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The Calypsonian Returns: Rethinking Social Transformation in Earl Lovelace's *The Dragon Can't Dance*

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There is dancing in the calypso. Dance! If the words mourn the death of a neighbor, the music insists that you dance; if it tells the troubles of a brother, the music says dance. Dance to the hurt! Dance! If you catching hell, dance, and the government don't care, dance! ... Dance! Dance! Dance! It is in the dancing that you ward off evil. Dancing is a chant that cuts off the power from the devil.

Earl Lovelace, *Dragon Can't Dance*

Patricia J. Saunders notes in “The Meeting Place of Creole Culture,” an interview with Earl Lovelace, that the “relationship between cultural expression and social transformation” lies at the heart of Lovelace’s work (10). *The Dragon Can't Dance* is no exception. In this particular work, the performativity of Trinidad’s carnival becomes an outward expression of Calvary Hill’s need to transform their social conditions. In this specific context, my use of the performative references different manifestations of cultural practices that are marked by an inherent agency. I emphasize the performativity of Trinidad’s carnival because it plays a key role in Lovelace’s interrogation of the possibility of cultural expression bringing about social transformation in the novel. The characters respond to and resist their social conditions through their individual performances during the carnival season: Fisheye’s steel band performance, Aldrick’s dragon dance, and Philo’s calypsos. Lovelace explores the effectiveness of each performance throughout the novel in search of a viable means of transforming the hill.¹ Seemingly, this correlation between cultural expression and social transformation is embodied in the protagonist, Aldrick. In fact, many critics hail Aldrick and his menacing dragon dance as the hope for social transformation of the metaphoric Calvary Hill.² However, his dragon mask and all that it signifies—as a connection to African ancestry and rebellion against the circumstances of the hill—are at best as ineffective in transforming the hill as his fruitless rebellion is shortly after carnival. Even as Aldrick questions the possibility of change for the people of Trinidad, he is unsure of the proper course of action. He asks, “how do you rise up when your brothers are making peace for a few dollars?” (179). His response, “I don’t know,” to this rhetorical question, is the climax of a string of ineffective tactics (179). At first glance, Aldrick’s failure to transform the hill seems to suggest hopelessness on the part of Lovelace, but in fact he leaves his reader with a possibility, indeed a hope, that cultural expression can bring about social transformation; that possibility lies with Philo, the calypsonian.

Philo’s significance in the novel has been misread by those literary critics such as Gerard Aching, Diana Brydon, and Angelita Reyes, who focus on what they interpret as Philo’s abandonment of the hill. These critics describe him as Judas, dandy, traitor, and sellout. In *Masculinity and the Dance of the Dragon*, Linden Lewis reduces him to a “minor character” (181). But interestingly enough, in their criticism of Philo, none of these critics have questioned

why Lovelace chooses to end his novel with “The Calypsonian” and not “The Dragon.” It is no accident that Lovelace leaves his reader with the image of Philo returning to Calvary Hill much like the prodigal son. When Aldrick is no longer able to don the sacred mask and Fisheye is unable to continue the African legacy of stick fighting, it is Philo that is positioned to take up the fight against the social conditions of the hill through the West African tradition of Kaiso. Although many critics have deemed Philo as a traitor to the hill, it is precisely his status as a calypsonian that enables him to lead the hill and Trinidad into nationhood. The novel does so by allowing him to act as a recorder of the nation’s social movements and the sentiments of the people, to occupy a space that is conducive to articulating and broadening awareness of the social issues facing Trinidadians, and ultimately to represent the place where cultural expression meets social transformation.

In order to understand the significance of Philo’s status as a calypsonian to Lovelace’s text, it is important to consider the role that the calypsonian plays in the context of Trinidadian society and why this figure has become a cornerstone of cultural expression in Trinidad. In *Calypso Calaloo*, Donald Hill traces the origins of calypso to both West Africa and France, as well as acknowledges the influence of songs brought to Trinidad by migrants: “Many tunes and lyrics came from other islands or from the South American mainland. Afro-French songs drifted in from Grenada, Carriacou, St. Lucia, Dominica, and Guadeloupe. British Creole migrants brought songs from Barbados, St. Vincent, and Tobago” (8).³ The West African roots of calypso are of particular interest as they lend to the musical genre a tradition of resistance. More importantly, they inextricably tie calypso to the cultural practices of Africa. Drawing connections between the cultural practices of Trinidad with that of Africa is fundamental to Lovelace’s work. Lovelace recognizes the importance of “an occasion for black people to say look, we come from somewhere, and we didn’t arrive culturally empty-handed” (Saunders 17). This is clear in the manner in which he aligns Aldrick with the sacred maskers of West Africa and Fisheye with a lineage of stick fighters that “came direct from Africa” (48). Although Lovelace does not make this direct connection with the calypsonian, several scholars have taken up this task.

Errol Hill traces the original term used for calypso, *kaiso*, to the Hausa language of West Africa. In *Guinea’s Other Suns*, where she examines the influence of Yoruba music on calypso, Maureen Warner-Lewis locates the etymology of the term in the Igbo lexicon, which means “good continue” (151).⁴ In addition to these scholars, the West African presence in calypso has also been the concern of Gordon Rohlehr (1990, 1998), Keith Warner (1993), and Shannon Dudley (2004), to name a few. Rohlehr not only grounds calypso in a West African tradition, but he also situates it in the context of a larger black diaspora: “It is related to all Black diaspora musics, regardless of language, and shares with them traditional African functions of affirmation, celebration, protest, satire, praise, blame and conflict of all varieties” (*Calypso & Society* 5). He also cites the connections between calypso and the Yoruba traditions of *picong* (provocation) and *mepris* (scorn) described by Warner-Lewis, concluding that, “such hubristic boasting-songs no doubt have their roots in ancient African and European traditions of the praise-song and the

boasting speeches that are so prominent in epic poetry” (*The State* 34).⁵ In *Carnival Music of Trinidad*, Dudley recognizes that the calypsonian’s use of masking and double entendre “has a precedence in West African tradition and was reinforced during slavery, when songs were used to convey secret messages that the masters could not understand” (31). As already stated, it is widely accepted that many cultures have contributed to the musical genre. However, it is in Trinidad that calypso has reached its apogee. Errol Hill writes of the integral role that Trinidad has played in the proliferation of calypso music: “If special claims are made for the minstrel art in the small country of Trinidad and Tobago, it is because that art has flourished, on both the national and the international scene, to a degree unparalleled by minstrel songs from other parts of the world” (55). He credits its role in the country’s annual carnival for the success of the musical genre, as carnival provides a stage from which calypsonians can comment on the affairs of the island.⁶ Indeed, calypso chronicles the island’s complex history. Nowhere is this better demonstrated than in the political arena of Trinidad.

Since the conception of calypso, the art form has served as an outlet for expressing dissent with the upper and middle classes, political factions, and hegemonic structures, and much like Lovelace’s *Dragon*, it has served as a marker of the political climate in Trinidad, leaving “us a priceless archive of social history” (Regis ix).⁷ In *The Political Calypsonian*, Louis Regis recognizes the calypsonian for his role in the struggle for independence, praising him as the herald of independence: “[I]t was fitting that the calypsonian be the herald of independence because he had long championed the national forces and movements agitating for self-rule and statehood” (ix). There are many calypsonians that are known for their political commentary. Atilla the Hun, Growling Tiger, The Mighty Chalkdust, and Black Stalin just to name a few. And in some cases, calypsonians were known to join forces with political parties they supported, most notably, The Mighty Sparrow. In his assessment of “The Sparrow Factor,” Regis identifies the famed calypsonian “as one of the major planks of PNM public relations campaign” (4).⁸ Indeed, Sparrow demonstrated his support for the prime minister and party leader of the PNM (People’s National Movement) Dr. Eric Williams, through calypsos such as “William the Conqueror” (1956), “PAYE” (1958) “Leave the Dam Doctor” (1959), and “Present Government” (1961).⁹ But remaining true to the character of the calypsonian, Sparrow also wrote calypsos such as “No Doctor No” (1957) and “We Like It So” (1982) expressing his dissatisfaction with the prime minister and the PNM, reflecting a changing sentiment amongst the people and thus functioning as a recorder of political and social movements on the island.

The Mighty Sparrow’s legendary influence on calypso has earned the attention of historians and scholars. He is credited with forever changing the genre with his determination to push boundaries with his explicit sexual lyrics, his direct and often scathing criticism of the social conditions of Trinidad, his incisive support of party politics in the country, as well as his sexually charged performances. Rohlehr addresses the manner in which Sparrow has left his mark on the art form:

[C]alypso freedom was practically rewritten, the boundaries redefined by Sparrow, whose risqué calypsos were more risqué than any had ever been before. His political calypsos, blending raw vitality with pointed commentary ... also set new boundaries for incisive criticism at a time when Dr. Eric Williams held the nation spellbound in the palm of his hand. His gyrations on the stage, the truly grotesque, macabre laughter of something like the “Congo Man,” would certainly not have been possible and, if possible, would not have been permitted in the 1930’s. (“The Calypsonian as Artist” 10)

Even though he undoubtedly changed the face of calypso, Sparrow’s success was possible only because the people of Trinidad were also changing, and more importantly, were willing to embrace the new direction in which he propelled calypso music as it reflected the national culture of a country agitating for self-rule and self-identity. I mention this because the subject matter of Sparrow’s calypsos, ranging from socio-political calypsos such as “Jean and Dinah” (1956) and “Present Government” (1961), to sexually charged calypsos like “Mr. Rake and Scrape” (1961) and “The Village Ram” (1964), and calypsos against “Badjohns” (1974), bears an uncanny resemblance to that of Lovelace’s fictional character Philo. Much like The Mighty Sparrow, Philo’s calypsoes cover a broad range of subjects, constantly changing in a manner that reflects the attitudes and temperament of the people. But more importantly, Philo’s most striking similarity to Sparrow is in the manner in which he makes “a bluffing mockery at himself and those who punished him” (228). Rohlehr refers to this strategy as an “attempt at rebellion ... that of accepting and according heroic status to the very quality and values that are rejected as antiheroic, antisocial and damnable by “respectable” society” (“The Calypsonian as Artist” 11). Like Sparrow, Philo is heralded for his ability to subvert society’s standards of decency and yet at the same time is ostracized for contributing to what many see as the denigration of a national art form.

As previously emphasized, the calypsos of Trinidad not only provide us with a chronicle of the political epochs of the country, but they also act as a recorder of the ever-changing sentiments and attitudes of the people. In fact, a calypsonian’s survivability in the profession depends on his ability to capture the sentiments of the people as the success of a calypso literally hinges on its reception by the public. This characteristic of the calypso is vital in understanding the significance of the calypso tent and the role that the audience plays in the degree of success that a calypsonian attains. Although judges select the title of Calypso Monarch, the audience has a considerable influence on the popularity of a calypsonian. A successful calypsonian is called back to the stage several times, an honor that is bestowed upon a select few. When Philo first sings “The Axe Man,” he “get[s] three encores for it” (112):

I am the axe man cutting forests down
I am the axe man working all over town
If you have a tree to cut I am the man to call
I never put my axe on a tree and it didn’t break and fall. (230)

The next year he would win the Calypso King Crown for his calypso “Women Running Me Down:”

All over town, I can't get a rest
Ah never thought I would meet the day when woman is a pest
But I stand up to the test
Because I is the axe man, I is the best. (230)

Due to the nature of the competition, a calypsonian must write calypsos that appeal to the audience if he is to establish himself as a top calypsonian. He does so by expressing his opinions, fears, hopes, and desires in the very words of his calypso.

Philo realizes the importance of singing what the people want to hear if he is to distinguish himself in a musical genre that is rapidly gaining popularity in the global market, and although the argument can be made that Lovelace is addressing a specific cultural context, he is keenly aware of the growing influence that the metropolises of England and America are having on Trinidad's calypso and carnival. This is evident in his depiction of Philo who as a young calypsonian “didn't sing for the tourists so much then” (229). But as Philo approaches the age of 42 he realizes that he must alter his style and musical content as the measures of success have changed. Philo understands that a truly successful calypsonian must have a strong following abroad as well. This knowledge prompts him to alter his calypsos to meet the demands of the rapidly emerging middle class in Trinidad, a group that is heavily influenced by the metropolises. He abandons his political calypsos because “the people” do not want to hear them.¹⁰ Philo explains to Aldrick:

I know you must be saying that I change, that this is not my style, my kinda song, that I ain't protesting again, I ain't singing against the bad things in the place. But, man you have to sing what the people want to hear ... Man year in year out, I singing about how people hungry, how officials ain't doing their duty, and what I get, man? What I get? (112-3)

Philo understands that if he is ever going to position himself as a competitive calypsonian with global recognition, he must “adjusts his tune and tone to conditions within his home circle, within calypsodom and within the larger society” (Regis xiii). Although Philo tries to convince Aldrick that he is making a necessary change, he is unsure of his decision. This is evident in the fact that he decides to test “The Axe-Man” on a rainy night when there are not a lot of people in the tent. Lovelace writes, “And maybe if it wasn't for the rain that night he might never have sung it. But that night the crowd wasn't big and the MC wasn't good at all” (229). Philo chooses to test his new calypso at this time because he knows that if the people do not like it, the damage will be minimal.

His decision to test his calypso is not an uncommon practice among calypsonians. Rohlehr notes the importance of testing in a musical genre that has become commodified by the

global market, recognizing that the “home community ... is the laboratory in which each new [calypso] is tested” (“The State of Calypso” 38). This testing is important because it allows Philo to assess his understanding of the sentiments of the people and his assessment is correct. It is not until he performs “The Axe-Man” that he succeeds in making it to the finals in the competition and, as Lovelace observes in the novel, this calypso helps him to “survive” in a cutthroat competitive market (231). But the significance of Philo’s change in subject matter does not end there, the implications are much greater. In abandoning his politically charged calypsos for that of “The Axe Man,” “Women Running Me Down,” and “I am the Ape Man Not Tarzan,” Philo is not only catering to an expanding global market that is rapidly consuming the music and culture of Trinidad, but he is also continuing to act in the capacity of a recorder of the social conditions in Trinidad. Indeed, he is chronicling the social decline of the hill that Aldrick laments. When Philo tells Aldrick that he must sing what the people want to hear, Aldrick replies, “‘I understand, man,’ Aldrick said. ‘Yeh.’ And indeed he understood too well” (113). Although Aldrick is bothered by Philo’s new calypso, what bothers him even more is that he fully understands that through his calypso, Philo is describing a movement that is sweeping through Trinidad. This opposing face of the political calypsonian reveals the complicated and often contentious position the calypsonian holds in Trinidadian society.

In *The Calypsonian as Artist*, Gordon Rohlehr traces the use of “more pronounced ... sexual themes” in the calypso to “the Yankee invasion between 1941 and 1945” (9), but he attributes “the grotesque excesses in sexuality” to Sparrow (9, 10). Despite the criticism that Sparrow received and still receives today for transforming the genre in this way, this shift has gained momentum. It has done so for two reasons. Sexuality has become the standard by which to measure manhood and the sexually charged theme appeals to the carnivalesque in the general population. This inundation of sexual themes is not only confined to calypso but is also present in other genres of Caribbean music such as Trinidad’s soca and Jamaica’s dancehall. This is evident in the manner in which manhood comes to be defined in the popular music of the Caribbean. In societies where the majority are poor and confined to dungs, shanties, and barrack yards, where a man is stripped of his ability to help himself, it can be argued that sexual potency becomes one form of currency in which to negotiate his manhood. My use of the term “sexual potency” does not refer to the ability to procreate, although Lovelace’s character Ms. Olive demonstrates that this too is a form of currency for the dispossessed.¹¹ Rather, my use of the term refers directly to what Philo’s calypso “The Axe Man” terms “cutting forests down,” celebrating man as a sexual predator.

Ironically, although Aldrick seems to loathe the calypso, it is Aldrick who most resembles Philo’s Axe Man. It is Aldrick, who always has women coming to see him:

[w]omen who flitted in and out of his life without really touching it, their relations ending in bed, as if they had together come with no more ambition or hope or want beyond a mutual desiring in the flesh, and when that last was satisfied the

attraction would disappear, ... no burden lightened except the one in his groin.
(33)

Philo, on the other hand, is nothing like the axe man. In fact, “the thing about the song that worried him was that it didn’t fit him” (229). However, it would be the success of this calypso that affirms him and his manhood (231). Philo becomes the axe man because of the popular reception that his calypso receives. No longer does he have to pant behind Ms. Cleothilda, hoping to inch his way up her steps. Instead, Philo now has a myriad of women from which to select. He even has enough to share with his friend Aldrick.

Philo’s calypso also appeals to his audience because of its carnivalesque overtones. Rohlehr speaks of the dichotomous nature of the Trinidadian people, who “oscillate between the puritanical and the carnivalesque, the moral sermon and the breakaway jam-down” (“The State of Calypso” 36). In spite of the fact that his lyrics are more than enough to pull his audience in, Philo’s performance of “The Axe Man” is crucial to his reception. Much like Sparrow’s signature wining, thrusting, and gyrating, Philo sings the song “with a lot of spirit,” ensuring an overwhelming response from his audience by giving them not only what they want to hear but also what they want to see, again appealing to the desires of the people (229). As Gordon Rohlehr observes of the calypso generally, Philo is fully aware of the manner in which “market forces determine the shape, the content, the message and the performance style” of calypso (Rohlehr *The State* 33).

As much as Philo’s “The Axe Man” appeals to the people of Trinidad, the calypso that takes the country by storm is “Hooligans in Port of Spain:”

Hooligans in Port of Spain messing up the place
Last night one of them slap my girl in she face
The next time they see me, they better beware
I have an axe in my hand, a pistol in my waist
When my gun shoot off the police could make their case

Why they so jealous I really don’t know
I was their friend no so long ago
Since I start to get fame they grinding their teeth
They ready to eat me up like salmon meat
The next time they see me they better come straight
I have a dagger in my hand, a pistol in my waist,
When I protect myself, the police could make their case. (163)

It is this calypso that earns him countless encores and ultimately “consolidate[s] his position as a top singer” (231). Philo is inspired to write this song after he is literally and figuratively struck down by Fisheye on the corner of Calvary Hill. Unlike “The Axe Man,” “Hooligans in Port of

Spain” does not grab the people’s attention because of its elements of fantasy or comedy, but because it expresses their growing resentment of the bad Johns on the corner. The calypso also marks the moment when Philo realizes his error in defining his manhood by literally becoming “The Axe Man.” He begins to understand that he must find a new way to define his manhood. Thus, Philo’s axe loses its phallic symbolism and becomes a weapon against the bad Johns of Trinidad. It is at this crucial juncture that Philo’s “people” begin to encompass the members of Calvary Hill and like communities who have abandoned the ideology of non-possession, a concept that is borrowed from Gerard Aching’s book *Masking and Power*, in hope of joining Trinidad’s middle class.¹²

Much like Philo, “these were people who had inherited the rebellion bequeathed them by their parents, upheld by bad Johns, Dragons, Stickmen, bursting forth in the steelbands, crowning warriors in Calvary Hill, Laventille, John John, Belmont, St. James, Morvant, but people for whom times had changed” (163).¹³ For the members of these communities, their very way of life is changing, prompting the abandonment of “the rebellion bequeathed them by their parents,” for the promise of modernity. Just as Philo is forced into recognizing that he cannot occupy both spaces, comrade on the hill and internationally renowned calypsonian “singing calypso all over the world, going to America and England. ... a big shot” (197), the people of Trinidad reach the same conclusion:

Philo’s attack on the Corner had come at a time when multitudes of people keenly felt the need to cut their ties with the corners in their own communities. ...
Something had happened. They had jobs now, had responsibility now for the surviving of their families, they could no longer afford rebellion at the Corner. They felt guilty turning away from it. Yet, they needed to move on. They had to move on. But they could not move on with that guilt. They could not move on, with the Corner still part of them. They had to choose, they felt; and, it was because they were unable to hold in their minds the two contradictory ideas—their resistance and surviving, their rebellion and their decency; because they felt that they had to be one or the other in order to move on, they needed to cut ties with the Corner. So it was that Philo’s calypso became a statement for them all. This would be the epitaph to their rebellion. (163-4)

Although Lovelace makes it very clear that the “people” of Trinidad have nothing to gain and too much to lose by turning their backs on “the rebellion bequeathed them,” he acknowledges the struggle of a newly independent nation to manage conflicting ideologies that arise with its emergence into the global community. This is apparent in the manner in which he addresses class and mobility. His repeated references to “moving on” indicates that he is keenly aware that for the people that embrace Philo’s calypso, mobility is a key element not only in their ascension to middle class status, but in their survival as well. Their assumed decency, which is a clear marker of middle classdom, is in direct conflict with their inherited rebellion. Therefore the people of the hill and surrounding communities feel that they have no other option but to relinquish their

claims to rebellion in order to survive in a society where class mobility seems to be their only chance for survival. Philo's calypso indeed marks an important juncture in the laborious birthing of a new nation.

Aldrick is unable to understand the popularity of the calypso. He is unable to assess the sentiments of the people, and like Philo is ultimately forced to choose between the corner and the rapidly changing Calvary Hill, ultimately between the Calvary Nine and Philo. For Aldrick:

it was less through his own conviction that Philo was a menace to the warriorhood at the Corner than his inability to hold the two ideas in his brain—Philo as a friend, and Philo as threat; Philo as playboy, and Philo as a brother from the Hill—and let his action flow from that whole that *he betrayed* his friend. (159 emphasis added)

In these scenes, Lovelace addresses two betrayals that take place in the text, Philo's betrayal of the hill's ideology of non-possession and Aldrick's betrayal of Philo. It is not fortuitous that these scenes come one right after the other or that Lovelace uses the same language to describe the logic behind the betrayals, the inability "to hold in their minds the two contradictory ideas" (164). It is indicative of the fact that both Aldrick and Philo are embarking on an evolutionary journey to consciousness however diametrically opposed their chosen paths might be. Non-possession is clearly the distinguishing factor that marks the development of Aldrick and Philo in the novel. Although Aldrick is struggling to define his own position in relation to possessions, he clearly decides that he is unwilling to surrender his rebellion. On the other hand, Philo readily abandons his previous attempts at rebellion. He does so by altering his calypsos to receive fame and respect, to be able to say, "I was there" (113). But along with respectability and fame comes financial gain, possessions, and an emergence into the middle class.

Dudley notes that "[c]alypsonians from Trinidad made recordings in New York as early as 1912," and as commercial success for calypso grew in the United States between the 1930's and the 1950's, distribution of the art form spread rapidly throughout the English Caribbean (23). However, this proliferation of the art form did not remain confined to the region. The American occupation of Trinidad contributed greatly to this movement by "expos[ing] Trinidadians to the outside world" (Oxaal 81). The top calypsonians began to perform abroad in nightclubs and dancehalls, particularly in the United States. This new international fame elevated the status of the calypsonian. No longer viewed as a blight on decent society, "the growing international reputation which calypso acquired was of the greatest importance for the prestige of the art form and the respect of its practitioners" (van Koningsbruggen 50). Philo speaks of the respectability that he has gained with his international fame when he tells Aldrick, "For years I struggle. Like a dog. People wouldn't let their daughter talk to me because I is a calypsonian" (156). Philo's possessions, his ability to "move on" to Deigo Martin, and his numerous trips abroad are indicators that he has become an internationally known calypsonian which no doubt contributes to this newfound respect.

In *Black intellectuals Come to Power*, Ivar Oxaal writes that a positive characteristic of “the American occupation [was that it] provided considerable employment and income for the local population” (81). This is definitely the case for Philo, but does not hold true for the rest of Calvary Hill who hold “their poverty as a possession” (10). Philo is driven away from the hill solely because he has abandoned the hill’s motto of non-possession, an issue that Gerard Aching addresses with great zeal. The harshest criticism of Philo undoubtedly comes from Aching. He criticizes Philo for abandoning the hill’s ideology of non-possession, and yet trying to re-assert himself as part of the hill by proclaiming, “I is we.” But as Kenneth Ramchand points out in his article *Indian-African Relations in Caribbean Fiction*, the philosophy of non-possession is broken long before Philo becomes a famed calypsonian (21). Not only are Guy and Ms. Cleothilda actively violating the code, but Aldrick also begins to question the ideology when he takes an interest in Sylvia. When Pariag buys the bike and everyone looks for Aldrick to handle the situation, he tells Philo:

I is thirty-one years old. Never had a regular job in my life or a wife or nutten. I ain’t own house or car or radio or racehorse or store. I don’t own one thing in this fucking place ... 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 want to catch a breath, I want to see what I doing, to try to remember what life is and who is I and what I doing on this fucking Hill. Let the Indian buy his bike. (110)

Interestingly enough, as Aldrick begins to question the hill’s ideology of non-possession, it is Philo that tries to remind him that the unspoken code should not be broken. He tells Aldrick, “you don’t find it funny, this Indian. He off by himself, he and he wife. You don’t know what going on with them, then sudden so he appear with a brand new bicycle. It strange you know. People don’t live so on the hill” (111).

Aldrick is the only one on the hill, it seems, that is not bothered by the Indian’s violation of the hill’s philosophy. He is not concerned with Pariag buying the bike not only because it does not affect him, but also because he is fully aware that in order to *possess* Sylvia he must abandon the hill’s ideology of non-possession. Philo recognizes that Aldrick is beginning to violate the code because of his attraction to Sylvia. He tells Aldrick, “This girl really set you thinking, man. I tell you... I tell you ... Have your head on! Have your head on!” (111). Philo recognizes even before Aldrick, the beginning of his evolution, and he is fully aware that Sylvia will be the catalyst behind Aldrick’s development and subsequent abandonment of non-possession, as Aldrick’s growing interest in Sylvia forces him to act. He is no longer able to simply mime rebellion through his dragon dance, but he must now assume responsibility if he is to transform the hill. So why then is it such a threat to Calvary Hill for Philo to abandon non-possession when members of the hill are already participating in this behavior? Philo, much like Pariag, is castigated for betraying the code of non-possession because he makes them aware of the very impotence of their ideology. His brand new car, flashy clothes, his entrance into the global

world, and the knowledge and experience that comes with it are daily reminders of the ineffectiveness of their chosen rebellions.

In *Trusting the Contradictions*, Diana Brydon writes:

their rebellion is doubly self defeating: not only does it compel them to behave in ways that maintain their poverty, but, more importantly, it also condemns them to continue thinking within terms of reference established by their oppressors. They have reversed the values attached to certain qualities, so that Black becomes Beautiful, and an evil becomes a good, but they have not moved beyond the restrictions of the dualistic thinking that establishes such categories in the first place. (322)

In other words, their methods of rebellion, hinders them from viewing Philo as famed calypsonian and Philo as brother, although they are conscious of the fact that the greatest betrayal is their betrayal of Philo. When Fisheye tells Philo that he doesn't want him on the hill, he must strengthen "his voice to hide, obscure, whatever wrong he felt in himself" (161). Aldrick also comes to "recognize it as a more profound betrayal of himself ... that denied growth in himself, denied the truth of his own feelings" (159). They must employ these tactics because they are cognizant of the fact that Philo is not the enemy that opposes them. Rather for Aldrick and Fisheye, he represents the eradication of their very way of life, however, Fisheye and Aldrick are not the only ones to make this mistake.

As stated previously, literary critics such as Angelita Reyes (1984, 1986), Harold Barrat (1984), Kenneth Ramchand (1988), Diana Brydon (1989), K.T. Sunitha (1989), and Gerard Aching (2002) play close attention to Aldrick's evolution throughout the novel. However Philo's evolution has not been given the equal attention that it deserves. Instead it has been erroneously reduced to the abandonment of socio-political values for the glitz and glamour of international fame, a charge often made against the modern day calypsonian. However, it is specifically because of this international fame that the calypsonian's form of cultural expression has the power to bring about social change.

Interestingly enough, Aching's polemic against Philo is not limited to his betrayal of non-possession, but extends its reach to criticize Philo's status as a calypsonian as well. Aching writes that, "Philo's self-styled mode of representativeness differs from the dragon's collectively inspired choreography during carnival, which, for its own continuity, requires the presence and engagement of opponents" (69). What Aching does not acknowledge is that calypso's ancestral heritage of calypso battles or wars, that employed the use of picong (witty insults), was indeed a contest between calypsonians with a legacy equally revered to that of Aldrick's dragon dance and Fisheye's stick-fighting. It was "[a] spontaneous, verbal battle in rhymed song between two or more contending calypsonians, in which wit and humorous impact of a contender's improvisation determines his supremacy" (Allsop 439). They battled on stage to win the

applause and loyalty of their audience. And although the tradition of calypso wars is no longer seen in the calypso tent, the art form continues to draw from the tradition by relying solely on the engagement of its audience as the artists continue to battle and engage in a dialect through their calypsos. In fact, many calypsonians are known for responding to their critics through their calypsos. The Mighty Sparrow was notorious for this practice. In “Thanks to the Guardian” (1962), he attacks the local newspaper for their criticism against him, comically thanking them for their free advertisement. Likewise, in “Outcast” (1963), he continues to attack the people of Trinidad for their treatment of calypsonians, and in “Everybody Washing They Mouth on Me” (1959), he responds to criticism of his decision to marry a white American.¹⁴ Philo is no exception as he too battles through his calypsos. This is evident in his calypso “Hooligan’s in Port of Spain” in which he keeps his promise to wage war against the Calvary Nine. Even though Philo’s attack is not a physical one, there is no mistake that his calypso sends the message “Is war” (162).

Another miscalculation that Aching makes in his critique of Philo, along with many others, is in underestimating the power of his performativity. He states that Philo’s “posture [is] afforded by an incipient culture industry that makes this calypsonian confuse his unique competitiveness in the marketplace with his ability to represent the community to which he had previously belonged” (Aching 69). The fact that Philo’s performativity allows him the privilege of occupying a space that is more effective in articulating the sentiments of the people than the two days of carnival that Aldrick’s performativity is confined to, has been grossly overlooked. It is Philo and not Aldrick that is in the preeminent position to wage an effective rebellion. At the very moment that Philo is soaring to greater heights, the weight of the dragon becomes too heavy for Aldrick to bear, as the “people” do not embrace his new dragon dance and his refusal to accept their money. He becomes painfully aware that “carnival presents the self, but not the whole self,” and unlike Philo, Aldrick must search for a new form of performativity that is equally as ineffective as the first (Saunders 10). As Calypso King, Philo’s calypsos extend past carnival season, the calypso tent, and the insularity of Trinidad. His audience has been expanded to include the metropolises of England and the United States. Although his perfidious abandonment of his socially charged calypsos seems to imply that he indeed “adhere[s] to a competitive bourgeois ideology,” as Aching suggests, it becomes a necessary evil in order for Philo to occupy this space and provide a larger platform from which to stage his rebellion (73). As van Koningsbruggen points out, “The current level of acceptance does not ... mean the complete elimination of rebelliousness, resistance and protest” (37). When Philo is performing calypsos that speak of the societal ills facing the people of the hill, he literally has no stage from which to present his message. By giving the people what they want to hear, Philo places himself in a position in which the people will want to hear what he has to say. He places himself in a position, contrary to Aching’s impression, in which he can effectively speak for the hill because he has the full attention of his audience. It is a strategy that Philo consciously employs. He tells Aldrick, “It don’t mean I don’t care, or that I give up the battle ... you understand man. It don’t mean I surrender” (113). Undeniably, the significance of Philo’s status as a calypsonian is the

ability it gives him to communicate the struggles and injustices of the hill, not only to the people of Trinidad, but to the world.

So I return to the question posed at the beginning of this essay. Why does Lovelace choose to end his novel with “The Calypsonian” and not “The Dragon?” If Philo has so perfidiously abandoned Calvary Hill as many suggest, then why does Lovelace leave his reader with the image of such an ignoble character? To fully answer this question, a comparison of Aldrick and Philo’s rise to consciousness must be made. Seemingly both characters struggle along the way as they strive for self-discovery and an effective style and mode of self-expression. Aldrick’s journey leads him to put aside the dragon mask, unfortunately for an equally fruitless form of expression, embodied in the ephemeral revolt. As the Calvary Nine rides around in the police jeep, taking turns speaking, Aldrick “feel[s] an increasing impotence as they talked on, talked words that stirred the feelings but did little else” (180). However, his time in prison affords him the opportunity for much reflection. It is in prison that Aldrick seems to understand the futility of their reversal of binaries as Brydon suggests. It is not until then that Aldrick realizes that all along they “[were] looking to somebody else to make a decision” (188), instead of recognizing, “We is people with the responsibility for we own self (189). Interestingly, it is this realization that marks the beginning of Aldrick’s self-imposed exile from the other members of the Calvary Nine while in prison. The former members of the Calvary Nine no longer understand him and think that he has started to lose his senses. Fisheye even attributes Aldrick’s unexplainable behavior to reading too much in the prison library.

Aldrick is also aware of the manner in which he has isolated himself from his former comrades; it is not by a physical separation but a cognitive one. He must isolate himself because his epiphany is not leading him back to the hill rather away from it. His ideologies have progressed in a manner that will disallow him to remain steadfast to the religion of the hill, “a religion of laziness and neglect and stupidity and waste” (10). His distancing from the Calvary Nine is symbolic of the distance that he will place between himself and Calvary Hill. Just as he will begin to hang out with the guys in prison after a period of consciously avoiding them, he will return to Calvary Hill, but not with the same spirit in which he left. Aldrick is fully aware that he will never again belong to the hill. It is with this awareness that he returns, not to stay or re-establish his position on the hill, but to help Sylvia reach the conclusion that he has already reached. When she explains to him that his room is no longer available, he asks her, “You ever think about leaving this place, leaving here? (197). Aldrick has no intention of remaining in Calvary Hill. He has outgrown the hill and the rebellion that it has represented for so long. He must now move on to take responsibility for “he own self,” leaving Calvary Hill behind and taking no one, but Sylvia. Ironically, Aldrick makes the shift that he once resented Philo for making, for choosing his self over the hill.

Much like Aldrick, Philo too comes to consciousness in isolation from the hill. The suburb of Diego Martin serves as the prison walls that confine him. At the beginning of the chapter we see Philo laughing at his neighbors for their sameness. He even writes a calypso to

poke fun at what he feels only he can see. It is not until he learns that Sylvia is marrying Guy and will be hid away in his new adopted home that Philo comes to the realization that he too has hid away from his people. He becomes painfully aware that he is one of the men that he ridicules in his impromptu calypso: "He couldn't imagine how he had not seen this before. He couldn't imagine it. Trips, I made a lot of trips. I wasn't here most o' the time. But, *three years!*" (219-20). Although it bothers Philo that he has comfortably made a home in Diego Martin for three years before he realizes that this place is not conducive to individuality and selfhood, it is not until he begins to listen to the history of his life, recorded by his calypsoes, that his tragic error becomes apparent to him. Louis Regis writes, "the calypsonian has been able to force society to look at itself honestly" (xi). If this statement is indeed true, then it undeniably serves the same purpose for the artist himself. Philo does not see himself honestly, does not see what he has become, until he is willing to examine the significance of the powerful words of his calypsos. In fact, it is not until he has this epiphany that he realizes the power of his words. The omniscient narrator describes the scene: "Philo sat and listened to the records spin, his voice sounding in the valley; spin, killing, wounding, vilifying his childhood heroes, his friends, the bad Johns, the Baptists, black women, his mother, his sisters, his self. Yes, he had moved on" (233). After listening to his calypsoes, the archive of his life, he can no longer ignore the fact that he has abandoned and betrayed the people that he once loved, that he once called his friends, the people that he belonged to. By looking at himself honestly, he is forced to acknowledge that he is "an imitator and an imaginator and a fabricator" (236). Like Aldrick, he too is "playing a mas", and like Aldrick, he is finally able to remove his mask. For the first time, Philo is "naked to himself" and he is glad (235). He is finally comfortable being himself, without the fancy hats, without the jokes, without having to ridicule himself. Philo is finally able to abandon "the genius of calypso itself, joking with pain" (James 14). Just as Aldrick has come to the realization that his life must go in a different direction, Philo realizes that he cannot continue his life in Diego Martin. He understands that he must retrace his steps to regain his "self." However, the crucial departure that severs Philo from Aldrick is that Philo's evolution leads him back to Calvary Hill. He knows that he must return, not necessarily to apologize, but to again become an authentic member of the hill. Ironically, he returns to Freddie's snackette, the same place where his career first takes off. The people's warm reception of Philo surprises him and makes him doubly ashamed of his perfidious abandonment of the hill, of his people. He thinks to himself:

maybe there is nothing to apologize for; the thing is to live and to grow on, not even to think that you could right wrongs, but grow on, take it from here.

Take it from here
Just where I am a traitor and betrayer
without memories or self
I want to remember and hold you
and love you ...

The calypso came quick. Or maybe it was not a calypso, but a poem to be understood by being felt. (238)

Upon leaving Freddie's Snackette, Philo tells the people of the hill that he loves them "in his showman kinda way, turning to leave, and wishing that he could have said it better, ... with the kinda American accent he used for his shows" (238-239). He plans to "come back another time to say it better" (239). His return to Calvary Hill is indicative that Philo still is on a journey to rediscover his self. The significance of his return is not his complete evolution, but the fact that he now knows where he belongs and continues to take the steps necessary to reintegrate himself into the hill. There is no need to apologize for his calypsos as they provide a record of the various stages in his development, just as his future calypsos will continue to do. Philo's evolution, much like *The Dragon Can't Dance*, does not come to a neat and tidy conclusion. Instead, it is a reminder that the hill still has a long way to go, but that there is indeed a hope that Calvary Hill will one day be transformed.

Linden Lewis writes of Calvary Hill, "The name Calvary is not fortuitous. Calvary has biblical resonances as a site of torture, suffering, and testing, redemption, transformation, and hope" (165). Although this statement can be applied to almost any member of the hill, it seems to best depict the evolution of Philo. Philo makes the most dramatic transformation and even more important, it is a transformation that leads him back to the embrace of Calvary Hill. His calypsos are able to transcend the conditions of the hill and provide a space conducive to resistance and allow for the construction of nationhood in a manner that is not ephemeral as Aldrick's dragon dance or as impotent as the Calvary Nine's short-lived revolt. Philo categorically represents the hope that Calvary Hill will one day be transformed, that cultural expression can indeed bring about social transformation. Thus, Lovelace chooses to end his masterpiece not with Aldrick and Sylvia's exit, but with Philo's return to Calvary Hill.

Notes

¹For more on this discussion see Angelita Reyes' *Carnival as a Ritual of Resistance*.

²See Gerard Aching, Diana Brydon, Angelita Reyes, Harold Barrat, and Kenneth Ramchand.

³For more on the origins and evolution of calypso, see also Errol Hill's *The Trinidad Carnival: Mandate for a National Theatre*, John Cowley's *Carnival, Canboulay and Calypso: Traditions in the Making*, and Gordon Rohlehr's *Calypso & Society: Pre-Independence Trinidad*.

⁴For more on the etymology of the terms see Richard Allsop's *Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage*.

⁵For a more detailed explanation of the practice of picong and mepris, see Richard Allsop's *Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage*.

⁶Errol Hill traces the connection between Trinidad's carnival and calypso to 1838, the year slaves were emancipated in Trinidad.

⁷See Errol Hill's discussion on the history of calypso.

⁸In "The Sparrow Factor," Regis suggests that The Mighty Sparrow's relationship to Dr. Eric Williams and the PNM extended beyond mere admiration and support. He cites an interview with Sparrow where he states that he was "called in 'for consultations'" alluding to the opinion that he was possibly commissioned to write his pro-Williams calypsos.

⁹In *Inward Hunger*, Eric Williams acknowledges Sparrow's unwavering support of the PNM and the vital role he played in furthering the agenda of the PNM. See pg. 201 and 248.

¹⁰It is important to note that when Philo refers to "the people" he is referring to the rapidly growing middle-class of Trinidad. It is this audience that he is targeting in his decision to alter the contents of his calypsos.

¹¹I borrow this term from Gerard Aching's "Dispossession, Nonpossession, and Self-Possession" in *Masking and Power* (53).

¹²Although Lovelace imparts the significance that possession plays in the narrative of *The Dragon*, Gerard Aching interrogates in great detail the role that nonpossession plays in the manifestation of social protest during carnival. (Aching 52).

¹³Along with Lovelace's fictitious Calvary Hill, he cites communities that surround Port of Spain. These communities indeed provided a blue print for Calvary Hill, but more importantly, they served as the center from which the growing demands for social justice and recognition were fostered and provided the steam that would propel the Black Power Revolt in Trinidad upon which the novel is based.

¹⁴I am indebted to Gordon Rohlehr for this argument. See *The Calypsonian as Artist*.

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