora and hybridity.

Trinidadian author and scholar Shalini Puri offers pragmatic recognition that the nation-state, more often than not, is conceived of as a “stable unitary subject” (12) that, nevertheless, contains diversity within its borders. She notes that hybridity has been discursively used to
either adorn the nation-state with the garb of diversity or to point towards and explicate the seams and divisions that underpin this fiction. At the same time, she is also extremely careful to note that while ‘hybridity’ may challenge and even problematize the fiction of the unified nation, it in turn, has its own attendant, romanticising mythos; namely, that ‘it’ (hybridity) perpetually serves as a destabilizing and disruptive force that stands against national homogeneity.

In her essay “Canonized Hybridities, Resistant Hybridities: Chutney Soca, Carnival and the Politics of Nationalism,” Puri undertakes the task of detailing the ways in which the concept of hybridity is conservatively deployed to uphold the nation-state and where the rhetoric of ‘diversity’ serves as a decorative gloss that obscures the asymmetry and inequality between distinct groups. She thus cautions against a “displacement of the politics of hybridity by the poetics of hybridity” (13), stating that “…there is no necessary opposition between hybridity and the nation” (14) and, as a result, demands that more careful and rigorous attention be paid to the realities of how pluralised societies operate, not only in Trinidad but throughout the Caribbean:

[F]ormalist celebrations of cultural hybridity in the Caribbean leave us ill-equipped to distinguish between the cultural hybridities and border crossings metonymically represented by, say, the slave ships, United States warships, Haitian refugee rafts and luxury cruise liners. These hybridities… must be read in relation to unequal histories of expansionism, oppression, and creative resistance. Furthermore, refusing of these hybridities and border crossings may have less to do with a modernist nostalgia for secure origins than with a will to physical survival and a struggle for political self-determination. (15)
In the following chapter, I will discuss carnival on the brink of state-sponsored corporatisation. I will also examine Indians’ relationship to carnival and Hosay in even greater depth. I will analyse at the fraught and often problematic way in which they have been periodically included and excluded from Carnival and, by extension, the national imaginary.
Chapter Three:
Dragons, Devils and How to Play Mas’

Setting the Scene

In Earl Lovelace’s 1979 novel *The Dragon Can’t Dance* there are echoes of Mustapha Matura’s view of carnival as a state-sponsored affair. Mas’ is depicted as an event that dramatises the tensions between an elite that attempts to capture the festival and revellers who seek to partake in expressions of organic and local culture. Like Matura, Lovelace uses carnival as a political and national metaphor. However, he also examines carnival as a locally crafted yet state-sanctioned event that is wielded to enforce social cohesion while simultaneously granting revellers an opportunity to construct and express a sense of ‘selfhood’ that is often denied by the state, by middle- and upper-class society and, in some instances, even by immediate neighbours and other members of their own community.

As a result, carnival serves as a theatrical device that further advances the action of the plot by unveiling motive and character. The novel problematises the constructed personas and masks that are donned by its characters and interrogates the notion of an ‘authentic’ identity that supposedly lies beneath. Furthermore, like Matura, Lovelace questions the boundaries between mecthetic play and reality while also providing a meta-commentary on an array of competing discourses that continue to surround carnival. These literary, academic, economic, social and political discourses all wrestle with the ontological dilemma of what a carnival is and what it can be used for.
Most notably, Lovelace’s novel pays particular attention to the art of carnival, as he pens a creative and detailed account of costuming, masking, dance, performance, and song throughout a narrative that is periodically focalised through four central male characters. While Matura invokes dance, performance and especially costuming as a metaphor, Lovelace submerges the reader in the physical and sensory practice of these arts, all the while emphasising and celebrating them as lived praxis rather than conceptual metaphors. The milieu in which the novel is set invites comparison to earlier crisis points in carnival such as the Canboulay riots of the 19th century and the erasure of jamette culture that followed. The struggles that resulted from this period reduced the centrality of carnival’s culture of female chantwells and propelled 20th century calypso music and male calypsonians to the forefront of the festival. Ethnomusicologist Hope Munro Smith reflects on the genderised shift that occurred in carnival:

Theoretically, calypso ought to have been a perfect vehicle for both women and men to express their displeasure with colonial society—and through the end of the 19th century, the chantwell of drum dances and the Carnival band was often a woman, who sang praises to the stickfighters, who were usually male. Female banter songs were common between rounds of the stickfight and these songs were designed to shock as well as entertain. Yet by the time calypsos began to be recorded in the early-20th century, all the performers were men. Where did the chantwell women go? One explanation is that at the turn of the century, public ordinances forced the gayelles and drum dances

55 Later in this chapter, I will examine the way in which Lovelace details Aldrick’s craft in constructing the titular ‘dragon’ of the novel.

56 A chantwell (from the French ‘(from the French chantuelle) was a lower class, female singer from the 19th century who led a band and sang ‘Bel-Airs’ usually at beginning of kalinda battles (stick fights) (Brown 86). I will go into further detail about the role of chantwells in 19th century carnival when I discuss the changing face of carnival’s music in the final chapter.

57 Gayelles refer to the designated rounds or venues in which kalinda battles occurred.
underground, thus decreasing the number of distinct performance venues for both men and women. (H. Smith, “Performing Gender” 34)

While Lovelace directly attributes the demise of a primarily masculine, Afro-Trinidadian and working-class conception of carnival to the rise of sponsorship of carnival bands by large corporations during the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s respectively, Smith looks further back in time. She describes the gradual marginalisation of women in carnival that occurred during the late-19th and early-20th centuries, which gave rise to the specific form of carnival that Lovelace memorialises in The Dragon Can’t Dance. Lovelace focuses on the ‘impotence’ of Aldrick Prospect, the novel’s main protagonist, who masquerades as a dragon each year before concluding with an examination of Philo, the local calypsonian on the Hill, whose political acumen and accusatory lyrics are blunted as his career develops, replaced by a ‘saucy,’ yet ultimately superficial sexual wit. This occurs as the commercial success of Philo’s ‘modernised’ lyrics transmogrifies him from a mere calypso yardman, a figure of female contempt, to a financially viable and socially desirable partner. As his career flourishes, however, he is gradually co-opted into the values of a middle-class lifestyle.

For Smith, the modern turn in carnival directly coincides with the emergence of a primarily ‘coloured’ middle-class that began to appear alongside business owners in the middle of 20th century. As they came to prominence in Trinidadian society, they expressed a more participatory if not overtly proprietorial interest in the festival. They enthusiastically involved themselves in the proceedings, organisation and mores of an event that had primarily been engineered and advocated by poor working-class black men and women:
By the late 1920s, tents were no longer community organizations but professionally run music venues, as they continue to be today. The rivalry between neighbourhood bands boiled down to rivalry between competing tents and their casts of singers. These venues became exclusively commercial ventures, run by middle-class businessmen who charged a set admission price to enter the tent. (H. Smith, “Performing Gender” 34) ^58

The most significant consequences of a bourgeois and ‘civilising’ effect were the swift elision of the chantwell women and their songs of praise or provocation from carnival’s public stage. This included the drum dances that occurred alongside the carnival bands or during the intermissions between primarily male stickfights. Private sponsorship became an increasingly regulatory tool which successfully introduced a middle-class etiquette that pressured “women to refrain from public performance of any kind, especially of bawdy songs” (34). The new aestheticisation came into effect and extended to “the promotion [of] well-dressed costumed bands, the encouragement of good behaviour and decency, and the suppression of rioting and obscenity” (34). Arguably, the ‘taming’ of carnival that Lovelace critiques in *The Dragon Can’t Dance* is but a continuation of the process that Smith documents. The disaffection described in the novel arises as carnival reaches a specific historical moment of further commercialisation. Thus, Lovelace plots an ongoing and highly familiar process of bourgeoisification that had already been initiated at the turn of the 20th century. ^59

All of the characters in the novel are situated on the cusp of a seismic shift. As a result, an event that was once dominated by poor and working class black revellers morphs into a festival that

---

58 I will analyse the effect of corporate sponsorship in the novel later in this chapter.

59 Though written in 1979, long before the advent of bikini mas’, Aldrick Prosper’s lament over the diminishing power of carnival represents a neat parallel to contemporary anxiety and debate about the direction carnival has taken. I will discuss bikini mas’ in relation to these issues in the conclusion of this thesis.
is attractive to a broader demographic. Indians, Chinese and middle-class black participants, all of whom had previously stood on the side lines, were now drawn into the fray. What is mourned in the novel, however, is not the inclusion of new participants or a new demographic entering the proceedings. At issue for Lovelace is the subsequent marginalisation of older forms of participation and expression, leading to the generation of a powerful politics of nostalgia. Kathleen Stewart analyses nostalgia’s function and its necessity in the process of narrativisation:

On one “level” there is no longer any place for anyone to stand and nostalgia takes on the generalized function to provide some kind (any kind) of cultural form. In positing a “once was” in relation to a “now” it creates a frame for meaning, a means of dramatizing aspects of an increasingly fluid and unnamed social life. (227)

The insecurity that results in the face of a new and unfamiliar carnival is primarily examined through the existential crisis of the central protagonist, Aldrick Prospect, and the titular dragon mask that he annually, ritualistically dons. What differentiates Aldrick from every other character in the novel is the manner in which he enters the symbolic play of the masquerade; he wholly surrenders himself up and over to the role while he regards the costume and the mask that he carefully creates each year as an extension and a renewal of himself. In effect, Aldrick’s donning and removing the dragon mask is akin to the reptilian act of casually shedding one’s skin. Or as he observes of his own annual practice: “Every year I make a new costume. The costume this year ai’t the one I had last year. When I finish I always throw them away” (Lovelace, *The Dragon Can’t Dance* 47).
Derek Walcott’s theoretical writing on West Indian carnival departs from conventional European perspectives on the festival and his description effectively embodies the principles that inform Aldrick’s ritual construction and disposal of his costume. Walcott specifically refers to the “waste, ephemera, [and] built-in obsolescence” that characterises the “carnival mentality” (D. Walcott, “The Caribbean” 55). This clearly echoes the spirit of the community in Calvary Hill, which enthusiastically celebrates the “Trinity of Idleness, Laziness and Waste” \( (*The \ Dragon \ Can’t \ Dance* \ 24)\). Walcott also contextualises Trinidadian and West Indian carnival as a culturally hybrid, uniquely post-colonial creation. Furthermore, as a West Indian poet, playwright and painter he emphasises a decidedly different order of politics to that of Barbara Babcock, Victor Turner, and Mikhail Bakhtin—one in which the values of seasonal originality, innovation, artistic competition and dramatic spectacle both motivate and structure carnival’s industry. Consequently, in Trinidadian carnival the following process occurs:

\[\text{An entire population of craftsmen and spectators compel themselves to this regeneration of perpetually making it new, and by that rhythm create a backlog of music, design, song, popular poetry which is as strictly observed as the rhythm of cane harvest and cane-burning, of both industry and religion. The energy alone is overwhelming, and best of all, on one stage, at any moment, the simultaneity of historical legends, epochs, characters, without historical sequence or propriety is accepted as a concept. (D. Walcott, “The Caribbean” 55)}\]

It is noteworthy that both calypso and costuming are essential motifs. *The Dragon Can’t Dance* similarly emphasises the creative, cyclic, deliberative and laborious process involved in creating a carnival. Arguably, both *Play Mas’* and *The Dragon Can’t Dance* eschew romantic theories on carnivalesque spontaneity by presenting Trinidadian mas’ as practical labour, craft,
and above all, as an extended process rather than event. This is best reflected through Aldrick’s
detailed and almost obsessive attention to his costume. He invests copious time and money in
creating the dragon’s attire, all in an attempt to unearth, salvage, aggregate and then showcase
what he considers to be the invisible remnants of his hidden and ‘best self,’ represented through
his costumed and masked play. Here, the mask materialises and reveals the man, who is
otherwise cloaked behind the disguise of mundane, everyday flesh. While the costume morphs
and evolves however, the role that Aldrick elects to play each year remains stable and
predictable, thus balancing the competing need for carnival’s innovation and continuity.
Despite the fact that Aldrick is fully costumed and masked, the notion of secrecy, cunning,
mystery and illusion (Kasfir, “Elephant Women” 18) that is so integral to West African
masking rituals is both peripheral yet at the same time oddly salient to Aldrick’s ferocious
performance as the titular dragon.

There Be Dragons…

Aldrick’s reputation precedes him to the point where everyone in the tiny ‘Yard’ or community
on Cavalry Hill identifies him as ‘the Dragon’ and anticipates his annual reprisal of the role.
This is particularly evident when carnival approaches. Yet, in the latter stages of the novel
Aldrick is steeped in inertia and apathy towards the prospect of yet another mas’. Aldrick’s
uncharacteristic lack of preparation and overt inactivity is such a cause for concern and unease
that other residents of the Yard are moved to query and even demand of him: “What happen?
Where is your dragon costume?” (The Dragon Can’t Dance 164). Not only does Aldrick’s
costume represent a seasonal marker for the entire community, it also symbolises the stability
and the correctness of an established carnival order. Through his mask, Aldrick attains a
reputation and a hypervisibility which differentiates most West Indian masking practices from that of West African masquerades.

To quote Sydney Littlefield Kasfir: “masquerade in Africa...presumes a structure of belief which typically associates this illusion [namely, that of the mask] with the embodiment of a spirit or, in certain places, the appearance of reincarnated ancestors...” (“Elephant Women” 18). As a result, the power of signification is foremost in West African masquerades which “signify something besides the basic visual and performative fact of a person in a costume playing before an audience” (18). By contrast, African diasporic masquerades that occur in the Caribbean and South America, while they are seasonal just as African masquerades are strictly calendrical, do not replicate the same belief structure that characterises African masking. Visibility, renown, spectacle and spectatorship are firmly at the forefront of masking in the Americas. This represents a point of divergence from the West African principles of secrecy, disguise, the invoking and embodying of a spirit and “the committed belief of the audience” in the ritual taking place.

In contrast to West African masking practices, masking in the Caribbean and South America does not seek to “fully disguise the identity of the performer” (18). While I would agree with this assertion, I would also argue that Aldrick’s deep commitment to a particular form of carnivalesque roleplay involves a form of invocation. He embodies a specific attitude and spirit of conviction that renders the fantasy figure of the dragon all-too-credible to his audience, inducing deep discomfort and fear. Additionally, Aldrick is as much an audience and critical observer of his performance as the rest of his community. He contemplates and assesses the effectiveness and truthfulness of his dance as avidly as his neighbours. Thus Aldrick provides his own internalised commentary as he plays dragon mas’ complete with rattling chains:
He watched terror strike pale faces as he lunged towards them, and he smiled inwardly as they grinned nervously and rushed hands into their pockets to find coins to offer him in appeasement, as was the tradition. But no. No. He refused the money. He wanted it to be known that he was for real, that you couldn’t just offer him a coin and he would disappear. He wanted them to know that he would always be threatening there, a breath away from them. Some couldn’t understand it, this refusal of the coins. They thought they were not offering him enough; and, as he danced before them they made another journey into their pockets and showed him more coins. He didn’t take the money—‘No, this couldn’t happen!’ ‘This dragon was crazy!’ ‘This fellar wanted trouble!’ But it was Carnival. Whoever heard someone calling the police for a Dragon? Aldrick growled and he spat and he moved to press against them, watched them grow more afraid, more confused. He wanted to frighten them. He liked it when they saw him coming and gathered up their children and ran. (138)

Aldrick’s performance strains beyond the limits of ‘mere’ spectacle as he attempts to extend his identity beyond the fleeting, liminal, and controlled space offered by carnival. He observes other residents playing mas’ and the passion and determined frenzy of their performance moves him to reflect that the residents of Calvary Hill were “refusing to let go of that visibility and that Self that carnival gave them, instead praying for a self to live in beyond carnival” (141). He then grimly concludes:

No, this ain’t no joke. This is warriors going to battle. This is the guts of the people, their blood: this is the self of the people that they screaming out they possess, that they
scrimp and save and whore and work and thief to drag out of the hard rockstone and
dirt to show the world they is people. (137)

James Scott's theory of the ‘hidden transcript’ has been used by a number of theorists on
carnival to reconsider both the effect and affect of carnival play and performance. Or as Patricia
Alleyne-Dettmers outlines in her article “Black Kings: Aesthetic Representation in Carnival in
Trinidad and London”:

Scott emphasises “arts of political disguise” to demonstrate how subordinate groups
use other forms of expression—whether verbal or nonverbal texts, rap, graffiti,
euphemisms, trickster tales, or rituals of celebration such as Carnival as “hidden
transcripts” to play out marginalization in public spaces or sites, thereby re-creating and
developing a new status and another sense of power for themselves. Scott defines the
“hidden transcript” as the “privileged site for nonhegemonic, contrapuntal, dissident,
subversive discourse [emphasis added]. (25)

Not only is this descriptor useful for considering contemporary performances of carnival, but
it is also highly applicable to the ideological struggle that occurs in Lovelace’s text amongst
the impoverished residents of Calvary Hill.

Aldrick’s dragon exists as a highly public form of masked inscription. The dragon represents
both the act of self-possession and a state of self-actualisation. The costuming allows him to
materialise the splendour of a concealed and unrecognised self which, although precious to
him, is constantly thwarted and denied through the inherited remnants of a racialised and
urbanised post-colonial economy. This leaves him and many other black males in the
community to pinch and scrape for a subsistence or to remain defiantly unemployed and destitute. This is further complicated by a sweeping cultural gentrification of carnival after World War II, which displaced some of carnival’s most subversive characters and reinterpreted others, reconfiguring some of the festival’s most iconic figures in order to fulfil the demands of a middle-class aesthetic and placate the eye of the tourist. This process threatens to disempower the semiotic significance of the dragon through a cultural and class-based misapprehension of the character. Finally, the clinical machinations of a broader national and post-colonial script systematically co-opts carnival, leaving no room for the likes of Aldrick or his ideology.

The Dragon Can’t Dance reiterates a history that is at once bitter, yet miraculous. A portrait of Calvary Hill is poetically sketched in the novel’s prologue. Readers are presented with a desolate urban ‘desert,’ while the narrative voice adopts the role of the griot—one that simultaneously constructs then positions an audience for its tale. Despite the inhospitable environment of Calvary Hill, life miraculously takes hold. It is symbolised by the struggle of a lone plum with “its roots spread out like claws, gripping the tough red dirt” (The Dragon Can’t Dance 24) and the local children who are described as “lean and hard like whips, their wise yellowed eyes filled with malnutrition” (24). In the earliest pages of the novel, following our first glimpse of Calvary Hill, the narrative voice ambles along then takes dizzying flight through a torrid history comprised of slavery and escape. A liturgical chant arises punctuated by a spectacular roll call of ‘Maroons,’ ‘Runaways,’ ‘Bush Negroes’ and ‘Rebels’ (24).

The narrator pauses—draws breath—then celebrates the defiance of those who remained situated “in the very guts of the slave plantation” (24), while affirming the ingenuity of slaves who asserted “…their humanness in the most wonderful acts of sabotage they could imagine
and perform, making a religion of laziness, neglect, stupidity and waste” (24). Emancipation is then described as perhaps the most daring enterprise of all, an audacious free fall into nothingness that led to “a more profound idleness and waste” (24). Lovelace’s 1994 novel Salt revisits this painful history and slowly and systematically arrives at the conclusion that ‘emancipation’ led to a profound economic and political dispossession for black Trinidadians. *The Dragon Can’t Dance*, by contrast, is prefaced by the dispossessed and the disenfranchised refugees of a slave economy who have been brutally liberated into ‘nothing,’ who are guaranteed nothing and are, thus, the inheritors and proud possessors of nothing:

[T]hey turned up on this hill to pitch camp here on the eyebrow of the enemy, to cultivate again with no less fervour the religion with its Trinity of Idleness, Laziness and Waste, so that now, one-hundred and twenty-five years after Emancipation, Aldrick Prospect, an aristocrat in this tradition, not knowing where his next meal was coming from, would get up at midday from sleep, yawn, stretch, then start to think of where he might get something to eat, his brain working with the same smooth, unhurried nonchalance with which he moved his feet, a slow cruising crawl which he quickened only at Carnival. (24-5)

Calvary Hill is not only portrayed as a battle camp but also exists as a harsh haven for its inhabitants. Maroonage is celebrated, as the Hill permits its congregation of the dispossessed to stand in flagrant opposition to the logistics of Western capitalism, colonialism and empire. It also exists as a subversive, inverted site where the ‘virtues’ of industry are eschewed, Christian ‘vice’ is elevated and a destitute ‘fool’ is, in truth, a king residing in a single room abode as a castle. Lovelace’s upside-down, carnivalesque kingdom is populated by the standard figures of European fairytale and Romance, transposed into a West Indian setting to include
Queens (Cleothilda), Princesses (Sylvia), (anti-)knights (Guy), Dragons (Aldrick), Devils (Fisheye) and Troubadours (Philo). Author Funso Aiyejina observes the overall cast of characters and notes the way in which individual narratives are organised into discrete yet related chapters in a way that reflects the structure of a carnival mas’. Aiyejina then suggests that it may be fruitful for readers to

see the novel as the narrative of an observing calypsonian operating as a master of ceremonies who is presenting a parade of carnival bands with chapters like “Queen of the Band,” “The Princess,” and “The Dragon” as individuals/kings/queens in a carnival band that could easily be named the “Calvary Hill Band.” (Aiyejina 3) 60

The Hill is not simply a parody of European monarchy but a reconfiguration of royalty with an insistence on lineage, familial and communal continuity and even more critically, inheritance. The ‘inheritance’ in question includes a history of slavery, familial and communal histories and, in the specific cases of Aldrick and Philo, a questionable legacy in the craft of carnival arts. Yet, it is a legacy that is directly rooted in impoverishment. Aldrick’s pride in his status on the Hill, in his carnivalesque role play, and in his unquestionable sense of ‘freedom’ is at once obdurate but largely unsentimental:

You see me here, I is thirty-one years old. Never had a regular job in my life or a wife or nutten. I ain’t own house or car or radio or racehorse or store. I don’t own one thing

60 Lewis Linden suggests that Philo is a minor character whereas Funso Aiyejina argues for his greater centrality by noting that the concluding voice of the novel is Philo’s rather than Aldrick’s (Aiyejina 2). Lovelace’s own apprehension of his text is that it is akin to the structure of a calypso: “If I consider my novel, The Dragon Can’t Dance…I think of the whole book as the movement of a calypso” (qtd. in Aiyejina 3-4). In this chapter, I suggest that Philo is neither marginal nor wholly central to the text but intervenes at critical junctures in the narrative.
in this fucking place, except that dragon there, and the dragon ain’t even mine. I just make it. It just come out of me like a child who ain’t really his father own or his mother own. (Lovelace, The Dragon Can’t Dance 124)

For one, he is keenly aware of his material lack and his inability to enter into a stable domesticity. He is also highly cognisant of the expense of his poverty as the ‘prospect’ of a wife, children, and a richer emotional attachment to others is sacrificed on the altar of his religion. Of all the characters in the novel, Aldrick fully embodies a resistant ethos of non-materialism. However, his understanding of the principles of ‘non-possession’ and his increasing awareness of the high cost of both material and social detachment is refined and complicated throughout the course of the novel. The Hill, in turn, eventually concedes its battle against materialism and social respectability. The residents surrender up their fierce pride in the principles of non-ownership while a comforting, yet numbing form of gentrification takes hold of their environment. This is exemplified in the costly and often painful compromises of characters such as Sylvia, who sacrifices her fierce independence and accepts the material comfort that Guy offers, and in the displacement of Philo whose financial success eventually distances him from the Hill.

The regenerative and creative powers of the carnival arts are displayed through characters whose skills in costuming, dance and song permit them to ultimately ‘birth’ hidden identities into existence. Through carnival they briefly attain the power of visibility but even this boon is eventually lost. Once Aldrick ventures beyond the safety of the Yard and performs during carnival, the dragon mask fails to confer true visibility on Aldrick. Perversely, his carnivalesque masks casts a spell of hypervisibility upon him, in which he is highly visible as a symbol while the human self that he reveres and holds precious is ultimately elided and
unseen. Shrouded in hypervisibility, Aldrick rails for visibility: “He wanted everybody to see him. When they saw him, they had to be blind not to see” (124). He is not, however, alone in his quest as Lovelace extends recognition to the plight of Sylvia who is attired in a ‘slave girl costume’ during carnival’s mas’. Yet, she is fully seen and apprehended by Aldrick who responds to her “dancing still with all of her dizzying aliveness, dancing wildly; frantically twisting her body, flinging it around her waist, jumping and moving, refusing to let go of that visibility, that self the Carnival gave her” (141).

The birth metaphor is in effect, and with it, the notion of painful toil that is expressed through “a shout, a bawl, a cry, a scream, a cyclone of tears…a scream for life” (141). Here, the work of cultural creativity and innovation, rather than ephemeral inversion, is the order of the day. This is best demonstrated through Lovelace’s careful description of Aldrick’s labourious yet attentive craftsmanship, which echoes the lived history of mas’ designers such as Peter Minshall:

In truth, it was in a spirit of priesthood that Aldrick addressed his work; for, the making of his dragon costume was to him always a new miracle, a new test not only of his skill but of his faith: for though he knew exactly what he had to do, it was only by faith that he could bring alive from these scraps of cloth and tin that dragon, its mouth breathing fire, its tail threshing the ground, its nine chains rattling, that would contain the beauty and threat and terror that was the message he took each year to Port of Spain. It was in this message that he asserted before the world his self. It was through it that he demanded that others see him, recognize his personhood, be warned of his dangerousness. (49–50)
In this passage, Lovelace not only celebrates the materiality of the dragon but also asserts the possibility of the co-existence of the sacred and the profane within the context of carnival. These tensions are accommodated in a meaningful and affective manner that maintains the vitality of their contradiction and subsequently reveals mas’ craftsmanship as an artform. The assignation of the word ‘priesthood’ as a descriptor of Aldrick’s painstaking labour of love also serves as a pointed reminder of the religious moorings of carnival. The dragon also functions as a rich, archival assemblage that embodies a lived history (Aching, “Masking and Power” 60). Indeed, as Aldrick crafts his dragon costume he ritualistically invokes then imbricates his labour with the very lives of his relatives. Furthermore, he adorns the dragon with life-affirming and intimate imagery comprised of his memories of landscape, vegetation, food and family artefacts. Aldrick weaves “…the memory of his grandfather into the dragon …including in the latticework the exodus of his grandmother and his two unmarried aunts from rural Manzanilla to St. James on the outskirts of the capital” (Lovelace, The Dragon Can’t Dance 53; Aching, “Power and Masking” 60). Aldrick instinctively constructs an archive tied together by familial bonds and threaded through with an attachment to disparate scenes and geographies. He embarks on a sporadic, non-linear temporal journey of remembrance in a flood of memories that “soak him through and through; and his life grew before him, in the texture of his paint and the angles of his dragon scales as he worked” (50). In the text, Lovelace advances the notion of Aldrick as an apprentice, practitioner or, in Aldrick’s own words, an ‘acolyte’ (49). Additionally, there is a sense of historical continuity through an inheritance of craft. Aldrick not only has the ability to stitch together a semblance of self but to thread his way back into his past, weaving together disparate images and memories into a vivid, coherent tapestry.

He not only inherits the skills of sewing, painting and wirebending from his Uncle Freddie, a surrogate father figure who he describes as “cooler and smoother than water” (55), but Aldrick
also seeks to emulate the economy of his Uncle’s unhurried, effortless ways. He also carries with him his grandfather’s stubborn, even prideful attachment to an infertile land “of mountain and stone that had exhausted its substance” (51), which is directly paralleled to his own attachment to the hard dirt of the Hill. Aldrick recalls the stern and unbending nature of the older man and attempts to recreate these characteristics in a displaced self, allowing them to inform the structure of the dragon. The story of Sam Prospect, the ‘miracle man’ from Manzanilla, also forms a critical thread in the familial tapestry as Aldrick reflects on Sam’s failure as a father and provider but success as a ‘magician’, whose sporadic disappearance and reappearance in his children’s lives was heralded with “a big brown paper bag full of groceries and presents for the children” (54). Not only is a lineage of masculine endurance and survival detected through Aldrick’s crafting of the dragon, but it is also a lineage that is punctuated by masculine defeat and female abandonment as his male ancestors commit to lives of inconstancy that prove to be untenable wastelands for women. His grandfather Cyrus’ commitment to an unyielding landscape, for example, is identified as a form of perverse martyrdom, while Sam’s gambling and hustling ends in his untimely demise working on the wharves. Uncle Freddie, by contrast, imperiously “runs the city” (55) but also glides through an existence unimpeded by domesticity or women.

Philo’s inheritance of the carnival arts is even more dubiously portrayed than Aldrick’s. Philo recalls the fruitlessness of his father’s mediocre musicianship, which results in a number of appearances on radio talent shows and a series of consolation prizes: “ten cakes of toilet soap, a bottle of after-shave lotion, a pen and pencil set” (238). On his father’s death, Philo inherits “nutten excep’ a cuatro without string and a rusty mout’ organ” (239). Once he initiates his own quest to become a calypsonian, he assumes that he will also inherit the mantle of his father’s extensive commercial failure. As a result, Philo regards his own eventual financial
success with a degree of ambivalence, even mourning. It would seem that the novel’s conception of freedom, resistance, and non-possession are distinctly ‘masculinised.’ This set of ideals constitutes a masculine code of honour which is both problematised and besieged in the novel. By contrast, conditions of material comfort, stability and domesticity are not only feminised as a form of ‘surrender,’ but congeal into a potentially threatening value system that is diametrically opposed to Aldrick’s. A conflict between these two contrasting value systems plays out through carnival as the once ‘masculine’ festival that is increasingly adorned, prettified and above all, made ‘effeminate.’ In “The Impotence of Dragons: Playing Devil in the Trinidad Carnival,” Max Harris succinctly summarises the struggle in carnival in which ole mas’ gradually cedes way to the increasing popularity of fancy mas’:

Carnival today is the fruit, good or bad depending on your perspective, of a century of prettification and commercialization, during which the festivities may be said to have split into two distinct but not entirely separate Carnivals: ole mas’, or traditional Carnival, and fancy or pretty mas’. The former, increasingly marginalized, but, over the last 20 years or so, doggedly resisting erasure and now even enjoying something of a small revival, sustains such traditional characters as the Midnight Robbers, the Wild Indians, the Burokits, the Baby Dolls, and the Blue Devils. (114)

Arguably, Harris’ work advances a ‘degenerative’ narrative in which carnival’s potential for social critique, rebellion and even violence has been radically subverted and replaced with a ‘prettified’ and overtly commercial carnival where the chief objective is to titillate, rather than offend, the spectator. As a consequence, he mourns the loss of ole mas’ along with its cast of menacing and satirical characters even as he provides a pragmatic analysis of the contemporary and deeply institutionalised trappings of ‘fancy’ or ‘pretty’ mas. Lovelace’s observations
regarding ole and fancy mas’ are certainly nostalgic, yet draw a far more ambivalent conclusion about the future potential of mas’.

Jouvay

If ole mas’ arose in a context of emancipation and rebellion with a drive to both celebrate and preserve the continuity of ritual arts such as the *kalinda*, drumming, and stick-fighting, then fancy mas’ rearticulated ole mas’ so that it might resonate with a post-emancipation, 20th century context. Furthermore, fancy mas’ also signalled a dramatic shift from a highly local, community-based performance to a spectacle designed, in part, to attract the eye of the corporate sponsor and ultimately the tourist. Like ole mas’, the masking practices of fancy mas’ are similarly ‘character-based,’ but have a propensity to re-fashion canonical ole mas’ characters and ‘prettify’ them. Fancy mas’ thus operates as a canonical continuation of ole mas’ which, according to Helen Gilbert and Joanne Tompkins, “preserves many of the identifying signifiers of the original while altering, often allegorically, its structures of power” (Gilbert and Tompkins 16). Thus the *Jab Molassies* of ole mas’ are transmogrified into ‘fancy devils’ and Wild Indians into ‘Fancy Indians,’ while ‘pretty’ while ‘pretty’ if sanitised sailors abound.

Nevertheless, ole mas’ is inextricably tied to the tradition of *Jour Ouvert* mas’, which is sometimes known as *J’Ouvert* and will hereafter be referred to as *Jouvay*. Jouvay is celebrated in *The Dragon Can’t Dance* and provides one of the critical set pieces in Lovelace’s text. Lovelace composes a ‘meta-scenario’ in which Aldrick can contemplate carnival’s ontology. Patricia Alleyne-Dettmers identifies *Jouvay* as a blending of the customs and mores

---

61 *Jouvay* is Trinidadian patois and represents the way in which the word is commonly pronounced in Trinidad.
of 19th century African and French Trinidadian culture. While contemporary Jouvy is an early morning mas’ that begins shrouded in darkness, ushering in the daybreak, it initially began as a ritual celebrated in broad day-light in the weeks preceding carnival. In its earliest inception in a pre-Emancipation era, Jouvy “assumed the form of after-dinner raids on private homes” (Alleyne-Dettmers, “Political Dramas” 327). In effect, the revelry of Jouvy was restricted to a specific social class:

The participants generally wore an old mask, with the term “old” referring to rags, discarded items and old costumes retrieved from former masquerades. A characteristic feature of old mask was to disguise oneself totally, thereby concealing one's identity. These portrayals involved cross-gender masking, in which men generally dressed as brides and women as policemen. The impersonators often spoke in falsetto voice as a further disguise. The idea was to catch the occupants of the house unawares and to keep them guessing as to their visitors’ identity. Each masquerader remained in costume until his or her identity was correctly guessed. All of this provided fun and great hilarity, and it was not uncommon for impromptu parties to develop. (327)

In the post-Emancipation era, the right to attend Jouvy was extended to former slaves who shifted it to carnival morning and radically innovated its festivities. It remains one of the few forms of mas’ that wilfully retains a connection to the history of slavery. It signals the dawning or opening of carnival and begins at two a.m. in the morning, on the cusp of darkness and dawn, signalling the liminality of both the space and time in which it occurs and the performance that ensues. Jouvy mas’ is typified by performances of ole mas’ characters, which consist of a collection of motley costumes and rags from previous carnivals. In the novel, Aldrick solemnly dons his costume at dawn while recalling the history of Jouvy with the words “Once upon a
time the entire Carnival was expressions of rebellion” (Lovelace, *The Dragon Can’t Dance* 135). Within this theatre of war, he regards himself as outnumbered in an unwinnable battle: “The dragon alone was left to carry the message” (135). He then reminisces on the old cast of stickfighters, warriors, jesters, fancy robbers and the jab jabs who will all cede ground to a new form of visual play in carnival.

...And Devils Too

*Jouvay* mas is still an integral part of Trinidadian carnival that permits ole time characters—most notably the *Jouvay* devils—to continue to thrive while mud bands and their accompanying masqueraders are divided into sections that are led by a King. The body itself is ritually transformed into an artistic canvas that displaces conventional artistic regalia. *Jouvay* masqueraders smear their bodies with mud to make a variety of statements that are political, ritual, cultural, and aesthetic all at once. Mud is an important feature of *Jouvay*, which intensifies the masqueraders’ “ugliness” and re-affirms their connection to earth and land. In “Black Kings: Aesthetic Representation in Carnival in Trinidad and London” Patricia Alleyne-Dettmers explores the *Jouvay* Jab Jab mas’, noting its ‘multiple signifiers’ and discussing the significance of its Christian iconography:

The icon of the devil originated in the European medieval miracle plays, where death and the devil formed a part of man's everyday existence. It is also linked to French Roman Catholic ethics signifying Western concepts of good and evil. It is claimed that the devil and his horde of fallen angels roam the earth on the two days of Carnival before the beginning of the Catholic season of Lent to test the virtues of the faithful. (247)
The *Jouvay* devil or Jab Jab is an important character, since playing the devil physically manifests the ambiguities and internal conflicts associated with an ontological quest for selfhood. It manifested the masquerader’s need to redefine not only themselves, but also their sense of home in an environment where the intimate structures were alien to them. It also served, and continues to serve, as a Janus-faced statement on the history of blacks in Trinidad. Not only does it refer to the way in which blacks were imaginatively situated in a racial and moral binary conceived by the West imaginary but it also constructs a space in which Western associations with blackness and devilry are overturned and reinterpreted to subversive effect.

The aggressive, threatening and extortionate behaviour of the Jab Jabs during mas’ also serves to re-enact and critically comment on the pecuniary nature of slave ownership and on the institution of slavery. It is sometimes argued that the coating of the body in molasses was a satirical commentary on the sugar industry while imaginatively associating plantation owners with devilry. Molasses also conjured images of the old plantocracies that had made their fortunes from sugar cane and its many by-products. By integrating the body of the reveller into this socio-political amalgam, the presence of Jab Jab’s in carnival insinuates the historical narrative of the plantation and slaveocracy. ‘Jab Jabs’ or devils, which is a creole derivation of the French *diablesse*, are usually bare-chested and clad in skimpy shorts. Not only do Jab Jabs dance, leap and twirl in a stylised dance but they also threaten spectators or enact a combative spectacle amongst themselves. Jab Jabs seek payment from the crowd amid “the shrill blowing of whistles and whistle-like screams as they incessantly chant, “Pay de Devil, Jab! Jab!” (Alleyne Dettmers, “Black Kings” 247). There are, however, various and divergent visual

---

62 Jabs Jabs, who are a canonical staple of carnival’s theatre both past and present, are primarily played by boys and men, while contemporary bikini masqueraders are predominantly, though not solely, female.
representations of this stock character, resulting in related but distinct categories of Jab Jabs.\(^{63}\) Ole mas’ characters often necessitated a specific performance or type of “play.” For example, the play of a late 19\(^{th}\) century ‘Baby Doll’ involved a highly genderised form of masking whereby the masquerader would don an “oversized baby garb” while holding “a doll” (Noel, “De Jamette” 65):

[S]he would theatrically accost any nearby man for not supporting her children. A baby doll masquerade allowed women the opportunity to say what was on their minds, confronting society about their lack of socioeconomic stability. It permitted women of African descent to comment on the working class men who refused to hold themselves accountable for their children, as well as on the elite men who contributed to the oppression of women. (Noel, “De Jamette” 65)

Like the Jab Jab, the character of the Baby Doll also elicited a highly specific type of role-play and follows an embedded script that revolves around confrontation, pointed social critique and perhaps some form of catharsis. Dragons, in turn, served as a theatrical counter-point to Jab Jabs and were often chained, bound and held captive to a group of Jab Jabs who led the dragon through mas’, placed him on public display and periodically poked and prodded at the captive, snarling beast.\(^{64}\) This was a highly choreographed display in which the Jab Jabs would taunt their captive then evasively retreat from the incensed beast “with highly complicated and

\(^{63}\) In the specific case of a jab molassie for instance, the costume is decidedly fluid and clings to the body in the form of mud, grease, treacle, chocolate or paint. Blue Jab Jabs who are coated in blue mud are famously associated with the Paramin region. Max Harris notes of their character play that “[un]like many of the other masqueraders, the devils stayed in character throughout, never breaking the illusion of possession to remove a mask or to pause for casual conversation” (Harris, “Devils and Decorum” 190-1).

\(^{64}\) In Lovelace’s novel, Aldrick engages in this tradition in a critical scene that will be discussed later in this chapter.
traditional steps” (Procope 279). Bruce Procope identifies the ‘fight of the beast’ and the ‘ballet of crossing’ the water as the highlights of a once popular mas’ that has now declined (279). Jab Jabs and dragons abound in the novel’s 20th century articulation of ole mas’. However, the feminine or feminised roleplay and social commentary that similarly accompany jamettes, Dame Lorraines, Baby Dolls are notably, even critically, absent from Lovelacian carnival.

While Aldrick is imaginatively wedded to the character of the dragon, he is also appreciative of the power of Jouvay and cognisant of the theatrical power of other forms of mas’ such as Jab Jab mas’. Towards the novel’s conclusion Aldrick is still excited and even buoyed by the prospect of “two thousand strong people playing devil in Port of Spain” (Lovelace, The Dragon Can’t Dance 209) and briefly muses that he has ‘misread’ the spirit of the times and that perhaps there is still room for menace and rebellion in the new carnival. He relinquishes this hope, however, when his misapprehension is gently corrected and he is informed that the revellers have eschewed ole mas’: “Not real devil, you know. Fancy devil, with lame and silk and satin. Pretty devil” (209). Both Aldrick and the narrative voice of the novel reconcile themselves to the growing reality of fancy mas’, in which the principles of abundance, possession and even self-possession sit in direct opposition to a stubborn ethos of non-possession and are centralised in an ever-evolving carnival.

**Wither the Jamette?**

As a literary work, The Dragon Can’t Dance attends to the division between ole and fancy mas’. The conflict serves as the backdrop, pretext and context of the novel, just as the novel also fissures along lines of the local and the national. Lovelace’s text also historicises the festival. While the novel articulates a specifically 20th century vision of carnival, the class and
racialised divisions that are all too apparent in a Lovelacian carnival are subtly and implicitly informed by the ‘high and low’ divisions of 19th century ole mas’. As mentioned in chapter one, the earliest days of ole mas’ were aesthetically and performatively shaped by the undeniable and, in the eyes of the colonial administration, undesirable presence of the jametre or jamet class, which was comprised of poor and primarily black slum-dwellers who were regarded as the dregs of Trinidadian society. But the term jamet also refers to a Trinidadian carnival character defined in the following way:

French—diametre—other half or underworld character. The costume consisted of a dress with many starched petticoats. A large hat decorated with feathers and flowers over head-ties. She had a habit of exposing her breasts. The jamet man had pants worn low over the hips and was garlanded in lots of gold chains. Both male and female spoke in low sultry voices. (Mendes 181)

The fortunes of other Calvary Hill residents are carefully detailed as readers are acquainted with the tall, dark-skinned ‘jamet’ character of Fisheye. Fisheye evokes a distinctly working class conception of masculinity that centres on martial prowess and toughness that is annually reaffirmed in the arena of the gayelle and on the streets during mas’. While this particular ideal of masculinity dominates many of the cultural representations that are present in ole mas’, he discovers that the potency of his role as the local “Bad John” is gradually being eroded by the materially lavish, and from his perspective, ‘effete,’ aesthetics of fancy mas’. While Jab Jabs and dragons abound in the novel’s 20th century articulation of ole mas’, the feminine or feminised characters that would be expected to accompany them on the festive stage are notably, even critically, absent from Lovelacian carnival. Admittedly, the figure of the male jamet is partially preserved in the form of Fisheye, the local Bad John of the Hill—a defiant
stick fighter extraordinaire—but the female *jamette* that played such a major role in ole mas’ is erased from view in the novel. The text also hints at the eventual obsolescence of Fishey’s role in carnival, while affirming the deletion of the cast of feminine characters from the ole mas’ canon. Due to such 20th century rearticulations of ole mas’, its politics and its modes of representation have come to define ole mas’ in its entirety. Philip Scher astutely notes that this imagines the history of carnival as a predominantly black, working-class and most critically *masculine* practice, resulting in a ‘hegemonic nostalgia’ (Stewart 227).

In contemporary analysis, the 19th century *jamette* is usually defined as a bawdy, lower class woman of ill-repute who is nevertheless able to wield an unusual degree of sexual autonomy. The fact that the term initially referred to a class of people rather than a specific gender is evident in the observation that “[t]heir numbers included *chantuelles*, stickfighters, dustmen, and criminals who occupied the barrack yards of East Port of Spain” (“The Jamette Carnival”). A form of carnival known as ‘the *jamette* carnival’ existed in Trinidad from 1860 to 1896, inspired and dominated by this particular class. Susan Campbell identifies that the greatest proponents of mas’ in this period were residents of the barrack-yards—“dock and warehouse workers, laundrywomen and other members of the working-class”—and were thus *jamettes* (10). She takes pains to describe the conditions in these quarters and to highlight the reasons that may have led poor working-class blacks to seek the respite of carnival celebrations:

A barracks-yard can be described as a small slum, located in the centre of an ordinary city block, in which housing consists of barracks of single rooms, reminiscent of slave quarters. Built of wood and roofed with galvanized iron, barracks could be built in single ranges or, worse still, back-to-back. Cooking was done on porches, in sheds, or
in the open while out-house facilities, always too few, were shared by all the residents of the yard (Campbell 25).

While female jamettes are not included in *The Dragon Can’t Dance*, the presence of the urban yard, reminiscent of the barrack-yard, functions as a communal space that houses the novel’s lower-class residents. For the most part, they exist beneath the ‘diametre’ of middle-class comfort and respectability. Lovelace’s sole jamet character eschews the gender inversion of the *Dame Lorraine* and is faithful to a static, hypermasculine interpretation of carnival’s space. For Fisheye, carnival is comprised of stick fights, steelpan and masculine forms of masking (such as Aldrick’s dragon) that are familiar and comforting signifiers. He effectively completes a trio of male characters who assume the form of the masked, writhing dragon, the dexterous calypsonian and the defiant panman who are all practitioners of the carnival arts. While Aldrick and Philo express their resistance to their environment primarily through their craft, the more literal-minded Fisheye resorts to physical displays reliant on his strength and violence in order to conquer his opponents and establish an egotistical presence on the Hill. As a consequence, gunfights eventually supersede stickfights and became characteristic of the working-class violence that was infamously attached to carnival before its mid-20th century gentrification. Although he never dons a physical costume or a mask, his form of carnivalesque roleplay is, perhaps, the most unyielding and fixed of all the novel’s characters.

Unlike Aldrick and Philo, Fisheye’s scenes of historical recall and memory lack deeper introspection. His is a conservative vision that fails to generate a reflective praxis where he is able to detect the distance between himself and his carnivalesque persona and attain some sense of personal liberation. He also fails to establish sufficient distance between his stated opposition to police and ruling authority and his own authoritarian desire to maintain and
‘police’ the existing rules and boundaries of the Hill. Fisheye is both an outlaw and enforcer, while his eventual incarceration is both physical and psychological. Lovelace argues that the badjohns simply occupied and continued the role of the kalinda warriors of yore, even as he critiques the failure of a coherent political consciousness and will driving their expressions of violence:

The badjohns were the carriers of that danger, heroes, at least to schoolboys who intuitively knew that they were warriors, heirs to stickfighters now metamorphosed here in the urban ghettos of Laventille and John John and Gonzales into fist fighters and head butters. Heroes, Warriors: these terms even in their most limited application traditionally suggest a political consciousness. It is doubtful that the badjohns exhibited any of that; but they were all we had to express the breadth of violence that the poorest had been emancipated into. (Lovelace, “The Emancipation” 55-6)

Fisheye, who represents a 20th century incarnation of jamette culture, becomes severely disoriented when the signifiers of ole mas’ are gradually divested of their meaning. Not only does this mark a transformation of the guiding aesthetic of carnival, it threatens his sense of his own identity and relevance, which had always been grounded in the customs and aesthetics of ole mas’. As a consequence he feels his presence is diminished “lost now among the [...] fantasy presentations that were steadily entering Carnival; drowned amidst the satin and silks and the beads and feathers and rhinestones” (Lovelace, The Dragon Can’t Dance 121). Corporate sponsorship of the steelbands by the oil companies is of particular concern to Fisheye:

At first it [sponsorship] didn’t worry him. He didn’t even really notice, because it started in one of the light-skinned bands—Merry Boys or Dixie Land or one of them.
They came on the road that Carnival with Cicada Cigarettes printed on their jerseys and on their pans. It didn’t worry him because he didn’t consider them real bands. They had no real place, no community, no Hill where people was people and the band was a part of them, the band was their orchestra, to give them meaning; to sing them. So it didn’t worry him that they came out with the cigarettes printed on their jerseys and their pans. People do all kinda crazy things anyway; and they wasn’t pushing anybody out of anything. They wasn’t breaking up nothing. But when he saw the Desperadoes the following year, that was something. For the Desperadoes were the baddest band on the island, the band where the people was one. When they appeared on the road with new pans and emblem and waving a new flag: Sampoco Oil Company Gay Desperadoes, well, he nearly went out his head. Gay? Gay Desperadoes. That was the end. And instead of the little fellars pushing the pans, you had the sponsors: the sponsor’s wife and the sponsor’s daughter and the sponsor’s friends, a whole section of them, their faces reddened by the excitement and the sun, smiling and jumping out of time, singing, All Ah We Is One. (82)

Not only does this passage encapsulate Fisheye’s rather rigid and deeply heterosexist notion of masculinity and his anxiety over a shifting order, it demonstrates his fear of displacement from the ranks of carnival. Yet one can also detect the correlation between colourism and class stratification. The newly corporatised bands are comprised of ‘light’ or comparatively lighter-skinned and consequently middle-class Trinidadians who, from Fisheye’s perspective, are outsiders. They are strange, inauthentic, and even alien. Most significantly they are disconnected from the small, local and urban communities that had been marked as ‘black’ and had upheld the practices of ole mas’ for decades. The sponsors, in turn, who regulated and owned the country’s resources and established its premier industries (such as tar, bitumen,
ashphalt and oil) are singled out as both white and the social elite. Faced with encroaching corporatisation and the inexorable tide of fancy mas’ representations, Fisheye mournfully observes the crowds and masqueraders and concludes with some regret that: “Everybody friendly, everybody nice” (82). This orderly, regulated and tame festival is the very antithesis of his vision and knowledge of how carnival ought to be performed. As his role is rendered obsolete he attempts to fix and defend a specific carnival order in which he is deeply invested.

Unsurprisingly, corporatism and colourism, go hand-in-hand. The latter, however, is not merely portrayed as a threatening, external, gentrifying force that encroaches upon the community of Calvary Hill. Rather, Lovelace subtly suggests that colourism and its attendant classism are, in fact, an integral part of everyday social life on the Hill. It serves as an undeniable fixture of carnival’s ritualistic proceedings. This is particularly evident in his portrayal of Cleothilda, who masquerades as the ‘Queen of the Band’ within carnival, before resuming the unofficial title of ‘Queen of the Yard’ that she holds for the remainder of the year. Light-skinned and lofty, Cleothilda’s fraternisation with other members of the yard is described as ‘seasonal’ (34), while her sporadic displays of warmth and sociability wax and wane in accordance with the Lenten calendar. As carnival approaches, Cleothilda actively ingratiates herself with members of the community. But, as the omniscient narrative voice observes, for the rest of the year she remains aloof, visibly disdaining her neighbours and actively spurning romantic advances:

All year long she carried on hostile, superior and unaccommodating, refusing still from the height of her presumed gentility to even give recognition far less encouragement to Philo, the calypsonian across the street [whom she dismissed] in one fluid gesture of disgust that only she could perform better than anyone else. (32)
Although almost polar opposites on the spectrum of class and colour, both Fishey and Cleothilda’s placement in the community and their subsequent sense of identity on the Hill is firmly anchored in carnival and their carnivalesque roleplay. Cleothilda’s elitism and exaggerated sense of self-worth is clearly informed by carnivalesque masking structures and it is through this performance that her identity is simultaneously solidified:

[T]he Hill knew what she knew: that to her being queen was not a masquerade at all, but the annual affirming of a genuine queenship that she accepted as hers by virtue of her poise and beauty, something acknowledged even by her enemies, something that was *not identical with her mulattohood, but certainly impossible without it* [emphasis added]. (32)

**The Women of the Hill**

Female characters such as Cleothilda, Miss Olive, Caroline, and Dolly are, by and large, ‘unthreatening’ whether they are situated inside or outside of carnival. With the notable exception of Cleothilda and Sylvia, the presence of women in the ranks of carnival is largely unobserved or incidental as the novel primarily focuses on male participation and revelry. The ageing Cleothilda, however, presents herself to the community as an ageless carnival queen in a futile attempt to re-enact the triumph of her youth where seventeen years ago “…she place third in the Carnival Queen in Port of Spain: two white girls, one first, the other second, and the girl, a black girl who come in as Miss Ebony and shoulde won the whole thing, fourth, and
The popular mythology surrounding Cleothilda’s queendom and dominance is rooted in a charade since it lies not in an actual victory but in a first-runner-up status that signals her relative proximity to whiteness. As a result, the ‘Queen of the Band’ is a carnivalesque character that Cleothilda subsequently fashions for herself to memorialise a triumph that never actually occurred. Yet, on the basis of this myth Cleothilda presides over the affairs of the Hill’s residents with a hawk-like, regulatory eye, proffering unsought advice to other characters while skilfully manipulating their relationships in accordance with her deeply held convictions concerning class hierarchy and social propriety. She reinforces her dominance by positioning herself as a benefactor, dispensing sweets to the local children or imposing cast-down dresses on Sylvia, the local belle of the Hill.

Caroline, however, proves to be a source of minor antagonism and serves as one of the rare characters in the novel who is willing to both analyse and unveil Cleothilda’s cyclic charade. She verbalises her disapproval of Cleothilda’s self-serving inconsistency and decries her social machinations even though she carefully avoids any form of direct confrontation with her. Most critically, Caroline’s assessment of Cleothilda’s colourism and classism proves to be perspicacious. The latter openly exploits her ‘yellow-red’ skin (35) and the privilege that it confers upon her over the other residents. Caroline scornfully critiques the willing complicity of other residents on the Hill who docilely submit to Cleothilda’s pigmentocratic reign and aggressively interrogates “…what class is she? What class?” (36). Furthermore, she identifies carnival as a collusive ruse that enables Cleothilda’s saccharine fiction of temporary ‘unity’

---

65 Read Rochelle Rowe’s *Imagining Caribbean Womanhood: Race, Nation and Beauty Competitions, 1929-70* for detailed insight into the history of the Carnival Queen competition which was popular during the 1950s and ended in 1971 after crowing the second ‘brown-skinned’ woman in the history of the event and gave way to the ‘Queen of the Bands’ as a feminine counterpart to the lucrative “Calypso King” competition. The Carnival Queen competition was an elitist affair that attracted middle class attendants while the winners were almost always invariably white-skinned which valourised white creole culture as supreme.
and inclusion, while recognising it as a deeply hierarchic structure that annually disguises—at the very moment that it reifies—an existing status quo comprised along stark colour lines:

You don’t have eyes in your head to see that is because the woman skin lighter than yours and mine she feel she better than people on this Hill. And all the friendly-friendly thing she give off for Carnival is just a smoke-screen to hide the wretch she really is… And we, so stupid and without shame, ready to embrace her again, every Carnival…he [Philo] will smile at all the insults from that woman, waiting for Carnival to come so he could jump in the band and put his hand round her waist and shout, “All o’ we is one’; and the fool don’t know that is all he going to ever get. That is the same way she treat everybody who blacker than she: lording it over them for the whole year, and for Carnival, coming out and pretending that she and you friend. She will never like me because she know I up to her tricks. (35-6)

Carnival’s colonial moorings are temporarily exposed and carry the attendant echoes of colonial hierarchies around race and class. Despite her keen insight, Caroline’s objections go unheeded. Cleothilda’s insidious sway over the yard is at once elusive and unjustified, yet is sanctioned and thus concretised through the consensus of the rest of yard—so much so, that her social power is transformed into a form of capital which she wields in order to determine the social pecking order of the yard. Thus, Caroline remains a marginal and frustrated figure whose clear recognition of Cleothilda’s illegitimate yet established power is thwarted. As a result, the residents of the Hill effectively reside in

a ‘social universe’…in which relations of domination are made, unmade, and remade in and by the interactions between person [and] social formations…producing and
guaranteeing the distribution of “titles”…[thus] relations of domination have the opacity and permanence of things and escape the grasp of individual consciousness and power. (Bordieu 84)

In ““We Is All People”: The Marginalized East-Indian and the Economy of Difference in Lovelace's “The Dragon Can't Dance,”” author Masood Ashraf Raja describes Cleothilda as being one of only two characters who possesses the “requisite symbolic capital” (Raja 122) which permits her to act as a jealous vanguard of the Hill’s gradually changing social structure.

Hypocrisy is evident in Cleothilda’s dramatic, strategic declarations of equality. In the meantime she “…lives in the nicest house in the Yard and does not appear to want any material things [but] must posit a sense of communal “equalness” to keep the economic hierarchy of the Yard hidden in order for the yard’s symbolic economy to function” (123). Philo, the local, struggling Calypsonian who unsuccessfully attempts to court the ‘Queen of the Band’ (and Queen of the Yard) is ruled out as a legitimate suitor. He is scorned on account of his lack of symbolic capital, which is directly attributable to his lack of financial resources and his unsavoury profession as a Calypsonian. This is then dramatically underscored by the darkness of his skin. In lieu of her own unsuitable suitors, Cleothilda turns her attentions towards Sylvia, the nubile teenage daughter of Miss Olive. Sylvia not only serves as a project for the disappointed Cleothilda, she is also the nexus through which masculine fantasy, sexual idealisation and desire converge.

If Cleothilda is the elite ‘queen’ of the Hill, imposing her rule on the tiny commune enclosed in the yard, then Sylvia, by birth right, is its celebrated Princess. Her influence over the other characters in the novel is and stems not from separation borne out of a sense of her own superiority, but from an organic belonging to the community. As a result, immense pride and
interest is invested in Sylvia. She is widely lauded as the very best that the Hill has to offer. Sylvia’s beauty and appeal is not only embedded in her sexual allure, but also resides in the community’s recognition of her freedom, which she guards and refuses to carelessly surrender. While she is not a *jamette* character in any traditional sense, she is nevertheless relentlessly sexualised even as the narrative observes her attempts to step beyond this role. Lovelace takes care to inform us that her mother trades on her powers of attraction to absolve them of overdue rent. We are told that she is “engaged in the apprenticeship of being the whore, the virgin fucked but untouched” and that “whoredom is her destiny if not her calling” (*The Dragon Can’t Dance* 39; 41).

I would argue, however, that while Sylvia sings no call-and-response *Bel Airs* nor leads any warring bands into battle, she is nonetheless a spirited presence with a subversive potential that Aldrick both fears and respects. As a consequence, he deems her to be “the most dangerous female person on the hill” due to her terrifying “ability to not only to capture him in passion but to enslave him in caring” (45). In “Masculinity and the Dance of the Dragon: Reading Lovelace Discursively,” Linden Lewis directly alludes to Sylvia as a potential dragon tamer (170) then elaborates on the very real ‘danger’ that she poses to Aldrick’s social role and the Hill’s status quo. Just as Aldrick, along with most of the residents on Calvary Hill, fears Sylvia’s entrapment and her subsequent defeat, he is similarly anxious to avoid a comparable fate at her hand. He is painfully self-conscious that as an unemployed man in a single room with no possessions to his name, he is inadequate to play the role of the knight or even the dragon to her princess. Lovelace inverts fairytale roleplay and scripting by revealing Aldrick’s anxiety while imbuing the ‘Princess’ of the novel with the devastating power to slay the dragon. Thus, he warily regards the young woman as “disrupting and disturbing his autonomy, a carefully crafted universe” and regards her as “fundamentally threatening to his status quo in a
way which reduces his control over his own destiny. Love for Aldrick is essentially ensnaring” (171). But as the archetypal princess in *The Dragon Can’t Dance* Sylvia is strategically positioned as an ideological battle-ground over which a tug-of-war between competing value systems arise. If Aldrick represents the ethos of non-possession and non-materialism then Cleothilda and Guy are aligned with a petty, bourgeois materialism that adorns the body but ultimately fails to nourish the spirit. A contest over the heart, mind and fate of Sylvia ensues, with Aldrick intermittently interjecting and insisting that the plans that Cleothilda and Guy have laid for her are neither her rightful ‘end’ nor her true inheritance (Lovelace 216).

But whether she serves as a beacon of resistance and hope for some, or a model of successful bourgeois propriety for others, we are provided with little real insight into Sylvia herself. In effect, her personal qualities come to metonymically represent the best aspects of Calvary Hill, which are then dutifully forced into the service of the narrative. In the meantime, her own specific hopes, visions, dreams and ambitions for herself and about herself are largely unvoiced and are vaguely gestured at through her hesitant oscillation between the narrative’s binary options of resistance or domestication. Tellingly, Aldrick describes Sylvia as a ‘custodian’ of her beauty (165), which suggests that it is neither a property exclusive to her, nor innate. This supports the observation that Sylvia’s traits are viewed by other characters as symbolic, even abstract. Although she exists as a discernible individual, she also characterises the positive aspects of the community as much as, if not more than, the novel allows her to actually represent herself. Instead, her alluring, defining characteristics are positioned as communal property and she is scrutinised and even treated by other characters as such.

---

66 The first chapter of Gerard Aching’s excellent *Masking and Power: Carnival and Popular Culture in the Caribbean* discusses this ethos in-depth as does Kevin A. Browne in the fourth chapter of *Tropic Tendencies*. 
The objectification of Sylvia is not only hinted at by her slave girl costume during carnival, but is indicated by her ability to exist and perform for others. This is apparent in Aldrick’s lyrical contemplation of Sylvia who he compares to “…finely tuned athletes, racehorses or violins” (44). For all of the externalised speculation about Sylvia in which she is buoyed by the supportive gaze of the community, trapped in the proprietorial stare of Cleothilda and Guy, or defined by the arduous glaces of Aldrick, the reader is seldom privy to her interiority. Despite Aldrick’s desperate admonition to Sylvia that she is “young and nice for [her] own self without anybody [emphasis added]” (182), and despite his hopes that she can retain the regal and fiery ‘self’ that she embodies during carnival mas’, the narrative consistently conspires to position Sylvia as a relational being. As a consequence, she is confined to the passive role, a ‘princess’ who is to be fought over and awarded as a prize to the victor as confirmation of their ideology.

In the latter stages of the novel, Sylvia is subverted by the will of other characters before eventually regaining her own path. Much of Sylvia’s trajectory as a character, however, involves her deft navigation of the Yard’s fraught sexual politics. Her maturation is compared to “a ripening mango rose” (37), while her movement is analogised to “the whirring blur of hummingbird wings” (39; 151). Amidst the tension of these drives, she instinctively evades the plethora of sexual advances and romantic propositions that threaten to entrap her. This also includes an eventual rejection of Aldrick’s visible yet unvoiced interest in her.

Of greater moment, however, is the complex relationship between Sylvia and the older women of Calvary Hill. The Hill bears witness to her journey towards maturation, and a maternal ‘monitoring’ occurs where older women collectively watch over her, simultaneously “envying and applauding” (40) her youth, beauty and energy. Above all there is both pleasure and joy expressed at each wilful evasion and every daring, and even miraculous ‘escape’ from the
pitfalls of romantic entrapment, illicit pregnancy, and matrimonial domestication as the matriarchs of the yard silently urge her on to “…climb undefeated out of this hill” (40). Indeed, the women “…recognize a certain defiance in her personality, a spirit of freedom and a sense of not surrendering to the strictures of her environment” (Lewis 70). Sylvia’s form of resistance is quieter than Aldrick’s, but is also of considerable interest to the novel. A decidedly feminine sense of solidarity emerges in the community and synthesises around the young teenager. Cleothilda, however, remains notably apart from the fray and is distinguished by her refusal to share in this communal guardianship.

Instead, Cleothilda’s surveillance is deeply individualistic as she projects her ambitions upon Sylvia. Rather than cheering on her potential escape, Cleothilda wishes to harness Sylvia to herself and colludes with Guy. Cleothilda attempts to lure Sylvia and acquire her as a protégé, while literally attempting to wed Sylvia to Guy. As the rent collector of the yard, Guy ascends to the role of a city councillor and becomes the only other person on the Hill with a comparable degree of social influence to Cleothilda. Under her tutelage, she seeks to induct Sylvia into the politics of respectability. She aims to re-fashion the younger woman in her own image, all in the hope that Sylvia will eventually adopt her aspirational values and attain the material trappings and social comforts of a middle-class existence. Initially, Sylvia resists Cleothilda’s attempts to position her as an indebted protégé and seeks refuge in Aldrick. However, she soon despairs of Aldrick’s visible yet mute attraction to her, and his overall paralysis as a suitor.

The futility of his social and economic impotence outside of the validating boundaries of carnival becomes all-too-apparent, and eventually she turns away from a dragon who cannot protect her. Since Aldrick can roar with the fury of a carnivalesque dragon during mas’ but can neither articulate his desires, nor act upon them as a man, she tentatively enters into a liaison
with Guy in order to obtain a slave girl costume. Her pragmatic compromise eventually
flourishes into a protracted, if tepid, relationship which Cleothilda is both possessive and
jubilant over. “He will be good for her. He will settle her down...Tame her. Put a ring on her.
That will stop those young men coming into this Yard on every excuse to watch her, tempt
her...” (231).

Sylvia’s potential domestication or liberation is a focal point of the greatest concern for the
novel, and she is scrutinised and surveyed by almost every character in the Yard, save for
Pariag and Dolly. In effect, Sylvia’s social ascent and subsequent surrender to Guy is savoured
by Cleothilda as a vicarious triumph. Cleothilda not only steers Sylvia towards Guy but
conscientiously screens, filters and dismisses unsuitable partners such as the dashiki-clad
Raymond, whom she associates with impractical ‘back-to-Africa’ imagery and rhetoric. She is
similarly wary of Talbot, the anti-capitalist internationalist who thinks beyond the scope of the
island and speaks “foolishness about China, and Cuba and Vietnam” (232). Not only are their
individual flaws satirised by Cleothilda—a lack of finances in the case of Raymond and a lack
of physical beauty in the case of Talbot—but it becomes increasingly evident that the disruptive
new post-colonial modalities represented by these suitors cannot be accommodated by the
conservative parochialism of Cleothilda’s perview. The world that she seeks to preserve is
firmly anchored in the ideology of a bygone colonial era with its requisite valourisation of
Englishness, idealisation of whiteness, commitment to class stratification and a pronounced
reverence for capitalism.

Nonetheless, Cleothilda is a survivor who is cannily in tune with the shifting tide of politics.
Like the Gookools in Play Mas’, she realises that, for better or worse, she must contend with
emergence of African and Black Power narratives. She is also forced to accept the advent of a
new socio-political order in which ‘Africanness’ and ‘blackness’ are no longer despised and outcast but function, instead, as a powerful new currency. Her concession towards the new social order and its shifting proximity towards ‘blackness’ is signalled by her eventual acceptance of Philo and her avid pursuit and co-option of Sylvia. In Cleothilda’s case, however, this does not indicate a newfound respect for black identity but reveals, instead, her own desire to shepherd and direct black identity towards uncritically adopting the mores and values of British colonial culture. At the very least, if change cannot be wholly averted, it can be temporarily impeded. Or as Maureen Warner-Lewis observes:

Realizing now that a positive acknowledgement of Africanness and black skin colour is an inevitable part of the evolutionary process, the mulatto—as inheritor and co-partner of White hegemony—consciously seeks to cultivate it. But this is a device to continue domination by channelling the Black life-style into assimilationist paths. In an informal context, this tutelage of Sylvia by Cleo is a parallel of the formal education system by which class/caste conflict between African and European is conciliated, though in the direction of European aesthetic, cultural and intellectual values at the expense of African ones. (Warner-Lewis, “Rebels and Tyrants” 81-2)

“A self to go in the world.”

If women appear in carnival, but are not the central focus of the event, Indians are notably absent in Lovelacian carnival. Unlike the Gookools in Matura’s Play Mas’, who are aloof and resist the lure of carnival’s mas’, Pariag ‘the Indian shopkeeper’ who is every bit as much of a central character and protagonist as Aldrick in the novel, wholeheartedly longs to participate in carnival’s revelry. Yet, as a rural Indian fresh off the sugar plantation and as a relative
newcomer to both Calvary Hill and the Corner—the Hill’s primary site for male socialising—he is culturally and ethnically excluded. Indian and of the entrepreneurial classes, Pariag is marginalised within the distinctly black, working class framework of carnival and from the social life on the Hill itself. As a result, he unsuccessfully experiments with a range of personas in order to make himself visible and thus substantial on the one hand, and yet known and transparent to his neighbours on the other. He also struggles throughout the novel to imaginatively conceive of a space in mas’ within which he can articulate his rural and ethnic origins. He attempts to distinguish himself while simultaneously partaking in the benefits of belonging to a collective.

Pariag’s dilemma situates him in direct contradistinction to Bakhtin’s rosy assertion that: “Carnival is not spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all people” (qtd. in Clark & Holquist 300). He is instead positioned as a perpetual onlooker, audience and outsider against his own desires and inclinations and is the central subject in a chapter explicitly titled “The Spectator” (Lovelace, The Dragon Can’t Dance 91–112). Play Mas’ similarly problematises the logic of nationalist assimilation in which the separate integrity of ethnic identity is threatened and elided by the carnivalesque rhetoric of an enforced ‘multiculturalism;’ in that text, ethnic distinctions between groups are superficially overglossed by a narrow, singular, national identity. In this text, Lovelace neither rejects nor forcibly assimilates the figure of the Indian. The village life that Pariag so desperately seeks to escape is structured around extended patrilineal family units in which men significantly outnumbered women and life is “regulated by the rhythm of cane and rice farming” (Sankeralli 203). Hindi Indian immigrants were distinct from Muslim Indians, but the two groups were often conflated and regarded as a monolithic, endogamous group. This overlooked the fact that communication was often difficult in a monolingual collective that
spoke “Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Tamil Nadu” even as Bhoj-Puri proved to be the dominant language amongst Indians (203). Nevertheless, despite these linguistic divisions, Indians banded together and created a distinct ethnic community.

Lovelace’s text captures the historical moment in which Indian workers began a second wave of migration, this time oriented towards the urban centres of the city. Pariag breaks with familial and community tradition, first in his explicit desire to choose a wife on the basis of his own individual preferences and secondly through his aspirations to reside in Port-of-Spain. His courtship of Dolly is conditional on living in the nation’s capital as he unwaveringly informs her: “You going to have to live in Port of Spain” (Lovelace, *The Dragon Can’t Dance* 94). It is no accident that Lovelace presents Pariag and his wife Dolly as naïve and wide-eyed newcomers who have yet to be acquainted with city life, despite Pariag’s attempts to feign familiarity with Port-of-Spain and affect a cosmopolitan sophistication. Throughout the novel Pariag shuns his rural roots, preferring the possibility of being accepted by the Hill and embraced into the fold of carnival’s revelry. In Pariag’s eyes carnival symbolises an attractive cosmopolitan centre of which he wishes to partake and an urban sophistication that he wishes to acquire.

Carnival functions as the threshold that demarcates inclusion and exclusion, acceptance and rejection. It also induces anxiety in Pariag who constructs a rather exclusive articulation of masculinity that is predicated on muscularity, toughness, the ability to play steel pan and sing calypso, all of which are associated with carnival (105). Most importantly for Pariag, carnival is also an expansive site that has the potential to affirm a common humanity while simultaneously permitting the individual to overcome the isolation of solipsism and partake in something greater than the self: “He wanted to be a man, to join the world, be part of a bigger
something in a bigger somewhere, to stretch out, to extend himself, be a man among people” (161).

The novel not only sheds light on the isolation of all of its central characters but also reflects an ideological reorientation for some of the members of the Indian community who have rejected the naturalised status of the ‘other’ that they had been assigned in Trinidad’s national discourse. As a consequence, they attempt to alleviate their alienation through migration, seeking entry into black Creole ‘mainstream’ spaces. In the specific case of Pariag, he seeks to break free from the confines of cultural and personal isolation as evidenced by his silent reflection on his unenviable position as the Hill’s marginalised shopkeeper: “He tried to think when last he had talked about more than the cost of flour and rice and saltfish” (223). Urbanisation and a proximity to carnival fails to draw him closer to Calvary Hill’s centre. Throughout the novel’s narrative trajectory, Pariag struggles to overcome a persistent sense of his own invisibility.

At first, Pariag believes that this position on the periphery of social life on Calgary Hill is solely attributable to his status as a newcomer. He idealistically rejects racialised rhetoric and, like Cleothilda, he asserts that “We is all people” (105). Pariag’s character is marked by a naivety that renders him, at first, blind to the clear bifurcation between blacks and Indians that his more pragmatic wife is all too cognisant of. As is typical in the novel, communal celebrations and festivals are sites where fissure points erupt, fracturing into visible fault-lines. In this instance, the parang⁶⁷ festivities that occur around Christmas time clarify where the Indian newcomers

---

⁶⁷ Ethnomusicologists often cite Venezuela as the origins of parang music which was adopted in Trinidad: “The influx of Venezuelans in Trinidad in the 19th Century has resulted in a Latin element in the musical history of the country. The parang derives from Venezuela and is specific to the celebration of Christmas. The early antecedents were totally Hispanic with compositions in Spanish or broken Spanish. In more recent times, there has been some
are truly positioned in relation to the rest of the community. As singers and musicians in the Calgary Hill band share ham and black Christmas cake and ritually visit each house in the neighbourhood, nobody comes to see Dolly and Pariag: “He waited there he and Dolly, he, with a pressed shirt on and she with her hair combed down and tied in plaits. They waited, with the ice melting in the bowl, and the roti and the curried mango getting cold. The band never came. They never came” (104).

This keen sense of isolation is noted in both *Play Mas’* and *The Dragon Can’t Dance* where Indian characters respond by withdrawing from a black-dominated, mainstream society and retreat into a state of cultural insularity. Thus, Indian navigation through and engagement with a ‘mainstream’ social and cultural landscape proves to be awkward. For Pariag, both Calvary Hill as a local community and Trinidad as a nation offer a liminal space in which he is both an insider and outsider. Subsequently, he makes a valiant if doomed attempt to redefine Indian identity and to bring it into the supposedly ‘multicultural’ framework of carnival. Pariag constantly seeks acceptance and validation from the predominantly black and urban community in which he resides, but ultimately retreats and holds himself aloof from both Calvary Hill and carnival when his attempts are rebuffed. Yet, towards the novel’s conclusion he experiences overwhelming nostalgia and begins to reminisce over his rural origins with the dawning realisation that both his origins and his ethnicity should be an enabling asset rather than an inhibitive barrier in carving out a performative space in carnival. David Lowenthal similarly challenges the assumption that both carnival and, by extension, West Indian culture in general

---

blending of Calypso and parang music. While songs are composed in Trinidadian English, the music blends calypso into a Latin beat. This new genre is known as Soca Parang, soca being the off-shoot of calypso. Emerging genres are chutney-soca and chutney-parang, which underline the continuous experimentation that is an ongoing characteristic of the industry in Trinidad and Tobago” (Henry 4).
are primarily a creole construction, with Indians playing no historical hand in the creation of the culture:

Creoles who believe themselves to be the only true West Indians also fail to recognize Indian traits in Creole culture. That carnival drumming has roots in Muslim Hosein and in Hindu Drummers’ skills, Creoles have forgotten. That rice in its present form is an East Indian contribution to the basic Creole diet, they seldom acknowledge. Curried goat is such a universal favourite that most Jamaicans are unaware of its Indian provenance. Creoles characteristically see even roti as simply Trinidadian, not Indian. (“West Indian Societies” 174)

Lowenthal identifies the important if under-recognised role that Indian culture plays in contributing to the regional character of the West Indies. Burton Sankeralli, in turn, points specifically to Hindu forms of masking, music and play that are clearly juxtaposed with carnival even as they claim the space of their own separate identity and distinct set of rituals. He disrupts myopic and stereotypical assumptions that attribute dance, celebration and play as the exclusive preserve of black or ‘creole’ Trinidadians and alludes to the ‘notion of leela’ or ‘lila,’ which translates into play. Carnival can be read as a moment of accord with this element in the Hindu belief system; the very cosmos in its entirety exists as “leela, a dance of energy, a drama staged by Brahman, the Absolute” (Sankeralli 203). In The Dragon Can’t Dance this is not observe. The narrative of Indian isolation and separation from African creole culture is maintained and Indo-Trinidadian festivals are largely unaccounted for. Nevertheless, there is certainly historical evidence to suggest that the aesthetic and practical skills involved in building floats, organising parades and designing effigies for Indian festivals have ultimately proved a major influence:
For instance Ramlee-la, a dance drama which required intricate wire-bending skill to construct huge effigies, was celebrated for five days in St James as early as 1896. Phagwa\textsuperscript{68} was no less influential with its bold use of colours and voices of scores of women singing songs of heroism. The musical instrument which linked all these festivals was tassa and the Africans were invariably present as spectators and sometimes as participants. (N. Mahabir, “Influence of Tassa Drums” 13)

The shadow of carnival—not only on Lovelace’s text but also over the national imaginary—tends to obscure and even minimise the significance of Hosay, the Shi’i Islamic celebration that, in terms of its scope, attendance and impact, is almost directly comparable to carnival. Hosay commemorates the assassination of Imam Hussein ibn Ali (or Husayn) in the 7\textsuperscript{th} century Battle of Karbala. The holiday also marks the death of Husayn’s family members and followers who were slain on the plains of Karbala, situated in modern-day Iraq (Korom & Chelkowski 51). The ritual mourning of Hosay in Trinidad culminates in a parade that extends over three successive nights, beginning with “a display of flags. The second night contains a procession of small tadjahs, while on the final night massive tadjahs are paraded” in processions that can extend for over a mile. Winding through the south of Trinidad the ceremonies are most spectacular in main centres such as San Fernando and Port of Spain” (Sankeralli 204).

While Hosay was initiated by the Muslim community, it was also supported by the Hindu community, effectively uniting Indians across creed and religion. Alongside ‘Diwali’, or the

\textsuperscript{68} Phagwa or ‘Holi’ marks the beginning of the Hindu New Year. Phagwa is held across the months of March and April and “coincides with the onset of spring in India, where the festival has been celebrated for thousands of years” (Harrylal “The True Meaning of Phagwa”).
‘Festival of Lights’, Hosay is both distinct from carnival yet shares with it a predilection for grand spectacle manifest in its massive, ornate tadjahs or tombs. These are decorative replicas that adherents constructed in honour of Husayn’s resting place in Iraq. The size, structure and grandeur of Hosay’s ta’ziya’s or ‘tadjahs’ as well as the rhythm of the tassa drums have found their way into Trinidadian carnival. It is particularly in the realm of music that the presence of Indian culture in carnival is most visible and audible. Like carnival, Hosay was also subject to colonial repression.

As a festival, Hosay has been established on several islands across the region, including St. Lucia, St. Vincent, Guadeloupe, Belize and Jamaica (Mansingh & Mansingh 29). Contemporary Hosay exists as a fusion of the sacred and secular and is no longer an Indo-centric event. A ceremony that once centred around “mourning, mercia (martydom songs)…tadjahs and drumming” (Mansingh & Mansingh 25) has cross-pollinated with the festivals and events of various islands. It has, for example, “incorporated the Jamaican ‘wake’ traditions of post-death mourning (in which drinking rum is almost a ritual) and the Trinidadian carnival theme.” Tadjahs have, in turn, found their way into Carnival (Cowley, Carnival, Canboulay and Calypso 83).

These instances are indicative of the possibility and promise of the meeting and intermingling of ‘African’ and ‘Indian’ cultures. Lovelace’s novel seeks to address the fraught terrain of multiculturalism and address the dilemma of the marginalised Indian on the one hand, but firmly situates Indians in relation to carnival rather than their own festivals. The text also

---

69 This will be discussed in greater detail in the final chapter of this thesis.

70 In 1884 the military attacked Hosay processions, resulting in multiple casualties and injuring at least one hundred participants.
glosses over the reality of Trinidad’s demographic balance, in which Indian Trinidadians rapidly came to rival the numbers of black Trinidadians\textsuperscript{71} whereas they are presented as a minority in the novel. Pariag’s role as an outsider is not only represented by his ethnicity but also in his clear quest for material success and domestic stability. As a character he stands in direct contradistinction to Aldrick’s embattled principles of non-possession. Pariag’s hard work, thrift, business acumen and eventual attainment of his own shop symbolically ushers in the process of commoditisation and compromise that Aldrick resists, acknowledges and then eventually makes peace with. Arguably, Pariag’s role not only as a shopkeeper, but a father and husband, is supported by the ‘softer’ values that lead to the transformation and implied ‘feminisation’ of the Hill. Like Aldrick, Pariag also suffers from an extreme form of hypervisibility, yet for much of the novel he assumes that he is invisible. Pariag then connects his invisibility directly to his exclusion from carnival: “Well, I ain’t big. I mean, I ain’t have no huge muscles, and I don’t sound tough, and I ain’t tough, and I can’t fight and don’t know how to play steelband or sing calypso, and I don’t know much about Carnival…” (Lovelace, \textit{The Dragon Can’t Dance} 105).

Tellingly, Pariag’s reading of carnival is culturally and ethnically specific, masculinist and deeply normative. It is a festival which can comfortably house articulations of black Trinidadian masculinity that are informed by spurious notions of ‘toughness’ conveyed through the masquerader, bad john, pan man and calypsonian. Human visibility and validation is predicated on one’s direct participation in carnival as represented through Aldrick, Fisheye and

\textsuperscript{71} During the time that \textit{The Dragon Can’t Dance} was published, Trinidad’s East Indian population was steadily increasing. In 2011, the Wayback Machine conducted a Population and Housing Census Demographic report that indicated that East Indians were the largest ethnic group on the island constituted approximately 37.6\% of the total population while black Trinidadians made up 36.3\% (Clement and Salim, “The 2011 Census Demographic Report” 15).
Philo respectively. Yet as a non-practitioner of the carnival arts and as non-participant in the event, these roles are not available to Pariag. Pariag’s admission of his failure to meet a rather narrow articulation of masculinity is further emphasised through the bullying and physical victimisation that he undergoes on the Hill, culminating in the destruction of his bike. His acquisition of a bike not only provided him with transport, but enabled him to sell his wares and expand his business. It also revealed his ambition and discipline both in the way that he attains and then uses it to further advance his goals of economic stability. Nevertheless “the bike is interpreted as an ostentatious and divisive display, among folk who are equal in their poverty and nothingness” (Lewis 179). Like Aldrick’s dragon mask, the bike also functions as an inscribed marker and status symbol, which grants him visibility in the yard and permits a specific performance of masculinity: through possession of the bike, he is an entrepreneur, husband, father, and family provider. Whether functional or destroyed, Pariag’s bike also becomes the focal point of repressed envy. It functions as a disruptive force that directly challenges the existing social order and ethics of the yard and must therefore be eradicated. Unsurprisingly, the residents on the Hill rally around Aldrick with the expectation that he will oppose the Indian upstart and usurper:

The Yard had already chosen him [Aldrick] as the one to defend it against the Indian; for it was he, more than Guy or Philo, who most faithfully upheld that living, that code; who, indeed, lived the reality of non-possession as a way of life that Pariag in acquiring the bicycle was now violating. (118-9)

Just as Aldrick’s dramatic stance of non-possession stabilises the Hill and provides residents with a reassuring point of certainty and an orienting point of reference, Pariag’s rapid economic advancement threatens the familiar hierarchy. While Lewis Linden suggests that the bike is the
means through which Pariag attempts to ameliorate his lack of masculinity, Masood Ashraf Raja astutely posits that the purchase of the bike was “aimed at obtaining recognition of his very humanity, his existence, from the Calvary Hill Yard” (Raja 123). I would also argue that Pariag not only upsets the fragile balance of social arrangements on the Hill but that the scope of his personal identity and his social vision threatens the Hill’s narrow reading and understanding of its own identity. Pariag’s vulnerability, domestic stability, his expressions of tenderness towards his wife Dolly, and his conception of a masculinity that is rooted in familial provision and material success challenges forms of masculinity articulated through carnival and offers an alternative articulation of freedom that stands apart from “the dragon, Carnival, rebellion, the possession of nothing” (Lovelace, The Dragon Can’t Dance 217).

While Lovelace contemplates the diminishing state of kalinda and the dying efficacy of masking, he reserves commentary on the commercialisation of calypso towards the end of the novel. The narrative presents Philo the Calypsonian as comic, clown and critical voice of the locals. However, he is abruptly jettisoned from the ranks of the men on the corner once he accidentally stumbles into national fame and fortune thanks to a fortuitously bawdy or ‘smut’ calypso. Alongside Pariag, Philo represents a parallel narrative of social and material advancement. Perversely, he is once again embraced by his former community on the basis of that very same success, although his position on Calvary Hill is irrevocably altered. Once, he was effortlessly part of the Hill and free to laugh and lime on the corner with ‘the fellas’ (Lovelace, The Dragon Can’t Dance 169), but is gradually regarded with suspicion by the likes of Fisheye who baldly admits his distrust of Philo’s outward displays of exaggerated levity and rejects Philo’s farcical denial of the change in their socio-economic situation and the resulting gulf between them.
Worse, Fisheye silently scorns Philo’s forced attempts to re-forge bonds of friendship and intimacy that have been sundered by his success and re-location (169). Aldrick, in turn, has a more congratulatory response to Philo’s cars, women, and the “the quality of his scarves” (168), but is also surprised to realise that “…he didn’t feel comfortable with him” (168). Worse, Aldrick even wishes that Philo would surrender his awkward, even farcical pretence that nothing had changed and would have the grace to let go of the Hill and ease into his new life. His assessment is both nuanced and astute when he takes note of the calypsonian costume that Philo dons. It simultaneously thrusts him into a condition of hypervisibility, while serving as a guise:

To Aldrick, it seemed as if Philo’s success had become a matter of apology. Philo decorated himself in gaudy shirts and broad-brimmed hats with long, colourful feathers stuck inside them, as if he wanted to hide himself, and to make himself appear so cosquel72 that any fool would know that he had to be found elsewhere, apart from the costume within it. (169)

Philo’s public performance, in contrast to his dress, relies on his calypsonian persona as the all-conquering ‘Axe Man’, a moniker rife with sexual double entendre. Similarly, his lyrics have become light and insubstantial, delivered in a faux-American accent, that fall well beneath his original standards which regarded calypso as both art and craft. The seemingly carefree mask of the ‘Axe Man’ wins him local and national acclaim, even as it simultaneously entraps Philo, wedding him to a stereotype that sits in direct and jarring opposition to his own understanding of his personal history and private identity. Philo’s character arc—from bullied

---

72 The word ‘cosquel’ is Trinidadian patois and a pejorative term “…for something overdone or juxtapositions which fail; it is a vulgarity that indicates an attempt to style but a failure of taste.” (Miller 145)
child and classroom clown to successful calypsonian—hinges on his verbal prowess and theatrical skill. He develops the ability to perform and to feign what he neither thinks nor really feels. His quick tongue disarms his opponents even as he entertains them, and it is this verbal litheness that permits him to survive in a harsh environment.

As an adult, his highly humorous, radio-friendly calypsos inexorably ossify into a tough, unyielding hypersexual and hyper-masculine mask that further distances him from both the boy and man that lie beneath. His calypsos, like his later costumes, are a form of hyperbolic parody that both mimics, mocks, toys with and ultimately exaggerates the ideal of the West Indian male. Furthermore, the material success that he accrues from his performance has a distancing effect, separating him from the local residents of Cavalry Hill as the chasm of class distinction arises. This causes him to seek refuge in the comparatively middle-class environment of Diego Martin. Philo’s ejection from social life in the Hill is marked by a heated confrontation between Fisheye and himself. He retaliates by not only turning his back on the Hill but by penning a pointed Calypso that attacks the Corner while decrying the violence of Bad Johns and ‘hooligans.’ Philo’s calypso has the dual effect of severing him from the Corner and distancing him from a family legacy. Unlike his father, whose career as a musician was unsuccessful, Philo is rewarded with relative wealth and reputation while his attack on the Corner secures his first carnival title as Calypso King. What is critical to note, however, is that Philo’s calypso captures the zeitgeist of the times and effectively expresses the dilemma of a people caught between the inheritance of a hard history and a newly emerging social order:

They had jobs now, had the responsibility now for surviving families. They could no longer afford rebellion on the corner. They felt guilty turning away from it. Yet, they needed to move on…They had to choose, they felt; and, it was because they were unable
to hold in their minds two contradictory ideas—their resistance and their surviving, their rebellion and their decency; because they felt they had to be one or the other in order to move on, they needed to cut ties with the Corner. So it was that Philo’s calypso became a statement for all of them. This would be the epitaph to their rebellion. (178)

Yet calypso, ever Janus-faced, serves a dual function for Philo as it operates in both his private and public life with profound effects. ‘Philo the Axeman’ who struts the stage is also Philo the dedicated Calypsonian who attempts to decipher then comment on the new neighbourhood he is cast into and the perplexing social climate that surrounds him. A synaesthesia of sorts occurs as calypso extends beyond clever verbal delivery and functions as revelatory in-sight.’ For Philo it is a means through which one watches, and ‘sees’ and thus knows the world. He notes with dawning horror the homogeneity of his new neighbourhood:

The new people so new, you know, nobody
Don’t know who is who
They so all the same, all of them carry
The same kinda name
Same kinda dog, same kinda wife, all of them living
the same kinda life.
Cause the same kinda dress, same kinda shoe
Same hair cut, same hair do
I hear it is true, they all caress their wife
On the same night too... (227-8)
Philo’s sudden, almost blinding insight into his environment contains, once again, the metaphor of a revelation or an unmasking: “Jesus Lord! I find them out! I find them out!” (228). Philo’s ‘findings’ are then penned into copious calypsos rich with social critique, that function as a personal epistemology that permits him to successfully read and then narrate on the changing environment. Yet they are never performed beyond the confines of his imagination and never find their way to any public audience as the lucrative, on-stage persona of ‘the Axeman’ proves to be too profitable to surrender.

Unlike *Play Mas’* however, which refers to calypso music in passing but neither dwells nor expounds on it, *The Dragon Can’t Dance* also interpolates the lyrics and the theatrical performance of calypso text into the literary in order to both constitute and comment on mas’. As a result the novel places an equal weight on both aspects of mas’ performance. Thus Philo the Calypsonian complements Aldrick the mas’ man as the two characters represent both sides of the same existential struggle. Their identities are threatened by displacement and the increasing trivialisation of their respective craft. A deep commitment to mas’ and to the serious business of play is evident in Aldric’s unease and bewilderment over the waning power of folkloric signification as bats, devils and even dragons lose their ability to represent rebellion. Nevertheless, Lovelace tentatively adheres to the idea that the genuine potential for creativity and representation still resides in the festival. This is not to say, however, that Lovelace does not interrogate or problematise carnival—particularly as it morphs and shifts in a climate of corporate and government intervention. Costuming and calypso are integral to a Lovelacian conception of carnival. Furthermore, costuming and calypso provided fertile ground for Lovelace’s text. Not only do these two practices inform the descriptive language and visual aesthetics of Lovelace’s text, they also provide an opportunity for the text to reflect on how class, race and gender intersect in the ‘microcosm’ of carnival’s limited space and time. This
is then refracted onto a wider social setting. Lovelace’s text is pre-dated by but also related to an earlier history in which carnival struggled to survive in the face of the colonial government’s disdain and censure.73

As this multi-perspectival text accounts for the personal biography of each man (Aldrick, Fisheye, Pariag and Philo) and explores where each is situated in relation to carnival, it is increasingly apparent that there is a notable gulf between their youthful identities and the social roles that they later assume as adult men. Arguably, they are prematurely pushed into adopting masks and following scripts that are not initially of their choosing, but to which they eventually submit. Carnival then becomes a way of indulging in a purposeful, serious play which is, to reiterate Aldrick’s assertion, ‘no joke.’ Mas’ play is thus representative insofar as it articulates the present material realities of the Calvary Hill residents, giving voice to their poverty, their blackness, their specific roots on ‘the Corner’ where they congregate and ‘lime’ and their broader commitment to the Hill.

Through costuming they construct themselves; they express their concerns and the music sings, dances and ultimately spins ‘them’ into being. It also provides the opportunity for a more fantastic, methetic play. For if ole mas’ is concerned with a politics of representation that commemorates historical identity and annually meditates on how one’s daily identity is both constituted by and situated within a changing social nexus, then fancy mas’ delves into a politics of pleasure, serving as an articulation of desire and a decidedly methetic play that fleetingly materialises the potential of what one could be. Lovelace’s novel identifies and

73Although the government's policies had created the social conditions under which distorted and repressed forms of calypso and kalinda flourished, the government used carnival's violence as an excuse for banning the festival. Moreover, carnival was not a part of British culture, and tended to overshadow the importance of Christmas, which was regarded as the most important event of the year in British society.
discusses, but never truly settles, the antagonism between black dispossession and Indian alienation; carnival’s promise as a unifying force remains unfulfilled. Aldrick remains hopeful but faces an ambiguous future and uncertain prospects. Fisheye’s disposition hardens into inflexibility. He graduates from a Bad John to a steelpan player but his limited outlook and ongoing commitment to hypermasculinity ensures that he will be ossified in a fading carnival past. Philo is increasingly detached from his community against his will, while Pariag struggles to move beyond the reductive gaze a community that prejudgets and ‘fixes’ him into place while refusing to grant him the human visibility that he desires. As he ponders aloud: “But how you make someone know you, who know you too long and don’t know you at all” (226). Kenneth Ramchand effectively articulates the rhetoric of social masking and veiling that pervades the entire novel both during carnival and beyond it:

Some of the veils may be deliberately and elaborately put in place, while others are simply there without the wearer’s conscious connivance. Sometimes, the veil exists more in the eye of the beholder than anywhere else. But the veil which can protect can also smother or pen in, and what gives sense of identity to a group can exclude others, and make it difficult for them to see the individual. Lovelace recognises the necessity of veils but points to the saving virtue of being conscious of one’s veils as veils, as well as to the dangers of allowing the veil to become a permanent mask. For if the latter occurs, the self is denied; or else, it becomes impossible either to begin to know one’s self or to be known by other selves [emphasis added]. (Ramchand 8)

Aldrick embarks on a markedly different personal journey to Pariag’s but he too learns to differentiate between ‘pretense and performance’ (Browne 117) and becomes increasingly conscious of both the possibilities and also the limits of social masking to the point where he
realises “[w]e coulda do more than play a mas’” (Lovelace, *The Dragon Can’t Dance* 200.)

The mask and its performance sclerotises as he is caught in a cyclic, repetitive display in which he plays mas’ for its own sake while losing sight of the original motivation behind the performance. Eventually he refuses to don the mask and refrains from the masquerade if only to give himself sufficient psychological space to contemplate why he plays mas’ and how his performance can actually speak to and meaningfully engage with a changing social climate.

Post-carnival, the police regulate and purge the Corner of hooligans, Fisheye, Aldrick and some local Bad Johns attempt to retaliate against this encroachment and try to defend both the territory of the Corner and their waning power in the new social order. However, their collective stance is curiously hollow as they clumsily draw upon foreign signifiers of masculine authority and power. Their confrontation is confused in both its influences and its intent and their attempts to incite rebellion fall on deaf ears. The “Calvary Nine’ are inspired by the foreign rhetoric of the Western gunslinger and the outlaw (187). They unimaginatively appropriate then mimic the trappings of American military might as Fisheye plays the part of a “General” while they are simultaneously seduced by the distant glamour of Black Power imagery.74 Fidel Castro and his associations of guerrilla warfare is also loosely and inaccurately invoked, culminating in an abortive pantomime and pastiche of political action. As Natasha Barnes observes:

> When he tries to perform his dragon dance in the space where it is not licensed—the landscape of concrete revolutionary action—his play is only that: play that elicits none of the modes of recognition and visibility that were guaranteed on Carnival Monday and Tuesday. The inchoate effort to organize Calvary Hill’s dispossessed “warriors”

---

74 Their rag-taggle, makeshift group assume the moniker of ‘The People’s Liberation Army’ which directly recalls ‘The Black Liberation Army’ which was a splinter group from the original Black Panther Party in the United States.
into a body for purposeful political action becomes a pitiful simulacra of the self that emerged from its original context. (Barnes, *Cultural Conundrums* 82)

Toothless and rudderless, the Calvary Nine are largely ignored. Despite anticipating theatre and resistance they contemplate surrender and are then tamely apprehended by the police in anti-climactic fashion. Aldrick is the first to identify that the mask does not fit and that the highly scripted and predictable gestures of their political theatre and the overall ‘play’ that they enact was not truly of their own making. He astutely identifies their failure of nerve, imagination and their overall lack of authentic vision when he muses that “…we couldn’t do what we didn’t see to do. We couldn’ta enter where we had no vision to go” (Lovelace, *The Dragon Can’t Dance* 201). He alone of the nine is able to identify the futility of a rebellion that solely seeks visibility and is dependent upon validation from the very forces that it seeks to overthrow. He recognises that they had no objective beyond spectacle, no greater demand than to be heard and no plan or ambition beyond infamy and recognition.

Paradoxically, once he is imprisoned, he is freed from former misconceptions about himself, his own desires, and his environment and his imagination take flight. No longer blinded by a desire for visibility he calmly reflects upon the insubstantial theatre of their ‘coup’ and notes how they simulate rather than exercise agency: “Is like we have we ain’t have no self…Is like even when we acting we ain’t the actor” (202). At heart, self-possession rather than non-possession is the key. *The Dragon Can’t Dance* suggests that it is only through ‘playing oneself’ and revealing oneself that carnival and life beyond carnival is reinvested and reinvigorated with affective, political potential. Kevin A. Browne posits Aldrick as a “Caribbean rhetor” and his dragon roleplay as a tropic75 manoeuvre (Browne 117) that enables

---

75 ‘Tropic’ as in trope.
him to substantiate an identity—even as the mask simultaneously obscures and forestalls the growth and development of an emergent and more sophisticated reading of the self. In order to overcome his alienation Aldrick must face

the unfolding future...[which] must be confronted in terms of a masque tradition rather than be masked as tradition. At stake, therefore, is the crucial need to perform as oneself, as a rhetor engaged not in pretense but in the deliberate display of ethos—“making a masque” rather than simply “playing a mas’.” (Browne 120)

The novel offers Pariag (and the reader) some consolation and even hope as he also differentiates between roleplay and reality. His recognition of his shared, mutual estrangement with (and from) Dolly and his resolve to bridge the distance between them acts as a partial salve to his own alienation. She is also a stranger, not only on the Hill but even to him, and he ultimately resolves to invite her into the intimacy of his interior life and to become acquainted with hers. Yet he cannot return home, don the easy inauthentic mask of ‘creolisation’ (as his former co-worker Balliram does) or retreat into the mono-cultural insularity of watching unsatisfying Indian talent shows scroll on the TV screen. Astutely he surmises that:

The show itself was too smooth, too easy. Its triumph was too much of a foregone conclusion. It tired him. And now he saw something that was always missing for him in these shows. He realized what it was now, for the first time. It lacked the guts of the struggle he, Pariag, had lived and Dolly and his father and his uncle Ramlochan. It didn’t have the sugarcane and the cow dung in it and the roasted peanuts and the boiled and fried channa in a basket round the Savannah with Colts playing Malvern (Maple done get licks already). It jingled with jewels, and leaves fell and there was perfume;
but it didn’t have bottles in it. It didn’t have Balliram and Vishnu on the bottles truck
at five o’clock in the morning… (Lovelace, The Dragon Can’t Dance 222-3)

Pariag’s moment of insight speaks to the desire for relevant representation that speaks directly
to the culture, time, place and milieu in which one is situated. It also paves new ground on
which to stand, enabling him to express a fuller, more stable and more complete understanding
of his own identity. Interestingly enough, neither Pariag nor Aldrick discover their sense of self
in the public parameters of carnival. Rather, they arrive at self-realisation outside of its
purview. Instead, epiphany strikes in the lonely confines of their own personal entrapment. The
parallel is not at all surprising, since Lovelace symbolically partners the two characters, African
and Indian, in a *sympatico* acquaintance that stands on the tentative cusp of a genuine
relationship. But before this can occur, each man must embark on a self-reflective journey.
Thus, Pariag is able to reject both assimilation as a passport to ‘national belonging’ and
segregation as a means to ensure a narrow interpretation of community. Instead he envisions,
for the first time, true participation on his own terms:

> I wish I could walk with a flute or a sitar, and walk in right there in the middle of the
steelband yard where they was making new drums, new sounds, a new music from
rubbish tins and bits of steel and oil drums, bending the iron over fire, chiselling out
new notes. New notes….Gimme the beat, lemme beat! Listen to these strings and let
his music cry too, and join in the crying. Let it scream too… (224)

But then the music moves from the sound of wailing to articulate vocalisation, then segues into
visualisation. As each scenario rises to the surface of his consciousness he records in his mind’s
eye an answering film reel connected to the intimacy of rural life and family. His memories
refute the glossy artifice on his screen. His vision for and of himself and his sense of relationship to wider community and to his past is complex even while it celebrates the struggle of each stage of his journey with a startling clarity. In confidently claiming himself, he is then able refute Cleothilda’s simplistic logic of assimilation and state: “No. We didn’t have to melt into one. I would have be me for my own self…A self to go in the world with, with something in my hands to give. We didn’t have to melt into one” (224).
Chapter Four:
A Tale of Two Carnivals

Contrasting Worlds

“Maybe I is a master weaver. I spin the threads. I twist warp ‘cross weft. I move my shuttle in and out, and smooth smooth, I weaving you my story, out? And when I done, I shake it out and turn it over swips! And maybe you see it have a next side to the tale. Maybe is same way so I weave my way through the dimension to land up here.”

—Hopkinson, Midnight Robber 3

In the second chapter I examined how Matura Mustapha’s Play Mas’ relied heavily on extended metaphors that drew on tailoring and carnival costuming. This preoccupation unveils one of the play’s chief thematic concerns—namely that of the intricate, often fraught process of political nation-building. While never a simple undertaking, statecraft is particularly unpredictable when it is ideologically informed by and then organised around the framework of a national event such as carnival. In the previous chapter, masking and costuming functioned as a powerful rhetorical trope in The Dragon Can’t Dance. Speculative fiction author Nalo Hopkinson similarly deploys a clothing metaphor that specifically pertains to textiles and the art of weaving. Through her own use of this extended metaphor, Hopkinson alludes to the polyphonic storytelling process that unfolds in her novel Midnight Robber, published at the start of the new millennia in 2000.
In brief, the story revolves around the exile of fallen politician and fugitive Mayor Antonio Habib, his estranged wife Ione Brasil (originally of Cockpit County) and their daughter Tan Tan who initially reside on Toussaint, in the techno-capital of Marrysheville. After inadvertently committing manslaughter, Antonio flees Marrysheville with Tan Tan and hides in the inhospitable dimension of New Half-Way Tree. Toussaint exists as an alluring amalgamation of selective aspects of Jamaica’s, Haiti’s, and Trinidad’s history of colonisation, as well as a weaving-together of threads from African-diasporic folklore. Jamaican Junkanoo, and Trinidadian carnival in particular, clearly informs Toussaint’s culture of festivities and the lore of ole mas’ is introduced to science-fiction and reconfigured accordingly. *Midnight Robber* constructs the twin worlds of Toussaint, a planet that has been colonised by a Caribbean-based diaspora, and New Half-Way Tree, its satellite colony. The former exists as a post-apocalyptic, post-industrial setting that can be described as an uneasily ambiguous technological utopia. Toussaint’s supposedly ‘dystopian’ shadow is expressed through periodic hints of class conflict which are perpetually negotiated and, for the most part, held at bay.

The underlying premise of Hopkinson’s futuristic tale involves space-travel and the subsequent settlement of the planet Toussaint by an African-based diaspora, but this time in a wholly voluntary exodus. Toussaint is thus part of a wider conglomeration of similarly settled planets known, as the ‘Nation Worlds’. ‘Granny Nanny’ is a complex web system who is the master-mind and chief engineer behind their act of settlement. *Midnight Robber* presents a society that temporally and spatially links the disparate worlds of the terrestrial Caribbean with Toussaint and New Half-Way Tree. Characters, in turn, are all ‘linked’ into an overarching, regulatory Web that introduces, sustains and monitors life on the planet. This link extends not only between its human citizens and the Web but to all plant life and living creatures on Toussaint.
Thus, the Web as a connective function arguably meshes with the planet’s biota, connecting the latter to itself.

Dystopia is also symbolised by New Half-Way Tree, the land where myth and folklore are menacingly materialised and creatures that are played in carnival or that populate folk-tales freely roam. As a result, the novel is a curious blend of science-fiction mixed with Caribbean-based mythology. Furthermore, carnival is an integral part of the novel’s world building which shapes both Toussaint and New-Half Way Tree as each society engages with a specific articulation of carnival. Hopkinson and Matura centralise carnival in their work and deploy it as a literary motif. Matura meditates on carnival and suggests that populist and comforting myths surrounding carnival, such as its avowed multiculturalism, are warped, massaged and manipulated much like the steel of a steel pan drum in order to construct a monotone national mythos. The monologue it generates excludes ‘other’ voices and diminishes opportunities for ethnic distinction, discursive difference, cultural diversity and voices of discord and dissent. Carnival also becomes the means through which unjust social and political orders are merely inverted. Armed with these insights, the text proceeds to speculate on how the process of ‘revolution’ may go radically awry.

Matura specifically positions carnival as a dubious and potentially sinister tool that assists in the construction and maintenance of state control. Earl Lovelace, by contrast, presents carnival as a vibrant, living and authentic event that is crafted through local creativity. Yet, it is at risk of being gradually domesticated and bowdlerised by the state, which only views the festival as a form of potential revenue from tourism. In the text, carnival is subverted from its roots, origins and purpose. Similarly, Lovelace is interested in demarcating the fault-lines of ethnic tension that permeate and stratify a supposedly ‘inclusive’ event and, as a result, carefully
examines both ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ status in relation to carnival, to a local community and to the nation at large.

Like Matura, Lovelace keenly observes how Indian identity functions as an oppositional ‘other’ in nationalist narratives. It is positioned in relation to notions of ‘authentic’ citizenry and national belonging and both authors consider the ways in which Indian identity is marginalised, stereotyped and curtailed. Indian identity is undermined by the artifice of multicultural rhetoric that skilfully conceals the over-riding reality of Afro-centric cultural dominance. Hopkinson, by contrast, does not dwell on racial conflict or tension which are largely absent from her futuristic utopia. In the absence of conflict, carnival is then portrayed as a decidedly post-revolutionary event that is ever more temporally distant from its origins. Class tension, however, is very much a salient factor in Midnight Robber, surfacing both within and beyond the parameters of carnival. Nevertheless, it is effectively contained not only by carnival but by wider social mechanisms that have helped to ‘engineer’ new colonies such as Toussaint. The ‘mechanisms’ in question are the socialist, humanist and egalitarian principles that purportedly underpin the society. They are uniquely bolstered and partially actualised through a potentially liberating form of technology that bears the matriarchal moniker ‘the Granny Nanny Web’.

Despite the markedly different approaches that each author makes to presenting and then using carnival as a literary motif, all three texts exhibit varying degrees of anxiety and scepticism if not outright hostility towards the notion of ‘the state.’ The ambiguous relationship between the state and its citizenry and the state and carnival is critiqued in each text through an examination of the power and authority it wields over citizens and carnival. In Play Mas’, the festival exists in a forced proximity to the state thanks to perpetual intervention into carnival as well as the state’s partial appropriation of the event. In Midnight Robber, however, state intervention into
carnival is subtly implied, while state appropriation of the event is a coup de grace. The central narrative unfolds in the wake of those twin processes which allows Hopkinson to ultimately part company with Matura and Lovelace and explore new ground.

Polyphony and vocalisation are also vital to the text. In the first few paragraphs, a critical, yet hidden narrator cannily outlines the structure of the narrative, identifying it as decidedly ‘double-sided.’ The events of the text are then balanced between the secondary mirror worlds of Toussaint and New Half-Way Tree, which are both colonised by human descendants of the Caribbean. Furthermore, the novel also ties together multiple, divergent, yet intersecting narrative strands resulting in a complex heteroglossia that oscillates between the ‘normative’ registers of so-called ‘standard’ English and a pan-West Indian Creole. The text is glossed with creolised patois where characters can be bassourdie, or tallawah, have mako, or be someone’s doux- doux. Downpressers swaggerboys ‘picky-heads’, and leggobeasts populate the text while characters consume toolum, chataigne (chestnuts), and Topi-tambo. Alongside carnival, the novel’s argot is integral to the world-building at the heart of her novel, resulting in two contrasting yet plausible societies with a vibrant, expressive language that

---

76 “Dim-witted’ or addled. It can also imply drunk.

77 Fearless or strong-willed and not be underestimated. It is usually used in relation to something small, indicating a contradiction. Of Ione it is said: “She little bit, but she tallawah, oui!”

78 Ridiculing or making a fool of someone. It can also refer to a joke. “You making mako ‘pon me?” (Hopkinson Midnight Robber 180).

79 Darling. A French infantilisation usually used as a term of affection.

80 A Jamaican term usually associated with reggae music and Rastafarianism that translates into ‘oppressor’.

81 An overly confident male.

82 A derogative term for someone (usually black) who barely has any hair on their head.

83 A Trinidadian sweet primarily made of molasses.

84 “Topi tambo or Calathea allouia is a popular tuber in Trinidad and Tobago that can usually be found during the Carnival and Lenten season. Often referred to as tipi tambo by locals, this tuber has a texture similar to a water chestnut, nice and crunchy” (“Topi-Tambo” 2012).
marks the society as predominantly black and Caribbean, and links them to their terrestrial homeland.

I argue that Hopkinson outlines two distinct rationales that motivate a carnival. In the earlier half of the novel she observes the way in which carnival is grounds for ritual commemoration, re-enactment, and colonial instruction. In the latter half of the novel she re-positions carnival as a dramatic stage for personal revelation, reclamation and redress. She also establishes a critical binary between two distinct articulations of carnival, demarcated by the presence of twin worlds that structure both the novel and the narrative. The pedantic commemoration and bloodless re-enactment of carnival in the early part of the text is subtly problematised and implicitly critiqued as Hopkinson invites readers to consider which social conditions will allow carnival to be genuinely affective and what kind of cultural environment is required in order for carnival to successfully take root and endure.

Furthermore, the novel initiates and eventually completes a grand inversion. The twin worlds presented at the start of the novel are incipiently positioned in a hierarchic binary where the materiality and the reality of Toussaint is privileged over the insubstantial ‘shadowland’ of New Half-Way Tree which is deemed inferior, insubstantial, regressive and ‘other’. As the narrative gradually unfolds, however, this hierarchy is inverted as it is eventually revealed that Toussaint in all of its post-industrial sophistication, embedded technology, and superior materiality actually functions as a shadowy artifice. The shadow world of New Half-Way Tree moves from the periphery and is strategically re-positioned at the heart of the novel. Critically, it is also the site that enables a more organic expression of carnival to prevail.85 The

85 In her essay “The Child and the Shadow,” acclaimed author Ursula Le Guin re-tells a Hans Christian fairy-tale. The story revolves around a man and his shadow, using a Jungian framework to reshape and then critique the tale
technological utopia of Toussaint is ultimately unmasked while its ritualistic, repetitive re-enactment of carnival is exposed as a form of hollow mimicry that occurs *in vacuo*, resulting in an ‘event’ that is a ‘carnival’ in name only. The carnivalesque mimicry that occurs on Toussaint is also obfuscatory.

Toussaint’s residents commemorate a vague account of a distant past in palimpsestic fashion as they carefully overwrite and erase the details of a more recent history of settlement. This results in a ‘thin’ and disconnected narration of their citizenship on the planet. The central world of the text is subsequently stitched together with half-truths, semi-lies and an incoherent history whereby its inhabitants cannot give a holistic account of their settlement on the planet and can only dutifully parrot the scattered details of a more distant past. Toussaint’s fragmented history foreshadows the narrative confusion and the broken ‘half-truths’ that the novel’s protagonist later struggles with as an adult, before she is able to give a full, coherent and transparent account of her own multiple journeys across the text. The novel’s preoccupation with an extensive history across time and space is firmly situated in the realm of science-fiction. The novel consistently alludes to the history of slavery, colonialism and ‘post’-colonialism that Lovelace sets his narrative against, but steps beyond a known history and into a speculative future where advanced technology and Caribbean folklore meet. Hopkinson casts her narrative into a future that is responsive to and structured by ‘realistic’ history even as she also casts a critical eye on how societies selectively deploy aspects of historical narratives in order to craft narratives of their own. In *Critical Theory and Science Fiction* Carl Freedman posits:

(59-64). Shadows and shadowplay are explored while the fairy-tale playfully inverts and questions the idea of materiality and insubstantiality. Ultimately, the ‘shadow’ is materialised while the man serves as shadow to his shadow. I see a similar process at work in Hopkinson’s novel in relation to her world-building and the characterisation of her divided protagonist, but a dramatic inversion is deployed to a markedly different effect.

Read chapter two of Eric D. Smith’s *Globalization, Utopia and Postcolonial Science Fiction: New Maps of Hope*. 

---

86 Read chapter two of Eric D. Smith’s *Globalization, Utopia and Postcolonial Science Fiction: New Maps of Hope*. 

173
In a sense, SF [science-fiction] is of all genres the one most devoted to historical specificity: for the SF world is not only one different in time or place from our own, but one whose chief interest is precisely the difference that such difference makes, and, in addition, one whose difference is nonetheless contained within a cognitive continuum with the actual (thus sharply distinguishing SF from the irrationalist estrangements of fantasy or Gothic literature, which secretly work to ratify the mundane status quo by presenting no alternative to the latter other than inexplicable discontinuities). (Freedman 187)

**Genre and storytelling**

*Midnight Robber* weaves a narrative across two disparate worlds or spaces but ambitiously works with the codes, conventions and requirements of two distinct genres; namely science-fiction and fantasy. In effect, Hopkinson uses a science-fiction novum to construct Toussaint while adhering to the principles of fantasy literature in order to give birth to New-Halfway Tree. The term ‘novum’ was originally coined by Darko Suvin in *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre* (1979). Suvin is most famous for attempting to define the parameters which distinguish science-fiction from other literary genres, sub-genres and tale-types: namely, non-fiction, realistic fiction, moral allegories, supernatural fantasy, myth, and fairytale. Suvin postulates that the two critical hallmarks of ‘sci-fi’ are cognitive estrangement and ‘the novum’. Cognitive estrangement is the necessary condition that allows the fictive world in a work of science-fiction to be differentiated from a recognisably realistic world. The critical factor, however, which enables cognitive estrangement on the part of the reader is that of the ‘novum’ which exists as a novel form of
innovative and intriguing technology that is scientifically plausible. It can be explicated using the logic of science while simultaneously indicating that the world or universe, in which the novum exists, is clearly not our own.

In *Midnight Robber* the ‘novum’ in question is an overarching ‘web’ or interface comparable to the internet as Toussaint’s citizens are linked or ‘wired’ into an intricate, regulatory system that has the ability to collect somatic data and information on each individual citizen through the use of nanorobotics. The link between individuals and the web and the subsequent surveillance that they experience is made possible by the presence of ‘nanomites’ or microscopic robots so diminutive that they are measured in nanometers. Their miniscule size enables them to be released into the human bloodstream while their movement is externally controlled and regulated. Nanomites also have a data-gathering function as they primarily perform toxicology reports, and have the ability to regulate the physical health of its citizens. They are also used to communicate to and educate the residents of Toussaint. Nanomedicine and nanorobotics currently exist as a promising, if nascent form of technology. Hopkinson follows the generic requirements of science-fiction by adopting then speculating upon an existing technology, imaginatively presenting it in an advanced and fully realised form then temporally resituating it in ‘the future’. Hopkinson chooses to emphasise the technology’s potential for surveillance and communication by way of information-gathering and educative story-telling.

In this way, the novel fulfils one of the key requirements for a work to be able to be regarded as legitimate science-fiction—namely, that the technology in question is plausible. ‘Sci-fi’ elements, in turn, are balanced by and upon Caribbean folklore. The very fabric of ‘the New World’ in the novel is spun from a folkloric procession of characters that is also grounded in
carnival. New Half-Way Tree may be devoid of web and nanomite technology but is replete with *moko jumbies, douens*\(^{87}\), choke puppies and rolling calves that are visibly indigenous and integral to its structure. Thus, the staple figures of Caribbean folklore, are imaginatively represented as they roam the forests and populate the landscape. In effect, Hopkinson successfully materialises a Caribbean cultural imaginary across time and space in order to constitute a coherent ‘secondary’ creation in the form of twin planets.

J.R.R. Tolkien’s seminal text on fantasy theory *Tree and Leaf* is a literary, taxonomic venture that seeks to establish the ontology of the fairy story. Through a process of discursive deduction he defines ‘the fairy-story’ which he positions as a close cousin to the genre of fantasy. He also introduces the idea of a ‘secondary world’ which is produced through a considered process of sub-creation and which he regards as a key component of the genre. The secondary world is distinct from the primary, or real world\(^{88}\), but draws on much of the same materials that are present in the latter. According to Tolkien, secondary worlds are a direct product of the act of ‘sub-creation’ which then creates an answering ‘secondary belief’ on the part of the audience “…into which both designer and spectator can enter, to the satisfaction of their senses while they are inside; but in its purity it is artistic in desires and purpose. Magic produces or pretends to produce, an alteration in the Primary World” (53).

---

\(^{87}\) According to Trinidadian folklore, *douens* “are the souls of children who died before they were baptized. They live in the forests, coming out occasionally in search of playmates, and appear as any other child except that their feet are turned backward” (L. Alleyne “The Douen” 47). Hopkinson reimagines the *douen* as feathered, bird-like indigenous caretakers who not only attempt to protect New Half-Way Tree from the encroachment of the penal colony, but who also assume protective custody of the runaway Tan Tan.

---

\(^{88}\) In *Midnight Robber* the ‘primary’ world is none other than a destroyed Earth that is vaguely recalled by the inhabitants of Toussaint and New Half-Way Tree.
He also suggests that ‘secondary belief’ is distinct from and counter to a mere ‘suspension’ of disbelief (50; 53). Thus, fantasy authors have tremendous powers of creativity and the ability to speak or breathe life into a secondary world. Critically, the secondary world (or, in this case ‘worlds’) must be cohesive and internally consistent insofar as its natural phenomena and laws of physics. Its social rules must also be logical, plausible and consistently applied and upheld in order to create ‘secondary belief’ since “…creative Fantasy is founded upon the hard recognitions that things are so in the world as it appears under the sun; on recognition of fact, but not a slavery to it” (55).

Hopkinson succeeds in constructing twin settings that are anchored in fantasy while fulfilling Tolkien’s requirements for a secondary world. Indeed, Caribbean myth and legend are a foundational feature of at least one of Hopkinson’s worlds and are seamlessly integrated into her settings so that ‘magic’ is an innate part of the fabric of her universe. At the same time, however, she demonstrates the ability to refashion and innovate traditional mythology to better serve the concerns of the novel. For instance, the douen community that the protagonist later encounters on New Half-Way tree is dramatically reworked in the text and are portrayed as a sentient, vital, and nurturing indigenous society in direct contradistinction to their established reputation in Trinidadian folklore. Menacing rolling calves from Jamaican folklore are also extricated from traditional Anansi stories and are also re-presented as vulnerable orphans when Tan Tan slays an adult ‘calf’ defending her young.

Re-working folkloric figures permits Hopkinson to simultaneously complicate and sustain an ongoing maternal discourse that is also present in the text (Anatol “Maternal Discourses”). The process of world-building involves generating a “secondary creation” and is absolutely critical to the text as Hopkinson deftly constructs not one but two parallel worlds that are situated in
‘sci-fi’ literature but are, at the same time, grounded in Caribbean carnival folklore. Two serious questions immediately arise regarding the critical framework for analysing this novel in order to fully apprehend both its fantasy and science-fiction elements. Any theorising around genre fiction, and particularly science-fiction is automatically rife with definitional fissures which often makes it difficult to justify whether or not a work can be ‘classified’ as a work of science-fiction. Arguably, the problem links back to genre theory itself. In “An Introduction to Genre Theory”, Daniel Chandler quickly points towards existing contentions within genre theory and how resistant it as, as a field, to creating discrete taxonomies. Chandler warns that: “There are no undisputed ‘maps’ of the system of genres within any medium (though literature may perhaps lay some claim to a loose consensus). Furthermore, there is often considerable theoretical disagreement about the definition of specific genres” (Chandler 6).

This problem is further complicated when examining science-fiction which is a genre that not only sits in an uncomfortable limbo between categories of high literature and low-brow ‘pulp’ fiction, but also proves to be highly resistant to a streamlined definition. The Oxford Companion to English Literature cautions us that “There are many definitions of science fiction (SF), all incomplete” (“Science Fiction”). The entry then further muddies the waters by placing the onus on the reader to determine “whether what they are reading is within the bounds of the possible” (Science Fiction”). Despite or, perhaps, because of the uncertainty that exists around the genre, dedicated science-fiction literary theorists such as Carl Freedman have argued for a definitive working critical theory that seriously apprehends science-fiction as a specific, legitimate literary genre. Contemporary theorists such as Paul Kincaid regard this as an impossible endeavour. Unlike modern fantasy which has a clearly delineated history, a discernible canon of seminal texts, and a lineage of authors such as John Ruskin, George MacDonald, William Morris, C.S. Lewis, and J.R.R. Tolkien who signal the beginning of a
genre, Kincaid pessimistically argues that in the case of science-fiction: “There is no starting point for science fiction. There is no one novel [sometimes known as an ‘urtext’] that marks the beginning of the genre” (Kincaid 409). He also points towards various projects such as the *Encyclopaedia of Science-Fiction* which collate disparate and conflicting definitions of the genre but fail to choose, create or ultimately “arrive at a single comprehensive overview of what science-fiction is” (411). Furthermore, he emphatically rejects Brian Aldiss’ nomination of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* as the prototypical genesis of ‘sci-fi’ (Kincaid 409).

Science-fiction scholar Gary K. Wolfe similarly rejects attempts by science-fiction historians to position Shelley’s text as the central source of the genre. He critiques much of the ‘low-brow’ quality of *Frankenstein*’s influence which spawned sensational rather than enduring literary progeny:

> Gothic trappings… didn’t immediately give rise to intellectual works of science fiction about the possibilities of science or the nature of artificial life, but rather [led] to a series of often lurid stage adaptations…that continued throughout the nineteenth century and segued into the movies throughout the twentieth. (Wolfe 18)

As a comparatively ‘young’ genre, science-fiction’s degree of indebtedness to and overlap with its narrative predecessors also makes it all the more difficult to define. Moreover, Wolfe suggests that one of the most iconic characteristics of the genre—that of the ‘artifact’—is in

---

89 To underscore the seeming impossibility of truly defining science-fiction as a genre, Kincaid promptly refers to Gary K. Wolfe’s 1986 work, *Critical Terms for Science Fiction: A Glossary and Guide to Scholarship* and its failure to provide a single, broadly agreed upon working definition of the genre but instead produced “33 different definitions of science fiction, many of which overlapped to some degree or other, but all of which included contradictions.” (Kincaid 409)
fact shared with “narrative formulas as diverse as the Gothic romance, the horror story, modern fantasy, the mystery and the espionage novel” (Wolfe 74). Thus, artifacts\(^90\) are neither exclusive to nor firmly definitive of science-fiction. Wolfe replaces the centrality (and certainty) of Suvin’s ‘novum’ with the artefact, which he describes as

not just any manufactured object, but rather (in the more popular archaeological sense) as a manufactured object embedding evidence of some specific (usually remote) time and place, and invested with some indeterminate value—be it material, pedagogical, or spiritual—to those who receive or discover it in some other time or place. The artifact implies and interacts with three distinct historical systems: the system surrounding its manufacture, the system of its own history, and the system of the receiving culture. If either of the first two systems is unknown or insufficiently understood, the artifact also implies a mystery, and a mystery particularly well suited to the dynamic of science fiction. (Wolfe 74-5)

In *Midnight Robber*, although the reader is privy to the details of why nanotechnology is produced and how it functions in its post-production state, the system surrounding nanotechnology’s manufacture is largely obscured in the text which enhances the mysteriousness of Granny Nanny and is also essential in lending Hopkinson’s dystopia essential elements of mystery, menace and intrigue. At this point, I would suggest that Paul Kincaid’s deeply pragmatic and descriptive (rather than taxonomical) approach to science-fiction posits that the field is best apprehended as “a series of generic or sub-generic strands braided together, any one of which might be may be removed (still leaving ‘science fiction’) but none of which is the genre” (Birch 2016). Although influences from both science-fiction

---

\(^90\) This is the spelling preferred by Wolfe.
and fantasy are evident in the novel, Hopkinson identifies her own work as being more firmly situated in the field of ‘speculative fiction’ which is sometimes considered to be one of the critical and most fertile ‘sub-strands’ of science fiction. It may be equally to consider the notion that science-fiction is a vital ‘sub-strand’ or sub-genre in the broader field of speculative fiction.

In 1945, Robert Heinlein91 wrote the essay “On the Writing of Speculative Fiction” and famously coined the term ‘speculative fiction.’ The essay functioned, in part, as a practical ‘how-to’ manual that dispensed advice in terms of successfully entering the ‘sci-fi’ market as a writer. Since Heinlein focuses on the practical endeavour of writing science-fiction and, by extension various forms of speculative fiction, he is less concerned with genre definition. Nevertheless, he provides a definitive demarcation through identifying two central approaches to field: “There are at least two principal ways to write speculative fiction--write about people, or write about gadgets” (Heinlein 13). Heinlein used both the term ‘speculative fiction’ and ‘science fiction’ in his essay. His perspective is two-fold: when he begins his essay he positions speculative fiction as the much broader field whereas science-fiction is a variant or form speculative fiction. As the essay progresses, however, Heinlein also suggests that speculative fiction exists as a sub-branch or off-shoot of ‘science-fiction:’

There is another type of honest-to-goodness science fiction story that is not usually regarded as science fiction: the story of people dealing with contemporary science or

---

91 Alongside Isaac Aisimov and A. E. van Vogt, Robert Heinlein is widely regarded as one of the most pre-eminent science-fiction authors of the ‘Golden Age’. According to The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction the Golden Age began in 1937 and is marked by “John W Campbell Jr's assumption of the editorship of Astounding [Science-Fiction]” while the conclusion of the Golden Age is far more difficult to establish but is estimated to have concluded before the 1950s. It is also identified as a peculiarly American phenomenon (“Golden Age of SF”).
technology. We do not ordinarily mean this sort of story when we say “science fiction”; what we do mean is the speculative story, the story embodying the notion “just suppose—” or “What would happen if—” In the speculative science fiction story accepted science and established fiefs are extrapolated to produce a new situation, a new framework for human action. As a result of this new situation, new human problems are created—and our story is about how human beings cope with those new problems. The story is not about the new situation; it is about coping with problems arising out of the new situation. (Heinlein 16-7)

In 2014 poet, blogger, and self-identified horror and speculative fiction author Annie Neugebauer undertook the task of attempting to define what speculative fiction is and why it proves to be such an attractive category for so many writers. Neugebauer suggests that speculative fiction is comprised of three dominant central genres; namely, fantasy, science fiction and horror. She also conceded that other genres (such as historical fiction) are also involved in the mix of speculative fiction. Demonstrative and complex venn diagrams are accompanied by a blog post which partially contradicts Heinlein’s prioritisation of human reaction. For Neugebauer it is the thought experiment itself or the act of speculation that is fundamental:

Fiction, by definition, is untrue, so all of it involves some degree of speculation. The difference is in what’s being speculated upon. Speculative fiction is fiction in which the author speculates upon the results of changing what’s real or possible, not how a character would react to a certain event…Therefore, the thing being speculated upon must be more elemental than character or plot. Speculative fiction is any fiction in
which the “laws” of that world (explicit or implied) are different than ours
[emphasis in original]. (“What is Speculative Fiction?”)

Renowned science-fiction and fantasy author, Ursula Le Guin partially corroborates with Neuberger’s view. She proposes that speculative fiction is a ‘thought-experiment’ but also claims that the nature of speculation is primarily ‘descriptive’ rather than ‘predictive’ (Le Guin 158). At the same time, however, she also suggests that the art of extrapolation is but a minor aspect of the genre (158). Le Guin, like Heinlein, also chooses to emphasise the human element. At the same time, however, neither Heinlein nor Le Guin are dismissive of the ‘gadgets’ of science-fiction with each author insisting on the importance of accurate world-building and well-researched science. What I wish to emphasise is the flexibility of a broad category of fiction that may include any series of objects in the form of ‘novum’, ‘artifacts’ or ‘gadgets’ but is not defined by their presence. Contemporary definitions of speculative fiction prefer instead to emphasise subjects and subjectivities. As a consequence, Midnight Robber occupies similar, though not identical terrain, with the likes of work from Octavia Butler, Samuel Delaney and Ursula K. Le Guin.

In an interview with Gregory E. Rutledge, Hopkinson clarifies that she does not write ‘black fantasy’ suggesting that it is a highly generic “umbrella term for all the genres of fantastical writing” (“Speaking in Tongues” 590). As a consequence, she insists that clear distinctions need to be made and sub-genres fully mapped out. Indeed, science fiction is distinct from fantasy, which then differs from sword and sorcery fantasy which, in turn, is separate from
speculative fiction—all of which can be distinguished from ‘magic realism.’ Furthermore, she is equally determined to acknowledge various aspects or 'intersections.'

The critical aim of intersectionality is to create a theory that examines the ways in which critical social markers in an individual’s or a group’s identity may ‘overlap.’ Social constructs such as race, ethnicity, nationality, gender, sexual orientation, class, age constitute a wider social matrix in which an interconnecting system of privileges and disadvantages are at play. The theory asserts that seemingly discrete, individuated categories of identity are, in fact, in constant interaction with one another producing a series of sometimes predictable and, at other times, wholly unexpected effects on the lives of people situated in the aforementioned ‘matrix.’ It also suggests that patterns of discrimination do not exist in isolation of each other but routinely intersect, reify and amplify one another to combinatorial effect.

Intersectionality has been further refined in order to account for seemingly ‘external’ factors such as geography, location and social environment while considering how these factors also effect individuals and entire communities. This approach is useful for understanding Tan Tan Habib, the novel’s protagonist. At the same time, however, Hopkinson cautions readers not to reductively map the

---

92 I use the term ‘intersections’ in reference to the theory of ‘intersectionality’ as defined by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw. The term first appeared in her article “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex” and was further defined in “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics and Violence Against Women of Color.”

93 Intersectionality also challenges the white feminism’s monolithic assumption that situates white women as the invisible default identity for ‘all’ women, while traditionally ignoring the ways in which differences in race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation and physical ability or disability ‘overlap’ and profoundly effects where individuals and groups are socially positioned as a result of these intersecting factors. It also represents a challenge to ‘pro-black’ and some anti-racist movements which tend to predominantly position heterosexual black males as the representative face of racial discrimination while eliding or ignoring the impact on women.in of her personal identity from her actual writing and insists that the former should not be conflated with the latter, in order to avoid a form of reductive, simplistic labelling.
intersections of her identity, as an author, on to her novels at large. Or, to quote Hopkinson directly on the matter:

I write speculative fiction. I am black….It’s very important to me to be a voice coming from one flavour of black experience, and Caribbean and Canadian, and female, and fat, and from feminist and sex-positive politics. But what I write doesn’t have those identities; I do [emphasis in original]. ("Speaking in Tongues” 591)

Furthermore, Hopkinson is also steadfast in her refusal to deny the intersectionality present in Tan Tan’s complex, even fragmented identity. Gender, age, class and race ameliorate to form the novel’s protagonist who then embarks on what proves to be a highly traumatic bildungsroman:

Some people said I had to decide what my protagonist's problem was. Was it internalized racism, or female body image problems, or the problems that the child of immigrants faces when she tries to adapt to a new culture? They felt I had to choose one, that my story would lack focus if I didn't. But the themes were all interrelated; it wouldn't have made sense to me artificially to disentangle them [emphasis added]. (592)

Intersectionality as concept is not only critical to the manner in which she wishes her work to be read but it is also fundamental to her writing process. An intersectional politics and aesthetic is quite evident in her work as complexity is embraced in a steadfast refusal to simplify the narrative ‘web’ of the story. The omniscient third-person narrator seamlessly slips from providing a detached, descriptive overview of events to a rather convincing focalisation:
And so it went: the classic tale, much embroidered over the centuries mirrored the autobiography of Olaudah Equiano, African noble’s son stolen into slavery on seventeenth-century Earth. The Robber King’s stream-of-consciousness speeches always told of escaping the horrors of slavery and making their way into brigandry as a way of surviving in the new and terrible white devils’ land in which they’d found themselves. (Hopkinson, *Midnight Robber* 57)

Both Tan Tan and her mother Ione are playfully ‘ambushed’ by a Midnight Robber and regaled with his tale. This scene foreshadows Tan Tan’s re-inscription of the role of the Midnight Robber. Tan Tan deploys the voice of a storytelling griot in order to relay the horrors of her own domestic enslavement, escape and survival at the novel’s conclusion. Arguably, Toussaint’s carnival functions as a ‘rehearsal’ space or forerunner for the real thing. At the same time, however, there is very much a sense that Toussaint’s carnival is also over-rehearsed. The narration constantly reveals Tan Tan’s childish misapprehension as she is able to point towards and identify key elements of both *Jonkanoo* and carnival, yet their significance is vaguely grasped. The scene serves as an educative instance: information is disseminated while at the same time Tan Tan receives an instruction on the art of storytelling. Furthermore, the narrative voice notes the history of the tale in question while providing an evaluative metacommentary on the tale’s delivery (stream-of-consciousness), story-type (auto-biography), status (classic or canonical) and construction (embellishment over an extended period of time).

A clinical, paratactic listing unfolds and insinuates routine and repetition. This is most evident when we are informed that the tale ‘always’ recounts the same pattern of events and follows a predictable, even formulaic trajectory which inadvertently anesthetises the listener (or reader) to what *should* amount to a harrowing account. Distance is instilled between the horrors of the
historical past on the one hand and the listening (or reading) audience on the other, precisely because the narrative voice constructs and then works through a veil by narrating about a narrative rather than directly relaying Olaudah’s tale, effectively masking it. Furthermore, reference to the story’s ‘embroidery’ recalls Hopkinson’s apperceptive metaphor that elucidates her own story-telling process at the beginning of the novel. Comforting stability is implied through the reification of a ‘classic’ tale but with it, a sense of stasis. Ione’s unenthused impatience over the majority of carnival’s proceedings is a logical outcome of a routinised staging of carnival. Tan Tan, however, eagerly anticipates such encounters and reads the spectacle of carnival not as shadow, but reality: “It ain’t look like no pappyshow to Tan-Tan; it looked like serious business” (41).

In this instance, we not only receive a ‘narrative about a narrative’ but we also witness a ‘carnival’ about a carnival. In Being Black, Althea Prince comments on 21st century carnival’s growing propensity towards self-consciousness and uneasily identifies “a cultural festival which is self-consciously carnival” rather than a carnival that celebrates and articulates a community in its current condition. Twin processes of reification and fetishisation occur which leads to an ‘idolatry’ of the festival (81). In effect, the Marryshow Corporation which regulates carnival, instils a near cultic attitude towards the event. While Junkanoo and carnival clearly fulfil a commemorative function, there is little sense that they are also responsive to and

94 This may seem like a contradictory statement, insofar as carnival is fundamentally ‘routinised’ and repetitive insofar as it is an annual, recurrent event. I use the word ‘routinised’, however, to indicate a banalisation of carnival that goes beyond the order, structure and repetition that are necessary to a carnival.

95 The term ‘pappyshow’ refers to an inauthentic performance or an “absurd imitation: a person or thing regarded as a ridiculous or grotesque mockery of something.” In the West Indies to make a ‘pappyshow’ either of oneself or someone else involves ridicule and the appearance of foolishness. It is also an early-20th century alteration of Scottish dialect in which “puppy show” referred to a “puppet show” (MSN Encarta 2009).
engaged with the immediacy of the present while articulating the latter in its own unique fashion. Yet, maintaining a balance between the two driving rationales behind carnival is vital.

Toussaint’s carnival, however, exemplifies an imbalance where the commemorative function of carnival overwhelms the event to such an extent that it leaves little room for innovation. Instead, carnival lacks the creative space for revellers to articulate their engagement with their current environment. Nor is there room to house a new carnivalesque mythology that reflects the immediacy and the specific exigencies of life on Toussaint. At this stage, however, Tan Tan is full of wide-eyed wonder as she is carefully inducted into Marrysheville’s social order, via carnival. The narrative voice moves from omniscient narration and is focalised through the protagonist, providing insight into a youthful interiority where comprehension is often partial:

Daddy’s face softened. Mummy smiled like she’d just won a game of jacks. She reached out a hand to Daddy. He took it and squeezed it gently. Then harder, until his heavy leather glove creaked. Don’t that must hurt? Tan-Tan looked to her mother, but Ione just stood there with her mouth set in a smile. She hissed a little through her teeth. A tear was worming its way down her cheek. See, she was really sorry for hugging up with Quashee! (Hopkinson, *Midnight Robber* 44)

A form of optimistic ventriloquism is evident in the last line as Tan-Tan not only anticipates Ione’s repentance over her infidelity but silently ‘vocalises’ it on her behalf. She exhibits an age-appropriate inability to fully apprehend the masked smile or penetrate the thin veneer of unity that the family affects. At the same time, however, Tan Tan cannily identifies a childish
form of *agon*\textsuperscript{96} that exists between her parents as they compete with one another over perpetually escalating stakes. Indeed, Toussaint’s carnival and its spectacular order is ultimately no rival for the public spectacle (and entertainment) that their family dysfunction provides for Marrysheville’s inhabitants which I will examine in greater detail, later in this chapter. At this stage, I will merely point towards the ubiquity of masking as social modality in Marrysheville. The Habib family are but a microcosm for the way in which the society, at large, seeks to disguise and regulate its underlying stresses and fault lines. Tell-tale fissures in the domestic sphere are contextualised by the growing fault lines of class-based division. As part of a privileged elite, the Habibs act as precipitous focal point for these tensions.

**Class, Labour and Surveillance:**

Traditionally, carnival has always been informed by class stratification, class conflict and unique expressions of class-based culture. Hopkinson creates a society that attempts to defuse these tensions which typically fuel or motivate a carnival. One of the way in which this occurs is through the use artificial intelligence or A.I. which excises physical labour from the society and purportedly paves the way for a more egalitarian set of labour relations. In her article “The Matter of Bodies: Materiality on Nalo Hopkinson’s Cybernetic Planet,” Erin Fehskens correctly identifies that one of the critical founding conditions of Toussaint is its clear antipathy towards manual labour which is disdained and frowned upon. Instead, Toussaint’s extensive use of technology as a substitute for ‘back-break’ labour (Hopkinson, *Midnight Robber* 8) ensures that the society can revolve around leisure and carnival. There are, however, early

\textsuperscript{96} In *Man, Play and Games* Roger Caillois draws on Johan Huizinga’s definition of play and creates a compressed, comprehensive typology. According to Caillois *agon* is a highly competitive form of play in which “the player relies only upon himself and his utmost efforts” (44).
countervailing voices in the text that complicate the idea of a straightforward ‘sci-fi’ utopia. Beata, the pedicab runner, stands as the clearest example of a character who defies the prevailing ideology which elevates leisure and technology. She takes conscious pride in her body—in her pronounced musculature, her strength and her extreme fitness—and her self-celebratory stance stands in direct contradistinction to Antonio’s dismissal of her as “…sweaty and grimy, blocking his path” (12).

Over the course of their encounter in which Beata transports him to his mansion they argue over the status of pedicab runners in Marrysheville. Beata argues that the pedicab community is subject to unjust taxation which reduces the overall quality of their lives because they choose to circumvent A.I. and rely, instead on their own physical labour. Despite the use of the customary address ‘compere’ which rhetorically signals at horizontal social relationships between citizens, Beata’s complaint points towards the existence of an underclass and a clear gap between theory and praxis:

I working ten more hours a week to pay your new tariff. Sometimes I don’t see my pickney-them for days; sleeping when I leave home, sleeping when I come back. My baby father and my woman-them complaining how I don’t spend time with them no more. Why you do this thing, Antonio? (7)

Antonio openly concedes that it is “a labour tax…You know how it does bother citizens to see allyou doing manual labour so. Back-break ain’t for people” (8). Theoretically, at least, manual labour on Toussaint is to be commemorated in the distant past rather than performed in the present. In the opening pages of the novel, Hopkinson reveals a subterranean conflict. Through Antonio, she represents Cockpit County’s aversion towards physical labour. Antonio, forever
the glib politician is concerned with image and show. Yet, at the same time, his objection is not entirely without merit and bears historical roots that run much deeper than one would initially assume. Arguably, it is only logical that a population descended from the traumas of slavery and forced labour would eschew the latter and its negative and painful associations and opt for the freedom that that a.i. technology and Nanny Granny offers. The County’s rejection or refusal to be ‘grist for the mill’ (*The Dragon Can’t Dance* 24) of colonial capitalism carries echoes of Calvary Hill’s similar disdain of hard toil and industry. Unlike the resident of the Hill, however, the citizens of Cockpit County are not forced into an untenable dilemma between enslavement of labour or the freedom of destitution. As Hopkinson observes:

> The experience of slavery is a huge cancer in the collective consciousness of African people all over the diaspora. The ripple effects of it (if you'll bear with a mixed metaphor for a moment) still continue, and they touch the past, the present, and the future. People recognize that about the effects of the Holocaust on Jewish people, but we don’t get the same recognition. We’re supposed to have “gotten over it” by now, even though its domino effect still very much straitlaces our lives. (Hopkinson “Speaking in Tongues” 592)

When Antonio’s encounter with Beata concludes, he is both disturbed and impressed by her indelible presence and is forced to reluctantly note that “He was sure he could still smell her sweat even though she had jogged off” (Hopkinson, *Midnight Robber* 12). Even more critically, perhaps, her physical ability extends beyond mere brute labour. Her chapped, work-roughened hands have the ability to craft hand-made paper, which is considered to be a practical, even valuable old-time art. Furthermore, her lips are able to issue an “impossibly intricate nannysong” in which the notes ‘hemidemisemiquaver’ (8; 11) and short-circuit the eshu
system, which allows her to communicate with Antonio ‘offline’, as they are temporarily situated beyond Granny Nanny’s surveillance. Antonio is then forced to recognise the potential for subversion that her physical ability creates: “Private messages! Privacy! The most precious commodity of any Marryshevite” (10). She is able to combine her physical abilities and use them to strike a rather practical bargain with Antonio who then deems her as ‘crafty’ in both senses of the word. It is also important to note that the ‘craft’ and the subversive potential of ‘nanny song’ establishes a hidden link between Toussaint’s and New Half-Way Tree’s history which the text hints at and finally unveils in its conclusion. I would also suggest that in this scene that Hopkinson, like Lovelace, also sees physical craftsmanship as both an inheritance and as a practice that provides a critical link which enables a sense of continuity between the past and the present.

Despite the fact that the novel is situated in a utopian imaginary, surveillance is a visible spectre that haunts the new settlement. While Beata and her kin are technically free to live outside the technocratic order of Cockpit County they must, nonetheless, confront Nanny Granny as a pervasive force that must be perpetually circumvented. It is certainly no accident that Hopkinson’s utopia prizes privacy and that the emphasis on privacy alludes to an older, more sinister history. Indeed, a lack of privacy for slaves and the subsequent privation that they endured did not prevent the rapid development of linguistic codes impenetrable to outsiders, a popular slave culture of ridicule and satire, an autonomous religious vision emphasizing deliverance, actual patterns of arson and sabotage, not to mention free maroon communities in the hills. (Scott 127)
Nevertheless, there is very much a sense that ‘headblind’ labourers form a distinct and parallel community that is somewhat analogous to a maroon community—albeit one that is neither persecuted nor pursued by the state. However, just as the power and the surveillance of the slave state is not all-pervasive and can be circumvented, there are also visible interstices in the utopian state that can be exploited. Like their enslaved predecessors, Marrysheville’s working class are able to develop ‘linguistic codes’ that create the necessary spaces where they are free to communicate. The communicative systems that resulted from slavery also included a culture of ‘ridicule and satire’ which is imported to Toussaint. Unlike Beata’s furtive and circumspect communication, however, a sanctioned satire occurs in carnival’s public space.

The other way in which the novel seeks to unsettle any complacency towards technology is through the character of Nursie who functions as a bustling physical presence in Tan Tan’s upbringing. Nursie not only cares for Tan Tan but shares information regarding older incarnations of carnival. She takes a particular pleasure in the act of reminiscence and sings the praises of stick-fighting. Both Lovelace and Hopkinson tend to foreground the carnival-based art of kalinda or stick-fighting while characters across both texts elevate martial prowess. Both Fisheye and Antonio associate kalinda with the assertion and preservation of masculinity and public respect. Nursie, however departs from a hegemonic conception of masculinity, evident in her experiential account of her own engagement with kalinda:

When me was young, me did train to be a fighter, you know? Well a dancer. Stick fight dance. The yard big so like a sugar cane field, but pack down flat all over; just dirt, no pavement. …And the practice! Lord it sweet for so! It have three kinds: stick fight, bare hands and machete. Your own labour, you understand? Don’t mind people who
tell you that labour is nasty. Sometimes it is a blessing for true, a sacrament.

(Hopkinson, *Midnight Robber* 35)

In this reminiscence as well as in other parts of the novel, the productive and reproductive labour of women is strategically centralised in the text. This is unsurprising when one considers that the enterprise of slavery was sustained by both forms of labour. However, it is only on New Half-Way Tree that physical labour which is tentatively hinted at through Beata and Nursie’s praise of the body, is explicitly foregrounded and validated in the latter half of the text. Tan Tan’s physicality is expressed through defiant feats of flight, escape, survival which eventually leads her generating and sustaining new life in an unwanted pregnancy. Ultimately, physical embodiment and humanity rather than ‘a.i.’ technology lies at the heart of *Midnight Robber*.

Granny Nanny’s creative acts of sowing and her administration of Toussaint positions her as a maternal caregiver rather than a patriarchal sovereign. The nation worlds are linked through the commonality of a shared, communicative network. This is particularly evident when the Nation Worlds are described as “one enormous data-gathering system that exchanged information constantly through the Grande Nanotech Sentient Interface: Granny Nansi’s Web.”

The fraught relationship between Granny Nanny and the citizens of the Nation Worlds is further elaborated on: “They kept the Nation Worlds protected, guided and guarded its people. But a Marryshevite couldn’t even take a piss without the toilet analyzing the chemical composition of the urine and logging the data in health records” (10). The central form of communication between the web and those who are connected to it is through the use of ‘nannysong’ which transmits musical audio signals through the embedded nanomites in order to convey messages.
Although Granny Nanny is primarily depicted as a benign force “designed to be flexible, to tolerate a variety of human expression, even dissension as long as it didn’t upset the balance of the whole” (10) it does, nevertheless, invoke the undeniable spectre of the panoptican. This is particularly evident in the presence of contraptions known as ‘four-eyes’ which double as both communication devices and ‘seers’, as well as the existence of household eshus, who are best defined as artificially intelligent operating systems that run homes and bear a name derivative of the West African deity (Hopkinson “Filling the Sky”).

Class on Toussaint is primarily signified by a division between those who submit to being seeded with nanomites and thus fully participate in Granny Nansi’s Web and those who resist and discover ways to circumvent the connection between the nanomites in their blood stream and Granny Nanny’s communicative surveillance. Hence the presence of the ‘headblind’ or those who not only live on the outskirts of Marrysheville and beyond the monitoring eyes and ears of Granny Nansi’s Web, but who also possess subversive nannysongs that are able to disrupt, counter and circumvent the signals of ever-ubiquitous eshus. Through nannysong, Marrysheville’s headblind inhabitants are also able to form a separate system of communication—one that is reminiscent of the coded communicative signals contained in seemingly innocuous field songs of slaves.

**Literary Place, Homespace and Exile:**

Speculative fiction is best described as a flexible genre that intersects with science fiction and sometimes merges with elements of what is known as ‘fantasy.’ It selectively utilises aspects
of these similar-yet-opposing genres to construct an alternative social vision that questions the conditions of our current social reality while encouraging readers to conceive of alternative social paths and choices. There is also a sense that Hopkinson’s literary journey in *Midnight Robber* is somewhat comparable to space pioneers or travellers embarking on a perilous quest insofar as she moves across unfamiliar terrain and specifically seeks to carve out space in a genre of writing that is not typically associated with black writers.

She asserts that: “…it is important [to me] to be identified as a writer of speculative fiction, perhaps because it feels like claiming my share of space in a literature that has largely not represented me” (“Speaking in Tongues” 591). Arguably, the most critical distinction between her own work and that of most other black writers is that of ‘realistic’ fiction. She runs counter to writers such as Jamaica Kincaid and eschews any desire whatsoever to write mimetic or autobiographic fiction precisely because of the limitations that are integral to the genre. In her view, realistic fiction severely restricts her ability to represent the depth and breadth of black life—particularly those areas that fall beyond the scope of white surveillance or regulation:

> When I read the work of African American realist writers, there’s always the awareness of the white world in which the characters live; there has to be, if the fiction is to be representative of the real world. The realist work of Caribbean writers must reference the effects of hundreds of years of colonialism. (592)

Hopkinson insists not only the specific freedom and the opportunity for escape that speculative fiction offers but she also directly counters Carl Freedman’s deeply reductive claim that waives aside the necessity of science-fiction writing for the third world. This is quite evident in his sanguine and liberal assertion that: “To live in the Third World is virtually to live in an SF
situation, and this obviates the need to write what we in the West would immediately recognize as SF—just as in a genuinely classless society there will be no need for Marxism in any currently understood sense” (Freedman 198). Freedman regards ‘Third World’ life as alienated from the West, if not simply ‘alien’ and views it as being so bizarre a site that it is already embroiled in an ‘SF’ and, in all probability, dystopian situation. Class struggle (and Marxian liberation) not only serves as a somewhat glib point of counterpoint to the woes of the Third World but they are also the vehicle through which these struggles can be read or understood. For Hopkinson, however, class and race converge; the destructive drama in alleged ‘Third World’ spaces, such as the Caribbean, is indecipherable without the critical glyphs of slavery and race. Moreover, it is capitalism, slavery and its after-effects that are the true horrors in the region, while speculative fiction offers the tools to imaginatively construct alternate societies that potentially move beyond these socio-economic and psychological cages.

Thus, speculative fiction offers a liberating and even essential psychological space in which her art can flourish. Hopkinson then goes on to argue that on the level of artful storytelling and critical and commercial success in terms of critical reception and sales, ‘black’ literature is perpetually judged in relation to whiteness while writers are critiqued on their ability to convey “being black in a white world.” As a consequence, the closer a black writer comes to mimetically conveying this state of affairs, and replicating their own oppressed and alienated state, the more likely the writer is to be deemed as ‘excellent’ (“Speaking in Tongues” 591). The underlying assumption of the publishing world and of the ‘market’ is that black writers must cede to, replicate and thus reinforce the logic of colonial narratives in which a dominant white culture ‘must’ exist as either background or foreground for any given story. As a consequence, black alienation in those societies which are part and parcel of living under
conditions of white hegemony becomes a necessary condition for mimetically recreating a ‘realistic’ environment.

This then begs the question of how Hopkinson opts for radical departure and chooses, instead, to deliberately populate her twin planets with black migrants from the Caribbean who construct a flourishing colony in the face of considerable odds and in the enabling absence of white hegemony. This absence, however, is neither pronounced nor marked. Indeed, Midnight Robber is refreshing insofar as it spends remarkably little time pontificating on or explicating this absence which, in fact, is so unremarkable that it is simply a given. At most, the European presence is inferred when European ethnicity is briefly listed as merely one genetic and cultural inheritance amongst the rest. The freedom to construct a world that defies the conventional limits of realistic fiction and then visualises a society in which ‘black’ existence is at home rather than ‘alienated’97 not only represents a daring thought experiment but also signals a break or an escape from the aforementioned limits of the imagination.

Fantasy, science fiction, and speculative fiction all fall under a class of non-realistic fiction that is sometimes dismissed not only as ‘trivial’ but escapist. Like many others in her field, Nalo Hopkinson openly celebrates the possibility of imaginative escape, yet refuses to trivialise the act of escape by confusing it with escapism. In this respect she is agreement with J.R.R. Tolkien who famously mused: “Why should a man be scorned if, finding himself in prison, he tries to

———

97 In Black Skins, White Masks psychiatrist and philosopher Frantz Fanon draws on Marxist notion of ‘alienation’ but takes the term from its strictly economic context and instead applies it to the psychology of the black (male) colonial diasporic subject who finds himself not only estranged from a white supremacist society but suffering from ‘disalienation.’ Since black as a ‘category’ and ontology has been specifically constructed by white supremacy and attributed to the black subject, the latter can then only understand his own existence through the eyes or the mask of his oppressor in a relationship that is somewhat akin to what exists between Frankenstein and ‘the creature.’
get out and go home? Or if, when he cannot do so, he thinks and talks about other topics than jailers and prison-walls?” (Tolkien 60). While Hopkinson’s novel liberates its subjects from white colonisation and supremacy, it is precisely the recurring theme of incarceration that the text wishes to scrutinise and it does so in the following manner; firstly, through the Caribbean diaspora’s originary flight from racial colonisation on earth; secondly, through the potentially suffocating surveillance of the Nanny Granny web system that intervenes in the lives of almost all of Toussaint’s settlers; thirdly, through Antonio’s attempt to evade punitive imprisonment for his own misdeed and finally, through Tan Tan’s escape from Antonio’s abuse and her subsequent retreat into the safe haven of an indigenous forest community.

The final and most poignant articulation of incarceration is the psychic bondage that Tan Tan endures over the course of the narrative due, in large part, to her inability to free herself of her father’s ghost. Competing notions of exile and ‘homeplace’⁹⁸ are similarly explored in the text. Carnival is of paramount importance in the narrative as a symbolic, yet elusive, harbinger of freedom. Carnival is also instrumental in an attempt to construct a familiar homeplace on alien soil. This in not only evident on Toussaint but also on New Half-Way Tree where an exiled and impoverished populace creates their own form of mas’. The festival also exists as an embedded ‘link’ that resides in a collective imaginary, that attempts to bridge the distance between eras, planets and the light years between universes. Despite her own predilection for writing speculative fiction, Hopkinson is quick to note that, as a genre, it is not a welcoming or attractive space for the vast majority of black writers. Instead, it is relatively devoid of black writers who tend to look upon speculative fiction with scepticism and even trepidation:

⁹⁸ I use the word ‘homeplace’ in accordance with bell hooks’ “Homeplace: A Site of Resistance” a critical chapter in Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politic. In that chapter hooks argues that the domestic sphere or home sites function as places of healing, respite and a form of resistance that extends beyond armed struggle or even civic or political defiance.
The long tradition of science fiction out of which came works such as Mary Shelley's Frankenstein and Karel Capek's R. U.R. has on this continent been overshadowed by the pulp era, which produced a lot of, well, pulp, as well as some fine literature. But it’s left Western sf with a stigma about being adventure stories in which white people use technology to overpower alien cultures. Small wonder that black writers haven’t been drawn to it in large numbers—we’ve been on the receiving end of colonization, and for us it’s not an entertaining adventure story. (“Speaking in Tongues” 590)

The novel works counter to the colonial picaresque and examines colonisation with gravitas as three distinct migrations are charted in the text. Indeed, a tale of colonisation predicated on exploration and discovery but also conquest frames the novel. It is a historical journey that becomes one of the founding myths of Toussaint and serves as a responsive re-articulation of migration to and throughout the Caribbean. The travellers eventually settle on a fertile and viable new planet which it ‘dubs’ Toussaint in commemoration of Toussaint Louverture, the renowned military leader who spearheaded the Haitian Revolt which began in 1791 and ended in 1804.

**Jonkanoo and Toussaint Carnival:**

The Haitian Revolution resulted in the defeat of the Napoleonic army as a population of slaves overthrew the shackles of slavery. It stands is one of the few successful slave revolts to have occurred in the Caribbean and in the Americas and is also the only known slave revolt to have ever led to the successful founding of a state, the Republic of Haiti. Shalini Puri postulates that rather than being an ‘African’ simulation of a European nation-state:
the Haitian Revolution was a hybrid political project of modernization, in which the rhetoric of French political thought was to be mapped on to and combined with the inherited economic and racial institutions of a plantation society—a project quite distinct from simple imitation or mimicry. (Puri 44)

The cultural and psychological significance of the revolt to the Caribbean as a region and to a black diaspora through the Americas and beyond cannot be overstated. In Toussaint’s historical discourse the settlement of Toussaint is analogous to Haiti’s struggle for autonomy while their journey also becomes the ‘stuff’ of myth and legend. Thus, the journey to Toussaint is incorporated as part of a socio-historical portmanteau that includes Bahamian and Jamaican Junkanoo\(^99\) (spelt Jonkanoo in the text) and Trinidadian carnival. Accounts of when Junkanoo first originated vary but most accounts suggest that annual John Canoe festivals may have occurred in the Bahamas, ‘particularly in Nassau’ as early as 1801. John Canoe was traditionally held on Boxing Day (the day after Christmas) and New Year’s Day:

During the period following Emancipation it was the custom for the Bahamian Militia Band to usher in Christmas morning with music. The Market place on Bay Street was the hub of activities and was open from early morning to 9:00 a.m. It was here that John Canoe and his followers danced and it is interesting to note that in one of the first accounts of his appearance, he is dancing on stilts. (Bethel 2)

\(^99\) In *Midnight Robber*, Tan Tan is educated by her ‘eshu’ (a nanomite that functions as a teacher that disseminates information about Earth’s history) and is told about ‘Jonkanoo’ (20) the Bahamian and Jamaican festival that also involves masking and celebratory dancing on the streets.
Junkanoo is a communal event most popularly held in the Bahamas and Jamaica. Like Trinidadian carnival its roots can be directly traced back to slavery and Emancipation. Dancing, rhythmic music, elaborate masking converge, culminating in annual street parades. The physical organisation and structure of Junkanoo is similar to the ‘bands’ that constitute a Trinidadian mas’ as Junkanoo participants are grouped, often in their hundreds and are thematically organised, which is then reflected through dance, music, play and costume. Trinidadian carnival arose from the colonial elite’s fear of slave rebellion, subsequent emancipation, and an uneasy dialogue between freed ex-slaves and the state Bahamian Junkanoo marked the Christmas holidays, and the few days of the year where slaves were permitted to leave the plantation not only to rest, but to spend time with their families (‘Junkanoo: Bahamian Festival’). Junkanoo is far from exclusive to the Bahamas or Jamaica and is popularly held throughout the Caribbean as well as in specific parts of South, Central, and North America. Furthermore, the festival has a variety of names “including Junkanoo, John Kunering, John Kooners, Goombay, Carnival, and Masquerade” (Sands 78).

In the context of Midnight Robber carnival and Junkanoo migrate to Toussaint and survive as separate yet connected events, each of them demarcating an extended carnival season. ‘Jonkanoo Season’ and carnival are both deployed not only for annual entertainment but for specifically educative purposes. Jonkanoo specifically commemorates the arrival of Toussaint’s ancestors on the nation ships some two hundred years ago. The syncretic layers of the event is revealed as Jonkanoo collides with Christmas, while parang music is accompanied by door-to-door mumming, choirs and festive food in the form of black cake, tamarind balls and over-eating. ‘Old Masque’ is not only constantly evoked throughout the story, but it is lauded and standardised:
This is the right way to play Jonkanoo, the old-time way. Long time, that hat would be make in the shape of a sea ship, not a rocket ship, and them black people woulda been lying pack-up head to toe in they own shit, with chains round them ankles. Let the child remember how black people make this crossing as free people this time. [emphasis added] (Hopkinson, *Midnight Robber* 21)

It is also functions as a commercial ‘product’ in the form of bourgeoisie family entertainment in an allegedly ‘classless’ society, as indicated in the scene where mother and daughter arrive at carnival in, of all things, a limousine:

The limo crept along, slow as a chinny worm. A mako jumbie100 strode through the crowd, picking his way on his tall stilts. His tattered motley had been made into pants that clothed the stilts all the way to the ground. A Robber King stepped into the road in front of them, brandishing pistols almost as tall as he was…The limousine tried to braked, tried to go round the man. Ione sighed. “Let he give he speech.” (56)

Significantly, material markers of wealth belie the claim of Marrysheville existing as a classless society. Ione’s periodic expressions of what can only be described as a languorous boredom towards carnival’s spectacle are equally as significant and stem directly from her position of privilege. Ione’s worn exasperation with the antics or ‘pappyshow’ of carnival sits at odds with the enthusiastic yet almost programmed response of Marrysheville’s revellers as they unquestioningly embrace a calendar structured around carnival inherited from another

---

100 Refer to the introduction of this thesis, on page twenty-five, for a more specific description of Mako-Jumbies.
world. Nevertheless, her mild irritation and bored indifference towards carnival’s spectacle also speaks of a society that encourages a superficial engagement with it.

Her use of the patois term ‘pappyshow’ not only signifies jaded cynicism but also suggests that Ione is all too aware of carnival’s artifice and is highly conscious of its self-consciousness. It would seem that the circumstances that surround Toussaint carnival are comparable to those that contextualise 21st century Trinidadian carnival. Carnival is thus resituated yet bears the familiar markers and traditions of carnival on earth. Just like earth, Toussaint has its renowned mas’ designers. ‘Fimbar and Philomise’ are Toussaint’s equivalent to Peter Minshall and Brian McFarlane and have the ability to generate a degree of suspense and excitement on the part of participants: “One big mako secret what theme them two men coming up with for the float this year, oui? Even though everybody who jumping up in the parade done pay for their costumes already” [emphasis added] (Hopkinson, Midnight Robber 38).

While creativity is suggested at, the commercialisation and professionalisation of carnival is also implied as there are no Aldrick Prospects crafting an outfit in the intimacy of their home. In essence, what Hopkinson describes is comparable to the commercial practices of contemporary 21st century carnival where mas’ design is a lucrative industry. Interestingly, the two designers are privileged not only in relation to carnival but to the state as they are permitted to conceal their creations from the Web and later unveil them to the paying in public. Consequently they have an unprecedented access to secrecy which ensures that they “have special dispensation to lock out data from the spider web till they done” (38).

---

101 In Marrysheville ‘Junkanoo season’ begins at the end of the year and coincides with Christmas festivities, reminiscent of a Saturnalian calendar.
It is in this environment that Toussaint’s or, more specifically, Marrysheville’s articulation of carnival fulfils the classic ideology of carnival as a social ‘safety valve’ that permits free, if licensed expression in a potentially restrictive, even over-regulated society in which inhabitants are materially provided for but are constantly watched and ‘overseen.’ Paradoxically, while Hopkinson’s carnival is imbued with futuristic technology, the festival that she creates bears a far closer visual (if not ideological) resemblance to an older, post-emancipation vision of Trinidadian carnival rather than to any current manifestation of the aforementioned carnival. Indeed, Hopkinson completely bypasses notions of modern bikini mas’ and its attendant politics. She chooses, instead, to revive the aesthetic trappings and structure of 19th and 20th century ole mas’ in order to create a nostalgic ‘carnival of the future’ that informs the early part of her text. At the same time, however, one senses that the ritualised mimicry of carnival is but a mere shadow of the more immediate and affective variant of the festival that is performed on New Half-Way Tree.

Consequently, Marrysheville’s carnival captures Tan Tan’s childish imagination while its images remain with her well into her adult life. It thus serves as a lasting reference for her. It registers the standard practices and institutions of ‘ole mas’ while also drawing on the cultural fusion of newer carnivals such as Notting Hill and Caribana. Allusions to calypso\textsuperscript{102} freely mixes with the strains of reggae. There is a clearly delineated \textit{J'Ouvert} ceremony along with a visibly recognisable, traditional Road March. It boasts theatrical displays of stick and machete fighting recalling the earliest history of bad john yard-fights; and, the inevitable ceremonial crowning of a carnival King and Queen.

\textsuperscript{102} Even the name of one of Hopkinson’s central calypsonians— ‘Mama Choonks’—recalls the 20th century calypso hit, ‘Papa Choonks’ sung by calypsonian, The Roaring Lion. The theme of gender inversion and re-inscription is hinted at fairly early on in the text.
Even the prospect of a *Jour Ouvert kalinda* challenge between Ione’s husband Antonio and her lover Quashee elicits starkly contrasting reactions from both mother and daughter. Tan Tan is receptive and sensitive to all aspects of carnival and is willing to enter into its symbolic order. Thus, her reading of the event is ‘naively’ mimetic as she queries with childish credulity if “Daddy go dead?” (45). Ione is quick to reassure her that like everything else in carnival, the duel is unthreatening and yet another form of ‘pappyshow’ before diverting attention to more pressing concerns: “I have to dress puss-foot tomorrow morning, oui!...So what you think I should wear tomorrow? I have to look nice for the fight?” (45). Amusingly, Ione is more attentive to her own physical image, expressed through her incessant attention to her attire, and to her image or standing in the eyes of the community than she is in the mechanics of carnival.

Toussaint’s reinterpretation of each festival functions in a manner that is somewhat reminiscent of Philip Scher’s description of certain parts of contemporary carnival existing as a “preservationist side-show”103 which has the twin purpose of entertainment and education (Scher, “Copyright Heritage” 454; 471). If carnival has an explicitly ‘educative’ purpose with the duty of imparting a civic education to children and adults then it creates a troubling dynamic that is suggestive of infantilism on the one hand and paternalism on the other, hinting at an ambivalent form of ‘nurturance.’ Participants are positioned in the role of dutiful students and perhaps, even, children. Conversely, the state, who funds and sponsors such side-shows occupies the role of an instructive teacher or parent. Patriotism’s ability to both patronise and infantilise a population are all too evident when we are told that the residents of Toussaint

---

103 This aspect of carnival will be discussed at greater length in the conclusion of the thesis.
celebrate the landing of the Marryshow Corporation nation ships that had brought their ancestors to this planet two centuries before. Time to give thanks to Granny Nanny for the Leaving Times, for her care, for life in this land, free from downpression and botheration. Time to remember the way their forefathers had toiled and sweated together: Taino Carib and Arawak; African; Asian; Indian; even the Euro, though some wasn’t too happy to acknowledge that—there bloodline. All the bloods flowing into one river, making a new home on a new planet. (Hopkinson, *Midnight Robber* 18)

This recitation of rote knowledge is essentially tantamount to a nursery creed while Tan Tan’s eshu or nursery maid, rather than her mother Ione or her father Antonio, oversee her civic education. The eshu uses both *Jonkanoo* and carnival as instructional tools and vessels that contain the precious fragments of a history. Yet, what is critical to note is that while these lessons are focalised through Tan Tan they are also ingested by adults who, for the most part, are comfortably interpellated into Toussaint’s social order. The ‘lessons’ in question are a form of ‘remembrance as forgetting,’ a process that involves the rituals of remembrance. This is usually characterised by an inherited storehouse of rote knowledge and the dutiful recitation of founding myths or a series of fragmentary, disparate historical facts without any deeper engagement with true remembrance. The notion of ‘hybridity,’ which is evident in the obligatory, even mechanical roll call of races recalls the rhetoric of a homogenising multiculturalism that is examined in both Mustapha Matura’s and Earl Lovelace’s texts.

Although *The Dragon Can’t Dance* falls into realistic fiction and, thus, seeks to recreate a specific point in Trinidadian history, I would suggest that Hopkinson’s speculative fiction novel demonstrates a similar awareness of the dilution of history and carnival’s folklore, albeit from a different perspective. Both texts clearly articulate a specific type of carnival that is
constructed with the aesthetics and demands of tourism. In the case of Lovelace’s text, the commercial imperative of carnival is laid bare and a clear binary is constructed between the local, ‘indigenous’ community who produce an authentic carnival and an external, non-local spectatorship that merely wishes to be entertained by what they consider to be ‘carnival.’ As a result, consumption replaces connection and the irony is that the desire for a taste of the authentic and the local imperils the very qualities that they seek. In *Midnight Robber*, however, carnival is directly comparable to the pervasive presence of Nanny Granny in Toussaint society insofar as carnival is a reliable fixture that effectively masks the tensions and inequities that lie beneath. Indeed, the routine stability that characterises the event gently mirrors the docility of Hopkinson’s utopia. As an enclosed migrant community, Marrysheville’s residents, unlike the residents of Calgary Hill, are not forced to dance to the tune of outsiders; nor are they exposed to the prying eyes of uninformed strangers. Technically, at least, carnival is performed for and by the community and remains an in-house affair.

At the same time, however, Hopkinson laces the novel with an overarching sense of a more subtle, even insidious erasure. While Lovelace gives an account of a carnival that is being gradually over-run by the state, in *Midnight Robber* carnival is already securely in the hands of the Marryshow Corporation as ‘the state’ is explicitly configured as a corporation. Furthermore, in a utopian society, the energy, impetus and fire of carnival is dimmed. Its potential as a site of rebellion is not only diminished, but rendered obsolete. As a result, carnival is effectively subverted or, perhaps, re-purposed to meet the specific requirements of Toussaint. What occurs, instead, is a series of historically attentive yet curiously detached performances, enhanced by futuristic spectacle. A thin re-enactment of carnival and *Junkanoo* tropes and performances ensues:
Palang-palang! Palang-palang! Cockpit County was in the full throes of Jour Ouvert morning revelry. …What a racket! Bodies danced everywhere: bodies smeared with mud; men’s bodies in women’s underwear; women wearing men’s shirt-jacs and boxers; naked bodies…Someone grinned into the limo at Tan-Tan and Mummy. The woman had temporarily cell-sculpted her skin to be Afro on one side, Euro on the other. The Euro side was already sunburnt. She licked the length of the window with her tongues, which had been pieced with a star-shaped platinum nugget. (55)

While carnival, as a festival, is symbolically tied to notions of resistance and rebellion it cannot be conflated with revolution either in this or any other text examined in this thesis. In Hopkinson’s novel, carnival serves the purpose of commemorating rebellion while simultaneously flirting with and skirting around the idea of the open rebellion. Participants are informed or educated about distant acts of rebellion even as spaces for resistance are contained and monitored. Interestingly, ole mas’ figures such as the piss-en-lit and Dame Lorraine (referred to in chapter one) that were absent in In The Dragon Can’t Dance are, once again, resurrected in the jubilatory open cross-dressing and gender inversion that occurs in Hopkinson’s carnival. Furthermore, while Jouvay mas’ structures Lovelaceian carnival, Hopkinson directly refers to the materials of carnival mud-smeared bodies that are so characteristic of this particular form of mas’.

The variation of carnival that Toussaint serves up is a colourful, kinetic pastiche that is committed surface display. Ironically enough, carnival in its entirety functions as a social mask that obscures and mystifies the history of Toussaint’s settlement104 even as it symbolically

104 Please refer to Eric Smith’s extensive chapter ““The Only Way Out is Through”: Space, Narrative and Utopia in Nalo Hopkins Midnight Robber” in Globalization, Utopia and Postcolonial Science Fiction: New Maps of
centres the event through commemoration. Unlike their earthbound predecessors, the residents of Cockpit County and Marrysheville do not resist external, antagonistic forces then proceed to carve out a space for their own carnival. Nor do they create a festival that celebrates their history on Toussaint, articulates their immediate society, or expresses their communal allegiance to one another. Instead, they are the passive recipients of a corporate spectacle that is ‘gifted’ to them by Granny Nanny and the Merryshow Corporation. Once they are gifted carnival, they proceed to re-enact and replicate rather than reinvent carnival:

The reader soon discovers, however, that these figures are bereft of any but the most tangential and memorial historical significance. Even the traditional fete of Jonkanoo is a distorted and a historically anemic variant of the subversive masquerade of its terrestrial ancestor. No longer a celebration of defiance, the historical significance of the festival and its attendant forms of cultural expression are either wholly forgotten or woefully diluted. The truth of the Toussaint carnival's ahistorical nature (its function as ideology) is revealed fully only at the novel’s conclusion, when Tan-Tan attends carnival on New Half-Way Tree. (E. Smith 46)

As a consequence, carnival is not ‘depoliticised’ but rather re-politicised and re-purposed on Toussaint. Yet, the festival ultimately operates as series of sporadic and disconnected dates, names, references and fragmented factoids. In the absence of struggle, it lacks the substance of its terrestrial predecessor or the vitality and affective power that carnival possesses on New Half-Way Tree. In truth, Toussaint’s festival lacks driving rationale of its own, independent of the Granny Nanny’s inculcated lessons. According to conventional theorisations of carnival,

Hope for a truly thoughtful examination of the way in which carnival is implicated in a process of colonial obfuscation and instruction.
carnival is a battle for cultural and physical face that is usually contested between opposing classes. Yet, this process is rendered obsolete in a colonised space in which carnival’s revellers and masqueraders are the descendants of colonisers and exist in a society where class difference is notably minimalised if not wholly eliminated. As a consequence, the imperative to carve out and claim a distinct cultural space is largely irrelevant while there is scant opportunity or motive to occupy and radically invert a space which has been ‘freely’ inherited. The incongruity is clear as utopia and carnival are incompatible and the latter operates as a diluted export.

Crossings and Migrations:

Cultural importation and exportation leads to the vexing issue of migration throughout carnival’s history. Forced settlement and voluntary re-settlement both inform and motivate the narrative, but the second act of voluntary migration that results in the settlement of Toussaint counterbalances the original terrestrial slave journey of long ago. The ‘secondary’ migration provides the historical backdrop for the novel but like the first migration is relegated to the annals of the past. At the same time, a third migration actively unfolds in the novel’s present and effectively bisects the life of the protagonist but also echoes the painful and disruptive history of the initial journey into slavery. Fugitive status and subsequent social alienation along with a struggle against centuries of incarceration (physical, spiritual, social and economic) are resonant concerns in a history disrupted by slavery. Thus, the notion of escape and the potential for freedom is always central to Midnight Robber and the quest has all of the moral gravitas that characterises fantasy literature.
Midnight Robber, however, is not concerned with an elemental clash between metaphorical forces of good-versus-evil that imperil the world or the universe at large. Rather, these forces are housed within the divided persona of an abused protagonist. It operates, instead, on the level of the personal and the intimate rather than universal and the civic and includes the quest to salvage a personal universe. Healing and reconciliation between the two sides of her fractured psyche somewhat mirrors the journey of the youthful protagonist Ged in Ursula K. Le Guin’s seminal young adult fantasy novel A Wizard of Earthsea.\textsuperscript{105} Midnight Robber’s quest for freedom unfolds through Tan Tan’s personal quest for autonomy and freedom from abuse. However, this quest is equally as evident in the novel’s meditation on carnival and through its migration of people and customs across disparate spaces. Hopkinson stresses the mixed cultural and racial heritage of the communities in Midnight Robber and draws attention to the history of forced labor that decimated the native peoples of the Caribbean and press-ganged millions from Africa, India, China and poor people from Europe. Even centuries later, those people on the new planet, even if they’ve managed to create a more equitable set of societies, won’t have forgotten all their histories. Some of it will remain in stories, in sayings, in the names for things. It will inform the way that they see the world. Change will happen, but it will be slow. (Hopkinson, “An Interview with Nalo Hopkinson” 153-4)

Change can also be rapid. Tan-Tan becomes both fugitive and exile on New Half-Way Tree and she suffers from her father’s drunken decline and subsequent violence. Consequently, she shifts from the role of a domesticated, dominated politician’s daughter descended from

\textsuperscript{105} In A Wizard of Earthsea the protagonist Ged undergoes a spiritual and psychic splitting. In his case, however, the division is corporealised and externalised as his ‘doppelganger’ materialises into an independent shadow.
Toussaint to that of an exiled ‘Robber Queen’ living and hiding in the wilds of New Half-Way Tree. If Toussaint represents a civilised centre of civic order and technological advancement, then New Half-Way Tree is the realm where historically-based myth and fantasy are brought to life. The latter is positioned as the twin planet and mirror image of Toussaint and functions as a penal colony where thieves, murderers and assorted criminals seek refuge from justice on Toussaint or, in some cases, are conversely shipped there as a punitive sentence. Or, as the narrator muses when comparing the two worlds:

You know how a thing and the shadow of that thing could almost be in the same place together? You know the way that a shadow is the dark version of the real thing, the dub side? Well New-Half Way tree is a dub version of Toussaint, hanging like a ripe maami apple in one fold of a dimension veil. (Hopkinson, *Midnight Robber* 2)

Physically and psychologically, New Half-Way Tree functions as a dark doppelganger and shares the “same clouds in the high, high mountains; same sunny bays; same green, rich valleys” (2) as its sister planet Toussaint. However, it also radically diverges from the image of Toussaint as it is wild, untamed and overrun with “poison thorns, diable bush and restless people” (2). Indeed, the stark visual contrast of each establishes the thematic parameters of the text. Antonio’s attempt to alleviate the conditions of his flight and exile by abducting his own daughter and unlawfully transporting her to New Half-Way Tree rearticulates and alludes to the grim mechanics of the Middle Passage, albeit as an individualised microcosm of a much larger event. Yet, the effect on the novel’s protagonist is no less devastating as the nature of the journey grimly foreshadows the severing of ties, maternal deprivation and abuse that lies in store for stolen child.
Tan Tan is lured with the false promise of ‘temporary’ exile and eventual return. This traumatic upheaval occurs without her full understanding of and true consent to the voyage as Antonio conveniently omits the fact that there is no possibility of return to Toussaint. In effect, the young ‘pickney’ is a victim of human trafficking, though not at the hands of a stranger. Once exiled, she is not only vulnerable to the physical and psychological hardship involved in acclimatising to a harsh, even alien environment but she is equally vulnerable to the physical and sexual exploitation of her father and captor. Not only is New Half-Way Tree ‘a shadow of a thing,’ but Hopkinson also applies W.E.B. Du Bois’s metaphor of ‘doubleness’ to New Half-Way Tree, to describe the severe psychic fracture that occurs when one is “always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others” (*The Souls of Black Folk* iv). Du Bois’s ‘doubleness’ is abbreviated and signified through the Jamaica patois term ‘dub’ which not refers to a popular genre of music but infers duplication, reverberation and echo. New Half-Way Tree is initially positioned as the shadowy replica of the Caribbean and Toussaint and exists as a space in which the effects of colonisation, discrimination and exclusion are not only replayed in the shadow realm, but are confronted and transformed.

Tan Tan’s life is not only drastically reconfigured through migration but utterly inverted; she is plucked from the heart of material privilege and the protective safety of her household which includes the idolised if, distant figure of her mother Ione, and the supportive structure provided by household servants, in the form of a robotic ‘eshu’ that is connected to greater Grand ‘Nansi Web and the human nurse (‘Nursie’) and who cares for her physical needs. Just as Tan Tan crosses from one realm to another, a ‘crossing’ over or migration of both ideas and language

---

106 As the novel progresses, Tan Tan is all-too-conscious of her standing and repute in the small, makeshift community of Junjuh. The character also views and reviews her own actions through the vantage of an alternative ‘self’ which I will discuss later in this chapter.
occurs at the authorial level as Hopkinson cross-pollinates two genres that are often regarded as antithetical.

**Carnival and Family:**

Earlier in the novel, the relationship between Antonio and Tan Tan is appropriately paternal, even maternal, as Antonio is nurturing, mesmerised and above all, extremely tactile with his new born child: “He could never hold her long enough, he could never touch her too much” (Hopkinson, *Midnight Robber* 13). Antonio’s intuitive skill with the infant stands in direct contradistinction to Ione’s disinterest and impatient, awkward attentions. From the offset there is a notable inversion of parental and gender roles as Ione Brasil is marked out in the text as distinctly lacking in maternal feeling and is coolly aloof from the young infant. This is of little surprise since the text explicitly reveals that Tan Tan was conceived amid the ongoing ‘war’ between her parents and that she eventually arrives into the world, not only as her mother’s desperate attempt to reignite her father’s fading interest in the marital relationship, but their new daughter is also “one more *thing* to quarrel over” [emphasis added] (48).

Consequently, Tan Tan is often treated by her mother as a fleeting form of entertainment, akin to a living doll that is dressed up for display and materially lavished upon. She utilises Tan Tan in adult games of her choosing, either as a pawn to secure Antonio’s attention or as a living toy and dolled-up extension of herself on display. She has little interest in the childish, overtly carnivalesque play that Tan Tan attempts to initiate and engage her with: “[Ione] was forever buying her new toys, even though she wouldn’t play Robber Queen or any oldtime story for she didn’t like to ‘bother up sheself with stupidness’” (33). As a result, Tan Tan plays a feminised version of the glamourous and canonical character, the Midnight Robber and it is a
solitary, imaginative role-play that she indulges in all year round, well beyond the confines of the official season of Marryscheville’s carnivals. The role temporarily alleviates the solitude of Tan Tan’s maternal neglect (and her status as only child) as well as providing her with a degree of solace over Antonio’s eventual abandonment of the family home on directly witnessing one of Ione’s torrid affairs.

While Antonio’s initially affectionate, even awed regard for his sole girl-child seems preferable to Ione’s bouts of dismissive irritation and indifference, it foreshadows not only parental authority, but a form of ownership leading to a fatalistic objectification of Tan Tan whereby “Antonio’s heart would swell with joy at the beautiful thing he had made, this one daughter, this chocolate girl” [emphasis added] (13). As the novel progresses, the fragile boundary between Antonio’s stewardship and eventual sense of ‘ownership’ is irrevocably crossed and the father-daughter relationship is corrupted beyond all recognition. As a result, Tan Tan is initially subjected to her mother’s objectification on Toussaint, then her father’s on New Half-Way tree.

The limits of parental power (including the power to create) and the shadow of control that accompanies such power is conceptually explored in the founding ‘myth’ of Granny Nanny and the reactions of Toussaint’s inhabitants, some of whom eagerly embrace her influence on their lives while others, again, seek to shield themselves from her intrusive presence. Parental control is equally problematised through the protagonist’s fraught parental relationship with her mother, father, then step-mother respectively. Social control and paternalism is also highlighted through carnival which is used to entertain, pacify and instil docility. Tan Tan seeks to escape Antonio’s tyranny but is eventually forced to carry his child, resulting in a hostile,
deeply traumatic relationship with her own offspring that is only resolved at the very end of the novel.

It is critical to observe that material privilege, the mask of respectability and the veneer of a stable nuclear family structure from which the protagonist is wrested are sceptically presented to readers and is thus, constantly critiqued and interrogated by the text’s multiple narratives. However, the fault lines of nuclear family life, the hidden ugliness and the instability therein are violently exposed through the mainstay institutions of carnival; the tawdry affairs of her parents are aired and their dire relationship is fully, publicly unmasked by the bawdy calypsos and grotesque, masked figures of mas’ revelry; indeed, the fissures of Ione’s and Antonio’s personal drama—that are only vaguely sensed as domestic tremors by the naïve child, are revealed to be world-altering chasms, that result in the final, spasmodic separation between her old life and the new.

The dramatic, highly dysfunctional relationship between Tan Tan’s high profile parents is the central drama of the carnival that occurs early in the novel. Their failed relationship garners a great deal of public attention amongst Marrysheville’s ‘seeded’ and headblind communities alike, as it fuels the local rumour mill and provides entertaining source material for satire in the upcoming carnival calypsos. But as Giselle Anatol accurately observes in her article “Maternal Discourses in Nalo Hopkinson's Midnight Robber,” although both Tan Tan’s parents are equally faithless, unstable and ultimately too emotionally immature to sustain a successful adult relationship, it is only Ione’s extramarital affairs and notoriously ‘greedy’ sexual appetite that is singled out as a fit subject for calypsonian song and satire come carnival time. The chorus of “Workee” is an exemplary verse of ‘picong’

107 *Picong* is one of three forms of calypso music that specialises in satire and personal attacks.
During the main parade she is even publicly confronted and mockingly rebuffed by the local Midnight Robber as the “horny horning whore of Babylon” (57), and all before an appreciatively giggling, titillated audience. Not even the presence of a prominent female calypsonian in the parade can subvert the standard, masculine rules of calypso word play and robber talk or ward off the misogyny that, by and large, has been standardised by both practices. By contrast, Antonio’s elicit affairs and open philandering hold far less popular currency as a source of satire and are relatively overlooked in comparison to the fierce spotlight that is cast on Ione’s similar actions.108

Antonio is assigned the undesirable role of the ‘horned’ man in keeping with calypso’s ongoing tendency to centralise and critique female sexuality. As a consequence he becomes an object of pity, mild derision even as public sympathy somewhat sides with him in the event of their highly public separation, leaving spectators and gossipers to note: “A man have him pride, you know! How you could expect him to live with a woman who horning he steady?” (32). It is then left to Ione to mourn over and explain the clear double standards around gender roles and sexuality that abounds in Marrysheville: “Tan-Tan, you daddy vex with me; he vex bad. He forget all the nights I spend alone, all the other women I catch he with” (25). Antonio rejects

---

108 Later in Midnight Robber, Antonio, Tan Tan and readers of the novel are confronted with the ‘fruit’ of Antonio’s infidelity in the form of Quamima, his illegitimate and retarded child who is born on New Half-Way tree after her mother Aislin is exiled there at Antonio’s behest.
his position as a cuckold and seeks, instead, to salve his bruised masculinity. He achieves this by challenging Quashee, the most recent in a line of Ione’s retaliatory sexual conquests, to a public machete fight. In doing so, he fleetingly re-inscribes the stick-fighting arena with its previous gladiatorial significance. Unfortunately, Antonio’s inept attempts to fix the fight in his own favour by lacing his weapon with a chemical substance results in Quashee being inadvertently slain, thus necessitating Antonio’s furtive flight to New Half-Way tree. Ultimately, their private war is publicised and the family unit collapses. Once Antonio fails to avenge Ione is abandoned on Toussaint. The fragility of the nuclear family structure is both revisited and redressed, however, on New Half-Way Tree.

**Robber Talk, Robber Play: Survival on New Half-Way Tree**

Tan Tan’s new life on New Half-Way Tree in the settlement of Junjhu is a direct and sustained echo of her former life. Chiggah Bit Village and the more refined centre of Sweet Pone are among the comparatively, rough, makeshift settlements that are constructed by adult exiles without the beneficence of Granny Nanny’s technology. Capital punishment and the threat of the ‘tin box’ coercively maintain legal and social ‘order’ in the new settlements. Both father and daughter assume new identities and attempt to construct a new life. However, the trappings of family life are disastrously revisited as Antonio remarries a woman by the name of Janisette. Over time, he re-establishes a degree of his former prestige and influence in the community but recreates a form of competitive dysfunction in his own family unit.

He openly favours Tan Tan over Janisette and creates a competitive rivalry between them that is largely one-sided. While Tan Tan’s relationship with her mother was distant, the open
conflict between herself and her step-mother Janisette, is caustic and intense as Janisette bitterly competes for the favour of Antonio’s attentions. In some respects, Janisette recalls Ione’s maternal inattentiveness—though in Janisette’s case her neglect is wilful as she deliberately ignores the tell-tale signs of Antonio’s physical and sexual abuse of his own daughter, choosing instead to scapegoat Tan for two teenage miscarriages and attributing these to her step-daughter’s loose morals, ‘wild’ and sluttish ways, rather than to Antonio’s sinister predation. In the initial instance of the first rape, Tan Tan’s undergoes a frightening de-corporealisation. She not only experiences the dissolution of her body but also a traumatic ‘splitting’ both physically and psychically. In the words of Elizabeth Boyle:

The uncanny disintegration of the ‘black’ body re-enacts specific dislocations from family, homeland or racial heritage that occur in the plot, and at a deeper level often recalls the symbolic separation from Africa through the Middle Passage, where the very real possibilities of disease, maltreatment and suicide confronted the slave body just as the extreme psychological impact of the Atlantic separation hit home. However, decorporealisation can also signal a symbolic reclamation of agency within these magic (178) realist narratives, involving the protagonist’s healing return to a ‘folk’ self governed by tropes of tricksterism and storytelling. (Boyle 178 – 9)

In an act of self-preservation she imaginatively divides Antonio into personas or ‘two Daddies’ in order to rationalise the attack (Hopkinson *Midnight Robber* 140). Her own psyche is similarly cleaved and gives birth to the alter-ego of the heroic Robber Queen who embodies “the terror of all Junjuh, the one who born on a far-away planet, who travel to this place to rob the rich in their idleness and help the poor in their humility… Nothing bad does ever happen to Tan Tan the Robber Queen. Nothing can’t hurt she” (25). The mask and garb of the Robber
Queen will eventually serve as a psychological refuge and a source of empowerment. Like a Greek tragedy the sins of the father echo, reverberate and are squarely visited upon the child as history flows in an inexorable loop. In effect, Tan Tan mirrors the actions of her father Antonio, in turn inheriting the mantle of a murderer and the role of a fugitive. Just as he accidentally slayed Quashee on Toussaint, Tan Tan in turn is eventually forced to kill her father in an act borne of physical self-defense. The experiential gap between the girl-child who is condemned by Janisette as ‘force ripe’\textsuperscript{109} but is in fact prematurely dragged into adulthood—and the cynical, damaged adult who carries her father’s child—is as vast as the distance between past and present. She is further exiled and doubly outcast. While Antonio successfully adopts a new identity and re-establishes himself, New Half-Way tree provides no similar opportunity or respite for Tan Tan. Instead, it threatens to serve as a prison. As an enraged widow, Janisette demands the most punitive of justice forcing the runaway and newly pregnant teenager into the depths of the bush where she is forced to assume a masked identity whenever she attempts to come into contact with the human world.

Once in exile, she attempts to reconcile her previous misapprehension of her old world, with the reality of the new world into which she is roughly jettisoned. When she first encounters the indigenous \textit{douen} of the forest she cannot see beyond \textit{their} protective guises. She fails to recognise the intelligence of Chichibud, who initially guides them to the nearest settlement for a fee. Nor does she recognise him as a sympathetic ally and a silent witness to her abuse. She is also completely unaware of the \textit{douen} practice of hiding their children in secretive

\textsuperscript{109} This accusation is later hurled at Tan Tan by her new step-mother Janisette, whereby the West Indian term ‘force ripe’ connotes an unseemly precocity in a young girl, where she is sexually forward or advanced beyond her years. In this instance however, I am emphasising the other connotation of the word insofar as the protagonist is experientially ‘taxed’ beyond her years and is forced by her father’s abduction and consequent abuse to mature far more quickly than she otherwise would have.
settlements deep within the forest. Female *douen* or ‘hintes’, in turn, masquerade as pack-birds who transport the new human settlers. When Tan Tan retreats into the forest and is taken in by their protective custody she finally meets Chichibud’s daughter, Abitefa and wonders “[w]as the *douen* child his? It reminded her of Old Masque bat costumes, leathery and plain. Ugly lizard pickney” (180). Her initial response is one of revulsion and dismissal while the seeming grotesquetry of New Half-Way Tree causes her to experience a deep sense of defamiliarisation:

> [T]he grotesque… discloses the potentiality of an entirely different world, of another order, another way of life. It leads men out of the confines of the apparent (false) unity of the indisputable and stable….The existing world suddenly becomes alien. (Bakhtin 48)

The alien world in question functions as a Jungian dreamscape and “…it does be rough” (Hopkinson, *Midnight Robber* 2). She is similarly dismissive of what New Half-Way tree offers in terms of its settlements or its local carnival: “Truth to tell, nothing could be completely right about Carnival in this shadowland of New Half-Way Tree. Everyone here was an exile; this could only be a phantom of the celebration they would have had on Toussaint” (314). Yet, it is the same phantom, alien world that also comes to her rescue. Her tenure under the protective custody of the *douen* community is brief and highly uncomfortable. Yet, the hidden community permits Tan Tan to experience a more positive familial experience while she forms a true kinship with Abitefa. But while Tan Tan survives, she does not thrive. Yet, despite her inability to adjust to their food, master their tongue, integrate into their customs and mores or acclimatise to the forest, she is protected and nurtured in a rare instance in the novel. Nevertheless, the care that she is offered cannot satiate her need for human companionship.
As a consequence, Tan Tan eventually occupies the role of the Midnight Robber. She refashions and subverts the iconic, carnivalesque character of the Midnight Robber for her own purposes. Her subversion of the role extends well beyond the socially approved parameters of carnival’s season, allowing the text to examine notions of female masquerade and roleplay. The titular character, the Midnight Robber is traditionally the braggart who spins half-truths and tall tales while delivering idle threats that introduce temporary chaos and a scripted inversion—all of which occurs in Marrysheville’s carnival. ‘Robber talk’ is thus a mythologising space in which the speaker constructs a space in which he ostentatiously re-invents his identity, and is characterised by braggadocio. The speaker not only embellishes the fantasy of fearful misdeeds, but rhapsodises over his fantastic, near-mythic origins all of which occurs in a constructed, free-floating *kairos.*

Whereas calypso often targets ‘others’ and speaks directly to and of current social reality robber talk trades in solipsism and constructs an imagined, glamourised self. Above all, as is the case for most of carnival’s speech, the speakers are male. In Tan Tan’s specific case however, the character of the Midnight Robber is rearticulated for far more pragmatic and immediate purposes both on Toussaint, where it is part of a complex form of child’s play, then on New Half-Way where it functions as an outlaw’s mask and physical disguise. Once on New Half-Way Tree Tan Tan once again, plays a distinctly ‘solo’ mas’, mirroring the playful actions of her childhood self; by retaining and then re-adopting the role of the Robber Queen as adult, she brings to fruition the imaginative play of the solitary child on Toussaint who whiled away hours

---

I draw upon the following definition of ‘kairos: “Kronos (or cronos in the English spelling, from which we take our word chronology) is sequential time. Kronos is the time of clocks and calendars; it can be quantified and measured. Kronos is linear, moving inexorably out of the determinate past toward the determined future, and has no freedom. Kairos is numinous time. Kairos is a time of festivals and fantasies; it cannot be controlled or possessed. Kairos is circular, dancing back and forth, here and there, without beginning or ending, and knows no boundaries.” (Makridakis 74)
of parental disinterest and neglect by similarly adopting this role. *Midnight Robber* explores
the origin and the psychic necessity of the lawless and, in the specific case of Tan Tan, the
‘outlawed’ alter-ego which Tan Tan flirts with on Toussaint as a child, and later depends on as
an adult and mother-to-be. Through a resourceful re-inscription of the ole mas’ character of the
Midnight Robber, Hopkinson ensures both the survival of her protagonist and her ole mas’
alter-ego. The persona of the Midnight Robber becomes vital in maintaining both Tan Tan’s
psychic stability and physical survival.

Both the skills of ‘robber talk’ and mas’ play shifts Tan Tan from the role of one who is both
victimised and transgressed against, to an active agent and a wilful transgressor against the
social and gender mores the human settlements that she encounters; as New Half-Way’s self-
appointed Robber ‘queen’ she lies, steals, cheats, preaches and occasionally delivers punitive
justice as she sees fit. Furthermore, the Midnight Robber serves as a welcome, positive respite
from the ravages of a damaged, deeply divided psyche that fractures along a childish,
manichean separation between ‘good Tan Tan’—the loving and obedient child who idolised
both her parents—and the “bad Tan Tan voice” (180) that perpetually berates her for the murder
of her father, evokes the guilt of an unwanted pregnancy, and insists upon a punitive state of
self-loathing in the protagonist:

*Friendship?* The bad Tan Tan voice howled at her, louder here in douen land. *You could
be friend to anybody? You was friend to we daddy?* Chichibud reached to help Tan-Tan
down. She flinched she nasty self away. (180)

The splitting of the self from the self is proves to be a torturous process. The condemnatory
voice surfaces whenever Tan Tan is on the verge of forming a connection with others and
simultaneously ensures that she remains disconnected from herself. Abreactive responses such as flinching, recoiling, sweating and vomiting all periodically occur throughout her tenure on New Half-Way Tree, indicating her deep state of abjection.

On Hidden Transcripts and Labour

First, the hidden transcript is a social product and hence a result of power relations among subordinates. Second, like folk culture, the hidden transcript has no reality as pure thought; it exists only to the extent it is practiced, articulated, enacted, and disseminated within these off stage social sites. Third, the social spaces where the hidden transcript grows are themselves an achievement of resistance; they are won and defended in the teeth of power. (Scott 129)

We are initially confronted with a utopian imaginary in Midnight Robber which involves the removal of negative forces that dominated and plagued the existence of a once subordinate people. As a result, the novel clearly suggests that subordinate groups have the ability to imagine a “counterfactual social order” (129) and are not so wholly blinkered or imaginatively crippled by their existing set of circumstances that they are unable to conceive of alternative social arrangements. James C. Scott famously critiques two notions that are typically used when analysing the circumstances of subordinate groups. Firstly, he dismisses a ‘fat’ theory of hegemony which involves a typically structuralist conception of ‘hegemony’ as an all-encompassing and all-conquering force that extinguishes any spaces whatsoever for imaginative resistance and what he terms as a “thin theory of naturalisation” (129; 132). He then examines a ‘thin’ theory of hegemony. The latter approach is less extreme and suggests
that domination is not all-encompassing and that, more often than not, subordinate groups engage in practical acquiescence. He then poses the following question:

How does a subculture of subordinates with less social power, almost by definition, than the dominant culture achieve a high level of conformity? The answer surely lies in the social incentives and sanctions it can bring to bear to reward members who observe its norms and punish those who deviate. (129)

The question is particularly salient to Half-Way Tree and towns such as Junjuh and Chigger Bite but is less obviously applicable to Toussaint and Marrysheville. In *Midnight Robber* one realises that Toussaint is very much “an ambiguous utopia.”111 It begins as the kernel of a ‘thought experiment’ that takes root in the soil of an alien planet, matures and then settles. As is so often the case with any process of ‘settlement,’ however, as the society strengthens and establishes itself it transforms *almost* to the point where it fails to carry the impetus of its evolutionary origins.

A form of intellectual and ideological ‘sedimentation’ occurs whereby lofty ideas and ideals solidify into the very ideological, legal and moral ‘materials’ that will ultimately construct a new establishment. Settlement initiates a new cycle of scepticism, resistance and even departure in the case of those citizens who choose to live outside of Toussaint’s regulatory web as well as those who are exiled from it. The critical difference, of course, is that the new colony is sufficiently capacious that it may house dissent within and beyond its walls. Even though the new colony is preferable to the brutality and open inequity of the colonial yoke

111 Here, I am borrowing from the sub-heading of Ursula Le Guin’s seminal science-fiction novel, *The Dispossessed.*
which it overthrows it, nevertheless, begins to monitor its own citizens to the point where it begins to partially echo the ‘establishment’ it resisted and from which its citizens originally fled.

The process of settlement is then repeated on New Half-Way Tree, although in this instance we are privy to its social development at an early point in its history. Critically, New Half-Way Tree is a harsh environment. As a prison colony it is unrelentingly unromantic about its origins including the fugitive status of its criminal population and its attendant lack of founding ideals. This no more evident than when Tan Tan admonishes the servant-\textit{douen} Chichibud for addressing the domineering One-Eye as ‘boss.’ The egalitarian principles of Toussaint, which Tan Tan has been reared upon, automatically fall from her lips when she dutifully recites: “\textit{Shipmates all have the same status. Nobody higher than a next somebody}” then insists on ‘Compere’, rather than ‘boss’ as a corrective and suitable title for One-Eye [emphasis in original] (121). Once again, the echoes of “All ah we is one” abound and are re-articulated in the future while iterature around carnival interrogates a form of social masking which elides underlying inequality.

Tan Tan is rightfully confused when crèche room lessons prove to be redundant rather than instructive and become, instead, a source of adult ridicule, amusement and dismissiveness. More critically, however, Chichibud’s social status and very ontology is questioned as Claude sarcastically intones: “is a human that?” (121) thus overturning the assumption that fraternal and horizontal social bonds will underpin this society and reveals, instead, a decidedly vertical hierarchic structure. One-Eye eventually offers Antonio reluctant praise when the latter strategically acquiesces to the authority of the men of Junjuh who have inhabited the town for a greater length of time and have assumed seniority. Tan Tan, by contrast, resists succumbing
to the rampant corruption of the backwater settlements that she visits; as the titular Robber Queen she is more than willing to disrupt, invert and subvert the existing order as she travels from one settlement to the next. Her behaviour is inexplicably audacious and draws both admiration and censure as she periodically speaks truth to power despite her subordinate position. As Scott cannily observes:

It is not the miasma of power and thraldom that requires explanation. We require instead an understanding of a misreading by subordinate groups *that seems to exaggerate their own power*, the possibilities for emancipation, and to underestimate the power arrayed against them. If the elite-dominated public transcript tends to naturalize domination, it would seem that some countervailing influence manages often to denaturalize domination. [emphasis added] (Scott 79)

When Tan Tan dons the mask of the Robber Queen the act does not exaggerate so much as *amplify* her existing power offering her anonymity, mobility and concealment. It enables her to participate in human public life and grants her the confidence to invert the world and briefly reconstruct it in order to accommodate a more just order. This is demonstrated when she encounters an abusive mother verbally denigrating, beating and publicly humiliating her servile and simple son, Alysious. Tan Tan proceeds to act as judge, jury and arbitrator, dispensing retributive justice and offering corrective advice as she sees fit with all of the bombast and verbal dexterity that is characteristic of the novel’s titular character. She also enacts a true reversal by dispossessing the abusive mother of her switch and turning it against her as she delivers a punitive whipping that triggers traumatic memories and echoes the physical punishment she endured at Antonio’s hands. She functions as the vigilante outlaw who delivers law and order to situations as is required. Indeed, the carnivalesque character of the Robber
Queen serves as the ‘countervailing influence’ that allows her to temporarily transcend the limits of her social reality and, for a brief period of time, overcome the strictures of her domination. On New Half-Way Tree, Tan Tan is akin to the lowest of the low, comparable to dirt. Even her own internal, self-regulatory voice raises the question: “Who would care for mud in the street” [emphasis in original] (Hopkinson, Midnight Robber 165) when she is offered not only romance but the opportunity to escape the prison of domestic abuse.

She is victimised by father and step-mother alike as they both draw on the resources that Juneja has to offer, that effectively enables their abuse. Antonio relies on the town’s status as a relatively new settlement where privacy and individualism is highly prized while a degree of isolation structures the town in terms of neighbours proximity to one another as well as the town’s proximity to other settlements. This leads to a silent complicity and willingness to turn a blind eye to what is tantamount to an open secret. The lowliness of Tan Tan’s position is reinforced when she finally confides in Abitefa and details her extensive abuse, once again invoking the Jouvay metaphor of mud, dirt and earth with this bitter summation of her experience: “He rape me, Abitefa. He put this baby in me, like the one before. He was forever trying to plant me, like I was his soil to harvest” [emphasis added] (260). In the very instance of the first rape, Hopkinson references the psychoanalytical condition of ‘splitting’ and makes it quite evident that Tan Tan’s psyche and character experiences a devastating fracture resulting in two related yet separate ‘selves’ that uneasily co-exist.

Yet, Tan Tan is fully conscious of the division in her character to the extent. She names and condemns the part of herself that she associates with the rape as ‘bad Tan Tan’ and it becomes the aspect of her psyche which she attempts to disassociate herself from. In contemporary psychoanalytical parlance, she would most likely be diagnoses as suffering from ‘BPD’ or
Borderline Personality Disorder. This aspect of her personality functions as a screen on which to project sex, sexuality, guilt and inferiority. Thus, her flight of fantasy which permits her to inhabit the character and costume of ‘the Robber Queen’ is an act that is simultaneously pragmatic, ephemeral and circumspect. It is only on carnival’s stage that these warring states are reconciled resulting in the holistic reintegration of her personality.

Calypso’s Triumph: A teller of Tales

Towards the novel’s conclusion Tan Tan who, for much of the novel has hidden under the protective care of the douen community, finally decides to step forth and participate in Sweet Pone’s carnival and momentarily rejoin the revelry of the human world. She predictably dons the mask of the Midnight Robber, partakes in the fete and follows the standardised conventions of elaborate self-eulogy, self-parody and mythologisation as she plays mas’ to her audience:

“My father, Lord Raja, was the King of Kings, nemesis of the mighty. He command the engines of the earth, and they obey him. My mother, Queen Niobe, cause the stars to fall out of the sky at her beauty and the wind to sigh as she dance. How could I not be joyful? How could I not be blissful?” She wove her deft weave about being

---

112 This chapter does not delve deeply into psychoanalysis as I am primarily interested in how festivals like carnival (and, to a lesser extent, Junkanoo) assist Hopkinson’s world-building and allow her to re-position and re-articulate ‘black’ migration to the Caribbean in a science-fiction setting. My central focus is also on Hopkinson’s own claim in an interview that she wishes to portray aspects of black life and black reality that extend beyond the purview of the white gaze (“Speaking in Tongues”). Nevertheless, for those who are interested in the psychological implications of BPO in relation to this text should refer to the work of Otto Kernberg (Borderline Conditions and Pathological Narcissism and Structural Derivatives of Object Relations. In: Object Relations Theory and Clinical Psychoanalysis) and Heinz Kohut (The Analysis of the Self and The Restoration of the Self). These works offer further detail and insight into the condition.
kidnapped and stolen away. About fleeing her captors, stealing to survive, helping those worse off than herself. (317)

Within the mythology, however, is thinly disguised truth that alludes to her biographical past a ‘princess,’ or a privileged politician’s daughter. Comparable to Play Mas’ nightmarish carnival scenes in the beginning of the play, Midnight Robber’s final carnival scene similarly segues from high fantasy to violent reality. The disruptive presence of Janisette, hurling insults and seeking retribution for Antonio’s murder shatters the dream-like, escapist reverie in which Tan Tan performs. The bullet-shaped tank in which Janisette arrives, the threat of chains and the ‘tin box’ that awaits her in Junjuh turns the carnival arena into a courtroom, the rapt audience into critical jurors, while Tan Tan’s fabulist storytelling morphs into a critical testimony. Tan Tan’s performance, her very name, and the stories from which her name is derived, is called into question, condemned by audience members as both myth and ‘pappyshow’ reminiscent of Ione’s dismissal of the affective power of carnival.

She is ultimately called on by Janisette and the voracious audience to give an authentic, cohesive account of herself and her life—including the life she has taken and the life that she reluctantly carries. Once again, carnival becomes a revelatory, dramatic stage for confession, the process of unmasking and public disclosure, and the entire performance revolves around ‘kaiso’ or the ability to narrate. Tan Tan uses the structure of a Midnight Robber’s fictional and fantastic biography, substituting high-flown embellishment with the sordid details of her own factual biography. She thus wields the weapons of a calypsonian—that of lyrical dexterity, rhyme, invective and, above all, the ability to speak truth to power—in order to still the crowd’s

---

113 ‘Kaiso’ is an early term for what became known as Calypso music. The etymology of the word will be discussed in the following chapter.
initial impatience and answer to each question or disruption from audience members in a powerful mix of repartee, song and confession. Antonio’s misdeeds—both on Toussaint and New Half-Way Tree, the paternity of her child, and Janisette’s own knowledge of and complicity in Tan Tan’s abuse is finally laid bare, ‘sans humanite!’

As her confession concludes, it is her ‘magical’ mouth (326) that secures a healing catharsis, and creates a new lore.

Despite the rupture of Tan Tan’s migration from one world to next and one carnival to the next, the critical, sustained connection that endures between Toussaint and New Half-Way Tree is the gift of oralure, preserved through folktales that are narrated by the human voice and also transmitted through nanotechnology. Tan Tan’s familiarity with the folktales that were told to her by her eshu in her Marrysheville nursery, and also those handed down to her by Nursie (the woman who acted as a caregiver in Ione’s stead and tended to and mothered Tan Tan on Toussaint) gives the protagonist a working acquaintance with the living myths that roam the landscape and reside in the bush of New Half-Way.

Furthermore, the instructive folktales of her namesake—“How Tan Tan Learn to Thief,” “Tan Tan and Dry Bone,” and “Tan Tan and The Rolling Calf”—are intermittently threaded throughout the narrative and are narrated in a mysteriously ‘disembodied’ voice. The folktales are strategically placed as a ‘disruptive’ yet analogous kairos in the text that is juxtaposed with the central narrative in which the character is forced to intellectually, morally and emotionally navigate her way through the traumatic chronos of her life. At times, Tan Tan reminisces about the ‘Tan Tan’ folktales she was audience to as a child. At other times she is an audience when

---

114 As Hopkinson explains in the novel ‘Sans’ Humanite’ is “…the traditional final phrase of the Calypsonian who had won the battle of wits and words” (326).
adult workers on New Half-Way Tree ‘hold court’ and share Tan Tan tales with their fellow workers. Towards the conclusion of *Midnight Robber*, Tan Tan scales the heights of artful storytelling and attains the ability to sway a captive audience as her own tale joins the established Tan Tan canon.

But whether an audience or teller of these stories, Hopkinson alerts us to the fact that they are not only a moral compass but they means for self-discovery as: “…[s]he [Tan Tan] kept trying to discern truths about herself in the Tan Tan tales. She couldn’t help it. People loved them so, there must be something to them, ain’t? Something hard, solid thing other people could see in her; something she could hear and know about herself and hold in her heart” (299). The Tan Tan tales are told in a storytelling ‘chain’ which in fact proves to be cyclic rather than linear. Tan Tan not only inherits a set of existing tales but the art of weaving tales like her eshu the ‘master weaver’, once did. It is only towards the end of the novel that Tan Tan is able to directly connect the folktales to her own lived experience and recognise elements of her identity in the tales. She gains the maturity to reconcile herself to the events in her life and the craft to then weave them into a truth-telling narrative, at the novel’s conclusion.

The Tan Tan tales specifically return full circle. The tales narrated to her by her human nurse, and more critically her household eshu, assume a life of their own. Once Tan Tan is departs to New Half-Way Tree she is violently severed from the Web and from Granny Nanny and the nanomites are rendered obsolete. Yet despite this occurrence, the folktales not only reside in Tan Tan’s memory but they continue to be transmitted through nanotechnology to the reader who continue to hear the tales, little realising that they are in fact narrated in the voice of a ‘master story-teller’—that of Tan Tan’s childhood former eshu. This process goes largely
unexplained, and the voice appears to be disembodied and detached until the novel’s penultimate conclusion where the identity of the speaker is revealed.

Not only is the reader privy to the Tan Tan tales but he or she is situated alongside a new, hidden and unexpected audience that is similarly unmasked. A link between Toussaint and New Half-Way Tree is tenuously maintained as the seemingly dormant, disconnected nanomites which seed Tan Tan’s body, and originally connected her to Grand Nansi Web on Toussaint migrate into the growing body of her unborn child and reactivate in new, malleable tissue. Consequently, while it is unborn child who becomes the audience to the eshu’s storytelling; her child not only inherits the traditional ‘Tan Tan’ tales, but the detailed history of his mother which becomes part of the existing oralture. Consequently, the new infant is reconnected to the Grand Nansi Web and is heir to a cultural inheritance of both worlds. He also becomes the means by which Tan Tan is reconnected (by proxy) to Granny Nanny and Toussaint. In this way, continuity and connection are ensured, even in the face of disruption.

On Toussaint, public festive space is reconfigured as a family affair while being intimately linked to the domestic sphere. It is the space in which a dark familial dramaturgy unfolds in two acts. If her family provides the novel’s theatrical spectacle, then carnival generously procures the decorative props and proffers not one, but two twin stages. Thus, the carnivalesque is repurposed as a familial site for the Habib family as two distinct ‘acts’ commence: The first is in Toussaint’s carnival where Antonio Habib’s deception, which results in manslaughter, is dramatically unveiled in the choreographed theatre of the gayelle. His unmasking precipitates his flight through the dimensional veil into a new land. The second occurs towards the end of
new novel, where Tan Tan dons the masque of the titular Robber Queen and performs an extempore\textsuperscript{115} calypso that is both perilous yet cathartic.

Like *The Dragon Can’t Dance*, Nalo Hopkinson’s *Midnight Robber* heavily utilises costuming and calypso in tandem. Both Tan Tan’s carnivalesque garb and verbal dexterity propel her on to a highly public stage where performance and confession collide. Here too, the forces of carnival lay bare her ‘authentic’ self. But while Aldrick uses carnival to construct a glamorous, and methetic presentation of self, this same process goes badly awry for Tan Tan as her performance and persona is publicly picked apart and unravelled, her words critiqued and her personal narrative vigorously contested. Indeed, the fantastic and escapist identity of the garrulous ‘Robber Queen’ that she attempts to protectively cloak herself with is overtly challenged and identified as ‘false.’

Through each extempore verse she undergoes a painful, liberating cartharsis in which her own narrative stands, centre stage. Through the act of unmasking, Tan Tan is freed from necessity and the heavy burden of perpetual disguise. Through playing mas’ in the final scene of the novel she is no longer forced to hide and sublimate her identity by living as an outlaw, compelled to play mas’ all year round. For Hopkinson, playing mas’ extends beyond costuming and the text enters the realm of intricate word play as calypso accompanies costuming and masking and enables confession and narration.

By drawing on the 20\textsuperscript{th} century cadence and rhythm of calypso, both Lovelace’s Philo and Hopkinson’s Tan Tan are able to use their verbal dexterity and wit to examine, unravel, puzzle

\textsuperscript{115} ‘Extempore’ refers to specific tradition of performance in calypso music that relies on spontaneity, improvisation and quick wits as the calypsonian verbally duels and vanquishes an opponent.
over and then re-piece their respective set of circumstances and re-arrange them into manageable, tenable, and navigable narratives. This process occurs in both texts with considerable skill and, in some instances, humour. The critical difference, however, between their calypsos and their on-stage performance is that Tan Tan’s performance initiates a substantively authenticating, truth-telling process that reconciles her with her own history and permits her to reclaim the abused self that she emotionally disassociates from, in order to survive. She is thus unmasked and rendered vulnerable and confesses to her past and her deeds through song. In effect, both father and daughter are exposed to public judgement. But whereas Antonio’s performance rests on deceit and his subsequent exile from Toussaint, Tan Tan’s effects a true homecoming.
Chapter Five: Where to From Here?

In this chapter I will segue from literary to textual analysis and specifically discuss the history of carnival’s music. My thesis will shift from an interest in the works of novelists, poets and playwrights to a ‘popular poetics’ as I examine the critical role that calypso lyrics and imagery play in enabling both old and new forms of mas’. I will then consider how these practices function outside of a literary context, reflecting on their performance on the street as individual yet related texts. An assorted array of calypso and soca lyrics will be useful for critiquing the more popular trends of ‘smut’ calypso and ‘jump and wave’ or ‘flag’ anthems. I also wish to point towards the gender disparity apparent in participation rates at a moment in history where women have ‘taken over’ the open, public spaces of the streets. The female body has become central to carnival’s performance at a time when men continue to rule the fête tents and dominate the production of contemporary soca imagery. Most critically, there is still a preponderance of male performers writing and performing calypsos. Even in the 21st century male performers outweigh the number of women composing music for carnival. This leads one to question who, exactly, is writing the scenarios, characters and imagery of the new carnival texts that inspire the corresponding imagery and performances of mas’? And where does creative control lie?

The ‘audial’ aspects of carnival, comprised of calypso and steel pan music, are overarching texts which directly influence carnival’s visual expressions as both costuming and dance take direct cues from the music. Despite the gaiety and festivity that is often evoked by the word ‘calypso’ and its modern progeny ‘soca,’ I would argue that Trinidad’s carnival music has at
times had the capacity to operate as a ‘battle music.’ 116 While routinely trivialised as novelty music or mere ‘party music,’ calypso and soca have a proven ability to mobilise carnival’s participants. In the past, calypsonians with an interest in local and national politics have put this to use, discussing matters of public interest in their songs. While some artists have retained an explicitly political focus in their lyrics, more often than not contemporary soca artists choose instead to delve into the politics of pleasure, as soca music operates as a form of street party music. This changing dynamic has left a trace in contemporary soca with performers openly meditating on the subject matter of fêtes: dancing, wining and of course, a ubiquitous interest in women. While the post-Emancipation roots of the festival continue to be commemorated, they increasingly register as a more distant concern. The patterns that can be seen in the lyrical content of the music hold true for the medium as a whole. As a hybrid music, soca takes cues from steel pan and calypso as well as the Indian tassa drum, American rhythm and blues and more recently, reggae and EDM 117. Under the weight of these influences it has, in turn, fragmented into a plethora of smaller categories with soca chutney, power soca and groovy soca featuring as the most notable, prestigious and, above all, lucrative forms of carnival music.

As I have discussed in earlier chapters, the history of social justice and the history of carnival in Trinidad are inseparable. Calypso music, in particular, has functioned as a rallying point that fuelled resistance against colonial encroachment as black revellers fought to retain space within carnival’s ranks. It has also been the vehicle through which calypsonians have delivered inspired critiques of socio-political conditions in Trinidad. Calypsos have routinely taken issue with social tendencies, policies, governments, institutions, as well as casting judgement on fellow artists. This has resulted in a verbal kalinda of wit and song that pervades carnival.

116 Gordon Rohlehr famously refers to calypso as the art of ‘warfare and exhortation.’
117 EDM is an abbreviation of ‘electronic dance music’. I will use the abbreviation throughout this chapter.
Although calypso has held a privileged place in carnival celebrations, it continues to exist as an embattled music with a long history of struggle both on a domestic and international front. Even the meaning and origins of the word ‘calypso’ are highly contested and, despite its obvious popularity, it has never had exclusive dominion over carnival.

**Carisos, calicos, kaisos and calypsos:**

Calypso, as a genre, was predated on the Trinidadian musical scene by musical forms such as *bel airs, calendas, bamboula*, and *juba*. It is critical to note that these genres are all defined as types of “…creole drum dances developed in the French-speaking Caribbean during slavery and can each refer to a *form of song as well as dance*” [emphasis added] (Cowley, *Carnival, Canboulay and Calypso* 97). Early in carnival’s history, *bel airs* were the dominant form of music and were performed by women. As the ‘*jamette* element’ began to run carnival, however, this graceful ballad and dance transformed into a bawdy, satirical and at times aggressive performance. Female *chantwells* of the era led competitive carnival bands, giving voice to the rivalries between the groups. Their extemporaneous lyrics were accompanied by musicians and were the forerunner to and prototype for the modern calypso.

The word ‘calypso’ entered Trinidad’s lexicon in 1882 and has been compared with the *Curacaon* dance known as the ‘*quelbay*’. Both the *quelbay* and the calypso are grouped together at this time as part of a stable of corruptive, abominable dances (97). The term calypso co-existed alongside *cariso* or *caliso*, which referred to music that was performed with “African drums that consisted of a goat skin drawn tightly over a keg” (98-9). Daniel Crowley notes that “[n]early every one of modern Trinidad’s many racial and national groups claims to
have originated calypso, both the word and the song form” (“Calypso” 1). He then proceeds to
catalogue a range of possibilities in an ironic, tongue-in-cheek fashion:

…[calypso] comes from an African word “Kaiso” meaning “Bravo!”; as “caliso” it
is a Spanish Venezuela and topical song; it derives from French “carrousseaux”
meaning “debauch”; as “carieto” it is a Carib song “used to heal the sick, to embolden
the Warrior, and to seduce the fair”, it comes from a Chinese insecticide called
“calypso” or even that they didn’t know what to call it so they “called-it-so.” In any
case we can be reasonably sure that it had little connection to Ulysses’ island
sweetheart, but rather that some European-educated Trinidadian “improved [sic] the
traditional Creole terms “caliso” or “cariso” with this classical allusion. (1)

Ethnomusicologist Errol Hill adds to the discourse by recouping sections of a lost manuscript
that was written by Calypsonian Raymond Quevado, who went by the stage moniker of ‘Atilla
the Hun’:

In my own experience of over half a century's association with kaiso, carnival, and
kaiso tents, the first word which I heard used to describe this song and dance form was
kaiso. Kaiso was used to describe the song when sung as well as a means of expressing
ecstatic satisfaction over what was in the opinion of the audience a particularly excellent

---

118 Percival Borde also suggests that the word calypso is derived from the Ibo word ‘Kasico’ which he translates
into the phrase ‘Once more, bravo!’ which is indicative of the interactive nature of the music and how deeply
reliant it is on live performance and popular reception (Borde 45-6).
kaiso.... Through the years I have heard the words kaiso, caliso, rouso and wouso, and finally calypso119 in that order. (qtd. in E. Hill, “On the Origin” 359)

For the most part, 19th century calypso was sung in French creole by chantwells who led the bands, but by the turn of the 20th century English lyrics began to infiltrate and eventually dominate the music (Crowley, “Calypso” 1). Early calypso music waged an extensive battle for survival against a colonial administration that sought to suppress it at every turn thanks to its association with jamette carnival. Calypso, chantwells and kalinda bands converged in jamette carnival, much like the triple-headed hydra, creating a form of institutionalized gang warfare. Each band had its lead singer or chantwell (from the French chantuelle). When two bands met, their chantwells traded insults in song, in anticipation of the actual battle. Calypso thus became stigmatized because of its association with violence and the lifestyle of the dregs of society. (Brown 86)

Despite the best efforts of the British government, calypso prevailed as carnival’s primary music. Yet, in the moment of its triumph it was irrevocably altered. The transformation began in 1882 when the tradition of African drumming was successfully legislated out of carnival.120 This was replaced for a time by tamboo bamboo,121 which was similarly excluded from carnival

119 In Errol Hill’s article “On the Origin of the Term Calypso” he takes account of the different spellings of the word in the press—‘calipso’ in 1900, calypsos in 1902 and ‘caliysoes’ in 1911 (E. Hill, “On the Origin” 359-60).
120 In 1882 the Attorney General introduced the ‘Musical Ordinance’ which effectively created a curfew which prohibited the playing of percussive instruments ‘between 6.00 a.m. and 10.00 p.m. unless a police licence was secured. The Summary Convictions (Amendment) Ordinance in 1883 targeted drum dances by making it permissible to heavily fine “the owner of any yard, where a drum danced took place,” particularly if convicts were participants (Cowley, Carnival, Canboulay and Calypso 95; 97).
121 Later in this chapter I will discuss the creation and the influence of tamboo bamboo bands on carnival.
not long after its inception. While live drumming is still a part of contemporary carnival, it plays a marginal role in shaping the current festive soundscape. With the exclusion of prominent drumming from kaiso, carnival music was subsequently renamed (or re-labelled) calypso. In the 20th century a newly invented instrument known as the steel pan assumed the centrality that African drums and tamboo bamboo instrumentation had once held.

20th century calypso music was a decidedly urban phenomenon that originated on the fringes of society in the capital city, Port-of-Spain. While calypso music and, to a much lesser extent, soca is imaginatively associated with male artists, the earliest forms of carnival music in Trinidad were indisputably dominated by female performers. The chantwells and their bel airs were eventually sidelined as jamette carnival was driven underground and 19th century kaiso gradually formulated and solidified into 20th century calypso. The streets and the gayelles in which kalinda were routinely performed provided these singers with both a stage and an audience. It also provided them with a critical, central role as performers who sang songs of praise and censure while extemporaneously narrating the kalinda battles as they unfolded. The outlawing of carnivalesque activities such as the kalinda during the 1800s greatly diminished the role of the chantwells and ultimately rendered them obsolete.

The marginalisation of the chantwells and the stickfighters ensured that another battle assumed centre stage—namely, the class struggle over ownership of festivities. As examined in the previous chapter, the tide of the battle now oscillated in favour of the middle-class, paving the way for their reintroduction into carnival and presenting them with the opportunity to re-exert control. One of the crucial developments in re-establishing this influence was the increased presence of a white elite that singled out and patronised specific chantwells. This then led to the commercialisation of musical acts. Errol Hill observes that “[t]his development, which took
place in the 1920s, led to the professionalization of the calypsonian. He divorced himself from
the masquerade band and became a fulltime singer” (qtd. in Thomas 98).

‘Tamboo bamboo nearly make her lose control’

When the English beka (white people) banning the drum, Totoben and Maisie moving around that and using bamboo and making the tamboo bamboo bands and when beka banning tamboo bamboo Totoben and Maisie using biscuit tins and making biscuit tin bands; they using pieces of iron, parts of cars, metal boxes, dustbins and even piss pots, and all the time they moving towards pan and making their music through their moving. — (Philip 15)

Despite the rapid and often fraught evolution of percussive instrumentation in carnival, calypso as a genre remains the critical link between 19th century kaiso and late-20th century soca. Kaiso is the direct predecessor of calypso which evolved from the former and was then established as carnival’s primary music until the mid-1970s. The terms kaiso and ‘calypso’ were used interchangeably and the word kaiso is still used in contemporary parlance to refer to calypso music. Kaiso’s historical importance is linked to the fact that it is the form of carnival music that is most directly aligned with the revolutionary and critical shift from drums to tamboo bamboo to steel pan, the latter of which is still upheld as being emblematic of Trinidadian music. The ‘war’ over percussion is not merely a historical footnote but is highly significant in explaining the contemporary shape of carnival. Music, even more so than costuming, was highly contested and rigorously regulated. Music gave avenues for aesthetic and cultural expression that challenged the hegemony of British and French notions of proper masking, role

122 This sub-heading is a direct lyric from the Roaring Lion’s (Raphael de Leon’s) ‘Netty, Netty’
play, and appropriate dance, lyrics and music. No other element of carnival, however, could explicate a hidden cultural transcript more clearly than percussive instrumentation and lyrics which represented a combined challenge to French and British hegemony not only in terms of carnival, but over Trinidadian culture on a wider scale. Furthermore, a cultural hierarchy was established in which European string instruments such as violins and *cuatros* positively connoted sophistication, civilisation and refinement. By contrast, instruments of West African origin such as the *banjee* and the *shack shack* were deemed to be crude and inferior (Campbell 11) and disrupted European aesthetics concerning musicality and musicianship. Each successive form of percussive instrument (African goat skins drums, tamboo bamboo and biscuit tins) were not only deemed as cacophonous and primitive but potentially dangerous as they had the ability to incite carnival goers to engage in dance and movement that was unpredictable but that might not be readily contained or disciplined.

African drums were both a stylistic innovation and a disruption to the existing cultural hierarchy that prevailed over carnival, adding echoes of West Africa to the parade with rhythmic percussion. Former slaves who had previously been barred from participating in carnival processions were now at liberty to celebrate in their own inimitable fashion. These musical instruments were not only used for celebratory purposes; they also functioned as a means of long-distance communication that permitted slaves who resided on different plantations to communicate with one another. Drumming, which also played an integral role in *Shango* and Shouter Baptist meetings, would eventually become a defining characteristic of carnival processions, ultimately preserving and centralising traces of West African culture while re-shaping how carnival was performed.
In “A Brief History: Origins of the Steel Drum and Rhythmical Steel,” author Christopher Walborn gives a direct summation of the history of percussion in Trinidadian carnival. He charts in considerable detail the shift from skin and wooden drums in the 19th century to the dominance of tamboo bamboo\textsuperscript{123} bands, noting the transition as an innovative, if temporary, replacement for outlawed drumming. Once tamboo bamboo instrumentation was subsequently all but legislated out of carnival, there was a steady progression towards the use of steel. It became the preferred material for creating carnival’s rhythm section due to its durability and superior volume. Steel instrumentation first appeared in the form of ‘one-note’ garbage can drums which were divided into two main categories: the bass-kettle and the biscuit drum. Both instruments were antecedents to the steel pan. Each was created through a process which removed the bottom from the instruments and formed a ‘convex playing surface’ on the top surface (3). Biscuit drums were also carried and hung around the drummer’s neck, a practice which foreshadowed the transportation of the earliest steel pans. These developments in garbage can drums would soon be transferred over to another readily available source of steel, proving to be an incredibly influential stage in the evolution of the steel pan. As Walborn explains:

While Winston “Spree” Simon is usually credited with pioneering the earliest version of the steel drum (namely, a convex instrument that was constructed from an old steel

\textsuperscript{123} Walborn details the ingenious process involved in creating tamboo bamboo instruments in which: “…the islanders began cutting lengths of bamboo and hollowing them out. They would pound the longer lengths of bamboo against the road as they marched, while the shorter lengths, called "cutters", they would hold along their forearms and strike with a mallet. This use of bamboo to create variously toned percussive instruments marks the beginning of the Tamboo-Bamboo bands which lasted into the 1930s” (2). Percival Borde also specifies that the bamboo was six inches in diameter and five foot long and served as a bass instrument and effective replacement for drums (47).
container for oil), it is Ellie Mannette who refined Simon’s invention. Manette attempted to emulate Simon’s convex design but was unable to ‘tune’ his drum. In frustration, he decided to reverse the process, and shaped convex notes in a circular pattern onto a sunken concave surface. (3)

Manette is often credited with being the first pan man to add rubber tips on the end of pan sticks in order to amplify their sound, although some ethnomusicologists suggest that Prince Baston of the All Stars actually originated the idea (Dudley, *Music from Behind the Bridge* 64). This not only signalled an aesthetic revolution in the music but also stands as a contrapuntal moment of cultural and artistic freedom when juxtaposed against an extensive history of constraint and censorship under colonial law. The small town of Laventille (which translates into ‘the Vent’) became an important site in the popularisation of Manette’s innovation. It was infamous for its extreme poverty, its primarily black population and its myriad junk-yards that were used for disposing of steel drums, and is now identified as the place that gave birth to the steel pan. Mannette, a resident of Laventille, is also credited with using the fifty-five gallon steel drum that would become the standard for fashioning steel pans. He also revolutionised the instrument by tempering its surface, transforming it into a flexible and mellifluous instrument that departed from its one-note predecessors. By strategically sinking different areas of the drum at different depths, the steel pan gained the invaluable ability to produce an array of notes when struck. In this way, melody and base were no longer disparate elements and were simultaneously combined.

No analysis of Trinidad’s carnival music would be complete without an examination of ‘pan’ or steel band music. Like the goat skin drum and *tamboo bamboo* before it, the steel pan quickly became associated with antisocial and subversive behaviour. The violence that was allegedly
implicit in steel band music and explicit in the bands themselves was a source of anxiety for the ruling elite. There were concerted efforts to domesticate and even eradicate steel bands through a gradual political and organisational process that spanned the early-1960s through to beginning of the 1980s. The movement to temper the perceived excesses of the steel bands occured in direct conjunction with the popular election and subsequent re-elections of Eric Williams. Never before in all of Trinidad and Tobago’s fraught history had carnival and its Jouvay emancipation tradition been directly yoked to the administration of a ruling government. The Williams administration subsequently exploited the event for its symbolic cache. Like calypso, steel band music served as a useful and populist rallying point to garner political support. It served as a useful tool with which to shape and bind a disparate, post-colonial population into the semblance of a multicultural nation.

Steel pan music is specifically celebrated during carnival through a competition known as ‘Panorama’ which was first established in 1963. Rival bands were permitted to play a composition of their choice before departing from the stage. Often the chosen composition was kept a secret from rival bands and even the judges. Panorama emerged out of a long evolution that began in the days of the single steel pan carried around the neck. In its contemporary form, it now stages an event for bands that function as complex orchestras in their own right, replete with sections of different pans that are grouped according to their type, sound and depth. With the arrival of Panorama, pans were no longer carried and were instead mounted on “carts, racks, stands, or trolleys” (Thomas 101).

By the middle of the 20th century, pan music’s songbook extended well beyond the scope of traditional calypso music to the point where “Tchaikovsky and Elvis are as “traditional” as calypso and West African Shango ritual songs when it comes to steel-band repertoire” (A.
Martin 358). While the stereotypical image of the music in the United States was of a folksy, upbeat but ultimately ‘simple’ music, Trinidadians had been “playing arrangements of Bach and other European composers for decades in a style known as “bomb” tunes,” (358) which referred to the art of re-arranging European classical music specifically for the steel pan.

The steel pan had moved from simple four and five note songs to compositions using a full diatonic scale. The further refinement of the tuning process allowed pans to include sharps and flats. An extended repertoire which included “…the ability to play “recognized” tunes...conferred a musical credibility that positioned the steelband to become something entirely different from its jamette antecedents” (Dudley, “The Steelband “Own Tune” 137). In effect, classical music helped to remove the stigma surrounding carnival’s allegedly ‘crude’ percussion. The ‘recognised’ tunes in question refer not only to popular songs but also canonical European classics such as “Ave Maria” or the British national anthem, both of which were famously performed by Winston “Spree” Simon (137).

As an event, ‘Panorama’ has created a national competitive space for steel pan which elevated the instrument from the status of merely being a substitute for tamboo bamboo and an accompaniment to calypso lyrics. In Panorama, the steel pan assumed centre stage. The event has come to dominate pan playing to such an extent that it has essentially become the primary venue for hearing steelband music, effectively closing off the original opportunities for enjoying pan in other venues such as the fête tents or on the road with masqueraders. Middle and upper class participation has brought with it “expensive fees for mass-produced costumes, staged performances, growth in carnival tourism, and the international marketing of carnival music and masquerades” (Dudley, Music from Behind the Bridge 202). Panorama, like calypso music, has been seized upon by cultural and governmental committees as a national art form.
and has been highly regulated. The tension with Panorama as with many other aspects of carnival is that it focuses on presentation and spectatorship whether it is the evaluative gaze of judges or the titillated gaze of the audience. However, the competition’s attempts to create clinically objective criteria with which to judge steel pan performances were, at times, disrupted by the intervention of an audience’s reaction. Over time, speed, virtuosity and the ability to move and thrill an audience became valid markers of a successful composition, equally important to ‘balance’ ‘precision’ and ‘tone’ (202). Nevertheless, there is the growing sense that commercialisation and bureaucratisation had diminished the community’s control over the event.

The competition has remained somewhat unruly, even unpredictable in terms of the trajectory of its development, which has definitively moved on from the ‘golden’ era of bomb tunes. The performances of steel pan artist and composer Ray Holman are a particularly good case in point. Holman became an important figure in the development of pan music in the 1970s when he went against the prevailing fervour for rearrangements. Along with Boogsie Sharpe, Holman opted instead to create his own original compositions, thus generating an era where pan composers sought to create ‘own tunes.’ The ‘own tune’ era was heavily criticised by the media with the songs often being dismissed as ‘strange.’ The press marginalisation of once dominant bands from the ‘own tune’ movement was compounded by the demands of famous calypsonians who naturally preferred for pan players to re-arrange their existing hits, hoping the exposure would helped to further popularise calypso. In spite of this lack of support for band leaders wanting to write new songs of their own specifically for steel pan, performers such as Sharpe and Holman were not deterred. This display of independent artistic individuality “ran counter to the nationalist ideology of integrating the carnival arts” and detracted from what many at the time believed to be the true ‘carnival spirit’ (225).
One of the critical organisational decisions designed to showcase yet simultaneously contain the ferocity of steel band competitions and the irreverence of the emancipation *jouvay* tradition has been to move both Panorama and *Jouvay* to the demarcated and regulatory stage of the Savannah. The discrete and limited space of the Savannah has profoundly affected the way in which steel band players, *Jouvay* revellers and audience members perform and respond to one another. Confined to this new location, the latitude that audiences enjoy for physical movement has been curtailed, reducing many possibilities for spontaneity and participation. The effect has been a form of containment that served as a forerunner to the barricades of Caribana in Toronto. As Earl Lovelace wryly observes:

> The Savannah could accommodate the music; but it could not accommodate the Movement. The organizers of Panorama began to construct more and more fences, to put up barricades, and to employ security… The fact is that, under the insistent weight of security, the numbers of security, the numbers of *jouvay* people in the Savannah have dwindled. Unaccommodated and unwelcomed they have drifted away. In any event, they didn’t want to sit down to a concert, they wanted to get on. They wanted to play. ("The Emancipation" 58)

Lovelace also paints a rather damning portrait of contemporary Panorama, illuminating new patterns of attendance and engagement. He alludes to the clear and continuing class divide that persists in carnival where different social strata have different ways of interacting with carnival and even muses if the domesticating effects of Panorama will prove to be the “final nail in the coffin of pan and the Emancipation *Jouvay* movement?” (58). Once again, the binary between polite spectatorship and passionate participation is made all-too-apparent:
In the Grandstand now, the Black middle-class sit and listen to pan, their baskets with food and drink at their sides. They look at programs and work out which band is playing next and discuss who is likely to win the competition. Here nobody gets up to dance. This is serious business. On the other side, over in the North Stands, there is a mixed gathering of people, on their feet, most of them, the majority in their own contained and rambunctious party. For them, the activities on the stage are the background to their own celebrations, which they carry on most wonderfully during the intervals when the bands are setting up onstage, beating dudups and iron and wailing down the place. (58)

Contemporary carnival, it seems, has lost much of its intimate connection with Emancipation. Without this association, class lines from the era of slavery have been redrawn, echoing an earlier period of elite domination, middle-class participation and black, lower class exclusion. By the same token, the relationship between the twin pillars of carnival’s music is no longer intertwined. At a time when steelbands have withdrawn to the stadium of the Savannah, calypso and steel pan music are no longer performed in tandem on the streets. The calypso fête tents that proliferated in the period preceding Panorama have become calypso’s domain while Panorama has provided an exclusive venue for the steel pans. Thus the gradual separation of the forms of music has been reified in space and along class lines. Even in the recording studio live steel pan music has been replaced by electronic simulation, while brass sections in general are no longer a characteristic component of modern calypso or soca music.

A contemporary debate around the the protection of the steel pan has emerged in an attempt to no only nationalise but patent the instrument. Unlike some of the practices and features of carnival which are often contested—there appears to be a greater degree of consensus about
the general origins of the steelpan, including a specific geographic location (Laventille) and a cluster of identifiable names and figures who are jointly credited with its creation thus generating a clear history around the instrument. This history is by no means singular but it is discernible. In the specific case of the steel pan we are not only dealing with the creation of new sound and the birth of a new genre of music, but the invention of a brand new instrument that is at once material and tangible. Arguments about nationalisation and trademarking tend to revolve around the steel pan as an actual instrument particularly since it has been patented in the United States but has yet to be patented in its original homeland. The instrument has currently gained popularity in international dance and pop music; yet, its origins are often unacknowledged or overlooked while the strains of the steel pan are simply regarded as an exotic embellishment that adds ‘flavour’ to the music. Despite the birth of the steel pan being directly attributed to Trinidad, intellectual property issues around the instrument abound:

The intellectual property (IP) issues that have plagued the steelpan, a musical instrument created from discarded metal oil barrels by impoverished musicians, strike at the heart of intellectual property issues affecting the developing world. As the music, first developed in Trinidad and Tobago, has become symbolic of Caribbean innovation in music, the region has also shared the instrument’s quest for recognition. The complexities of globalisation, competitive trade and intellectual property regimes have made it difficult to establish ownership and innovation in the creative sectors. (Rampersad “Intellectual Property”)

Rampersad then goes on to account for a patent claim by two academics in the United States which was directly contested by Trinidad and Tobago’s government. The patent, which was proposed in 2001, specifically centred around the process of hydroforming “resulting in the
ability to mass produce steelpans that were purely made of stainless steel that were rust resistant and rapidly produced” (Rampersad “Intellectual Property”). By contrast, those who had actually innovated the steel pan were economically excluded from the patenting process and were actively discouraged by the government from applying for a patent. Notions of collective culture and creativity struggle with a legalistic framework that emphasises individual authorship. (Balliger 206). At the same time, it would be all too easy to construct a “North versus South” paradigm which, according to Robin Balliger, “masks a more complex analysis of transnational class interests, an increase in inequalities within nations, and the re-territorializing of identities in transnational space” (202). In other words, the potential for class antagonism inside the nation-state is all-too-often obscured by the North-South framework as each space is simplified and homogenised. What is essentially minimised are the internal collisions between competing political and economic interests housed within the borders of the nation state.

An Ode to Pan

Despite the tensions around steel pan’s status in a transnational and capitalist context, there is still a vibrant tradition of carnival singers composing odes and singing tributes to pan music. Destra Garcia’s (Destra) “Calling Meh” was penned in 2011 as a comprehensive anthem dedicated to the craft of steel pan musicianship, lauding the irresistible lure of the music. Above all, the song narrates a heady, transformative encounter that bends the listener’s ear and entire body to its will. “Calling Meh” opens with themes of ‘addiction’ and goes on to examine the compulsion of pan music: “I would help it if I can/But I have to meet the band” (Destra 2011). The song’s title structures and punctuates the chorus as the musical element (the percussive melody and rhythm), the institutions of carnival (Panorama) and iconic locations of revelry
(the Savannah) that help to create pan music are individuated, extricated and placed in the spotlight in a roll call of praise that concludes with the emphatic declaration ‘I love pan’:

The melody, it calling me
A rhythm, calling me
Bacchanal, calling me
Panorama, calling me
Savannah, calling me ...leh we go
I would help it if I can
But I have to meet the band
’Cause I love steelpan, I love pan. (“Calling Meh”)

She is not only drawn to the Savannah, the site of pan music, but is also compelled to celebrate on the streets. The term ‘bacchanal’ and the use of the unitary ‘we’ rather than the singular ‘I’ or ‘me’ extends the scope of Destra’s ovation. This transforms the lyric from a personal response to pan music into a wider meditation on the relationship between pan and revelry. By introducing elements of dance and masquerade into the discourse of the song, she asserts that they are a vital and necessary part of any response to the steel bands. The reference to ‘bacchanal’ not only refers to the celebratory state that underpins a masquerade but signals a subtle eroticism. This is evident in the way that the singer details a highly somatic response to the music which toys with her senses, reverberates through the body almost as if the latter were also an instrument:

I am addicted to pan
My darling please understand
When dem tenors tuning
I does forget everything I doing
If ya hear how my ears and them ringing
This music does make me feel to wine...
down low, I have to go ( “Calling Meh”)

Behind the scene processes are invoked as the ‘tenors’ tune and warm up to perform. One of the traditions of pan music that has endured into the age of soca are local pan sites where members of the audience are free to sit and watch their local band tune and rehearse their selection for Panorama. The more prototypical features of standard soca music are also made present through exhortations to ‘Jump up’, while references to raised hands, waving, flags and ‘tearing up the place’ readily abound. Destra’s “Addicted” was her offering for 2013 carnival, which reiterated her allegiance to pan music: ‘I am a slave to de steel pan...’ (“Addicted” 2013). In “Addicted” Destra’s narrative voice works at two levels. At times she is a reveller responding to the distinctive sound of pan music, caught up in the physicality of dance as she is a ‘captive’ audience or slave to its compelling sound. But she moves beyond corporeal compulsion and suggests that there is a spiritual element involved in the freedom of movement that pan music elicits:

Something divine ‘bout de steelpan
So I’ll go where de vibe take me
Where my spirit feel free, land of iron
And ya better believe it now
_I eh going whey_
With conviction, this is de only way
In this instance Destra experiences the same addictive draw of steel pan as a musician and a producer of music rather than simply as a member of a respondent audience. The experiences are comparable and suggest something important about the status of the reveller. While soca music tends to be dismissed as ‘party music,’ it also has the capacity to advance a meta-narrative that comments on carnival itself and analyses, discusses and responds to its key components. At other times, it uses these same components as a means for self-reflection. “Addicted” alludes to the artist’s personal struggles in a competitive soca industry and aligns these with pan music’s waning fortunes as a genre in an increasingly commercialised market. Garcia implicitly invokes the wider framework of the instrument’s beleaguered history and struggle for survival. The lyrics also touch on a critical binary; there is flight and freedom through the ecstasy of dance which is off-set by the historical endurance and physical solidity of the instrument. Pan music is portrayed as a permanent fixture of Trinidadian carnival that permits the flux and motion of carnival revelry even while it ‘grounds’ and stabilises the event. Like pan music, the singer is ‘immoveable’ in her commitment to continue a career in soca (“I eh going whey”), directly aligning her own fortunes with the longevity of pan music.

While Destra praises and responds to pan music on a physical and personal level, calypsonian David Rudder explicates pan music’s history and writes calypsos that carry a historical record of the music’s development, replete with dates, names and locations. While Destra identifies as a soca artist and is unambiguously referred to as such, Rudder straddles a dual identification in which he is sometimes regarded as a ‘calypsonian’ but at other times is viewed as a soca
artist. While Destra’s career began in 1999, Rudder’s career started over twenty years prior in 1977. He was thus active in the decade that marked the beginning of soca music and established the cross-roads between calypso and its younger off-shoot.

In “Rhythm and Class Struggle: The Calypsoes of David Rudder” Joy A. I. Mahabir gives a highly sophisticated, comprehensive account of the music of David Rudder and explicates the artist’s thesis of ‘rhythm.’ Rudder’s highly respected calypsos contain lyrics which chart carnival’s history of percussion and situate pan music within that history. He constructs complex and sustained narratives that specifically name and contextualise each part of a historically constructed rhythm section. Within this testimony the drums, tamboo-bamboo, garbage drums and steel pan are all accounted for. Rudder’s music also pays tribute to the pioneers of steel pan, most notably in his 1986 hit “The Hammer,” which affectionately alludes to the nickname of pan pioneer Rudolph Charles:

Somewhere up in Laventille
Many years ago
A man had a hammer
Used to follow him to and fro
He used to use it to pound a pan
Or sometimes a stupid man

124 Read my later sub-section titled “The King is Dead: Long Live the King” in which I refer to the confusion involved in naming sub-genres and creating a ‘taxonomy’ of soca music.

125 Charles Rudolph was both a pannist and a pioneer in the field who invented specific steel pans and is renowned for his dual role at the Desperadoes Steel Orchestra where he was both their bandleader and their ‘tuner.’ Most notably, he spearheaded a boycott of Panorama in 1979 where he and his fellow pan men demanded an increase in wages and greater respect for their craft. Panorama was cancelled that year as a result of the protest.
All in the savannah

Never miss Panorama

One day the old hammer just disappear

Some say that it vanish into thin air. ("The Hammer")

The tribute is marked by the often bittersweet quality that distinguishes David Rudder’s work from his peers. Mourning and celebration are seamlessly combined across a sustained narrative. Rudder is not only a historian but a storyteller with the ability to humanise the characters and figures who feature in his lyrics. Class politics are ever a concern for Rudder, and while he charts the historical succession of different instruments in carnival, he is always conscious of its humble beginnings and the class discrimination that arose around pan yards and pan men, who were socially stigmatised: “Nearly every old panman will tell you/That his in-laws were outlaws” ("Engine Room"). Rudder is a meticulous record-keeper and commits to cultural memory a period in time before pan music was assimilated and bowdlerised by the middle-class. Through music and lyric he commemorates a time before the artforms of carnival were politically co-opted, and ultimately nationalised.

**The New Battlefront: External Challenges to Calypso**

While carnival’s percussion underwent dramatic transformation in the 19th and 20th century, calypso also refused to remain static. Traditionally calypso has functioned across three broad-based categories. The first, *Picong*, is derived from the French ‘piquant’ and the Trinidadian Spanish term *picon* and alludes to witty social and political commentary that often targets 126

---

126 In “The origin of ‘Mamaguy and ‘Picong’” Kemlin Laurence states that: “…picón is particularly associated with the singing contests of the velorio de crud (cross wake, Patois veille croix). During the course of the cross
politicians, celebrities or other powerful public figures. ‘Smut,’ by contrast, boasts provocative and highly sexualised lyrics. Finally, ‘extempo’ is a lyrical form that relies on spontaneous improvisation and often features two duelling calypsonians engaged in riposte.

The music migrated to other islands including Barbados, Jamaica, St Kitts, St. Lucia and St. Vincent, all of which established thriving markets in calypso music. The music continues to flourish on these islands at the behest of the soca industry. The theoretical framing around the music presents calypso and soca music as if they are innately nomadic, forever destined to be migratory. But as Sandra Pouchet Paquet suggests, nomadism is a far more strategic and conscious process than the term typically connotes:

> Any dictionary will include a definition of nomadism as a way of life in which a community has no permanent settlement but moves from place to place, seasonally and within a defined territory, in search of food, water, and grazing land. In fact, for hunting and gathering societies, nomadism does not imply aimless wandering, but suggests an organized rotation of settlements to ensure maximum use of available natural resources. The pattern is circular rather than linear, it is rehearsed and predictable and a strategy for survival. (69)

It would be easy to be cynical but I believe that the quest to disseminate calypso music is not merely a pecuniary manoeuvre. The vitality, popularity and endurance of the music as an art

---

wake the principal singers, drawing upon an established corpus of material which is either religious (mainly Biblical) or historico-geographical (for example the discovery of the New World) in nature, engage in a sort of verbal duel carried out in song. Each singer must be able to reply to his opponent's questions and challenges, and the teasing, taunting, often bitingly satirical remarks and repartee which are directed by one singer to the other, are known as picón. To a certain extent, picón also appears in parang-singing” (37-8).
form was and still is sustained by its successful proliferation in spaces beyond Trinidad. The ‘circularity’ that Paquet alludes to is evident in the way in which calypso music has been adopted outside of Trinidad, has mingled in the international market and has returned ‘home’ in new incarnations. The recent quest for calypso and soca music to gain an established foothold in the international market is nothing new and is part of an ongoing mission that dates back to the 1920s.

Last century, calypso music enjoyed a brief period in the global spotlight between the late-1940s and early-1960s when it emerged as an international sensation. The brief ‘calypso craze’ in the United States was largely attributable to the success of Harry Belafonte’s 1956 LP _Calypso_ which “became the first million-selling record album in the history of the industry.” Ironically enough, however, Belafonte admitted that the album actually contained very little in the way of genuine calypso songs and the music, instead, was an amalgamation of Caribbean folk ballads and ‘work songs’ derived from different islands which reflected Belafonte’s own musical leanings and tastes (Funk & Hill 178; 186). The popularity of calypso was such that the genre was regarded as both a rival and a potential successor to rock n’ roll. Ray Funk and Donald R. Hill both describe the ‘calypso’ craze of that period as ‘chimerical’ (178).

The popularity of Calypso was due, in large part, to topical songs that aired the news of the day and provided a humorous, if slanted, perspective on the relations between men and women, usually from the male singer’s point of view. Although musical styles and the instrumentation backing the singers changed, the function of calypso remained essentially the same throughout the 1950s and beyond (178). The threat of calypso’s dominance was short-lived as the music and its performers experienced a fairly routine, formulaic journey that started with a rush of intense popularity followed by a long decline as they fell out of fashion. Calypso was thus
relegated to the status of a consumable, ultimately disposable, novelty. Like several Caribbean folk-music styles before it such as the rumba, calypso’s vernacular musical style was momentarily adopted, altered, and exploited by the commercial forces of US popular music during the late-1940s and 1950s before falling out of favour (A. Martin 358). Following the demise of the so-called calypso craze, the music faced a two-pronged challenge that was both internal and external:

In the 1960s calypso had to fight for survival against the pressure of both rock and roll and reggae. A major development that affected calypso was the birth of soca…Soca is now used to refer to modern calypso and specifically to designate the dance music, in opposition to more traditional calypso, which maintains an emphasis on text. Soca…infused calypso with more danceable rhythms and pan-African texts. (Herzefeld & Moskowitz 265)

By this account, a waning calypso movement gave birth to soca music during the early-1970s. Vital and innovative, soca later came to prominence in the 1980s. By experimenting with styles and technology it helped to introduce a more vibrant and upbeat variant to the wider Trinidadian music scene. Soca music was quickly differentiated from its predecessor and, thanks to a distinctly ‘hybrid’ rhythm, it was soon regarded as a legitimate music in its own right.127 During the same period calypso also faced an external challenge as Jamaican reggae gradually came to dominate the regional music industry before coming to global prominence. Calypso music had rapidly been eclipsed at home and internationally, once again suffering both economically and in terms of its enduring popular impact in the face of a competitor. Calypso’s fall from prominence in the Caribbean popular imagination had a number of limiting effects,

127 Later in this chapter I will briefly outline the origins of soca music.
but it also helped to pave the way for new Caribbean diasporic festivals that depended on Trinidadian carnival artforms. Primary among these were Notting Hill and Caribana.

Stage Left: Enter Reggae and Notting Hill

Claudia Vera Cumberbatch who assumed the name ‘Claudia Jones’—is critical founding figure in the history of Notting Hill Carnival. Trinidadian-born Jones was a political activist and journalist who originally migrated to the United States and was subsequently deported back to Trinidad in 1955. She then took up residence in the United Kingdom. Her politics were a complex combination of pro-black nationalism and a strain of feminism with a diasporic and transatlantic grounding. Each was situated within a distinctly Marxist-Leninist framework. During the 1930s she was specifically attracted to the Communist movement precisely because, in her view, the Communists alone “made connections between the racism and exploitation of workers at home and the rising threat and reality of fascism overseas” (Atkinson 10). In 1936 Jones joined the Communist Youth League where she honed her skills as a writer, editor and public speaker (11). Author Carol Joyce Davies suggests that what distinguished Claudia Jones from her contemporaries was not her fierce commitment to socialism or her visibility as a black woman in a communist organisation, but the fact that she was able to advance in the ranks and become “both an organiser and a leading theoretician within the party up to 1955” (Davies 64).

Jones was also presciently astute in her denunciation of the discrimination that black working class women faced along a toxic triple axes comprised of race, class and gender (Atkinson
Her deep involvement with communist and leftist organisations including the Congress of American Women (CAW) and leftist publications such as *The Worker* led to her eventual detention on Ellis Island under the jurisdiction of the McCarran Internal Security Act of 1950. After serving a one-year prison sentence, Jones was then threatened with the prospect of deportation to Trinidad. She was eventually deported in 1955, but was refused entry into her country of birth due to her reputation as a ‘troublemaker.’ She was subsequently accepted into the United Kingdom on humanitarian grounds and lived out the remainder of her life on British soil. Her commitment to social activism and her vision of solidarity not only within a migrant West Indian community but across racial and transatlantic lines was unwavering. Not only was she responsible for founding and editing *The West Indian Gazette* in 1958, which was the first black newspaper in Britain, she also established the Caribbean Committee later in the same year (Ferris 519). These landmark achievements are contextualised by a climate of racial hostility. Racial tension escalated to new heights in the late-1950s when white British youths attacked immigrants in a notorious wave of racist and xenophobic incidents. This would be followed by legal discrimination and systematic harassment at the hands of the police who specifically targeted “…‘Black’ cultural venues and events….political organisations and cultural institutions” (Pryce 37).

---

128 In contemporary parlance, Claudia Jones would almost certainly be regarded as an ‘intersectional’ feminist, which is evident through her desire to make connections between different forms of oppression as discussed earlier in chapter four.

129 Chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, Pat McCarran, introduced the McCarran Act which was “…an omnibus “anti-subversive” measure with provisions for the registration of Communist-action and Communist-front groups, the emergency detention of persons believed likely to commit espionage and sabotage and the tightening of laws against sedition and espionage” (Griffith 26-7).

130 Claudia Jones also spearheaded The Committee of Afro-Asian Caribbean Organizations (CAACO) and sought to unify leftist organisations and anti-racists into an anti-colonial coalition that explicitly connected the struggles that West Indian immigrants faced in the United Kingdom, whether of Indian or African descent, with the ‘Negro’ struggle that she had participated in in the United States (Perry 9).
The migrant West Indian community rallied and organised against these threats. One of the ways in which these communities sought to assert cultural pride and agency was by creating their own carnival. The committee initiated a series of indoor events during winter that were located in local community halls. After Claudia Jones’ death in 1964, the participants relocated the carnival to Notting Hill to be held outdoors, memorialising her work by asserting a cultural claim on public space.

Almost a decade after the death of Claudia Jones, the Carnival Development Committee (CDC) was established and headed by Trinidadian musician Selwyn Baptiste. Baptiste’s leadership maintained the illusion of Trinidadian influence over the event. However, a crucial fissure had occurred in the previous year between Trinidadian and Jamaican contingents at the festival. Everton A. Pryce singles out Leslie Palmer, whom he describes as having “tremendous organisational ability and an acute sense of timing,” and directly credits him with changing the ‘cultural orientation’ of the festival (Pryce 35; Klöß 262).

Thanks to Palmer’s efforts, Notting Hill’s organisers adopted reggae rather than calypso as its predominant sound. This resonated with Notting Hill’s large population of pan-Caribbean black youth who would become carnival’s primary participants. Although of Trinidadian origin, Palmer had no desire to merely transport then replicate Trinidad’s style of mas’ carnival to Britain. He sought, instead, to create a genuinely pan-Caribbean festival that represented the West Indian diaspora in its entirety. The inclusion of reggae ultimately unseated calypso from its place of primacy in Notting Hill carnival, resulting in a new ideological direction for the festival. It also altered the image of the festival in the public eye. Notting Hill visibly moved away from the perceived light-heartedness of calypso, the allegedly ‘sunny’ disposition of the
music and dispensed with the connotations of warm shores and tourism that pan music stereotypically evoked in the British imaginary. Palmer effectively revivified the festival by drawing black British youth into the fold as they organised around competitive ‘sound systems’ in place of the rallying call of the steel bands.

The sound systems were introduced by Palmer and were incorporated into the festival as early as 1973 (Price 36; Klöß 266). Sebastian Klöß identifies an ideological ‘splitting’ of Notting Hill carnival at around this time in terms of its physical movement and relationship to space. He associates the Trinidadian ‘model’ with movement and flux and suggests that the Jamaican model by contrast was comparatively stationary and structured around the heaviness and relative immobility of large sound systems or speakers which needed to be transported on trucks. Nevertheless, the sound system actually revived one of the most important aims of carnival. On the one hand, Notting Hill sought to gather together a diasporic community; on the other hand, it also wished to communally regulate, mediate and contain competition, particularly between male youths. The sound systems provided the means to accomplish this. Thus, competitive zeal could be safely expressed through the blare of sound systems vying for the attention of revellers. “Superiority’ would be established through whichever system dominated the others and played the best ‘tunes.’ Sound systems and DJs (disc jockeys), known to Jamaicans as ‘selectors,’ became a dominant presence in carnival from this time, much to the chagrin of dedicated pannists and calypsonians: “Nowadays, we have a music

---

131 In West Indian British slang, the word ‘massive’ is a term of approbation that refers to the ‘size’ of the tune over the sound system as well as its infectious appeal or popularity.

132 In the article “Reggae, Rastafarians and Revolution: Rock Music in the Third World” author James A. Winders indicated that dub music, as a sub-genre of reggae, “gave rise to a special reggae star: the disc jockey. At dances or on radio programs the person playing the record would improvise a kind of talk-song over the rhythm tracks, and in some cases became a celebrity in his own right, overshadowing the musicians on the record itself” (68).
where someone just needs a microphone and a box to talk over a rhythm track. Why should anyone invest in a music that takes more money and effort to make?” (Jacob 1994).

Sound systems shifted the emphasis from live music to recorded music, which pushed studio production and ‘selectors’ to the forefront of carnival. Next to the power of the sound system, the steel pan appeared quaint and antiquated. Furthermore, reggae became the voice of a disenfranchised youth that wished to address the reality of its existing environment rather than harking back to sunny times, climes and places that many of the younger members of the British-based Caribbean diaspora had neither visited nor experienced. Reggae spoke directly to their immediate concerns around white supremacy, discrimination, police violence, youth unemployment, gang violence and disenfranchisement as exemplified in the lyrics of Junior Murvin’s anthemic “Police and Thieves,” released in 1976:

Police and thieves in the street (oh yeah)
Scaring the nation with their guns and ammunition
From Genesis to Revelation yeah
What the next generation will be, hear me
All the crimes committed day by day
No one try to stop it in any way
All the peacemakers turn war officers
Hear what I say. (“Police and Thieves”)

Junior Murvin and Lee Perry’s lyrics challenge a comfortable status quo and effectively dispel orthodox colonial narratives which frame the police as heroic protectors while questioning the assumption of a peaceful compatibility between the will of the people and that of the state. At
the same time, the biblical basis of Rastafarianism, as alluded to in the lyric “From Genesis to Revelations,” provides the song with a moral compass and code. While calypso valued wit, verbal dexterity and an ability to excoriate corrupt individuals, shed light on a corrupt policy or critically comment on local or national government, reggae had the framing metaphor of ‘Babylon’\textsuperscript{133} that proffered a discernible moral philosophy and a counter-ideology.\textsuperscript{134} In Jamaica, by contrast, both calypso and reggae were positioned rather differently. Calypso, rather than reggae, existed as the ‘respectable’ face of Caribbean music and subsequently gained a higher public profile:

The Rastas scornfully regard calypso as the music of the “rum culture”; of the tourists who never see places like Trenchtown. If you go to hear live music in Jamaica, you will hear calypso, not reggae, for live reggae is banned in Jamaica. Calypso is considered “safe,” reggae subversive. (Winders 67)

In Britain, however, reggae proved to be a powerful and effective mainstream discourse that enabled a generation of black youth to recognise and critique a system of white supremacy. Popular consciousness-raising helped identify an overarching global ideology that affected citizens bound together in an ongoing struggle against colonisation. This critical act of identification allowed reggae to imaginatively reach across temporal, cultural and national boundaries to the extent that its messages also began to resonate with London’s white working class youth. Having successfully established itself in Britain, reggae’s global outlook helped the music to continue on to achieve global status and recognition. Rather than adopting a

\textsuperscript{133} Rastafarianism refers to Western white supremacy and corruption as ‘Babylon.’

\textsuperscript{134} ‘Counter’ insofar as it offered an alternate and opposing worldview to white supremacy along with an interpretation of Western history.
playfully anti-authoritarian and satirical stance, reggae was staunchly anti-colonial, overtly resistant and had the capacity to express anger. In an interview with Ramabai Espinet, calypsonian David Rudder maps the relationship between history, rhythm and tempo, and the way in which they inform one other. Rudder suggests that the tempo and rhythm of calypso and reggae articulate a different historical experience, which in turn influences the nature of the music itself:

Trinidad's period [of slavery] was short, so you find that our interpretation of pain is different. This is why I feel Reggae have to be a Jamaican experience, because the music down in the ground and it painful. A Jamaican will say ‘This life hard, you know man;’ and a Trinidadian go say ‘This life real hard, yeah boy.’ Is the same thing we saying, except that we laugh. We laugh at the pain and this is how Calypso is like ‘Pardner, what we go do, take a drink and leh we go up the road.’ And is like—this is why the drum—the laughter of the melody. Our music laughs—a cutting kind of laugh. (Rudder 12)

With all of this said, one must be careful not to simplify either genre. Nor am I suggesting that one form of Caribbean music (reggae) has greater political ‘efficacy’ over the other (calypso). Music works across multiple registers and modes, while its efficacy is always dependent upon its social context. In the specific case of Notting Hill during the 1970s, the gravity of reggae, rather than the levity and laughter of calypso, met the needs of a specific community situated in a particular time and place. Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge that reggae is by no means monolithic and has its own engagement with humour, romance and sexuality as any light-hearted reggae summer hit can attest to. Reggae music and its attendant sub-genres in the form of Lover’s Rock, ragga and dancehall also contain its own set of what I would term ‘party
politics’ with a small ‘p’. Artists working within these movements have been just as able as any calypsonian to meditate on dance, pleasure, movement, sex and the body. Calypso, in turn, is much more than an ironic ‘jester’ and also houses the antagonistic spirit of the stick-fighter. The music has a long-standing tradition of pointed political commentary where the voice of the calypsonian can have and has had a significant impact on popular opinion.

In “The Performance of Politics: Caribbean Music and the Anthropology of Victor Turner” Frank Manning conducts a cross-comparative study of political calypso in Trinidad, St. Vincent and Barbados. The essay particularly focuses on the work of Barbadian (or Bajan) calypsonian, The Mighty Gabby (Anthony Carter) who was locked in a highly publicised duel with Barbados’ Prime Minister, Tony Adams during the 1980s (“Challenging Authority” 175-8). The Mighty Gabby roundly criticised Adams and subsequent Barbadian governments for, in his view, bowing to neo-colonialism in the form of American imperialism. Gabby’s protracted duel with Adams continued right up until Adams’ death, and epitomised the classic role of the calypsonian as “a powerful gadfly in Trinidadian society—the poetic voice of ordinary folk, transforming thoughts into words and feelings into music” (C. Mahabir, “The Rise of Calypso Feminism” 412). In “Recognising The Language of Calypso as Symbolic Action in Resolving Conflict in The Republic of Trinidad and Tobago,” author Everard M. Phillips analyses the lexicon of calypso lyrics, describing it as a “symbolic language…deployed to tell a story about conflicts, that to them, are at least metaphorically ‘true’” (57). He thus parts company from Gordon Rohlehr, who famously asserts that calypso is centralised on warfare and confrontation. Philips, by contrast, suggests that:

In the process of influencing and persuading, the Calypsonian exercises his or her ability as an artificer, adept in the art of navigating along a spectrum of meanings that
range from standard English to a colloquial dialectic. Using various types of wordplay, the calypsonian successfully and skilfully manoeuvres within this spectrum, demonstrating a degree of sensitivity to each of the attributes of an active triadic, co-existing relationship which engages the audience, their encompassing social world and the performer. Focusing on the intersection of this triadic interaction allows the Calypsonian to establish a dramatic structure for the process of addressing the prevailing conflict. (Phillips 57)

This approach acknowledges the difference between the lived-in world of the audience, the encompassing social universe and the liminal world of the performing calypsonian as he or she mediates the tensions between the social world and the lived-in-world. Phillips also uses the term ‘lamina lyrics’ and compares the structure of the lyrics to that of an ‘onion’ which contains “…a number of different levels of meaning, concealed one underneath the other functioning as not only lyrical dexterity but a form of masking in its own right” (58). Like Gordon Rohlher and Keith Warner, Phillips also cautions against a misapprehension of the music being ‘carefree,’ light-hearted or complacent. In the words of Keith Warner:

this easy-going nature should not be mistaken for complacency or stupidity. The most serious of issues can receive what looks to the outsider like frivolous treatment, but is actually cleverly disguised criticism and analysis. In other words, beware the mask! (56)

Thus the notion of framing and masking is essential to how most calypso and (some) soca music is performed. This duality in the meaning of the lyrics of calypso is supported by the type of wordplay that is abundant in Trinidad’s heteroglossic linguistic environment. Phillips
sagely identifies the practical realities and limits of the role who are comparable mediators whose power lies in their ability

[to] influence the parties’ views persuading them on a course of action. In doing so, the Calypsonian reframes the issues by restating them in different words and phrases. There are numerous approaches to reframing... rephrasing, focusing, proposing an option, creating metaphors. (63)

This process is quite visible in the case of the Mighty Gabby. The calypsonian was at his most scathing following the United States invasion of Grenada in 1983, which was assisted by the government of Tom Adams who deployed the Barbados Defense Force (BDF) and The Naval Facility (NAVFAC). The calypso “Boots,” sometimes known as “Government Boots,” is exemplary of calypso music during the early 1980s at a time when it had begun to assume some of the characteristics of faster paced soca music. The song contains the energetic and sophisticated syncopation of a classic brass melody line, punctuated by emphatic horn stabs and a repetitive, rhythmic refrain in the chorus that is highly politicised on the one hand, yet imminently ‘danceable’ on the other:

Left, right, left, right
In the Government boots, the Government boots
Left, right, left, right
In the Government boots, the Government boots. (“Boots” 1983)

The deceptive simplicity of the chorus uses a form of percussive mnemonic that ‘hammered’ home to a listening audience the central concerns of the calypso. The interest in the Barbadian
Government’s involvement in the invasion of Grenada is confronted in a repetitive refrain which can be swiftly committed to memory by the audience on a first hearing. This strategy has been effectively replicated in contemporary soca, but has been deployed for the very different purpose of offering instructional kinetics on the dance floor. Throughout subsequent verses, the Mighty Gabby poses a series of blunt, rhetorical questions to his listening audience as he overtly critiques the growing militarisation of Barbados, with a direct reference to St. Lucy, the northernmost parish, or sub-region, of the island. The influence of American military control is evident in the fact that then the National Facilities Engineering command (NAVFAC) was located in Harrison Point and was directly controlled by the United States Navy for over two decades.

The audience is lured into the performance and invited not only to mull over the questions posed, but to respond by repeating a simple responsive refrain (“no, no, no, no”) using call-and-response, or antiphony, to great effect:

Is it necessary to have so much soldiers in this small country?
No, no, no, no

Is it necessary to shine soldier boots with taxpayer's money?
No, no, no, no

Well don't tell me, tell Tommie
He put them in St. Lucy
Unemployment high and the treasury low
And he buying boots to cover soldier toe
Tell Tom I say that wouldn't do
He got to see 'bout me and you
And most of all, all the children
And stop dem soldiers from marching. (“Boots”)

Critically, the audience is skilfully redirected by the calypsonian who incites, then encourages, his audience to vocalise their protest. The Mighty Gabby initially positions himself as a sympathetic audience to their responsive, chanted refrain of ‘no,’ but ultimately steers them towards a new target audience: “Well don’t tell me, tell Tommie.” Roles in the theatre of calypso are tactically switched or inverted as the messenger becomes the audience, while the audience is encouraged to deliver a two-fold message: firstly, their own refrain of disapprobation (“no, no, no, no”) and secondly, the calypsonian’s dissatisfied scolding of the Prime Minister: “Tell Tom I say that won’t do” (“Boots”).

The calypsonian addresses and ‘dresses down’ his more powerful opponent with the familiarising—and potentially patronising diminutive—‘Tommie’. Through the use of the diminutive, he constructs an egalitarian space in the verses of the song wherein the Prime Minister is reduced to an equal. As an equal, Adams is subject to direct address, public admonishment and correction. As “Boots” progresses, he combines humorous and deadly imagery in a single couplet, balancing laughter and censure with comedy and violence to incongruous but memorable effect as he ridicules the soldiers who have aligned themselves with the government: “Some of them so fat, they could hardly run/But shooting bulls eyes with automatic gun” (“Boots”).
While calypso is still nostalgically tied to the type of ‘true’ politics and the art of satire expressed in “Boots,” I will now turn to an analysis of Trinidad’s youngest musical progeny, soca. Since the late-1970s, Calypso and reggae music have both ‘splintered’ into innovative sub-genres that have gone on to challenge their parent genres. It is all too easy, however, to view these categories of music as stable and unitary and to elide the diverse backgrounds from which they emerged. Reggae, like calypso, arose from earlier traditions of Jamaican music such as toasting and ska. It has since begat an array of modern sub-genres that rival the offspring of calypso, including dub, ragga, and dancehall. I would suggest that dancehall, the most popular offshoot of reggae in a contemporary Jamaican musical landscape, is most directly comparable to Trinidadian soca insofar as both are explicitly dedicated to dance, freedom, celebration and an overtly public eroticism. Compared to their progenetors, they deal with a very different order of politics.

“The King is Dead: Long Live the King.”

I have briefly alluded to calypso’s rivalry with other genres of music but it is important to revisit and further analyse calypso music by discussing the internal conflict within the music. Calypso music has also engaged in a protracted competition against the very sub-genres that it has spawned. There is very much a sense that while calypso remains the symbolic ‘face’ of carnival, in real terms it has been overshadowed by soca, which is clearly the dominant voice of the festival. Yet this transition has been accompanied by a blurring of lines. Just as kaiso and calypso were used interchangeably last century, calypso and soca often ‘stand in’ for one another. Soca, which is a direct off-shoot of calypso, has in turn splintered into a kaleidoscopic

---

135 Toasting originated in Jamaica during the 1960s as sound systems proliferated through Jamaica. It precedes the advent of American hip-hop by around a decade.
range of sub-genres. There is chutney soca, which draws on East Indian influences and combines them with soca; parang soca, a fusion of Trinidad’s traditional festive Christmas music with modern soca; rapso, a mix of rap and soca; ringbang, a popular Barbadian music that is credited to Guyanese musician Eddie Grant; ragga soca, which combines Jamaican ragga, an off-shoot of reggae, with soca music; and most recently ‘afro-soca.’ Before I discuss any of these sub-genres, however, I must account for how ‘soca’ originated and became distinct from calypso.

The term ‘Sokah’ or ‘solka,’ which has been standardised as ‘soca,’ is unanimously credited to Trinidadian calypsonian Lord Shorty Ras I, also known as Garfield Blackman. In 1973, Blackman experimented with different sounds and consciously mixed East Indian rhythms into calypso’s percussive repertoire, drawing the dholak, dhantal and tabla into rhythm sections to produce a hybrid, innovative new sound. Other than the inclusion of Indian instruments, soca music was also distinguished by its rapid ‘bpm’ or beats per minute. Lyrical content marked another critical progression. Soca is commonly associated with the ‘corporeal’ rather than the cerebral. It is thus compromised, ‘inauthentic’ and diluted in at least two senses: Firstly, it is a light-hearted but empty-headed deviation from calypso that lacks the gravity and impact of its

---

136 For the rest of this chapter I will refer to Lord Shorty Ras I, as ‘Blackman’ in acknowledgement of his eventual disassociation from his own creation.

137 A dholak is a twin-headed, barrel-shaped drum of North Indian origin that is made of wood and covered in rope. It can be struck at either end which is covered with a heavy skin and can be struck with the fingers or the palm of a hand. A dhantal (also a percussive instrument) is made of a metal or iron rod that is struck against metal that is shaped like a horse shoe. It is also Indian in origin and can be found throughout the Caribbean and Fiji. The sound of the dhantal resembles that of a triangle. The instrument is somewhat comparable to the steel pan insofar as it is another item that was originally used for industry (in this case iron bows that yoked oxen together) that was subsequently refashioned and utilised to produce music. Whereas the steel pan’s origins are urban, the dhantal has rural roots.

138 In specifying soca music, Gordon Rohlehr refers to party songs “rendered these days at tempos of over 150 per minute” (Rohlehr, “We Getting the Kaiso” 87).
parent and, even worse, is ‘guilty’ of evading “the moral and social responsibility for reforming
the problems and injustices of the present” (Rohlehr “We Getting the Kaiso That We Deserve”
86).

Calypso’s ability to narrate and deliver social commentary is one of the characteristics that
supposedly separates traditional calypso from modern soca. Soca is thus aligned with the
pleasurable rather than the political, with movement rather than cognition. It embodies the
wining, bacchanalian flesh of carnival, countering the sobriety of calypso’s contemplative
mind. The unease caused by soca’s unapologetic recentering of the body has positioned it as a
rival to ‘genuine’ calypso music, reviving anxious debates about an elusive and unresolved
notion of ‘authenticity.’ The ‘apparent’ disinterest in engaging in a sustained narrative also
distinguishes it from its parent:

The tendency to de-emphasize the narrative function of the voice, for the singer to
participate more as another instrument in a rhythmic and timbral ‘groove’ that is created
for a party atmosphere and dancing, is a distinction between soca and calypso that is
persistently clear [emphasis added]. (Dudley, “Judging “By the Beat” 294)

In an eagerness to draw a line between genres, there is a tendency to overstate and exaggerate
calypso’s subversive and rebellious tendencies and to overlook the ways in which it has often
been willingly domesticated, co-opted and muzzled by the state.139 Calypso is typically lauded
for its ability to speak truth to power, to construct scenarios and engage in the art of storytelling.
Furthermore, the drive to elevate calypso from soca has also created the need for distinctions

---

139 For further reading on this subject, see Gordon Rohlehr’s “Man talking to Man” Calypso and Social
between soca’s subsequent sub-genres. This has led to considerable confusion over terminology. Because older terms such as ‘kaiso’ are still used interchangeably with calypso and soca, any attempt to create a clear, stable taxonomy is inherently problematic. This is further complicated by the fact that genre labels and descriptors are used interchangeably in Trinidad’s public media and in much academic discourse. It is debatable whether or not a rapid proliferation of sub-genres and ‘sub-sub-genres’ is in fact necessary in the face of a persistent and generally applicable terminology. A common suspicion is that this escalation of new musical genres merely generates artificial distinctions and creates the illusion of new music to be marketed to a receptive audience. Afro-Soca for instance is the latest iteration to join soca’s crowded ranks. While the music has been well received, it is also subject to scepticism and a degree of exasperation:

...they also have a sub-genre called ‘afro-soca’...Now I love mi soca. But I want to know: what the hell is Afro-Soca? Cos allyuh gone and put some Afro beats in it, you gone and chant a little bit: ‘olay, olay;’ and you do your little chant...that don't make something ‘afro-soca.’ Stop trying to make everything sound so blasted fancy. Soca is Soca. (Trini Trent 00:05:14-34)

The confusion and anxiety over branding is not only obvious, it is far from fortuitous “[e]specially at a time when artists from the English Caribbean are trying to consolidate their position in the world music scene…” (Guilbault “The Politics of Labelling”). Jacqueline Guilbault argues that this process cannot be solely attributed to cynical power brokers who wish to monopolise the representation of potentially lucrative genres. While she acknowledges that they do play a critical role the proliferation of poorly defined genres, she also suggests that
the interchangeability of labels is “indicative of particular rapports” that exist between genres (“The Politics of Labelling”).

Arguably, while soca currently exists as a fractured music, the minutiae of divisions housed within contemporary carnival music ultimately obscure the fact that soca and calypso share far more in common as Trinidad’s two main genres of music than such categorisations would otherwise suggest. The dividing line between celebratory soca and ‘serious’ calypso is much finer than many a dedicated calypso fan would care to admit. Indeed, there is a long tradition of social and political commentary in calypso music that bears the characteristic registers of party music. There is also an equally long-standing tradition of ‘smut’ calypso which is no more ‘intellectual’ (or subtle) than the most sexualised contemporary soca. Furthermore, even the most socially conscious calypsonian had his or her collection of calypsos that mused on the arts of dance, winning, flirtation, ‘mash up,’ flag waving and ‘breaking away.’

Conversely, the party music of soca has inherited from its predecessor the serious and unenviable task of nationalising, branding, copyrighting and mapping Trinidad’s music on to the world stage. This must be attempted while simultaneously nurturing a viable, home-grown music industry that will support its artists. Despite these stresses, soca has been able to construct meta-narratives that draw the audience’s attention to the structure, form and function of soca as a genre, irrespective of the complaints of critics and analysts.

Soca music has demonstrated the ability to critique its own industry, to observe its own effect on a crowd or audience and will often construct a discourse around the conditions in which it is performed. Indeed, soca has drawn attention to how carnival itself is enacted and to the festival’s very structure. It is also, of course, indelibly tied to the contemporary practice of
bikini mas’. Like soca, bikini mas’ is similarly charged with precipitating an untrammelled process of ‘de-narrativisation’—one that not only implies cultural and historical loss but also signals a descent into the abyss of semiotic unintelligibility:

Soca party music is loud and has over the years become louder and louder. Perhaps a singer needs to shout in order for the noise of one’s song and sound to be heard over the other 400 noises that are using the same catchwords and recycled, cloned melodies of other singers’ past successes. The local market displays all of the features of primitive capitalism. It is a grim survivalist business which feeds on energy. (Rohlehr “We Getting the Kaiso That We Deserve” 92)

As a result, it is not at all surprising that soca and bikini mas’ are imaginatively paired with one another as the new ‘pillars’ that have replaced calypso and ol’ mas’. They now constitute modern carnival, and if some critics are to be believed, this is to detrimental effect. Patricia A. De Freitas notes the collusion between bikini mas’ and soca and the way in which both carnivalesque practices work to produce and reinforce gender stereotypes of “‘sensuous’ femininity and “macho” masculinity.” She also describes the way in which “calypso lyrics continue in part, to trivialize caricature and ridicule women” as they are exhorted by male singers to “bump and grind” (de Freitas “Disrupting the Nation” 30). The entire performance, however, is predicated on the complicity of women who are ultimately willing to follow instruction, perform and ‘wine djon djon’ in a complicated negotiation of carnival’s norms:

Women are, therefore, caught at intersections of consent and resistance, self-expression and reaction, pleasure and guilt, agency and passivity, manipulation and active appropriation, commoditization and rebellion. (de Freitas “Disrupting the Nation” 30)
Rohlehr argues in a similar vein and critiques the way in which soca music specifically attempts to tap into the visceral freedom and abandon that some female revellers experience during carnival by repackaging this in song and marketing it back to women. He also suggests that a calculated exploitation occurs where the ‘wild winer woman’ is not only appealed to but is positioned as a puppet who is commandeered by the ‘shouts’ of the male voice and effectively steered:

…through a series of slogan-commands in which she is instructed to wine, grind, jump-up, jump-down, move, groove, do this or that with various parts of her anatomy. There are so many of these songs which each year issue the same list of commands, that in 1995 Eric Powder of Tobago composed a calypso in which he accused his fellow calypsonians of “running out of parts—parts, that is, of the female body. (Rohlehr “We Getting the Kaiso That We Deserve” 88-9)

While soca music has generated a myriad of sub-genres, soca itself is divided into three central categories: power soca, chutney soca and groovy soca. Power soca is a deeply percussive form of the music, anchored in a driving rhythm and functioning as both club or fête music. However it is also ideal for more energetic street parades. ‘Chutney soca’ draws heavily on tassa rhythms, usually features Bhojpuri Hindi lyrics, but may also be ‘glossed’ with Trinidadian patois. It is primarily performed by Trinidadian artists of Indian descent. Finally, groovy soca is the most mellifluous, melodic and commercially successful of the three and is currently the form of soca music that enjoys the most exposure on an international level. Supported by a range of prizes and awards for soca artists, the movement has resulted in a flourishing of soca tents of all kinds which have become one of carnival’s central sites.
Initially, calypso music had a single competition originally known as the ‘Calypso King Competition,’ which was first held in 1939. This was then renamed the ‘Calypso Monarch’ in 1978 in order to acknowledge the victory of Calypso Rose, the first female calypsonian to win the prestigious title. The title is an exclusively national award and is currently known as the ‘National Calypso Monarch.’ Soca contests, by contrast, are regional. The ‘International Soca Monarch’ was established in 1993, but as soca music splintered into its groovy and chutney variants, separate titles and crowns were established for each genre. Power soca is tied to the International Soca Monarch title, a reality that is reflected in its unofficial name ‘The International Power Soca Monarch.’ Chutney soca burst on to the scene during the 1980s, but it was not until 1996 that the first chutney soca competition was held. It was subsequently formalised as the ‘International Chutney Soca Monarch’ title in 1998. Groovy soca was eventually recognised as its own genre in the 21st century and the ‘International Groovy Soca Monarch’ title was established in 2005. All of these titles are distinct from the ‘Carnival Road March,’ inaugurated in 1933, which is a separate and highly sought after honour. The Carnival Road March is the equivalent of the popular electoral ‘vote’ and is based on the number of times the song is played during the parade at strategic judging points that are situated along the main route.

With this metaphor in mind, I would like to argue at this critical juncture that the repetitive, minimalist poetics and the popular force of soca music are a local expression of ‘party politics.’ They deliberately and cynically eschew an engagement with governmental and official institutions. Instead, soca represents the concerns, actions and aspirations of current youth and street culture, seeking connection to and solidarity with dance party culture around the world. Thus, soca music aims to position itself directly in relation to the global and international dance
scene and movement. This is nowhere more evident than in the lyrics of Destra Garcia’s 2010 power soca hit “Proppa,” which could be easily dismissed as a standard ‘wine and jam’ soca that stereotypically celebrates the physique of the winer woman: “Wey de girl with the bumper bling? Wey de girl who could bounce de ting?” (“Proppa”). Hints of Americanisation are also expressed when the singer uses American slang (‘crew’) in reference to her band of female friends and then offers a playful challenge to any interested parties: “When I come up my crew/Hope you can stand the test.” (“Proppa”).

The lyrics in question follow the contemporary trend of turning an almost exclusive focus on the performance of carnival and soca music, celebrating the regenerative powers of the festival and its music. This is accompanied by an often hostile and explicit rejection of any intrusion by national or international politics or events: “We duh wanna lot of talk man! No Politician” (“Proppa”). Indeed, an overt hostility towards ‘talk’ or political claptrap is evinced. Carnival is temporally sealed off from the rest of the year. It is explicitly constructed not only as a hedonistic space and discourse in which one can ‘get on bad’ and misbehave, but also serves as a haven or safety zone in which one can temporarily ‘leh go the stress’ and escape from daily tribulation. The politics of fantasy and escape rather than the hard graft of representation and confrontation are at play in today’s festival. The fantasy that soca markets and offers to its revellers makes the music ripe for international dissemination and, arguably, exploitation. The ongoing quest to export soca to the shores of the United States, Europe and Japan continues as artists and the government alike seek to place Trinidad and Tobago ‘on the map’ and to relive the golden era of calypso’s international success. Soca’s artists and patrons alike often exhibit considerable anxiety over the music’s relative lack of international renown and success even

It is possible to overstate the ideal of carnival being a discrete and demarcated space as carnival’s music has begun to be played beyond carnival season, particularly on islands beyond Trinidad.
as they debate how to retain the national and local identity of the music and maintain the
connection to an older form of carnival.

The deep and enduring irony of dismissing soca as ‘mere’ dance music however, is that it
ignores the conscious, politicised intent behind its creation, including its name. Says Blackman
of soca music: “The ‘so’ comes from calypso. And the ‘kah’ to show the East Indian thing in
the rhythm, right? I selected the syllable ‘kah’ because it represents the first letter of the Indian
alphabet” (qtd. in Guilbault, “The Politics of Labelling”). Thus, cultural unification between
Trinidad’s main ethnic groups was Garfield’s central objective and resulted in the 1973 track
“Indrani.” Soca’s definitive break-out hit would come towards the end of the decade along with
Lord Kitchener’s irreverently playful “Sugar Bum Bum” (1978), which helped to cement
soca’s image as a feel-good party music that did not strain itself much beyond meditating on
the female form. Despite this stereotype, it is important to note that Garfield successfully
revivified calypso music, which was already waning in popularity during the 1970s. It also
marked an astute recognition of the power of dance music and its ability to construct, unified
and potentially sustain egalitarian spaces.

Dance music is both imperative and disciplinary insofar as it consists of specific commands
and exhortations which transmit ‘rules’ to the bodies of participants. To enter into its domain
is to willingly surrender over to the discipline of the beat. At the same time, however, dance
music also operates as both a levelling space and a meeting place that can fleetingly deconstruct
hierarchy and difference. Far from being mindlessly apolitical “the sphere of rhythm can most
readily accommodate ideological expression” (J. Mahabir “Rhythm and Class”). Furthermore,
Soca music also has the potential to move beyond a mere ‘rhetoric’ of multiculturalism and
reflect genuine unity. This correlates with the general sentiment that one finds in international
dance music of ‘one nation’ under the groove or beat. If soca is positively classified as a local form of dance music it is much easier to consider how well the music succeeds as dance music rather than misreading it as ‘failed’ social commentary. It is then possible to discuss the ways in which it departs from the international dance ‘creed’ and operates according to culturally and politically specific values.

Soca emerged during the 1970s not only through Garfield’s mixing of Indian and African percussion but also as a direct response to a specific social and economic climate that was rife with labour strikes, riots and protests. Joy Mahabir observes that these conditions were ideal for forming “a class alliance across race that sought to actively displace the national bourgeoisie in power” (“Rhythm and Class”).\(^{141}\) Mahabir singles out the highly successful calypso “Real Unity” which brought together the talents of the ‘King of Soca’ Machel Montano and the undisputed ‘Queen’ of chutney soca Drupatee Ramgoonai Persad.\(^{142}\) She suggests that this soca is a clear example of how a successful alliance between ‘African and Indian’ plays out in the arena of art and music.

Currently, chutney soca is not as prolific as either Groovy or Power soca. Nonetheless, it has an international presence and has had its share of hits and chart-toppers. Like the early bel airs in carnival, the origins of soca chutney are decidedly feminine. The critical difference is that while bel airs were sung in public spaces, chutney performances occurred in the enclosed temporality of a three day period known as matikor. This ceremony was exclusive to women

\(^{141}\) In Trinidad, by the mid-1960s, the ruling People’s National Movement (PNM) was mainly African and the oppositional Democratic Labour Party (DLP) largely East-Indian. Most of the left leaning intellectuals of both parties had either been expelled or had resigned. In the late 1960s, several new political parties and newspapers, headed by the estranged left in close association with the trade unions (comprised mainly of oilfield and sugar workers), began to agitate for social and political transformation.

\(^{142}\) Also more commonly referred to as ‘Drupatee Ramgoonai.’
and involved a sexually explicit dance that was performed as a part of the Hindu wedding ceremony (Bergman 6). The trajectory of soca chutney in terms of gender and performance loosely parallels the way in which carnival’s chantwells were, at one stage, exclusively female, before the role opened up to accommodate men:

When chutney made the transition to the public sphere and adjusted to include men as performers and audience members, it was still considered an exclusive space for Indians. The art form was labelled ‘Indian soca’ and chutney shows ‘Indian alternatives’ to Carnival. (Mohammed 2)

Drupatee Ramgoonai exploded on to the soca music scene in 1987 and became the first East Indian Caribbean woman to chart a number one hit with “Mr. Bissessar” in the following year. She is also known for her willingness to collaborate with black Trinidadian soca artists, resulting in songs such as “Real Unity.” She has been credited with coining the term ‘chutney,’ by titling her debut album Chutney Soca. “Real Unity” boasts a dexterous heteroglossia as Ramgoonai sings the chorus in Bhojpuri Hindi. Ramgoonai’s verse is directly sampled from Pakistani pop singer Nassia Hazan’s 1980s Hindi disco hit “Aap Jaisa Koi” that was recorded for the film, Qurbani. The lyrics and melody were replicated in a Trinidadian soca and recorded twenty years later:

Aap jaisa koi meri zindagi main aaye to baat ban jaye
Ahaan baat ban jaye
Aap jaisa koi meri zindagi main aaye to baat ban jaaye
Montano, in turn, reels off an almost obligatory national roll call that celebrates Trinidad’s hybrid demographics while simultaneously invoking the national carnival dance as the unitary ‘glue’ to unite all groups:

Nothing wrong with wining on a Indian girl
Nothing wrong with wining on a Chinee girl
Nothing wrong with wining on a African girl
Nothing wrong with wining on a Syrian girl
Nothing wrong with huge unity [huge unity]. (“Real Unity”)

This strategy is also used in David Rudder’s “Trini to the Bone,” recorded three years later, in which he muses on the national character with rueful fondness:

As crazy as we might seem to be
We still fight to be ah family
Indian, African or ah Chinee
Syrian, French-Creole and Portuguese
We vex with ah spirit fiery. (“Trini to the Bone”)

143 Roomgoonai’s refrain translates as: “Someone like you should come into my life/It will be great; Yes, yes life will become great/Someone like you should come into my life/It will be great; Yes, yes life will become great”
“Real Unity” builds on the prototypical carnival roll call but takes a more sophisticated lyrical turn when Montano commands the audience to “Hear mih story” (“Real Unity”). Once securing their attention he then casually takes his listeners on an aural and imagistic tour through a Trinidadian carnival. Locations and culture are imbricated through iconic and intimate references to locales such as Harrylal, Port-of-Spain, and the local store, ‘Textile King.’ An elaborate and diverse menu of Trinidadian fare (‘curry,’ ‘curry crab,’ ‘pelau,’144 ‘dumpling,’ ‘dahl,’145 ‘fry rice’) is presented, all of which is accompanied by the standard jumping, ‘jooking’ and wining that occurs in mas’:

Me eating mih curry from Harrylal
Me invite him out to piece ah pelau
Leh we take a little jump in the bacchanal
Take a jook and a wine in the Carnival
...and he eating dumpling and dahl
Curry crab, fry rice from de Chinee gyal
Now we take a trip down to the Port of Spain
Make a little stop by the Textile King. (“Real Unity”)

Food functions as an index of the national and the local while signifying a twin-fold process that begins with ‘douglarisation’ where African and Indian cultures meet and combine. This is then followed by a further process of creolisation as multiple cuisines are mixed into the fray. Fancy mas’ and the art of ‘dressing up’ is later alluded to in the lyric: “Pretty in we costume,” while the casual reference to sequins which were traditionally associated with Indian mas’

144 ‘Pelau’ refers to an Afro-creole rice and lentil dish that is commonly eaten in Trinidad.
145 Dahl is a Hindi word for ‘chickpea’ and is a staple ingredient in many Indian dishes.
characters helps to normalise Indian aesthetics as constitutive to the spectacle of mas’. The artists not only call for ‘unity’ but inform the audience of the music’s genre: “This is jam this is a soca tassa jam!” Ramgoonai re-visits culinary references in “Hotter than a Chulha” and refers to adding ‘geera’ and ‘curry’ to a soca mix. This additive impulse demonstrates that wilful transgression is at play. There is an insistence on douglarisation and a strategic appeal to the history of soca, which Ramgoonai knowledgeably relays while responding to her critics:

The music of the steel drum of Laventille
Cannot help but mix with rhythms from Caroni.
For it’s a symbol of how much we come of age
It’s a brand new stage. (“Hotter than a Chulha”)

Ramgoonai’s use of sexual entendre and her provocative dances that bring the private space of the matikor to the public space of the fête have ensured that she remains a divisive, transgressive and controversial figure on the Trinidadian soca scene. The kind of tactical, irreverent play that refuses to adhere to boundaries continues, emphasises the cultural fusion initiated by Garfield. Ramgoonai rearticulates soca’s central tenet that the “Riddim from Africa and Indian… Blend together is ah perfect mixture” (“Hotter than a Chulha”).

The Why and the How:

In her article “Raise Yuh Hand, Jump Up and Get on Bad!: New Developments in Music in Trinidad,” Lorraine Leu points towards a process of ‘decoding’ in music that arguably runs

---

146 Chulha refers to traditional Indian ovens fuelled by charcoal or animal dung that were used to communally cook Indian breads such as rotis and chappatis.
parallel to important features in carnival music. She suggests that the process of unmasking that is a feature of bikini mas’, particularly the transparency that dressing down implies, resonates in important ways with decoding. Leu pushes against the stereotype of an unreflective party music with no higher pursuit beyond hedonistic indulgence, suggesting instead that soca and calypso merely communicate in different ways. These differences are necessary if each genre is to meet the needs of their respective audiences. Coding, rather than content, is what is at stake (49). Leu points toward the shared ‘complicity’ between calypsonians and their audience in constructing a musical discourse that is balanced upon shared cultural values, cultural in-jokes and an ability to read and navigate coded language. The art of the double-entendre, the knowing wink and the ubiquity of sexual innuendo, for instance, was an essential ingredient in both the traditions of smut and *picong* calypso.

Grenadian born Slinger Francisco, also known as ‘The Mighty Sparrow,’ is perhaps the calypsonian most associated with witty word play and the veiled reference. This is never more evident than in the iconic “Jean and Dinah (Wen’ the Yankees Gone).” The calypso paved the way for a national discussion on endemic prostitution in Trinidad due to the presence of exploitative ‘Yankee’ naval bases. While the calypso rhythms gave it international appeal and turned it into a party hit, Sparrow’s central audience was local and national. In his home market, his coded references were fully accessible to a Trinidadian audience cognisant of the social situation to which he referred:

So when you bounce up
Jean and Dinah
Rosita and Clementina
Round the corner posing
Bet your life is something they selling
And if you catch them broken
You can get it all for nothing
Don't make no row
Since the Yankees gone, Sparrow take over now. (“Jean and Dinah”)

The equally iconic “Rum and Coca Cola,” which was performed by Lord Invader, arranged by Lionel Belasco and appropriated then sanitised by the American pop act the Andrew Sisters, is yet another example of calypso’s heavy reliance on coded language. Double entendres enabled a liberating mobility for both and performers and audiences alike. Calypsonians could publicly deliver veiled missives to revellers who were invited to indulge in the transgressions by decoding them. Artist and audience entered into a ‘forbidden’ discourse with each side maintaining a mask of propriety. In the case of soca music, however, transgression is open and unabashed, frequently dispensing with coded language and oblique references in favour of an unprecedented freedom in what is still a very conservative, religious society. The language of courtship in the new soca is often the language of explicit sexual desire and the raw, physical terms of male/female encounters. (Leu 49)

I would both agree and disagree with Leu’s assessment. For example, in 2011 soca artist Daryl Henry, who performs under the sobriquet Farmer Nappy, released “Flirt.” The lyric of “Flirt” is no less playful than the calypsos of yore, but parts company from them when he overtly identifies, indulges in then celebrates a ‘scandalous’ act of transgression which naturally involves wining with strange women during carnival. Transgression itself becomes the (self)-
conscious subject matter of the song. However, the singer’s attitude towards the act is somewhat lackadaisical and he ultimately seeks to normalise what he describes. The ubiquity with which wining is referred to in his own lyrics and in the lyrics of his fellow artists ultimately establishes it as perfectly normative and predictable behaviour within a demarcated season: “This is the season for the wining” (“Flirt”).

Within the inverted universe of mas,’ wining and the presence of the winer women is perfectly natural and constitutes carnival’s status quo. This is particularly true of a festival that is not only increasingly commercialised but is also internationalised. The transparency that results from dressing down transgression is thus performed for a tourist gaze. In “Flirt,” however, the external gaze of the onlooker, whether local or foreign, is casually ‘dismissed’ while the wining bodies idyllically construct a public-private space as evinced in the chorus: “I don’t care who’s watching me... Distinct between you and me.” Furthermore, rather than merely being a physical act that occurs in the allotted space of carnival, wining is also spatialised by being referred to as a ‘place’. This place exists both in the lyrics of the soca and in the space of carnival. Furthermore, it is universalised:

Gyul, ‘cos a dance is a place
Where everything is everything
And you can feel like you can wine up on everything
I wanna hold you
Like a hol’ a mic when I sing [emphasis added]. (“Flirt”)

Conventional social norms that apply to the world beyond carnival are dispensed with as ‘wedding rings’ and their signification of institutionalised order are deemed unnecessary. The
soca artist rejects traditional calypso’s codified language and portrays desire in a straightforward, unvarnished fashion:

Cos all I wanna do is flirt

*With no strings attached*

When I hold on I gon’ wine like that [emphasis added]. (“Flirt”)

Rather than being an expression of unbridled licentiousness and sexual abandon, however, the lyric is curiously conservative. It establishes behavioural rules, limits, norms and, above all, restraints. What Farmer Nappy speaks to, in effect, is a form of ‘wining etiquette’ which establishes the accepted rules of courtship, wining and play in the context of a mas’. One of the critical rules involved in playing mas’ is that a reveller does not become attached to or seek to monopolise the time and attention of another reveller. A social dance ensues in which the skilled and courteous winer knows the socially accepted limits of wining which includes when to detach and move on to another partner. The ‘wine,’ like carnival itself, is momentary and ephemeral. To prolong it is to violate the etiquette of playing mas’. The tension between brazen, unmasked display and the potential for censure as a result of surveillance is also addressed in the defiance of the following verse:

I don’t care who’s watching me

What dey see is what dey see

Dis ting between you and me

Dey not make me guilty. (“Flirt”)

292
Perhaps 2011 was the year of the flirtatious, relaxed soca, as evidenced by “Wotless.”\textsuperscript{147} “Wotless” was a groovy soca number performed by KES the Band and written by Kerwin Du Bois. It was a surprise contender that overtook the anthemic frontrunner “Trini” (performed by Benjai) in its successful bid to secure the International Groovy Monarch title for that year. The song strayed away from the standard pace and formulaic instrumentation usually expected of groovy soca and stood out for its distinctive ‘folksy’ guitar riff. Kerwin Du Bois took great pride in the fact that ‘Wotless’ contained “…five different genres of music combined into one song: ska, dancehall, pop, jazz, African music, and soca (qtd. in Dowrich-Phillips). Like Farmer Nappy’s “Flirt,” “Wotless” constructs carnival as a site made up of the physical pleasures—“waving away, feeling so light”—as well as the physical demands—“sweat dripping on meh...Sun beating on meh”—involved in playing mas’. “Wotless” paints a deceptively simple scenario and delivers a seemingly routine account of the ordinary mechanics of playing mas’. Parading, jumping, flag waving and the “wearing [of] Caribbean colours” all feature prominently. The political ‘moment’ in the song occurs when the reveller also declares pride in his ‘wotlessness’ which, on the one hand, connotes a lack of social respectability and, on the other hand, defies the rather orthodox demand to prove one’s ‘worth,’ value, and productiveness to society: “Cuz, right now I just Wotless/And I don’t really care less” (“Wotless”).

Conventionally, value is associated with the ability to demonstrate one’s ‘utility.’ But in the temporal context or chronotope of carnival, the immediacy and the instantaneity of the moment in which the reveller brazenly asserts his ‘wotlessness’ is paradoxically where his or her true value lies. In this chronotope, the ability to relax, to be flagrantly unproductive or useless and to have the freedom to simply ‘be’ is indeed, invaluable. The reveller moves throughout the

\textsuperscript{147} “Wotless” is Trinidadian patois for ‘worthless’.
parade ‘careless,’ ‘fearless’ and unconcerned with his lack of utility to his peers, society, or the state, all of whom are implicated in the song’s humorous commentary on spectatorship. By being ‘wotless,’ the resistant reveller cannot be deployed, harnessed, or utilised for any purpose beyond the immediacy of carnival. Thus, the self-proclaimed ‘wotless’ reveller institutes a new set of values that are relevant to carnival’s ephemeral, topsy-turvy order.

The accusatory, deictic ‘you’ of the song addresses an array of carnival spectators who are summarily dismissed: “You!/ I dont care what you say” (“Wotless”). The spectators are singled out—“Meh girlfriend she go get vex/meh family gon’ send text”—along with gossiping friends, bystanders, and even social media: “Facebook dey done (Talk bout dis)” (“Wotless”). “Wotless” goes one step further than “Flirt’s” defiant disavowal of guilt (“You not make me guilty”) and its refusal to pay heed to scrutiny and judgement. Instead, “Wotless” disarms the power of spectatorship by actively accepting and even actively revelling in the condemnatory gaze. It transcends notions of guilt and “scandal” by establishing a politics of ‘the unbothered’ in what essentially amounted to a 2011 carnival catch cry: “Tell dem call meh name/I go take de blame” (“Wotless”). Transparency and directness rather than double entendre and innuendo, are the order of the day.

State of the Industry

Soca, Calypso, Kaiso, all these different genres. The steel pan our national instrument. You hear it playing in America. You hear it in many of these American artists like Souljah Bay and Drake and you hear it in their music but you not really getting the recognition for people to say “Ooo look, this is from Trinidad and Tobago.” Like Leona Lewis have an album out now with steel pan playing in the album. Nobody know where
that from. However, whenever you hear a little Jamaican twang or you hear the reggae or you hear anything like that you know it’s from Jamaica. And that’s because Jamaica, in many ways, they had Bob Marley who basically put them on the map and ever since then many foreign artists have gone to Jamaica to study the craft that Bob Marley left behind and of course study reggae music in general and of course dancehall music. So in an effort to get us out there our artists are looking outside to see, okay, how can we get the foreigners to listen? (Trini Trent 00:06:31-7:23)

In an international context, soca holds a precariously unmarked yet pervasive place. At home it is weakened by ever-proliferating sub-genres with which it must compete for a share of the local spotlight. It is thus diluted from within in its struggle to find a place on the world stage. The new tendency has been to hybridise the music with international music trends, resulting in ‘rapso’, Afro-Soca and the predominance of electronic dance music (EDM). There is also a growing suspicion that Jamaica has been far more successful at imaginatively binding reggae to the culture. It is deeply embedded in a wider sense of national identity that can be recognised by those both inside and outside of Jamaica. As a consequence, even though reggae’s origins are just as diasporic as calypso’s, and while the music is no less ‘nomadic,’ reggae remains firmly rooted in the Jamaican soil.¹⁴⁸ Not so with calypso, the origins of which are still contested. The resulting narrative around carnival’s music is fraught and manages to be possessive, celebratory, yet anxious all at once. Trinidadians thus negotiate with a deep desire to disseminate the music, be it calypso or the current strains of soca, while simultaneously

¹⁴⁸ With that said, there has been a degree of debate and even angst across social media sites such as Instagram and Twitter over the recent success of Drake’s 2016 album Views. Drake (Aubrey Drake Graham) is a Canadian-born Toronto artist of African-American and Jewish descent. Views borrows heavily from Jamaican dance-hall music, features Jamaican dancehall artists and finds Drake emulating a Jamaican accent all the while eclipsing authentic Jamaican artists in terms of global sales and recognition. Accusations that he is a ‘culture vulture’ have been expressed along with concerns that the music is being subtly disassociated from its nation of origin.
seeking to re-territorialise the origins of the music through an aggrieved assertion of
ownership.\textsuperscript{149} Gordon Rohlehr suggests that this state of affairs is indicative of a twin set of
‘contradictory impulses’ which he outlines in the following manner:

The first is parochial, inner-directed, quite often defensively aggressive, in which the
citizens of a small “postcolonial nation” reassure themselves by celebrating what they
have created and by claiming themselves and the works of their hands and minds in the
face of an appropriating world that at times includes rival Caribbean states, many of
which have their own Carnivals and their own competing calypso or \textit{soca} music. The
second impulse is externally oriented and involves calypso’s ongoing encounter with a
world market that imposes its own terms, standards, and conditions of access. (“We
Getting the Kaiso That We Deserve” 83)

Aside from the supposed simplicity of its lyrics, musical content and its ‘depoliticisation,’ \textit{soca}
is also criticised for being ‘mass’ produced and lacking in originality. This is most apparent in
the practices of ‘recycling’ and repetition that have come to prominence in Trinidad, where
many songs may feature an identical melody and beat. However, rather than regarding this as
a dramatic break from tradition, Ray Funk and Donald R. Hill suggest otherwise:

\textsuperscript{149} Rohlehr constructs a neat hierarchy of the different markets that calypso and \textit{soca} music attempts to appeal to.
Firstly, he outlines a diasporic market that appeals to West Indian communities living abroad in the United States,
Canada and the United Kingdom and extends this category to include neighbouring West Indian islands. Next,
there is the corporate media of Canada and the United States with its network of radio and television channels.
There is also an attempt to satiate the desire for \textit{calypso} in Switzerland, France and interestingly enough,
Scandinavian nations. Japan, Africa and Latin America are also identified as potential target markets (Rohlehr,
“We Getting the Kaiso That We Deserve” 83).
Early in its development in Trinidad, new issues were taken up every year in calypso, with mostly new lyrics. The melodies remained traditional and were reused over and over again. In the 1930s, new melodies were added to the kit so that each year both the lyrics and the tunes were sometimes newly composed. (179)

This practice is very much alive and well in contemporary soca as beats and melody lines or ‘riddims’ are produced and then purchased by a range of artists who subsequently accompany these arrangements with lyrics of their own. Riddims are regarded as an essential art form in their own right and, interestingly enough, are given a unique name that indicates their affects such as ‘Jumbie Jab Riddim,’ ‘Hush Riddim,’ ‘Boom Boom Riddim,’ ‘The Morning Sun Riddim.’ This ritual reuse of riddims does not detract from their value, even as they may be subject to ‘mass’ dissemination. They are also regionally flexible and mobile as is indicated by the practice of naming riddims after their island of origin. During carnival time it is not at all uncommon to hear multiple songs boasting the same ‘riddim’ and instrumental track overlaid with a different core melody and set of lyrics.

Wither Power Soca?

Power Soca has fallen out of favour with listeners and music industry taste-makers in recent years and is less likely to be heard during carnival time or on the radio. This has been noted by critics and industry insiders alike, as Power Soca was once extremely popular due to its thundering tempo and its ability to produce ubiquitous anthems that were tailor-made for ‘jump and wave’ fêtes.150 Groovy soca, by contrast, which was often regarded as the lesser of the two,

---

150 ‘Jump and wave’ fêtes are high energy and extremely kinetic affairs where the participants forego dancing to literally jump in rhythm and ‘wave their (national) flag.’ With that said, both power soca and groovy soca are
is now on the ascent and has enjoyed greater international success, creating a stark division between the practitioners in each genre. In the world of popular soca artist Machel Montano—the self-proclaimed ‘King of Soca’ and five-time consecutive winner of the Power Monarch title—is regarded as one of the country’s most popular ambassadors for soca and was, by and large, expected to be the artist who would break through in the international market. However, fellow soca artist Bunji Garlin, a four time winner of the International Soca Monarch title, has found success by transitioning into the more mellifluous strains of groovy soca. Since this shift Garlin has scored notable hits such as “Differentology” and “Tabanca Carnival,” both of which heavily feature EDM elements. Both songs further cement modern soca’s propensity to make carnival itself the central topic of meditation.

Ironically enough, the sheer speed of power soca’s music, which made it a national favourite in the fête tents along with its explicit focus on ‘big upping’ the nation, are precisely the qualities that have led to a struggle to find international favour. Essentially, the music is too specifically and explicitly ‘Trinidadian,’ with a tempo that speaks in the language of the ‘jump and wave’ parade and the fête tent but has less relevance beyond these contexts. As a result, the music does not share groovy soca’s ‘feel good’ messages that tend to meditate more on congregation and dancing.

happy to delve into the type of display that taps into the political cache of an almost glib expression of national identity. While power soca is often regarded as the more overtly ‘nationalistic’ form of soca, groovy soca proffers similar praises to the nation and is just as willing to discuss Trinidadian identity, especially when it relates to themes of exile and belonging

151 A slang term for ‘praise and support’ that is used in Trinidad, Jamaica and in most metropolitan spaces that contain diasporic populations from either or both countries. It involves publicly naming and representing someone or something.
Furthermore, groovy soca’s comparatively mellow tempo has made it more suitable for integration into the international dance scene. While power soca has remained very much a ‘hard’ dance music with a specifically ‘local’ sound, groovy soca has been more ‘relaxed’ not only in terms of its tempo but also in terms of its musical borders and influences. Of the two, groovy soca has been both more permeable and more malleable. In 2016, the influence of EDM from Europe had such an impact on groovy soca that there were times when groovy soca was almost indistinguishable from EDM to the point where one could argue that groovy soca has been assimilated. Rather than merely housing and incorporating EDM influences such as auto-tune, disc jockeys and electronic instrumentation, the boundaries that separate the two genres have become increasingly difficult to discern.

While government bodies such as the NCC have attempted to preserve older art forms like picong and extempo by creating televised competitive categories for them, these older forms of calypso tend, by and large, to be treated by revellers as quaint and somewhat rarefied novelties. While they receive official state recognition and have a space specifically carved out for them, they are very much marginalised in terms coverage, popularity and earning potential for performers. Inevitably, picong and extempo has been relegated, or arguably banished, to relatively discreet calypso tents and small stages that are primarily attended by diehard enthusiasts. Soca music, by contrast, is situated front and centre; it currently blares from the ‘big trucks,’ dominates the streets, directly accompanies the actual parades and road marches and permeates the air.

Carnival is inextricably a part of Trinidad’s entertainment industry and is embedded in the tourist sector to such an extent that it becomes difficult, if not downright impossible, to disentangle the local from the national or the national from the international. Arguably, the
trends and patterns of the carnival calendar are far from local or organic. They are structured to work around and to meet the demands of an international market. Carnival’s calendar, the regularity or irregularity of exposure that carnival’s music receives throughout the year, the touring schedules of calypsonians and soca artists, advertising, and sponsorship are all determined by the caprices of external forces (Rommen 388). It is equally difficult to discern at what point carnival is an expression of local culture and at what point it is a calculated performance that meets and satiates external expectations of what supposedly constitutes ‘Caribbean’ culture.

Is the ‘carnival’ mentality organic, embedded, or both? I wish highlight the cogent observations of Ernest D. Brown in his scathing article “Carnival, Calypso, and Steelband in Trinidad” which focuses on the harsh conditions faced by the calypso bands and soca industry. These conditions make it almost impossible for artists to survive without taking on other employment or, even worse, transforming carnival into a round-the-clock, commercialised industry. As he states:

"The problem has been and continues to be that once-a-year competitions and engagements at occasional international festivals are not enough to support performers. Too many talented calypsonians and panmen return home to poverty after a moment of fame on a foreign stage. What is missing is ongoing support, which might involve promoting steelband and calypso on the government-controlled radio and televisions stations. Today Trinidadian radio inundates listeners with calypso and steelband during the Carnival season, but during the rest of the year indigenous music comprises less than a fourth of its programming. (96)"
He also notes that inadequate copyright laws and the nation’s failure to join a copyright convention leaves soca artists vulnerable to piracy and unable to recoup proper royalties for their recordings. This leaves them ‘scrumting’ or ‘struggling for survival’ (97). In various interviews, David Rudder has spoken at length of the various constraints involved in producing contemporary soca in Trinidad’s current music industry. He is also philosophic about the fact that soca is compelled to compete on an international stage. The music is directly pitted against other black diasporic genres of music such as American hip-hop and the current ubiquitous swell of dancehall that dominates international radio stations. Rudder, ever the knowledgeable musician, notes the importance of both the means and the cost of production and concludes with some resignation that:

In the beginning I tried to establish as a world class music. I got myself in a position with people who could make that transition for if it were going to happen. But watching how things operate, you realise what is really happening. You go into it naive. Like other people you see a man and think, ‘I can do that.’ But then you realise it’s not about that at all. It’s what the market calls for, the economics. For the record companies it’s also about: if I have a good thing going, why mash it up? (qtd. in Jacob, “David Rudder: The Breakthrough”)

---

152 Hip-hop is widely regarded as a dominant, influential and truly international music insofar as it has reached every corner of the globe and has been embraced by local industries from Japan to Serbia to Palestine. It is noteworthy that part of the success of the music is that it is still imaginatively associated with ‘story-telling.’ As a result the music is imminently flexible in its ability to incorporate a range narratives spanning across an array of nationalities, ethnicities and cultures. Hip-hop narratives may articulate lived realities, specific points of crisis, or fantasies and aspiration.

153 In 2016, Jamaican dancehall has enjoyed a ‘revival’ that is comparable to the popularity it experienced during the mid-to-late 1990s and early-2000s.
Rudder believes that his calypso “Feeding Frenzy” neatly encapsulates the dilemma of most calypsonians and soca artists trying to promote a ‘small music’ on the world stage. He concludes that calypso and soca are a music that will always ‘quietly sell’ and assesses the state of the industry with a deflated pragmatism: “That’s the best we can hope for when a people don’t support their music. That’s the best we can do in a society where people become fragmented like this one” (qtd in “David Rudder: The Breakthrough”).

While Trinidad carnival is still officially and imaginatively associated with calypso and the image of Notting Hill is tied to reggae and dancehall, Toronto’s Caribana is aggressively framed inside the rhetoric of an inclusive ‘multiculturalism’ that supposedly creates an open, egalitarian space for masqueraders. To an extent this image is supported by the fact that, in the 19th century, Canada provided a safe haven for runaway slaves from the United States and stood as the “northern-most terminus of the Underground Railroad” (Trotman “Transforming Caribbean and Canadian Identity” 186).

**Multicultural Caribana and the ‘intrusion’ of Hip-Hop:**

As a festival, Caribana is by no means ‘Trinidadian’ in any straightforward sense of the word as its complex history can attest to. A calypso carnival first held in 1955 was organised by the CNWA (otherwise known as The Canadian Negro Women's Association). It was the joint creation of African Canadians and a group of first generation, middle-class blacks who were attempting to foster unity in the black Canadian community at the time. The group was also interested in traversing cultural and class lines, and felt that an implicitly diverse festival that would create links between native-born and immigrant communities in Toronto would do just this. The carnival they organised proved to be a precursor to what is now known as ‘Caribana’
(Gooden 417). Thanks to the efforts and ingenuity of the CNWA, Caribana was inaugurated in August 1967, marking Canada’s centenary in celebratory fashion. Despite its Trinidadian framework, Caribana in the last half-century has become a fusion of Caribbean cultures residing in Toronto. It is thus a pan-Caribbean street-festival that is more easily comparable to Notting Hill Carnival than to Trinidadian carnival’s explicitly nationalist celebrations. In its earliest inception, Caribana’s central objectives “…were to promote West Indian culture and identity through song and dance in Canada and to build a West Indian cultural center. However, in subsequent years, the festival was unable to raise enough money to build a center, and money promised from various government sources never came” (Gooden 424).

In the 20th century, however, attitudes towards black immigration had hardened to such an extent that “[i]mmigrants from the Caribbean, especially Afro-Caribbeans, did not initially benefit from [a] Canadian policy of open immigration, which in the period between 1945 and 1967 welcomed immigrants from eastern and western Europe but severely limited those from the Caribbean” (186). Economic pragmatism prevailed and an eventual change in federal government policy helped to encourage immigration directly from the Caribbean to Canada. The relaxation of restrictions also attracted “large numbers of Caribbean immigrants who sought refuge from the growing racism in England [and] formed a stream of second-phase Caribbean migrants who brought the experience of adjustment as immigrants in a white metropole” (187).

Caribana is clearly informed by the rhetoric of inclusion that mid-20th century Canadian government policy was wont to espouse. It seeks, through participation in a multicultural event, to project the image of a welcoming host. As a consequence, the festival ‘hosts’ a mix of soca and reggae music alongside a myriad of other musical genres including dancehall. This easy
blend of Caribbean musical genres somewhat elides the bureaucratic struggle for dominance over Caribana that occurred behind the scenes. It also safely obscures some of the more insular politics that have prevailed amongst Caribbean immigrants who have competed to influence the festival and its organising institutions. Yet, the Jamaican presence in and contribution to Caribana is undeniable:

...Jamaican-descended residents make up the highest proportion of Caribbean Canadians...in unofficial and official capacities. Unofficially, Jamaican Canadian celebrants travel from all over Canada to join those in Toronto. Officially, the Jamaican Canadian Association hosted the Calypso Monarch Competition and sponsored a masquerade band called Epiphany in 2000, and the 2 day Toronto Island postparade party always showcases local and international reggae and dancehall talent. (Burman 275)

Other notable events such as the marking of Jamaican Independence Day, Marcus Garvey Day and ‘Reggaebana,’ which is a concert dedicated to reggae and dancehall music, has helped to construct a diasporic context for a festival that is clearly dominated by Jamaican cultural markers (275). The growing ‘infiltration’ of American hip-hop, however, has also initiated a new conversation about which black diasporic cultures Caribana should represent. Ironically enough, notions of purity and contamination collide. Hip-hop music, which is an audible and visible presence at all three festivals, is the latest fissure point that creates a dividing line

154 In “Transforming Caribbean and Canadian Identity,” David V. Trotman details the controversy and in-group tensions in Toronto’s Caribbean community over which cultural contingent should lead the festival. In the early days, Trinidad’s perceived ‘sway’ over Caribana was a source of agitation. The Jamaican contingent within the community stood in firm opposition to Trinidad and what they perceived to be the ‘East Caribbean block’. The West Indian coalition became even more fragmented as the Eastern Caribbean nations proceeded to fight amongst themselves with “all of them complaining about the machinations of Trinidadian Mafosi” (189)
between authentic carnival and fake importation. It is a foreign element that, despite its dramatic floats and parades, merely masquerades under the trappings of carnival. Derisory terms such as ‘Rapabana’ and ‘Ameribana’ signal that hip-hop is regarded as an invasive force and even a contaminant that has no legitimate home in Caribana (Phillip 128; 129). Questions of where ‘home’ is located arise in some of the reveller’s plaintive reactions to the presence of hip-hop at Caribana: “I go to Caribana to see my country represented, as most others do. Please, please do not let hip-hop take over a great event like Caribana” (qtd. in L. Phillip 129). A binary between uniquely Caribbean diasporic music and the ubiquity of hip-hop is also clearly established:

My wife and I come to Caribana to see the costumes and hear the music of the islands. If we want hip-hop we can get that at home. I realize these people invested their money to keep Caribana running, but if necessary, I’ll go to the islands to get the real thing. (qtd. in L. Philips 129)

Music is the great divider and a telling index of nationality. One attends Caribana to glimpse a portrayal of one’s home country. It is a transnational amalgamation of ‘foreign’ elements and the festival tantalisingly alludes to places abroad; home is situated ‘elsewhere’ rather than squarely in Toronto, Canada. Thus, Caribana is viewed through a nostalgic but ultimately prismatic lens that divides the festival into the constituency of its ‘national’ parts. This mindset also extends to Caribana’s music. Soca, calypso, reggae, ragga, and dancehall are nostalgically attached to the nations of their origins, yet in the context of the festival are also seen as indigenous to Caribana. Hip-hop, however, is cast as the foreign import that disrupts pan-Caribbean, diasporic space. The sheer success of American hip-hop on the international stage
has meant that hip-hop is seldom if ever seen as genuinely expressing the culture of Toronto’s African-American diaspora.

The OVO (October’s Very Own Sound) festival was founded in 2010 by Canadian hip-hop artist, Drake. It is held annually over Caribana weekend and is promoted on their official website as one of the main attractions on a weekend that boasts a roster of international star power. Yet, despite OVO’s popularity and its affiliation with local Caribana, its hip-hop performances are enjoyed and consumed but are never fully embraced by Caribana’s core audience. They never manage to secure acceptance as part of a ‘local’ or ‘national’ music scene. I would suggest that this is only partly attributable to the overwhelming presence of foreign artists who play at the event. After all, Drake, Maestro, and the Party Next Door are all regular performers at OVO, yet are Canadian hip-hop artists, born and bred. They too, by and large, are ironically seen as performing a type of music that comes from ‘elsewhere.’ I would argue that this arises from a sense in which hip-hop, as a genre, is regarded as the product of a racial minority underclass situated across the border. It is in no way understood as a ‘national’ music, either of the United States or Canada. It makes little difference that in 2016 Toronto-born Drake was the most successful hip-hop artist not only in Canada, but everywhere, dominating sales and charts all over the world.155

Indeed, hip-hop’s international success seems to forever debar it from being classed as a national music. In effect, hip-hop artists are workers or producers rather than cultural ambassadors; though ubiquitous their music has never been wholly or solely regarded as a

155 Drake’s most recent album Views sold “1.2 million units worldwide within six days of its release, while the songs on the project have reportedly been streamed over one billion times in the U.S. alone” (Johnson, “Drake’s “Views” Breaks Sales”).

306
‘nation’ music in quite the same way that calypso, reggae, dancehall and soca has. Perhaps the dissonance that surrounds the music’s perpetual displacement mirrors the uneasy, hyphenated status of African-Americans who have, thus far, been unable to claim full citizenship in the United States. As a result, it is sometimes regarded the political expression or commercial product of a beleaguered subaltern class within a nation; at other the times it is idealistically configured as an ‘international’ music with the ability to express the frustrations and concerns of an array of populations scatter across the globe. Or it functions as a metonym for international corporatism which connotes a marauding neo-colonialism in the guise of ‘globalisation.’ In the latter scenario it is the intruder to be guarded against. The overall effect of positioning this newer music as a youthful interloper is that its younger audience is similarly relegated to the festival’s margins, resulting in a generational divide.

At the same time, the presence of hip-hop is suggestive of the ‘nomadism’ that Paquet describes. The inclusion of hip-hop in Caribana and other carnivals is not only an expansion of carnival’s musical repertoire but also signals a vital connection between diasporic forms of black music. The juxtaposition of hip-hop with calypso and reggae suggests cultural continuity rather than dramatic disruption; in the shared performance space parallel and connected histories are made visible. The inclusion of hip-hop into contemporary carnival is as imminently logical a development as the inclusion of dub sound systems and DJs. It ensures another point of continuity, with carnivals around the world helping to pave the way for a

156 Ahmir Khalib Thompson performs under the professional moniker ‘Questlove’ as a percussionist and multi-instrumentalist for renowned, ‘veteran’ hip-hop group, The Roots. Questlove wrote a six-part essay series published in Vulture examining the identity and the cultural currency of hip-hop music as both a genre and a cultural signifier. Questlove expresses anxiety over the production, ownership and efficacy of the music and opines that: “Once hip-hop culture is ubiquitous, it is also invisible. Once it’s everywhere, it is nowhere. What once offered resistance to mainstream culture… is now an integral part of the sullen dominant” (“How Hip Hop Failed Black America”).
musical genre that was born from the same technological and aesthetic innovations as reggae and dub. Hip-hop is clearly a cousin to dub music in terms of its production and its performance, just as MCing is entangled in the history of ‘toasting’ with its toast master rhythmically speaking or chanting over a ‘riddim’ or beat. Jamaican immigrants who resided in the South Bronx area of New York during the 1970s had an undeniable influence on the development of early hip-hop, while reggae and dub flourished as a parallel music movement in a metropolis across the Atlantic.

Hip-hop also holds certain performance aesthetic in common with 20th century calypso. With its liberal use of royal stage monikers, its attraction to regal costuming and ornamentation, its predilection for hypermasculine stage personas for male performers and its ‘scandalous’ displays of sexuality from female performers, hip-hop is obviously a kindred spirit. Both forms of music contain combative spaces and have a history of being both marginalised and embraced by a mainstream audience. They also share a tradition of channelling and redirecting conflict and potential in-group aggression through lyrical dexterity and public displays of prestige. Caribana is thus a site where related metropolitan cultures journey, meet, jostle for space and sometimes collide. The question remains whether or not Caribana has sufficient space to accommodate new musical tastes.

In terms of costuming, Caribana has specific bands which consciously adhere to Trinidad’s ‘ole mas’ costumes. The masquerade band Shadowland, for example, is a production company that hails from tiny Ward Island, Toronto and is comprised of artists who are not only involved with theatre production and literary arts, but also take part in the festivities of Caribana. They have been a successful masquerade band since the 1980s (Pierre 44) and have been directly inspired by the work of mas’ designer Peter Minshall. As a result, Shadowland specifically
travelled to Trinidad to work under his tutelage out of a desire to hark back to and preserve the theatrical power and spectacle of ol’ mas’. Indeed…”[i]t is ironic though not surprising that [Shadowland] maintain the most consistently theatrical presentations in the Carnival Parade, even learning to stilt-walk like the traditional African Moco Jumbie” (45).

Anthony Pierre observes that Caribana has also inherited fancy mas’ pageantry, visible in the retention of African and European court hierarchies comprised of a King, Queen, and “lesser dignitaries and subjects” (45). In both instances, regalia is central to mas’. An ongoing and, at times, contested process of transformation is balanced by continuity. Both are crucial factors that help to define and characterise Caribana. Caribana also follows the temporal staging of Trinidadian mas’ and has its own version of J’Ouvert or Jouvay mas’ which traditionally opens carnival. This provides an opportunity for Caribana’s revellers to adopt ‘anti-social mas’’ characters and also partake in the social commentary, drama, menace and creative fertility that J’Ouvert both permits and inspires. There is very much a sense, however, that despite retaining some aspects of Trinidadian carnival, Caribana has been ‘Canadianised.’ Consequently, its creative potential has been subverted in service of a docile image of the nation at large, where law, order and respectability prevail over licence and excess. As a consequence, researchers such as David Trotman lament that:

This is no world turned upside down; there is no hidden script. The face that is presented here must be a face without warts, a reinforcement of the status quo and a search for respectability. There is no social criticism except ironically by a small group of White Canadians who in traditional Trinidadian fashion have consistently used the parade to express their concerns with environmental issues, global concerns, and local politics. The Caribana presentations displayed by Caribbean masquerade producers are well
constructed, aesthetically pleasing, extremely beautiful, and eye-catching; almost Disneyland-type presentations marked by an element of escapist imagination. (“Transforming Caribbean and Canadian Identity” 192)

While considering the limits of representation in Caribana, it is equally important to note the limits spatially imposed on the festival. The demarcation of a physical periphery for the event is incomparable to the essentially unconstrained abundance of space that Trinidad’s or Rio de Janeiro’s carnival enjoy. Indeed, Caribana’s current parade route cannot even be compared to the geographical centrality bestowed upon Brooklyn and Notting Hill carnivals. In the case of Brooklyn and Notting Hill, their parade routes are directly situated in the heart of historically caribbeanised residential areas. By contrast, Caribana has been effectively diverted from Caribbean enclaves and in 1991 was ‘safely’ re-routed along the lakeshore. The size of the event was offered as pretext for its relocation (Burman 284-5). This speaks of a historical tendency whereby carnival has always involved a contestation over physical and cultural space. Cultures clash, while subordinate groups fight for visibility and centrality. The occupation of the ‘main’ streets is a vital part of carnival’s annual ritual, and becomes even more significant in an urban context. Indeed, the body of the city, its manifest form, is the critical site of temporary transformation and inversion.

The literally spectacular process involved in politically challenging officialdom through physically claiming the streets has been lost to Toronto revellers. Instead, they tamely parade along a pristine and relatively isolated lakeside view, barricaded in on each side. In effect, the political will and energy that motivates and ultimately rationalises a carnival has been dissipated. Other comparable events such as Toronto’s Pride parade, which is hosted in early
July to represent the LGBQT\textsuperscript{157} community, and the St Patrick’s Day parade have fared much better in terms of the space they have been allotted. These events are regarded as ‘non-threatening,’ and so have been permitted to parade in the downtown area. Their processions pass monuments, institutional buildings and colonial-era streets, all of which celebrate and commemorate official power (284).

Caribana participants, by contrast, cannot engage or interact with any of these symbols and are forced to circumvent them. The unequal access to the city’s central spaces is compounded by the negative media coverage that Caribana receives in relation to occasions of unrest or violence. The media also promulgates the values of a white, mainstream Toronto which frowns upon excessive ‘noise’ and ‘aggressive’ dancing. Yet this is a festival that boasts a transnational audience and harbours an almost unprecedented capacity to generate revenue for Toronto’s local economy. Caribana has remained a lucrative affair for the city despite the fact that it is over-policed, underfunded, micromanaged, contained and hidden from view.\textsuperscript{158} It is undeniable that Caribana easily outperforms other cultural events and festivals both in terms of attendance and in revenue:

About 1.2 million people participated in the 2009 edition of Caribana and over 300,000 of these revelers came from abroad. It ought to be clear that dollar-for-dollar, Caribana’s economic performance leaves its more favoured cultural competitors in the dust. (Nanwaya, “Toronto, Exploited”)

\textsuperscript{157} LGBQT as an acronym stands for ‘Lesbian Gay Bisexual Queer and Transgender’. At one point the categories of Intersex (‘I’) and Asexual (‘A’) were also a part of this coalition but they are seldom used.

\textsuperscript{158} Read Ajamu Nanwaya’s blog article for further detail on the sheer disparity between the revenue that Caribana generates versus the share of government funding it receives relative to other more highly favoured cultural events and institutions.
Carnival scholar and researcher Keith Nurse also points to the troubling disparities between the revenue generated by Caribbean carnivals and festivals and the minimal profits the organisers receive. This is compounded by negligible state funding:

As a result, the Caribbean carnivals exhibit something of a contradiction: the carnivals generate large sums of money but the organizing units retain very little of the profits. This also occurs because the carnival organizers have not adopted enough of an entrepreneurial approach to the festival. For this reason most of the carnivals find themselves in a position of resource dependency upon state and city authorities or corporate entities. The contributions are then generally viewed as subsidies rather than investments in the public art process or festival tourism. When the carnivals are funded the amounts granted are generally small relative to the mainstream arts and to the economic impact that the festival makes. (679)

Jennifer Joseph, in turn, effectively outlines what can only be described as an event that has been assigned second-class status. She gives a poignant account of her own initial participation in a community-controlled event followed by her subsequent retreat from a festival that she no longer recognised or had any wish to participate in. Like Nanwaya and Nurse, she too is highly cognisant of the commercial imperative that currently dominates Caribana:

[Even] even with these negative reports about the festival, the City still found a way to make profit off it. Spectators were asked to pay a $20 fee to access the inside of the parade. Those looking to attend for free were locked away behind barriers. In 2008, Caribana received corporate
sponsorship from Scotiabank; along with the supporting funds came a name change to the Scotiabank Toronto Caribbean Festival. One year later, the situation worsened when the City erected six- to eight-foot fences along the parade route. Attendees were baffled—we were held back from our own culture. (Joseph, “Caribana Has Room to Improve”)

Not only are Caribana’s revellers denied the challenges of fighting for space and the satisfactions of successfully claiming it, they are also forced to concede defeat by ceding critical ground to the city’s police. In the carnivalesque moment they are literally fenced in or locked out. By contrast, onlookers and participants at a Pride or a St. Patrick’s Day’s parade are not heavily barricaded or effectively incarcerated, and are permitted a freedom of movement that is not extended to Caribana’s masqueraders. In addition, Caribana’s organisation is subject to immense criticism from its own participants as any casual perusal of the comments on social media or the Caribana websites can attest:

Hmm and all this talk about Caribana being something that unites people just makes me laugh. Only if you’re an avid soca reveller. There are so many other events going on in the city at the same time as Caribana which I feel creates more SEPARATION than anything. For example Island Soul (predominantly reggae), Veld (techno fest...mostly white/asian people there).....I feel like this separates Toronto’s black youth and white youth..or maybe I'm overthinking OVO Fest (mainly HipHop..apparently

---

159 In 2011 Caribana was renamed ‘The Scotiabank Caribbean Carnival Toronto’. This ‘neutral’ title was indicative of Scotiabank’s corporate stranglehold on the festival and also signalled that the CAG (Caribbean Arts Group formerly known as the ‘CCC’ or (Caribbean Carnival Committee) who had originally founded the event no longer held genuine authority over it, even though they had the copyright to the name ‘Caribana’ and the logo. The new name was a palimpsest that effectively sought to overwrite the history of the CAG. Nevertheless, the original name persists.
machel\textsuperscript{160} is performing at OVO though) (sic). Oh and there's a lot of white flight. All the white people in the city head off to their cottage or whatever. (Lukawski 2016)

The above comment expresses considerable cynicism over the organisation of the event. Rather than occupying a special place in Toronto’s annual calendar, Caribana is forced, once more, to engage in a politics of spatial Darwinism as multiple events are held during Caribana weekend. This creates the distinct impression that it is simply one enterprise competing for time and attention amongst many, even though it is far and away the most lucrative and heavily-attended cultural event in Toronto. A subtle form of invisibility and even erasure occurs with the restricted physical and calendrical space that is allocated to the event. On the one hand it is very much a ‘presence’ in Toronto and is integral to the city’s economy, yet is rendered relatively ‘invisible.’

In reality, white ‘flight’ has a minimal impact on carnival in the 21\textsuperscript{st} century as Caribana is increasingly reluctant to perform for the white local gaze or to dance to the tune of white respectability politics. It is an unabashedly transnational event that draws an audience of primarily, though not exclusively, black participants and spectators. This results in a curious reversal where the inhabitants of various ‘mother countries’ visit and reconnect with a displaced, diasporic site. Unlike black migrant cultures in Notting Hill or Brooklyn, which have established an undeniable presence in their new locations, black diasporic Canadians from the United States, Caribbean and Africa have all struggled to establish roots in their new home while attempting to gain an enduring foothold in the cultural memory of the nation. There is

\textsuperscript{160} ‘Machel’ is in reference to Trinidadian soca artist Machel Montano who was part of OVO’s line up of performers. This once again indicates how the lines that are demarcated in terms of music and culture are highly permeable and traversable.
substantial evidence to suggest that the presence of each wave of black immigrants has been silently effaced. Rinaldo Walcott, for instance, catalogues a litany of historical erasures in which the African-American community that had immigrated to Canada in 19th century were never permitted to truly settle. Instead their presence was aggressively over-written and deleted from view. This violence was not limited to the African-American diaspora; the process has been re-propagated and extended to the Caribbean diaspora as well. Walcott reveals a thread of continuity that runs through these seemingly incidental and isolated events, rejecting a fragmented account of the black presence in Canada. Through re-historicisation he identifies a relentless marginalisation of black diasporas by white Canadians and pointedly refers to the long and now broken silence in St Armand, Quebec, concerning the slave cemetery almost ploughed over, which the locals call nigger rock; the destruction of Africville in Nova Scotia; the demolition of Hogan’s Alley in Vancouver in the 1960s; in Ontario, the changing of the name of Negro Creek Road to Moggie Road in 1996 all suggest a wilful attempt to make a black presence absent. These moments are complex ones because they occasion what we might term the “absented presence” of black evidences in Canada. (128-9)

While it is easy to trivialise a weekend of song, dance, food, cultural exchange and commerce, I would suggest that this would underestimate the impact of Caribana. Even the popular retention of the festival’s original name ‘Caribana’—while participants blithely ignore the festival’s ‘official’ name —is politically significant. Despite the disillusionment and growing detachment of young black ‘diasporic’ Canadians, the persistance of the name represents an attempt to resist erasure and to establish a visible and lasting cultural legacy. Whether or not this proves to be an effective strategy remains to be seen and the future of the event as an
amalgamated expression of black and diasporic West Indian culture remains uncertain. Nonetheless, it is becoming increasingly evident, that commemoration alone does not guard against the threat of erasure nor lead to continuity and vitality.

In *Being Black* Althea Prince identifies the point of struggle as an unhealthy process of *neutralisation* (80) which results in the ‘…unreflecting adoption of things frozen in time, taken out of one society and relocated in another’ (80). Her critique not only points towards the threat of cultural stagnation but sharply scrutinises the primacy of the festival and how it inadvertently provides a reductive, static and illusionary vision of African Canadian identity. That is to say that, all too often, Caribana is falsely conflated with African Canadian identity to the point where ‘…the festival *itself*, is the sum total of the conversation that we [African Canadians] wish to have with ourselves and with our fellow citizens.’ (80) I feel that Prince’s astute observation is equally applicable to contemporary Trinidadian carnival and echos similar concerns shared by Philip Scher, Milla Cozart Riggio and other scholars who are highly critical and somewhat sceptical about carnival’s seeming ossification:

It is instructive to note that a large group of African Canadian youth have taken to boycotting Caribana, stating that they do not find themselves culturally in the festival. These young people conduct their own cultural festival (during the same weekend as Caribana), with their own cultural milieu. *Their* festival gives recognition to the cultural root of some of their parents, but acknowledges their own specific cultural creations. *Their* gatherings include “rap sessions” in which they explore situations with which they grapple daily, presented in artistic mediums. They also include dances, poetry readings and performances by singers and by hip-hop artists. Clearly these youths have
come to accept that there is no dynamic place for them within the Caribana cultural festival as it is now conducted. (Price 82)

Price, like many others, is particularly critical of Caribana’s antiquated structure which, in her view, accrues political power to an older elite. In the meantime the vitality, ideas and potential innovation that a disenfranchised youth could inject into carnival are excluded from its parameters. There is a growing sense of unease that Caribbean carnival in general is trivialised, commodified and presented to the world at large as a material ‘object’ that is fit for consumption while its creators and participants are largely alienated from it. While Caribana has its own specific history and set of concerns, it shares a common dilemma with both Trinidadian and Notting Hill carnival. Each festival is forced to negotiate between commemoration and innovation, preservation and renewal, culture and industry, revelry and containment while trying to bridge the distance between a receding past and an uncertain future.

Each festival is also faces considerable public debate over their underlying purpose and function and each must address the question as to who ‘owns’ them, and who are its participants and audience? I would suggest that while these questions arise, the answers can never be permanently resolved. Carnival resides in a curiously liminal zone in which it is a folk festival that is generated by local populations whose creativity and culture is periodically regulated and co-opted by the state, tourism, and a social and financial elite only to be briefly re-possessed and innovated. Control, ownership and domination of the event periodically changes hands. In my conclusion, I will examine bikini mas’ and how this particular form of masquerade is at once commodified and politicised.
Conclusion:

Las’ Lap

Bikini Mas’

*Mas players seek an exoticism that is gaily bright. “Pretty mas” is an accurate phrase for the coloristic effect of the costumes. Masquerades get prettier and prettier, not least because middle-class women have come to dominate them. Eighty to ninety percent of the masquerades in Port of Spain’s large carnival bands today were women.*

—Bellour and Kinser 136

*...more than 80 percent of those playing mas on carnival Tuesday are now women. Empowered by the beauty and sexuality made visible by the bikini costumes that are the bane of carnival purists and traditionalists, women who decades ago might have taken refuge in a decorated lorry now mingle with others in the street, proudly displaying bodies often honed for the occasion in the gymnasium of Trinidad or their home cities in North America or Europe. On the surface, at least, the carnival beast has been tamed by its own success.*

—Riggio, “Play Mas” 107

In the introduction of this thesis, I examined the history of colonialism and slavery from which Trinidadian carnival emerged. Post-Emancipation gave way to post-colonialism and both eras saw significant changes to the festival, including the birth of new carnivals in Toronto, Brooklyn and Notting Hill. The innovation, modification and industrialisation of Trinidadian carnival has led to a range of 21st century versions of the festival that are at once distinct from
the 19th and 20th century predecessors, yet also demonstrate a degree of continuity and commitment to earlier incarnations. While carnival’s music has been important in charting a perpetually morphing event, I would also argue that costuming and character play have been essential in marking carnival’s shifting politics and social concerns.

If pre-Emancipation carnival centred on parody and temporary social subversion, then post-Emancipation carnival and the Canboulay riots\textsuperscript{161} saw increasing regulation. Attempts to control and defuse the threats that carnival posed were resisted by a newly freed slave populace. To chart these changes, I turned to literary figures who deal with carnival themes. In chapter one I describe how Mustapha Matura examines a carnival that is wedded to the rhetoric and aims of the post-colonial polity. Chapter two interrogates Lovelacian carnival in which characters navigate through a social and political landscape that slowly but inexorably surrenders its attachment to the political and cultural defiance that characterised post-Emancipation carnival. In chapter three I note the way in which Nalo Hopkinson reflects on the conflicting objectives of post-Emancipation and 21st articulations of carnival. She achieves this by imaginatively re-situating the two forms of carnivals on contrasting fantasy worlds set in the future.

The pan-Caribbean basis of Hopkinson’s setting offers an interesting point of departure from which to reflect on the hybridised inheritance of Notting Hill’s and Caribana’s festivals. This becomes the focus of chapter five, which investigates how carnivals in London and Toronto are similarly grounded in a ‘pan-Caribbean’ cultural aesthetic. I also discuss at length the current scholarship on carnival that suggests that 21st century carnival has become a ‘feminised’ affair with a predominance of female revellers. Increased female participation in carnival is

\textsuperscript{161} Refer to chapter one for more detail on the Canboulay riots.
directly linked to a post-World War II era, arguing that this particular historical juncture provided the optimal conditions for women to become a visible presence in carnival once more. From this historical trajectory, it becomes apparent that mid-20th and 21st century carnival is rooted traditions in the 19th century when women were at the forefront of jamette carnival. The presence of women has been a topical area of research and has provided fertile ground for serious scholastic inquiry. Unsurprisingly, some of the most thoughtful interrogations and insights into female traditions of carnivalesque masking and performance are offered by female scholars. Their contributions have been central to this thesis.

Scholar and researcher Pamela R. Franco, for example, regards the high number of women in contemporary carnival as neither novel nor new to carnival. Her extensive body of work specifically focuses on female practices of masking and adornment, with a particular interest in costuming during the 19th and early 20th century. Franco, like many other female academics in the area also acknowledges the 1950s as a critical juncture in the festival’s history that led to greater numbers of female revellers. She does not regard contemporary anxiety and censure over bikini mas’ as anything remarkable. Instead, she argues that carnival is characterised by a continuous and cyclic history in which women oscillate between occupying the forefront and the margins of the event. This observations is reflected the fact that female masquerades and performances in carnival are politically and socially policed to a much greater degree than men. She also identifies a clear link between jamette carnival and carnival in a post-World War II context. In both eras women re-emerged at the forefront of mas as visible participants in the festival. Franco notes:

There is a long-standing history of opprobrium and censure that regulated carnival’s behaviour dating back to the 1800s with the dominance of Jamette Carnival. This
caution extended through to the 1950s where carnival was still positioned as a lower, working-class and black activity while the middle class tended to shun and disdain the event itself and the streets which housed it were both regarded as dangerous and a potentially unsavoury for women of a particular class. Middle-class and upper-class revellers who took an interest in a black, lower class carnival and chose to participate in it were especially singled out for social disapproval. (Franco, “The ‘Unruly Woman’” 64)

One can easily discern the common concern over class and respectability that existed in the 19th century and lingers even in the 21st century. Franco also suggests that throughout carnival’s history, women have been instrumental not only in preserving the integrity of class barriers as symbols of class, but as agents who actively maintained the boundaries. As a consequence, they were keenly regulated as their movements and interaction in carnival could potentially perforate carefully maintained divisions between the classes. In “The Changing Attitude of the Coloured Middle Class Towards Carnival,” Barbara Powrie’s research into the role of female revellers after World War II also provides vital insight into the anxiety that the presence of female bodies mingling in carnival and breezily transgressing class lines elicited. Furthermore, Powrie examines the intersections of class and gender in which parents were fiercely protective of their daughter’s sexuality and their social reputations. As a consequence

[f]ew parents would consent to their daughters joining a band. This was in part due to fear of their daughters being ‘interfered’ with by male revellers, especially those from lower class bands. It is a common Carnival custom for men to ‘interfere’ with the women—this interference being little more than a touching or pinching of the more outstanding parts of the female body. It was felt to be akin to rape. Those girls who did
join bands did not parade the streets on foot. Lorries were used for the purpose, and the lorries would circle the Savannah, bearing their jumping, singing group of girls and musicians—men of the middle class might also join the girls on the lorries. (288)

Powrie also discusses the intimate connection between colour and class during the 1950s noting the ways in which colour, class and church politics converged to dictate social boundaries for ‘coloured’ women of the middle-class. She is also clear and direct about the racial dimension that accompanied colonial notions of respectability:

Respectability is the keynote of coloured middle class existence. The ideal person and form of behaviour is still ‘white’ and life is patterned to conform as closely as possible to all that is felt to be contained within this ideal. (288)

This was further complicated by a church culture that was primarily attended and upheld by women (288). While social ostracism was the penalty for women who failed to appropriately regulate their sexual conduct, men were, more often than not, exempt from attending church. Furthermore, they were not subject to the same degree of regulation and their sexuality was not subject to intense scrutiny. Men were freed from the standards of piety and decorum that the church would use to regulate women. Ironically, the church resembled the wider matrifocal structure of Trinidadian family life. As a result, older women tended to be powerful figures in the church and were instrumental in imposing colonial standards of propriety upon younger women. Powrie’s study also details the class stratification and segregation of mid-20th century carnival and echoes Daniel Crowley’s observations that East Indians, coloured immigrants and the coloured middle-class had little-to-no interest in carnival.
It seems that the temporary marginalisation of women from carnival in the early part of the 20th century would have critically informed the prevailing aesthetics of mas’. In the absence of female revellers, what is known as ole or traditional mas’ flourished along with a cast of ‘canonical’ characters that have come to be deeply imbricated in carnival’s history. The stories, characters, performances and visual aesthetics of black working class men informed carnival throughout the first half of the 20th century. Powrie thus marks the post-World War II period as being a critical historical juncture. From this moment, existing types of bikini mas’ became a popular and common form of mas’ amongst women. As a result, costuming and music are two components of carnival that have undergone the most visible change:

Today the pattern of Carnival activity and behaviour has changed from what it was before the war. Masks are not worn by either sex, either during the day or night. Jour Ouvert costumes are seldom worn by women and fewer men take the trouble to don Old Mas’ wear. Street bands contain a fair proportion of women and there is now no rooted objection to women taking part in such a band. (229)

Interestingly, she also describes the steelband music that came to prominence as ‘mellower’ than earlier brass percussion, hinting that carnival was becoming a more polished and arguably ‘domesticated’ affair (229). The new music also intervened in carnival’s standard form of dance as bodies were less prone to energetically ‘jumping up’ alongside the old bands as revellers entered a new kinetic and sensuous order:

Now, the dancing responds to the music by taking the form of a hip-rolling, swaying, shuffle a very slightly exaggerated form of the dancing practised on the Trinidad dance
floor all year round. This exaggerated and erotic dancing, known as “wining”, no longer stands out as abnormal when performed in the streets under the public gaze. (229)

Pamela R. Franco, Milla Cozart Riggio, Philip W. Scher, and Garth L. Green\textsuperscript{162} all draw upon Powrie’s research and similarly concur that the shift in carnival’s demographics and the rise of female participation is indelibly tied to the economic emancipation of women. This was precipitated by the demand for labour and a relaxation of gender norms and barriers regarding war-time employment. This, in turn, led to a corresponding increase in social freedom including the fact that there was considerably less fear of accusations of impropriety or promiscuity on the part of women who socialised with men. This was influenced by the pragmatic reality of the new work place that situated men and women alongside one another. Improved wages allowed women to gradually work their way towards attaining a middle-class income and status, while also enabling them to more easily afford the luxury and expense of ‘bead and feathers.’ These conditions provided the ideal nexus for bikini mas’ to flourish.

While there is a broad consensus regarding the cultural climate that resulted in the emergence of contemporary trends in carnival performance, there are also stark differences in the approaches that the aforementioned scholars take when analysing bikini mas’. Both Green and particularly Scher, for example, acknowledge that even during the 1960s and 1970s there were a large number of ‘pretty mas’ bands consisting of 3000 women or more, with figures continuing to climb exponentially in the following decades (Green & Scher, “Introduction” 17-8). They also take note of voracious national news coverage of bikini mas’ and the ‘hand-wringing’ of bikini mas’ critics. Furthermore, they specifically identify 1988 as the year in

\textsuperscript{162} Texts such as \textit{Trinidad Carnival: The Politics of a Transnational Carnival} (2007) and \textit{Culture in Action – The Trinidad Experience} (2004) group together the contributions of these scholars to carnival studies.
which ‘skimpy mas’ and the ‘great wining controversy’ occurred. At this particular juncture bikini mas’ revellers were soundly lambasted in a national media that trained its television camera lens on masqueraders across the nation (17-8).163 Green and Scher cite the 28 February 1988 issue of the Express, noting its dramatic condemnation of “the lewdness” of the revellers which “marked the nadir of feminine behaviour in Carnival” (qtd. in Green & Scher 17-8). For some, the removal of visible masks and regalia in favour of bare skin is analogous to a process which ‘strips away’ carnival’s substance. Carnival’s complexity is diminished; the depth of its narrative signification is depleted. More often than not, bikini mas’ is regarded as the apex of this impoverishment.

Contemporary carnival is then conflated with degeneration, de-historicisation and a sense of loss which simultaneously erodes the local and the historical. While the earliest stages of fancy mas’ were met with initial resistance, fancy mas’ has undeniably expanded carnival’s cultural sphere of meditation by re-fashioning ole mas’ or traditional characters. Furthermore the centrality of the ‘unmasked’ and near-naked female body in 21st century mas’ is not only a site of social anxiety and moral vexation but it is also equally as inscribed and legible as any material regalia or mask:

Even the naked body, then, cannot be thought of as naked: it is already clothed in and through meaning and power...The surfaces of the body are as important as they are unstable: inside or outside or not, male or female or not, black or white or not? (Lewis & Pile 25)

163 Later on, I will analyse in the role that popular media plays in framing bikini mas’ and winer women as a cause for national concern, controversy and opprobrium.
In effect, the corporeal flesh is a tangible text that is perpetually inscribed and deciphered. The encoded and legislated body oscillates between replicating and unravelling colonial interpretations of the body that are still predicated on notions of phenotypical and genderised legibility. Racialised and sexualised bodies are classified and then strategically positioned in order to constitute a decidedly heteropatriarchal and heterosexist\textsuperscript{164} construction of the nationalised body politic. However, I would suggest that these bodies are not merely passive pawns or palimpsests to be over-written by the state or by external forces such as globalisation and transnational capitalism; rather, they have the ability to act and perform in ways that periodically disrupt and comment on hegemonic assumptions about their visibility, value and positioning. The way in which bodies perform, conform, transgress and interact during mas’ can reveal how they are read and how they are contained by the gaze on the onlooker. Skin operates as a social marker or index that makes visible the stratification of identities and nexus of boundaries that are routinely affixed to (and accepted by) particular bodies. Moreover, the feminised, bikini-clad body-in-motion has the alarming capacity to expose then interrogate the conventional limits and constraints of movement during mas’.

Questions arise as to what types of movement and performances are permissible in carnival and which physical and cultural spaces are accessible or sealed off to revellers? Which bodies are expected to interact with one another and which interactions are acceptable? Rather than ‘femininity’ being expressed through bikini mas’, or the ‘body-as-costume,’ bikini mas’ offers commentary on the way in which “femininity [is] understood and exceeded” (38). Frank B. Wilderson uses Marx’s concept of the ‘speaking implement’\textsuperscript{165} (Wilderson 17) to specifically

\textsuperscript{164} I will re-visit and elaborate on this point further on in the conclusion.

\textsuperscript{165} Karl Marx characterises man as a ‘tool-making animal’ (Marx 234) and the slave as an \textit{instrumentum vocale} (or speaking instrument) which is distinct from the labourer. Marx refers to Marco Terentius Varro’s \textit{Rerum Rusticarum, libri tres} to draw the following distinctions. The ‘speaking instrument’ is only distinguishable from
refer to the objectification of black bodies and culture that occurs during anti-racist, anti-colonial and anti-capitalist alliances between blacks and other subordinated racial groups. He argues that black suffering is commodified and black struggle and labour is converted into a utilitarian ‘tool’ that can be mobilised in order to articulate the pain and potential liberation of other racial groups rather than having the ability to speak and act on its own behalf. In the context of this thesis, however, I borrow and use the term to suggest that while female bodies (and particularly black female bodies) are objectified during carnival and may function as an object or ‘speaking implement’ that is co-opted and deployed by external forces and interests in order to articulate highly specific visions of carnival, I would also argue that these bodies can and do articulate their own identities and their own revisioning of the festival.

**Domesticating the female body: Can the female body represent the nation?**

In her PhD thesis *Mas is Desire: The Erotic, Grotesque and Visionary in Trinidad Carnival*, Kamenlara Seidman suggests that bikini masquerades are regularly and interchangeably referred to as “‘pretty mas’” and notes that this type of masquerade “uses historical themes lightly to construct their costumed story” (198). At the same time, however, she also argues that there are a ‘sea of potential taxonomies’ that are visible. Seidman identifies bikini mas’ alongside other forms of mas’ such as Fancy Indian mas’ and Sailor mas’, all of which fall under the collective category of of ‘pretty mas’ (198). She cautions against dismissing “its mass-produced sparkly styles with feathers and pasties as simply a Brazilian or Las Vegas import” (197) even while conceding that there may be some influence from these foreign

---

an *instrumentum semi vocale* (an animal) and *instrumentum mutum* (an actual tool or instrument) through a hierarchy of abuse, in which the ‘speaking instrument’ abuses or cripples ‘lesser’ instruments in order to differentiate himself from them. (Marx 140).
aesthetics. Furthermore, an entire chapter of her thesis is dedicated to specifically examining bikini mas’ in isolation, singling it out from the entirety of “fancy mas’.” She marks it as a distinct phenomenon and identifies it as “predominantly middle class” and “female,” arguing that it provides “working middle class women with an opportunity to feel divine and let go, in a culture where their labor, conscientiousness and dependability usually run the show” (197). She then distinguishes bikini mas’ as a gender-specific form of masking distinct from many other performances in carnival. From this singular position bikini mas’ can be regarded as a potential site of dream and fantasy play as well as a space of rest and respite for working, middle-class women.

What I would question, however, is whether comparable spaces of rest and respite are provided for those revellers who are not middle-class and who cannot afford the often exorbitant prices of bead and feather mas’? Samantha Noel adds her voice to a chorus of academics who seek to analyse bikini mas’ as a distinctive form of masking and observes that “[t]he dominant presence of scantily-clad women in Carnival has often led to it also being described as ‘skin mas’” (Noel “Woman is Carnival” 4), a term which Natasha Barnes also alludes to in Cultural Conundrums: Gender, Race, Nation and the Making of Caribbean Cultural Politics. Barnes describes skin mas’ as a Rio-styled ‘advent’ that was introduced during the 1980s which, in her words, “shifted the aesthetic and demographic landscape in a manner unprecedented. Women and women’s bodies, both as spectacle and performance are now everywhere in Carnival” (85).

On the one hand Noel charts the dramatic rise of women participating in carnival and sees it as a parallel development to critical historical developments that improved the socio-economic and political status of women. On the other hand, she is also cognisant of the economic implications of expensive costumes and participation fees. She notes the way in which bikini
mas’ came to be organised, with the introduction of the ‘all-inclusive band.’ This innovation in the commercialisation of mas’ led to the charging of package rates that “include[d] unlimited supplies of food, drink, and other amenities” (Noel, “Woman is Carnival” 228). While the term ‘all-inclusive’ suggests accessibility and hints at egalitarianism, Noel is forced to concede that the term is ‘deceptive’ and to acknowledge the economic barriers that such steep pricing erects.

While the festival still contains discrete and adjunct spaces that house the history of carnival and focus on commemorating ole mas’ it would appear, beyond the specific confines of Jouvay and Kiddie’s carnival166, that carnival on the whole is a festival that has been relentlessly packaged and marketed throughout the Caribbean. The branded iteration of carnival has subsequently been exported to North America and Europe. It has been commercialised to such an extent that it has become a faded facsimile of Trinidadian carnival. Mas’ has transformed into a festival that is ubiquitous, highly lucrative yet oddly indistinct. While bikini mas’ does not lack colour or spectacle, the mainstream media, in particular, argues that it adheres to the more mundane values of ‘mass’ production. Uniformity is emphasised and replication preferred over displays of individual craftsmanship, structure, and creativity. Indeed, the confluence of bikini mas’s minimalist costuming with the popular figure of the winer woman is not at all accidental.

Costume and role mutually inform one another, resulting in a uniformity of display that discourages unique costuming and clearly defined characters. If anything, the minimalism of bikini mas’ aesthetics reinforces the anonymity of the individual winer woman while simultaneously showcasing the potential power of her collective presence. Ironically, the tendency towards displaying rather than masking the body creates a ‘mass’ effect that

166 I will specifically discuss Kiddie’s Carnival toward the very end of this conclusion.
imaginatively anonymises the reveller as effectively as any character mask. In the national imaginary, the winer woman functions as carnival’s ‘everywoman,’ a deictic signifier with the underlying invitation for any and every woman to potentially occupy the role. Even if the reality is significantly different and carnival predominantly attracts a specific age group and class, the repetition of this form of costuming has a universalising effect (Seidman 197).

Soca, carnival’s dominant music, in turn, is similarly criticised for what is considered to an artificial and erratic process in which the music perpetually splinters into ever newer sub-genres in the hope that one will somehow strike a chord in international markets. Participants and practitioners are confronted with a music that strays ever further from its origins as it morphs into an internationally palatable music. Rather than expressing and consolidating cultural identity, the music attempts to strategically mirror and reflect prevailing international trends in popular music. The conglomerative effect of globalisation has meant that the festival bears the name of carnival even as it is no longer particularly interested in Lent, post-Emancipation freedom or the mockery and temporary inversions that are integral to carnival. One of the complaints most commonly levelled at carnival’s costuming is its monolithic aesthetics, lacking in visual diversity. According to this critique, bikini mas’ is not only unable to speak to and re-tell existing narratives related to Trinidad’s culture and history, it also demonstrates a glaring inability to generate new mythology, new characters and new cultural narratives that can successfully transcend the immediate demands of ‘satiating’ the global market:

The costumes have definitely evolved [as well as] how we play mas . . . It has different meanings for us.[For a] long time it was because of history and whatever we did to get away from our daily routine and have our own party and such, and like mock people…

---

167 See the previous chapter for a more in-depth discussion of this process.
mock our plantation owners. And now…I think people have lost the real reason why Carnival is around. It’s more naked and just the meaning has dissolved. (qtd. in Copeland and Hodges 193)

In 2013, columnist, writer and editor of Trinidad and Tobago Newsday Suzanne Mills ruminates upon what Samantha Noel terms as the ‘advent’ of Rio-style costuming and what I term as the “Rio-fication” of carnival, which is instrumental in the internationalisation of the festival. While Noel sees it as part of a wider part of a transnational process, Mills critiques the costumes of bead and feather mas’ as a foreign import, lacking authenticity:

Mas characters evolved with the artistry of Minshall and then MacFarlane. Bikinis, beads and feathers are a cheapened version of Rio Carnival. We’ve diluted Rio, and we have constrained the TT festival. When Europeans travel to West London’s Notting Hill to see the biggest festival of its kind in Europe, they believe they are beholding TT culture. TT High Commissioner, Garvin Nicholas opined that “via the proliferation of Trinidad and Tobago-inspired Carnivals around the world, our culture is exposed on a global scale”…I suppose he’s right; “pretty Mas” has become an integral ingredient of TT Carnival culture, but it is purloined culture, not home-made. We have taken Rio and spun it into Trinbagonian. (Mills, “Changes and Evolution”)

In her essay “De Jamette in We: Redefining Performance in Contemporary Trinidad Carnival,” Noel attempts to explicate the link between the jamette carnival of the past with a particular focus on jamette women and the way in which they were sanctioned and curtailed. Their physicality, in terms of their actual bodies as women as well their mass numbers during carnival, was condemned and primitivised in the 19th century, leading to the eventual
delegitimation of this type of display. Yet these same performative stylings have been re-framed and valourised in academia in the late 20th and early 21st century:

The 1980s would be pivotal in respect to the way women moved during Carnival, with the majority of women masquerading by wining and gyrating without reservation. The disconcerted reactions to these public acts of transgression were immense, and the behaviour soon became a moral and sociological issue on a national level. (Noel “De Jamette in We” (61)

Clearly, the scandalous jamettes of the past never fully left carnival and the echoes of their influence remain in contemporary women masquerades. But I would question the suggestion that today’s bikini mas’ revellers are the reincarnation of the jamettes of yesteryear. And neither are they a straightforward, feminist ‘triumph’ as some scholars insist. Instead, I would argue that the history of an intersection of struggle needs to be acknowledged and more clearly articulated. The fight for women to occupy the centre rather than the margins of the festival occurred in a complicated political nexus. Bikini mas’ dramatises not only a history of sexism, but racial and class discrimination, colourism and gentrification, all of which directly inform today’s bikini mas’. Jamette carnival and the carnival of bikini mas’ are not only separated by a century or more, they also centre on related yet distinct objectives. In the first instance, a poor, working-class and primarily black festival in which bands of cross-dressing men that were led by physically aggressive women struggled to survive in an unprecedented atmosphere of censure. As a result, jamette carnival did not simply ‘run the streets’ but it also provided a source of genuine class conflict and anxiety for the colonial government.
At the same time, luxurious and elaborate forms of masking and acceptable forms of mas’ co-existed alongside jamette carnival. The penchant for ‘pretty mas’ and glamour is equally an integral part of carnival. The current dominance of bikini mas’ not only represents a markedly different demographic and aesthetic orientation to the older jamette carnival. Bikini mas’ is simultaneously transgressive and conformist. Consequently, one must avoid any easy or sanguine conflation between the two. Nevertheless, this is not to suggest that Trinidad’s middle-class women do not face any real barriers in terms of playing bikini mas’. In the first instance, it has become a notoriously expensive form of mas’ to perform. In addition, the censure of respectability politics and the very real threat of physical and sexual violence remains. Patricia de Freitas, for example, notes that “[i]n the last decade, the large numerical presence and behaviour of women in Trinidad’s Carnival has been one such “national” controversy” (De Freitas, “Disrupting the Nation” 6). She continues on to analyse the very real threat that bikini mas’ poses to notions of national identity, suggesting that it questions the assumption of the ‘carnival nation’ as being innately masculine in origin.

In direct contradistinction to bikini mas’ is the Viey la Cou (or the ‘Old Yard’), which is a carnival space that is specifically reserved for ole mas’ characters and was established in 1987 by the National Carnival Commission (NCC) in a drive to preserve Trinidadian heritage (Scher, “Copyright Heritage” 471; Green “Authenticity” 68). The Viey la Cou was established at the same time that bikini mas’ was gaining infamy in the wider media. The explicit aims and values of the ‘Old Yards’ perhaps serve as a defensive counter-measure against the perceived hedonism, vulgarity and “commercial elements” of the changing face of mas (69). In keeping with the demands of tourist culture and industry, the NCC also casts a ‘cross-continental’ gaze on the festival while consciously emphasising cultural inheritances from Africa, Europe,
America, India, and China respectively, thus acknowledging the diverse, diasporic moorings of Trinidad’s populace.

Green argues, however, that the *Viey la Cou* functions as a somewhat antiquated ‘educational and moral’ project with an explicit mission statement to rescue and preserve traditional mas’ characters, all the while positioning these characters as an ‘endangered’ species (Green, “Authenticity” 67). Green observes that the ‘Old Yard’ serves as an educative and protective space. It is effectively cordoned off from the rest of carnival and supported by a main audience comprised of tourists, children “and the local middle class.” The distancing of the Old Yard from carnival ‘proper’ is not merely spatial; it is also held on the Saturday preceding the actual event (66). As with any museum, the choice of what to exhibit and what to elide from view is often telling and indicative of underlying political purpose. Thus, the cast of the Old Yard consists of Dragons, Midnight Robbers, Jab Jabs, *Jab Molasses, Dame Lorraines, Fancy Indians, Imps, Minstrels,* 169 *Moko Jumbies, Pierrot Grenades, Clowns, Bats, and Buroquits* (66)—or in brief, those characters which still reside in the national imaginary and have yet to retreat into historical obscurity.

---

168 The instructional and educative purpose of the Yard is also outlined by Philip Scher: “In the 1990s the NCC had begun actively promoting and expanding the Viey La Cou show and trying to foster the portrayal of old Carnival characters in schools along with the artistic skills to make the costumes in workshops” (Scher “The Devil and the Bed-Wetter” 118).

169 Like Sailor mas’ Minstrel mas’ also relies on imported imagery from the United States and can be defined in the following manner: “Also referred to as “Yankee Minstrels”, this mas is based on American minstrel shows popular in the late 1800s, in which white singers painted their faces black and adopted other conventions representing “negroes”. The local minstrels of Trinidad are generally black persons who adopt a similar set of conventions. As such, they are an imitation of an imitation (black performers, pretending to be white performers, who are pretending to be black performers), which is a convention often appearing in Mas” (“Minstrels: Music”).
Yet, the Yard curiously excludes the ‘gross antics’ of the piss-en-lit from its protective enclave, along with the forgotten figures of the “Bajan Cook, Policeman and Thief, Yard Sweeper, Cow or Bear” (Green, “Authenticity” 68). Philip Scher similarly argues that the ‘authentic’ carnival that has been constructed and then sanctioned by the state suffers from ‘selective amnesia’ in which heroic\textsuperscript{170} characters are actively pushed to the forefront of the nation’s consciousness and are then celebrated and extolled as the representative face of carnival while more controversial and grotesque characters are relegated to the historical periphery (68).

Franco goes even further, suggesting that what is termed ole or ‘traditional’ mas’ in Trinidadian carnival is erroneously conflated with carnival in its entirety. She argues that the very notion of ‘traditional mas’ is a highly selective and carefully genderised fiction. Franco accounts for the ways in which newspapers such as Trinidad Express not only expressed their considerable alarm over bikini mas’ during the late 1980s, but attempted to counter the spectacle of bikini mas’ through “a tacitly sexist framing” of women masqueraders—one which sought to retrieve and safely reposition wild and wining women back into “their biological roles as mothers and wives, respectively” (“The Invention of Traditional Mas” 39).\textsuperscript{171} Most critically, she interrogates bikini mas’ as a form of revelry that offers the potential to challenge and destabilise the hegemonic normalisation of supposedly ‘masculine’ forms of roleplay and masking. Academic frameworks that attempt to explore bikini mas’ often presented as a site where the microcosm of a dramatic annual theatre systematically unfolds. The spectator is presented with

\textsuperscript{170} It seems to me that heroism is conflated with ‘appropriate’ and concrete expressions of male rebellion. By contrast rebellion that is expressed through sexual and gender transgression, which flirts with liminal identity and sometimes veers towards the grotesque, is deemed to too excessive or effeminate to qualify as ‘heroic.’

\textsuperscript{171} Both Patricia de Freitas and Pamela Franco reference Gordon Rohlehr’s extensive research on calypso and soca and critique of the way in which calypso lyrics, in particular, portrayed women as virtuous mothers. This then functioned as an idealised image underpinned by a controlling ideology designed to define then police the parameters of female identity and behaviour.
the rise of visceral moral panic in response to (over)-exposed and ‘vulgar’ female bodies which temporarily threaten and invert the known social order. This is ritually resolved through a predictable ‘venting’ of public outrage, public denouncement and the reinforcement of the gender status quo.

In “Copyright Heritage: Preservation, Carnival and the State in Trinidad”, Philip W. Scher, uses the popular Trinidadian mas’ band Poison as a case study in order to investigate the undeniable popularity of bikini mas’. Moreover, Scher pays particular attention to the ways in which this form of mas’ ‘feminises’ carnival, which then renders carnival as a less efficacious tool for the decidedly masculinist endeavour of nation-building. At the same time, the flagrant excess and moral dubiety associated with bikini mas’ problematises the stable, moral coherence of a patriotic image of the nation—so much so that it suggests that

Trinidad the nation is equated with a masculine model of citizenship, even in its most creative forms. A Carnival that places emphasis on the female body instead of on male musicality becomes national culture without social conscience, a “suspect” performance of the nation.”\(^{172}\) (Pinto 141)

Two questions arise: if bikini mas’ reflects the current state of carnival and involves the deterioration of carnival through its “feminisation,” then how can carnival effectively ‘portray’ a masculine conception of the nation? Furthermore, is this even the appropriate task for an event like carnival? Scher carefully examines “how acts of preservation and protection of

\(^{172}\) Both Scher and Franco note that part of the suspect performance of a ‘feminised’ carnival is the spectacle of women gyrating with and winning on other women and the threat of ‘lesbian overtones’ (Scher, “Copyright Heritage” 478; Franco, “The Invention of Traditional Mas’” 39).
heritage serve to exclude significant portions of the population, most notably women” (“Copyright Heritage” 453) while suggesting that traditional mas’, with its distinct folklore, is far more amenable to nationalisation and copyrighting than the more indeterminate and ubiquitous visuals of bikini mas’. He also unabashedly celebrates and even romanticises the ascendance of bikini mas’, wine and jam culture and with it, the ‘elevated’ role of middle-class female Trinidadians. He argues that it not only provides an “outlet for middle class women to express frustration with a patriarchal and limiting society” (478), but that it also provides them with an opportunity to see themselves as members of the most privileged group. They are allowed to celebrate their position and, it is hoped, maintain or even improve that position…In the words of one Poison player I interviewed: “This is the one day we women rule the streets and can free up.” (477)

Patricia A. de Freitas similarly undertakes the task of examining attempts by academic and media discourse to effectively metonymise the bikini clad body with carnival. She argues that the predominance of women participating in contemporary carnival cannot be ignored. As a result, contemporary carnival is gendered as a primarily female pursuit and is simultaneously presented as both attractive, yet trivial. Carnival is both subverted and diverted from more serious political objectives such as representing and critiquing the nation. Indeed: “The “soft and sensual” post-Independence Queen has usurped the throne of the “hard and Mean” pre-Independence King” (“Disrupting the Nation” 23-4).

The currency of carnival’s new queendom is all-too-apparent to a masculine marketing machine that still seeks to shape and control carnival’s ‘feminised’ image and imagery. In disciplinary and pecuniary fashion, the media yokes the image of the sexualised and ‘unruly’
female to the festival. Carnival is imaginatively conceived of as a masculine cultural progeny birthed from the ‘womb’ of male creativity and labour. The progeny in question is also synonymous with the birth of the postcolony of Trinidad. As a consequence, the position of women in the national imaginary is problematised and contested. While women can be romantically invoked in soca music as a metaphor writ large for the nation and can be idealistically invoked as figures that support and nurture the nation (6), creative control over this imagery consistently lies beyond their grasp. In short, women can never be the authors, creators, managers and owners of the carnival and by extension, the nation according to this schema.

While Mustapha Matura points towards the post-colonial nation as a racialised hegemon, de Freitas suggests that the nation’s identity is also predicated on its presumed masculinity. Current attempts to decipher the nation involve both negotiating and apprehending the visibility of women and the popularity of bikini mas’. She also examines the often hostile framing of bikini mas’ in mainstream media and draws the conclusion that the feminisation of carnival is carefully ‘stage-managed.’ In effect, women are presented as carnival’s alluring and sexy ‘new’ figure and are the critical ‘resource’ that serves as the basis of this imagery. This manufactured image then serves as a lucrative form of capital that is globally disseminated in order to ‘sell’ carnival. A contradictory, even hypocritical process unfolds where bikini mas’ is positioned as the ‘destroyer’ of carnival even while it functions as carnival’s central currency that finances and enables the event. The ‘ubiquity’ of bikini mas’ is routinely decried; yet, it is also exploited and hyperrepresented. A diverse range of different forms of mas’ costuming and play are then obscured:
Not all women wine and jam or wear revealing costumes, but this is the image that is
projected in the media, paradoxically both to express national moral outrage at the “fall
of Carnival” through its association with debased womenfolk, and to sell Carnival
internationally on the tourist market as the exotic “Greatest Show on Earth”. (24)

Samantha Pinto also examines the same contradiction by analysing the relationship between
soca music and female revellers, while also making reference to bikini mas’. She partially
agrees with Scher’s analysis, insofar as he interprets attempts to censure and contain the bodies
of bikini masqueraders as part of wider project of nation-building which involves ‘re-
masculinising’ the image of the nation. However, she also critiques the manner in which he
airily and amorphously positions bikini masqueraders as young, middle class and female, yet
remains curiously silent on the issue racial identity, resulting in a reductive and triumphalist
reading of bikini mas’. Pinto deliberately re-racialises and re-historicises the performers of
bikini mas’ and argues that an acknowledgment of the blackness of bikini mas’ and of the
women who ‘jam’ to soca music and ‘get on bad’ while scandalising ‘the nation’ is essential
in order to apprehend the true root of the moral opprobrium and disgust that bikini mas’ elicits.
Class and gender cannot be separated from race because the notion of ‘blackness’ functions as
the fertile ground on which genderised and class-based notions of ‘respectability’ flourish.
Pinto thus offers the following critique:

Scher rests on just such an easy and unarticulated connection among soca, the sexual
performance of “wine and jam,” and black women’s sexuality when he refuses to name
or make visible the race of its performers. As the representation of the English-speaking
Caribbean remains overdetermined by its identification with the African diaspora,
Carnival and its complicated relationship with gender and class respectability…are also intimately linked to “blackness” as a racial identity [emphasis added]. (Pinto 143)

Pinto works to connect the current commodification of bikini mas’ to a wider and deeper history of commodification in the region. Unlike Scher, she is far more attentive to the way in which bikini mas’ positions black female bodies, which perform on both the national and international stage, as the prime attraction in a postcolonial tourist-driven industry. She then draws a historical link between contemporary ‘postcolonial’ carnival and the way in which black female bodies were also called upon to function and perform in order to fuel colonial economies. In both instances, black female sexuality “becomes the sign under which the Caribbean nation is frequently read…and diasporically distributed” (Pinto 143).

Thus, the black female body not only carves out a space for bikini mas’, which is then occupied and shared by other women, but her body physically enables and symbolically ‘encodes’ bikini mas’ with a specifically genderised, sexualised and racialised identity. Historical and contemporary associations continue the colonial project of binding the black female body to vices of excess, hypersexuality and lewdness, while routinely positioning ‘it’ outside of colonial conceptions of moderation, chastity and decency. This constant encoding, which can only be maintained through reifying conventional readings of the black body, serve to invest contemporary bikini mas’ with its alluring characteristics of sexual rebellion and transgression. However, while the black female body evocatively represents the ‘lewd’ and lower class elements of carnival, one can simultaneously observe “the overrepresentation of white or light-skinned women in Carnival advertisements and imagery” who strategically serve as the
‘acceptable’ face of carnival’s tourism (Powers, “Trinidad’s Women Find a Rallying Cry”).

In *Sexing the Caribbean: Gender, Race, and Sexual Labor* author Kamala Kempadoo similarly explicates the notion of the hypersexualised black body and examines how this identity is then mapped on to the region at large and hyperinflated in the global imaginary so that black hypersexuality becomes synonymous with the Caribbean. She defines Caribbean hypersexuality as

> a pervasive, long-standing ideology that holds that Caribbean people possess hyperactive libidos and overly rely upon sexuality as a marker of identity. Caribbean sexuality then is not normal, but excessive, at times pathological and at other unruly, and it is this characteristic of the people and its region that shapes images, policies, and economic programs from without, as well as internal ideas about self, culture, and development. (Kempadoo 7-9)

Barnes, in turn, acknowledges the history of racialised and genderised representation in a Caribbean context and cautiously questions narratives which equate female visibility with female advancement and liberation:

> Given the politics of voyeurism and fetishism that frequently accompany the representation of black bodies, can a resistive praxis emanate from the spectacle of women masqueraders gyrating in full view of television cameras? Is ‘visibility’ enough

---

173 In her *Washington Post* article “‘Leave Me Alone’: Trinidad’s Women Find a Rallying Cry for this Year’s Carnival,” Maxine Powers notes the convergence of growing elitism and sexism in carnival as expressed through “[t]he pressure for female Carnival-goers to crash-diet, pay for expensive gym memberships and spend money on hair extensions and professional makeup artists.” Powers identifies this as an unwelcome development and “a departure from Carnival of decades ago, when women of all shapes and sizes were encouraged to participate.”
of a liberatory strategy to convert the subversive act into an emancipatory politics?

(Barnes, “Body Talk” 95)

While there are no easy conclusions to be drawn about bikini mas’, it is safe to say that a growing body of academic scholarship is both alert and sensitive to how it is performed. I would also suggest that these frameworks, which complicate but engage with bikini mas’, are less likely to be found in conventional and social media. Notions of Trinidadian carnival’s evolution, or perhaps devolution, are voiced in pessimistic and sometimes scathing media-driven ‘narratives of degeneration.’ By simply reading publications such as Trinidad and Tobago Guardian, The Trinidad Express, Trinidad Times, as well as visiting various online forums that are dedicated to the practicalities and the business of playing mas’, it is evident that bikini mas’ is perpetually singled out, critiqued and presented as a source of vilification or cause for concern.

Inside the parameters of this mainstream public discourse, bikini mas’ is positioned as a trend that usurps competing forms of costuming, even threatening carnival’s creativity. In 2006, the head of the National Carnival Bands Association (NCBA) David Cameron stated in an interview with the Trinidad and Tobago Guardian that the group’s explicit aim was to “…bring back true portrayals into mas [emphasis added]” while hoping to “attract young people with authentic things” (Serac “Trini Revellers”). In the interview Cameron cites the 1990s as being the point in history where “bikinis and small costumes began to be more fashionable than education” and suggests that ‘escaping’ the bikini mas’ ‘syndrome’ is a ‘top priority’ (Serac,

174 Internet sites such as Caribbean Islands Forum offer a space for potential mas’ players to ask questions about how best to enjoy the experience of carnival. Advice may include procuring a costume, routes and roads, comfort in playing mas’ and mas’ etiquette and physical safety.
“Trini Revellers”). Resistance towards bikini mas’ as carnival’s dominant paradigm is similarly expressed by predominantly male mas’ designers and bandleaders. In 2014 De Core T&T’s spokesman Earl Thompson conveyed the band’s vision of a ‘back-to-Africa’ theme called “Reclamation” and made a point of noting that its fabrics had been imported from Nigeria while critical props and accessories such as “horse whips, the talking drums, the sections [were] decorated with cowrie shells [and] are all authentic” (“A Reclamation of Mas”). Like Cameron, Thompson also expressed an interest in reviving authentic carnival and regarded bikini mas’ as standing in opposition to this, even going so far as to state that: “People get so accustomed to the concept of the beads and bikini type of mas. But we want to put back clothes on people. People have become too comfortable with playing themselves175 instead of playing mas” (“A Reclamation of Mas”).

*Trinidad and Tobago Newsday* is another mainstream online publication with a number of articles dedicated not only to carnival but specifically to bikini mas’. In 2014, the publication lauded the victory of veteran steel band “Neal & Massy Trinidad All Stars Steel Orchestra” during Panorama. Despite the brevity of the article, there was sufficient time and space to tangentially comment on the trend of bikini mas’ while describing it as an array of “intangible themes represented by colours, sequined bikinis and feathers” that signalled a visible departure from traditional themes with which spectators could ‘relate’ (“Rebel Judgement?”). Tellingly, the newspaper sides with critics of bikini mas’ and echoes popular complaints about the uniformity of bikini mas’. Moreover, they situate bikini mas’ in opposition to what they regard as a deeper historical epistemology of carnival:

---

175 This is also known as ‘playing yuhself’ and refers to the same phenomenon that Samantha Noel and Natasha Barnes call ‘skin mas.’
The trending “Bikini Mas’” has received much criticism from Carnival aficionados who know their Carnival history. They claim that people cannot tell one band’s costumes from another, or indeed whether they may even be “last year’s costumes”. And the truth be told, those critics have a point, for while the average young masquerader loves the brief costumes, which allow them to jump up more freely, costume design and portrayals have become boring to the spectators [emphasis added]. (“Rebel Judgement?”)

The ‘deeper epistemology’ in question is clearly tied to familiarity with ole or traditional mas’. On this basis, binaries are established between youthful masqueraders and those who are well-versed in the history of the event. Concern is also voiced for spectators who are frequently assumed to be alternately bored and offended by bikini mas’. These fears are sometimes corroborated through the online comments of spectators:

Don’t get me wrong ..I like to see Tribe and Island People “bead and feather” costumes but when you see real mas costumes from Minshall or McFarlene you have to admit “bead and feather” pale in comparison....it’s what makes Trini Carnival unique... (sic)
I miss seeing the theatrical aspect of Carnival.. I get bored watching band after band of half naked people just jumping up and wining down the place.. (sic) I love when a band presents a story with a beginning and end when they cross the stage. (Triniameri)

In her article “Hitting Rock Bottom,” columnist and contributor to Trinidad and Tobago Newsday Suzanne Mills publicly protests against the apotheosis of soca ‘wine and jam’ culture and bikini mas’. She condemned carnivalesque revellers in 2015 as “a bunch of senseless simians” who, according to her article, had the temerity to wine in a graveyard (“Hitting Rock
Mills' scathing dismissal of the 'gym and aerobics set' refers to the primarily middle-class women who perform bikini mas’ and she points towards the interdependent relationship between two forms of production. Soca music produces an indistinguishable production line of hits that receive constant airplay and permeate public spaces ranging from the supermarket to the gymnasium. The musical conveyor belt then colludes with the exercise ‘treadmill,’ whereby carnival’s largely female participants physically exercise and train to the strains of soca music in order to tone and groom their bodies in preparation for bikini mas’. Mills hints at a direct corollary between the two ‘treadmills’ of industry and infers that the production of bodies for bikini mas’ display is aided, abetted and fuelled by the music of soca, resulting in a highly cohesive value chain. She then situates this process inside a broader social process and rhetorically posits: “but wasn’t everything in our lives being reduced to a crude assembly, to the lowest common denominator?” (“Hitting Rock Bottom”). Mills is not only disdainful of an
isolated and highly specific act of impropriety; her deeper concern extends towards the mindlessness of a culture that now mandates ‘wining’ on everything.\textsuperscript{176}

While Mills’ outrage at this state of affairs is clearly manifest, I would also argue that underlying her vociferous critique is an even more disturbing implication: In Trinidadian carnival an inverted semiotics exists whereby acts of ‘lewdness’ and ‘obscenity’ are routinised rather than ritualised, and are so commonplace as to be banal. As are result, these acts no longer have the power or ability to shock or to symbolise actual rebellion or lawlessness, but instead signal a docile conformity whereby “[d]ecorum was out; contempt was a la mode…And anyone who did not join the unimaginative party was an alien” (“Hitting Rock Bottom”). The trappings and gestures of obscenity thus function as a hollow mask. Once again, Victor Turner’s description of carnival as a liminoid event that is characterised by ‘optation’ is brought into question as 21\textsuperscript{st} century Trinidadian carnival is structured by local and international tourism which brings with it the forces of a highly scripted conformity and an all-encompassing compulsion. No critique of soca music, however, is complete without an acknowledgment of bikini mas’. Mills implies that the former is an accomplice of the latter. Thus, bikini masqueraders are unflatteringly described as those

who were willing to dole out thousands more to pay the con of monotonous feather, beads and bikini Mas, the money Masses Carnival, a folk festival that was no longer in the grasp of the folk. Everything was a predictable all inclusive which was in reality a

\textsuperscript{176} When I attended Carnival in 2011 and participated \textit{Jouvay} mas’ I personally witnessed an altercation between a driver who was attempting to get home and a handful of revellers who were wining against his car. The driver in question was concerned for any potential damage to his vehicle. My cousin’s husband (Nigel) who is decidedly pro-Carnival and who was with me at the time, voiced his firm disapproval over their actions in the belief that they were ‘overdoing it’ and simply lacked common sense and courtesy and felt that there were definitive rules involved in playing mas’.
dull elitist, an insipid all exclusive. Carnival was fête for those who could afford to fête\footnote{In the same publication, J. Gomes laments in a 2012 article that “… bands and designers seem to have bowed to pressure to make everyone look like a Las Vegas showgirl.” Gomes also points towards the increasingly exclusive nature of carnival through the prices of costumes: “It was couture mas versus the retail off the rack items being sold today for no less than $2,800” (“RIP Trinidad Carnival”).} 177, yet there was nothing festive about the festival. (“Hitting Rock Bottom”)

Conversely, in the Sunday Express a 2015 online article highlights the confusion and dissent expressed by ‘Ronnie & Caro’ bandleader Ronnie McIntosh when his band won third-place in the Band of the Year according to the results “from the National Carnival Bands Association (NCBA)” (“Ronnie Puzzled”). McIntosh politely gestures towards the validity of the traditional mas’ band that won the competition but fervently argues in favour of bikini mas’. He bluntly points out to the NCBA that bikini mas’ “is the mas that selling,” which consistently attracts more revellers, more spectators and effectively finances carnival in a way that traditional forms of mas’ do not. He then mournfully concludes that: “At this point, I don’t know what mas is” (“Ronnie Puzzled”). In the article, it is clear that McIntosh’s own taxonomy of carnival falls between a clear-cut distinction between traditional and bikini mas’. McIntosh points towards the hypocrisy and the impracticality of carnival judges and organisers embracing the monetarisation that every other aspect and component of the festival has undergone in order to meet the demands of 21st century market. Perversely, however, costuming is the lone aspect of carnival which is then singled out, set aside for ossification, then symbolically invested with the ‘duty’ of serving as a historical archive:

Everything else must change but we, the bandleaders, must stick to traditional mas? That won’t work. We are a business like everyone else. When the airlines and fête promoters keep their prices the same for Carnival for the sake of the culture, then we
keep it traditional…Those playing the similar costumes, the bikini, the feathers and so on, their numbers are way higher than what (the judges) are trying to keep alive and calling traditional. *It is amazing that bandleaders must study culture while every other aspect of the festival is a business*” [emphasis added]. (“Ronnie Puzzled”)

These selective instances are by no means an exhaustive account of the media’s portrayal of bikini mas’. Yet they are indicative that, while bikini mas’ exists as a subset included in fancy mas’, it is also recognised and afforded special status as a particular type of masquerade that is distinct from ‘traditional’ notions of mas’. In brief, there is a discernible narrative around this specific form of masking. The perception that bikini mas’ is a singular form of masquerade is not only evident in academic discourse and official media. It is expressed in the arguments amongst ‘ordinary’ members of the public who argue back-and-forth about whether or not bikini mas’ as an interloper or a dominant institution that should be embraced. Even the two responses in the comments section regarding McIntosh’s confusion over the demands of carnival reflect two contrasting attitudes. Commenter ‘San Dan’ of Scarborough Tobago supports McIntosh’s argument and queries: “‘Bikini and bead’ bandleaders making money from sale of costumes why they wan to fight down prize money too? You know those same costume not so expensive in Brazil. We making we own mas uncompetitive” (San Dan 2015). The second commentator, by contrast, unsympathetically suggests that bikini mas’ bands are finally being judged (and stung) by their own commercial imperative and are simply subject to the vagaries of the market:

Suck it up Ronnie, suck it up. When Bikini and Feathers was winning was there any hew and cry? now Traditional Mas getting a play you want to complain (sic). Didn't know WINNING was so important thought you guys just wanted to have FUN and
make a BOAT LOAD OF MONEY. Maybe the judges are just BORED with what your product.. (sic) That's business for you. (Woods 2015)

Of course, while popular media discourse and public opinion is more likely to be critical of the ascendance of bikini mas’, it is far from wholly condemnatory and offers up a counterbalance of thoughtful critiques that observe both its shortcomings and its virtues. Online newspapers host writers and contributors who are willing to embrace the reality of bikini mas’ while demonstrating the ability to pragmatically situate it as part of an ongoing and essential process of change. Journalists such as Jeremy Jones, for example, have been willing to challenge the iconic status of mas’ designers such as Peter Minshall and Brian McFarlane, even taking the former to task for a myopic arrogance that regards traditional mas’ as the only legitimate form of masquerade while “all others are undeserving of space “on de road”” (“Minshall or Not”). Jones then passionately argues for the validity and vitality of some of Trinidad and Tobago’s most popular mas’ bands, including “Harts, Tribe, Bliss, Poison, [and] Barbarossa,” which are female dominated bands that are part of the “bikini and beads brigade” (“Minshall or Not”). Rather than decrying the alleged absence of politics in carnival, Jones upholds and celebrates mas’ as

a place where people play mas to have fun and express themselves in their manner of choosing. This does not make it wrong, but simply different, as different as Minshall was when he took Danse Macabre on the road and back then the feathers and castor wheel costume “mafia” blocked his King and Queen on the Savannah Barber Greene…Carnival, changing, transitioning, perhaps not as pretty, perhaps no longer “theatre”, but always us screaming—shouting, waving our hands, bikinis and beads, not bat and sailor, Machel and Bunji, not Sparrow and Kitch.” (“Minshall or Not”)
Jones directly references a critical juncture in carnival during the early 1980s when the spectacularly pessimistic and even apocalyptic imagery of Minshall’s elaborate mas’ theatre was deemed a threat to the established understanding of what carnival was about and what its costumes ought to convey. Peter Ray Blood also recalls the “ugly side of mas” when rival carnival kings conspired to block “…Minshall’s king, Peter Samuel, portraying Tiger Tiger Burning Bright, from parading at the Savannah. He was allowed to perform the costume one week after carnival, at Pan Trinbago’s Champs in Concert, and the costume and its wearer were given a standing ovation by a packed Grand and North Stand” (Blood, “False Teeth”). Minshall’s now famous River trilogy (River, Callaloo, and The Golden Calabash), which is so highly praised in the 21st century and is upheld as an example par excellence of meaningful mas’, was once incoherent and indecipherable to bewildered carnival judges and contemporary bandleaders “…who felt Carnival was no place for Minshall’s uncompromising artistic ambitions” (Laughlin et al., “Masman: Peter Minshall”).

178 Minshall’s infamous ‘Madame Hiroshima, is one of the central characters in in his 1984 mas’ Callaloo. Madame Hiroshima is not only memorable for her complex character design but her placement in Minshall’s mas’ trilogy as the offspring of Mancrab. John Nunley suggests that the character allowed Minshall to ‘explore another dimension of the Trinidadian character, one that would eagerly trade the purity of the land and its people for imported technology (“Peter Minshall” 304).

179 Peter Minshall’s 1983 to 1985 trilogy of mas’ bands is still considered to be one of the best examples of Trinidadian carnival’s potential to offer incisive commentary on global issues. Minshall’s seminal mas’ titled “River” refashioned existing Trinidadian folklore. This resulted in the theatrical drama of the “Crab and de Callaloo,” featuring an iron-wrought and maniacal ‘mancrab’ representing the forces of untrammelled industrialisation and capitalist greed set in opposition to the Washerwoman who “protected her river people from the crab’s pollution and greed” (Huggins “The Work of Peter Minshall”). For further detail on the visual intricacy of the performance and the thematic cohesion between Minshall’s “River” and his subsequent mas’ dramas (“Callaloo”, and “The Golden Calabash”) please refer to Nicholas Huggins essay, “The Work of Peter Minshall” and John Nunley’s “Peter Minshall–The Good, the Bad, and the Old in Trinidad Carnival.”
Despite Minshall’s failure to secure official approbation from the committee of judges, two of the three of his mas’ bands (River and The Golden Calabash) “…won the people’s choice award, decided by ordinary spectators” (Laughlin et al. “Masman: Peter Minshall”). John W. Nunley also refers to the controversy that Minshall’s art evoked, so that even one of his own band members decried his 1983 victory when ‘Mancrab’ secured the ‘King of Carnival that year. The band member in question, Irwin McWilliams mourned Minshall’s decidedly pessimistic vision of environmental pillage and rape and felt “[t]hat [it] will kill the whole spirit of carnival… I have been playing carnival for 21 years and you look forward to things getting better, not worse” (qtd. in Nunley, “Peter Minshall” 305). What is important to note in all of this is that yesteryear’s rebels become today’s establishment figures. Controversy and complaint is one of the few stable traditions in carnival. Both traditional mas’ and bikini mas’ have always had the ability to provoke extreme reactions from the public, whether positive or negative, supportive or condemnatory.

It is fitting, at this point, to examine the words of academic, writer and vlogger180 Gabrielle Hosein, Head of the Institute for Gender and Development Studies at the University of the West Indies in Trinidad, who also assumed the moniker of “Diary of a Mothering Worker” when using social media. Hosein wrote “The Power of Bikini Mas,” which exists as a blog post but was also published in Trinidad and Tobago Online Guardian. Nevertheless, it occupies a curiously liminal space. Despite her high profile status as an academic, the post is not a part of official academic discourse on bikini mas’. Nor is it firmly ensconced in the tradition of excoriations of bikini mas’ that permeate online newspapers. Nevertheless, Hosein’s brief yet succinct post captures the complexity of bikini mas’ and takes into account not only the

180 ‘Vlogger’: A person who ‘blogs’ in video form and speaks rather than writes their entries. A single video is the equivalent of a blog post entry.
multiple, and at times contradictory, desires on the part of its participants, it also accounts for
the barriers to freedom that playing mas’ engenders:

There are also contradictions. Costs of bikini mas participation mean that class shapes
access to these moments of freedom. Many women continue to play within ropes,
reproducing historical ways that upper classes cut themselves off from others, while
signalling the reality of sexual harassment which all classes of women continue to fear.
Additionally, the marketing of hypersexuality over these very decades has reinforced
hierarchies of beauty and the policing of women’s bodies in ways that complicate the
radical potential of bikini mas to throw off pressures women face, embrace self-pleasure
without judgment or justification, and defy nation-state commodification. (“The Power
of Bikini Mas”)

**The Power of Contemporary Protest Mas’**

*Boy doh touch me*
*like you goin crazy.*
*Let go me hand*
*lemme jump up in d band.*
*I dont want nobody*
*to come and stop me.*
*Leave me let me free up,*
*myself let me jump up.*
*(leave me a lone, leave me)*

—Calypso Rose “Leave Me Alone”
“You’re there, you’re in the party and somebody trying to control your bamsee"… ‘And you’re just like, ‘Just leave me at peace! I just want to be in my body and feel what it’s like to be in my body for myself.’”

—Activist and Author, Atillah Springer.

One of the central criticisms levelled at bikini mas’ is that it lacks the ability to seriously address the state of the world while it fails to embody any serious form of social critique, political consciousness or active protest. Bikini mas’ is supposedly committed to the light-hearted physical pleasures of revelry. The dark side of carnival emerged, however, in 2016. Tragedy struck when the body of thirty-year-old Japanese national Asami Nagakiya was discovered on Ash Wednesday in Queen’s Park Savannah. Nagakiya was still clad in a bejewelled bikini masquerade outfit after having played her first and final mas’ with local band ‘Legends’ (Miller, “Outrage in Trinidad”; “Asami’s Final Moments”; Boodram, “Missing Asami”). As a professional musician and dedicated pannist, Nagakiya annually travelled to Trinidad over a seven-year period to pursue her keen interest in studying steelpan music. As a result she regularly played with the PCS Nitrogen Silver Stars during Panorama. She also introduced the art form to her native Japan and offered instruction on how to play the instrument “all over Asia,” which led to her being regarded as part of the “fraternity of pan” (Miller, “Outrage in Trinidad”). The homicide remains unsolved in 2017 but resulted in widespread public mourning for the loss of her life, praise for her talent and a celebration of her cultural ambassadorship. However, grief and dismay within the community quickly transformed into

---

181 ‘Bamsee’ is a Trinidadian colloquialism for ‘bottom’.
182 (qtd. in Powers “Trinidad’s Women Find a Rallying Cry.”)
outrage over comments from Port-of-Spain’s then mayor, Raymond Tim Kee, who made an infamous public statement in response to the news of Nagakiya’s murder:

“You know before Carnival I did make a comment about vulgarity and lewdness…The woman has the responsibility to ensure that [she is] not abused…And my argument was you could enjoy Carnival without going through that routine…of prancing and partying…Then why you can’t continue with that and maintain some kind of dignity?” (qtd. in Miller, “Outrage in Trinidad”)

Tim Kee went on to explicitly draw a link to bikini mas’ costuming and her violent demise by speculating that “[i]t’s a matter of, if she was still in her costume—I think that’s what I heard—let your imagination roll” [emphasis added] (qtd. in Miller, “Outrage in Trinidad”). More than merely insensitive and impolitic, Tim Kee’s words reflected a prevailing misogyny that interrogated then derided the ‘morality’ of bikini mas’ revellers while having nothing of insight or value to say about acts of suspected rape and murder. In effect, the victim was placed on public trial by an official dignitary. His comments, however, also proved to be a tipping point that led to vocal protest in Port-of-Spain and throughout Trinidad as women and men united against sexual violence, victim-blaming and shaming, and the normalisation of rape culture that were endorsed in Tim Kee’s pronouncements.

183 His surname is ‘Tim Kee’.
184 In the earliest reports of her murder, there was suspicion that she was also the victim of sexual assault (Miller “Outrage in Trinidad”; “Asami’s Final Moments”), which was later dispelled by a subsequent autopsy report. Her death by ‘manual strangulation’ was eventually confirmed (“T&T mayor resigns”).
185 The term ‘rape culture’ was first used in 1974 by Noreen Connell, feminist activist and co-author of A First Sourcebook for Women by New York Radical Feminists. The phrase refers to the normalisation of rape as an unremarkable and commonplace ‘feature’ of society and daily existence.
This damning impression was further reinforced through Prime Minister Keith Rowley’s equivocation over Tim Kee’s continuing his role as mayor. While Rowley publicly condemned Tim Kee’s statements as unacceptable, he simultaneously defended him as having “misspoken” and concluded that the controversy was not sufficient cause for his dismissal from office (Rambally et al., “Tim Kee to Resign”). Trinidad’s public, however, felt otherwise and political reprisal was swift and immediate: “Within hours, a woman had launched an online petition calling for Tim Kee’s resignation. By early Friday morning, it had gathered nearly 7,000 signatures”186 (Miller, “Outrage in Trinidad”). Furthermore, local feminist organisation Womantra TT187 mobilised and led a march from Woodford Square to City Hall in protest (“Outrage in Trinidad”; Mendes-Franco, “Citizens Protest”).

A handful of infuriated female revellers who were attired in their carnival costumes surrounded his office. They voiced their objections to the implication that clothing was a causative factor in violence against women and expressed a fresh vision of the gender and sexual politics that they desired to see in Trinidad. Defiant bikini masqueraders stood alongside men, women and children who were fully garbed in ordinary clothing or who wore tee shirts with statements in support of women’s rights and Tim Kee’s resignation. A number of protestors also carried placards with an array of statements. Some apologised on behalf of the nation, expressed shame and disapproval of the ‘vulgarity’ of the mayor, or bore feminist statements ranging from the eloquent: “Women have complete sovereignty over their bodies and are not to be advised concerning their conduct nor threatened with violence;” to pithy sloganeering: “My Body, My

---

186 The petition “A National Call for Raymond Tim Kee to resign as Mayor” garnered 10,509 signatures.
187 Womantra (a combination of the words ‘woman’ and ‘mantra’) is a non-profit, local feminist collective founded in 2011 by Mrin Argwal and Stephanie Leitch. According to its website the group seeks to “sustain a community of over 1000 Caribbean and Diasporic women engaging in feminist politics and social justice work.” It also exists as a virtual platform designed to create ‘solidarity abroad’ (“About Womantra”).
Mas”. (Mendes-Franco “Citizens Protest”). As is the case with any protest, a consensus did not exist. Voices in support of Tim Kee were also present while others argued that the murder of Asami Nagakiya had been inappropriately politicised and used as a vehicle to advance local concerns which distracted from the immediacy of bringing her murderer to justice. Others again accused grassroots organisations of squandering valuable international attention to cast light on deeper systemic issues such as “a dilapidated police, legal and health system,” and also questioned “if a poor black girl or gay boy from a poor district miles from the ‘Lighthouse’” would receive the same outpouring of grief and solidarity (RED).

Despite the dissent amongst the ranks, the majority had spoken. Obliged to obey the will of an incensed public, Tim Kee tendered his resignation from office a mere six days after he had uttered his statements (Miller, “Outrage in Trinidad”; Powers, “Trinidad’s Women Find a Rallying Cry”). Tim Kee’s subsequent replacement, Keron Valentine, promptly met with Womantra in order to discuss the outcome of the petition and to share initiatives in order to combat violence against women (Ramdass, “New Mayor”). Furthermore, the Woodford Square protest proved to be diverse, also attracting the attention of high profile women such as former Prime Minister and Leader of the Opposition Kamla Persad-Bissessar, academic Sheila Hosein and activist Atillah Springer, all of whom voiced their opposition to the ideological violence implicit in Tim Kee’s initial response. They joined in openly celebrating the triumph of public resistance and female solidarity. The individual who initiated the online petition, Cherisse Berkeley, had this to say:

This is truly an unprecedented milestone in our nation’s history and a testament to the power of collective action. We would like to thank the 10 000+ people who signed our petition and all those who showed up yesterday at Woodford Sq. to stand in solidarity
with Asami Nagakiya and ALL WOMEN who have been blamed for their own victimisation. We also hope that this occasion has left no doubt in the mind of our nation's leaders that a Gender Policy is needed to provide clear guidelines that protect women and other vulnerable groups from Gender Based Violence [emphasis in original]. (Berkeley, “Petition Update”)

In effect, political protest against a representative of ‘the state’ was mobilised in response to carnival-related violence. Rather than the protests occurring within the official time-frame of carnival and being enacted through the medium of mas’ costuming, they occurred instead outside of carnival. Notably, there was a searing backlash against the sensational politicisation of bikini mas’, its masqueraders and, by extension, the bodies of Trinidadian women. Like their 19th century counterparts, female revellers in the 21st century do not simply view carnival as a space in which to mock and rebel against an alienating society. They also see carnival as their rightful space. It can be critiqued, defended, amended or protested against as the need arises. In all of this, a contest over cultural ownership and control is revealed, foregrounding the question of who ‘runs’ the space and who can safely enter it. It emphasises the critical difference between ‘occupying’ and owning a space. Protestors defended the legitimacy of bikini mas’, rejecting its denigration and re-framing it as a legitimate space that they themselves had carved out within carnival. Moreover, bikini mas’ helped to rally protests around genderised violence and generated public space for women to critique wider social misogyny and articulate their resounding rejection of respectability politics and its attendant body shaming and policing.

Even more critically, protestors asserted the right of women to move freely within carnival along with the freedom to play which ever form of mas’ they deemed fit; indeed, autonomy of
movement, aesthetic choice, and freedom from social and physical harm (in the form of sexual harassment and violence) were essential tenants that protestors and petitioners organised around, fuelling the dramatic backlash against the mayoral office. Both Nagakiya’s murder and the disturbing dismissal of her as a ‘lewd’ bikini masquerader opened up a vital national conversation. Better yet, the conversation is ongoing. In carnival 2017, concerns about women’s safety and sexual freedom in carnival, which have always been present, emerged at the forefront of carnivals’ proceedings. Assertions of sexual autonomy and an explicit rejection of a culture of harrassment during carnival were visibly and audibly expressed through costuming and song. One of the most notable examples of this is the surprise runaway anthem of 2017 carnival, “Leave Me Alone.”

The infectious lyrics were penned and performed by seventy-four year old calypso veteran and pioneer Calypso Rose and centre around an uncompromising female reveller who asserts her physical autonomy during mas’ with the opening lyric: “Boy, don’t touch me!” She rejects the physical advances of men through their invitations to wine and unwelcome attempts to steer and commandeer her body. Rose’s chanted refrain, “Let me party! Let me party!” (Calypso Rose, “Leave Me Alone”), repurposes the hedonism of the standard soca jam and re-invests it with political energy and purpose. The right to party is not only associated with rebellion and the liberated pleasure of the flesh; it draws the listener’s attention to the gendered dimensions and restrictions involved in fêting and playing mas’.

188 Cynthia Mahabir’s “The Rise of Calypso Feminism: Gender and Musical Politics in the Calypso” both acknowledges Calypso Rose as a pioneer while simultaneously situating her in a tradition of female calypsonians who have expressed pro-woman or feminist concerns through their lyrics. This movement includes artists such as Singing Francine, Singing Sandra, Denise Plummer, and Drupatee Ramgoonai Persad. Mahabir notes the way in which these women’s lyrics were unafraid to explore domestic and sexual violence against women on a national stage.
For women, freedom of movement during carnival is a concrete matter rather than a theoretical abstraction. The ability cannot be taken for granted. It can only be guaranteed once sexist attitudes and behaviours that restrict a woman’s ability to freely revel and that impede her safe passage through mas’ are identified and resisted. Female independence is contingent on non-interference from carnival’s male masqueraders. The song calls into question an unexamined mandatory heterosexism that structures carnival’s interactions and determines the rules of engagement between masqueraders while defining its etiquette. It also makes visible the broader heteropatriarchy that houses carnival. Kemala Kempadoo defines and contextualises heteropatriarchy in the Caribbean as

a structuring principle in Caribbean societies that privileges heterosexual, promiscuous masculinity and subordinates feminine sexuality, normalizing relations of power that are intolerant of and oppressive toward sexual desires and practices that are outside of or oppose the dominant sexual and gender regimes. This structuring principle privileges men’s experiences, definitions, and perceptions of sexuality, whereby not only are appreciations of female (hetero)sexuality obscured, but homoeroticism and same-gender sexual relations are denied legitimacy. In this structure, coupled with a discourse of hypersexuality, lesbians, gays, transexuals, prostitutes, and other “sexual deviants” are cast not only as oversexed Caribbean subjects but as outlaws and noncitizens. (Kempadoo 9)

Kemapdoo’s examination of compulsory heterosexism is useful in analysing the way in which carnival necessarily attaches female bodies to male carnival goers which excludes the very idea of queer, lesbian, transgender and asexual identities and rendered these invisible at best, if not explicitly rejected. “Leave Me Alone”, in turn, rejects an unspoken set of social
rules around mas’ which foster the expectation that women ‘naturally’ wish to party, interact with or wine on a man and opens up a imaginative space where female bodies can reject and forego such invitations. These assumptions also treat female bodies as public property, freely accessible to any passing (male) reveller.

In “Leave Me Alone” Calypso Rose presents the novel scenario of a woman whose principle pleasure resides in the control of her own body while experiencing mas’ on her own sensory terms, independent of any other body. Engagement with the music and the visual experience of carnival, rather than men, is central to female pleasure. The song demands that a space be carved out for this type of interaction with mas’, while challenging masculinist assumptions and expectations of how mas’ should be performed. The idea of a female pleasure in mas’ that exists beyond a regulatory male presence is also toyed with in the accompanying video for the song which “features a B-plot about a woman who sneaks out of the house, and away from her male partner, to enjoy the Carnival festivities on her own” (Schwedel, “The Feminist Anthem”).

Like many other Trinidadians, acclaimed mas’ designer Anya Ayoung-Chee responded positively to “Leave Me Alone” and partnered with “local activists and artists to design and sell hundreds of T-shirts with the phrases “Leave Me Alone” and its colloquial corollary, “Leave She Alone” (Powers, “Trinidad’s Women Find a Rallying Cry”). In an article in the Washington Post, Ayoung-Chee discusses the social pressure placed on women to interact with men during carnival noting that “women are often labeled “stush” (snobbish or stuck-up) when they decline invitations to dance” (Powers, “Trinidad’s Women Find a Rallying Cry”). Ayoung-Chee not only discusses carnival etiquette and sexism, but also voices her objection towards rape culture. The mobilisation around bikini mas’ was but a rallying point in a wider
struggle against sexual violence in the Caribbean. A nascent yet growing form of digital-based social activism began to take root in 2016 after earlier murmurings, but found widespread expression in 2017. The formation of the online activist group #LifeinLeggings189 mirrored the speed of the movement that unseated Raymond Tim Kee from power. The hashtag movement, which originated in Barbados, was jointly created by Ronelle King and Allyson Benn in 2016 when King’s report of roadside harassment to local police was adroitly dismissed (Kalloo, “#Life in Leggings”; Kebede, “A #lifeinleggings”). As King reported in her own words:

Whenever I tried to explain to someone my experiences, I’d be asked questions such as, “What were you wearing?” #LifeInLeggings was purposely coined to dispel the myth that only certain types of woman are harassed and are deserving of their assault/abuse because of the way they are dressed. We know that this couldn’t be farther from the truth but the myth is perpetuated through the use of respectability politics. (qtd. in Mohammed, “Meet Ronelle King”)

The pair established the hashtag on Facebook and invited women to share and compare their own experiences of harassment and sexual violence. They created a narrative network that, for many women, confirmed that their experiences were neither isolated nor anomalous. The following day “#lifeinleggings “island-hopped to Trinidad and Tobago and Jamaica” and went viral on both Facebook and Twitter. In the following year, on the 11th of March, the online movement had successfully organised an unprecedented cross-regional movement that aimed

189 The group takes its name after a popular, casual and comfortable form of clothing that many women enjoy yet are sexualised and even harassed for wearing (Kebede “A #lifeinleggings”). The censure of leggings and ‘yoga pants’ seems to be an international phenomenon. In March 2017, United Airlines barred two female passengers from boarding a flight to Mexico for wearing leggings. One of the passengers was only able to board the flight once she had changed into a dress (Zoppo “Internet Erupts”).

361
to hold multiple marches “in Barbados, Antigua and Barbuda, Trinidad and Tobago, Dominica, the Bahamas, Guyana and Jamaica” (Kebede, “A #lifeinleggings”) in order to reclaim the streets and combat a culture that normalised and trivialised violence against women (Kebede, “A #lifeinleggings”; Mohammed, “Meet Ronelle King”). The #lifeinleggings movement solidified into a grassroots movement known as “Life in Leggings: Caribbean Alliance Against Gender-Based Violence” that has also affiliated itself with local feminist groups across various islands. It has also spawned similar hashtag movements such as #LévéDomnik in Dominica which similarly aggregates women’s accounts of harassment and abuse (Wallace, “The Bahamas: Interview”).

Amanda McIntyre, who was in charge of organising Trinidad’s #lifeinleggings, identifies the size of the movement as unprecedented in the region but also notes the way in which it is particularly attractive to young women (Kebede, “A #lifeinleggings”). Established Trinidadian grassroots movements such as Womantra and newly forged groups such as Say Something also allied with Life in Leggings in order to create a coalition to fight for women’s social, economic and sexual equality across a range of social spaces, including carnival. While Womantra began in 2011, Say Something is a non-governmental organisation (NGO) that directly rose out of the 2016 Woodford Square protests and was jointly founded by writer and activist Atillah Springer and her fellow activist Angelique V. Nixon. The pair “launched a group called Say Something to press government officials to conduct gender-sensitivity training and collect

---

190 The Dominican protest was re-scheduled on the 25th of March due to flash floods and landslides, while St. Lucia later joined the protests (Trotz, “International Women’s Day in the Caribbean”).

191 In an interview with Ronelle King, blogger Alicia Wallace cited statistics from both the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime and the Latin America and the Caribbean Region of the World Bank which noted that “[w]hile the worldwide average for rape was 15 per 100,000, the Bahamas had an average of 133, St. Vincent and the Grenadines 112, Jamaica 51, Dominica 34, Barbados 25 and Trinidad and Tobago 18” (Wallace, “The Bahamas: Interview”).
better data” (Powers, “Trinidad’s Women Find a Rallying Cry”). Another activist hashtag #NotAskingForIt also joined the fray and ran a campaign “featuring female students, workers, family members and bikini mas players,” which “circulated social media across the entire Caribbean region” (Hosein, “Carnival Goes Feminist”). The campaign deliberately and specifically drew on the aesthetics of bikini mas’ in order advance its anti-rape and anti-harassment politics. While carnival is neither the sole nor even the central concern of these groups, it has nonetheless played a critical and highly visible role in a burgeoning political movement in favour of women’s rights.

The Woodford Square protests and the creation of activist group Say Something hints at the potential for mas’ culture to generate ‘mass’ numbers. The alliances that were forged between local, single-issue protests and pan-Caribbean groups such as A Life in Leggings indicate the ability for bikini mas’ to challenge respectability politics. Widespread recognition of this capacity represents a departure from the ‘apolitical’ nature that is usually attributed to bikini mas’. In effect, the bodies captured and framed by male-constructed imagery and narratives that have come to drive the carnival industry are also bodies capable of agency. The female reveller has been able to harness the power of mass mobilisation. For a moment in 2016, carnival and bikini mas’ was re-fashioned from a tourist spectacle and transformed into a platform to advance female-produced visuals and imagery through masking. Women articulated all manner of political narratives that expressed local and national concerns while remaining explicitly attentive to gender issues. Thus, Gabrielle Hosein describes bikini mas’ as

the largest movement of women in Trinidad and Tobago seeking autonomy and self-determination around their sexuality and their bodies, in opposition to a particular kind
of respectability politics...purely for the joy and pleasure they experience...One can see those goals as highly political in our world today. (qtd. in Powers “Trinidad’s Women Find a Rallying Cry”)

The re-centralisation of the body during carnival is similarly evident in academic discourse on carnival. Author and scholar Giuseppe Ghini departs from the work of Rene Lachmann, the latter of whom focuses on the ‘culture of laughter’ that is integral to Bakhtin’s notion of the carnivalesque. Ghini argues that Lachmann overemphasises the discursive mayhem, inversion and (temporary) subversion that ensues when laughter punctures official seriousness. While he sees this as an important process, he also argues that a preoccupation with disorder and inversion can overlook what is important in Bakhtin’s notion of the carnivalesque: the unruly body that omits a laugh. As a result, Ghini insists on a recentralisation of corporeal flesh. By acknowledging the centrality of the physical body in carnival, he argues that it ultimately functions as the critical site of potential transformation for the reveller. He then posits that the Bakhtinian conception of carnival is directly ‘anti-gnostic.’ In effect, Ghini claims that Bakhtin successfully dismantles the traditional Western binary of pneum (spirit) and hyle (flesh) and “promises a salvation through the hyperbolization and hypertrophization of corporeality” (40).

Ghini then goes on to clarify and re-define ‘gnosis’—as opposed to Gnosticism—by referencing the work of German-American philosopher, Eric Voegelin. Aside from Order and History, which is often regarded as his magnum opus, Voegelin also wrote Science, Politics and Gnosticism, published in 1964. According to Voegelin, the world, while disorganised and highly problematic, is nonetheless salvageable through direct human action and effort. In effect, Ghini views ‘gnosis’ through a distinctly material, hedonistic and sensual lens, rather than situating it in its customary moral and religious framework. He argues at length that what
occurs in carnival is in fact a replication of ‘the fall’ in reverse, adding the subversive suggestion that by being wedded to the earthly flesh and by consciously revelling and celebrating the body in flagrant fashion, the individual can partake in a form of collective and earthly salvation. Ghini defines this as the ‘gnostic chronotope’ and describes how it works in the following fashion:

By losing his own personal and social identity through masquerade and role exchange, by taking the part of the grotesque body, the protagonist of Bakhtin’s Carnival redeems his limited and restricted life. He redeems himself from that fall from grace, which gave life to the world of institutional sadness. Thanks to the loss of boundaries between “I” and “We” in the grotesque body of Carnival, he conquers earthly immortality. (43)

Perhaps bikini mas’ has the ability to return carnival back to its linguistic roots, with its emphasis on the physical, revelling body and an attendant set of politics that increasingly regards the body of the reveller as both sacrosanct and inviolate. It not only recentralises the sensory and sensual body rather than the adornment of the mask; it also offers the possibility of a transcendence that is achieved not through laughter or inversion but through the direct embrace and celebration of ‘the flesh.’ By inhabiting the flesh, the reveller temporarily experiences a ‘farewell to flesh:’

The spirit of Carnival is about citizens being in full ownership of their bodies. Yes, that’s the spirit. The body as temple and the body as riot. The body as joy and the body as protest. The body as receptacle for, and inner pillar of, ideas greater than ourselves—Kings and Queens of the Bands. The body as soapbox, as vessel for ecstasy and pride and praise—calypso, extempo, soca, steelpan, the rhythm section. The body as politics
—ole mas and Canboulay, and yea, verily, even the wine. The body as doorway to the unknown—jab mas, the Bookman. The body as history, and as challenge to history—Dames Lorraines and Baby Dolls and Fancy Sailors, and so much more. For a festival whose title draws from a ‘farewell to flesh’, it does so not by wantonly discarding the flesh, by merely rejoicing in its sinew, and never by abandoning it, but allowing the flesh to transcend the mundane alongside us. For the flesh to not be mere flesh [emphasis added]. (Brandewijn, “A ‘Brief’ Open Letter”)

While bikini mas’ is becoming increasingly political, it in no way hinders the ability of traditional mas’ to offer protest and resistance. In the past, the creativity of mas’ was overtly politicised and was often accompanied by a placard bearing a statement that was carried by each participant. In contemporary mas’ placards bearing written statements of a political or aesthetic nature have faded from fashion and are far less likely to be seen during Jouvay mas’.

In the 21st century however, there seems to be a pan-Caribbean revival of the political placard in carnival. In 2010, a group of artists formed the carnival arts collective Jouvay Ayiti “as a creative consciousness-raising response to the rebuilding and restitution efforts in Haiti after the 2010 earthquake” (George, “Marvin George and Jouvay Ayiti”).

The group draws on the aesthetics of ole mas’ and specifically deploys Jouvay mas as “a strategy and raison d’être” that enables them to “work inside and outside the carnival space.” Along with ole mas’ characters and costumes, Jouvay Ayiti protestors also carry placards. While the group originates in Haiti, their political purview is decidedly pan-Caribbean and they have used an aspect of Trinidadian carnival to visually dramatise their protests. Their work includes championing the exposing or ‘unmasking’ of human rights abuses and they recently stood in opposition to the Dominican Republic’s jingoistic ‘back to Haiti’ campaign of
‘denationalisation’ which has involved the deportation of Dominican Republic citizens of Haitian descent. The gradual reclamation of carnival’s space for social protest is certainly not limited to the Caribbean as Brazilian carnival saw the re-emergence of an explicitly gender-based form of protest in Rio de Janeiro. Too often ‘Rio’ carnival is dismissed as the spectacular capital of bikini mas’ and samba parades while the political history of its carnival is under-emphasised. In 2016, however, carnival was a decidedly more serious affair as the event was used by explicitly feminist ‘blocos,’192 street parties first formed in 2015, to protest against the hypersexualisation and sexual violation of Rio’s bikini clad carnival queens. Not only were the blocos protesting for the immediate safety of female revellers, they were simultaneously championing freer and safer access to abortion rights on a national level. The blocos not only utilised both Latin American and North American icons of ‘strong’ women in their character play, they also carried ‘posters’ and protest placards that bore written statements:

A Brazilian woman dressed as the late Mexican artist and feminist icon Frida Kahlo cracked open a can of beer. Another, wearing a Rosie the Riveter outfit, began to dance to the music of a marching band. Other revelers carried posters bearing slogans such as “Let me samba in peace.”193 One placard proclaimed “Whenever She Wants,” alluding to the title of an acclaimed Brazilian film that translates as What Time Will She Be Back? (Young, “Brazilian Feminists Tackle Carnival”)

192 Journalist James Armour Young discusses the impact of blocos on carnival and the way in which they actively voice a position and a stake in national politics, while using carnival as a platform to achieve visibility. He identifies Mulheres Rodadas (a world-weary phrase that translates into “women who have been around”) as an example a newly formed yet highly vocal group that originated as a response to Brazil’s highly restrictive access to abortion rights. He claims that the group seeks to shatter a ‘silence of culture’ around sexism and is part of an emerging feminist movement in Brazil (Young “Brazilian Feminists Tackle Carnival”).

193 I suggest that there is clear political and regional connection between the Brazilian “Let me samba in peace” and the Trinidadian “Let me party!”
In the last five years, carnival parades have also involved serious meditation on local and global concerns including costumed commentary on conflicts such as the Iraq War during the 1990s, global warming and current protest movements such as no-DAPL (opposing the Dakota Access Pipeline). Led by the Standing Sioux Rock Tribe, no-DAPL is comprised of the Hunkpapa Lakota, Sihasapa Lakota and Yanktonai Dakota peoples who have organised to protest against the construction of “a 1,885 km crude oil delivery pipeline running from Bakken, North Dakota to Patoka, Illinois” (Atack, “What is the Dakota Access Pipeline”). The pipeline runs beneath Lake Oahe, which is situated “approximately half a mile upstream of the tribe’s reservation” (“What is the Dakota Access Pipeline”) and has the potential to poison the reservation’s ancestral land and water supply in the event of a leak. In 2017, a relatively new Trinidadian mas’ band by the name of Mas’ Passion dedicated their mas’ band theme and costuming to Tashunka Wito or ‘Chief Crazy Horse.’ On their official website they released a statement that detailed their shared solidarity with the protests of the Sioux of Standing Rock and their acknowledgement of common concerns over clean drinking water and climate change (“From the Home of D’Lakotas”).

Before I conclude, I would like to mention the contentious yet under-theorised role of ‘Kiddie’s Carnival,’ which was established in 1976 in order to preserve characters, narratives and performances of carnival. Children’s carnival exists as an adjunct to mainstream adult-dominated parades, yet also flourishes as a separate, vital microcosm. It is held over the weekend prior to carnival ‘proper’ and is distinct from adult bacchanalia. While it shares much of the music that structures adult carnival, it includes its own junior parade of the bands, Junior King and Queen and Junior Soca Monarch, with participants ranging in age from as young as two through to seventeen. “The Junior Parade of Bands receives sponsorship from the National Carnival Bands Association of Trinidad and Tobago, various community organizations such as
the Red Cross, and local businesses” (H. Smith, “Children's Musical Engagement” 289). Like other forms of Trinidadian mas’, children’s carnival has also been adopted throughout the Caribbean. The way in which children’s carnival is positioned as both a direct parallel and contrast to adult mas’ is of critical interest to this conclusion. Children’s carnival is often referred to as a bastion of creativity and regarded as an oasis of visual and thematic plenitude in the midst of carnival’s creative decline. As mas’ designer Richard Bartholomew enthuses:

Kiddie’s carnival brings out creativity first and foremost…if you look at the kiddie’s carnival costumes now or even any time, you see so much more creativity than the adult carnival. I mean, I’m not knocking their—um—bikini mas’, but…the kids have full costumes, complete costumes, you know? I always tell people kids are small people, so you have to extend the body… So it’s much more creative, so much more to watch and the lovely fabric that is used in the costuming lends to more movement and…bigger blocks of colour. And all that creates more impact. (qtd. in Bonterre)

Fellow designers Gerard Kelly and Rosalind Gabriel also praise the use of full, structured, lavish regalia as well as the educational capacity of children’s carnival. It offers children direct access to the characters and lore of ole mas’ while providing the opportunity to learn about the history of carnival. It thus provides a highly lauded, ‘educative’ function. As a result, in Trinidad, children’s carnival is a fertile site where many of the best adult designers in the country invest considerable time and effort. Dedicated to their craft, they commit intellectual, creative and material resources to their bands, resulting in a unique theater. Specific values are also attached to children’s carnival. Terms such as ‘clean,’ ‘fun,’ ‘joy’ and ‘innocence’ are routinely attributed to it and it operates along its own set of principles. For example: “There are of course, restrictions on the Junior parade of Bands: costumes must not be offensive or
sexual in nature, and children are discouraged from “wining” or dancing suggestively” (H. Smith, “Children's Musical Engagement” 289). Arguably, kiddie’s carnival is yet another temporalised ‘space’ for mas’. Its practices seem to reflect—at least in part—what is deemed appropriate and interesting for children as spectators and performers. However, the degree of adult participation in children’s carnival is such that it has been suggested that adults are, in fact, far more likely to enjoy children’s carnival than they do their own (Bonterre).

What is one to make of the fact that children’s carnival is comparable to the status of children’s literature, insofar as it is determined by the ideals, ideas and attitudes of adults, even as children are its ‘subject’? How much of the childhood imagination is reflected in it? Or does it predominantly operate as site of adult imagination and play? Does children’s carnival merely further the agenda of a preservationist carnival or does it genuinely re-vitalise carnival? If childhood play is a rehearsal of and preparation for adult life, what is one to make of the stark disjuncture between kiddie’s carnival and adult carnival? Furthermore, if children’s carnival functions as a site of ‘preservation’ and possible stasis, then how does this ethos problematise more romantic descriptors that suggest that carnival is an act of creative destruction, renewal and above all, innovation? To a degree, children’s carnival functions in a manner that is comparable to the role that is played by children’s fiction in literature. Both are deeply instructive and are deployed for pedagogical purposes, insofar as children’s carnival exists as an early training ground that inducts children into carnival as spectators, performers and, in some instances, mas’ designers. As Peter Minshall notes:

It starts when you’re a child, mindless, you don’t why you’re doing what you do. But at the age of 13, with cardboard box and Christmas tree bells turned inside out as eyes, and some silver and some green paint that I begged from the Chinese man who ran the
grocery at the bottom of the hill, and some grasses from San-San, which was the name of that very hill behind the house, and bits of wire, and bones the dogs had left around the yard dried in the sun and bleached, I prepared all by my precocious little self a costume for the Saturday afternoon children’s competition. (Schechner and Riggio 109)

What is significant about Peter Minshall’s account of his initiation into carnival is that, unlike contemporary carnival where costumes are more often than not pre-ordered by parents on-line, the child plays an active role in designing his or her own costume. As a result, they are instrumental in determining what type of mas’ character they will convey and what type of performance will accompany this. Contemporary children’s carnival, by contrast, contains a far greater degree of adult participation and regulation. Iconic children’s mas’ designer Jacqueline Koon How of San Fernando praises children’s carnival not in terms of what the space provides for the child reveller or participant, but the creative potential on offer for the adult mas’ designers. Koon notes that while outfits must be ‘wearable and durable’ and attractive to children in order to encourage them to actually participate, the designer also has the opportunity to be “experimental and artistic,” describing the costumes in questions as “a blank canvas” (Jason, “Koon How Creations”).

Both Jouvay mas’ and kiddie’s carnival act as sites of preservation where local history and tradition are not only preserved but permitted to prevail. Neither form of mas’ is able to compete against the international behemoth that is bikini mas’ in terms of specifically securing the lucrative reward of international attention and acclaim. Yet, both Jouvay and kiddie’s carnival persist and both enjoy high rates of participation, popularity and in the case of the latter, unprecedented levels of approval from the Trinidadian public. Contrary to Philip Scher’s
assertion that the presence of ole mas’ is government-sanctioned, a brief perusal of newspapers and internet forums certainly suggests that there is an increasing desire by ordinary Trinidadians to hold on to what is seen as a receding art form and a diminishing history.

Nevertheless, it would be premature to dismiss the ongoing presence of Jouvay mas’ and myopic to assume that the two forms of mas’ cannot co-exist on the streets, just as calypso and soca both share the fête tent. While Jouvay is played by adults and the other is specifically tailor-made for children they nevertheless share critical points of intersection in terms of their commemorative approach to masking. Ironically, even though Jouvay is often a ‘minimalist’ mas’ while Kiddie’s Carnival is a display of abundant regalia, both forms of mas’ are intimately linked to folklore and continue a tradition of commemoration artfully combined with spectacle. Both are greatly concerned with not only ‘preserving’ folkloric and historical narratives but transmitting these narratives. They are performed for international, national and local audiences all at once. At the same time, forms of mas’ undertake the task of ensuring that cultural continuity and a visible link—however tenuous—between carnival past and carnival present is retained. They also attempt to ensure an ongoing connection between participants and these stories and characters.

Ultimately social, cultural and historical contexts help to indicate, if not determine, the underlying and overarching objectives of each carnival movement. This holds true for revels in medieval Europe, 19th century Trinidad or 21st century Britain and Canada, respectively. Attention to the situatedness of the communities and discourses that coalesce around such periods of sustained revelry will offer insights into the ways in which carnival serves the needs of its multiple publics. As participants respond and engage, embracing carnival’s opportunities for experimentation and abandon, they stake a claim to its realisation, informing its aesthetics.
This may offer a partial explanation for why the grotesque and menacing cast of characters of ole mas’ have fallen by the wayside and become obsolete. Perhaps they no longer reflect or directly speak to the immediate concerns and needs of a contemporary social climate. In carnival immediacy is critical. For carnival, ever ephemeral, exists in the moment. Ever-responsive, it answers to the needs of the moment. Consequently, as middle-class status and lifestyles have become a viable possibility for many members of Trinidad’s working class and entry into an increasingly demure festival has become an attractive proposition for an existing middle-class, the aspirations and aesthetics that were reflected in earlier revelry has inevitably altered.

Carnival has been re-purposed and a different form of play has come into being. Pretty mas’, which is aligned with notions of high fantasy, marks a distinct ‘genre’ shift and, in narrative terms, infers a very different type of chronotope to that contained in representations of local folklore. Traditional narratives that were embedded in ole’ mas embraced the visual spectacle of the grotesque and were thus more inclined towards mockery, socio-political critique and an open celebration of vice. The grotesque in carnival served a particular function and it is important to question exactly what type of social and political climate it confronted, reflected, or answered to. Furthermore, if one focuses on the ‘materiality’ of carnival, then structure and organisation will necessarily inform any insight into the performative aspects of the festival. This stands in contradistinction to literary accounts and academic discourse which are more likely to focus on intangible qualities such as flexibility and ‘flux,’ particularly in terms of carnival’s ability to adapt to and reflect a current social climate. But as the scholarship on carnival advances, a range of varied and sophisticated theorisations on the event have emerged:
Carnivals, and carnivalesque artistic practices, are not essentially progressive or regressive; it depends on who is carnivalizing whom, in what historical situation, for what purposes, and in what manner. Actual carnivals form shifting configurations of symbolic practices, complex crisscrossings of ideological manipulation and utopian desire as their political valence changes in each new context. Official power has at times used carnival to channel energies that might otherwise have fueled popular revolt, but just as often carnival has provoked elite anxiety and been the object of official repression. (Shohat & Stam 304)

Texts such *Play Mas*, the *Dragon Can’t Dance* and *Midnight Robber* work against this tendency as the scope of their focus extends far beyond the ‘ephemeral’ moment of carnival. They choose, instead, to draw specific attention both to the extensive preparation leading up to carnival and the lingering aftermath that follows and surrounds the event. The physicality of carnival—and the tension between transformation and continuity—is critical to any understanding of the event. Not only does this tension provoke and inform the literature that focuses on Trinidadian mas’, it guides the academic and wider social discourse that surrounds carnival as an actual festival. Trinidadian carnival, in particular, has a history that is characterised by ephemerality and fragility but at the same time is marked by its endurance.
Bibliography


Berkeley, Cherisse. “A National Call for Raymond Tim Kee to Resign as Mayor.”


---. The Location of Culture, Routledge, 1994.


Capildeo, Surendranath. “The Stench of Hindu Shame.” *Express* [Trinidad & Tobago], 17 April 2007, p. 11.


Dowrich-Phillips, Laura. “Behind the Soca Music.” *Caribbean Beat*, no. 119, 2013,


---. “The Invention of Traditional Mas' and the Politics of Gender.” Green and Scher, pp. 25-47.


“Jamette Carnival.” *Nalis*, 2016,


Joseph, Jennifer. “Caribana Has Room to Improve.” *Torontoist*, 28 July 2016,
Joseph, Terry. “Comments.” *Sunday Express* [Trinidad & Tobago], 20 April 1997, p. 2/7.


“Junkanoo: Bahamian Festival.” *Bahamas Gateway.com*, 2000,

Kalloo, Sherene, “#Lifeinleggings.” *Daily Express* [Trinidad and Tobago], 4 Dec. 2016,


Kebede, Rebekah. “A #lifeinleggings: Caribbean Women's Movement Fights Sex Assaults, Harassment.” *Daily Mail* [Australia], 10 March 2017,


---. Salt, Faber and Faber, 1996.


---. Is Just a Movie, Faber and Faber, 2011.


---. West Indian Societies, Oxford University Press, 1972.


[Trinidad & Tobago], 17 Feb. 1984, p. 13,

uwispace.sta.uwi.edu/dspace/bitstream/handle/2139/40647/W130.pdf?sequence=1.


Matura, Mustapha. *Play Mas'; Independence; and Meetings: Three Plays*, Methuen, 1982.


Miller, Michael E. “Outrage in Trinidad After Mayor Blames Carnival Killing on Dancer’s ‘Lewd Behavior.’” *The Washington Post*, 12 Feb. 2016,


Pinto, Samantha. “‘Why Must All Girls Want to be Flag Women?’: Postcolonial Sexualities, National Reception, and Caribbean Soca Performance.” *Meridians:*


Rowe, Rochelle. *Imagining Caribbean Womanhood: Race, Nation and Beauty Competitions, 1929-70*. Manchester University Press. 2013


Ryan, Selwyn. *The Jhandi and the Cross: The Clash of Cultures in Post-Creole Trinidad and Tobago*, University of the West Indies, 1999.


---. “Performing the History: Contesting Historical Narratives in Trinidad and Tobago.”

73–109.

Trotz, Alissa. “International Women’s Day in the Caribbean: Marching in Solidarity with
#LifeinLeggings to End Violence Against Women and Girls.” *Stabroek News*, 13
diaspora/03/13/international-womens-day-caribbean-marching-solidarity-

Symbology.” *Rice Institute Pamphlet - Rice University Studies*, vol. 60, no. 3, 1974, 

---. “Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in *Rites de Passage.*” *The Forest of Symbols: 
Aspects of Ndembu Ritual*, Turner, pp. 93-111.


Valentine, McKinley. “Chronos & Kairos.” *The Whippet*, 2013, 

van Koningsbruggen, Peter. *Trinidad Carnival: A Quest for National Identity*, Macmillan, 
1997.

Vogel, Shane. “Jamaica on Broadway: The Popular Caribbean and Mock Transnational

Walborn, Christopher D. “A Brief History: Origins of the Steel Drum and *Rhythmical Steel.*”

*Toot Hills School Website*,


---. *Three Plays: The Last Carnival; Beef, No Chicken; A Branch of the Blue Nile*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1986.


---. *Selected Poetry*, selected, annotated and introduced by Wayne Brown, Heinemann, 1993

---.“The Caribbean: Culture or Mimicry?” Hamner, pp. 51-7.


Williams, Eric. A History of the People of Trinidad and Tobago, Andre Deutsch, 1964.


