

December 2006

## “Self Searching for Substance”: The Politics of Style in Earl Lovelace’s *A Brief Conversion and Other Stories*

Carolyn Cooper  
anthuriumcaribjournal@gmail.com

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### Recommended Citation

Cooper, Carolyn (2006) "“Self Searching for Substance”: The Politics of Style in Earl Lovelace’s *A Brief Conversion and Other Stories*," *Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 2 , Article 3.  
Available at: <http://scholarlyrepository.miami.edu/anthurium/vol4/iss2/3>

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A much-rehearsed trope in Earl Lovelace's carnivalesque fiction is that of the masquerade: the elaborate disguises assumed by an array of working-class characters to bestow a necessary dignity on lives systematically brutalized by everyday material poverty. The dragon, badjohn, princess, and film-star personae inhabited by Lovelace's multifarious characters signify their philosophical disengagement from the mundane limitations imposed on them in the "real" world. There is, undoubtedly, an element of the ridiculous in the grandiose, bacchanal identities that are appropriated by Lovelace's heroes and villains. Indeed, the *OED* etymology of the word masquerade confirms that a quintessential feature of the mask is the sense of absurdity it encodes. The origins of the word are presumed to be Arabic: "*maskhara*, laughing stock, [from the root] 'sakhira' to ridicule." In Lovelace's deployment of the figure of the masquerade there is certainly the inescapable absurdity. But there is, as well, the ambivalent triumph that the act of masking engenders.

In his illuminating study, *Masquerade and Civilization: The Carnavalesque in Eighteenth-Century English Culture and Fiction*, Terry Castle persuasively argues that:

Like the world of satire, the masquerade projected an anti-nature, a world upside-down, an intoxicating reversal of ordinary sexual, social, and metaphysical hierarchies. The cardinal ideological distinctions underlying eighteenth-century cultural life, including the fundamental divisions of sex and class, were broached. If, psychologically speaking, the masquerade was a meditation on self and other, in the larger social sense it was a meditation on cultural classification and the organizing dialectical schema of eighteenth-century life. It served as a kind of exemplary disorder. Its hallucinatory reversals were both a voluptuous release from ordinary cultural prescriptions and a stylized comment upon them. (6)

Though Castle's reading of the masquerade cannot be simply lifted out of context and applied entirely and ahistorically to Lovelace's rendering of late twentieth-century Trinidadian society, there are, nevertheless, common features in the masquerade traditions of both cultures that resonate over time and space. A recurring principle is subversion.

Much closer to home, Maureen Warner-Lewis argues in her magisterial work, *Central Africa in the Caribbean: Transcending Time, Transforming Cultures*, that masquerade traditions in Trinidad, in particular *cannes brulees*, have their genesis in African rituals of empowerment. In the chapter "Accessing Power: Ritual War and Masquerade," Warner-Lewis offers a compelling alternative etymology for the French *cannes brulees*: "... the presence of the fire motif in Central African dance and ritual, and the co-occurrence of this motif in other Caribbean ritual events, adds support to my thesis that **kambule** derives from **kambula** (Ko) 'procession, parade'" (*Central Africa* 222). Warner-Lewis further argues:

... Trinidad masqueraders may have been drawing mystic power from the fires they set, accessing superhuman strength from the flames, rather than merely

trying to extinguish the flames they had set in the first place ... A religious reading may also help to account for why people congregated around the fires, why they did so masked, why they brought some of their most cherished belongings with them, and why those holding torches approached from the margins of a liminal space towards a central point. (*Central Africa* 223)

These polyvalent readings of the masquerade as both “secular” and “sacred”—imported European and re-appropriated African—are clearly manifested in Lovelace’s articulation of the African religious origins of carnival mask-making traditions in *The Dragon Can’t Dance*.

In the title story of *A Brief Conversion and Other Stories*, Travey, the precocious first person narrator, reflects on the subversive heroism of his Uncle Bango who functions as a life-saving role model for the vulnerable eleven year old. Travey intuitively understands that the truth of his uncle’s story is not simply the Hollywood fantasy persona he so admirably mimics:

I would like to embellish Uncle Bango with power and purpose and a war, give him two pistols and a rifle and a double bandolier; and, with a *sombrero* tied around his neck and falling on his shoulders, put him on a white horse and make him a bandit chieftain at the head of forty, fifty, a hundred lean desperadoes who appear out of nowhere to battle for the poor. I would like to tell of his being pursued by the cavalry, riding through a hail of bullets to meet the woman that is waiting for him, and his name will be Pancho or Fidel or Che. But that would obscure the truth of this story. I am not blinded by Uncle Bango. (Lovelace, *Conversion* 26-27)

This passage is an excellent example of what Funso Aiyejina has so lucidly defined as Lovelace’s technique of “narrative possession or narrative ventriloquism” (Aiyejina, Introduction xvi). Lovelace’s preferred narrative mode is, as Aiyejina elaborates, “a process that allows for the primary narrator to be invaded/mounted and controlled, or relieved of the task of narration, by the subject of the narration who temporarily takes over the task of narration” (Aiyejina, Introduction xvi-xvii). In this instance, there is role reversal as the primary narrator, the child Travey, is possessed by the omniscient authorial consciousness, breathing insights in a language that the child could hardly master.

Mounted by the spirits, Travey becomes the mouthpiece of the masquerade. He defines his Uncle Bango’s importance in this way: “... he was all I had to pit against the desolate humbling of our landscape. What did he bring?” (Lovelace, *Conversion* 27). The answer to that question is a classic articulation of Lovelace’s subversive masquerade aesthetics:

I suppose I must call it style. It was not style as adornment, but style as substance. His style was not something that he had acquired to enhance an ability; rather, it existed prior to any ability or accomplishment—it was affirmation and self

looking for a skill to wed it to, to save it and maintain it, to express it; it was self searching for substance, for meaning. (Lovelace, *Conversion* 27)

This conception of style as the essence of the man, the substance of the self flamboyantly awaiting realization, is a central preoccupation of Travey's own story. "A Brief Conversion" opens with the young boy lamenting his mother's refusal to let him style his hair in a way that will make manifest his incipient manness. In his mother's lexicon, style is synonymous with vanity, and it must be contained for his own good. Shorn of his stylish muff, Travey, again possessed by the omniscient narrator, elaborates the meaning of his mother's protective control:

So maybe it was something less simple than her spite. Maybe my mother's rage and pain derived from having to tame in us what she would have loved to see us exalt, at having to send forth camouflaged as clowns the warriors she had birthed. With her voice ranging over the sounds waves make at every tide, their roarings and their sighs, she had her boychildren shorn, zugged and greased down; and she never allowed us to leave the house without the parting command, 'Button up your shirt! Button up your shirt! As if our beauty was an insolence to be corrected, our spirit a hazard that endangered us. (Lovelace, *Conversion* 6)

As early as *While Gods are Falling*, published four decades ago, Lovelace's male protagonists reject the camouflage of clown for the masquerade of warrior. Abhorring patience, Walter Castle, ill at ease in the castle of his skin, rejects the subservient posture he is forced to assume in the workplace. Like his namesake Walter in Lorraine Hansberry's *Raisin in the Sun*, Lovelace's Castle refuses the identity of emasculated victim: "A man must have some pride. That's one thing a man must have. And a man must have a point like a mule; when you reach there, you not going further. Well, I reach. I don't think I goin' back to that office in the morning" (Lovelace, *Gods* 15).

Young Travey, briefly converts to his mother's religion of self-effacing modesty with such conviction that even she fears that he is ill. He no longer protests the ritual shearing. He allows bullying schoolmates to deride him without retaliating because he views his "sainthood" as a necessary apprenticeship for the life of scholarship to which he aspires. But he is rescued from the threat of absolute clownishness by one word from his Uncle Bango: the salutation "Bull" (Lovelace, *Conversion* 27). This greeting fires Travey's resolve to fight his chief antagonist, Police, and reclaim his sense of warriorhood.

Maureen Warner-Lewis observes in "Mind-set, Myth, and Masquerade" that:

The African elements in Trinidad carnival are to be found in certain of the traditional or *old mas'* bands. One such is the cow band. Earliest reports on Caribbean street masking speak of maskers wearing cow tails and horns and rattles on their legs. They moved vigorously, and blew empty gourds or jars to create a mooing sound. Such masks symbolized virile power, prestige and

awesomeness, much as the boar masks in Europe did.... [C]ow masks appear to be modifications to representations of the West African buffalo or wild cow, which was a symbol of fearsomeness. (Warner-Lewis, *Other Suns* 181)

Uncle Bango's "Bull" empowers Travey who manages to overpower Police in the showdown fight. His reward is his mother's concession: "And that head. You better get one of your friends to cut your hair. Fitzie does trim too clean" (Lovelace, *Conversion* 31).

Unlike Travey's mother, Pearl, Irene, her town-wise sister, indulges every whim of her son Ronnie, whose hairstyle becomes a metonym for vanity: "Ronnie has his hair parted and brushed for the waves in it to show" (Lovelace, *Conversion* 3). Ronnie, tyrannical in the games he plays with Travey, is represented as a real devil mas:

Ronnie is not very athletic. In the races we run, I beat him every time; yet, when we play, he is Tarzan; he is Zorro. He has a little Zorro mask which he never lends me and, like Zorro, he has a whip with which he feels free to lash me, since in all our games Ronnie is the star boy and I am the crook. When we play stick-em-up, my shots are the ones that miss. He never misses. "I get you!" he cries, celebrating his perfect marksmanship. "You dead!"

If I argue, he sulks and refuses to play. I try to hold out against his unfairness; but he knows that I am dying to play, and he waits until I give in and say, okay. I learn to stumble, to hold my shoulder as I fall, pretending to be wounded only in the arm. He stands, at such times, with a cruel and triumphant grin on his face, his gun aimed dead at my head, ready to shoot me down in cold blood, should I seek to escape. (Lovelace, *Conversion* 3-4)

The exploitative relationship between Ronnie and Travey strikingly echoes that between Annie John and her domineering companion, the boy Mineu in Jamaica Kincaid's eponymous novel. The historical oppression of the feminized native by the conquering Columbus is replicated in the childhood games they play. The local scandal of a man who "killed his girl-friend and a man who was his best friend when he found them drinking together in a bar" is a classic tale of misplaced proprietorship (Kincaid 96). In their childish replay of the drama in which culminates in the hanging of the murderer, Mineu almost kills himself in a parodic trope of mimesis.

His near-strangulation is the fulfillment of Annie's silent wish to become the star, to abandon the role of mere spectator in the childhood games that mirror the gendered, adult identity:

If we played knight and dragon, I was the dragon; if we played discovering Africa, he discovered Africa; he was also the leader of the savage tribes that tried to get in the way of the discovery, and I played his servant, and a not very bright servant at that; if we played prodigal son, he was the prodigal son and the prodigal

son's father and the jealous brother, while I played a person who fetched things.  
(Kincaid 95-96)

"Call Me 'Miss Ross' for Now," the other story in the Lovelace collection on which I now focus briefly, illustrates female entrapment in restrictive gender roles—the camouflage of clownish respectability. Persistently wooed by the young man Fitzroy, Miss Ross, the ageing postmistress and a faithful member of the executive of the moribund Village Council, is unable to abandon the pedestal of virtuous asceticism on which she is firmly fixed, as illustrated in this humorous exchange:

'Miss Ross,' he said. 'You really looking good these days, you know. What it is you eating?'

'Thank you,' she said stiffly, pretending not to notice the section of her body he was admiring. She didn't want to encourage him. He had never stepped out of line with her before.... She tried to make her face serious then; but, instead of feeling outraged, she felt an alarm as if the front of her blouse had got undone and her breasts were showing. For one eternal moment they looked at each other with the fiction of casualness, he, without the language to go further, she, without the power to compose herself, feeling more alarm about what she had revealed about herself than about what he was saying. (Lovelace, *Conversion* 63)

That very night a bull appears in Miss Ross's dreams. But unlike Uncle Bango's virile *old mas* bull that empowers Travey, this beast precipitates flight:

She was standing under the moon and a bull, grazing in the savannah, suddenly began to run towards her. She was rooted to the spot, and she took a letter from the cupboard in the Post Office, and tried to shoo it way. It came hurtling towards her with its head lowered and its horns showing and at the very last minute the letter opened into a parachute and she jumped up and began to fly away.  
(Lovelace, *Conversion* 63-64)

Miss Ross, distrustful of entanglement in a relationship with a much younger man, refuses to surrender even her first name. The promise of this intimacy—"for now"—is never fulfilled. She comes belatedly to recognize that "she had held on too long to things that had no use in this time. She wished that she had been more herself, more individual and separate" (Lovelace, *Conversion* 79). The self hidden behind the camouflage of propriety is unable to claim its proper style, the substance of its being.

At a contentious meeting of the Village Council in which squabbling old men parody the rituals of British parliamentary procedure, Miss Ross fantasizes about Fitzroy and the pretty young girl who moved in with him the very night they met at a fete. Fearing life sentence in the prison of respectable spinsterhood, Miss Ross recklessly abandons her duties as a member of the executive: "And she ran and she ran with the fear in her that was nothing, she felt, to the terror

from which she hoped she had escaped.” (Lovelace, *Conversion* 80). Though it is too late for Fitzroy, Miss Ross is readying herself to take another bull by the horns.

In the essay “A Caribbean Place for the Caribbean Artist,” Lovelace brilliantly deploys the contested issue of reparations for the enslavement of Africans in the Americas as a tricky metaphor for the reclamation of the self that is so central to the decolonization process: “Reparation is to give back something to yourself, something that you have lost or did not even know you had, something like innocence, power” (Lovelace, *Growing in the Dark* 161). Taking the discourse of reparations out of the contentious arena of global politics, Lovelace privileges the personal politics of individual responsibility. Abandoning the camouflage of clown, both Travey and Miss Ross, emancipated from victimhood, rediscover within themselves their own style and substance.

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