

Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal

Volume 3

Issue 2 *Calypso and the Caribbean Literary*

Imagination: A Special Issue

Article 8

December 2005

Unmasking the Chantwell Narrator in Earl Lovelace's Fiction

Funso Aiyejina

anthuriumcaribjournal@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <http://scholarlyrepository.miami.edu/anthurium>

Recommended Citation

Aiyejina, Funso (2005) "Unmasking the Chantwell Narrator in Earl Lovelace's Fiction," *Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal*: Vol. 3 : Iss. 2 , Article 8.

Available at: <http://scholarlyrepository.miami.edu/anthurium/vol3/iss2/8>

This Essay is brought to you for free and open access by Scholarly Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal* by an authorized editor of Scholarly Repository. For more information, please contact repository.library@miami.edu.

With the publication in 1979 of *The Dragon Can't Dance*, which is now widely regarded as the quintessential carnival novel, Earl Lovelace established himself as a sensitive, perceptive, and rigorous interrogator and manipulator of carnival and the carnivalesque for thematic and aesthetic purposes. However, his preoccupation with carnival and the carnivalesque dates back to his very first novel, *While Gods Are Falling* (1965) in which calypsoes such as Spoiler's "Himself Tell Himself" are deployed as meta-narrative threads. Of his five novels, one collection of short stories, and one collection of plays to date, only one, *The Schoolmaster*, does not engage with carnival or the carnivalesque. This paper continues my exploration of Lovelace's narrative strategies initiated in "Novelypso: Indigenous Narrative Strategies in Earl Lovelace's Fiction," where I identified and analyzed a number of carnival and carnival-related paradigms deployed by Lovelace as narrative signifiers. In this sequel, I explore the possibility of reading many of Lovelace's narrators as chantwells or approximations of the chantwell. I suggest that although Lovelace experiments with first-, second-, and third-person (limited or omniscient) narrators, the narrative tradition that conditions his main narrators is, more often than not, the tradition of the

Gordon Rohlehr dates the emergence of the chantwell figure in Trinidad to the early nineteenth century (52). By the 1840s, there was a chaotic linguistic situation in Trinidad with Spanish, French, and English contesting for official supremacy, with French Creole emerging as the dominant language for verbal communication, and a number of African languages negotiating their status among the majority Africans of the underclass in the squatter settlements that sprung up around the urban centres to which many Africans had drifted in search of jobs (51-52). One of the consequences of the competition for limited resources and jobs within such squatter settlements was the rise of calinda/stickfighting street gangs, formed to defend turfs. Each such band had a lead singer/chantwell whose duty it was to "harangue the stickfighters into action, to sustain the courage of his champion, and to pour scorn on the rival group or champion" (Rohlehr 52). The chantwell functioned as a soloist and the other members of the gang as the chorus. The chantwell, as the "possessor of the word and as a spokesman for the group, occupied a position of supreme importance" (Rohlehr 52), and the performance of the chantwell would go on to form the foundation of the calypso art. In essence, "calypso grew out of this milieu of confrontation and mastery, of violent self-assertiveness and rhetorical force; of a constant quest for a more splendid language, and excellence of tongue" (Rohlehr 52-54). The chantwell as a storyteller, critic, commentator, creator of delightful turns of phrase, and astute user of double entendre, often with humorous effect, is reminiscent of African griots who, among other things, "recount genealogies, narrate epics, compose songs to mark important events, sing praises of others ... teach people of all ages about the past ... interpret speeches, announce news, maintain the legal, family, and historical records of a people, and give advice to their patrons" (Peek et al 162-164). The chantwell as a storyteller is central to the survival of every civilization because, in the words of the Old Man in Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*, "it is the story ... that saves our progeny from blundering like blind beggars into the spikes of the cactus fence. The story is our escort; without it, we are blind" (114).

The Dragon Can't Dance, a novel that owes its inspiration to carnival, closes with the voice and vision of the calypsonian; not with Aldrick, the questing native intellectual and central hero of the narrative; not with Fisheye, the warrior and defender of tradition; not with Pariag and Dolly, the male/female idealization of the latest cultural addition to an emerging multi-cultural/cross-cultural mosaic; and not with Sylvia, the new generation of the Black woman whose ultimate self-discovery, along with that of Aldrick, represents the most overt articulation of a positive vision for the society, one that includes the female perspective in an otherwise patriarchal society. The inevitable question is: Why has Lovelace, who has consistently demonstrated that he is a deliberate artist, opted to close with Philo, a man who is viewed by the Hill as a traitor, following his material success, his relocation to middle-class Diego Martin, and his in-your-face flaunting of the miracle of his escape from the poverty of the Hill?

One way of looking at Lovelace's narrative choice here is to consider the fact that the voice of the calypsonian is actually the unidentified voice presiding over the novel in the same way that the voice of the calypsonian presides over carnival (his calypsoes are listened to, jumped up/danced to, and played by steelbands). The novel, therefore, is presented from the perspective of the calypsonian as he engages in the documentation of the trials and tribulations of the Hill. That these are possible interpretations is hinted at in the introspective, ritualistic, and retrospective nature of the novel's closing coda, in which the details of Philo's development as man and calypsonian are presented as an intrinsically intertwined ethos of personal and communal developments. Philo is presented at once as a hero and a villain, a victim and a victimizer; he is both the narrator and the subject of the narrative, hence, his double-vision consciousness. Philo's double vision, articulated in part in the radical difference between his views about the Hill before and after his material success, is an intrinsic consequence of the circumstances of the history of the region; it is an expression of "the psychological flexibility of the Trinidadian, and even perhaps the Caribbean person. So the sense of joy, when it surfaces, must not be seen as trivial, nor totally descriptive of the whole person; similarly, the very serious concerns when they are expressed should not be seen as an aberration to be dismissed" (Lovelace, *Growing in the Dark* 169). When Philo reviews his life without attempting to sanitize it, he is merely affirming the critical tradition of the chantwell/griot who is capable of simultaneously praising and deflating his subject, including himself.

Against the background of these comments about Philo, it is possible to re-examine the prologue of the novel and to recognize the embedded call-and-response pattern of the chantwell/chorus paradigm in the novel's single-voiced, single-versioned, and unidentified but involved third-person narration. At the beginning of the Prologue (*Dragon* 10-13), the narrator's "This is the hill tall above the city where Taffy ...", introduces the observing voice of the chantwell/teller-of-tales, and at the end of the Prologue "dance" establishes the choral refrain, such that the Prologue can be re-formatted as follows to convey the underlying call and response tradition at work:

Solo: There is dancing in the calypso.
Chorus: Dance!
Solo: If the words mourn the death of a neighbour, the music insists that you
Chorus: dance;
Solo: if it tells the troubles of a brother, the music says
Chorus: dance.
Solo: Dance to the hurt!
Chorus: Dance!
Solo: If you catching hell,
Chorus: dance,
Solo: and the government don't care,
Chorus: dance!
Solo: Your woman take your money and run away with another man,
Chorus: dance.
Solo: Dance!
Chorus: Dance!
Solo: Dance! It is in dancing that you ward off evil. Dancing is a chant that cuts
off the power of the devil.
Chorus: Dance! Dance! Dance!

Once analyzed in this way, it becomes possible 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." In fact, although the narration is not undertaken in the first-person/direct voice of the calypsonian, it is executed in a style that acknowledges the calypsonian as the master of ceremony, as a documenter and articulator of events and sensibilities as they relate to him as an individual participant in the human dramas around him, and as they affect the community as a whole. "If I consider my novel, *The Dragon Can't Dance*," Lovelace confesses, "I think of the

whole book as the movement of a calypso” (*Growing in the Dark* 94), thus affirming the need to approach this and his other novels with an awareness of the nuances of the calypso art form.

In *The Wine of Astonishment*, Lovelace continues to explore the figure of the chantwell as a narrative trope. Of course, *The Wine of Astonishment* is narrated in the first-person voice of Eva who is not a chantwell by normal definition although she affirms the notion of women as the active carriers and, by extension, vocalizers of tradition. Eva is the Mother in the Spiritual Baptist Church over which her husband Bee presides. The strategies she adopts for structuring and narrating the story of her family and community echo those of the chantwell. She is an aggregate of the multiple voices in her community, and, by the end of the narrative, she evolves into a chantwell/griot figure entrusted with the task of identifying the heroes and anti-heroes of the community, and chanting their stories.

When Eva narrates traditional female spaces and consciousness, such as her household, she narrates with the confidence and authority of a participant/witness. When, however, she narrates traditional male spaces, such as the rumshop and the stickfighting gayelle, she is quick to establish that she is a secondary or tertiary filter inspired to re-tell her inherited stories, and re-shape them into collectively beneficial visions. The primary and secondary filters are more often than not the chantwell and her husband respectively:

Most evening he [Bee] would go down to Buntin shop where the men congregate to play draughts, and he would drink a rum with Clem and listen to the men talk about Hitler, the war and Churchill.

Clem is a chantwell, a singer leading stickfight chants and bongo songs and he will sing a nice sentimental, like Bing Crosby. Clem always had a guitar with him. And he would sit down there picking his guitar above the talking, watching with Bolo what all of us seeing: the Yankees zooming about the place, the village girls parading ... their eyes full with the sickness for money that was the disease taking over everybody ...

Clem could make up a song on anything ... and sometimes Clem wouldn't sing at all, just sit with his head lean to one side, the way I see him sometimes when I passing, his fingers pulling soft hard notes out of the guitar strings to match the things that was happening; for it wasn't only the girls, it was the men. (*Wine* 22-23)

This passage invites a number of observations: 1) Bee participates in the “story sessions” at Buntin’s shop and relays them to Eva; 2) Clem is the village’s resident storyteller and social critic; 3) Eva occasionally observes Clem operating as an extemporaneous artist; 4) Clem is a fictive approximation of the calypsonian, especially since the content and design of his songs echo The Mighty Sparrow’s comments about war-time Trinidad in “Jean and Dinah.”

Eva is conscious of her role as a secondary filter. Through narrative-hook lines like, “As they tell it,” she constantly reminds her audience that she is merely re-telling stories she inherited from others. In spite of her confession of her lack of direct access to her stories, however, like the calypsonian, she narrates and re-creates with the confidence of a witness. For example, when she reports Bolo saying to Clem: “We playing the arse here (25),” we wonder how she managed to know the content of a dialogue that would have, according to her own admission, taken place in the exclusive male domain of the stick-fighting gayelle.

The centrality of the chantwell as the repository of the stories of the community becomes manifest after Clem's departure from Bonasse. Before his departure, he functions as the primary source of stories and comments about the socio-political landscape of the community, but with his departure, Eva is forced to shift the focus of the narrative away from male/public spaces to private/family/church spaces. She also becomes the primary synthesizer of all the tales rather than the inheritor of Clem's synthesized versions. Ultimately, she offers generalized versions of stories which are so public that everyone in the village is privy to their basic details, or narrates other people's conversations with Bee to which she would have been privy. Ironically, Eva's post-Clem/chantwell sources of stories become more democratized to include Buntin, the store keeper/local ideologue who would become the primary source of the accounts of events at the gayelle in front of his shop, and out-of-Bonasse events like Bolo's visit to a government office to enquire about land: “Brother Ambrose nephew work there. So between what Ambrose nephew say and what Bolo tell Buntin, it ain't hard to put together what happen there that day” (*Wine* 89), and that of Komono, “a half-Carib fellar who always drunk ... and who have on his head more bumps than an alligator have on its body ...” (*Wine* 104)), who would narrate the story of Bolo's destruction of Mitchell's bar to a group that includes Eva. They include Cap, who would narrate Bolo's ban from the gambling club to Sister Elaine who would re-narrate it to Eva: “And I telling the story just as Cap tell Sister Elaine and Sister Elaine tell me” (*Wine* 107), and Trotman, who would narrate the fight between Bolo and the ten policemen (*Wine* 128). This section of the novel is replete with narrative source-identifiers like “Some say” (*Wine* 46), “They tell this story” (*Wine* 83), “They tell of another time” (83), and “As he, Buntin, tell it later” (87), which reinforce the notion of multiple contributory perspectives and a structure of narrative relays that would be refined into central narrative and thematic devices in *Salt*.¹

Throughout *The Wine of Astonishment*, Lovelace presents Eva as a narrative pool and/or channel, with some editorial latitude, into which the stories collect and through whom they are organized and disseminated. By the time most of the public stories get to her, they have been mediated by the consciousness of the primary and/or secondary witnesses. Eva's major task is that of collating, shaping, and giving a unifying and coherent voice to all the stories that are entrusted to her. She is at once inside and outside the stories she tells. In this task, she approximates the chantwell, the broadcast journalist, or the (oral) writer. Interestingly enough, Santo, the narrator in the three linked Fire Eater stories in *A Brief Conversion and Other Stories* is a journalist, albeit a print journalist.²

If the chantwell paradigm is not too overt a trope in *The Dragon Can't Dance* and *The Wine of Astonishment*, the same cannot be said for the film *Joebell and America*. "Joebell and America," the short story, opens with a third-person limited omniscient narrator relating the story of Joebell's frustrations in Trinidad and his decision to migrate to America where he hopes to realize his dreams of a life of pleasure:

Joebell find that he seeing too much hell in Trinidad so he make up his mind to leave and go away. The place he find he should go is America, where everybody have a motor car and you could ski on snow and where it have seventy-five channels of colour television that never sign off and you could sit down and watch for days, all the boxing and wrestling and basketball, right there as it happening. (A *Brief Conversion* 111)

Like Joebell, the narrator is a gambler and the language of narration approximates Joebell's language as well as the language of dialogue. As a participating third-person narrator, the narrator can only be privy to the contents of public events to which he is a witness. For most of the first part of the story, he operates within this narrative parameter. However, when he narrates the first meeting between Alicia and Joebell, he slips out of narrative focus and plausibility:

The first time she see him in the snackette, she watch him and don't say nothing but, she think, Hey! Who he think he is? He come in the snackette with this foolish grin on his face and this strolling walk and this kinda commanding way about him and sit down at the table with his legs wide open, taking up a big space as if he spending a hundred dollars, and all he ask for is a coconut roll and juice. (114)

And later:

But Alicia was thinking, Lord, just please let him get to America, they will see who is vagabond. Lord, just let him get through that immigration they will see happiness when he send for me. (117)

Since the snackette is a public space, it is possible to conjecture how the narrator could have gained access to the external details of the meeting. It would, however, have been impossible for him to discern Alicia's thoughts. This slip casts doubt on the narrative integrity of the story, and in the second part of the story, more questions about narrative agency, narrative plausibility, and narrative consistency are raised when the narration switches from third-person limited omniscience to a first-person perspective. On the surface, the narrative does not provide any justification for this seemingly arbitrary shift.

To appreciate the rationale behind the switch, however, it is important to recognize that the second part of the story, which is narrated by Joebell, is an account of Joebell's ordeal at the immigration in Puerto Rico. The third-person limited omniscient narrator, located in Cunaripo,

could not have witnessed that event. For him and the village to have become privy to it, they had to have been told by someone who was present at the scene. Joebell is the only one who fits that bill in the narrative. Once this point is recognized, the other parts of the narrative puzzle begin to fall in place: Joebell attempts to enter America through Puerto Rico on a false passport to fulfil his dreams but he is caught and deported. He returns to Cunaripo and tells his story to the villagers, among whom he must now settle and make a life for himself and Alicia, the girl friend he was going to send for once he was in America. On the basis of the story of his American misadventure and what the villagers already know about his dream to go away and his relationship with Alicia, the third-person narrator sets out to tell us the Joebell story. Presumably, in telling it, he borrows liberally from the collective memory of the community, including snippets of Alicia's account of the courtship between herself and Joebell, hence his access to Alicia's thoughts.

The switch from third- to first-person narrator illustrates the complex and organic relationship between the subjects of stories and their tellers. Both at the structural and thematic levels, the switch can be seen as a technique that allows Joebell to testify, as in a religious ceremony when the new convert testifies before the congregation, to both his experience and his resolution, or conversion, to return to find himself among his people. When the third person narrator re-tells Joebell's story, he implicitly provides the community with a cautionary tale, in the tradition of the chantwell/griot.

Though commonsensical, the conclusions about the chantwell paradigm in *The Dragon Can't Dance*, *The Wine of Astonishment*, and the short story "Joebell and America" implicit in this paper would have remained speculative criticism if Lovelace had not written the film script for *Joebell and America* and been forced by the demands of the medium to reveal the identity of his primary narrative agent. *Joebell and America* opens with a sequence that answers all the questions about the narrative structure of the story and, by extension, confirms the speculations about the narrative strategies in *The Dragon Can't Dance* and *The Wine of Astonishment*:

MIGHTY LICKS, the village calypsonian, and some other FELLARS are gathered outside the club singing extempo. They sing and laugh about each other. As Joebell walks out, Mighty Licks sings a verse about Joebell.

MIGHTY LICKS

*Is Joebell coming out the club again,
once again his face full of pain.
He still waiting to win out the wappie,
but up to now his pockets still empty.
Joebell boy you better go home
and leave the gambling alone.*

They all laugh. Joebell responds with a clever verse.

JOEBELL

Licks, you better watch your mouth,

*you really don't know what you talking about.
Very soon I will have the ace
when I get up and leave this place.
I will send you a postcard
because you will still be here singing bad calypso in Trinidad.*

The introduction of Mighty Licks identifies the narrator as a chantwell/calypsonian/griot. He is used for most of the film to comment extemporaneously on events, especially as they impinge on Joebell or as Joebell impinges on them. Also, in order to indicate the organic relationship between the chantwell-narrator and the first-person narrator from whom the chantwell inherits most of the story, Joebell, the closet-chantwell, shares the narration with Mighty Licks, the champion-chantwell. With this outing/unmasking of the narrator in the short story “Joebell and America” and the fact that the primary narrator in Lovelace’s 2005 novel-in-progress, tentatively titled “It’s Only a Movie,” is a poet/calypsonian, it is now possible to explicitly affirm the identity of Lovelace’s unmarked narrators as variations of the chantwell. With this enthronement of the chantwell/calypsonian as one of his dominant narrators, Lovelace signals the calypsonian, both in his/her style and content, as one of the prototypes for a native voice of authority.

Notes

¹For more on this subject, see Aiyejina, "Novelypso."

²It should be noted that, although outside of the focus of *The Wine of Astonishment*, the flow of influence between the calypso tradition and Eva as Mother of a Spiritual Baptist church is a two-way affair as can be seen in the influence of the rhythm of Spiritual Baptist/Orisa traditions on calypsonians in Trinidad like Super Blue, Sugar Aloes, Singing Sandra, David Rudder, and Ella Andall.

Works Cited

- Achebe, Chinua. *Anthills of the Savannah*. New York: Doubleday, 1987.
- Aiyejina, Funso. "Salt: A Complex Tapestry." *Trinidad and Tobago Review*, Vol. 181(0-12): 13-16, 1996.
- . "Novelpso: Indigenous Narrative Strategies in Earl Lovelace's Fiction," *Trinidad and Tobago Review*, Vol. 22(7-8): 15-17, 2000.
- Lovelace, Asha and Lovelace, Earl. *Joebell and America* (film). Trinidad: CCN Six Point Production, 2005.
- Lovelace, Earl. *While Gods Are Falling*. London: Andre Deutsch Limited, 1965.
- . *The Dragon Can't Dance*. London: Andre Deutsch Limited, 1979.
- . *The Schoolmaster*. Oxford: Heinemann Educational Publishers, 1968.
- . *The Wine of Astonishment*. Oxford: Heinemann Educational Publishers, 1982.
- . *A Brief Conversion and Other Stories*. Oxford: Heinemann International, 1988.
- . *Salt*. London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1996.
- . *Growing in the Dark (Selected Essays)*. Ed. Funso Aiyejina. Trinidad: Lexicon Trinidad Limited, 2003.
- Peek, Philip M. and Kwesi Yankah. Eds. *African Folklore: An Encyclopedia*. New York London: Routledge, 2004.
- Rohlehr, Gordon. *Calypso and Society in Pre-Independence Trinidad*. Trinidad: Gordon Rohlehr, 1990.