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FROM FOLK TO LITERATURE: THE TRADITION OF PICONG IN TRINIDAD

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ABSTRACT

FROM FOLK TO LITERATURE: THE TRADITION OF PICONG IN TRINIDAD

By

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My work addresses two key issues in the foundational debate that has raged in Caribbean Literature since its inception. How does one define the uniqueness of Antillean writing, and how can it be critically accessed? One of the current concerns for Caribbean theorists is the necessity of providing critical lenses that do not rely completely on a remote Western metropole, and depend instead on the rhetorical strategies that reflect the material conditions and folk-consciousness of the region. Thus, my project seeks to continue this process by looking at a similar relationship between rhetorical strategies of the *folk* and Caribbean Literature. Tracing an element of Afro-Creole folk culture called picong, from its rural roots to its manifestation in literature, provides a demonstration of how non-mainstream culture may become a source for reading and defining Caribbean literature.

For Marlene and Mikre

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Introduction

From Folk to Literature: The Tradition of Picong in Trinidad

My work addresses Caribbean literary production in terms of its relationship with elements of folk-culture. My project seeks to examine the role of rhetorical strategies embedded in the Afro-Creole Trinidadian folk culture that manifest themselves in politics and literature, and that provide a vehicle for contestation of notions of individual and collective utterance. Although much work has been done to give a framework for the interpretation of the literature that reflects the dynamic histories of the Caribbean, little attention had been paid to the efficacy of the rhetoric and folk-ritual of picaresque social criticism and its hereditary offspring – the Caribbean novel. This is the axis upon which my work turns: the dialectical opportunities provided by the picaresque folk rituals as evidenced by Trinidad's Carnival, Calypso and their relationship to Trinidadian literature and politics.

This project is an exploration of the subversive and generative potential that one finds to be an important element of the performative aspects of the folk. As the reflection of peasant culture, I see the folk as a reflection of a diversity as figured by Edouard Glissant—"which is neither chaos nor sterility...(but) the human spirit's striving for a

cross cultural relationship, without universalist transcendence"(Discourse, 98). The folk-aesthetic, as a project of self-actualization, reflected the marginalization of the peasant class through its nascent emergence in the rural villages and its positionality outside the mainstream discourse. The received forms of the colonial language combined with the oral traditions borne out of folk culture create a convergence of form whose dynamism reflects both the material position of the peasant class, and its ability—due to its existence outside the mainstream—to direct its gaze to the social structures which hold it to the margins of discourse. Hence, the instability characterized by his notion of diversity may be replicated in the oral and ritual forms that exist in the "irrupted" space of the Caribbean. The Caribbean histories of violent seizure and movement, of cacaphonic cultural upheaval and transformation create the irrupted spaces from which the margin may look at the center and contest its preeminence. These strategies create in their positionality a dialectical relationship among figurings of class, race and inter/national production.

The historical context for my research is located in those interactions between colonial power and the subjects within which Trinidad's early colonial demographic makeup provided new ground for fashioning themselves. When Christopher Columbus arrived in Trinidad in 1498, he named it for the Holy Trinity, beginning the conquest of the island in its naming for his ambitions to claim the land in the name of Catholicism and God, not necessarily in that order. He found the land peopled by the aboriginal peoples known as the Awaraks, and to a much lesser extent, the Carib peoples who had been decimated by an earlier series of wars of conquest against the Arawaks. Spain, in turn found Trinidad to be of little importance compared with other Spanish-controlled

islands that were producing goods to send back to Europe. It wasn't until Spain found use in the enslavement of the Arawaks who were used to further establish a presence on the island, that the country began to send a series of governors to oversee the process of turning a profit from the resources of their new territory.

As the Arawak numbers were reduced through illness and relentless labor, Spain sought to increase the population of the island by introducing slavery. According to historian Michael Anthony, at the turn of the seventeenth century, Trinidad had begun to establish itself as a slave-owning outpost:

> The profits involved were great, and there was much competition among the maritime nation of Europe to secure the right to supply slaves to the Spanish West Indies. In 1701 a French company won the contract, and promised to supply 48,000 Africans over a period of ten years. (Profile Trinidad 35)

With the decision to acquire such a large number of Africans for work in the colony, it became apparent that more settlers were needed to increase the European population of the island. Yet, underlying this need, was the belief that larger numbers of planters would also serve as a deterrent against uprisings. Hence, Spain enacted the Cedula of Poblacion.[1] The Cedula provided land for anyone of the Roman Catholic faith, as long as they were allies of Spain. This stipulation of faith made it possible for French settlers to move to Trinidad and find a welcoming atmosphere in which to set up shop. Thus, the island became populated with African slaves and Spanish and French settlers. As a result, the demographic in which the enslaved Africans found themselves included an

[1] Meaning "The Cedula of Population."

elite of French and Spanish planters who lived under the relatively less repressive Spanish laws. Under these laws, according to Anthony, "slaves should be taught the Roman Catholic faith, they should be allowed two hours a day to do their own work, they were to have sufficient accommodation, and they should be encouraged to marry (Profile Trinidad 45)." While each of the considerations given the slaves were more lenient than in the French and English colonies, it took very little accommodation on the part of the colonial elite to provide these concessions because the were a means to bind the slaves ever more closely to their masters—and thus was seen as a lesser evil—by the colonial elite. Because of this, when the British took the island in 1787, they encountered an unusual conundrum—their administration was seen as hostile to both the French and Spanish because they sought to eliminate the French and Spanish cultural hold on the island and to relegate even those meager concessions to slaves and free blacks as non-existent.

This contestation would eventually manifest itself in attempts of the British to eliminate rituals of picong, and other elements of Afro-creole culture. This repression served as a means of establishing English cultural control of the island, and as a means of establishing their might over their local European counterparts. As a result, practices such as picong came to be seen as one of the means to disrupt the English agenda.

Following this, I use aspects of Afro-creole Trinidadian oral tradition, to discuss the ways in which the impulse of contestation borne out of the milieu of slavery and European cultural and administrative conflict is performed as picong, both in the service of the slaves and in the service of the French and Spanish conflict against the English. In the pre-emancipation contest of the chantwell, the picaresque existed in the songs sung by

slave chantwells of the nineteenth century to denigrate plantation owners, as well as to excoriate other chantwells and their supporters. After emancipation the population of Port-of-Spain, Trinidad's capital, became filled with people of different classes living in close proximity with each other. Of the poorest elements of the social hierarchy, the jamette class or demimonde emerged. For this group, organized by community or neighborhood, the chantwells were the lead singers of the bands, made famous by their biting witticisms directed against colleagues and the icons of respectability, such as the colonial government. As the lead singers of nineteenth-century stickfighting Carnival bands, their designation as "jamette" reflected their representation in society, "below the line" or the diametre. The word jamette was a derivation of diametre, and "amounted to a class in the community, the people below the diameter of respectability or the 'underworld'"(Carnival in Nineteenth Century Trinidad,31). I will examine their position in society, and the vehicle of picongesque folk culture, as a means of engaging in social critique.

Because the chantwells (and chanterelles) become important participants in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century carnival, and carnival itself exists as a cacophony of voices of various classes—a focus on the dialectics of representation would further the understanding of the appropriative and dynamic nature of the ritual. The masking of the French planters in figures such as the negre jardin (field slave) and the free blacks' post-emancipation masquerade of "Dame Lorraine," a mincing, large-posteriored caricature of a French lady, served to reflect the antagonisms and liminality of the folk masque. The folk singing that characterized the art of the chantwell carried over into the performance of calypso, creating a forum for both entertainment and social

commentary that borrowed heavily from the picong of the chantwells. Thus, an oral form formerly relegated to the peasant villages, the urban lower-class, and the barrack-style living of the demimonde is later refigured and dynamically altered to emerge as part of a major festival as the social commentary calypso. Calypsonians of both the lower class and the bourgeoisie turned and fashioned this form to support their social and ideological beliefs. Because calypso could be used to address the political issues of the day--both to support and attack the underpinnings of legislation--a discussion of the power and impact of its use of picong will give insight into the ways in which elements of this folk-form permeate and replicate antagonistic discussions about class identity. Though nationally projected as a signifier for creole culture— here understood to be that which is African and European--picong, or the peeling away of an opponents ideologies using satirical and picaresque verbal wordsmithing, becomes a potential signifier of individual and collective self-actualization and resistance for varied communities within the conceptions of nationhood.

Trends in the study of Caribbean folk culture seek to articulate the crossings and spaces that exist between the folk and literary expression. In his essay "The Problem of the Problem of Form," Gordon Rohlehr articulates the debt to the oral tradition that is owed by some Caribbean texts, and the inherent indeterminacies that reflect a post-modernist imperative:

> If oral tradition directs our attention to assemblies of people, the lime, the calypso tent, church, grounation, cult, drum dance, performance, narrative, song, and sermon. Modernist aesthetics may raise problems of void or vortex, chaos or silence, the irrelevance of the individual, the

> dehumanization of art and the emergence in an incomprehensible universe of the art object as its own circular self-contained world, exploring itself, echoing itself, and sometimes with enviable, worm-like flexibility, even copulating itself...many of our writers have been simultaneously attracted to both sets of possibilities, so that the same works may contain the tension between two poles of shaping. (3)

My dissertation will explore the potentialities that emerge from the interrelationship of oral and written forms in politicizing the folk, while seeking from this connection the folk's influence of the written. As part of a colonial heritage in which, the written was privileged over the oral, Afro-Creole folk culture in Trinidad was largely relegated to the status of that population of poor, black—and after the 1880s—colored middle class. As a function of oral culture, the folk was seen as a remnant of an uncivilized minority culture. For this reason, I find in the dialectic created by that hierarchy, a point of departure for observing representations of power and social critique in the received written forms and the overlappings, fissures, and the "worm-like flexibility" of orality.

In examining oral tradition, Carolyn Cooper's Noises in the Blood articulates this relationship as an "antagonism/complementarity"(3) which takes into account the ability of the two forms to converge and diverge according to the situational variability of the preeminence of each form. She suggests that "if the oral broadly defined, does achieve status once it appears in written form, it nevertheless contaminates the written as subversive praxis"(3). The suggestion of oral tradition as a contaminant further invokes the issues of class inscriptions on the folk as a derivative of mainstream culture, and its potentiality as a form that both explodes and signifies upon mainstream discourse. She

notes that the Jamaican dialect "assumes the burden of the social stigmatization to which the practitioners of Afrocentric ideology in Jamaica are continually subjected"(2). Hence the hierarchy of literature and the folk becomes representative of the colonial structure which privileges the written Western structures over the orality of peasant[2] folk-culture.

This invokes the dialogic nature of the folk in its relationship to the written—the double-voiced interrogation existing in each utterance—as figured by Mikhail Bakhtin. I look to the folk influence on Trinidadian Carnival as a figuring of this double-voicedness.

Aligning my work with Cooper's notion of the "subversiveness" of the oral tradition, I view the picaresque in nineteenth century carnival as the voice under the surface of the official format of the festival. In concert with this idea, I invoke Judith Butler's notion of performance "destabilizing the very distinctions between natural and artificial, depth and surface inner and outer through which discourse almost always operates"(Gender Trouble xxix). This moves my work on Trinidadian carnival beyond Bakhtin's notion of European carnival as an inversion of high and low culture manifesting itself in the celebration of the materiality of the grotesque body. Burton's notion of Trinidad's Carnival as one that does not exist as a reversal of high and low, but as an intensification. He claims instead that "what happens is not fundamentally at variance with what happens all year, it is less a ritual of reversal... than a ritual of intensification in which forces that govern the ordinary are expressed with particular salience, clarity and eloquence"(Afro-Creole 157). He sees this as a contestation of inside and outside, setting his view at variance with Victor Turner's notion of carnival as refracting subversive tendencies. My position is that it is a not a reversal of high and low

[2] Here peasant represents the rural folk existence, transferred and lived through, the material and aesthetics of non-mainstream European culture.

or a simple dialectic between inside and outside, but a contestation of margin and center in which both rub against each other and overlap—a constantly moving and interrelating of folk and mainstream discourses.

My current concern seeks to apply critical lenses that do not rely heavily on any metropole and depend instead on a rhetorical strategy that reflects the material and psychic consciousness of the region as reflected in the microcosm of the community. Specifically, I see picong as a reflection of a collective and individual Trinidadian Afro-Creole, Caribbean, folk-culture experience. Such a strategy would have the advantage of addressing the social and political tensions embedded in a work, that are processed and revealed through the use of the folk's vernacular, ritual, and oral register, and are easily overlooked in the process of forcing an external cultural template onto the text.

My project would localize this process further by looking at a similar relationship between traditional Trinidadian construct of picong and its literary representations. By examining the influences and importance of the rhetorical strategy of picong, as an oral technique of both traditional West African and Trinidadian singers, I historicize its influence by linking it with that which is represented as constitutive of the island's Afro-Franco creolized colonial past. One feature of the process of picong is the layering of critical meanings, both political and mythological within the structure of the commentary. In the pre-emancipation state, the balladeer used it to trope folk-culture, which signified slave culture—and to address his message of resistance to the peasant class, while ostensibly entertaining the ruling class. By the very act of its performance, both for the elite and underclass, picong-in-song proved the capacity of the individual from the perceived margins of colonial culture, to possess a wit that could potentially function to

excoriate those whom s/he currently sought to entertain. In the ritual of presentation for an elite audience, its presence says, "here I have the tool to subvert notions of a lack of rationality, although presently, they are not overtly being used against you." Considering its potentiality as a source of resistance to being erased from the discourse of colonialism and slavery, picong exists in the act of the performance before the ruling class as a liminal site for ideological contestation. In addition, in its unadulterated form, picong functioned as means of voicing the material and psychological situation of afro-Trinidadian in their discourses of resistance.

Picong figures interculturally as social commentary through its satirical and picaresque structures that reverse the theme of West African praise singing and produce early nineteenth-century Trinidadian balladeering. Both the African praisesinger and the chantwell were charged with the tasks of entertaining with demonstrations of wordsmithing, yet the latter could—and frequently did—subvert that process by turning his razor wit on those whose repressive systems defined society's politics. Hence, the chantwell—by definition of his low caste status and his troubadour entree into the ruling classes—could speak both individually and collectively about the politics of the repressive colonial system.

Since picong's cultural functions have been appropriated for contemporary literary and political use, it is imperative that its significance as a critical tool be assessed. This study is important to the field of Caribbean Literature for two reasons: First, it furthers work in the understanding of what constitutes a Trinidadian tradition, and by extension gives specificity to generalized claims concerning Antillianite or Creolite. Secondly, it contributes to current missions to document the substantial contribution of

oral tradition to Caribbean literary theory, and thus provides substance—and indeed challenges such theorizing by illuminating the complexity inherent in a reading the folk/literary continuum.

In order to detail the powerful social influence of picong, and the political conflicts arising from their compositions, it is necessary to examine the skirmishes in nineteenth and twentieth century newspaper accounts and their reflection of the national discourses of what constitutes mainstream identity. As the new millennium begins, Trinidad is engaged in a fierce battle over the legitimacy of use of picong by the news media to critique governmental institutions. Hence this project would allow me to examine the sociopolitical role that this tradition of satire has played in various debates over the intersections between representations of national and folk identity.

Chapter One:
Grounding the Folk: Picong as Afro-Creole Folk-inheritance in Trinidad

In this chapter, I look at the relationship of picong, as it relates to the historical milieu of slavery, and to the interaction of different elements of society in its pre-emancipation fashioning. Picong, as a part of the folk register, exists in that complex relationship of signs, which together form the folk consciousness. Its individual elements form a complete and referential connection, sign invoking sign—which functions as a language of self-actualization. I examine how the power-structure of the island's inhabitants was formed during—and just after—the period of slavery, as well as its connection to the repression borne out of the dialectic between French and Spanish Creoles,and enacted against the English. From its consistent appearance in various

aspects of Trinidadian Afro-Creole culture—from the capitulation of the island to the British in 1787, to its current incarnations—it has wielded a unique and far-reaching sphere of influence. Although the Spanish and French shared a distaste for African and Afro-Creole culture, they found a common resentment with the black underclass at the administrative and cultural impositions of the English. This shared hostility led the franco-spanich cultural elite to transfer the ritual of picong to a critique of the oppressive nature of their British neighbors.

From this period to Eric Williams' "Massa Day Done" speech, I trace the political use of picong to attack government and societal ills.

Chapter Two:

Becoming the Picongesque: Representations of Afro-Creole Folk in Nineteenth Century Trinidadian Carnival

This chapter will examine the mid-century period of Carnival in Trinidad to elaborate on the processes through which picong first enters the mainstream public arena. I examine here the Black impetus to enter the festival as a means to enact the affirmative, accommodative, and combative rhetorics of picong. Linking the rituals of wordsmithing that were a part of plantation life for slave, and through the slaves—their masters, to its reappearance in the form of the participatory elements blacks brought into the pre-Lenten ritual, exposes the ways in which picong is used by the peasantry and underclass to refashion nineteenth-century Trinidadian Carnival by their very participation and presence within the ritual.

Chapter Three:

Descendants of a Sharp-Tongued Dialectic: Calypso and the Chantwell

Looking at one of the most relevant and direct descendants of calypsonians, the early folk singers known as chantwells, I locate their class inspirations and relevance of tools that the calypsonian inherited from those early singers. Those who were accustomed to extemporaneous critique, and who achieved renown through their blistering attacks on each other, and on the plantation elite, were the earliest form of Trinidad calypsonian. Moving from this point, one can see the borrowing that takes place from the oral tradition of the pre-emancipation practitioners to contemporary songster counterparts. Picong then provides a reading of the heteroglossic nature of colonial Trinidad and its tradition of singing the folk and the mainstream into a dialectial relationship.

Chapter Four:

Wordsmith: The Folk as Literary Trope

This chapter focuses on the nature of orality in Trinidad's post-colonial Caribbean context. Using several Caribbean texts, such as Hollis Liverpool's "Brain Drain," Merle Hodges' Crick Crack Monkey and Earl Lovelace's The Dragon Can't Dance, I point to the manner in which Trinidadian authors reference the culture of the folk as a means of articulating a particularly localized folk aesthetic. Utilizing the vernacular speech of the Afro-Creole folk, in song, theater and vitriolic commentary, writers have found picong to

be a valuable means of imbuing a text with the cadence and rhetoric of a relevant, but marginalized, culture.

For my purposes in this work, I find the sheer variety and manifestations of picong in local culture demonstrate that it moves beyond the simply iconic feature of a cultural element, long since past. Instead, it continues to function as a living example of oral tradition, in which its self-constitutive aspects negate it as a relic and continually re-fashions it to serve new processes.

Chapter One:

Grounding the Folk: Picong as Afro-Creole folk-inheritance in Trinidad

When I was about eighteen and student-teaching in Port-of-Spain, I went to the vendor across the street to get a breakfast sandwich. The old lady selling these treats had a stand on the sidewalk. As I reached the front of the customer line, she handed me my sandwich and said loudly, and in my direction, "they playin' saint in the day, and takin' so much man in the night." As I reached forward to accept my food and my change, I said under my breath, but loud enough for my voice to carry, "At least we are still young enough to get men." The old woman swelled like an angry crapaud and let loose with a blistering commentary, and I quickly retreated. Late that afternoon, when I returned from school, she was still piconging my family, background, and my—as she saw it—negligible assets.

--Bernie Hamilton[3]

In the above anecdote, the speaker illustrates the commitment necessary to the enactment of picongesque critique. The relentlessness of the attack, the multi-pronged and layered catalogue of faults, and most significantly perhaps, the rotating audience of customers and passersby create the theater that produces picong.

In this chapter I look at the method by which the folk aesthetic is grounded in theoretical discussions of agency, ritual, and referential relationships to social practices. I align myself with practices that do not seek a finite definition of the purpose of the folk, but instead explores its potentialities as a discourse, in contestation, in concert, and, in excess, of the dominant ideology of society.

For my purposes, the folk is characterized as the aesthetics of performative ritual grounded in the peasant classes first, then through the lower, and is later reflected in mainstream performance. This "transversality," part of a "historical convergence underneath" the mainstream discourse reflects the remaking that takes place in the New World, producing the folk as a product that is formed as a process of that convergence (Glissant, 65). I look to picong as part of a Trinidadian oral tradition, embedded in the folk, that points to the generative aspects of performance. As a theatrical form, it participates in the processes of becoming that give the marginalized a voice, individually and communally.

In this connection, I also build upon Glissant's notion of the Caribbean theater as transformative. He notes, "theater is the act through which the collective consciousness sees itself and consequently moves forward...at the beginning there can be no nation without a theater"(196). It is this idea of "beginning" that one finds to be useful in the picongesque, for it is borne out of an environment in which old oral rituals were taken by the slaves and combined with dominant cultural vehicles to form—for the lowest echelon of colonial Trinidadian society—this constitutive element of folk culture. Therefore,

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[3] Personal interview. 1998.

because picong accesses both a community's past and its dynamic future, its performance is an act of re-membering history.

The image of Caliban, Prospero's slave is now a familiar trope to Caribbeanist scholars who have found in his dialectical relationship with his "master" is a useful trope to articulate the repressive situation of colonial peoples in the Caribbean. Glissant's reading of the hierarchic elements imbedded in the tale point to its colonialist ideologies:

> In this totalizing equilibrium, a hierarchy was established, from Caliban to Prospero; and it is not difficult to see that Caliban-nature is contrasted from below with Prospero-culture...In The Tempest the legitimacy of Prospero is thus linked to his superiority, and epitomizes the legitimacy of the West...History is written with a capital *H*. It is a totality that excludes other histories that do not fit into that of the West...(Discourse75)

Rather than locate this history merely in the chronological, what Glissant would call "(H)istory," it situates itself in "(h)istory"—that which is negated by the dominant culture.[4] His notion of theater being an "act" that serves to link the community coincides nicely with the self-identification that arises out of a theatrical practice. Therefore, I invoke this vision of theater for picong in the enactment of the verbal dissection it characterizes in song, performance and literature. Picong's performativity, as a manifestation of the folk, proceeds historically from the naturalization of a European-centered discourse, with which it can exist as a destabilization of that ideology.

In "Partial Truths," his introduction to Writing Culture, "the Poetics and Politics of Ethnography," James Clifford reiterated the science of ethnography and anthropology

[4] See Glissant's discussion of the Western imposition of History(chronological) with history(communal/personal).

as one in which the process of interpretation was deliberately hidden from an association with writing or literature. The result of this was an assumption that no subjective influence from the researcher was brought to bear on the process of documenting culture. In the 1980s, when this approach to the study of human culture was critiqued on the basis of its notion of the researcher as (somehow) an absent gaze—one that records, but does not judge, circumscribe, and produce through categorization. Taking this into consideration, I approach the study of elements of folk culture by referring to its practice and potentialities. Caribbean writers and theorists have dealt with these problems of cultural and political inquiry by seeking to replicate-in-reading the collective material and political existence of its people. My examination of the influence of, and influences upon, folk practices is built upon readings of its rhetorics, performative and political functions.

According to Gordon Rohlehr in "The Problem of the Problem of Form," two poles have guided our writers in the achievement of shape: the oral traditions of the West Indies and certain aspects of the aesthetics of modernism"(3). As a significant source of inspiration and "shape," the culture of the folk reveals itself as a unique source of socio-political potentiality. The other pole, the modernist aesthetics of instability and flux, is seen by Rohlehr to be composed of modernist tropes of instability, change, the negation of traditional notions of chronology, and the independence of art ("The Problem of the Problem of Form," 3). For my purposes, the influence of oral tradition is situated, not at one pole opposite the imperatives of modernism, but dynamically moves amongst all aesthetics that make up the Afro-Creole Trinidadian experience—influencing History/history, ideologies of the dominant discourse, and its margins.

Antonio Benitez-Rojo purports that one "re-read the Caribbean in a manner in which the text reveals its own textuality"(The Repeating Island 2). Since part of that textuality is the folk, one finds that its power influences the inscriptions of Caribbean cultural products and their ability to direct their gaze at both the center and its own center, namely the masses for whom speaks, and from whom it emerged. What is useful here in the examining the function of the folk, is the notion of change and generation as foundational aspects of the Caribbean experience. The Caribbean historio-cultural landscape is defined by its emergence in a collision of ideological impositions that sought to create its existence as marginal to that of a metropolitan administration. The folk has been read as an important force for the subversion of the dominant culture's impositions. It's flexibility, historical referents, and community-building dynamics take it beyond a simply subversive function to expressions of being and creating. In its political incarnation, it serves to replicate and transform itself for these purposes.

History

In the years since 1498, when Columbus arrived in Trinidad, a sea change in the population occurred. As a possession of the Spanish Empire, it became a geo-political site upon which diverse groups would enact the colonial processes of displacement, inscription and re-inscription.

When Columbus claimed Trinidad, he formally connected Europe with the "New World," thus began a systematic erasure of the two main Amerindian tribes, the Arawaks and the Caribs. Naming the island for the Holy Trinity, he assumes that his arrival is a sign of God's blessing on his endeavor to the claim "new" lands, subjects, and converts

to Christianity. As an economic venture, Trinidad at this time could not produce the necessary capital to sustain itself. Thus, in the 1700s, while the thirteen North American colonies fought for their freedom, Trinidad becomes a colony of slavery. To combat the low population density and to help the colony to become more prosperous, Spain proposed a Cedula of Population:

> The principal incentive offered was a free grant of land to every settler who came to Trinidad with his slaves. Every white emigrant was entitled to four and sevenths fanegas (an old Spanish unit of measurement equivalent to 30 acres) for each member of his family and half as much for each slave he introduced. Free colored or free black settlers who emigrated as property-owners and slaveholders were entitled to half the amount granted to the white emigrant, and a proportionate grant for each slave. (Brereton Trinidad 13)

Through the Cedula, blacks and colored members of society to allowed to own slaves and land. When Sir Thomas Picton was appointed governor, after the island's takeover by the British in 1797, he found the attitude of the more permissive Spanish towards free black and colored classes to be unnecessarily lenient. The new administration dismissed the former's allowances to these groups:

> Many of the free blacks were prosperous men who greatly resented having to live in the twilight world between the slaves and the whites, and they were constantly angered at the petty restrictions imposed on them, such as being forced to carry a lantern at night, which emphasized their lack of

social status. They formed a powerful group especially susceptible to the republican ideals of liberty and equality. (Anthony Profile 60)

Thus, with Spain's capitulation, the social makeup of the inhabitants of the island underwent a socio-political change. This meant that a non-European segment of the population occupied a dual position as having material and economics rights denied to the slaves, yet existing outside of the center and the margin:

> The aim of the colored strata was to penetrate as far as possible into white society. They disparaged their ancestral past and strove to eliminate or conceal all evidence of their Negroid origin. They accepted and internalized all the myths about black inferiority, and imitated with exaggerated fidelity, the cultural patterns of the European.(Race 20)

This serves to make early notions of marginality—the colonial administration as center, the colonial subject as margin--incomplete[5], for this is a series of margins and a series of centers, intersecting within the power dynamics of the colonial environment. The inequality of the grants reflect the degree to which the European colonial structure was envisioned as a means of the circumscribing the non-European body both within, and on the margins, of the mainstream discourse. Although remnants of the native peoples still lived in isolated areas, their population suffered from the rigors of forced labor under the Spanish. Living in the rural and hilly areas, natives were kept apart from the social structure—and with their population decimated by the Spanish—were relegated a non-status similar to that of the slaves. After emancipation, the indentured workers from the

[5] See Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin's The Empire Writes Back for further foundational discussions of marginality.

Indian Subcontinent, were brought in to replace the slave labor that had been lost through emancipation:

> They reacted defensively. Geographical, residential and occupational separation was reinforced by the Indians' protective use of cast, religion, village community and traditional family organization to cushion them from contact with a hostile society. (The processes of existence in Trinidad required their separation from the society of former slaves. (History 115)

Thus, the East Indians became the isolated from the unvoiced cultural alliance between the French elite and the their African former slaves against the British government. According to historian Bridget Brereton:

> The essential reality was that the Indians came to a society that was hostile to them, a society whose attitudes ranged from tear to contempt to indifference.(History 115)

Thus, there was created a rigid social structure in which the French and Spanish settlers and their creole offspring became the representative colonial elite. Each group developed interconnected and discrete cultural practices. By the mid-nineteenth century, the groups saw more interaction than had happened prior to the end of slavery in 1834. Andrew Pearse, writing of the mid-nineteenth-century, demonstrates the makeup of the folk:

> As for the folk, by 1860 its composition was extremely heterogeneous. The was a nuclear group consisting of ...ex-slaves, and their children, nurtured in both French and English plantation traditions, descendants of the non-slave small settlers, labourers and artisans of African or mixed

> descent, free Africans to the number of about 7,000 who had immigrated during the preceding 20 years, and Spanish-speaking peons. (Pearse, "Carnival in Nineteenth Century Trinidad" 36)

As each group moved from the slave period to post-emancipation, their cultures came into a more dynamic interchange. While the English took control of the island in 1797, the Spanish and French elite were forced to make way for the English colonial administration. This feat was not without its complications; the French so dominated the island's mainstream elite that their language and the patois became the dominant language of the center, and of the slaves that lived on the island before capitulation.

It was, in part, through the language and the anti-English politics of the mostly Catholic French and Spanish that the folk element of picong came to the notice of the mainstream gaze. Unwilling, in cultural aesthetics, to acquiesce to the capitulation to England, the French and Spanish gave a tacit support to certain aspects of Afro-creole folk traditions that were found to be offensive by the English.

Picong became a means by which the Afro-creole folk is utilized to encounter the English colonial administration. When picong is brought out into the open, from the drum dances, wakes and festivals of the slaves and free Africans, through the medium of Carnival, and other social events in which the under and lower classes participated, it functioned as personal/communal/social critique. When picong came to the attention of the planter class during slavery, masters of its sword-like wit were singled out within the slave community—and without, in the patronage of men like Pierre Begorrat whose *maite de kaiso*(master of kaiso),[6] Gros Jean, was renowned for his ability to use picong

[6] See "Mitto Sampson on Calypso Legends of the Nineteenth Century," arranged and edited by Andrew Pearse. Trinidad Carnival. Vol.4, 1956.

against his master's enemies—thus transferring a folk practice into an offensive tool for the master's use.

Within the slave community, there existed a number of social societies for the purposes of performing rituals brought from Africa and others created in the vortex of cultural displacement. The imposition of colonial languages and ideologies served to create a power dynamic in which the dialogic nature of language-interaction in a colonial context became more apparent. Hand in hand with this cultural production came the ideologies of language that reified the metropole and negated that of the various margins. In the imposition of the colonial language, the centers replicate the colonial process by presenting its own language as a means of power. In this manner, the dominant culture makes normative its language as a means of bringing the margin into existence, through its linkage of its speech with mobility towards, and incorporation into, the center. As a result, this makes the process of interrogating the diverse strands of power—social, administrative, historical—within the colonial hierarchy a function of the master's language. Vernacular processes from the margin, such as picong, then subvert this power construct by very effectively critiquing the center from outside of this normative construct. Picong thus becomes the marginalized attacking with a tool unrecognized, and as a result, it is therefore able to be dismissed by the dominant culture.

A famous use of picong in mainstream politics is the "Massa Day Done" speech delivered in 1961, by Dr. Eric Williams, a man who would become Trinidad's first black Prime Minister, and who would heavily influence Trinidadian politics from the 1950s to the 1980s. In it, he brings the folk to bear on the processes of political debate, demonstrating in the process its rhetorical roots in the oppositional dialogue of the

margin. This margin, defined in terms of language seeks to reproduce itself in arenas ostensibly dominated by the center. The vernacular, so necessary to the traditional performance of picong, dances in opposition to the normative colonialist project in which the language of the master is set up as the only vehicle in which one might enter in to discussion with the center:

> The capacity for 'ole talk', 'mauvais langue,' and the ability to give 'fatigue' are important ways in which Trinidad and Tobago used language to survive, and to create new space for historic possibilities. To 'speak properly' and to manipulate language has been of enormous importance to the people of Trinidad and Tobago. Apart from an oral storytelling tradition that allowed self-expression in any manner that one chose, and allowed for a great deal of flexibility, skill, and diversity, the concern for the proper use of formal English always has been a preoccupation of the society. (Cudjoe "Politics of Language" 755)

Already bringing with them a consciousness of the power inherent in a mastery of language, from the folk vernacular and within the context of participation in the milieu of the center, the disenfranchised utilized oral tradition to articulate their place in the colonialist contest of language inscriptions. It was one in which the rhetoric of well-speaking is re-formed to penetrate the center from both the language of rural enclaves and its urban counterpart—that of the street.

With the history of conflict between the French and the English for control of the hegemonic aspects of social being, the method of verbal dueling, in the conflictual

debates of the centers, overlap, so that each European culture inhabiting the island becomes signified upon by Williams' performance of picong.

> What was Massa Day, the Massa Day that is done? Who is Massa? Massa was more often than not an absentee European planter exploiting West Indian resources; both human and economic...On his West Indian Sugar plantation Massa employed unfree labour. He began with the labour of the slaves from Africa, and followed this with the labour of contract workers from Portugal, China and then from India. The period of Massa's ascendancy, the period of Massa's domination over workers who had no rights under the law, the period of Massa's enforcement of a barbarous code of industrial relations...lasted in our society for almost 300 years. (2-3)

Williams grounds his critique in the history of the island, pointing to series of margins that the metropoles inscribed as other, in order to justify the impetus of production that is part of the "civilizing" project of colonialism. His method of interrogation represents the staging of the picongesque ritual, embodying a resistance to the imposition of nonhistory, or rather a subversion of the underpinnings of History as it is perceived in the masters' world view. He foregrounds this sense of opposition to the dominant culture by locating the force of his performance in his sense of folk continuity, employing the traditions of ranconteurship and social/historical critique that is drawn from the old rituals and reconfigured inside and out of traditional usage. In addition to attacking the "Massa," Williams made a point of directing a significant portion of his vitriol at that segment of society for whom he felt a singular contempt—the colored middle class:

> If Massa was generally white, but not all whites were Massa, at the same time not all Massas were white. The elite among the slaves were the house slaves. Always better treated than their colleagues in the field, they developed into a new caste in West Indian society, aping the fashion of their masters, wearing their cast-off clothing, and dancing the quadrille with the best of them. To such an extent did Massa's society penetrate the consciousness of these people, that Haitian independence, which began with a fight for freedom for the slaves, ended up with a ridiculous imperial court of a Haitian despotism with it café-au-lait society and its titles, its Duke of Marmalade and its Count of Lemonade, exploiting the Negro peasants. (7)

This strategy of attacking a group close to the center, and who had adopted its underpinnings of race and class inscription, made Williams a compelling figure to the masses of disenfranchised whose construction with in the social hierarchy was—to be absent from it. Considering that the group here critiqued were historically also slave masters, and who, although they shared African ancestry with them, kept themselves apart and read themselves as center to the slaves' margin, it is apparent that the chasm between the two worlds remained great. Williams' invocation of the speech-style of the street remakes him in the gaze of the center as other folk figures who were and are defined by the vernacular of the folk tradition. Rohlehr emphasizes this point by pointing to the link that Williams' role as social commentator has with traditional elements of lower and underclass aspects of the Carnival tradition:

> A language of violent challenge had always been a part of Trinidad's masquerade performance, might indeed, have been the only truly 'national' characteristic that cut across race, color and class behaviors in the turbulent chaos over which Williams presided in the pre-Independence period. Like the Midnight Robber, the Stickfighter, the Wild Indian, the *sans humanite* Calypsonian, the Bad John, the aristocratic Pierrot of the old time Carnival, Williams and every other significant politician employed the register of the street. ("The Culture of Williams," 856-7)

Each of the figures mentioned come out of the rituals and festivals brought out of the rural enclaves circumscribed by the plantation system. They were brought into the mainstream through the vehicle of Carnival. In the post-emancipation period, the former slaves penetrated the ostensibly European flavor of the masques during the 1830s bringing with them characters that permeated their folk practices. In each instance, the figures lived through their speech. The Pierrot Grenade, for instance, was costumed in his oration and is the carnival masque most demonstrative of picong:

> Undoubtedly the supreme jester in the Trinidad Carnival is the Pierrot Grenade. Although there are individual masqueraders who by their dress and paraphernalia present satire or burlesque on prominent local personalities, world figures or public affairs booth local and foreign, introducing form subtle humour to frank comedy in the Carnival celebrations, the Pierrot Grenade by dress, manner, and discourse, his

wide commentaries, and his irrepressible poking of fun at men and things. (197)

Carrying a whip and dressed fantastically in multi-colored clothes with bells attached, he demonstrated his verbal repertoire to the crowds of onlookers. One of the main aspects of his performance was the challenge other pierrots encountered in the streets to verbal combat. The result of which was physical/verbal confrontation in which the whips and words entered into signifying relationship—each one referring continuously to the other. Similarly, the *bois* men or stickfighters used the songs of their attendants and followers to incite battle by piconging their opponents.

The Wild Indian masque was marked by the performance of each group of the language they created by melding traditional Amerindian words and phrases with the registers of afro-creole patois. In creating a performance history for the masque, masqueraders incorporated historical fact with the stereotypes of the local tribes as presented by the colonial elite. According to Daniel J. Crowley:

> (Wild) Indians are supposed to come over from Venezuela, from a village or area called 'lokain' which is probably Los Canos (Spanish for 'drains' or 'tributaries'), the swamps of the Ironic Delta. Actually aboriginal Indian of the Guarao, Guarajo, 'Warrahoon' tribe from this area brought beads, parrots, and hammocks, and other products to Trinidad to barter until the 1920s, when they were prohibited. ("Traditional Masques," Trinidad Carnival 63)

The terminology used to describe the traditional aboriginal masques as Indian reflect the adoption, at least in part, of the inscription of the native tribes as savage,

untamed and outside of proper society. The fact that former slaves and their descendants should find in it one of the most popular inspirations for carnival performance points to a desire to achieve a measure of the symbolic freedom troped by the masque. This created a psychic divergence from the constructs of civilization as posed by the social elite.

Similarly, the *sans humanite* calypsonian, descendant of the slave chantwells or lead singers, masters of picong, brought into the mainstream the tradition of songs of satire and vicious criticism. The phrase sans humanite formed a part of the introduction to calypsos that were songs of picong. Its meaning, "without humanity," prepares the listener for the airing of dirty laundry, affirming the right of the singer to critique without sanction whomever he/she sees fit. This phrase, coming as it does from the milieu of he folk—that segment of society that shares customs and rituals and a way of being outside that of the mainstream—reflects the fears felt by the plantation elite that picong could be used as means of undermining the discourse of the center, thus destroying it.[7]

Newness

This interrelatedness and separateness of influences make the Trinidadian Afro-creole vernacular an opportune site for new approaches to reading. Newness, as articulated by C.L.R. James proceeds from the major signposts of Caribbean history, the plantation and slavery. He links the islands through this "peculiar history"(Black Jacobins 391), the effects of which created "an original pattern, not European, not African, not part of the American main, not native in any conceivable sense of the word, but West Indian"(391). Seeing this as a departure from the Western national conception

of history as a unified chronological whole, he looks to "newness" to reflect the disjointed, ruptured reality of the Caribbean identity—one might say, its hybridized reality. This Newness then, is a paradigm that evokes a Caribbean identity borne out of the colonial history that creates, out of disparate groups, a cacophonous subjectivity. This subject, aware of the essentialism inherent in his/her construction by the metropole, recognizes within the self, the capacity to turn inward and draw from this wellspring of history and place.

In regarding this inwardness as new, James traces its progression form a form of resistance to Western hegemony, to a subjectivity that is aware of the e uniqueness of its selfhood. He notes the forerunner of this paradigm as negritude's search for self-actualizing discourse in the face of the Metropole's negation. "The African way of life of the Haitian peasant became the axis of Haitian literary creation"(394). While negritude focused on the African influence as *the* originary site, newness goes beyond this totalization to draw upon that identity which is re-membered in the national Caribbean experience. If Western discourse creates for the Caribbean writer, distance from the island, newness is reapproaching that island with an awareness of this ambivalence intact. Since Caribbean cultures are not essentially, metropolitan and not essentially native, as none of the disparate groups of the plantation system may claim an originary there, they may share the locus of their historical experiences as site from which to define a national culture not confined to the idea of nationhood, but to those experiences which overlap in Caribbean histories.

By bringing the folk to bear on mainstream discourses, performers of picong give voice to the uniqueness that characterizes their identity by defining newness through

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[7] I discuss this in greater detail in Chapter 3.

going beyond negritude's essential African self, while continuing its project of articulating the erased subject into existence. Jamaican author Michele Cliff defines this sensibility as:

> Retracing the African part of ourselves, reclaiming as our own, and as our subject, a history sunk under the sea, or scattered as potash in the canefields, or gone to bush, or trapped in a class system notable for its rigidity and absolute dependence on color stratification. (Cliff 14)

The oppostionality to this order subverts the fixity of the ideology of color prejudice, creates the post-colonial subject as an inheritor of the tradition of local resistance in the act of invoking that which is meant to be ignored--the psych-social landscape of the plantation and its locus as a site from which a source of power is drawn for self-actualization of the masses.

Acknowledging the presence of subjectivities shaped by the assumption of the colonialist racial and cultural ideologies, and a resistance to them, Williams evokes the notion of the colonial subjectivity as dynamic—traversing ideas of high/low cultural boundaries. In effect there is an assumption of Anglocentrism, that is evoked in the elite's reading o f the language wars, bringing to light a sense of identity that turns on a heritage was intended to made unapparent by the gaze of dominant order.

These lingual structures which are a part of the island's cultural landscape--locating the folk as a site for the subject to articulate identity—the particularity of the island's constitutive power for identity comes not simply from place, but from relational connections between elements of the hierarchy constituted by their dialects.

This transmission of history-in-performance is an act of return to the island's rural/social past to provide a sense of opposition to the imposition of nonhistory. Hence, the desire to retain and refashion the folk, figures less as a project whose sole use is to negate the influence of the center, more as a process of encountering and re-membering the self in each act of performance, and looks ultimately inward—toward the psychic and physical locus of the land. This cacophonous subjectivity, of which the folk is but one aspect, articulates a Caribbean convergence of history and culture. Thus, in each performance, hybridized landscapes break apart and reconstitute themselves, contesting the space in which the modernity of the elite stages its relevance.

Chapter Two

Becoming the Picaresque: Representations of Afro-Creole Folk Culture in Nineteenth Century Trinidad Carnival

The role of the folk practice of picong[8] in Trinidad's Carnival provides a useful means of articulating the rhetorical strategies of resistance of people of African descent to the interlocking colonial systems of race and class repression. The process of examining the festival's place as a site for the performance of the ritual, one must consider the nineteenth century celebrations of both the black slaves in their pre- and post emancipation festivals and the French creole planter classes' pre-Lenten festivities.[9] For, it is within the framework of these beginnings that the voice of the slaves, and later their descendants, rewrite their presence in colonial society, moving away from an ideological absence to an engagement in the dialectics of colonial discourse.

Pre-Emancipation Carnival existed only for the French planter classes. From the period after Christmas to Ash Wednesday, a series of masked balls and musical

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[8] In her essay "Slackness hiding from culture: erotic play in the dancehall," Jamaican Carolyn Cooper defines picong as "that Trinidadian art of wicked wit." (London: Macmillan, 1993) pg.

[9] See John Cowley's Carnival, Canboulay and Calypso: Traditions in the Making. Cambridge UP, 1998. Michaeal Anthony's Parade of the Carnivals of Trinidad 1839-1989. Port of Spain: Circle, 1989, and Richard Burton's Afro-Creole: Power, Opposition and Play in the Caribbean. Ithaca: Cornell, 1997.

entertainments defined the Carnival Season as a period of license before the fasting of Lent. During this time, slaves were allowed to give vent to their own culture. Within the limits of the slave yard, the chantwells (folk singers), and drummers, celebrated this season through their own masques and drum dances.

Contemporary Trinidadian Carnival begins on Saturday before Lent, and ends on the eve of Ash Wednesday. On Carinival Saturday, the masquerade bands are made up of school-age children; their costumes and band themes often produced by schools. From early in the morning until early evening, the bands compete for best costume. They will cover approximately thirty miles as they cross the various stages en route—being judged at each stage. As this is taking place calypsonians vie for the title of King or Queen. The costumes range from world news to local history, flora, and fauna. When "kiddies carnival" ends, the anticipation builds for Dimanche Gras, "Fat Sunday." Sunday is competition day for steelbands (Panorama) and for the kings and queens of the adult masquerade bands. Scores of steel orchestras vie to win Panorama; their followers passionate and emotional over the prospects of their chosen steelband to win the competition.[10] With names like All Stars, Desperadoes, Renegades, Starlift and Invaders the over two hundred steelbands keep the nation in suspense as they compete from early evening, to the wee hours of the morning. Invariably, the outcome is a cause for some controversy—the debates over individual feelings about the judging flow all over Port-of-Spain and give way somewhat at the advent of the masquing at Jouvert.[11] The jouvert masquerade bands meet at two o' clock in the morning for food, rum and costuming. It is during jouvert that the traditional masques, some hailing from the nineteenth century

[10] Families often remain loyal to one band, generation after generation.

period just after Emancipation dominate Carnival. The devil masque—blue, black and red—now inspires wonder and nostalgia, instead of fear. The mud (Devil) masque, once a prominent feature of early Afro-creole carnival is still popular. Other traditional characters such as the Midnight Robber, Pierrot Grenade and Wild Indian are no longer as prevalent as they were in the nineteenth and late twentieth century. However, one feature that seems indestructible is the "ole mas" tradition of using picong to critique society, and especially, the government through the use of skits. For example, the year that Princess Diana died, one of the red devil bands dressed as paparazzi and titled their composition "Paparazzi is Hell." The main feature of the masquerade was participants costumed in red tinted mud, horned helmets made from bull horns and chamber pots, and cameras.

What remains after jouvert is what is known as "fancy mas," bright colorful and usually expensive costumes that serve to elaborate on a main theme. The marching of the bands continues for two days, culminating in the final hurrah of Carnival Tuesday. The main difference between Carnival in the nineteenth century and its contemporary manifestation is the solid middle-class backing that is now receives. The festival has evolved from a purely French Catholic ritual, to a site of black accommodation and resistance, and finally, to a source of national pride sanctioned by the most of the class structure. This is not to say that it has no detractors—Carnival is annually the target of hostile censure by a number of religious groups, Protestant, Catholic, Muslim and Hindu—who see the music, costumes, calypsos and "winin"[12] as a scourge of society.

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[11] "Break of day."

[12] A type of dancing, familiar even in nineteenth century accounts of the black underclass, that is the equivalent of a hip-rolling hula.

The use of picong in the structure of Carnival traditionally gave the black lower and underclass a means by which a folk practice of layered insult is refashioned to serve the purpose of subverting, and refashioning, a formerly exclusive European festival. Through the use of picong, Carnival becomes the site upon which these celebrations overlap, converge and diverge in a contestational dance becoming the locus where discourses on the colonies' race and class conflicts are manifested.

This chapter will examine the processes by which picong is used by the peasantry and underclass to refashion nineteenth-century Trinidadian carnival from an ostensibly European festival into an expression of Afro-Creole folk culture, reflecting the material situation of two cultures' ideological relationship in the ostensibly *new* arena in which they found themselves. By virtue of its existence in a colonial state, with its resounding clash, overlappings and refashionings of European and African cultural elements, the folk as represented by picong, presents a system of values in which a practice of verbal swordplay that was a part of rural slave life and ritual becomes the tool of the urban underclass. Picong receives its contestational signification from the community out of which its revolutionary fashioning takes place, a black urban and rural lower class and underclass. Carnival becomes an area in which the expression of the folk is made possible through the physical presence of the marginalized, enabling them to fashion the performance of picong's biting wit into a means of challenging colonial discourse. [13]

In The Repeating Island, Antonio Benitez-Rojo articulates the complexities of the Caribbean as rooted in "fragmentation, instability, reciprocal isolation, lack of historiography, syncretism and cultural heterogeneity"(1). This region's history creates

[13] See discussion of marginalization from the center as formulated by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tifflin in The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Colonial Literatures.

an opportunity for the development of an Antillean poetics grounded in the socio-political landscapes that are formed out of such a complex of cultural overlappings and contestations. Local festivals such as Carnival provide a rich site for the political development of the folk.

Of Carnivals and Utopianism

Following Mikhail Bahktin's Rabelais and His World, [14] critical discussions of carnival have centered around notions of inversion, parody, and the destabilization of the power of society's elite in the controlled form of the festival. Bahktin emphasizes the power of the *low culture* to challenge normative notions of the positionality of the marginalized and lower classes:

> This experience, opposed to all that was ready-made and completed, to all Pretense at immutability, sought a dynamic expression; it demanded ever changing, playful, undefined forms...All the symbols of the carnival idiom are filled with this pathos of change and renewal, with the sense of the gay relativity of the prevailing truths and authorities.
>
> We find here a characteristic logic, the peculiar logic of the 'inside out...of the turnabout. (11)

Basing his paradigm of the reversal of higher and lower on the customs of medieval Carnivals, Bakhtin stresses the dynamism of the European Carnivals as the petri dish out of which the festive play between the culture of the elite classes and the lower or peasant

[14] In Rabelais and his World, Bakhtin elaborates his notion of Carnival in a Medieval context, I use it as a means to engage in the critical discussions of its importance as a tool for elaborating colonial repression.

classes is borne. However, this very focus on the mutability of social norms as part of the carnival negates the Bakhtinian ideal of static, utopian reversal. I suggest that there are historical moments in which this mutability does become static: that other carnivals which have a strong non-Western influence may effectively function so as to effect an actual reversal.

Bakhtin found in festivals such as carnival a means to read popular culture for its revolutionary potential to overturn the normativity of dominant culture. He sought to present popular festivals as a site for the symbolic overthrow of societal norms, by the marginal. For this reason, theoretical readings of popular festivals in various parts of the world have often referred to Bakhtin's work on Renaissance carnivals in Europe.[15] In a Caribbean theoretical context, reading such festivals as tropes for revolutionary displacement of dominant ideologies has fostered interpretations based on the apparatus of displacement, refashioning of culture, and the cross-cultural politics of reading Caribbean identity.

However, Bakhtin's work on carnival festivals is dependent upon an understanding of such rituals in a specifically European context. Hence, its paradigms must be problematized in order to attempt to theoretically access a Caribbean Carnival festival. For Richard D.E.Burton, Trinidad Carnival is "less a subversion of high and low than an attempt by the low to raise, enhance and aestheticize themselves to the level of the high"(157). In Afro-Creole: Power, Opposition and Play in the Caribbean, he critiques the Bakhtinian approach to Carnival's impact in social hierarchies as merely

[15] Bakhtin, M.M. Rabelais and his World: Popular Culture in Gargantua an Pantagruel Trans. Richard M Berrong Lincoln: U of Nebraska, 1986.

symbolic, and claims that it does not enact actual liberation of the marginalized. For Burton, such a reading would be a rather "utopian" view of carnival:

> At the heart of this widely held view is the belief that what happens during carnival is essentially different from what happens during the rest of the year, that the three or four days it lasts are a negation in every respect of the laws and behaviors that hold good for the remaining 360-odd, during which, it is implied, people live lives of unblemished moderation, seriousness, and decorum. (156)

For Burton, this question of essential difference around which Bakhtin builds his argument is expanded to include possibilities of carnival as officially sanctioned performance, and hence not engendering a literal overturning of the status quo. Here, he incorporates Terry Eagleton's analysis of the festival as a socially permitted framework by saying it is potentially "reinforcing the order it seems to subvert"(156). In assessing Bakhtin and Eagleton's positions, Burton arrives at a premise for Trinidad's carnival that "incorporates aspects of both the 'idealist' interpretation of carnival and its 'realist' critique and argues that...it both challenges and reinforces the status quo"(157). This attempt defines the boundaries of carnival as two oppositional poles of "utopian" and "realist" --creating a limiting binary in which one is forced to approach the festival from a necessarily abstract or necessarily historical (with a capital H) paradigm, respectively. In Caribbean Discourse, Edouard Glissant elaborated the problem of History as a "highly functional fantasy of the West, originating at precisely the time when it alone 'made' the history of the world"(64). This western preoccupation with chronology, for Glissant, excludes the prospects of a history, which is neither a "schematic chronology" nor a

"nostalgic lament"(64). One may view the two borders of Burton's carnival binary as victims of this oversimplification.

In his elaboration of the two paradigms, Burton separates Carnival into two possible forms. The first is a fixed concept of revolutionary overturning. It is premised on the evidence of some invisible historical act in which the change evoked by the festival must arrive at the end of the chronology of its historical moment to be viewed as legitimate. His second--or as in this case oppositional twin--is the 'realist' interpretation, that subscribes to the nostalgic imagining of the popular festival as a means to generate anarchy where it does not exist without the permission of the dominant order. The dialogic nature of this discussion over the question of agency in carnival reiterates the oppositional nature of the discourse inherent in the idea of the festival. Burton's views the dynamic of the festival as a motivation of the "low" to ascend to the level of the "high." This position is a further oversimplification of the aims of an entire substrata of nineteenth century Trinidadian society. For the jamettes–the underclass for whom the critique of social hierarchy did not fit into the accepted and sanctioned form of the festival—Carnival meant that instead of seeking to simply ascend, one creates a space inside and outside the form in which virulent social criticisms could take place. I will discuss those for whom official sanction becomes irrelevant, in both their parodic performance of otherness, and their intention to enact a dialectic of opposition to established festival structure and context.[16] Butler further elaborates this point in her essay "Critically Queer" by signaling the indeterminacy of the discursive aspects of the performative as elements "that do not conclude at the terminus of a given statement or

[16] See the notion of performativity in Judith Butler's Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (New York: Routledge, 1999).

utterance, the passing of legislation, the announcement of a birth"(241). In this performativity, there exists a dynamic strategy of emergence, a refashioning of a sanctioned form, which subverts the very notion of sanction. This refashioning opens up the practice beyond simply the act of subversion within the performative, moving us into the potentiality to envision multiple readings of said performance:

> The reach of...significability cannot be controlled by the one who utters or writes, since such productions are not owned by them. They continue to signify in spite of their authors, and sometimes against their authors' most precious intentions. It is one of the ambivalent implications of decentering...to have one's writing be the site of a necessary and inevitable expropriation. (Bodies That Matter 241)

It is in the act of destabilizing the center that readings of the center's *purpose* become open to various interpretations—this is why the utopian views of carnival's potentiality are insufficient. The jamettes or urban underclass, enacted violent struggles with the police in an effort to move the folk form of picong, or biting wit, into the mainstream of the festival. Hence, they participated, with or without sanction, in a festival that did not allow for an unendorsed presence from the black community. My focus here is on those periods in Trinidad's history in which the sanction of the dominant class is overtly and successfully subverted by open and armed resistance—the 1850s and 1880s. I call attention to the power and potential of the marginalized to engage the elite and middle class in a discourse of refutation by the former and of self-determination by the latter. Thus, Burton's notion of the festival as a form that "both challenges and reinforces the status quo" is useful for reading the dynamic dialectic that exists as part of the festival,

but does not quite apply to those periods of Trinidad Carnival history in which the festival participation results in a direct and unsanctioned attack on the established structures of social repression (157). In the mid-nineteenth century, former slaves moved to the city of Port-of-Spain and began to actively participate in the established structure of the ostensibly European festival.[17] It is at this historical/social moment that the elements of Afro-creole folk forms were deliberately brought into the ostensible play of Trinidad's Carnival. At issue here is the potential for performance to enact a subversion that is carried into aspects of cultural life in which the notion of performance is ostensibly absent.

Bakhtin portrayed the European carnival as a joyous celebration of the body's materiality and as a reflection of the overt hostility to accepted social hierarchy. These elements exist in post-emancipation nineteenth century Trinidadian carnival to the degree that the sexualized dancing and singing were seen as an affront to the mores of the European planter class. However, the inclusion of a peasant culture heavily influenced by an African past did more than symbolically enact the overthrowing of the dominant planter class, it also exposed the contradictions inherent in planter masques such as the negue jardin(field slave).[18] In addition, it did assert black resistance—by way of the unsanctioned presence, of the black body, its enforced negation made possible by colonial discourse with its notions of absence of the black history and of the black body. Therefore, it was not a matter of simple anarchy, or the inversion of higher and lower, but the penetration of a naturalized European body by one foreign to it—an African

[17] John Cowley's Carnival, Canboulay and Calypso: Transitions in the Making cites the 1850s as the first major attempted suppression of the festival.
[18] One of the most popular masques of the planter-class was that of the male field slave and Afro-creole female.

foreignness both sanctioned so as to create the slave and simultaneously negated by the cultural overlapping that was part of the slave experience. The very presence of a congregation of blacks in the streets during Carnival threatened received ideas of social order premised upon the absence of the black body in social discourse. Michael Anthony's history of the festival, Parade of the Carnivals of Trinidad, 1839-1989, defines the mid-century period of the festival after emancipation as being "like a war declared"(8).[19] The official response--violent suppression and repressive legislation--attests to that fact. Within the context of the festival's nineteenth century origins, Trinidad Carnival became the arena in which the historically marginalized slaves and their descendants use picongesque performance to reach beyond Bakhtin's binary of high and low culture, and provided opportunities for a dynamic articulation of both the political realities of the colonial existence and the Africanized resistance to the multifaceted controls over the slave body.

As a reflection of peasant culture, the folk exists as the liminal space under, and within, the radar of the mainstream. It signifies upon the dominant discourse of national politics. It figures as the langue and parole of the people as posited by Glissant.[20] The songs, rituals, and performances are the langue—what amounts to a set of signs that provide a context for an underclass to penetrate the discourse that marginalizes them. The parole exists in the individual element of picong taken from the folk rituals such as the chantwell song, the masque of the midnight robber, and later, the calypso. From its inception in nineteenth century Trinidad, Carnival articulated the voice of the folk—the parole of the disenfranchised could be heard. From this standpoint, the very vehicle of

[19] He is quoting historian Andrew Pearse.
[20] Glissant, Edouard. Caribbean DiscourseTrans. J. Michael Dash. Charlottesville: U P of Virginia, 1992.

Carnival performance became a picongesque ritual in which the dominant order was displaced. The adoption of the form of the festival of the French planter-class whose culture and mores were ostensibly projected as the national langue, created a refashioning that subverted the enforced absence, materially and culturally, of the marginalized.

Decentering the Festival

The festival can thus be viewed as a journey to a site of resistance, and a removal from a site of silence. In Victor Turner's[21] notion of this liminal space of absence one sees this idea of removal elaborated:

> [It is a]Time and place of withdrawal from normal modes of social action, it can be seen as potentially a period of scrutiny of the central values and axioms of the culture in which it occurs. (167)

This anthropological reading falls in line with the Bakhtinian perception of European carnival, because it invokes the idea of reevaluation of normative societal structures, the dynamism of its process, and suggests that any reversal achieved in this conflict is effectively a part of a Historically-specific time with no opportunity of mutability. Turner develops the work of Arnold Van Gennep on the analysis of the liminal process, elaborating a notion of liminality "as both phase and state," and dividing types of these rituals into those which produce "status elevation" and "status reversal"(167). The first describes the means by which a participant's status in society is irrevocably heightened; the latter a sanctioned reversal of societal status that is allowed only as part of a ritual

[21] See "Humility and Hierarchy: The Liminality of Status Elevation and Reversal." The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure. Chicago: Aldine, 1969.

celebration such as carnival. Neither of these readings takes into account an additional element of revolutionary, successful and subversive overturning of societal structures. For Turner, "the liminality of the weak represents (merely) a fantasy of structural superiority"(168).

Similarly, for Edouard Glissant, the notion of liminality becomes refashioned to describe tranversality, the presence, of an indeterminacy, an aspect of behavior beneath the normative processes of (H)istory and other aspects of the dominant discourse where "multiple converging paths exist."(66). These convergences are a meeting of collective Caribbean history:

> The implosion of Caribbean history (of the converging histories of our peoples) relieves us of the linear, hierarchical vision of a single History that would run its unique course. It is not this History that has roared around the edge of the Caribbean, but actually a question of the subterranean convergence of our histories...this expression can only evoke all those Africans weighed down with ball chain and thrown overboard whenever a slave ship was pursued by enemy vessels and felt too weak to put up a fight. *They sowed in the depths the seeds of an invisible presence.* (Discourse 66-67)

Through this transversal space, Glissant's notion of presence, turns on the idea of a site from which one may explore the elements of a consciousness outside that of the fixedness of Western-imposed hegemony. This site of exploration is limitless in scope, embracing both the past and the present in a dialectic that neither excludes the fact of an African past, nor its present diasporic variability.

Thus, although the form of carnival in Trinidad was sanctioned by a society ruled by a European elite, its appropriation by the black underclass becomes infused with the folk aesthetic in a parodic and open critique—that which is similar but overtly and mockingly subversive. For the former slaves, these elements become but the smallest means of entering the dialogue on normative colonial politics.

For the English and French elite, the greatest threat to their centralized societal status was to be found in the affirmation of agency as projected in the black underclass's' non-slave status because it represented the potential for unsanctioned action. The black presence in the pre-Lenten festival of Carnival is seen as a manifestation of this fear.

Before the mid-century period, during slavery, the participation of this group was limited to separate gatherings of drum dances and private celebrations and fetes, with some masking in the streets in the early years after emancipation arrived in 1834. By the 1850s a large population of free blacks had moved into the city of Port-of-Spain and taken up residence in barrack-style housing. The proximity of these groups to the European population made for tense interactions during the carnival festivities. After slavery more overt participation by blacks was evident in the festival, and this became a source of some concern for the dominant classes; so much so, that by the late 1840s this period would seem a major example of the black desire for societal transgression. For in the late 1840s, a series of repressive legislative measures were passed that attempted to circumscribe the participation of the jamettes in Carnival.[22] John Cowley notes that at this time the standard of official harassment escalated with a new severity:

[22] See Andrew Pearse's "Carnival in Nineteenth Century Trinidad" in Trindad Carnival. Paria: Arima, 1988.

> Consolidation of Police laws in 1849 restated restriction on dancing and playing music at specific times and appearing masqued in the streets of towns. A clause not in previous Police Ordinances concerned the singing of profane or obscene songs or ballads. These were now perceived as a threat.(Carnival 50)

The layers of meaning in the perception of a "threat" reflect the potentiality of normative displacement inherent in the refashioning of the festival. For the planter class, this perceived danger includes not simply those elements of society for whom pre-emancipation participation was primarily distinct and removed from the arena of Spanish and French creole balls and masking celebrations—but also the underclass' appropriation of carnival as cultural site to reflect their presence in colonial discourse. Instead, the rumblings of European creole discontent were also directed at the very structure of performance through which blacks negotiated their participation. According to Anthony, after slavery the elite attacked the attendance of blacks in the festival by focusing on the "barbarity" of the spectacle--as juxtaposed with its pre-emancipation European-centered manifestations:

> What came in its place were scathing remarks about the Carnival and a call for the Government to ban it altogether. Almost all the editors regarded it [Carnival] as a period of barbarism and license, as uncivilized, and as an abomination. The white element appeared to withdraw completely from what before was their chief annual merriment, and the days of disguised balls with courtly dances, of the carriages rolling with

> their masked occupants from estate to estate and from great house to great house, seemed gone forever. (6)

This retreat signaled two things: First, it marks carnival in the mid-1840s as a site upon which battle lines were first drawn in the contest over cultural ownership of the festival. Secondly, it problematizes the notion that the presence of people of African descent operated in the festival solely through the sanction of the white elite. The withdrawal the upper segment of the population points to a reality in which the center is destabilized, and competing discourses take a prominent role in a public arena. The projection of "abomination" onto the festival by white Creoles constitutes misrecognition of a cultural space—in that carnival appears to have been eclipsed by the blackness tainting the European purity of the festival. This misrecognition is a direct result of the foreignness of the spectacle—from the viewpoint of the elite. In effect, the celebration now had a different cast, one that boded ill for the integrity of the original European elements. The source of the strangeness of the new Carnival for its elite celebrants is located in the afro-folk elements that were brought into the public festival by the jamettes. This is both a destabilization—from center to margin—of the festival's European form, and a reinscription of the imposed absence by the black masses. Hence, it invokes the elements of "interrogation and subversion of imperial cultural formations."(Ashcroft, 11) The most obvious of these formations is the idea of the African as uncivilized and savage—as other than the norm. The melding and overlapping of African culture in the colonial space with elements of European culture constitutes, for the ruling classes, a contamination of their civilization, which calls into question the very idea of what is meant by *civilization*. For the people at the summit of Trinidadian society, it is defined as

that which is not African or Other. Hence, when the slaves moved their celebrations from the yards and rural communities to the streets of towns, Africa--or what was perceived as Africa--became overt rather covert. According to Kim Johnson, "carnival in Trinidad, like similar festivals throughout the Caribbean, had become a focal point for the elaboration of African cultural retentions in music, dance, costume and ritual, and a celebration of freedom"(Trinidad Carnival, xiv). This tension had been earlier remarked upon on August 14, 1840 in TheTrinidad Standard in a letter from W.H. Burnley, Agent for the Council of Trinidad. He advises that the ending of slavery has caused difficulties in the relationship between former slaves and their masters:

> The master and the labourer were formerly in juxtaposition, administering, without the necessity of intermediate aid, directly to the wants of each other. Emancipation has severed the tie which bound them—has removed them apart, and left a void space between which must be filled up by a middle class. (Standard No. 274: V. 3)

This marginalization of former slaves exists also in the underpinnings of control of the black body that had been absolute during slavery. By the late 1840s, the dominant class's desire for an affirmation of control over the former slave population has shifted towards legislative repression. Hence, the freedom which emancipation ostensibly guaranteed is encroached upon by ordinances, such as those of 1848, which become a means to deny blacks a visible existence outside their former status.

The masquing, which formed the most contested part of the festival, becomes one of the most useful ways to delve into the competing discourses of identity. Because the jamette class participates without an overt welcome by the upper classes, their action

becomes a rebuttal of the dominant colonial discourse. Because this element of society is changing the nature of its presence in the sphere of the public space—from absence to presence—they become recognized, albeit negatively, as the presence of a dissenting voice exploding into the communal discourse.

The celebration of carnival in Trinidad began with the ending of the Christmas season and culminated on the eve of Ash Wednesday. Before 1846, Christmas was the start of the Martial Law period in which whites and free colored were required to muster for service in the Militia. This was due to the fact that the courts were closed during the season and as such, military law became the order of the day. According to Andrew Pearse, "the Christmas season came to be a time at which the whole status system was given outward expression through the vehicle of the Militia...business was at a standstill and the occasion became one not only for serious military duties, but also for balls, and a variety of other amusements"(11). Hence, symbolically the "outward expression" of military might during a time in which the lower orders of society were given a measure of license is also a means to reiterate a readiness on the part of the dominant class to crush any overt expressions of hostility from the lower(11). As a result, this period of the year became the occasion for symbolic airings of class tensions, culminating in spectacles of confrontation in the celebration of Carnival.[23]

This presence becomes dialogic in nature because it brings into question the very nature of the festival as a purely European cultural production. As with Bahktin's notion of dialogism, it questions the perception of a single-voiced utterance as an unmediated force for ordering. For Bakhtin, discourse does not exist in isolation, but points to an

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[23] Militia Law is suspended after 1845.

awareness of a second voice existing within its utterance: "the word does not exist in a neutral and impersonal language...but rather it exist in other people's mouths, in other people's contexts, serving other people's intentions: it is from there that one must take the word, and make it one's own"(Rabelais 294). The single voice of the colonial elite's festival is contested by the margins' appropriations, reversals and re-fashionings. Yet, it deviates from Baktinian dialogism in that the dominant order's voice is unaware of the contesting presence of the margin's voice within its utterance. Hence, although the jamettes usurp the basic form of the festival, they introduce elements that make carnival anew—something that is not pure in the sensibility of the dominant class.

In the Port-of-Spain Gazette of February 11, 1858 a writer laments that the sanctions against "masquing" at Carnival was little heeded by the lower order of the society:

> It was thought that the deprivation of the annual two days of license would be much felt by the natives of the place. Still, when it was remembered that the prohibition was caused by, and directed against the most dissolute and reckless vagabonds who had nothing to lose, and every chance of gaining something in any possible "scrimmage" at the expense of others and the facility with which a row may be got up, it might have been anticipated that its enforcement would be a matter beyond the power of the ordinary police force.(Gazette No. 13, V. xxxiii)

The writer, referring to that class which have "nothing to lose," anticipates the coming clashes which will reinforce the fears of whites that a group of blacks, loosely organized against authority, will become a force through which racial and class antagonisms are

made visible in their performance of carnival. Although the English see the presence of blacks in Carnival as an attack on White culture, the elite classes of French and Spanish, for whom carnival was a cultural tradition, are brought into a clash with the English elite through the festival's symbolism as cultural artifact. The pressure to circumscribe the festival by the English colonial government, and English Protestants, is therefore viewed by the French and Spanish as a way for the English to impose their traditions. Hence, the writer's claim that the need for suppression is made necessary solely by the presence of "vagabonds" whose purpose is a 'scrimmage' with the authorities, redraws the social lines of demarcation. By creating this delineation of responsibility for the attendance of the unsanctioned masses in a public space, the writer can assume a co-recognition of purpose between the white Protestant and catholic elite groups, while keeping the margin at bay. This uneasy alliance between the upper classes is a result of the taking of the island by the English in 1797. Worried that Trinidad was potentially a place in which the sentiments of the French Revolution were gaining a foothold, the English captured the island and sought to make it a political and social reflection of Englishness. The French and Spanish residents chafed under their style of governance and carnival became an arena in which the conflict manifested itself. The jamettes - or black underclass - and the Free Colored and Indians occupied the bottom of the social hierarchy—the latter keeping aloof from society through cultural custom and government enforcement. But, prior to the island's capture by the British, the Free Colored had attained a measure of rights under Spanish Law. The group, made up of "colored and black slave-owning planters, traders, artisans and petty cultivators,(...)were similar in language, customs and dress to the French" (Pearse, 9). Within this black and colored class hierarchy, recognition by

the Spanish authorities as a legal class gave them a certain position in society—one that became severely restricted in the decades following the institution of British government. In addition to this, blacks from the British West Indies came to the island and created further cultural overlappings and contestations through their English speech and through various adopted customs. Hence, the conflict over the festival elaborates not a simple binary of margin versus center, but several contested centers, in alliance with and opposed to each other--and opposed to the various margins. This structure creates a shifting dialectic in which the various social groups articulate syncretic, oppositional and converging definitions of social inscriptions.

On February 11, 1858, the black-owned Trinidad Sentinel highlighted these antagonisms by taking issue with the government's repression of people of color:

> For ourselves we have heard and read much of the tumults and conflagrations in other lands—the results of oppression and infringements of the subject, the people of this country have been suffering materially from class legislation and misrule; and, to their honor have but on one occasion, have they shown anything like resistance.(Vol. III, No. 5)

The writer illustrates his position by negating earlier attacks on black activity in the public sphere and instead pointing to the example of the October riots of 1849 as an expression of colonial "misrule."

> Because a few ignorant, unarmed men and women threw a few stones, government got alarmed, showed their weakness, abrogated the obnoxious clause, and, horrible to relate, resorted to bloodshed.(Standard No. 5 Vol. III)

Referencing the debacle of the October riots, the writer articulates the polyphonic nature of utterance in the contest over jamette presence. As a writer for more liberal Standard, he is affiliated with the non-white element of society, and uses this alliance to critique the underpinnings of the official response to the attack as an attempt at racial repression. However, the nature of his social position as a newspaper writer negates a racially essentialist reading of his purpose. His inscription of the rioters as "ignorant" reveals his own negation of their class as aligned with his own. He makes a delineation of his allegiance to the rioters—in concert with politically--yet with the intention of keeping them at a distance from his class' center.

His account of the Carnival festival of that year serves the same purpose, to distinguish the voice of his own class from that of the jamettes—with whom he shares a racial/political resistance to the colonial order, but not a social allegiance:

> On Sunday night last, at a very late hour the Police Force were put in requisition so as to prevent any person wearing a mask...nor did any attempt to do so—but because some of them put on fancy dresses, Policemen...were seen in almost every direction of the town making arrests, dragging respectable people of colour, who were not engaged in the mirth and jollity of the rabble, to the Station.(Sentinel Vol. III, No. 5)

The ideological distinction articulated by the black-owned Sentinel between the classes of participants that is at the heart of its depiction illustrates the conflicting and dynamic voices that exist within the black classes. The rabble--read here as the jamette class--is made separate and distinct from the colored classes who also participate in the festival. And, for The Sentinel, the line that creates this distinction is one of aspiration revealed in

performance. The members of the colored class, in their desire for a recognition that, for them, denotes respectability, wear "fancy dress" costumes and refrain from the "mirth and jollity of the rabble" in an attempt to align themselves with the normative social standards of behavior. In the public sphere of the festival, these normative standards are representative ideologies of the colonial elite. Orderliness in manner and structure of performance is, for them, a hallmark of European and upper class sensibility. Hence, the use of the word "rabble" suggests an unruly, uncontained and mutable nature—all elements of white fears of open and revolutionary resistance by the black underclass—and references the anxiety of the colored class that they could be *tarred* by the same brush.

Too often the participation of the black underclass in carnival created a reference to their inscription as an *other* and they both celebrated and attacked that inscription. The Canboulay procession that opened carnival was of particular offense to the upper classes as it made a picongesque connection with slavery. With lit torches, participants paraded through the streets on Sunday night and sang to the accompaniment of what was seen as crude instruments, including the chac-chac and drum. The Canboulay ritual recalled the pre-emancipation cannes brulees process in which a fire on a sugar plantation would be cause for slaves to be rallied by their masters and put to work processing the cane before the crop would be lost. As part of the reenactment of the process, maskers dressed in rags and chains and promenaded while one of their number made a show of urging them forward with a whip. In the mid-century, this reference to slavery made, for the colonial elite, a bitingly uneasy reminder of the not-so-distant past.

The potential for the realization of rebellion in the class below the line of respectable society becomes a part of the picongesque aspect of performance participation by the jamettes:

> On Tuesday the people continued to amuse themselves, when a large band of them were assailed by a detachment of the Police: a pitched battle ensued, the Police were routed, wounded and disgraced, so much so, that on their return to the station, not a man would venture out. Government must have been alarmed for a detachment of the 41st Welsh Regiment was marched into town, and quartered at the Police Station.... We conceive that the people have a prescriptive right to amuse themselves on this occasion: it is of a date anterior to the cession of the Island to Great Britain. (Sentinel Vol. III, No.5)

It is interesting to note that the effort to depict the difference between the respectable citizens of color who were taken into custody on Carnival Monday has been replaced, in content, by a group much more hostile to authority and more willing to make a spectacle of their resistance. The Port of Spain Gazette, which functioned as a voice of white Protestant authority, condemned this editorial. It saw the maskers as a lawless horde enacting an idolatrous sentiment that they associated with Catholicism--yet, in an effort to negate the level of subversive power displayed by the jamettes, the paper failed to give any detailed description of the incident that would embarrass the police authorities:

> It had been perceived long ago that though with their fondness for mirth and display, the people of the island enjoyed the time and partook of its recreation, yet the parts of it which gave so great umbrage to the

> respectable, and in which the offenses against the laws generally prevailed, was entirely confined to the unsettled and temporary items of our population...It was remembered that the prohibition was caused by and directed against the most dissolute and reckless vagabonds who had nothing to lose, and every chance of gaining something in any possible 'scrimmage' at the expense of others, and the facility with which a row may be got up, it might have been anticipated that its enforcement would be a matter beyond the power of the ordinary police force.(Gazette 2/18/58)

Defending the intervention of the military, the Gazette operates as a particularly English voice—one that finds Carnival to be a suspiciously pagan spectacle. Its portrayal of the rioters as the indigent and unsettled members of society anticipates the resistance against anti-masking ordinances that elite Spanish and French Creoles might have against this attack on their cultural institution. Thus, in appeasement of the Spanish and French Creoles, the writer reiterates dominant order's inscription of the jamettes as an untenuous mass of anti-elite, and particularly anti-English, hostility. Making the project of respectability a normative aspect of the social structure, the writer seeks to identify resistance of the jamettes as the contamination of that project. The instability of the population, the subversive presence in an ostensibly creole festival, and the Africanness that they brought to the celebration was anathema to both the colonialist project of civilization and the agenda of making the island more British in culture.

The Trinidad Sentinel reinforces this cultural aspect of the battle over the festival by challenging the racism subsumed within the Gazette's assumed single-voiced utterance of the clash between the maskers and the police:

> There is no denying it—for any coloured or black man with a grain of self-respect will say the same, that prejudice of colour is more rampant now than ten years ago, and that if it increase in the same ratio, it will be impossible to say what may be its ultimate effects. 'Tis time to stop it then—'tis time to check a Press such as the Gazette, which fans the flame of discord—and 'tis time also that everyone in the community should know that the black and coloured races desire simply to be let alone. As a race they ask no favors. They simply demand the same rights and privileges which are accorded to any other race of her Majesty's subjects. (3/4/58)

This picongesque critique of the underpinnings of the Gazette's socio-political agenda is a detour from the class-centered discourse of earlier Sentinel writings. It articulates a common ground of race repression inherent in the colonial discourse as a basis upon which rests the erected edifice of the politics of repression. This attention to foundations invokes an important aspect of picong—the dismantling of layers of assumptions by attacking both origins and levels of ideas simultaneously—in much the same way that jamette performance critiques both culture and history. Yet, in the issue of "respect" to which the writer connects the argument, there still exists an appeal for participation in the very hierarchy out of which the repression comes. This call for respect, directed at the center, from a member of a marginalized group still invokes the center's preeminence-a

departure from the unifying project of the writer's utterance. But, the call to be 'let alone,' to 'ask no favors' and to 'demand equal rights' presupposes a dominant dialectic that seeks to deny the vernacular African foundation of the colored and black community, while using it as the basis for social and political negation.

Jamette resistance, being more performative in displacing the dominant order's imposed inscriptions of marginality, is enacted through the dynamic invocation and subversion of those readings. Their ability to point to the fears of whites that a "savage" and militant hostility lay at the core of black consciousness, is perhaps the most powerful aspect of their picongesque attack on the dominant colonial order:

> On Monday morning at an early hour, Policemen were seen about town preventing people from enjoying themselves...a policeman who had the temerity to attack another party (of maskers), was beaten...Later in the day about 25 policemen had the hardihood to venture, in what is commonly known as the "French Streets" and interfere with the people of that locality, but the treatment they received caused them to make an inglorious retreat. (Sentinel No.13, V 4 3/10/59)

The French Streets, a neighborhood in Port-of-Spain, are at this time the provenance of a large population of blacks with afro-creole (French) cultural beliefs. The "temerity" of the symbol of colonial authority to attack the jamettes within that cultural/racial space suggests of the circumscribed role of the black threat in the colonial order. The rebuttal, open and militant counter-force, refashions--for the elite--the public space of the French Streets into an overt symbol of hostile others. This militancy, but one layer of contestation, is carried further by the commentary of the Sentinel:

> The sobriquet "picnic governor" will now have to give place to the less euphonious, and, perhaps, not less appropriate one Robert the Insane. We of course would not call any man coward of madman—the better way would be, according to Junius, 'to strive to prove him so.' Now we are perfectly satisfied that none but a coward would expect his subordinates to execute an order which he himself has not the moral nor physical courage to carry out. Who but a madman would put in a belligerent attitude about 80 armed policemen, and a host of rigid disciplinarians in arms, against a loyal and unarmed people? (Sentinel No. 13, V. 4, 3/10/59)

The Sentinel's charge that the practice of colonial repression is "cowardly" creates a foundation for the biting wit that is the hallmark of picong. Displacing the pretense of benevolent authority which is part and parcel of colonial discourse, the Sentinel points to the governmental hypocrisy by detailing successive slippages in the naming of the governor, colony's symbol of authority. These movements create a critique of colonial authority, removing its normative assumptions and re-placing it in the realm of the abnormality. This, in effect, re-defines characterizations of the denizens of the "French Streets" as a social contaminant and points to an inherent contamination of government that is the colonial order.

In its sympathies with the British governmental authority, The Gazette distances itself from the Catholics with whom the festival had resonated since its earliest celebration on the island.

> At first it was stated that no interference with the mummers would be made—that they were to be allowed the full license they claimed; then the

> orders given to the Police were far from exact—not to say intentionally equivocal—then the assistance of the Military was obtained in an irregular and inefficient fashion. The consequence were as might have been expected...another example of the authorities patiently submitting to be set at defiance.(Gazette 3/19/59)

The clash between the police and the denizens of the "French Streets," re-enacts the colonizer/colonized conflict:

> Such was the state of the town that another detachment of soldiers was sent for, and soon after marched into town, and like fiends commenced an attack on the people of Corbeau Town, who, to their praise be it said, drove the heroes of Sebastopol like chaff before the wind. The people notwithstanding, congregated in large numbers, and had their pleasure without further molestation.(Sentinel 3/10/59)

The predominantly black residents of Corbeau Town[24]—in their hostile response to the soldiers' interference, elicit from the writer a contrast between the colonial military inscription of 'hero' --with the jamettes' *heroic* response to repression. The designation of 'hero' presupposes an opponent that is its other—its enemy, and as such, a site of bodily inscription for the colonial authority to perform its response to fears of a black revolt. Like the heroes of Sebastopol, the military assumes its normative role as protector of the Empire and, as such, must answer this threat of blackness in all its Western colonial readings; savage, ruthless, uncivilized and uncontrollable. Their inability to successfully answer this threat calls into question the very nature of Empire and its supposed unchallenged preeminence.

Chapter Three:

Descendants of a Sharp-Tongued Dialectic: Calypso and the Chantwell

Work on calypso has centered on its development as a part of Trinidad's national culture. For my purposes, calypso becomes more than simply entertainment, but a form of subversion of the colonial order. In its role as art, cultural artifact and political tool, it shares some very important critical and satirical tools with picong. The reason being that calypso owes its bite to the folk form. The contemporary social commentary calypso, whose purpose is to speak to the people's concerns about government and social problems, shares a tradition with earlier forms of critique, such as the *cariso* and the *lavway*—two categories of song that also utilized picong's biting wit.

Approaches to studying calypso range from examining its West African roots, to situating it in a framework of colonial resistance, to concentrating on its development as a New World microcosm. My purpose here is to locate calypso's place in Trinidad's Afro-Creole folk-genre of picong—to see how calypso adopts the folk to make it an integral variation of its production of social criticism.

Keith Warner's The Trinidad Calypso, articulates the term calypso as a product of a potentially multi-faceted origin:

Meaning "crow" in French—it is used colloquially to designate vultures.

a) The Carib word "carieto," meaning a joyous song, which itself evolved into "cariso";

b) The French patois creations "carrousseaux" from the archaic French "cailisseaux"," an apparent attempt to give a French form to a term transmitted orally probably "kaiso," of which this form would be an acceptable rendition in writing;

c) The Spanish word "caliso," a term also used for a tropical song in St. Lucia;

d) "careso," a topical song from the Virgin Islands;

e) The West African (Hausa) "kaiso," itself a corruption of "kaito," an expression of approval and encouragement similar to "bravo."(8)

What is remarkable about readings of the term is the connection to music and to the term "kaito!" which, points to a relationship with picong—in the public nature of the form and its interactive structure. Borne out of related oral tradition, picong and calypso both have a similarity with at least one role in West African griottage—biting critical humor addressed to an audience in song format. This emphasis on orality connects African wordsmithing with a genre of criticism that produces in Afro-Trinidadian folk culture the ritual of picong. In a New World context, this oral art becomes part of a larger re-fashioning of orality. In Griots and Griottes: Masters of Words and Music, Thomas Hale notes that the notion of the griot has transcended Africa "into the Caribbean and the United States, taking on extremely positive connotations for those who see the professional as a link to their ancestors"(15). Hale also points out that among the many social functions that are performed by griots in parts of West Africa are:

> Recounting history, providing advice, serving as spokesperson, representing a ruler as a diplomat, mediating conflicts, interpreting the words of others into different languages, playing music, composing songs and tunes, teaching students, exhorting participants in wars and sports, reporting news...contributing to important life ceremonies, and praise-singing. (19)

In particular, it is in its role as social commentator that calypso makes potent use of picong. The overlapping considerations of "recounting history", speaking for a group and rallying contestants are the social sites upon which the use of picong is inscribed in this *New World* incarnation. Another link in the oral chain is the practice of ritualizing the performance of biting wit in the vehicle of song.(19). According to Rohlehr, the performance of 'blame' has been found in folksongs throughout the Caribbean, and as a result, has become a part of the calypso tradition:

> African music often served the purpose of social control, and the roots of the political calypso in Trinidad probably lie in the African custom of permitting criticism of one's leaders at specific times, in particular contexts, through the media of song and story. The leaders of society recognized the value of such satirical songs in which the ordinary person was given was given the privilege of unburdening his mind while the impact of his protest was neutralized by the controlled context within which criticism was permissible. (2)

In eighteenth century Trinidad, picong stretched beyond the arena of black social rituals, such as drum dances, and came to influence such spectacles as chantwell singing.

According to scholars,[25] these contests of song, sometimes instigated by slave owners, were marked by the extemporaneous and pre-composed abuse of a subject. The most famous chantwell, or singer of carisos, was Gros Jean, a slave whose master Pierre Begorrat utilized the picongesque aspect of the cariso to deride his neighbors and enemies. Hence, it is in this period that the upper class acknowledged the social usefulness of picong. What is ironic in this instance is the ignorance of picong's potentiality as a political tool of the black lower and underclass to problematize the colonial system.

The essence of picong is its dialectical rhetoric. It is dialectical in its production of the cultural contestations between Trinidad's various colonial elite and its afro-creole other (rather than in the idea of progress that is part of the Hegelian notion of dialectics.) Calypso is picong, not simply in its use as social criticism, but because of its very existence in the cauldron of cultural overlappings and contestations of the colonial period; it is a projection of the politics of colonial placement and re-placement.

The aspect of picong that is at work here is the voicing of social criticism in the structure of the rhetoric of picong. This choice to assume the use of a folk practice to effectively challenge the power structure functions as a sharply pointed attack on the very use of the normative European hierarchical social structure. Abandoning the conventional means of criticism, the jamettes and the rest of the African community chose to bring the practice into the center so that the audience of the elite would recognize the practice as one foreign to their traditions. For the elite, the perception of the margin addressing the center using a structure and rhetoric of criticism that is

[25] See also Andrew Pearse's "Carnival in Nineteenth Century Trinidad," Paria; Arima, 1988. Gordon Rohlehr's Calypso and Society in Pre-Independence Trinidad.

unfamiliar to their own is that of a multi-layered negation of the center's authority. It is this layering aspect of picong that is part of Trinidad's Afro-Creole rural oral tradition; it addresses the past, present and future in a single breath—all the while cutting through the assumptions of the elite—slicing from top to bottom. In bringing a cultural artifact whose function is to publicly expose the transgressions of an individual to bear on the ideologies of a group, the black use of picong is re-imagined to explore a meta-narrative of social forms of criticism through which the colonial elite frame their world. Disenfranchised from the recognized forms of administrative regress, the black lower and underclass' use of picong in song introduces its own rhetorical critique. Its presence in Carnival points to its beginnings in the environment of chattel slavery, suggesting its presence during a period in which blacks were assumed to have no legitimized voice for criticism. The advent of this form of abuse into social arenas of the dominant culture signals, to the social and administrative elite, a subversive presence within their midst—one that has the potential to, and eventually does weigh in on the subject of cultural and social marginalization. James Millette's Society and Politics in Colonial Trinidad reveals the heteroglossic nature of nineteenth-century Trinidad, illuminating the socio-cultural realities of the colonial state:

> The society was not so much foreign, as French, both with respect to its free coloured and white communities. In 1802, apart from the Indians and the slaves, numbering 1166 and 19,709 respectively, there were 5275 free coloured and 2261 whites. Of the whites 663 were British, 505 were Spanish and 1093 were French. (105)

Despite the capitulation of the island to the British in 1783, the overwhelming colonial cultural influence was French. Thus, the dominant language of the slaves was a patois of French and African languages. As a result, the singing of cariso took place in French. So, chantwells sang their "New World" folk into existence by lacing picong into the fabric of the cariso—for themselves and the dominant French planter class. For this elite, picong would be seen as taint on the future prospects for social debate, and as a result, created the potentiality for the margin to assume a larger presence in the center's future ideological discussions.

From the rural environs of the plantations, the practice of picong--the tradition of songs and speeches of combat—came into the town of Port-of-Spain. From the black underclass and up through the hierarchy of the marginalized, it worked its way into the gaze of the center.

In Roger D. Abrahams' The Man of Words in the West Indies—he examines the place of oral performance in the Anglophone Caribbean and notes that there is a prestige in the mastery of various forms of oratory. Although his focus centers on the islands of St. Kitts, Nevis, Tobago and St. Vincent, his work points out that the perceived importance of wordsmithing appears to be a characteristic of communities all over the African Diaspora, including Afro-American communities:

> (He) observed a number of traditional performances and began to perceive a pattern of traits in the roles played by the performer, his relations to his material and his audience, and in the audience's attitude toward the performer and his enactment. This pattern centered upon the acclaim given to those individuals who were good at using words—individuals

(he) came to call 'men-of-words'...It became clear that that these performances almost always arose in contests with other men-of-words, and that such contests were a community-accepted manner of establishing and maintaining a public (or street) reputation. (2).

Similarly, in his essay on *halo* "The Ewe Tradition of Songs of Abuse," Kofi Anyidoho points out that the practice of verbal swordplay is an important part of West African culture, is sometimes utilized to address perceived infractions. He notes that, "the case of halo tells us that it is even more significant that the tradition...(of abuse) prescribes the need for insult as a legitimate reaction to an individual's disregard of society's norms"(19). This suggests that picong's traditional format is one refashioned from the cultural retentions of Trinidad's slave community--who were predominantly of West African descent.

One must go beyond the notion of calypso as simple representation of this conflict; picong politicizes calypso—first, by pointing to the folk elements of which it is partly fashioned—and by extension, politicizing the use of the folk as a transforming force in national popular culture. It creates the calypsonian as part "New World" griot and part contemporary chantwell.

In this chapter I examine the calypsonian as a descendant of the chantwell, and explore the politics of both singing forms as a refashioning of the trope of the West African praisesinger. Research in the field of Caribbean folksongs and calypso has made strong connections to West African forms. Gordon Rohlehr makes this link to African roots a marker of a socially controlling project:

African music often served the purpose of social control, and the roots of the

> Political calypso in Trinidad probably lie in the African custom of permitting criticism of one's leaders at specific times, in particular contexts, and through the media of song and story. (Calypso and Society 2)

My work proceeds from this potential connection by examining the figure of the West African griot and the similarity between his/her role as social commentator and the refashioning of that aspect of groittage through the figures of the chantwell and the calypsonian. According to Hale, although there is a great variety in the profession of *griottage* in West Africa, that it is "anchored in verbal art, service to noble families, and the symbiotic relationship of word and music"(Griots 14). I see the wordsmithing and social commentary of Trinidadian calypsonians, regardless of ethnicity, as descendants of the griot/chantwell--who inverts the social order by singing the material and ideological lives of the marginalized. This creates for the social commentary calypso a theoretical link to the subversive axis upon which it operates a perspective that I find to be particularly useful for examining the contestation between the classes and against the government. Similarly, Bakhtin saw this contest between groups as it is fought in language:

> Like the living concrete environment in the consciousness of the verbal artist lives—is never unitary. It is unitary only as an abstract grammatical system of normative forms, taken in isolation from the concrete, ideological conceptualizations that fill it, and in isolation from the uninterrupted process of historical becoming that is a characteristic of all living language...although it is unitary not only in its shared, abstract, linguistic markers bit also in its forms for conceptualizing these abstract

> markers, is itself stratified and heteroglot in its aspect as an expressive system, that is in the forms that carry meanings. (Discourse 288)

For critics of calypso, such as Gordon Rohlehr[26] and Richard Burton, the calypsonian is a part of the diasporic trickster tradition. He is a "man-of –words" who "like Anancy, must use all his resources of verbal trickery to mock the powerful while entertaining and, above all, impressing both them and the powerless with his prowess as performer, mime, and master of words"Burton, 188). This view links the calypso to the tradition of picong, as well as the tradition of the griot. Because early calypsonians were of African and Creole heritage, the later developments in the form which included people from hithertofore underrepresented groups such as the East- Indian community produce a dialectical opportunity to examine how the form is refashioned to signify a dynamic change from the solely Afro-Creole folk form to a diverse national product.

Genealogy

In the history of calypso, the name Gros Jean has become synonymous with the earliest practitioners of the art. A slave to Pierre Beggorat, his skill in singing carisos was such that his owner made him master of kaiso. According to Mitto Sampson, Gros Jean's talent as a chantwell lay in his ability to compose extemporaneous songs whose picongesque qualities lacerated his master's opponents:

> Legend has it that Begorrat...would adjourn with favourite slaves and guests on occasions and indulge in a variety of entertainments. The court was attended by African slave singers of "Cariso" or "Caiso", which were

> usually sung extemporare and were of a flattering nature, or satirical or directed against unpopular neighbours or members of the plantation community, or else they were 'Mepris', a term given to a war of insults between two or more expert singers. (Pearse 147)

Thus, a practice borne out of the traditions of the slave community comes to be utilized by slave masters to attack their enemies. One wonders whether the master/patron's act of calling for the performance of the mepris did not signify a fascination/repulsion of the potentiality of the ritual to be turned on the patron himself. This idea was not lost on Begorrat, for as well as he is known for his patronage of Gros Jean and others, he is also known for his cruelty. According to historian John Cowley:

> His attitude symptomised a singular love-hate relationship between slave and master. He sustained particular black chantwells, or lead singers, for their skills in spontaneous composition, but was instrumental in meting out macabre punishments to slaves who were believed to have transgressed. (Carnival, Canboulay and Calypso 15)

I see the act of performing the song as a subversion of the imposed silence that was a part of the slave's lot in early nineteenth century Trinidad. The fact that chantwells could gain renown within the plantation community for the mastery of song composition—a renown that reached beyond the folk practices of the slaves to the master's realm—destabilizing the very notion of an absence of agency.

Because of the large influx of French planters from neighboring islands, the early social framework of Trinidad evinced a heavily Franco-African influence, this being the result of the 1783 Cedula of Popluation which encouraged immigration to the island.

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[26] See Interview with Rohlehr

During this time, the slaves of these immigrants had societies in which ritual singing, drumming and performance served simultaneously the purposes of a connection to Africa and a projection of their material existence in the "New World." Chantwells such as Gros Jean, Soso, Papa Cochon, Ofuba and Possum become the antecedents of the calypsonian through their connection of the marginalized world of the slave societies to the public forum of singing for the center.

With the advent of Emancipation in 1834, Chantwells became well known as the lead singers of the underclass groups of stickfighters and their supporters. Designated by society as jamettes—those beyond the realm of respectability—their purpose was to exhort their members in battle against rival bands, picongesque compositions against authority, and singing praises of the bravery and prowess of its members. Their battle cries of "bois" (wood) were meant to acknowledge and conflate the perceptions of physical battle and verbal combat. Rohlehr conflates the advent of the popularity of these stickfighting, or calinda, bands with the social congruence of the various elements of ethnic and racial groupings:

> In the confused post-Emancipation period, the problems of identity and status must have been acute. How was status to be determined in a society where groups of Yorubas, say, fresh from Africa as indentured workers, or taken off slave ships. Were living alongside creolized Blacks of French, English or Spanish background, East Indian indentured workers and a dozen or more fragmented ethnic groups, all experiencing severe problems of language in their relation to the power structure? Clearly in that melee, the man who was recognized as a possessor of the word and as a

> spokesman for the group occupied a position of supreme importance. Such a man would have been the chantwell of the Calinda bands. (Calypso and Society 52)

What is interesting about the presence of the calinda bands is the transference of locus for the performance of picong from slave entertainments and social gatherings to the patronage system, and finally into the unsanctioned public sphere of carnival. It is in this new arena of performance that the process of mariginalization is made advantageous to the jamettes. In effect, it brings visceral hostility and subversive nature of picong into the mainstream arena--revealing the dialogic nature of the patronage system.[27] Free now to direct their attacks against the very pillars of colonial society—and its attendant tools of governmental repression, chantwells infused their every vocal performance with the shadow of the drum dances and slave rituals out of which their satirical use of wit is drawn. This signified upon the material circumstances upon which the folk form is fashioned. Although the calinda is not a song or dance form isolated to Trinidad,[28] its inseperability from the jamette stickfighting bands added to its infamy.

Transference

One of the most well-known picong song-smiths is Slinger Francisco, known by the moniker "The Mighty Sparrow." In 1998, he released "Doh Touch Meh President." The song, in response to hearings on the impeachment of American President William

[27] I am reading this as dialogic in the Bakhtinian sense—an awareness of the double-voicedness existing in each utterance, and the jamettes' conversant interaction with the privileged utterance.
[28] See Gordon Rohlehr's Calypso and Society In Pre Independence Trinidad. Port of Spain: University of the West Indies, 1990.

Jefferson Clinton, combined the vitriol of impugning the authoritative premise of the investigations with the wicked humor of nineteenth century jamette rhetoric. Within the context of the song is the suggestion that a white man whose cabinet placements and policies were seen to give blacks—and other minorities--an unprecedented amount of access to the highest office in United States government was inherently unsuited for his official position. Sparrow's winking salute to Clinton adopted the nose-thumbing of chantwells to the normative American hegemony—and it is also suggested—hypocritical stance of the iconization of the American Presidency with tones of an innate morality:

> Sexual McCarthyism/ Ken Starr inquisition
>
> Showed a young innocent White House intern
>
> Not realizing Monica/ was a manipulator
>
> When she exposed all her thongs without concern. (19-24)

The multilevel aspect of his attack in linking the hysteria of the Red Scare of 1950s America--with a corresponding note of defensiveness against a nonexistent threat--is part and parcel of the picongesque. It creates a metanarrative about the proceedings that invokes the milieu of a period in American history for which the country has since acknowledged its wrongheadedness. In effect, Sparrow suggests a foresight that future revisitations of the current political and judicial situation will yield the same result.

This is the historical crossroads of picong—pointing to both the past and future simultaneously, commentating on the diverse meeting sites within which there are overlappings and conflations. He delineates his attack, moving back and forth between the individual and the general, between specific personages and overall intent. His invocation of the disreputability of the nineteenth century underclass by linking Monica's

supporters to the aura of violence and prostitution that was a part of the jamette makeup, saying Monica was, "headed by Greenberg and Linda/ And she jamette mama," suggesting the mother's collusion in her daughter's prostitution, and her own status as madam. Attacks on background and origin are one of the foundations of picong because it presents history in an oral context—as communal, known--and its knowledge as reciprocal. In addition, in the rhetoric of a voice of the geographical margin criticizing the center, Sparrow revisits his own historical role as a descendant of the chantwell.

In the famous picong duel of 1957, The Lord Melody and Sparrow reenact the venom of the famous chantwell duels of the nineteenth century. Turning on the combat tactics of the bois men, they perform a form of extemporaneous, verbal hand to hand conflict. The insults invoke in each combatant's arsenal of personal and social critique, the layering of personal and familial history:

> Sparrow: Well Melody, come close to me/I will tell you plain and candidly
>
> Don't stop in the back and smile/Because you have a face like a crocodile
>
> Melody: Sparrow you shouldn't tell me that at all/I mind you when you was small
>
> Many of the nights I use mash you head/In crossing to go to your mother's
>
> (extemporaneous scatting and humming). (1-8)

In this 20th Century duel, one can see in the directness and license of the insults—the attraction/repulsion that picong of the nineteenth century held for the Franco/Spanish creole elite—hence the patronage of planters such as Begorrat. The suggestion is that

such duels between social equals such as slaves displayed a verbal violence that could easily be turned against the master.

Sparrow's introduction, claiming to speak "plainly and candidly," recalls the rhetoric of truth-speaking, of laying a foundation in which the speaker claims veracity as part of the ritual of the verbal duel is standard fare in the practice of picong. The phrase "sans humanite" (without humanity) has been a standard part of the Trinidadian oral tradition in the singing of the kaiso. It purports the singers fault in their rendition of the depictions they sing in which people may find themselves characterized. It gives a license to the performer to tell the truth, as they see fit, without the censure of the audience or subject of the song. This part of Trinidad's oral tradition is part and parcel of the truth-telling vocation of the picongesque. In rituals of jesting, it is picong's own herald—the case for veracity being the anticipation of a negation of the niceties of verbal conflict in the pursuit of supposed "truths." When attacking the political establishment, picong functions as a truth. Yet when in play, it utilizes the format of the truth-telling of social and authoritative critiques to mimic and use as referent the "truth" of the statements about to be made.

The reputation of the calypsonian as a "saga boy" or ladies man has traditionally been a part of the folkloric myth-making, associated with the gifts of oratory, satire and social commentary. The reference to Melody's ugliness pokes fun at this image and "unmakes" his personal mythology. In response, Melody's recounting of his earlier relationship with Sparrow—supposedly "minding him when he was small" is a declaration of his elder status—like that of a father, or more scandalously, lover to

Sparrow's mother. In theory, Melody is suggesting that his opponent's mother is a woman of questionable judgment if she formed romantic attachment to a calypsonian.

The mood of the song becomes more bitingly humorous as the opponents verbally circle each other in combat:

> Sparrow: I know you think you looking sweet/You posing here in your own false teeth
>
> Is a lucky thing your uncle kick out/For you to get the false teeth to put in your mouth
>
> Melody: That is all you can say/In every angle and every way
>
> But the way how you watching at me/I go bust a right hook in your belly

Again, the response is a foundational one; Sparrow attacks Melody's age and possible decrepitude. The use of the image of false teeth points to decay and suggests that Melody is already past his prime, and therefore, is not a fitting challenger for his younger opponent. Not only is he old, according to Sparrow, but he is also so socially low that he would wear a dead man's castoffs. The threatening reply that this engenders in Melody reiterates the chantwell's role as instigator of physical combat and references its powerful nature, both as a ritual of insult, and a tool of verbal warfare.

While the face-to-face duel takes for granted the participation and laughter of the audience and calls for listeners to make a judgment about the winner's skill in humor, wit and extemporaneous composition, the song with an individual as its subject puts picong in the position of relating a personal account. Sparrow's 1959 calypso, "Teresa," tells the tale of a manipulative woman who uses the singer as her dupe:

> You worse than a dog, Teresa/Girl, you break my heart

This morning you take my dollar/Now you playing smart

This morning you come we talk we business quiet and soft

Every time I come you making excuses and trying to put it off. (1-6)

The faithless or manipulative woman is a popular theme in calypso, and part and parcel of the male-dominated nature of both the genre of music and the society.[29] The introduction of song provides an assessment of Teresa's character. Henceforth, it will seem to be a foregone conclusion. What is left to the commentator is to present the evidence of the subject's treachery. By linking the image of "business" with that of secrecy, the singer allows his audience to make conclusions about the nature of a transaction between a man and woman conducted under such circumstances. The suggestion that intimacy is being bought reinforces his earlier designation of the woman by linking her behavior with that of a prostitute. However, since the arrangement was not concluded satisfactorily, it is obvious that Teresa is not. Thus, one gets the idea that she is really a manipulator. Teresa's protestation, "Sparrow let me go/boy don't hold me so/my mother go know," give more currency to the idea that she is using dissembling tactics to get money, while keeping her aspiring lover at a distance (7-9). The singer then reinforces his evidence by saying:

Never me again, Teresa, to give you a cent/I rather to give a beggar up on the pavement

I try all my best but girl I know and I see/You will never never love anybody...(13-16)

Comparing the lover, from whom he is becoming estranged, to a beggar, calls into question the caste status to which he believes her behavior belongs. This attack on the

social aspect of a person's actions becomes, in picong, one of the outer layers of the critique. Since an individual's movements in society are a part of his/her identity, a criticism of those very movements are a more indirect commentary the public's perception of his/her character.

Because the assessment comes in the form of a personal account, the provision of evidence in aligns support for the discernment of the listener. Yet, part of the nature of that support is trickery—the calypsonian as trickster figure sometimes draws the audience's sympathy in order to reverse his course, making both him/herself and the listeners the object of the joke:

> Don't make so much noise, Teresa, darling have a care
> There is nothing irregular going on in here
> This morning you take my dollar to buy tickets for the show
> Now I come to take you out to the theatre you bluntly refuse to go. (18-21)

Thus it is learned that the attack on Teresa was the unwarranted result of an act of kindness. The listener has been the dupe of the singer and of his/her own imagination. The placating phrase "don't make so much noise...darling" hilariously presents the image of a wronged woman responding with a stream of verbal abuse to rival the picong of the singer. The fact that the purpose of the request for money was to pay for a treat for the lovers negates the former impression so venomously articulated by the teller of the tale. Teresa's anger and refusal to go on the outing effectively creates a reversal of the subjects positions-one in which the singer plays the fool and is now himself not worthy of Teresa's affection. Adding to this, the revelation that the "currency" in question, a mere dollar, has been the cause of such a vicious reproach, reveals the aspiring lover as a

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[29] The has changed over time and many more female singers now give tit for taat.

miserly fraud. The humor of the situation lies in Teresa's imagined, and unrecounted, reply. One envisions a spirited and violent verbal attack and is allowed to share in the newly gained humility of the taleteller. This form of entertainment recreates for listeners the proximity and commonality of minute community dramas. It reinforces the idea of the connectedness of experience and the shared responses imbedded in cultural forms.

The link between the wordsmithing insults of the chantwell and the calypsonian lies in the potentiality of their tools. Contests of abuse, drawn from West Africa and remade in a site of diasporic dynamism create both rituals of diversion and of political reading. According to Gordon Rohlehr, this tradition "transformed itself...diffused itself...disguised itself, allowing for the singer to assume the roles of "provocateur, commentator and trickster."[30] The chantwell's skill in exhorting listeners to combat reaches beyond to suggest a similar political usage. Hence, the history of more than attempt by the authorities to ban certain songs and to try to circumscribe the public spaces in which these songs could be performed. The calypsonian as the melodic and compositional offspring of the chantwell inherits the genre both as communion with the past oral tradition, and as a retention of that potentiality.

Chapter Four

Wordsmith: The Folk as Literary Trope

This chapter focuses on the ways in which picong, an oral element of Afro-creole folk culture is used by Trinidadian writers to signify upon dominant discourses by referencing the language of the folk. In addition, it examines the orality of several Caribbean texts and the manner in which Trinidadian authors also reference the folk as a means of articulating a Caribbean aesthetic.

I examine early work by two Trinidadian authors, Chalkdust's "Brain Drain, Merle Hodges' Crick Crack Monkey and Earl Lovelace's The Dragon Can't Dance to demonstrate how the picaresque use of the folk becomes a formula for situating a literary work in a context that specifically references lower class cultural traditions as source of critique of the Trinidadian mainstream. Although picong is seen as a part of the Afro-creole folk tradition of Trinidad, its critique is by no means dissimilar to other cultural forms used to demonstrate wordsmithing. Each of the above works suggest that the concept has entered the popular discourse, so that—the twentieth century—it is not a specifically afro-creole possession, but Trinidadian. Each author invokes picong as a

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[30] Perdonal interview. 1998.

significant characteristic of the communal existence of lower-class and/or rural village life. In addition the authors use the register of the folk to critique the circumstances of class and societal politics.

This chapter seeks to make the connection between the impulse of contestation evident in a marginalized discourse like the folk, and the writer as a practitioner of the sharp-tongued dialectic evidenced by picong.

One of the factors influencing the passage of picong from the plantations and small rural communities of nineteenth century Trinidad is the presence of two groups of Africans who had never been slaves. According to Maureen Warner-Lewis's Guinea's Other Suns, indentured servitude provided a significant pool of labor in the years after 1808. As the British began to phase out the slave trade in its colonies, they began to harass the slave traders of other countries, especially the Portuguese. The most common method of harassment utilized by the British was to capture foreign slavers and discharge the captured Africans in British colonies. Thus, a population that had not been creolized like the Trinidadian-born Africans, entered the milieu of the colonial society dominated by a French, Spanish, and British elite. According to Warner Lewis:

> For the African immigrant was a liberated slave who had in fact undergone sudden capture, forced marches, imprisonment in barracoons, sale, and transhipment His grant of freedom on recapture by His Majesty's Navy must have rendered his position confusing – in indeed he did understand that he was free. This was not because of stupidity on his part, but because of language difficulties, the youth of many a recaptive, the unfamiliarity of the system into which he had suddenly been thrust, the

> undoubted element of coercion often involved in the treatment of liberated Africans, and the arbitrary nature of his disposal in the Caribbean. All these must have seemed like strange interludes to which his personal destiny had committed him and over which he could exercise little control. (8)

This discrepancy in experience between recaptured Africans, ostensibly free upon release, creates a subculture within the populations of Africans, both enslaved and free, resulting in an African cultural injection into the Afro-creole culture of the enslaved.

The importance of this exchange ensured that multiple cultural formations coming from the homeland of the slaves and free Africans combined with the creolized European cultural productions to form new traditions as well as maintain practices and ideologies of the slaves' mother culture. Due to dominance of western cultures, to both creolized and first generation, Africans retained certain aspects of their cultures as a means to hold on to their identity. In addition, African cultural elements provided a means of surviving the experience of colonial repression and the active hostility against their cultural retentions that operated within the dominant social ideology.

For this population of Africans, the folk functioned as part of a self-actualization. Products of a cultural base in which the oral tradition dominated, they re-placed their traditions, in the process reinventing the milieu in which these cultural products could be encountered. For Gordon Rohlehr:

> The oral tradition has always been concerned with matters of energy, its containment in the shaped process of ritual enactment and catharsis. Any aesthetic based on the oral tradition seeks naturally to address itself to

> these considerations: energy, containment and catharsis. So the oral tradition , far from being a static folk inheritance, is proving to be the vital and adaptable source of new exploration. ("The Problem of the Problem of Form" 5)

This suggests that the dynamic process of telling one's story is intimately wound up in a ritual process that influenced both the oral and written processes of tale telling. Within the context of this project, one finds that the written, when accessing the "folk," can replicate aspects of its rhetoric, style and ritualistic practices.

> The movement of ritual enactment is towards climax and catharsis in which celebrants become possessed and their normal everyday personalities are displaced by a force of extraordinary inner energy. The capacity for movement beyond and beneath the threshold of ordinary surface experience, persists even in Caribbean cities, as well as in areas of the metropole...Black musics of the New World, too, have constantly celebrated and reenacted on both the sacred and the secular planes, a capacity for movement beyond.("The Problem of the Problem of form" 6)

Looking at the enactment of ritual in the sacred and its transference to the secular, Rohlehr's words point to a desire, for some writers, to a "movement beyond" the plane of the written and into the oral. What this "capacity for moving beyond" points to is the ability for Caribbean writers to access the folk both in its spiritualistic and practical uses, often converging the two, in acknowledgement of the folk's ability to influence varying spheres of life.

Festivals such as Carnival, though ostensibly European became imbued with the folk practices of the various groups who participated in its days of license and reversal. This became evident in the fact that much of the practice of verbal combat was a significant part of the enactment of carnival for the black participants, most especially the black underclass(or jamettes). Of the various aspects of Afro-creole folk traditions, the aspect of verbal combat, known as picong, is one of the inheritances that came to influence the literary products of the land in which these folk essences were re-fashioned.[31] As black writers sought to bring oral culture into their work, they borrowed from the folk to re-produce it, and themselves, through these cultural influences.

As elements of this cultural production, novels became a means by which picong could be brought to bear on the structural and thematic elements of a literary work. This oral/literary continuum, as extrapolated by Gordon Rohlehr, suggests poles of interiority and exteriority. The interior space being one of psychic attachment, or influence by the folk, in the work of a writer. The exterior space becomes those conventions, within a colonial society, that determine normativity in all aspects of public space, including that of the writer's work.

It has long been established that a writer in a colonial context has to penetrate the layers of ideologies that circumscribe his/her place in that society in order to articulate a specific presence in the colonial hierarchy:

> One of the main features of imperial oppression is control over language. The imperial education system installs a standard version of the metropolitan language as the norm, and marginalizes all variants as

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See Maureen Warner-Lewis' Guinea's Other Suns: The African dynamic in Trinidad Culture. The Majority Press; Dover, 1991.

> impurities...Language becomes the medium through which a hierarchical structure of power is perpetuated and the medium through which conception of 'truth,' 'order,' and 'reality' become established.(The Empire Writes Back 7)

This emphasis on language provides a means of reinforcing the colonialist socio-political project in which the culture of the colonial subject is forced to enter the dialogue on existence, and *the meaning of existence*, from within the colonial dialogue. As a writer in this environment, the act of writing proceeds from a necessary re-imagining of the constructs of truth, order and reality.

What the folk does in this context, is provide not simply an opposition to the narrow constraints of these colonial impositions, but also to expand and simultaneously displace the concepts.

One of the questions inherent in the exploration of the folk inheritances, such as picong, is in its birthplace in the lowest order of colonial society. Considering the disenfranchisement of the underclass, rural and lower classes, how can one intellectually provide for its influence on a product like Carnival that is viewed by the elite as their own? Writing has been a means by which colonial masters have traditionally viewed themselves as superior to their subjects. It has been inscribed by the dominant culture as a benediction given to the colonial subject as a legacy from the colonial patron, and therefore, a form of expression that does not sit easily in the hands of a people for whom its structure and European referent is not "native." Thus, the colonial writer sought to use his/her pen to answer the fallacy of this ideology as well as express a reality that displaces these structural, thematic and political forms of literary negation. "The

energizing feature of this displacement is its capacity to interrogate and subvert the imperial cultural formations"(Empire 11).

One of the concerns of colonial writers and theorists has been to problematize the use of originary or foundational strategies in elucidating the place and purpose of literary products. In his Caribbean Discourse, Edouard Glissant turns away from the "longing for pure origins and inviolable systems" in the work of some caribbean writers and seeks instead an articulation of the dynamism that characterizes Caribbean history and identity(xii). I proceed from this strategy, in invoking the folk's influence on literature as one aspect of this creative and *creating* process. Because picong comes from the spoken and is incorporated into literature, the very manner in which it wraps itself around text and context is useful in bringing the margin into the center. In addition, due to its intimacy with the writer and his/her reality, it simultaneously invokes the collectivity of an oral tradition while revealing the individual's connection to the historical[32] and personal experience.

Scholars of orality and oral tradition have ranged in approach from agendas- of-rescue and reinforcement to agendas of negation and subsuming. In an African Diasporic context, the former seeks to unearth and explain the relevance of oral tradition—in an environment in which it has been inscribed as the tool of the illiterate and disenfranchised. The latter seeks to relegate the importance of oral tradition to that which is inherently inferior in comparison to that which is written. As a result of this, one sees a new form of old-colonial negations that saw the written as the only legitimate sign of presence in the master dialogue of nation-building.

[32] Here I use Glissant's notion of history as opposed to History—the former personal, the latter chronological.

In his Caribbean Discourse, Edouard Glissant the dangers of a static approach to the folk:

> ...The only way, to my mind, of maintaining a place for writing (if this can be done)—that is, to remove it from being an estoric practice or a banal reserve of information—would be to nourish it with the oral. (101)

In their essay "Telling stories in the Era of Global Communication: Black Writing—Oraliture," Susan Petrilli and Augusto Ponzio" posit that:

> Texts of oral literature have the potential to get free of their immediate Context and live a life of their own. They continue to be telling, significant, capable of hospitality and listening, even when their original context has been strongly modified or no longer exists and they are re-evoked and developed in contexts completely different from the original....(102)

In the dynamism of travel between the oral and the written, Petrilli and Ponzio echo one of the views of oraliture. In their work, they align themselves with the notion of Julius Lester, who removes any hint of the subversiveness of a folk character such as Brer Rabbit--in The Tales of Uncle Remus—saying, the "Lester is right when he exonerates Brer Rabbit from functions of ideological or political order(the sly rabbit reduced to the status of symbol or sublimation of black resistance to slavery on plantations, etc.)"(103). Hence, they add their voices to the grounding-work of an aggressive oversimplification of the role of tropic figures in storytelling, negating any revolutionary role, and hence any thought of textually revolutionary role of revolution in the teller. However, they fall into the trap of assigning some role to such characters in maintaining the general order of

discourse, when in fact their main business is the pleasure of telling a good story. Their suggestion that stories can not be a form of cultural survival used to effect social change is currently rife in academia—suggesting that oral tales are static in their usage when transferred to print. This tendency of some critics to downplay folklore as a convenient means of inflating the importance of the mediocrities of non-Western literary products can be *worked* in ways that appear to support or patronize the folk, while containing and negating its current influence. Using the text of Antillean theater, Glissant addresses the adverse political nuances that simplify the folk, through a false patronage, into an artifact with little contemporary influence:

> Thus we have the official defense of folklore. It seemed shrewder to neutralize it while giving it apparent support than to suppress it. It becomes cloying, silly, too much. The elite, which has never assisted in the positive evolution of folklore, will assist in paralyzing it.(Discourse 208)

Hence, the elite controls the expression and its venue, thus making it a mockery of itself. The oral/written continuum, often troped in Caribbean literature, is a fact of societies whose lower classes lived its rhetorics in order to give voiced meaning to their world—in an environment in which literature is reified. Hence, it's presence as an influence on the Caribbean writer has become almost cliched.

With all its obvious advantages, writing particularly when enhanced by the application of printing technology, came to be perceived by speakers as the primary form of language. It was a short step from this to the conclusion that only those forms of

speech which can and do appear in writing and print, are true languages.(Cooper, Devonish, 61)

Literature utilizing the oral tradition becomes the bastard child of Western Literature's prejudice against the viability of writing from a perceived non-elite source. The writing-in of the processes of oral tradition, from the return gaze of the African Diaspora, also suffers from the ideologies that created Antillean orature, in its New World context, as a negation of the quality of Caribbean oral literature.

While the debate to name the oral/literary continuum has produced oral literature, oraliture, and finally orature, in her essay, The Oral Tradition in the African Diaspora, Maureen Warner-Lewis articulates this divide:

> Orality transmutes into orature, oracy or oral literature when either unconsciously or deliberately couched in esthetic form rather than when deployed in perfunctory manner or primarily for content transmission...However, if the concept of "literature" is not indivisibly language inscription, and its esthetic function foregrounded, then et equates "verbal art."(The Cambridge History of African and Caribbean Literature 117)

Since aspects of oral tradition can be found in various texts, it is important to define my terms when one considers what constitutes an example of orature. For my purposes, I find the term orature to signify upon the processes of oral tradition by invoking its rhetoric, cadences and performative potentiality. The oral tradition can be said to point to itself in a written text—referencing its usage and the occasion of that usage—creating itself in the process of the telling. Thus, everything produced in the African Diaspora

cannot simply be inscribed as oral, but instead, works that use it as a referent become the site upon which orality, and the collective consciousness that is inherent in traditions of orality, figure as orature.

Picong, as it is performed, both in literature—and in its literal construction—presumes a knowledge of the personal and collective history of the opponent. The use of this rhetoric appropriates the role of community historian—while the humor of the technique signifies upon the skill of the narrator as humorist and wordsmith. The ability to ostensibly assume a link between the family history and the general history of the opponent, lays a groundwork for a layered critique that is both indirect and direct in its approach. Its most powerful weapon is the circuitous way in which it draws conclusions about the personal, class and communal nature of the opponent. In the strategy of providing entertainment, the speaker defines his/her deductions by giving a varied account of the "evidence" that "supports" his/her argument. When used in a realistic or generalized political context, it assumes no boundaries of engagement—linking the behavior, manners, morality and, of course, origin of the opponent as a deviation from, and fabrication of, his/her "official story.

In the poem "Brain Drain," by the Mighty Chalkdust nee Hollis Liverpool, the author subverts the notion of the emigration of educated professionals as a form of cultural dispossession. This became a cause for political concern as waves of schoolteachers, doctors, nurses and other professionals emigrated from Trinidad and the rest of the Caribbean during the 1960s. The assumption that the absence of a significant element of the professional middle class would leave the country in a state of cultural and

professional turmoil, reifies the notions of legitimized presence in a colonial/post-colonial[33] context.

Chalkdust's contests the underpinnings of the belief that intelligence is marked only by professional training and education:

> Just because some teachers go away
> To improve their status and their pay,
> Many people calling this thing Brain Drain,
> But I say they should be shame.
> They ain't see Horace James and Errol John
> Teaching drums to foreign sons,
> They would never see our best footballer
> In the states as professionals. (1-8)

Countering the perception that markers of middle class professionalism—in this instance teachers and nurses—are the only authentic evidence of mastering a craft. He sets in opposition teachers and artists whose specializations do not figure as products of the imperial center. Pointing to the folk, he determines that the mark of the professional extends beyond positions for whom one's mastery is affirmed in the colonial/post-colonial infrastructure. His contrast of the manner in which the dominant elements of society dismiss folk culture, as irrelevant to both mainstream and marginalized discourses of achievement, situates the teacher of the folk and the local athlete as artists of equal stature to their conventional counterparts. Naming the skill and renown of the football star, and the impetus to preservation of the fold as part of the cultural/professional wealth

[33] For my purposes in this chapter, the terms post-colonial/ colonial are symtoms of a period in which "Independence" was still new. Trinidad became sovereign in 1962.

of the nation, he seeks to combat the colonial project of negation imbedded in the discourse. Hence, he overturns the notion 'Brain Drain,' revealing it to be another aspect of the hegemonic assumptions that permeate the classes of society. The ideologies that underpin imposed notions of civilization reflect Western cultural impositions borne out of the colonial process:

> And when foreign artistes come
>
> They does get lump sum,
>
> While calypsonians must sing for rum;
>
> And when steelbandsmen teach outsiders
>
> To tune pan for kisses and favours—
>
> All that is what I call Brain Drain. (11-16)

Continuing to layer his critique of ideologies that made the migration of the "professional" class, he savages the normative paradigms that create the calypsonian's craft as negligible in comparison to the work of "foreign artistes." Chalkdust's words do not create a simple dichotomy between convention and the folk. Instead, he contests the reification of symbols of an external culture as a construction of meaning and purpose. A consequence of this is that the products of the local socio-historical environment that do not mimic the conventions of the master are created as an absence:

> And we does use we Drain to make we mas:
>
> Tourist come click-click in photograph—
>
> All we mas pictures in America...(36-8)
>
> Our culture fruits are draining away,
>
> And we ain't doing nothing to make them stay!

Tobago goat race, crab race, bongo, limbo

And stickfighting draining out slow.

O yes we, we are living on yankee sad songs like bugs,

While we parang and folk songs going to dogs.

That is what I call Brain Drain!(40-6)

Re-placing the center's construction of education he situates the folk alongside conventional mainstream education, setting the stage for dialectical dance in which, though the boundaries are not absolute, the socio-cultural hierarchy is destabilized. Each of the reinscptions operates to affirm the place of the folk as an alternate discourse that should be reified alongside the stereotypical "professions." The author tropes the folk through the invocation of the rural and non-mainstream entertainment's of the "crab race," bongo," "parang" and "folk song"(42, 45). Each of these enjoyments was enjoyed by the communities for whom the folk is not simply an aspect of education but of life-affirmation and self-making ritual.

Playing on the word "Drain," he dismantles the idea that the artists and teachers of folk culture are the dregs of the professional class—those that remain after the plug has been pulled. In effect, he makes discrete the contributions to collective learning tht not only create the culture of the folk, but to allow it to re-member itself. Questioning an educational cannon in which local folk culture is erased, while received colonial forms are made normative, he utilizes the layering technique of picong.

Chalkdust's purpose is to articulate not only strategies of critique in which the margin may displace the center, but to appropriate for the folk the signification of authority and presence in a system which seeks to first deny, then destroy its relevance.

Similarly, in Merle Hodges' Crick Crack Monkey invokes the destabilizing potentiality of the folk by referencing an old ritual of afro-creole storytelling—the reciprocal introduction:

Traditional storyteller: "Crick crack."

Audience: "Monkey brake he back, on a rotten pomerack."

The title of Hodges novel, in its literal context, suggests the role of the storyteller in the act of initiating a storytelling session. In the welcoming "crick crack," the reader/listener is given an elliptical space in which to enter into a reciprocal storytelling relationship with the author/storyteller. This liminal reciprocal space is then re-created as overt and brings into relief the formalities of the tale-telling.

Hodge's Tantie[34] reflects in her characterization the elements of the folk in lower middle class life. Her ficelle, Aunt Beatrice, represents-through her title-the assimilationist project of middle class ambitions in a colonial enterprise. Tantie, the word associated with lower class, and by referent, folk culture becomes a resistant thread in the narrative of the story.

These two characters act as forces which create in the main character, Tee, an interplay of dialectical opposition between what is considered "proper" by the dominant discourse and that which is inscribed as negligible or "improper." In a colonial context, Auntie Beatrice--first introduced to the reader as possessing a "voice like high heels and stockings,"—becomes the inscribed as the voice of the dominant culture.(2) The narrator, Tee delineates their opposing subject positions through the behavioral traits of each woman's class. While "Tantie's company was loud and hilarious and the

[34] The term used commonly by working class people of afro-creole cultural influence to designate the anglicized "Aunt."

intermittent squawk and flurry made me think of the fowl-run when something fell into the midst of the fat hens"(4). The boisterous atmosphere in Tantie's household is in direct contrast to the quiet superiority of Aunt Beatrice. She does not engage in the exuberant behavior of Tantie, instead when arming herself for a confrontation with her sister-in-law, she inscribes herself with the trappings of the colonial administration—the law. When she arrives to take the narrator Tee and her brother Toddan, she arrives with a policewoman. "Aunt Beatrice appeared one day stepping up the path in the shadow of a round bosomed, round-bottomed policewoman," (31). In the bare-footed, comforting informality of Tantie's world, Tee finds that the symbols of middle class influence is closely linked to a personal investment in the imperial cultures' ideologies, in which the culture of the colonial "elite" supersedes that of the colonial subject. This is not to say that there are no overlappings between the colonial subject and the metropolitan or localized administration. Firstly, the class positions and their markers are emblematic of the cultural impositions of the metropole; they reflect ideologies about language, social placement, and decorum. Aunt Beatrice's mode of dress in visits to her sister-in-law's house makes for a dialectical signification of class politics ; the desire for respectability within the colonial structure. Tantie also negotiates the sites of her subjectivity; her position within the lower middle, or lower class, her status as nonconformist to the restrained demeanor of a respectable woman. This allows for Tantie's emotive potential to be inscribed as high—begging the question: How is she displace the authority of Aunt Beatrice's ally, the police officer? Tantie uses the reputation she has earned in her community—that of a skilled and fearsome in her use of picong.

The realization of this comes in part from within her own family. Mikey, unemployed and part of a group of disenfranchised young, warns the warns Tee and her brother Toddan not to mention the visits he makes to his friends because of "what would befall us at his hands if we breathed a word to Tantie for he wasn't having that settin'-hen takin a turn in his arse"(6). The description of Tantie as a setting-hen serves as a referent to the fierce protectiveness—and defensiveness—of caretaker's role. However, the emphasis is placed most strongly on her verbal weaponry. Taking a turn in someone's ass is analogous to the searing effect of Tantie's picong.

> When Tantie was thwarted the neighbours for six houses on every side of us were generally aware of this fact. ...yu t'ink blasted saga-clothes an' t'eater does grow on tree? An' before yu look to help out yu mother and she forty-nine chirren no yu prefer siddong on yu arse wid them long wut'less young men down at that bridge....And as was not uncommon, Mikey in the long run left the house to the accompaniment of flying objects...(5)

Tantie's performance, as described by the narrator, are a testament to the humor and hostility of picong. It critiques the provenance and respectability of Mikey's upbringing. However, it is directly linked to his lack of motivation to help his struggling mother—or himself. In Tantie's world, the values of communal loyalty figure as highly as her sister-in-law's values to the external trappings of success. The fact that Mikey is taken in, along with Tee and Toddan, into Tantie's home as her own children demonstrates her assumption of the non-nuclear family models that are made normative by the dominant discourse. The notion of extending the bounds of intimacy and kinship to include those

outside the realm of the nuclear model was inscribed by the black middle classes as a marker of deviance. It did not mimic the nuclear family structure of the British administration. This reflects their desire to separate themselves from the margins, and to enter and be accepted by, the various centers around which the dominant ideologies are built.

When Aunt Beatrice reads Tantie, she sees only the absence of colonial gentility; "Look at you, aren't fit!" Tantie responds, "Monkey can't see e' own tail"(2). Using a folk saying to produce a counter-reading, she points to Aunt Beatrice's assumptions that children produced within the marginalized community of the lower classes are, by definition, not being "raised." For Aunt Beatrice, the implications of "raising a child" produces a slippage in which the manner of a child's upbringing means, through her middle-class ambitions, being raised up the social ladder--suggesting that one's upward mobility is the signifies[35] upon one's worth. The reading of signification here invokes Gates' notion of signification within the context of a tradition "ranging from severe critique to acknowledgment within a literary tradition."(Signifying Monkey, xxvii). In the conversation between the two women, Tantie's words raise the specter of Beatrice's inability to recognize her collusion in the elitism of the social system. In this instance, the monkey's mis-recognition of his own reality signifies upon both the inherent repressiveness of the class system and upon the pressure to negate the folk in order to acquire a mobility toward the top of the social hierarchy.

The author delineates the world-views of the households of each woman through the children's reaction to each environment. Aunt Beatrice's home, wealthy in relation to

[35] See Henry Louis Gates' The Signifying Monkey., which explores a notion of signification in a Black literary context.

sister-in-law's is immaculate. She places great importance on the normative values of the Western administration under which she lives. It is she who introduces Tee and Toddan to the concept of their class marginality. She critiques Tantie's world through the venue of the children. The children find various ways to subvert Aunt Beatrice's attempts to pathologize their upbringing:

> Their was a violent fight every morning between Toddan and Eudora, for, Toddan, whose habitual garb consisted of a vest, did not take kindly to the jersey and pants and shoes when he wasn't going anyplace.(34)

Toddan's resistance to the imposition of this sartorial class marking overturns this inscription. His aggressive refusal to pander to his aunt's class perceptions negates the self-importance of her household/family. In Aunt Beatrice's milieu, the idea that one should dress up to stay home is part of the construction of material/social success. To perform this ideology, she utilizes the children's bodies as sites upon which to contest their upbringing outside the mainstream of Afro-creole middle class culture. Her silence and rigorous attention to these ideals bring into relief the dichotomy that she believes is an inherent aspect of her difference from her lower class relatives.

Beatrice's maid Eudora, dark-skinned like Tee, Toddan and the members of Tantie's household, provides a referent of imposed marginality that underpins the colonialist discourse of the house in which she serves. When Eudora's dialect begins to begins to infiltrate the home, Beatrice's response is a fury of negation:

> Carol threw many a tantrum in the bathroom, screaming at Eudora to hurry and get the soap of he and Eudora said 'Awright White-lady,' after which she would sometimes mutter under her breath 'You damn lil

> redants!' Carol enjoyed running all over the house naked with Eudora shouting after her: 'Come put-on your frack! The day Carol started calling her dress 'frack' Auntie Beatrice was near hysterical: 'If you can't speak properly when you speak to these children then don't bother to say anything to them at all! It's not that you never went to school in Grenada! What class did you go up to? 'T'ird Standard, Ma'm,' replied Eudora without raising her eyes. Well! There you are! Third Standard! That means you could very well speak properly if you wanted to! (3)

Her preoccupation with speech as a powerful aspect of social making is in direct contrast to Tantie's acceptance of dialect speech as a means of self-construction outside the mainstream. Beatrice harbors faith in an educational system whose purpose is to erase all aspects of folk-speech as a civilizing project of the colonial elite. The fact that she sees education as a means to pathologize the folk reveals—in microcosm—the essentialist practices of the European-centered discourse within which she lives. Eudora's construction of Carol as "White-lady" reinforces—and reverses—Beatrice's attempts to repudiate and rise above her blackness. The "White-lady" reference also points to the glaring difference between Beatrice's place in society, and the unrealized reality of her ambitions. Though pale in complexion, her blackness aspires to the erasure—the transcendence of the situation of her race. This inability to acquire whiteness-in-fact creates in her the need to achieve a whiteness-by-default, allowing her to construct mimicry of the world of the European colonial elite—she associates only with wealthy, fair-skinned blacks like herself.

Tantie's very presence in the imaginations of Tee and Toddan links them to the milieu of the folk. Tee's behavior in school marks her as a product of this environment. When Mr. Brathwaite, who's "Estate" borders the school, finds her raiding his tamarind tree, she defensively uses her skill with picong to halt him in his tracks. Shrieking "Marche-shoo"(58). "Marche-shoo whitey cockroach, "she effects a double-displacement, linking whiteness to a species of insect pest while utilizing a phrase, adopted to dismiss animals(58). "I summoned to my rescue every obscenity I could think of, and let fly like a machine gun. He stood stock still and his mouth fell open"(53). This ability to use replicate the whip-like cadence of picong for combat is a reflection of Tantie's counter-narrative of folk culture. When Tee is sent to the school administration, her beliefs in the power of her words are reinforced:

> I was your Tantie's teacher you know...You know your Tantie used to cuss down Tom, Dick and Harry too as a schoolgirl. She would have given the Governor a cussing if he'd looked at her too hard. (59)

The fearlessness of Tantie's performance of picong re-places the folk from a tool of the margin to one whose effectiveness could appropriate the self-security of the center. Thus she has taught Tee to see the agency inherent in the performance of picong—one that gives no quarter to class or racial system that inscribes her as extra-politic. The ritual barges into the central discourse—contesting its preeminence.

> The Friday night when we walked into the shop customers moved aside so that Tantie could march straight up to the counter, and silence fell. This was due much to the fact that they were familiar with the indiscriminate nature of Tantie's wrath was the fact that a lil noise was always welcome

> on a Friday-night-in-the-shop, and a lil noise involving Tantie was sure to be on of the highest order. (41)

Tantie's renown bespeaks picong's importance as not simply verbal warfare but as part of folk-entertainment. The expectation of a show produces an awareness of the impending drama. The eagerness for the performance is evident in the way in which the Friday night crowd separates in order to give the two opponents, Ling the storekeeper and his customer Tantie, a forum in which to perform. When his son Henry attempts to intervene in the coming storm, the manner in which she dismisses his authority, and subsequently, the prestige of a colonialist education—one in which formal learning is akin to social power:

> Well yu could jus' send he back, I ain' come to argue wid a lil chile; go back an' do yu home-lesson dou-dou. But only Tantie could conceive of calling Henry dou-dou[36], for you might just as well walk up and pat the Judge of the head. (42)

Denigrating Henry's importance in the discussion between what is seen as elders reinforces the social hierarchy within Tantie's world. This world in which children did not interfere in the business of "adults" was not a part of the mainstream culture. By calling Henry dou-dou she infantilizes him. Thus, she also dismisses the dominant discourse that creates his education as an essential aspect social power. Coded within this exchange, is Tantie's fear that entering into the colonialist educational system would render a child into a foregin element re-made in the image of the dominant order. This hostility to letters reflects an fear and opposition to that administrative aspect of society

[36] Dou-dou is a part of afro-creole dialect, literally meaning "sweet-sweet," that is colloquially similar in meaning to sweetheart.

that makes a negation of folk culture necessary. Ling's delegation of the responsibilities of an elder to his son, Henry, functions as proof that the standard education divested students of their respect for the traditional customs. Under such a system, traditional behaviors such as conflict resolution took place between elders—not in an encounter between an elder and a child. By giving his son license to deal with Tantie, Ling gives precedence to education over the structure of village life, and its unspoken rules regarding the respectful treatment of its older members. Hence, picong speaks in a broader reference to the importance of folk culture. Its very nature as an underrepresented emblem of one element of national culture, places it—for the dominant culture—in a state of absence. For ascendant colored classes, distance from the folk meant an entree into the hallowed middle class and the rich. It created an ideological distance from the register of the poor blacks—the vernacular speech that incorporates a melange of African syntax, French-creole, African word-stocks. The loss of the vernacular then becomes an absence from the folk register; and subsequently, it is an absence from the milieu of an identity framed by a history in which the mainstream did not dominate.

The conflict between the comfort and familiarity of folk culture and the potential for social advancement that is woven into the performance of mainstream culture becomes enacted in the struggle to two aunts fought over Tee. Aunt Beatrice, a worshipper at the temple of complexion hierarchy, knows the importance of light skin and a lifestyle that is a mimicry of the upper echelon of British-colonial society. It, more than education and character, is the guaranteed entrée into the preeminence of the dominant culture. Tantie reads the administrative forces of the government as a threat to

her world—one in which the folk register is the mainstream, rather than the margin. The vernacular apects of black culture in Trinidad were embedded in a history of resistance, accommodation, and survival. Since this process began before the British took the island, the melding of African and French culture became a foundational aspect of black folk culture. Its influence continues to this day. Yet, in the early to mid twentieth century, the adoption of British customs gave blacks a greater chance for advancement than the maintenance of African and French creole culture. Thus, distance from folk-speech and folk values is the gauge by which the aunts wage their battle for the identity of Tee.

In Lovelace's The Dragon Can't Dance, the aspects of the folk in Carnival become a means to evaluate its potential as a force for social change in the early 1960s. In Lovelace's treatment the potentiality of the folk, Carnival reflects the promise of revolutionary subversion, yet its realization is blocked by the politics of corporate patronage and an inability to maintain the performance—and realities—of social reversal beyond the Carnival season. Lovelace thus complicates notions of the Afro-creole folk as an effective source of permanent change—and history has been filled with confirmations of this view.[37] Along with its purported failure to sustain a centralizing prominence in the mainstream, in this view, folk culture becomes confined to its practitioners, and the administrative processes of iconization. These processes seek to circumscribe the culture of the folk in a static tourist-friendly and white-washed cultural form.

Lovelace's portrays Carnival as the performance of a collective desire for change. In the giddy atmosphere that pervades the Carnival season, the rhetoric of communal and political strength seems possible. Thus, this twentieth-century representation of folk

[37] The uprisings of the jamette underclass in the 1840s, 1860s and 1880s each eventually resulted in a general crackdown and subsequent adoption and comercialization of the festival by mainstream culture.

potential re-presents the poorer environs of Port-of-Spain as a reflection of the struggle to perform the Carnival aesthetics of self-actualization—a feature of the Afro-Trinidadian relationship with the festival.

From the perspective of Aldrick "the Dragon," the masquerade constructs him as an inhabitant of a community for whom the festival is a site for expressing its communal and individual history. Here, Carnival is a series of moments through which the legacy of a dynamic past is refashioned to a present physical and psychological utterance. In the promise of a connection with his personal history, the creation of the costume is also the speech of the storyteller, preserving and re-inventing the past:

> In truth, it was in a spirit of preisthood that Aldrick addressed his work; for, the making of his dragon costume was to him always a new miracle, a new test not only of his skill but of his faith: for though he knew exactly what he had to do, it was only by faith that he could bring alive from these scraps of cloth and tin that dragon, its mouth breathing fire, its tail threshing the ground, its nine chains rattling, that would contain the beauty and threat and terror that was the message he took each year to Port of Spain. It was in this message that he asserted before the world his self. (50)

Despite the fact that the aggression and joyful celebration of licence and resistance does not create a permanent political change, for the residents of the Hill it figures as a remembrance of moments in time during which Carnival proposed to be a legitimate representation of the rhetorics of black resistance. In Aldrick's experience of the making of the dragon is the invocation of the Afro-Trinidadian oral traditions of Carnival. The

sacredness of the event of costume-making is created out of the reverence he feels for the opportunity that is represented by the creation and performance of the dragon. Although at the mid-twentieth century the masque was no longer as popular as it had been in the 1920s.[38] The chance to articulate, in performance, one aspect of the legacy of creolized folk culture that is voiced in the collective experience of this Pre-Lenten event, presents an opportunity to relive history. It also gives the performer a chance to show respect for his or her past. The priestly dedication with which he attends to the task of preparation points to the importance of the desire for entry into the a dialogue with the dominant discourse—one in which functions some elements of performative resistance against the mainstream construct of Carnival as a senseless, gay, frolic.

A masque, popularized in the milieu of early twentieth-century Trinidad Carnival, it began as a part of Devil-masques. In a dragon band, masqueraders painted red, black—and in latter years of the twentieth century, blue—performed a representation of the inhabitants of Hell. One facet of this performance was the aggressive, rippling fluidity of the Dragon dance. A costumed performance of lunges, spins and rampant hostility, its shiny scales and rustling fabric—bristled with the anti-establishment nature of the popular masques of mid-nineteenth century Trinidad. In the milieu of Aldrick's world, the dragon masque recalls the picongesque element of the black discourses that circumscribe Carnival. Its invocation of the darkest elements of Christian mythology creates a parody of the percieved monstrosity of slaves and their descendants—a satirical portrayal of the contestation between the imperial project and its object.

[38] According to Bruce Procope's history of the dragon band, the 1920s saw a rise and climax in the performance of this masque.

Aldrick's incarnation—as the dragon costume develops--moves from acolyte, to priest, to divine realization. His purpose in the making of the masque shows a dedication to the preservation of a potentiality, yet to be realized, but one tht seems closer in the moments of social protest that exists in the structure of Carnival. His reading of the masque is a part of the rhetoric of the folk, the opposition to its place as menial and extinct form of culture. He is then a storyteller in the oral tradition, who reconstructs his individual and communal self, and his past, in the act of the telling. His audience—the next generation of dragons, and the crowds of viewers—are the witnesses to this process of folk-storytelling:

> With the door of his little shack half open, Aldrick work solemnly on his dragon costume, saying nothing to Basil, the little boy of about ten who came from somewhere in the neighbourhood of Alice Street, appeared just so a year before, in the ragged khaki pants and sleeveless merino that was his uniform all that year, and stood at the door and gazed in at the dragon Aldrick was then making, looking from the costume to Aldrick with a fullness of wonderment, and fascination and awe...maintaining that attitude of reverence throughout, as if he were in the presence of holiness, until one day Aldrick asked him to run to Miss Cleothilda's parlour and buy him a pack of cigarettes; and cemented in that act the boy's apprenticeship to dragon making. So the boy was here again this year. And, working now, he seemed to divine exactly which tool or piece of material Aldrick needed for his work, and her handed it to him with a

> ceremonial solemnity as if he, the boy, were an acolyte, and Aldrick a priest. (49)

Basil's reverence for the making of the costume, a communal inheritance of lower and underclass participation in Carnival culture, articulates an aesthetics of revolution. Like Aldrick, he sees the dragon's construction as a manifestation of skill and inspiration—a promising escape from the material realities of poverty and disenfranchisement that hangs over the residents of the Hill. Thus, in the process of creation, Aldrick re-places the relevance of this communal folk influence from ineffectual to acutalization. This provides a signification upon folk culture as a defining element of the incidental masses—recalling its roots in the collision of cultures that occurred when the elite and the black underclass encountered each other in the sanctioned and unsanctioned moments of the festival.

Conclusion

This project seeks to examine the relevance of folk culture in the Caribbean by studying a feature of non-mainstream oral tradition known as picong. This verbal warfare has persisted since the pre-Emancipation era in Trinidadian history. This examination seeks to place itself in opposition to readings that seek to determine Antillean folk culture as an irrelevancy—an ineffectual source of self-actualization.

Hence, I examine hegemonic discourses that attempt to inscribe and subjugate the Other, while glorifying and promoting a dominant discourse of Western-centered oral and literary uniformity. This functions as an attempt to give voice to the uniqueness of Afro-Trinidadian folk culture.

Hegemonic discourses—constructs of sameness within the Western cultural canon—are used to define cultural products at the center and on the perimeter of its ascendancy, as lacking in history and identity. Through this view, the culture of a class that consisted of a social group who were seen ultimately as chattel, was at best, negligible. After slavery, the rituals and rhetorical structures were transferred from a rural environment to an urban milieu.

Seeking an understanding of the importance of picong in Afro-Franco creolized folk culture and its signification upon Carnival, and its expanding influence on other aspects of Trinidadian culture. Since picong's movement from rural enclaves to urban lower and underclass living, served as a crossing from static to dynamic geographical lines of oral progression, it demonstrates a

modernist flexibility. It correlates the experiences of chronological and non-linear history—making the dynamism of its role politically apparent.

For the colonial elite, the folk exists as a latency—a sign of the black disenfranchised masses, who demographically constitute the culture of the folk—a cultural feature that is irrelevant to the imperial project. The symbols of folk culture, interpreted as a way of telling the margin's story—and thus giving it a validation unachieved within the dominant ideology.

Picong serves as useful template for reading the ways in which folk culture is utilized as a means of understanding and creating one's world. The rhetorics of survival, resistance and self-actualization are made possible, in part, by the rituals and traditions of folk culture. Hence, in a colonial context, the dialectics of this collision of cultures becomes reflected in spaces where the voice of the disenfranchised is heard.

Looking at picong's place in Trinidadian culture, one finds that its power is in its referential relationship to diverse elements of Afro-creole oral tradition. The rural slave societies, drum dances, carisos of the chantwells, the reverence for ranconteurship are all invoked in the performance of picong. The reciprocal nature of this folk form is brought to bear on the mainstream through the vehicle of Carnival. The Devil bands, Dragon, Pierrot Grenade, Midnight Robber, Stickfighter and Calypsonian all hearken from within the environs of an afro-creole cultural fashioning. Eric Williams' "Massa Day Done" speech reflects picong's reach into the realm of politics, invoking through its use the specter of those masses who are circumscribed by its influence. The anti-establishment nature of each of these folk creations points to a criticism of the Western-centered norms

of social hierarchy that served as the foundation of the colonialist agenda. For Trinidadian writers Merle Hodge, Earl Lovelace and Hollis Liverpool, the dynamic features of modernism become enhanced by referencing the register of folk consciousness. It provides a linkage to the past while reconstituting itself in a contemporary milieu. It is this self-referential ability that has the potential to create new cultural products that serve to articulate the socio-historical dynamics of the island.

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