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To Be Dragon and Man: The Cultural Politics of Carnival in Earl Lovelace's *The Dragon Can't Dance*

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Trinidadian writer Earl Lovelace's 1979 novel *The Dragon Can't Dance* sets out to portray Trinidad from Home Rule in 1956 to the 1970s not only in socio-economic but also ideological transition. Lovelace achieves this, via depictions of historical developments in the political dimensions of carnival. Carnival, at the beginning of the text, is a means by which impoverished urban Trinidadians perform a gesture of oneness, community, and continuity with an imagined pre-colonial history. For once a year during carnival season, Trinidadian revellers in the novel find a voice gesturing defiance of their subjugation under imperial rule. At the start of *The Dragon Can't Dance*, Lovelace portrays the protagonist Aldrick Prospect as a man who has lived in the urban barrack yard slums of Calvary Hill for 17 years. Aldrick is a product of a diasporic wave from the country to the city, his father Sam having initiated his family's exodus from their old cocoa estate in Manzanilla to the island capital. Without education and training, the Prospects have struggled to find work in Port-of-Spain's economy and thus, the men in particular have languished in the slum margins of town, finding no means to assert a sense of masculine status in a patriarchal colonial society. The adult Aldrick in the novel cuts a lonely, reclusive figure in his dilapidated shack, as he stitches together a different self-made dragon costume annually to wear in public for Port-of-Spain's carnival season. For much of the time, he keeps himself at a social distance while watching and reflecting as generations of youths grow up and negotiate their way through the squalor and deprivations of the hill. The dragon costume is his means to find a place in a marginal society that only manages to amass itself in gesture. Dragon *mas* had been the way by which his uncle Freddie before him had made a public gesture of manhood. Aldrick, following a family pattern, seeks a sense of selfhood via the dragon disguise. Afro-Trinidadian ritual customs such as masque and dance allow him to become a vital part of the life and consciousness, and a symbol of both masculinity and miracle, in the physical and cultural space of the yard and amongst young and old alike.

Aldrick's shaping of selfhood via carnival, costume, fire, and dance has long facilitated an imaginary of African ritual, identity, and cultural heritage, which refuses to be obliterated by colonial hegemonic attempts to marginalise and exclude non-western cultural forms. Dressed as a fire-breathing dragon, he becomes a symbol of cultural political resonance and collective memory. His annual costumes and processional dances are in many respects politically-infused gestures against a long history of social oppression. The dragon dance allows a performative modality for negotiating and mapping in physical space a continuum of communal Afro-Trinidadian history, selfhood and oneness. Where African names and pasts have been lost by slavery and its legacies, dance reconfigures the social practices of Orisha in a new Caribbean context. Yet, at the climax of the novel, Aldrick is faced with a new crisis. He is no longer able or willing to continue to wear his self-made

masque, nor will he participate in local festivities in the political climate of post-independence Trinidad.

The question of why Lovelace creates a narrative showing that over time, Aldrick's dragon can no longer perform its show of historical defiance and self-identification in a decolonising Trinidad, is one which Kenneth Ramchand's 1988 essay, "Why The Dragon Can't Dance," tries to answer. Ramchand recognises that, since Trinidadian Home Rule in 1956 and independence in 1962 came about through peace rather than revolution, the islands' disparate ethnic and social elements never had the opportunity to come together as one and find a commonality of identity in collective resistance. The nation state of Trinidad and Tobago

...was granted Independence without having to fight for it, without the experience of a struggle that might have burnished and unified us. We entered our Independence, Africans, Indians, Chinese, and White Creoles as separate, uneasy, and even disillusioned groups. (Ramchand 2)

In Ramchand's view, Aldrick comes to regard the prevailing discourse of national unity championed at carnival, "All o' we is one," as still unrealised due to an Afrocentric bias in Trinidadian politics. For example, Aldrick observes that while many people of his barrack-yard community proclaim oneness, they nonetheless ostracise an Indo-Trinidadian newcomer, Pariag.¹ Independence has effected no oneness, no fellowship.² Aldrick, by the novel's close, seeks to find new ways to reach out to connect with Pariag and his broader Trinidadian community, since the pre-independence theatre and revolutionary promise of the dragon dance had clearly failed to usher in the unification of the people in uprising.

Ramchand's essay sets a strong precedent for readings of Lovelace's novel by scholars such as Diana Brydon, Linden Lewis, and Nadia I Johnson. While all of these academics provide vital contributions to discussion, what is still lacking so far in scholarship and criticism of *The Dragon Can't Dance* is a systematic, comprehensive historicist reading of the text's treatment of the evolution of the cultural politics of Trinidadian carnival, from its European and African origins, through to the novel's last depicted events in the early 1970s. This can be most comprehensively redressed via a close examination of the novel's portrayal of

¹ Since *The Dragon Can't Dance* is concerned specifically with events on the island of Trinidad rather than Trinidad and Tobago as a whole, I shall hereafter refer to Trinidadian events, carnival, and politics.

² Brereton observes how an Afrocentric Trinidadian government excluded Indo-Trinidadians: "With the accession to power by the PNM in 1956, and independence under a PNM government in 1962, Indo-Trinidadians found, as the narrative continues, that an even more burdensome oppression by this African-dominated government had replaced oppression by the British" (225).

changes in society and carnival, as perceived by the text's major characters Aldrick, Fisheye, and Philo. The rationale of this paper is to show the following. In order to understand what we as readers are encouraged to think are Lovelace's intentions regarding the politics of carnival, in the author's creation of Aldrick's dragon as a character who cannot dance at the end of the novel, we need to ask how and why carnival, prior to the 1960s and 1970s, had functioned as a catalyst of, or response to, turning-points throughout colonial Trinidadian history. We also need to consider how independence compromised carnival's cultural political power.

Lovelace's novel does not provide an overt narrative of the development of carnival from the 1780s onwards. Flashbacks from the focalised perspectives of key characters aside, the novel's main sequential timeframe is predominantly set from its early narrated events in the latter, post-Home Rule 1950s, through to the novel's close in the setting of the early 1970s. That being said, it is the key contention of this paper that Lovelace's novel works in many respects like an archaeological site that presents a history of carnival practices in formal, social and political development, from European and African origins, through the colonial era, to post-Home Rule and beyond independence. Indeed, a historicist close reading of how these elements work stratigraphically in the novel reveals much about how Lovelace creatively documents changes in Trinidad's socio-cultural makeup in key moments in its political formation. Once one comprehends a broad but also detailed picture of the novel's historical elements and contexts, and how these features work in the site of the text as a whole, one can analyse effectively how Lovelace engages with and critiques the implications of decolonising processes in the changing cultural politics of carnival and, by extension, Trinidad as a post-independence society.

Carnival is in many respects a cultural refraction of socio-ideological forces. It is a statement of, and on, various conditions and perspectives of the island at the particular moment and space of its spectacle. As art, it is society's mirror up to its own nature. *The Dragon Can't Dance* creatively relates street carnival's longstanding ability, throughout the colonial era, to define individual and social roles in response to political, ideological, and demographic changes, tensions and conflicts. The novel moves on to explore a new crisis of identity in the post-independence era among a Trinidadian people who, for nearly two centuries and only until recently, had been able to use forms of masquerade, dance and procession as an effective mode of social resistance and radical self-representation. It shows how, while Home Rule, then independence and economic improvements had brought a measure of prosperity to the island, many of the impoverished people of Trinidad's slums began to struggle to reinvent themselves in the face of drastic social change. Lovelace depicts the wearers of old masks of colonial-era carnival rebellion as soul-searching for new masks, and for new modes of performance, in order to challenge dominant constructions of social hierarchies and fixed identities.

Lovelace asks if such modes of self-representation have been exhausted, and whether the dragon can find a new way to dance.

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Trinidadian carnival is a vital hybrid of European and African cultural forces of festivity, play, and communal social rebellion. Indeed, the deepest layer in the historical stratigraphy of *The Dragon Can't Dance* constitutes skilful references to carnival's origins in medieval European society.³ These elements are understated but crucially registered in the novel, which otherwise foregrounds carnival's African origins. For instance, Lovelace portrays *Mardi-gras*, with all its history of masque, frivolity, grotesqueness and potential revolt, as the customary, boisterous climax of carnival festivities. Trinidadian revellers, like the participants of the European carnivalesque, use masque and gesture to *transform* themselves, poetically in the performativity of carnival. Aldrick muses at the proud spectacle of revelry, "This is people taller than cathedrals; this is people more beautiful than avenues with trees" (115). In European medieval festivals of misrule, which had their own origins in Roman carnival, revellers asserted themselves through masque to be at least as important to the sum of humanity as the officious owners of grandiose cathedrals and opulent homesteads (Yaneva 35). Lovelace's language here, which constructs cathedrals as synecdoches of power, alludes to the radical cultural politics of early European carnival in daring to equal the loftiness of society's masters. Moreover, when Aldrick stitches together his own carnival costume, he recognises what Bakhtin would call medieval carnival's potential for offering its participants a second life. To wear masque is a political gesture to construct a respected, even feared, subversive alter-identity, which will be understood in the eyes of one's community and most importantly, one's oppressors. The narrator of *The Dragon Can't Dance* observes of Aldrick, "It was through [masquerade] that he demanded that others *see* him, recognize his personhood, be warned of his dangerousness" (28).

In Trinidad, European and African migrant cultural forms fused together from the early colonial period onwards, via the seasonal performance of carnival, to facilitate the constant renegotiation and re-development of selfhood and community on the island. Carnival was one key factor in the determination of Trinidad's consistently changing social and cultural fabric. For example, many of the French Catholic planter-settlers who arrived in Trinidad after the Spanish instituted the Cedula of Population in 1783 continued to perform the masquerade balls and carnivals that they had brought with them from their homeland via the

³ For details on Carnival and Europe, see Bakhtin's *Rabelais and His World* (1965), and Twycross and Carpenter's *Masks and Masking in Medieval and Early Tudor England* (2002).

French Antilles (Forbes-Erikson 240). Andrew Pearse writes that these French festivities included “concerts, balls, dinners, hunting parties, and “fêtes champêtres [...] which lasted from Christmas to Ash Wednesday” (Pearse 176). British Trinidadian colonists who became more dominant on the island from the 1790s held their own fancy-dress balls, while the island’s “free coloured” society held imitative, private masques and processions.⁴

The African population that French and British colonists had enslaved and transplanted to the island observed, then adapted, these rituals of Europe. Drumming had always played an essential part in Orisha rituals in West Africa and continued to feature prominently in Afro-Trinidadian communal custom.⁵ Yet also, in response to the “official,” private carnivals from which they were excluded, many slaves synthesised their own hybrid carnivals, which they took to Trinidad’s open spaces. Louis Regis argues that as early as the 1780s many slaves, whose African cultural practices had long involved mask, dance, and public ritual, adapted European carnival practices in their own festivities (Regis 2). Earl Lovelace describes in *The Dragon Can’t Dance* the history and significance of the mask in African culture. The African mask denoted socially recognised and feared warrior status, power, and a spiritual link with tribal ancestors:

[T]he masqueraders’ coming [...] goes back centuries for its beginnings, back across the Middle Passage, back to Mali and to Guinea and Dahomey and Congo, back to Africa when maskers were sacred and revered, the keepers of the poisons and heads of secret societies. (112)

Semiotically, the mask in Trinidadian carnival, both in history and in Lovelace’s novel, has become a hybrid. It allows Afro-Trinidadian participants an imagined community and diasporic link to the ancestral heritage of a constructed African homeland of the mind, as a performative means of healing the trauma of transplantation and dislocation from half-forgotten social and cultural origins. It also serves the function of masque in European carnival, to allow people with no

⁴ Pearse’s article provides a useful gloss of the changing colonial hierarchies between Spanish, French, and British powers in the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth centuries. It is mindful of the prevailing influence of each colonial society on the island’s cultural politics in the period (evidenced in the forms and customs of carnival).

⁵ George Eaton Simpson notes that “In the shango cults of Trinidad, as among the Yoruba, drums are the most important musical instruments. Shango cult drums in Trinidad, made in sets of three, resemble the double-headed *bala* drums more than the other drums found among the Yoruba—the *igbin* (open-ended log drums with single leather heads, tuned by wooden pegs, which stand on three legs); the *dundun* or *gangan* (two-headed, hourglass-shaped, ‘pressure’ drums; or the shallow hemispherical *gudugudu* drum with a single fixed head)” (1208).

visible social status to become colourful, striking, identifiable social forces in a larger community.

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The next layer in the historical stratigraphy of the cultural politics of Trinidadian carnival that Lovelace represents in *The Dragon Can't Dance* concerns carnival's growth as a means of resistance to European colonialism. There were other strategies by which the Afro-Trinidadian populace Africanised European custom. From the 1780s onwards, Afro-Trinidadians mimicked pyrotechnical popular European festive, paganistic rituals of agricultural renewal and harvesting such as *flambeaux*, which also took place in the Americas on the slave-owning estates of New Orleans, Louisiana. Afro-Trinidadians publicly torched and carried in procession the sugar cane they had been forced to work on the plantations. Following emancipation in the 1830s, the ceremony of *canboulay* gave a customary incendiary practice a riotous and revolutionary aspect, throughout the following decades of British imperial rule over the Trinidadian Crown Colony (Sofu 19).⁶ By 1972, a decade after Trinidadian independence, writer Errol Hill proposed that *canboulay* had been the "ritual beginning" of Trinidadian carnival (Hill 23). Certainly, the birth of *canboulay* was a point at which Trinidadian carnival customs and ritual were infused with a radical new cultural politics, via its transplanted and oppressed slave population.⁷ Yet, this festive custom mimics and subverts a European ritual precedent, while indeed applying elements of African public ritual to its ceremony. It is a ritual synthesised from a politically charged interweaving of European and African cultural forms. In addition to *canboulay*, there were other examples of a radical Afro-Trinidadian cultural blend of European and African festive practices. Comic verbal compositions of European carnival in time fused with the southern Nigerian custom of *kaiso* (the communal extemporisation of oral composition) to create calypso, a comic musical poetic form where its Afro-Trinidadian performers sang in variant creoles, in mockery of colonists, themselves, and one another.

Lovelace perceives calypso as a form of heraldic custom signifying the arrival and social presence in carnival season of a people who, for most of the year,

⁶ Coming from the French "cannes brûlées," "burnt canes," the name designates a reenactment ritual with extremely strong resistance connotations, from its birth, to the celebration of emancipation in 1834 and 1838. See Guiseppa Sofu's "Carnival, Memory and Identity" (2014).

⁷ The etymology of the word *canboulay* is a matter of contention. Errol Hill, and Sofu, regard *canboulay* as a creolisation of *cannes brûlées*, or burnt cane. Jeff Henry, on the other hand, argues that *canboulay* derives from the Kikongo word *kambula*, meaning procession (Hill 2008). In the hybrid imagination of post-independence Trinidad, the word has in many respects come to mean both concepts.

have no face or voice. Calypso is the signal for a mass of peoples to stand tall amid the squalor of their environment, and find pride, selfhood and self-expression in spite of such social iniquities that might make one feel worthless and insignificant. The tunes of calypso change like masks and costumes from season to season, and thus allow the people to reinvent themselves as socially relevant participants, or more importantly agents of change, in the cultural-political landscape of the island. Etymologically, the Hausa word *kaiso* derives from *ka*, meaning “go,” and *iso*, meaning “forward” (“kaiso” 482). *Calypso* thus implies in terms of the politics of Afro-Trinidadian carnival an African notion of going forward, of protagonistic action, and an ability to direct the future course of individual and communal selves and lives.

CALYPSO

Up on the hill with Carnival coming, radios go on full blast, trembling these shacks, booming out calypsos, the songs that announce in this season the new rhythms for people to walk in, rhythms that climb over the red dirt and stone, break-away rhythms that laugh through the groans of these sights, these smells, that swim through the bones of these enduring people so that they shout: Life! They cry: Hurrah! They drink a rum and say: Fuck it! They walk with a tall hot beauty between the garbage and dog shit, proclaiming life, exulting in the bare bones of their person and their skin. (5)

Kaiso is, in Trinidadian carnival, often a laudatory shout meaning “Bravo!” *Calypso* is therefore implicitly and in socio-political terms a cry of praise, of celebration for the moving forward of a society ordinarily held back by social hierarchical norms. The cry of “Fuck it!” in the above quotation works like that of “*Kaiso!*” It is not a proclamation of withdrawal or retreat, but one of life-affirmation and determination to celebrate one’s continuing, purposeful humanity in spite of owning nothing but one’s bare bones and skin. It is a demonstration of pride and self-motivation as a transcendence of the squalor caused by hierarchical injustices. (The centrality of *kaiso* to the integrity of carnival as anti-colonial community self-expression is not lost on Lovelace, who later in the novel and at a higher point in its historical stratigraphy of carnival focuses in depth on the character of the calypsonian Philo as a barometer of socio-political and cultural crisis in post-independence Trinidad and Tobago.)

By the mid- nineteenth century, Trinidadian carnival had become a multicultural prism through which diverse cultural politics and customs of European and African peoples were continually refracted as representations of the state of the island at particular moments in its history. Every carnival was a snapshot

of the island in the instant of performance. Its formal properties of masquerade or *mas*, calypso and street pageant would be open to constant reinvention, to allow the people new and topical masks through which to represent or satirise the evolving, contending cultural discourses of the time. Where state procession championed tradition, carnival glorified upheaval, the turning upside-down of worlds, and a continual redefinition of social identity.

From the 1840s, a new, post-Emancipation urban Trinidadian underclass experienced appalling slum conditions and state violence, in ramshackle barrack yards and shanties. Bridget Brereton observes the effects of the colonial violence that pervaded in the slums at the time:

Colonialism rested on racism which meant separate and unequal treatment for the non-white majority, psychological violence against the inferior groups, and disrespect for the culture of the people. This was a climate in which violence (physical and psychological) could thrive. Colonialism and racism made possible atrocious living conditions and a low quality of life, which in turn promoted a milieu in which violence and aggression were salient. (Brereton 8)

Overcrowding and poverty caused frustration and resentment between rival gangs of young men seeking to assert status and primacy in their community, often through the sole means of gender and social self-definition at their disposal: physical violence. Hidden in the slums, the deprivations of many vulnerable people could be ignored by colonists and the black middle classes. In public carnival, however, aggrieved slum revellers made their presence felt with the revolutionary potency of mocking laughter, or, as Lovelace puts it, “[l]aughter [that] is not laughter,” but rather “a groan coming from the bosom of these houses – no – not houses, shacks that leap out of the red dirt and stone” (1). Their licentious radicalism, in full bawdy spectacle, presented a threat of upheaval to the existing order and colonial Victorian, hypocritically “civilising” mores of the time.

What became known as *jamette* carnival evolved throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century as a radical feature on the “respectable” boundaries of Trinidadian carnival. The creole term *jamette* is thought to derive from *diamètre*, a French word meaning diameter (*jamette* 460-1). Socially marginal yard figures employed their own bawdy, hybrid carnival rituals of *mas*, drumming, *kalinda*, calypso and *wine* on the diameter, or borders, of official festivity. They sought to express themselves, in spite of the wishes of the middle classes who would rather they would be quiet and remain spoken for. Marginal yard men and women, including badjohns and sex workers, taunted the hypocrisies of their easily offended but murderously punitive, white colonial rulers. They did so, with open displays of lewdness and grotesque debauchery which redrew the boundary of the circle of

visible Trinidadian society to include themselves definitely within that recognised field.⁸ In *The Dragon Can't Dance*, Aldrick reflects on the impact of *jamette* carnival as a cultural political form of artistic and performative protest and defiance, and as a statement of radical and dangerously potent *négritude* and alterity in the face of the repressive dictates of a white colonial hierarchy. Black men wear blacker masks and thus construct themselves as the violent, revolutionary Other of the ruling classes' fears. They find an ancestral, masculine and politically powerful identity in roleplaying, self-caricature and performance:

Once upon a time the entire Carnival was expressions of rebellion. Once there was stickfighters who assembled each year to keep alive in battles between themselves the practice of a warriorhood born in them; and there were devils, black men who blackened themselves further with black grease to make of their very blackness a menace, a threat. They moved along the streets with horns on their head and tridents in hand. (113)

From the 1840s to the early 1880s, a threatened white colonial Trinidadian society balked at a street carnival in which *jamette* forms were ever more prevalent and challenging to its power, sensibilities, and traditions. Growing consternation grew among British colonial society, particularly regarding the practice of *canboulay*.⁹ Trinidadian carnival-goers had seized upon and adapted medieval European forms of lampooning lords of misrule. In procession, they overtly mocked stereotypical colonial figures such as the whip-wielding *jab-jab* or satin-wearing, clownish slave master, his *Dame Lorraine* or mistress, and various other establishment stereotypes.¹⁰ Lovelace nods to this practice, where Aldrick recollects “the jab jabs, men in jester costumes, their caps and shoes filled with tinkling bells, cracking long whips in the streets, with which they lashed each other with full force” (113). The fact that the actors of the *jab-jab* were prepared to attack one another without displaying capitulation to blows that, at “landing, must have been burning pain,” signifies a revolutionary message. The people have become so brutalised by their treatment that they are prepared to withstand any further ill-treatment, and even to

⁸ “In all probability, nineteenth-century, working-class blacks, the chief participants of Jamette Carnival, also may have perceived their performances to be oppositional, or in direct contrast, to the Victorian code of moral ethics. Unlike the colored middle class, they were less inclined to aspire to the white community’s sense of morality and to adopt their cultural practices.” (qtd in Franco 29)

⁹ “RG Hamilton, a colonial office representative from London, who lived in Trinidad throughout the 1870s called canboulay a ‘senseless, irrational amusement, that affords a pretext for the indulgence of unbridled licentiousness on the part of the worst of the population.’” (Guzda 3)

¹⁰ “Additionally, the partygoers would impersonate figures like the Governor, Chief Justice, the Attorney General, well known barristers and solicitors, socially-prominent cricketers, and other props of society. There was hardly an upper class profession that was not lampooned.” (Guzda 3)

turn the whips on their colonial oppressors with impunity and aggression equal to that shown towards them. The colonial government, scared and affronted by the suggestion of a politically aware, culturally articulate, and strong-armed mass revolt of African society against the civilising mission of the British Empire, banned African percussion on the island in 1880. The poor still held their carnival in February 1881, and beat drums, burned cane, and engaged in full, bawdy and satirical street festivity. Thus, they demonstrated a purposeful act of political defiance against the colonial state and its proclaimed civilising values.

The next layer in the novel's historical stratigraphy alludes to the birth of bourgeois Trinidadian street carnival at the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth century. It also portrays the tensions between ostensible efforts at what we would now call gentrification in carnival and the role of the dragon and stickfighting badjohn in maintaining the subversive power of *jamette* carnival practices. Briefly, the historical context of this strata can be summarised thus. Although police attempted to suppress *canboulay* and *jamette* carnival, the riots that ensued caused so much damage to British colonial face, if not authority, that the ban was reversed in 1882. Following the lifting of the ban, black middle class Trinidadians and even whites became more involved in the carnival, albeit with an input that subsequent commentators have seen as an effort at deliberate de-Africanisation of carnival (Dudley 207). Such attempts frequently failed. From the late 1880s, devil *mas* became a popular feature of parade. It assimilated features of Shango ritual and performed in public a political gesture the subversive capacity of a perceived demonic Other to usurp, by possession, the outward forms of colonial Trinidadian society from within. Carnival organisers may well have attempted to attract a more middle-class audience by introducing big bands into processions. However, leader Patrick Jones challenged this new convention by adding to the creation of dragon *mas* in 1908. He took inspiration from a European "high" cultural text such as Dante's *Inferno*, with its imps and dragons, and devised a creolised pageant with visible radical cultural politics. Here, Afro-Trinidadian performers dressed and performed as indomitable dragons. In many respects, they writhed and danced in styles reminiscent of Orisha warrior spirit dances, and celebrated their recalcitrance in resisting control by surrounding imps (Procope 280).

Moreover, in 1911, Jones was inspired by the story of St George and the Dragon to base the carnival dragon on illustrations of traditional British pageantry ("dragon" 313). Yet this Trinidadian dragon, a signifier of Otherness opposite to the national English heroic model, was not pursued or slain by the icon of English civilising nationalism. Rather, it was free to claim the streets and assert violently its mastery over the Crown Colony. The beast of the dragon *mas* therefore became a potent sign of the rage and flame of a people capable of turning beast once and for all, on the forces of Empire. The dragon and his dance thus signified a gesture

towards a dangerous, anti-colonial history of alterity with which festival revellers identified and which the establishment, like a thwarted carnival imp, might, come the threat of revolution, barely contain.¹¹

In *The Dragon Can't Dance*, Lovelace conveys how street carnival in pre-independence era Trinidad successfully co-opts and appropriates bourgeois carnival's recent formal innovations to express once again an ancestral voice of anti-colonial resistance. Aldrick's industry in sewing together the dragon costume is a gesture indicating that he himself, transfigured in masque, might be possessed by his ancestral lives and experiences into one recognisable, communal body that exacts redress over past injustices:

Aldrick worked slowly, deliberately; and every thread he sewed, every scale he put on the body of the dragon, was a thought, a gesture, an adventure, a name that celebrated some part of his journey to and his surviving upon this hill. He worked, as it were, in a flood of memories, not trying to assemble them, to link them to get a linear meaning, but letting them soak him through and through (28)

Aldrick realises that he can, in his carnival dragon costume, construct himself as a signifier or spiritual embodiment of the collective memory of his Afro-Trinidadian people. On Carnival Monday, a festive pre-Lenten occasion with origins in European public ritual, Aldrick fashions himself as a symbol of an entire, rebellious, transplanted Afro-Caribbean people:

...every Carnival Monday morning, Aldrick Prospect, with only the memory burning in his blood, a memory that had endured the three hundred odd years to Calvary Hill felt, as he put on his dragon costume, a sense of entering a sacred mask that invested him with an ancestral authority to uphold before the people of this Hill, this tribe marooned so far from the homeland that never was their home, the warriorhood that had not died in them, their humanness that was determined not by the possession of things. (112)

¹¹ The origins of dragon iconography in Trinidad are complex and several, but they have always symbolised danger to European expansionists and conquerors, even from the beginnings of colonial encounter on the island. When Christopher Columbus arrived in Trinidad in July 1498, the strong currents at the surging mouth of the sea between the island and South America presented such a threat to his crew that he named the most hazardous location *La Boca del Dragón* ("The dragon's mouth"). This may be the first instance of the employment of dragon mythology in Trinidad. See Evelina Gužauskytė, *Christopher Columbus's Naming in the "Diarios" of the Four Voyages* (2014).

In the midst of carnival, Aldrick is transformed into a collective anti-colonial spirit:

For two full days Aldrick was a dragon in Port of Spain, moving through the loud, hot streets, dancing the bad-devil dance, dancing the stickman dance [...] He was Manzanilla, Calvary Hill, Congo, Dahomey, Ghana. He was Africa, the ancestral masker, affirming the power of the warrior, prancing and bowing, breathing out fire, lunging against his chains, threatening with his claws, saying to the city, "I is dragon. I have fire in my belly and claws on my hands; watch me! Note me well, for I am ready to burn down your city. I am ready to tear you apart, limb by limb." (115-116)

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Moving upwards in our historical stratigraphy, towards what we might call the independence-era gentrification of carnival, we enter the timeframe of the novel's main narrative. While there are flashback episodes throughout the course of the novel that present background biographical information regarding the formative years of characters such as Aldrick, Fisheye, Pariag and Philo and their ancestors, the main sequential narrative of this ostensibly realist text commences at least as late as after Home Rule in 1956. We can see that the novel places the start of the main action of the story after this historical marker, because Chapter Four's flashback story of Fisheye, "The Bad John," refers to the first PNM general election victory and its aftermath shortly before resolving its own linear chronological narrative in coincidence with the main timeframe of the early chapters of the novel.

The novel's main sequential narrative explores the marked changes that affected Trinidadian society and its cultural expression in carnival, and which depleted the revolutionary power of masquerade and dance, in the light of the events of Home Rule and independence. Lovelace fictionalises processes by which carnival became divested of much of its social force largely as a response to the shifting of the platform for socio-cultural self-determination to a nationalist political platform, and also due to efforts by a new national élite to manipulate carnival to its own ends. As Green and Scher observe, "The [Trinidadian] government has sought to appropriate the festival as a symbol of the nation and in doing so to establish the government's legitimacy to rule as representative of "the people" since the advent of full internal self-rule in 1956 and with greater urgency since independence from Great Britain in 1962" (Green and Scher 3-4). Green and Scher indicate that PNM leader and new premier, Eric Williams, made a point of

seeking to contain the running and public image of carnival as a nationalist construct. Williams was willing to excise most of its original, radical politics as long as it appeared at least superficially a simulacrum of many of the formal properties of pre-Home Rule carnival, for safe public consumption (Green and Scher 5). Lovelace sensitively registers the ideological changes and tensions leading up to and after the point at which Williams's PNM came to government. He carefully seeks to detail the effects of Williams's politics upon carnival immediately prior to and following Home Rule in 1956 onwards, from the perspective of one of the novel's chief characters, the stick-fighting carnival badjohn Fisheye. Lovelace chooses to portray these changes and events through Fisheye's eyes because Fisheye is such an archetypal force of carnival's subversive politics and incorrigible resistance to containment by authoritarian forces. Carnival has, for him, always been the principal means by which to attain social visibility.

Chapter Four, "The Bad John," relates as a flashback Fisheye's story, and portrays the social upheavals of the pre- through to post-Home Rule period in Trinidad, largely via the character's focalised perspective. Fisheye is shown to recollect arriving as a young man in Port-of-Spain from Moruga. The narrative reveals that Fisheye's moment of arrival and involvement in the capital's gang culture takes place at the very earliest following the settlement of US marines on the island in 1941. The gangs in which Fisheye quickly involves himself see themselves as warriors competing for primacy amidst the costumed warriors of carnival processions, from the historical "Ghengis Khan and Attila and Sparticus" through to the more contemporary Hitler and US marines of the day (47). Fisheye is particularly keen to construct himself in the social realm of the island's yard communities as a warrior figure to be recognised and feared. He finds in the yard district of Calvary Hill a place where he can create a social and masculine gender identity. He aims not to be ignored or emasculated by the prevailing power structure, but for people to view him in the social milieu of the yard as "a man, [whose] strength and quickness had meaning" (46). In spite of efforts to make carnival palatable for "respectable" attendees, the merger of middle-class and yard street festive forms since the *canboulay* riots had led to the growth rather than suppression of tambour-bamboo and later, steelbands. Local gangs had manipulated the largely middle-class innovation of carnival bands, via steelpan, into a demonstration of violent, *canboulay*- and *jamette* carnival-style political resistance of colonial civilising values. Influenced by American western movies imported to Trinidad in the wake of a growing US presence on the island, Fisheye fashions himself as an outlaw cowboy. He even affects a horseman's macho, bow-legged walk.¹² Gang membership for Fisheye signifies contravention of the dominant codes of respectability by continuing a subversive cultural politics from

¹² Ransford W Palmer discusses the impact of the American wartime presence in Trinidad on the subversive elements of steelband, calypso, and *jamette* culture in carnival (89).

the social “diameter” or periphery. Gang culture, and its political potential to define male status outside of the socioeconomic and hierarchical norms of society, quickly becomes Fisheye’s life.¹³

Earl Lovelace cleverly illustrates how women played a part in the changes in steelband culture, from the 1950s. For example, while the novel shows how Fisheye’s frustration stems from a natural intelligence deprived of opportunity for social engagement and enhancement, it displays how his partner Yvonne is even smarter. In the light of a particularly brutal gang incident in which her family is involved, Yvonne convinces Fisheye to petition for the end of inter-gang warfare. She coaxes him to consider the possibility of rival gangs coming together. However, rather than seeing this unification of gangs as peace-making for peace’s sake, Fisheye starts to imagine a gang federation as an anti-colonial army. He believes that, with his talents for leadership, he could be general of these troops. Fisheye therefore proposes a gang truce, albeit in order for this army to come together to fight and overthrow the powers who deny true freedom:

“We is all one army – Desperadoes, Invaders, Tokyo, Casablanca, Rising Sun: all o’ we is one. We’s the same people catching hell.”
“Make peace, and do what?” Reds asked.
“Fight. Fight the people that keeping us down. Take over the government.” (51-52)¹⁴

Via the intervention of Yvonne, Fisheye no longer wishes for violence for the sake of local infamy. However, he retains his warrior spirit and wishes to aim his anger at the power structures in a true act of rebellion. His aggressive defiance in many ways echoes the essential spirit of *canboulay*. Yet, when the local steel bands eventually call a truce, they do so not at his behest or with insurrection in mind but in a complicit spirit of “nice peace” that Fisheye finds distasteful (53). It is a peace

¹³ Perry Henzell and Perry D Rhone’s Jamaican movie *The Harder They Come* (1973) also explores the influence of the American (or more specifically Spaghetti) western upon outlaw, badjorn consciousness in the Caribbean.

¹⁴ Bridget Brereton gives a brief overview of how the Crown Colony government itself tried to address and control the issue of steelband gang rivalry and violence. In 1949, the government launched a committee investigating the problem. The Steelband Association was formed that year, with input from respected Trinidadian dancer and choreographer Beryl McBurnie, who also founded the Little Carib Theatre in a move to give Trinidadian music and art recognised cultural legitimacy in the eyes of the island’s dominant classes. In 1951, attempts to contain and revision steelpan were realised when the Trinidad All Stars Percussion Orchestra performed as an official representation of pan, at the Festival of Britain. This information provides a context by which to understand the dynamics of the beginnings of the gentrification of carnival, from the late-colonial period onwards. (Of course, Fisheye’s vision of a steelband association has much more subversive intentions.) (Brereton 226).

bought by the establishment and his enemy, at the price of pride and individual identity.

No. They did not sign peace. Peace overtook them; and though a great fuss was made in the newspapers about this peace, with men from Calvary Hill and Desperadoes shaking hands and Inspector Rose from Besson Street Police Station standing with his two hands around the shoulders of Terry and Little John from the Desperadoes, the war had ended long before. Fellars really didn't want to fight each other anymore. The bad John, the warrior, had lost zest for the fratricidal war (53).

Fisheye hopes in the run-up to Home Rule in 1956 that, from an emergent political force in Trinidad, Eric Williams's PNM, will arise the opportunity for one Trinidadian people to fight for freedom and attain the anti-colonial independence to which Fisheye had long aspired. Fisheye briefly leaves the street corners and slums where, as a carnival bandsman, he had learned to wear a recognisable social mask as a bad john. He who stands in Woodford Square, watching PNM meetings and envisioning in politics a possible successor to carnival in giving a platform to the anger and the warrior spirit of a people held down for so long by colonialism. ("This was the thing that the steelband might have become, if fellars had sense, if they had vision," (57)). Historical contexts show that the rhetoric of Williams's political nationalism in many ways matches Fisheye's philosophy, of the potential oneness of a Trinidadian nation state. For example, Williams proposed,

Only together can [Trinidadians of all racial backgrounds] build a society, can they build a nation, can they build a homeland. There can be no Mother India...no Mother Africa...no Mother England...no Mother China...no Mother Syria or no 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. (Williams 279)

Yet, Williams's belief in one unified Trinidadian nation was prevented by the peace of transition of power and the continuing dominance of colonial interests in the country's financial sector. In *The Dragon Can't Dance*, Fisheye is shocked that, when Home Rule comes, it does so without armed struggle, or without any fight whatsoever. Guyanese intellectual Walter Rodney once stated that freedom is not something that one person can give another. It is something for which one has to

fight to obtain.¹⁵ Similarly, Fisheye regards the freedom that William's PNM has won to be no freedom at all, since "white people were still in the banks and in the businesses along Frederick Street" and "[t]he radio still spoke with a British voice" (58).

Regarding the pitfalls of national consciousness, Frantz Fanon remarked in *The Wretched of the Earth*,

The national bourgeoisie turns its back more and more on the interior and on the real facts of its un-developed country, and tends to look towards the former mother country and the foreign capitalists who count on its obliging compliance. As it does not share its profits with the people and in no way allows them to enjoy any of the dues that are paid to it by the big foreign companies, it will discover the need for a popular leader to whom will fall the dual role of stabilizing the regime and of perpetuating the domination of the bourgeoisie. The bourgeois dictatorship of under-developed countries draws its strength from the existence of a leader. We know that in the well-developed countries the bourgeois dictatorship is the result of the economic power of the bourgeoisie. In the under-developed countries on the contrary the leader stands for moral power, in whose shelter the thin and poverty-stricken bourgeoisie of the young nation decides to get rich.

Point by point, the post-independence Trinidad that is portrayed in *The Dragon Can't Dance* bears out Fanon's analysis of a general problem of decolonising politics. Fisheye considers that Trinidad's leaders have ostracised the poor of Port-of-Spain's slums. That very leadership had sold itself as representing all the people, but now it panders to bourgeois, corporate, capitalist and residual colonial economic interests. Colonial interests had long sought to divest carnival of its *jamette* elements and render it "safe and respectable" (Dudley 207). Yet, it is a self-governing Trinidad that sterilises carnival practice. Fisheye watches in dismay as cigarette companies now start sponsoring the various steel bands, while the government's effort to gentrify carnival for its own propaganda gets underway.¹⁶ He makes occasional attempts to unsettle the bland calm of corporatized carnival with outbursts of violence against erstwhile rival gangs, but he becomes an

¹⁵ Walter Rodney [1977]: "Freedom is something for which you fight and then you win. if someone gives it to you as a gift, it is not really freedom." From *In The Sky's Wild Noise*, directed by Lewanne Jones (1983).

¹⁶ Lovelace bases the gentrified, sponsored Sampoco Oil Company Gay Desperadoes that so appal Fisheye upon the real-life Coca-Cola Gay Desperadoes. (Stuempfle 260)

increasingly peripheral figure who is excluded from the carnival in which he had once been a noticeable, vital, and subversive cultural force.

Fisheye seeks to re-invent himself as a dignified outcast, “the only man left on the Hill not traitor to his warriorhood, [who] now had a duty to uphold it” (143). His new terrain is the Corner, the periphery of town that signifies the domain of those who refuse in the time-honoured tradition of post-Emancipation to work to prop up a system of colonial capital. Now that the radical carnival gestures of steelpan have been appropriated by the state, Fisheye must find a new space and a new gesture by which he will be recognised. He takes to the Corner as “the head of a band of maybe six or seven young fellars, warriors who still believed in their muscles, who hushed to their bosoms an anger older than themselves” (143). When one uncovers the contexts of the Middle Passage, slavery, Emancipation, *canboulay*, *jamette* carnival, the riots of 1881 and the subversive evolution of street-drumming, tambour-bamboo and steelpan, one understands the nature of the anger that Lovelace portrays Fisheye’s warriors as feeling.

For many years, the barrack yard celebrated its shared poverty and its refusal to work for a colonial master, as a measure of its humanity in the face of brutalising competitive colonialism. What exactly has changed? Historical contextualisation illuminates a complex series of events and political processes in the era of decolonisation that initiated a growing prosperity, material acquisitiveness, and capitalist ideology on the island which shifted the mainstream political interests of the mass of the people increasingly away from the plight of the poorest areas of the island. Even the barrack yard itself could not escape the extending lived ideology of social mobility, much to the dismay of some in its community.

The Second World War and its aftermath had seen oil revenues increase dramatically on the island. 15,000 people were employed in the Trinidadian oil industry by 1944 and oil constituted 80 per cent of Trinidad’s exports. Many sugar workers, disaffected by low wages, left to work on US oil and military bases; others left rural areas for towns, in search of employment. The US presence on the island also greatly improved the Trinidadian economy. Bridget Brereton notes, “[F]reesponding US servicemen played a major role in galvanizing the whole Trinidad economy and accustoming thousands of people to decent wages and modern labour conditions” (Brereton 214). As a result, Tubal Uriah “Buzz” Butler’s labour movement, which was in many respects a response to British colonial economic policy in the sugar industry during the Great Depression, now seemed anachronistic in a more prosperous, bourgeois-aspirative Trinidad, and began to fall into disarray. Divisions and rivalries between various trade unions diminished their influence on the island. In a Cold War climate, unions fractured to distance themselves from suspected Soviet interests. The PNM, whose economic policies acknowledged the prominence of oil and investment from multinationals such as BP, Shell, and

Texaco, sought to discourage strikes, while it courted foreign investment in industrialisation. By the time of Home Rule, the dominant interests of the PNM were identifiably middle-class (Brereton 223). Aldrick, who had arrived in Port-of-Spain from a migrant Manzanilla family and worn the dragon masque as a gesture of continuity with an Afro-Creole heritage that he perceives the spiritual identity of his impoverished, historically oppressed people, struggles to reconcile with the new aspirations of post-independence Trinidadians.

Lovelace finds a poetic means of narrating this political turn of events. He constructs an allegorical narrative complication involving Aldrick's young love interest, Sylvia, in order to provide commentary on a Trinidad on the verge of independence and courted but not yet won over by competing political powers. In this formulation, Aldrick stands for a masculine Afro-Creole society, which is now apprehensive, given its history of subjugation, about asserting its status and claiming the young (here feminised) nation. In the symbolic form of Aldrick's love rival Mr Guy (a sexually advantageous rent-collector-cum-businessman), the new bourgeois economics and politics of the PNM rapidly overtake the Trinidadian poor in ambition and action towards self-determination. Guy represents a local agent of this new, bourgeois materialist neocolonial order aiming to seduce the young nation with offers of wealth and prosperity, whereas Aldrick embodies a political underclass still uncertain of its capacity to lead the people. Raphael Dalleo suggests that, in this allegorical situation, Sylvia is

[I]like an island on the eve of independence, filled with hope that the end of empire will restore the men's masculinity by freeing the island from its predatory relationship with England, Sylvia's exchange with Mr. Guy of her body for loans and money stands in for Trinidad and Tobago's status after independence as a developing country forced to have its economy and resources controlled by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund via corrupt local business people and politicians. (Dalleo 217)

Sylvia vacillates between options. Guy's offer to provide Sylvia with a carnival costume equates with his wish to take her virginity. In symbolic terms, Lovelace here illustrates PNM-era businesses' hard courtship of the fledgling state. Just as Guy claims that he will give Sylvia any costume she wants, the Party promises to defer to the popular will of the people. Sylvia nonetheless out of a sense of longstanding loyalty also tentatively gives Aldrick the opportunity to fashion a costume for her after finishing his own dragon costume. In symbolic terms, thus, Trinidad might well be courted by powerful corporate bodies but it holds out hope that a more local and grassroots political force will emerge to lead the country into its coming of age, given time for self-organisation and demonstration of an ability to serve the interests of the population. Aldrick, however, avoids consideration that

a role is expected of him to announce to Sylvia that she does not need the *accoutrements* of a life of material comfort and complacency in order to find happiness. To make such a statement to Sylvia would be a proposal, or a political manifesto of sorts. It would be the promise and vision of a better, more morally and spiritually meaningful and sustaining life than that offered by the bourgeois classes. Aldrick knows that the dispossessed, masculine political force in yard society can only hustle for support, on the promise of happiness in community and oneness that does not rely on wealth and possessions. Its only historical gesture of strength lies in the community potential for emancipation in the performance of revolution of carnival. That strength requires the enduring understanding of its politics by continuing generations of Trinidadians. If the young of Trinidad should look elsewhere for fulfilment, then male figures such as Aldrick would struggle to create a new space by which to realise their power and status as political forces (dragons) as well as socially visible agents of masculine force.

Aldrick, and the society whom he signifies, fritters away time agonising that he does not have an alternative space or an attractive political platform beyond the dragon dance, into which to invite and accommodate Sylvia or a young Trinidad. Trinidad has waited like a potential, beautiful young lover at the door of a marginalised older bachelor, while the latter (for too long) painstakingly designs the timeworn gestures of a cultural politics with which it hopes to endear and secure the former's affections:

[Sylvia] had waited the eternity at his door for some word from him, some sign that he understood, at least acknowledged what her words were saying. She had waited the eternity during which he continued to sew scales on to the costume, refusing even to think of her meaning, far more comment on it [...] (57)

Aldrick cannot find the words to tell Sylvia she is a princess without the need for finery. He cannot make any political proposal. He himself begins to realise, that dragon *mas* no longer effects a literal, material cultural political influence in the radical development of Trinidadian society. The shift in supposedly decolonising Trinidad towards a neocolonial competitive materialism in the echo of the former colonial classes has reduced the dragon costume to a mere figurative gesture of an increasingly anachronistic expression of revolt. The growth of the Trinidadian labour movement has given way to a new ethos of increasing the demographic of middle-class wealth, status, and most importantly aspiration, as part of the trickle-down economic ideology of the oil boom. Once, it had sufficed that barrack yard Trinidadians were unified in their lack of material possessions and resistance of a colonial socioeconomic hierarchy from which they were instantly excluded. The yard was the stage in which the dragon could dance its proud resistance of dominant social structures. Yet once capitalism began to find its insidious way into the hearts

and minds of the Sylvias of the yard, the dragon could any longer dance with cultural political power. It has become an impotent relic of an old show hinting at a fertile political promise.

Yard newcomer Pariag, like much Indo-Trinidadian society, is so excluded from the old Afro-Trinidadian social ethos of fellowship and anti-colonial, anti-capitalist resistance in disdaining materialism, that he is shocked by the fierce reaction to his apparent taboo of purchasing a bicycle for work. The hypocritical Miss Cleothilda, who has her own haberdashery and business interests, wears a black headscarf in mourning for Pariag's murder of the old yard ethic of oneness in poverty. The ambitious rent-collector Mr Guy also makes an ironic public show of righteous indignation, stomping about the yard 'as if he had decided to go directly to see his lawyer' (91). Yard dwellers Miss Caroline and Miss Olive dispatch a young relative to inform Aldrick of Pariag's transgression, as if the dragon Aldrick could turn beast and summon the ancestral warrior spirit of an aggrieved people against the enemy within. Yet the seeds of Aldrick's doubt in the inherent spiritual and political power of the dragon are already sewn. Calypsonian Philo arrives at Aldrick's shack door to admire Aldrick's latest dragon costume, for the impending carnival, only to hear Aldrick exclaim "Oh, fuck the dragon!" (92). Philo senses Aldrick's pained love for Sylvia and implies that Aldrick must forsake his old gods for Trinidad's new mammon, in winning his desired prize. If Aldrick really wants Sylvia, then he should buy Sylvia her carnival dress. The symbolism of Philo's advice suggests the turning point in the mainstream ideology of the yard, from an Afro-Trinidadian socio-cultural sphere in which the ancestral practices of Orisha channel through carnival to determine the values and belief-systems of the people, to a new political ideology where people can be bought with promises of material comforts and niceties. The new Trinidad cannot be won over by hesitant appeals to a bygone set of cultural values, of "the reality of non-possession as a way of life" (97).

Guy of all people is aware of Aldrick's increasing realisation of the political redundancy of the dragon dance and so seeks him out to gloat at his self-disillusionment. It appears at first a matter of supreme irony that Mr Guy of all people, a rent collector and prospective businessman of the PNM ideal, should head to Aldrick's door to request Aldrick to channel the ancestral spirit of a warrior community in dealing with the outcast Pariag. Yet it soon transpires over the course of Guy and Aldrick's meeting that Guy's intentions for visiting are not ingenuous. With an almost self-knowing hypocrisy, Guy warns Aldrick that, left unchecked, an upwardly mobile figure such as Pariag "will be buying car, and after that a shop... Just now he will own this whole street" (100). Guy himself harbours competitive aspirations similar to Pariag's. He hints that Aldrick can do nothing to counter him, let alone Pariag, given Aldrick's pervasive preoccupation with carnival culture rather than the economic materiality of contemporary Trinidad.

Subtextually, Guy uses this moment to assert the supremacy of a new order of competitive acquisition, over the yard's old beliefs in fellowship of disinterest in private ownership. Guy implicitly challenges Aldrick to realise that the dragon dance by which he seeks to represent Trinidad and win over Sylvia is nothing more than a hollow performance. When Aldrick asserts the inherent volatility of the dragon as a political force, Guy momentarily stands back and appears fleetingly to concur with Aldrick's expression of ancestral power, before counter-attacking and chastising Aldrick in parting. Guy remarks that the dragon is a mere masquerade and play, an obsession, or a frivolous distraction from socioeconomic realities. The dragon costume and masquerade is no currency in a society that works upon capital: Guy mocks Aldrick for explaining that he cannot pay his rent for this month because of the cost of investment in the dragon costume, exclaiming "Your dragon! You want me to go and tell the owner about your dragon?" (101):

Aldrick came out and sat on his steps. He was tapping his feet. "Well, what the hell going on in this place? What it is? I must be getting soft or something. I must be getting old. First they come fucking up my brain about the Indian; now this man come telling me about rent." He stood up in front of Guy. "Listen, man, I is still Aldrick. I is still the dragon. I could turn beast in a minute!" "That is what I say," Guy said in a more polite tone, taking a step backward. "The Indian must take over this place. You have your masquerade to play, so you can't think 'bout nutten else. How you like that? How you like that?" Guy gave a short, tight laugh, turned and walked away, leaving Aldrick seething there, regretting that he hadn't cuffed Guy in his mouth from the very beginning. (101-102)

When the calypsonian Philo visits Aldrick soon afterwards, we hear Aldrick admit the realisation that he has no visible status in the bourgeois world to which Pariag, Guy, Miss Cleothilda, and, it soon emerges, Philo, aspire. Aldrick confesses that he finds himself in ideological transition, neither truly believing any longer the old cultural political authority of the dragon dance in Trinidadian society nor wishing to subscribe to the materialist ambitions of his peers. First, Aldrick diagnoses the facts of his financial condition, stating, "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." Secondly, he disavows his personal ownership of the dragon costume he has made. He remarks that the dragon is nothing to do with him and exists outside of his sense of actual identity, "like a child who ain't really his father own or his mother own." Thirdly, he realises that post-Independence society is destroying any sense of self-worth, masculine status,

or ancestral community spirit that may have survived the Middle Passage to recent times. Capitalism exploits and objectifies the vulnerable for generation after generation, and Aldrick can see no clear way via the dragon dance to deliver his society from neocolonialism's clutches. To be dragon is to be an abstract concept. It is a shadow or play at political vitality, authority and manhood. It has no evident force in a society where people are emasculated if they do not display the competitive obsession to gain dominant wealth or an ostentatious advertisement of their expensive possessions. In cultural political terms, Aldrick realises that in the current climate, he cannot be dragon and man:

They killing people in this place, Philo. And I is dragon. And what is a man? What is you or me, Philo? And I here playing a dragon, playing a masquerade every year, and I forget what I playing it for, what I trying to say. I forget, Philo. Is like nobody remember what life is, and who we fighting and what we fighting for. (102)

Aldrick is astutely cognisant of the hypocrisy in the fact that Guy and Cleothilda are not worried about Pariag insomuch as him being a threat to the old idea that one can be recognised as a person and part of Trinidadian society without possessions, but rather that they see him as a threat to their own competitive interests. Aldrick advises Philo, "Guy and Cleothilda ain't fooling me. The Indian is a threat to them, he ain't no threat to me [...] How people does live? Cleothilda with she parlour, doing what she like when she like, don't care 'bout nobody; Guy collecting he rent, buying up property, and trying to fuck all the little girls on the Hill" (102-103).

As the new government of Trinidad and Tobago outlaws the *jab-jabs*, the steelband gangsters and the stick-fighting warriors of *canboulay*, Aldrick feels that he alone is left of the old guard of rebellious revellers, to make a last-ditch attempt at representing the pride and history of the dispossessed in the carnival processions of the streets. From the earliest times of Trinidadian carnival, new cultural sources had fused into its forms and themes to produce a statement of the revolt of a diverse population against the prevailing power of the Crown. Now, under Home Rule, Aldrick feels that carnival has finally been taken away from the people who had made it an expression of Trinidadian identities and communities in the first place. The new state has succeeded in suppressing the dangerous potentiality of carnival through incentives and bribes, where the violence of colonialism had failed. Carnival has thus become prettier, tamer, and infused with a corporate-sponsored, global-capitalist flavour.¹⁷ Aldrick knows that he is burdened with the expectation

¹⁷ Garth L Green: "Through its sponsorship of the Carnival, the state recognizes a destructive oppositional force and thoroughly tames it by offering prizes and praise. Trophies and prize monies have replaced the balata clubs and truncheons of late nineteenth-century Trinidad that were that era's chosen mode of restraining Carnival enthusiasts." (Green and Scher 72)

to make a last gesture in *mas*, of his excluded people's continuing social deprivations and revolutionary rage:

The dragon alone was left to carry the message. He felt that now, alone, with even Philo and Fisheye gone, it was too great to carry. It would be lost now among the clowns, among the fancy robbers and the fantasy presentations that were steadily entering Carnival; drowned amidst the satins and silks and beads and feathers and rhinestones. (113)

However, for some time, Aldrick has become increasingly conscious that "maybe he didn't believe in the dragon any more" (113). In previous times, part of the romance of carnival was that it signified an imagined pre-colonial masculine, politically powerful warrior strength to which a post-independence, youthful Trinidad, in its view, desire to be reunited and wedded come the time of liberation from the shackles of British rule. However, Aldrick now has to face the likelihood that his romantic gesture of power is an empty one, which offers no material attraction to a new Trinidad.

Aldrick's doubt of the continuing social power and relevance of the gesture of the dragon *mas* and dance at this time relates historically and ideologically to the rise of political activism as a means for self- and community definition. The emergence of trade unionism and the growth of the PNM along the road to independence and beyond had offered Trinidadians new means by which to make gestures for identity and community representation.¹⁸ Eric Williams's PNM government may well have had considerable shortcomings in retaining colonial-era economics that perpetuated the encroaching marginalisation of the poor. Yet inhabitants of the yard such as Fisheye and Aldrick now at least had been exposed to the radical essence of the possibility of a new politics in Trinidad as a substitute for carnival. They have a taste for finding a new and long-lasting mode of social rebellion that has more meaning than the increasingly empty gesture of a badjohn stick-fight or a dragon dance. The old masks of carnival no longer assure social

¹⁸ "Numerous explanations have been offered for the decline of "traditional mas." One Trinidadian scholar (Allong, 1984) offers a psycho-political explanation, arguing that with self-government and the emergence of standard political avenues for the expression of dissent, it was therefore no longer socially necessary to assert defiance through masquerade. She suggests that since the black urban working classes had found their champion in Eric Williams, they no longer aspired to middle-class linguistic and cultural norms. The lifting of the colonial yoke provided increased social mobility and decreased the need for the imagined power realized temporarily through a masquerade. This explanation is a logical outgrowth of the idea that Carnival is a 'steam-valve.'" (Green and Scher 12)

recognition for the people of the diameter, now that carnival increasingly and ironically signifies its stately antithesis: a dominant-ideological construct of tradition. The dragon can no longer dance when it has become an empty signifier, devoid of its historical capacity for self-reinvention and social revolution. The dragon once symbolised a future uprising of the people, a fight, a freedom won by struggle. That fight, that freedom, never came. The dragon is thus no longer Aldrick's, or the yard's cultural property. It is a reminder of the modern tragedy of failed revolution. Aldrick must therefore find a new mask, a new setting, a new dance, in order to reconstruct himself and find a chance to fight for self- and social visibility.

Aiming to enter a new forum for selfhood and rebellion, Aldrick situates himself on the perimeter of urban aspirant respectability, in the notorious company of Fisheye's Corner badjohns. Fisheye goads Aldrick to prove his claim to authenticity as an outcast. In the space of the new yard, a creeping politics of consumerism, competitive economics, and individual ambition has begun to supplant Emancipation-era beliefs in solidarity of humanity in poverty and resistance to work. Fisheye taunts Aldrick into rejecting his longstanding friendship with the calypsonian Philo. Philo, in Fisheye's view, though once a onetime icon of local yard carnival, is now a co-opted symbol of bourgeois national culture. Philo, whom scholars from Diana Brydon to Nadia I Johnson see as Lovelace's fictionalised version of Trinidadian calypsonian Slinger Francisco (aka "The Mighty Sparrow," 1935-), has over the course of the events of the novel developed as a highly visible signifier of newfound international fame, money, and favours in the company of politicians. Although Philo himself desperately seeks to escape from the bourgeois anonymity of his prosperous new Diego Martin homestead and maintain his earlier sense of self-definition through continued contact with the people of Calvary Hill, Fisheye nonetheless perceives him as a traitor to their former camaraderie, which had been forged in the experience of adversity. Fisheye insists that Aldrick prove his allegiance to the badjohns by aggressively ostracising Philo from the yard. Privately, Philo has already petitioned Aldrick to "let the fellars [of the Corner] know the kinda man I is. I is we" (149). Notwithstanding, Fisheye utterly disputes Philo's plea to be regarded as still one of the Hill's radical and integral figures. Furthermore, Fisheye pinpoints Philo as another ambitious local capitalist like Guy and Miss Cleothilda who is only posturing in his assertions of fellowship with the people of the yard:

"Well, he ain't my friend," Fisheye said. "That fellar just playing a game. He not one of us again. Cleothilda and guy is his friend. He just come up here to fuck around, to show off, because he ain't have nobody else to show off his girls and his hat and his car to yet. Soon as he find his real clique, we wouldn't see him up here again." (150)

Philo in many respects is a symptom of state-controlled “pretty *mas*,” or the dilution and sanitisation of carnival as a spectacle divested of its once inherent subversive politics. His audience is, as always, the streets of urban Port-of-Spain, but the values that he propagates are those of the affluent residual-colonial Diego Martin society in which he is now domiciled. He feels the compulsion to return to the Hill as a visible carnivalesque icon of the oneness of the people, yet his art, his persona, and the politics he now embodies, are anathema to Fisheye’s wounded principles.

Aldrick will later come to see his rejection of Philo as his betrayal of personal friend. However, at least for the time being Aldrick, like Fisheye, shuns Philo and the populist culture Philo now represents, in an effort to assert his own, new radical gestural politics. Aldrick, in his ostracism of Philo, is a barometer of the ideological conflicts of the moment. Following the decline of the radical potentiality of carnival, Aldrick feels the anxious need to find a new, highly visible outlet for self-definition, revolt, and social empowerment. Aldrick and Fisheye scramble to distil the powerful essence of carnival and affect new masks and gestures, and to beat a new drum rallying a call to arms, in order to synthesise a new political means of a public display of selfhood, defiance, and the old warrior spirit.

In historical corollary to these depicted fictive events, Brinsley Samaroo traces the growing dissatisfaction felt by many Trinidadians throughout the latter 1960s towards Eric Williams’s post-independence government. Samaroo also explains how a new revolutionary activism created a brief, yet ultimately flawed effort at overthrowing the legacy of colonial power that had survived independence largely intact. He shows that Williams’s PNM, in spite of its pre-independence emancipatory promises, had nonetheless maintained the old socioeconomic inequalities between former European colonists and the bourgeois nationalist elite on one hand and the poor of the slums of Trinidad and Tobago on the other. The clamour for revolution that anti-colonial expression had presented had fallen comparatively silent until around 1969 and the formation of the National Joint Action Committee (NJAC). The NJAC was formed by University of the West Indies students at St Augustine campus in response to perceived institutional discrimination against Caribbean students at Canadian universities. It also sought to challenge the continuing neocolonial monopoly over Trinidadian industry. The NJAC visited impoverished slum communities, with a view to motivate large-scale political action in protest both against Canadian authorities and in resistance to the continuing poverty and inequalities of life under the current national élite. A series of marches, endorsed by the politically influential Oilfield Workers Trade Union (OWTU), grew in number and strength. The government reacted under fear of revolution, by banning the Trinidadian African-American political activist Stokely Carmichael -- the former chairman of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating

Committee and since 1968 a Black Panther Party member in the USA -- from entering the country. NJAC member Basil Davis was assassinated by Trinidadian police: this had the counter-active effect not of repressing but galvanising the Black Power movement. Woodford Square, the former seat of colonial British rule in Trinidad and Tobago and now home to Williams's government, was the site of repeated marches and demonstrations of expanding population. After appearing to fortify himself physically behind hastily constructed high walls at the high point of the crisis, Williams emerged in an effort to wrest control of the narrative of the Black Power rebellion. Williams claimed that Black Power was historically always his political aim in Trinidad. He thus aimed to neutralise resistance by appearing sympathetic to many of its objectives.

Lovelace does not directly reproduce these political events in the late 1960s and early 1970s, in *The Dragon Can't Dance*. However, Lovelace does find a fictive means to portray the fervour and inevitable futility of revolutionary gesture politics in this period. He supplies a careful critique of the pitfalls of employing theatre in the articulation of a new form of cultural politics. He shows that revolutionary activism might seem a replacement modality for carnival in the articulation of rebellion, but inexorably it is another self-defeating masquerade or guise that obscures one from effecting genuine self-realisation and social power.

Lovelace conveys this attitude on the novel, thus. When the local police in Port-of-Spain announce a new operation to purge the gangs from the street-corners, Fisheye has clearly not given up on the idea of adapting old carnival forms in pursuit of challenging these restrictions and achieving his desired infamy in a new expression of political resistance. He still envisages himself to be the latest in a long line of carnival warriors, such as 'Mastifay, Tom Keen, Batman, Baron', and prepares to add his name to a litany of badjohn anti-heroes, by taking on the authorities to the death (157).¹⁹ With a pistol in hand, Fisheye and his cohorts (including Aldrick) hijack a police jeep, and hold two officers hostage. Fisheye again gleefully advertises his public masculinity, in full public view hybridising once more an African warrior spirit with his mimicry of the outlaw cowboy of the American western. The novel's narrator depicts Fisheye 'braced against one of those storms of dust that always seem to sweep across the street, rolling hoops of brambles, just at the moment of the showdown between two nerveless rival gunmen' (165). The jeep, with Fisheye at the fore, rolls into Woodford Square: a location which was for previous decades a centre of anti-colonial activism and now the locus of post-independence, residual- and neocolonial political authority.

¹⁹ Grenadian-born calypsonian Theophilus Woods, *aka* Small Island Pride, produced an ode to the legend of stickfighting badjohn, *Mastifay* (1930s, recorded 1959). The song's speaker resembles in his refrain Fisheye's desire to be a Corner boy and outlaw in the manner of Mastifay: "Ah, Mastifay, Mastifay/Meet me down by the Croisee And Cutouter, Cutouter /Meet me down by the green corner" (Gibbs 217).

Aldrick serves in this part of the novel as a fictive representative of the novel's implicit critique of the theatre of Black Power politics. The character clearly does not share Fisheye's enthusiasms. Rather, Aldrick realises that, while carnival had once offered him and Fisheye the chance to play-act and gesture at rebellious intent, such role-playing is now ultimately constrictive rather than revolutionary. Driving around in a jeep and being followed half-heartedly by other jeeps containing officers who know that Fisheye's rebellion is aimless and will flag, Aldrick develops "a feeling of being imprisoned in a carnival costume on Carnival Tuesday" (169). Frantically, Aldrick seizes the police jeep's megaphone and implores an assembling Woodford Square crowd to trade in the unfought-for peace of post-independence that has brought nothing to liberate the people from centuries of deprivations, for a new rebellious battle-cry:

"Make no peace with slavery," Aldrick cried. "Make no peace, for you have survived. You are here filling up the shanty towns, prisons, slums, street corners, mental asylums, brothels, hospitals. Make no peace with shanty towns, dog shit, piss. We have to live as people, people. We have to rise. Rise up. (171)"

What for the most part constitutes Aldrick's call to arms then stumbles at a question which identifies a problem at the heart of radical politics in Trinidad. "But how do you rise up when your brothers are making peace for a few dollars?" (171). Eric Williams's Trinidad had seen a sea-change in social attitudes to acquisitiveness and aspiration. The new government's political agenda was to represent the ambitions of hard-working Trinidadians who sought to reap the rewards of oil-era prosperity. Improved material conditions on the island meant that for many, the attractions of consumer capitalism encouraged people to want to own possessions such as a new bicycle or a car, a house, or a local business. The will for people to rise up from nothing had been replaced by the will to get on in life. The mechanics of Euro-American oil interests in Trinidad had seen that peace could be bought in the island. Yes, many of the old social iniquities of colonialism continued and capitalists whored out the young and the vulnerable for fast gain, as ever. Yes, a Trinidadian populace seemed complacent to be bought off for small comforts at the expense of their neighbour. Yet Aldrick considers the unavoidable reality that a growing number among Trinidadians are content to forget the worst poverty of the slums in order to acquire a little of the island's prosperity. He agonises over how the rebellious heart of public protest, the true spark of revolt that had been demonstrated in spite of its limitations from the earliest days of carnival, might rise up again as an effort to fight injustice.

Aldrick openly admits in answer to his own question as to how change might be achieved, "I don't know" (171). One could be justified for offering the conjecture that Aldrick's confession here reflects an admission in the overarching

theme novel of the whole, that there is no clear solution to the question of how one might find a post-carnavalesque means of expressing and realising a will to social revolution. One thing for certain is, an approach to rebellion can no longer be managed through the playing the dragon, playing the rebel, or adopting the traits of a dangerous, masculine or bestial stereotype. He comes to terms with the realisation that he, and by extension a more socially conscious Trinidadian society, has outgrown the need to play a *mas*, to play a dragon, or to make futile political gestures in public show (“Indeed, their efforts at rebellion was just a dragon dance” (178)).

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Lovelace’s fictive diagnosis of post-independence Trinidad may well read as a discourse on the triumph of capitalist ideology and the demise of ancestral community culture and politics that had survived colonialism only to be adulterated and neutralised by the neocolonial era that followed. Notwithstanding, Lovelace presents a narrative plot twist at the end of the novel which is surprisingly open-ended if not exactly revolutionary in its hint of a vision for Trinidad and Tobago’s future. We have seen throughout the novel that Sylvia symbolises a young nation courted by the opposing interests of masculinised political structures. We have also observed how over a series of events, Sylvia, and indeed Trinidad and Tobago in general, have apparently abandoned ideals of self-definition and community membership through the ancestral rituals, gestures, and cultural practices of the past. Sylvia, and Trinidad, have seemed to choose individual ownership of things as a route to status, rather than follow an older belief in community through the shared expression of marginality and resistance to colonial values. Sylvia has agreed to marry the predatory Guy, who is now a prominent businessman and figure in Trinidadian political circles. Yet on the eve of their wedding, and while Guy is briefly away on a trip to the old motherland of Great Britain, Sylvia absconds, in search of Aldrick. The novel does not venture so far as to reveal the outcome of Sylvia’s at least temporary break from Guy and all he represents, or divulge the result of her attempted union with Aldrick. This is because Lovelace is not so much arguing that the neocolonial capitalist era of Trinidadian society is transitory and that ultimately Trinidad will return to its older cultural politics, as represented by Aldrick and the dragon spirit of carnival. He does, however, insinuate that the new capitalist era of post-independence Trinidadian society inevitably lacks an emotional sway over the deepest irrepressible desires of the people of the yard. A community that has for so long expressed selfhood and fellowship in ritual, in

communal procession, in dance, in resistance, in incendiary potential against the big plantation estates and jab-jabbing landowners -- in carnival -- cannot easily forsake the mantle and ideology of the former oppressor in the name of independence. While Sylvia still yearns to run back to the hope of self-determination in marriage to the idea of the carnival dance, the carnival takes on a new radical aspect as the spiritual antidote to the neocolonial era. Lovelace hints that at least as long as Sylvia still feels the urge to flee Guy and all he represents, or as long as Philo acts on a nocturnal impulse to escape his Diego Martin villa in search of old friends and lovers in Calvary Hill, then carnival still possesses a radical power to destabilise the socioeconomic and ideological structures transplanted by western colonialism to the islands and maintained by its post-independence successors.

This paper has demonstrated that a comprehensive understanding of the historical stratigraphy of the cultural politics of carnival in Trinidad informs skilful readings of Lovelace's careful depictions of carnival and its evolving roles in society in *The Dragon Can't Dance*. It has shown that, in order to grasp the cultural and political significance of Sylvia's choice to leave the capitalist Guy and seek out once more the dragon Aldrick, one needs to be able to contextualise the belief-system that Aldrick, and by extension the dragon dance and Trinidadian carnival as a whole represents, as a vital and community-affirming alternative to acquired forms of capitalist ideology imported to the Caribbean by colonial masters and carried through by the bourgeois nationalist inheritors or puppet-agents of that power.

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