

December 2006

## Earl Lovelace's "Unsalted" Indians

Vishnudat Singh  
anthuriumcaribjournal@gmail.com

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

---

### Recommended Citation

Singh, Vishnudat (2006) "Earl Lovelace's "Unsalted" Indians," *Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 2 , Article 11.  
Available at: <http://scholarlyrepository.miami.edu/anthurium/vol4/iss2/11>

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](mailto:repository.library@miami.edu).

A central concern in Lovelace's work, almost from the beginning, has been the process of movement from a condition of victimhood to a state of freedom, from past enslavement to self-realization. The natural agents/subjects of this transformation are the wretched/near wretched of rural Trinidad and, occasionally, of the urban ghetto of Port of Spain: steelbandmen, stickfighters, mas'-men, artists, entertainers, and cricketers. In the opening sequences of *Salt*, for example, Bango steps "on to the cricket field and into the stick fight ring, grand and compelling" carrying "danger ... in his person" and with a total "self-assured conviction" (Lovelace 4). He is the archetypal example of people who cannot be defeated, who cannot be broken, and who cannot be kept in captivity. Bango, who has never owned anything material, has no land, only a ramshackle abode with no steps, a missing backdoor, a hanging window made from an aero plane wing, is a man who owned nothing but himself (Lovelace 138), who, like his forefather Jo-Jo refuses to squat but demands compensation for unlawful captivity (Lovelace 45). He represents the principle of warriorhood, a tradition that is unbroken and continues "to the very end of time" (Lovelace 260). Unlike his great-grandfather, Guinea-John, who flew back to Africa, Bango has eaten salt and may be too heavy to fly, but is he a "creole," native of the Caribbean in the sense of being born here, or is he African? And how do the "Indian" characters fit into this concept of "warriorhood"?

Other modes facilitating the transformation are education and religion. As we see in the case of Alford George, the former can be a two-edged sword, providing certification (not necessarily with validation) but profoundly alienating as well, often serving as a means of escape from Trinidad and from self. The significant religious manifestations are Shango/Orisha and the Spiritual Baptists and generally, since Indo-Trinidadians' participation in these denominations is at an extremely low level, Lovelace carefully omits them. The final ideological consideration relates to political activity, carnival and reparation (for Africans first), but before I deal with these I want to look at "salt" and civilization.

As I have indicated, "Jo-Jo's great-grandfather, Guinea John, with his black jacket on and a price of two hundred pounds sterling on his head, made his way to the East Coast, mounted the cliff at Manzanilla, put two corn cobs under his armpits and flew away to Africa, taking with him the mysteries of levitation and flight, leaving the rest of his family still in captivity..." (Lovelace 3). He has not eaten salt, he has retained his African skills, sensitivities and oracular learning, has not been Caribbeanized, has not become a "creole." His children (presumably born in the Caribbean) "had eaten salt and made themselves too heavy to fly. So ...their future would be in the islands" (Lovelace 3). Salt is mentioned at least three other times in the novel: during the period of slavery "ships ... come back with another load of salt fish and salt pork, and smoke herring and tasso and salt" (Lovelace 152). Just after Emancipation Andre Carabon tells Jo-Jo: "Each week every one of you get three pounds of salt meat and three pounds of salt fish" (Lovelace 181). And finally, "Salt. Too much salt. Rastas don't eat salt. Too much salt meat" (Lovelace 213).

Those who are born in the islands, the Creoles, have eaten too much salt, leading to disease and dereliction unknown in Africa. But the same salt causes them to stay, to reassess their relationship to the new land, to their new neighbors, to reinvent themselves. Incidentally, the rations for indentured Indians sailing from Calcutta to the Caribbean included 2 lbs of salt fish per person each day, vegetarian or not (Weller 143). So some of them were potentially “salted” before their arrival from 1845 and potentially subjected to the process of “creolization.” As Benítez-Rojo argues, creolization is not a fixed state, it is a process, a discontinuous series of occurrences:

... our cultural manifestations are not creolized, but are rather in a state of creolization. Creolization does not transform literature or music or language into a synthesis or anything that could be taken in essentialist terms, nor does it lead these expressions into a predicable state of creolization. Rather, creolization is a term with which we attempt to explain the unstable states that a Caribbean cultural object presents over time. In other words, creolization is not merely a process (a word that implies forward movement) but a discontinuous series of recurrences, of happenings, whose sole law is change. Where does this instability come from? It is the product of the plantation (the big bang of the Caribbean universe), whose slow explosion throughout modern history threw out billions and billions of cultural fragments in all directions—fragments of diverse kinds that, in their endless voyage, come together in an instant to form a dance step, a linguistic trope, the line of a poem, and afterward repel each other to re-form and pull apart once more .... (Benítez-Rojo 55)

Discontinuity, coming together, repelling, reforming, pulling apart of the disparate cultural fragments: “... the plantation repeats itself endlessly in the different states of creolization that come out here and there in language and music, dance and literature, food and theater. These elements are summed up in the Carnival” (Benítez-Rojo 56).

When Alford George, the chief protagonist in the novel, fails to change the College Exhibition examination and becomes an instant celebrity, he returns to teaching, turning his back on the Eurocentric paradigms of the past. He decides the most important project is a Carnival band, and in order that people would understand one another he wants them to take on the role of the other: Africans are to be Conquistadors, Buccaneers, Pirates; Europeans are to be African warriors; Indians are to be Amerindians; and Chinese and Syrians are to be the enslaved on the plantations. Carnival is to be the glue of the new society, achieved by the recognition of the otherness of the other by assuming that identity. Alford George claims “Carnival as the future religion of the island, because it was the single celebration in which disparate races and classes of people could come with whatever was their contribution to celebrate freedom and fellowship without a feeling of patronage and alienation” (Lovelace 91). This was going too far in the colonial environment of *Salt* and all the Churches, Christian, Hindu, Muslim denounce the plan.

The strongest support for George's radical plan comes from Dr. Kennos, the Indian leader of the Church of Fellowship and Joy.

We first meet Kennos as a "thin Indian boy who had proven before that he could neither bat nor bowl nor field and who didn't care either" (Lovelace 31). He is selected over Alford George but when the argument over what to do with Alford goes on for several minutes, "the thin disinterested boy decided that his time was being wasted and left" (Lovelace 31). Is he a spoilsport? Is he un-cooperative? Is he selfish? My view is that he is only being sensible in not letting stupidity cause him wasted time and effort. He is independent and self-reliant. When he next appears he is an achiever; having left Cunaripo to go to El Dorado Presbyterian School and Queens Royal College, he wins a scholarship to Cambridge University to study Philosophy and Religion, goes on to Winnipeg for his PhD, and is now leading his own church. Education and Religion are the way forward, the way out for the Indian as well. For most of the rest of the novel Dr. Kennos (Lochan's nephew Kenwyn) is a marginal political artist, betrayed when Alford George leaves their fledgling group to join the National Party (the African party) after deciding that his vocation as a preacher is what he will use to campaign for the development of the country. It is his attitude to Carnival that distinguishes him, however:

Dr. Kennos was of the view that Carnival belonged to all the peoples of the islands. Living as we were so close to one another, any creation or practice by any group in the island achieved its character because of the presence of the others in their midst, that in a way we all share in the creations and practices done by everyone in this island. Each one of us needs to understand that he runs the risk of denying his own self and presence when he looks at the creations or practices produced in his presence, in his place and time, as if he had nothing to do with them. The problem, he argued, is not with the practices. Nothing is wrong with Carnival or Phagwa or Easter. It is clear that there is a sense of insecurity in every sector of this nation. Instead of exploiting it for their narrow purposes, leaders need to help with the healing.

'For my part,' he wrote, 'Carnival must be claimed by all of us, just as we must all claim all that has been created in our presence. 'As far as I am concerned,' he wrote, 'I find the idea of Carnival, its indigenous character, its embracing fellowship, its sense of celebration of art, of life, of creativity, worthy to be given the kind of appreciation reserved for religion. Let us put it to the test. Get a costume for everybody, bring in tassa, tabla to join the steel band, teach the children how to play these instruments and to make them harmonize. Put the thing in the schools. We have the teachers here, designers, pan players, singers, wire benders, sculptors. I am willing to give my full support. I can't teach steel band and I can't teach tabla, I will be more than willing to show them how to *wine*.' (Lovelace 92-3)

Carnival is seen by this “salted” Indo-Trinidadian as integrative, developmental, healing, indigenous, encouraging fellowship, facilitating nation building.

The view of the slim Indian man finds resonance in Florence’s portrayal of her Africanness in George Bailey’s “Back to Africa” as she sees the admiring spectators “acknowledgement and their granting of a right that she had claimed by the display of herself” (Lovelace 96); in Alford George’s plan to put “Carnival arts ...at the center of the educational system” (Lovelace 128); and in the French Creole owner of the new plantation Adolph Carabon’s “thinking of Carnival, the ceremony of possession, of becoming, of joining. Of the beginning that was waiting” (Lovelace 214).

The argument for reparation for those who suffered from African enslavement is handled most explicitly in this novel, and in historical terms must have surfaced soon after Emancipation and the subsequent arrival of the Indian indentured labourers in 1845. Jo-Jo is free but chooses to return to Carabon’s plantation after petitioning the Queen for land as a form of reparation for wrong done (Lovelace 182). Shortly after a “band of oily-looking people” from India arrives on the compound, Jo-Jo accosts one of them cutlassing the land nearby only to be told by the Indian: “This land is my own...because of my contract. I not going back to India” (Lovelace 185). Jo-Jo, as pompous an interrogator as if he were the Protector of Crown Lands, is bowled over by the awareness that “they give these Indian people contract and land to work on these estates” (Lovelace 186). This reinforces his view that “the Colony’s treatment of the Indians had given him an even greater claim to reparation, but what was worrying, was his feeling that he had made an enemy of Feroze and the rest of the Indian people” (Lovelace 186-187). The narrator explains: “Where Bango got his story from, I did not know, and I did not dare ask him” (Lovelace 187).

Bango has his own story when he accosts Moon, a thin Indian man he thinks is trying to start squatting next to him. Moon retorts: “Neighbour, I think you make a mistake ... This land is mine. I buy it.” Five acres with his deed to prove it. Bango realizes he has been “tricked,” “betrayed,” “robbed of something” (149-150). He has been treated differently, given nothing for his services while the more recent arrivant is able to purchase land from savings and is rewarded for remaining in the new homeland. We know that the differential treatment of formerly enslaved Africans and formerly indentured Indians is one of the root causes of mutual hostility that has persisted for more than a hundred years but Bango’s explanation and acceptance: “I can’t vex with him. Is not his fault,” (150) the second such accommodating and understanding response in an aggrieved situation is remarkable in these archetypal “warriors.” They both know they have suffered a loss but Jo-Jo:

...had no idea of the loss he had lost. He had to try to put aside the depth of this loss he had lost and find a way in his mind to claim this new world as home. And he would claim it, he felt, out of having endured here, out of having planted the land without reward, out of having built houses without occupying them, out of

having sown without reaping. He could claim it out of having made it a battleground for freedom. (Lovelace 173)

This is his preparation to be “part of a new people whose sweat and blood had fertilized the soil” (Lovelace 173).

One of the many narratives in the novel is the story of Moon and his progeny, especially his grandson Sonan Lochan. Moon has been given land in the Bandon, abandoned plantation land, half of it swampy. He exploits it fully as a farmer, hunter, and fisherman. He changes his caste, allows the women to walk nearly abreast of the man as if the old world customs are behind them, exchanged for a new world freedom in which they would have the chance to make themselves anew (Lovelace 218). He becomes a skilful businessman, moving from Cascadu to Cunaripo from the proceeds of a settlement he extracts (falsely) from the government, and then opens a hardware and auto parts outlet. Significantly, he sponsors stick fighting at Carnival and there is bongo dancing at his wake. But we are given no sense of the inner man, what drives him, what leads him into politics where he is a complete failure.

It is Sonan Lochan, his grandson who takes us into the present, Sonan the cricketer who could make no runs for the Hindu School or Naparima College because of the burden: “He was not just a batsman, he was an Indian” (Lovelace 228). Only when he learns that “the best way to bat was to bat for batting” can he have the confidence to be independent (he is an independent at heart), to realize that the feminist views of Reena Lochan were valid and Indian, to reach out to Africans, to resist the taunts of those who feel that he is not representative of the Indian party. He has the strength and the wisdom to use his ancestral struggles to be understood and to feel welcome to his advantage. He has learnt how to bat; he is for growth and development. He has taken but he has brought to the table as well. He will now be the one to welcome others to Cascadu. Like Alford George he will “work to make this island a place where people didn’t have to leave to find the world” (Lovelace 90).

Earl Lovelace sees Lochan thus: “Similarly, Sonan has also been in the cricket. They are rooted in the landscape in various ways—the cinema, the lime, University of the West Indies (UWI). He’s aware of certain issues...he has stood up in his own party for certain values. We feel he’s onto something” (Aiyejina 15). He may not be in Bango’s Independence march but he is represented. He has supported it, unlike the members of the National Party, which has tried to subvert it from the beginning. He realizes on an individual and political basis that, “No man is an island entire unto itself,” but that every man is “a piece of the continent, a part of the main” (Lovelace 234). Whether he has had salt on the ships coming from India or in his new homeland, he is adequately “salted.”

Works Cited

Aiyejina, Funso. "Earl Lovelace." *Self-Portraits: Interviews with Ten West Indian Writers and Two Critics*. Ed. Funso Aiyejina. St. Augustine: The University of the West Indies School of Continuing Studies, 2003. 1-22.

Benítez-Rojo, Antonio. "Three Words toward Creolization" Trans. by James Maraniss. *Caribbean Creolization: Reflections on the Cultural Dynamics of Language, Literature and Identity*, edited by Kathleen M. Balutansky and Marie-Agnès Sourieau. Gainesville: UP of Florida, 1998. 53-61.

Lovelace, Earl. *Salt*. London: Faber and Faber, 1996.

Weller, Judith Ann. *The East Indian Indenture in Trinidad*. Rio Pedras, P. R.: Institute of Caribbean Studies, University of Puerto Rico, 1968.