Mas'Queer'Raid

by

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Abstract

As a creolized Trinidadian subject, I navigate the tensions of my heritage and selfhood as a transgressive queer body. Through a critical engagement with ceramic sculpture I fuse the costumes and characters of Trinidadian Carnival in order to manifest tensions of power, gender, and violence through a conversationalist practice. Utilizing texts on the historical development of Carnival and Trinidad, I form a historical foundation upon which I build critical reflection into my embodied past. The resulting characters are solidified navigations of my selfhood through Carnival. I propose that each character then adds to an expanding critical reflection of Mas/Carnival in Trinidad both at home and abroad

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To my Family and my Home.

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Once upon a time there was a magic island,
Full of magic people.
Let me tell you a story,
'Bout their pain and their glory, oh yeah.
Many rivers flowed,
To this naked isle,
Bringing fear and pain,
But also a brand-new style.

DAVID RUDDER, GANGES MEETS THE NILE, 1999

Chapter One

Caribbean identities are in constant production. To effectively posit a racialized body as the signifier of the region is to admit to an insufficient understanding of Caribbean histories. The interlaced histories of those with power and those without have shaped the Hispanic, Dutch, Francophone, and Anglophone islands. The immediate perspectives of the Global North, contextually seen as both North America and Europe, often attempt to essentialize the Caribbean body, which does not allow for the various racialized perspectives within the Caribbean to enter the discourse. This Global North perspective often implies a framing of Black versus White. While Trinidad is far more industrially focused on oil and petro-chemicals, the general Global North perspective of my nation is of a tropical idyll, which belies the true complexity of the island and its peoples. I would go further to posit that these perspectives are based on a consumeristic, vacation-oriented view of the region, and are colonial echoes. As such they limit the island's cultural realities to what is palatable to the Global North and lead to a Eurocentric standard that influences and drives the cultural production of the island. This goal fundamentally supports the capitalist agenda. To seek validity by striving towards Eurocentricity erodes the foundations of cultural creation outside the structures of colonialism. This way of thinking limits Caribbean cultural worth so that each endeavour is either compared to foreign, Eurocentric standards or fetishized into a commodified and trivialized form that is easily marketed to the consumer. Far more fertile fields of investigation occur within a consideration of my creolized selfhood in relation to my own heritage and how it has led to these investigations. Creolization here refers to the process

by which cultures clash violently before producing something new out of such a conjuncture, the results existing in what Stuart Hall refers to as a distinctive "Third Space", a space of unsettledness. (Hall 34) In an unsettled place there is the potential for new definitions and representations. Operating within this space allows for the emergence my queerness, which is inherently complicit in my artistic manifestations. Rosamond King refers to queerness and masculinity in her text "Imaginary Bodies, Transgressive Sexualities in the Caribbean Imagination". In particular, her writings on transgressive male queerness resonate within my research and my own internalized experiences. Navigating the spheres of racial and socioeconomic privilege offers its own tensions, but growing up queer in Trinidad and Tobago, which has not, at the time of this writing, decriminalized homosexuality, adds a further tension to my work. In relation to the greater heteronormativity of Trinidad, queerness is forced into marginal spaces.

Positionality

My project involves Trinidadian Carnival characters and costumes, yet at its core is a navigation towards an understanding of my selfhood as a creolized subject, investigating and facing the histories embedded in my body as a Trinidadian of European descent. My project has shifted from its inception and continues to develop along these lines, from a focus on the costumes themselves and into the characters as mirrors in a self-critical practice. Fundamentally I position myself within this project, not as an archivist documenting specimens, or as a white-cisgender-male saviour of a dying culture on an exotic island. I speak as a West Indian, a Trinidadian Queer, a creolized subject conceived and formed of the atoms of the island of Trinidad. I do not derive my selfhood

from any point of rootedness within an "authentic" Trinidadian experience, only that which I have lived and continue to embark upon. As a homosexual male, I am part of a marginalized group within Trinidadian society; a white male, belonging to a historically privileged class, though I transgress this through my queer identity. In my recent Canadian education, I have entered into yet another class of intellectual privilege. It can be argued that inevitably there will be a distinct difference in understanding; those with an understanding of Trinidadian culture viewing this work may respond to the sculptures in more complex ways than those outside. While this can appear to be a conflict, I treat this contrast as an arena in which I may navigate my selfhood as a creolized queer individual.Throughout the course of this paper I will use terms that are colloquially understood to be interchangeable, yet for the sake of clarity I will seek in this section to define these choice terms.

Mas and *Carnival* each represent a separate facet of the festival and yet can be used interchangeably to refer to the period as a whole. Mas however denotes a more culturally focused framework, often being used in reference to history, in the form of "Ol'Mas" (or Old Mas) and contrasted with modern Carnival, or "Pretty Mas". Mas is derived from "Masque" the French term for a mask.

Carnival refers to the particular Monday and Tuesday before Ash Wednesday, but can also refer to the season as a whole, beginning after Christmas and ending on Ash Wednesday. Etymologically Carnival is derived from the Latin "Carne" meaning flesh and "Vale" meaning farewell; "Farewell to the flesh" recalls the Catholic tradition of giving up meat for Lent.

Caribbean, I use this term to refer to geographical location, while *West Indian* refers to the specific regional identity.

Trinbagonian, this term is used colloquially to denote a unity of identity and statehood between the two islands of Trinidad and Tobago. Individuals may choose to refer to themselves as Trinidadian, Tobagonian, or Trini, all denoting a relationship to the twin island republic.

Creole is a particularly slippery term used in the same sense that cultural theorist Stuart Hall uses it: "Cultural, social, and linguistic mixing rather than racial purity." (Hall 30)

French Creole has been used colloquially within Trinidad and Tobago to refer to the ethnicity of white Trinidadians regardless of their European heritage. Hall writes:

> Originally, creoles were, of course, white Europeans born in the colonies, or those Europeans who had lived so long in the colonial setting, that they acquired many "native" characteristics and were thought by their European peers to have forgotten how to be "proper" Englishmen and Frenchmen (Hall 29)

And therein lies a certain irony at the heart of colonial mentalities, the insidiousness of Othering that can occur within creolized European bodies. Novelist Jean Rhys in Wide Sargasso Sea articulates this mentality;

> It was a song about a white cockroach. That's me. That's what they call all of us who were here before their own people in Africa sold them to the slave traders. And I've heard English women call us white niggers. So, between you I often wonder who I am and where is my country and where do I belong and why I was ever born at all. Antoinette (Rhys 85)

In "Wide Sargasso Sea" Jean Rhys seeks in her own way, through the character of Antoinette (who would later become the mad Bertha in Charlotte Bronte's 'Jane Eyre') to navigate tensions between the formally enslaved and colonial families in Jamaica. Rhys

herself was born in Dominica to a Welsh Doctor and a White Creole Mother. Arguably the contradictions that Antoinette experiences in the novel are reflections of Rhys' own. The creolized white subject is a part of what Stuart Hall refers to as a *third space*, a product of transculturation; the entanglement of cultures within a space. This third space is a fusion of cultural elements from the 'original' cultures; it is not based in cultural equity, it cannot be disaggregated. That is to say that even though they are composed of differing parts they cannot be separated. These cultures cannot return to a "pure" state as they've been intrinsically "translated". This in essence is *creolization*, an ongoing process of cultural and linguistic mixing primarily in Caribbean contexts surrounding plantation societies, colonization, and slavery. (Hall 30-31) Critically, it is the contact between cultures that generates the greatest tension. Through entanglement cultures rage against one another, interlace, resist, and reform. Crucially, in this meeting a tension arises that resists attempts to arrange this conjuncture of forces into binary terms and eliminates the ability to do so. The struggle is "two-way, as well as reciprocal, and mutually constituting" (Hall 31) Power is always at play, structures of hierarchy form as volcanic glass, constantly remade and restructured, yet always with a sharp tension.

Chapter Two (Background, History and Positions)

Home always refers to Trinidad for me; for my fellow West Indians home serves as a loaded word that always references our islands of origin, no matter our current location. Once my home was known as the land of the hummingbirds to the indigenous Taíno people, who were all but eradicated; their echo has faded away to a distant murmur. European invaders came across the Atlantic on a path that would eventually be known for its horror and sorrow, genocide and slavery. Colonialism spread its hideous wings in the form of sails that bore across the ocean a host that snuffed out the indigenous populations of my home; they were conquerors, settlers, invaders, monsters. The Spanish colonial forces forged the first wave of slavery in the form of the Encomienda (Rogoziński 31) a brutal system of slave labour that resulted in the annihilation of the indigenous Taíno and Carib peoples.

With the near total eradication of indigenous Caribbean peoples, the need for slaves arose to sustain the growth of staple crop plantations for an expanding European economy. (Cowley 3) Colonial forces turned to Africa and brought about what was called the Middle Passage. From western Africa, narrow European slave ships carried hundreds of men, women and children west towards the Ascension Islands before veering north towards the West Indies. Crossing the Atlantic the ships could face fierce storms or stagnant doldrums, periods without wind. Aboard these ships the enslaved faced untold horrors, diseases due to hideously cramped conditions, and brutalities at the hands of their captors. (Rogoziński 182) “No precise accounting is possible. But as many as eight million Africans may have died to bring four million slaves to the Caribbean”.

(Rogoziński 128) The years of slavery have left an indelible mark on the Caribbean. When structuring our selfhood as Trinbagonians we must always return to these years of blood.

Emancipation in 1833 came to fruition slowly, with a period of "Apprenticeship", which extended slavery another 5-7 years. In order to replace the labour 'lost' after the abolition of slavery, labourers from India were brought to the colony with the Planters' intention of maintaining a cheap labour force. In 1845, indentured labourers from British controlled India were brought in, though they were largely unskilled. Though their passage from India was free, it came at the cost of their indentureship to the planters. (Besson 83) Intrinsically, slavery defined a period in which black bodies were objectified and brutalized with no recourse, while indentureship held Indians bound to service with a limit on the amount of time they could be tethered to the plantocracy.

Crucially, the socio-economic divide between labour from indentured Indians and descendants of formerly enslaved Africans grew larger, forming racial tensions that persist. Subsequent years saw the arrival of Chinese labourers and Syrian/Lebanese merchants, each bringing their own culture into the process of creolization. The Colony of Trinidad had been in the hands of the Spanish, French influenced, and eventually the British. Sugar and cocoa were driving forces wrenched from the fertility of the land before the discovery of oil and natural gas resources in the late 19th century (Besson 27) that to this day fuel our economy. Industry blossomed and soon the people prevailed over imperialism and in 1962 Trinidad and Tobago, my home, became an independent republic.

Mighty Masquerade

The invader Columbus sailed in misdirection on an imaginary path towards what he believed would be India. Instead, under the flag of Queen Isabella of Spain, he spotted three peaks on an island. In the ecstasy of his discovery he named the island after the Catholic Trinity and thus, Trinidad was 'discovered'. (Besson 197) Over the centuries since, pirates have swept the seas for plunder, conquistadors slaughtered on their path to El Dorado, the mythical city of pure gold, empire after empire came and went, each having cultural impacts on those left upon the island. Enslaved Africans from primarily western Africa, while under the brutality of slavery and the strains of a forced conglomeration of separate tribal societies, found commonalities in language, culture, and tradition (Liverpool 54) that would lead to what cultural theorist Gerald Vizenor refers to as cultural *survivance* in the face of manifest manners. Survivance is engaged with ongoing presence of the subordinate in the face of, and renunciation of, domination.

Vizenor poses in "Manifest Manners: Postindian Warriors of Survivance" the survival, endurance, and resistance of the *Postindian* in opposition to the deployed structures of American and European dominance in their insidious imperialism. "The scriptures of dominance are the absence of tribal realities not the sources of a presence. The simulations of manifest manners have never been the masks of civilization or even the historical ironies of tribal cultures". (Vizenor 14) In the face of colonial powers seeking domination there existed the will to resist total assimilation into the European idea of the enslaved. Tactics of survivance took root; mimicry, parody, and the trickster's ploy proved to be powerful tools existing within the space between the dominant and

enslaved. James C. Scott places this third space between the public transcripts of the dominant and the hidden transcripts of the subordinate. Scott writes;

> There is a third realm of subordinate group politics that lies strategically between the first two. This is a politics of disguise and anonymity that takes place in public view but is designed to have a double meaning or to shield the identity of the actors. Rumor, gossip, folktales, jokes, songs, rituals, codes, and euphemisms – a good part of the folk culture of subordinate groups—fit this description. (J. C. Scott 18-19)

Utilizing Scott alongside Vizenor it is apparent that the Trinidadian Carnival is a powerful location of this third space, the seat of the trickster, the satirist, the perspective-giver. “Tricksters are the translation of creation”. (Vizenor 14) The trickster flits around Trinidadian Carnival, and indeed sits within us all, ready to begin the next dance.

I turn now to the origins of Carnival. The French brought the Catholic pre-Lenten Carnival to the island and it was adopted and subverted. Masking rituals of Europe became enfolded into surviving African ritual masking, eventually developing into what would become Trinidadian Carnival. In his book, “Rituals of Power and Rebellion”, Hollis “Chalkdust” Liverpool, noted calypsonian and Carnival academic, writes:

> My research showed that African sensibilities were the starting point in the acculturation process that produced today's carnival: European values were simply adopted in the face of resistance to upper-class oppression, and the search for the continuity of their beloved African traditions. (Liverpool Xvii)

Liverpool expresses the difference between the European carnival masquerades and Trinidadian Carnival, highlighting that it was created out of the process of creolization; in violence and satire, parody and play.

The development of Carnival since its early days in the late 18th century has seen a multitude of transformations. With Emancipation, Carnival continued to develop in

violent ways as Colonial powers sought to suppress celebrations of the newly freed African-descended populations. The 19th century saw Mas mobilizing resistance to the existing hegemonies through subversive characters that mocked colonial dominance. The 20th century saw these characters at their zenith, but Independence from Britain in 1962 consolidated Trinidad and Tobago as a Republic, and those characters that once found purchase in active resistance were eventually relegated to a starched traditionalism. Crucially, into the 20th century, characters began to become both influenced and created directly by an expanding global visual culture. Characters such as the Midnight Robber were directly influenced in their presentation by Mexican bandits bursting forth from cinema screens; likewise came Indian mas, based on Native American simulations. Sailor mas beautifully parodies US naval imperialism with huge white heads possessing massive phallic noses. With the rise of Hollywood came the rise of sequined showgirl costumes pulled right out of the 1950s and 60's. (Laughlin 27) These particular costumes would hold fast on the Trinidadian imagination and develop into the bead-and-bikini or "pretty-mas" of today.

Economics shifted Carnival into rapid transformation post-independence as a growing middle class blurred past traditional boundaries within the celebration and let in the first influences of capitalism. Costumes became less and less considered within a larger narrative and more intensely focused on the superficial. Female costumes became the center of designers' creativity, while their male counterparts were secondary. Focus shifted to an expanding hyper-feminine carnival image. The 21st century has seen drastic shifts in the construction of costumes as traditionally crafted and locally made methods of

production were given up in favor of mass production abroad to meet demand. (Aching 97)

Contemporary Carnival or Pretty Mas continues to evolve on the premise of the hypersexualization of the female body and the ongoing expansion of power within Trinidad's middle class. Costumes no longer contribute to a larger narrative within the bands, and are instead constructed based on subtle variations of the bead-and-bikini style of costume. Carnival culture has developed into a model that favors minimum narratives and maximum sexual appeal while banking on the magnetic qualities of "playing Mas". To play Mas in the 21st century is to be confronted by hypersexualized bodies that undergo weeks or months of rigorous training and dieting to cultivate an attractive physical form.

Yet to be placed in the field of Carnival in Trinidad during the festival at its zenith on either Monday or Tuesday is to experience a tide of humanity in ways that artists still struggle to fully articulate in practice. Expression of carnival to those outside of the culture is often reduced to an anthropological level of objectivity.

> *Carnival is a celebration that quickens the blood in the veins into a glorious fluid that rushes about the body in a tempo that is matched only by the music. The pulsating tides of humanity moving in scintillating rhythms to pounding music pulls the individual into a torrent unlike any other. Alcohol, food, bodies, all at arm's reach frost the world around you, pleasure is the sword and shield of Carnival. Power courses through the earth beneath your feet as thousands stamp a soca beat while sweat drenched flesh finds heated flesh meeting in an ecstasy of mythic proportions. All around is a hyper stimulating register of visual imagery*

I attempt in the above poetics to grasp the power of Carnival as it exists within my own experience, and within the minds of other Trinidadian nationals, transnationals, and those within diaspora communities abroad. The epicentre of my nation is arguably

Carnival, the axis upon which we spin, all thoughts drawn magnetically to the season of our physical, emotional, spiritual, and sexual explosion. Depending on an individual's perspective, the Carnival season can begin as early as December 26th, after Christmas, or be confined to the Monday and Tuesday before Ash Wednesday. In the European carnival tradition, Trinidadian Carnival has its principle two-day period calculated in relation to the Catholic/Christian religious holiday of Easter; situated on the first Sunday after the first full moon of the spring equinox. Easter Sunday marks the end of the 40 days of Lent which begin with Ash Wednesday, a day of repentance. Roman Catholic dogma still persists within Trinidad and Tobago and is responsible for the apparatus from which we generate our Carnival Days.

Before Ash Wednesday there is of course a Monday and a Tuesday, both of which are the apex and culmination of Carnival, a glorious orgasm before lapsing into sleep perhaps. Monday morning, the festival of Jouvert, from the French for daybreak, can be spelled J'ouvert using the contraction for day, Jour, and ouvert, to open, is the morning when individuals participate in an orgiastic and haptic confrontation with material. Clay, oil and paint are three of the major substances that are liberally applied to flesh in the prelude to dawn. The covering of the body in these substances can be traced through another character, the Jab-Molassie and its ties to molasses, a product of sugar cane. The blackening of the body with molasses has multiple meanings as it applies to both white and black masqueraders. White planters masqueraded as the enslaved by blackening their bodies using soot and varnish, while black masqueraders blackened in a different manner that, as Gerard Aching posits in his text "Masking and Power" has to do with tactical

mimicry, Aching writes: “Blackening already black skin facilitates a strategic “reappropriation” of blackness beyond which no further mimicry is feasible”. (Aching 17) The use of molasses in turn is of specific power as it is, as previously stated, a product of the sugar industry and thus highlights both the objectification of enslaved Africans as agricultural tools and the Othering of the black body deprived of social, political, and economic agency. Whites masked their skin to mimic enslaved Africans and they in turn turned that action against them, highlighting through masking the ability of the dispossessed to repossess. Though in the J’ouvert of today these critical histories are not at the fore, yet J’ouvert remains our closest surviving link to the Mas or Ol’Mas of the post-emancipation period. (Mason 90)

To the thunder-beat of the latest Trinidadian Soca music, the crowd’s bacchanalian stampede begins. With the rising sun, they return to their lairs to don a fraction of their costume or specifically crafted “Monday Wear” gear before heading into the beating sun to begin the celebrations. The next day however, Tuesday, is the highest peak of Carnival, the largest celebration, with revelers in full costume judged on the historic stage situated in the capital’s largest green-space, the savannah. Much like sex, for most, the frenetic movement and riotous colour invade the brain. Much like sex, for some, it ends suddenly with all momentum spent on the Tuesday and religious ceremonial repentance looming on the next day. From personal experience, the aftermath of Carnival is an exhaustion that stretches past the flesh, into the bone, past the mind, into the soul and beyond. Yet regret barely registers, only exultant jubilation, and a low longing for it to continue.

Chapter Three (Process and the Figures/Characters)

Trinidad and Tobago is a culturally multilayered archipelagic republic, where both main islands are a testament to its inhabitants both past and present, existing, surviving, or thriving in the wake of the colonial age and into a ‘post-colonial’ age still within the shadow of the colonial system. I will focus on the island of Trinidad as it is the site of my birth. Postcolonial discussions usually end up leading the inquirer along a meandering passage lush with the foliage of *the then* and *the right now*. In developing this project, the challenge was to invoke the tension in which these characters exist, forming with the same vibrancy that informs their predecessors, the original costumes and personalities that were first born out of a confluence of influences. Movement plays a vital role within the substrata of this project in that it inhabits those movements that shaped Caribbean culture in its darkest days into the current society, much like a river; flowing, collecting, and distributing.

Deep in the south of Trinidad there are points where thick volcanic clay bubbles to the surface. In the north, there are ochre riverbanks towering with clay. Trinidadian clay was used by the Taíno people to craft Zemis; small animalistic figures with religious value. (Rogoziński 16) By those of east Indian descent it's used to craft deyas; small earthenware dishes filled with oil and a wick to be lit for the holy Hindu festival of Diwali wherein light triumphs over darkness. The purest expression of clay within Trinidad occurs in the small hours of the morning on Carnival Monday. Jouvert. As night prepares to slide across the horizon, people gather to douse their bodies in oil, paint, cocoa, or of course, clay. Alcohol jolts the system, and music calls all who hear into a

Dionysian spectacle of bodies intertwined in a veritable cascade of colour and clay. Hands grasp buckets filled with rich volcanic clay, grey and silken, or heft thick buttery knobs of ochre river clay, only to be smeared into hair, slid down backs, rubbed, poured, pressed, massaged. From cool night to bright morning light all those enthralled and inebriated by the sensuality of Jouvert are engaged in a relation like no other. A transformative time of hypersexuality, of social performance of self, of inhibitions lost, a baptism in paint, oil, cocoa, and clay.

In the Language of Earth and Clay

It is this intersection of human and material that I draw on in the genesis of my work. To acknowledge the history of a material is to begin to construct the subtle language that comes with engaging a medium, until it becomes an embodied practice, embodied wisdom. My journey with clay and ceramics has largely been self-taught, through experimentation and repetition, though I owe much to tactile practices in my early childhood. An aptitude for three-dimensional modeling by hand was apparent at an early age and I have had the privilege of a family that supported my engagement with different sculptural media. My ceramic practice has become a medium through which the apparitions of my mind can be materialized, a link between an interior and exterior reality. Inexorably my ceramic practice, alongside my academic studies, has fostered ongoing navigations of my selfhood as a creolized subject. Moving forward in my practice is therefore tied to self-reflection through process.

It begins with the purely ephemeral, the conjunction of traditional forms and figments of my own academically influenced imagination. By this I mean the expanding

horizon that further delving in my academic studies has granted me. Exposure to differing perspectives is critical to expanding the connection between influences and representations within the mind. Specifically, “Colonalisa”, a character of my own creation; her image came to me after an expanded study of colonial histories in the Caribbean. My process then further swelled through critical readings of both academic and historical accounts of Mas/Carnival costumes and performances. Texts on the genesis of traditional Trinidadian Carnival and folklore characters, and personal experience of contact with these characters furthered the swelling to the bursting point.

In understanding the creation of characters and their costumes through historical texts one can grasp the initial impetus behind them, the power in play and in costumes through the transformative time and space of Carnival. Importantly, subversive elements of early Carnival nourished the practice of character creation. This led to many a poignant and satirical character. Through an understanding of the embodied history present in the amalgamation of each character’s regalia or personage comes a fertile plane of experimentation. Delving into a material art practice as research allows for the histories of costumes and characters to seep from an opened aperture within myself into a tangibility, compressed into an elemental physicality.

The text “Hands in Clay”, by Charlotte F. Speight offers insight into the ceramic arts through various artists and their practices. Notably, in the chapter entitled “The Artists Vison” Speight highlights the ways in which perception and vision offer understanding through an intimate relationship with clay and ceramics. I find resonance specifically with a quote from Icelandic sculptor Borghildur Orkarsdóttir as to the origins

of the imagery she utilizes; “I don’t always understand completely why I make my sculptures like I do, but while working and afterwards, I learn”. (Speight 178) I find this sentiment echoed in my own process, though I would posit that drawing on the interlaced history of Carnival and Mas offers a visual register that spans the globe yet always returns to the creolized self. Going further Speight utilizes the reflections of Robert Turner on his ceramic practice to highlight perception, participatory experience, or embodied knowledge, and connection making. He states;

> In art, mine has been a participatory experience in the way things seem to be and to happen in a perceived world. Indeed, my pottery in retrospect is about perception, our connection making, metaphor-making, and a process of possibilities. Perceptions I see as openings toward knowing the universe we observe and toward an identity as a human being who is of the particles and workings of that universe. In using our capacity to perceive connections – Thus we alter the sense of our world, our reality. (Speight 176)

Within my ceramic practice there exists a fluidity in creation alongside textual research and embodied knowledge in which physical material is subject to academic influences and yet flows along its own avenues, informing its own creation through process. I find the process of ceramic sculpture to be conversational; the material informs the hands of its attitudes, preferences, and limitations. Malcolm McCullough writes in “Abstracting Craft”: “Hands also discover. They have a life of their own that leads them into explorations. For example, a sculptor’s feel for a material will suggest actions to try, and places to cut. Learning through the hands shapes creativity.” (McCullough 8) This conversationalist practice allows critical self-reflection to work in unison with physical making and exploration. Organic forms bloom through action and the immaculate ability of clay to capture intent allows the history of its creation to be evident. With the focus on

materiality this effort becomes a binding, or sealing, of an almost unbounded consciousness into a physical form.

To attempt to confine or tether characters that have been performed with such visceral emotions and physicalities into a ceramic body is evocative of a violence. Could the process of ceramics and my tactile practice be an invocation of plantation violences inflicted on the black body? In forming the torso of a body, is every press of the thumb or finger a whip of control? Are these navigations of my embodied history as a creolized subject of European descent within Trinidad, indicative of what Antonio Benitez-Rojo refers to as the travestying mirror? Benitez writes;

> Thus, the violence of plantation/colonial/neo colonial society on being processed by the carnival's machine, has been converted into the Caribbean's travestying mirror that at once reflects the tragic and the comic, the sacred and the profane, the historical and the aesthetic. (Benitez-Rojo 311)

In childhood, my father, entirely blue and horned as a devil, terrified me one Carnival Monday morning, J'ouvert. He called for me to wash him. I remember my mother defiantly telling me not to. Those horns continued into my nightmares for years to come. Even in the wake of such an experience I continued to play in "Kiddies Carnival" geared towards children and teenagers. Some of my best memories revolve around the magic of playing my own kiddies Mas as a shark or a patch of bamboo. These costumes have stayed in my mind and the self-generated characters I imagined; the hungry shark, the elegantly swaying bamboo. In migration, they come with me, as fragments of my own psyche created mentally, projected physically. The costume made solid, a manifestation that navigates towards defining Trinidadian national identity. Always there is contradiction. Black or Indian, Costume or Ceramic. European or African.

Violence against the Othered body is interwoven in the historical body of Carnival; in its own etymology, it is a “farewell to the flesh”. Have I struck the flesh off the other and formed it into clay? Is my own practice an extension of colonial power? These are the questions that drive my own critical reflection on my own past, and the past my skin indicates when considering the history of Trinidad.

My participatory experience with material does not assert dominance over the clay, it is an interlaced conversational practice. Each work is a consideration not just of the subject matter of character and costume but a fragment of my own selfhood made solid; each releases a spirit that is highly individualized. Indeed, each character within this work projects a certain amount of their own influence over their material creation. That is to say, in the process of making, the characters influence their own formation through my experiences with them, both embodied and imagined.

A character in process begins as an established archetype within the milieu of Trinidadian culture, performed by thousands of individuals on both a personal familial level, passed on through generations. What writer Earl Lovelace puts forth through the fictional character of Aldrick (A Trinidadian living on the poverty stricken ‘Hill’) is the action of imbuing a traditional Carnival costume with personal reflection, towards an embodied performance of the character of the Dragon. Lovelace writes;

> Aldrick worked slowly, deliberately; and every thread he sewed, every scale he put on the body of the dragon, was a thought, a gesture, an adventure, a name that celebrated some part of his journey to and his surviving upon this hill. He worked, as it were, in a flood of memories, trying not to assemble them, to link them to get a linear meaning, but letting them soak him through and through; and his life grew before him in the texture of his paint and the angles of his dragon’s scales, as he worked. (Lovelace 28)

The costume Aldrick creates is both the archetypical Dragon of Mas/Carnival while also being the Aldrick-Dragon. Thus, a liminal space is created wherein the logos of the Dragon mounts Aldrick, generating a trifold entity; the Dragon as it is historically known, the Aldrick-Dragon born from his own experiential treatment towards process, and the negative space, which neither creates - the Dragon unplayed dancing his trickster's dance within the third space of mimicry, satire, and parody, waiting for the laughs to thunder on. The unplayed Dragon is that which I believe exists within a territory of potentiality, of expanded perspectives that ever change its body. The endless dragon, the Ouroboros. What enters then into my process is a participatory experience with each character; the conversation is informed by my own developing ceramic skill in concert with an unfolding history behind the portrayals and embodiments of each character. La Diablesse exudes a carnivorous femininity through the lens of the male fear-gaze, this flame leaps into the work through process, making the curve of her hips, the shape of her lips, the violence of her gesture. Gerard Besson poetically captures the character of La Diablesse in his text on the Folklore of Trinidad and Tobago, conjuring the fear-laced sexuality of this entity;

> She is what you expelled in prayer, but she returned, more compelling yet, suspended in air. Resist her! She, hateful, mocking, grabbing your thighs, pulling your garments! This creature, touching you, humiliating you. A gorgeous woman, wide hips, long hands. (Besson 40)

The La Diablesse in my eyes is a fetishized temptress; above all things challenging the sovereignty of masculinity. In her text "Seeing Differently", Amelia Jones tackles the issue of fetishisms alongside the sovereign subject (the artist) and the

world picture. Jones states in the chapter “Fetishizing the Gaze” that European invaders held the key to a strategic justification of colonialization, “the Europeans had to devalue those they colonized in order to legitimate their practice while at the same time substantiating the idea of the European subject- a subject who was of course superior (in a moral as well as cultural, intellectual, political and every other sense) to those he colonized.” (Jones 75) Critically, it is in the positionality of the constructed gaze of subject and fetishized subject that the La Diablesse operates. In the fetishized body of the idealized feminine, she is the seat of castration, a lure into a place of male disempowerment which obscures the pathway into self-reflection.

Subversion then is highlighted; the act of reversal, of the shift, the trickster’s ploy. I believe that through the subversion of constructed codes of representation the hybrid costumes and characters that I engage with come into their own creolized spotlight. The action of subversion is deeply rooted in Trinidadian Carnival history; the earliest forms of Carnival in Europe staged the reversal of roles that would echo in Trinidadian Carnival. James C. Scott simply states a core component of Carnival reversals as “The anticipation of carnival and the pleasure derived from it are largely due to the fact that, in anonymity, one can say to one’s antagonists precisely what one has had to choke back all year” (Scott J.C 176) While James writes in reference to the medieval carnivals of Europe, I believe his observation works within a Trinidadian Carnival context. Historically, mockery/mimicry of the upper-class has been a staple impetus behind many of the characters of Mas/Carnival, often directly parodying the very hegemonic power structures that reinforce colonial society. Within Trinidadian history, the enslaved

operated in what James C. Scott refers to as the 'third space' in early forms of parody. This third space lies between the 'public transcripts', the "self-portrait" of dominant forces as they demanded to be seen, and the 'hidden transcripts', the offstage arena where those dominated may assert their own voices of dissent. Between the two lies a space of subversion, of mimicry, parody, and satire. In satire and parody the enslaved can apply subtle pressure. "So safely and well-hidden did the Africans satirically mock the English Militia and their annual military drills, that the editor was forced to conclude that it was all meant "in good humour and as a mere piece of fun" (Liverpool 171)

And it was in such a space that Carnivals began in Europe, a sanctioned space where lower classes could stage dissent. Within Trinidadian Carnival, satire and mockery ran full tilt in the form of ritualized characters and costumes. The European penchant for courtly pretense in Trinidadian masquerade balls was seized upon by the enslaved. In attempts to supress "barbarous" African dances and rhythms, the enslaved were taught European dances and yet; "Little did the 'estate planters' masters realize that their erstwhile pupils would change the form into an elaborate and grotesque parody of the way the elites conducted themselves at their stylish balls". (Henry 63) In their subverted balls the enslaved Africans would mimic and parody the finery of the elites and the "self-portrait" of dominance that they sought to project. Characters were created that exaggerated physical features, often genitalia, and mocked courtly pomposity. The character of Gwo Bunda, a woman with overtly large buttocks, struck at European masculinity:

> The character was also presented with a physically small man who walks behind her. Wherever she goes he quietly follows. There is much sexual interplay between these two characters, which has a subtext of the elite men's sexual attraction to the physical attributes of the African Woman. (Henry 66)

Striking at existing power structures through the subversive use of tactics of satire and mimicry was the genesis of many a traditional Carnival character in Trinidad. Finding power in play is a formidable moment to activate the 'third space', the arena of mockery, of myth and legend. In subverting the regalia and pretense of the oppressors, Trinidadian slaves found part of the spirit that would lead them further in the creation of a creolized culture, a hybrid of the European and African in Carnival. The characters I've created, I believe, add to an expanding memory of representational Trinidadian culture serving to further expand a critical reflection of Mas/Carnival, my selfhood, and the perspectives of the creolized subject. It is in the spirit of Aldrick that I approach each ceramic sculpture, as Lovelace writes:

> In truth, it was in a spirit of priesthood 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. (Lovelace 26)

A prime directive of my project has been the drive towards producing character and costume fusions that pull at the strings of tension between class, gender and sexuality in Trinidad and Tobago. Manifestation of tensions of power, gender, and violence in the arenas of my own selfhood and in critical national reflection becomes the challenge at the beating heart of my production. Characters can reflect both the macro and micro of societal issues within Trinidad that have been historically performed in traditional

costumes. By manifesting and re-investigating the tensions within Trinidadian society through the subversive constructs of Mas/Carnival conjunctions of characters and costumes, I attempt to prevent an eradication of the critical qualities of these characters. Yet, as artist Pat Bishop states:

> It is necessary to bear in mind that, unlike folk festivals, Carnival does not rely for its validity upon the faithful repetition of what occurred last time. Carnival does have a folk root, but its critical difference lies in the fact that it turns for its success and its validity upon newness, innovation, invention, novelty, and coming different (Bishop 1994) (Green 309)

Bishop may be right in noting the resilience of Carnival, yet through consumerism it can be said that we have fallen into a cycle of 'faithful repetition' based solely on what has sold well to consumers. With the steady march towards a more consumerist Mas/Carnival becoming past, present, and future I believe there is a need for restatement, an intent to rebuke any desire to consign the criticality of these characters to a fading aestheticized memory.

Character meets Costume.

Isaac Julien posits in his essay entitled "Creolizing Vision", that a traversing of transatlantic Caribbean cultures mapped out by the global circuits of dancehall, reggae, hip-hop and its discontents, is an apt arena to perform a translation of territory and temporality. (Julien 150) His film *The Darker Side of Black,* set in Jamaica, was the focus of this performance of translation that demanded a self-interrogation through the technologies of cinematic representation. Julien writes: "If one doesn't read against the rules of representation as they are defined by the global networks, then those rules of representation will, as it were, rewrite you." (Julien 150) Representation is one of the

many spectres that trace their nails across the full breadth of my project. I believe in rewriting representation to work against the allure of pure aesthetic production in my work. Subverting the highly ritualized and traditional costumes of these characters is an effort to offer new representations as part of a Trinidadian discourse on selfhood. Julien sees his own cinematic practice as both a critical tool and an effective means of memory recirculation. (Julien 150) As I move forward in considering myself as both a creolized, queer and transnational subject, I desire a navigation of history of my own past and a means of moving forward productively, using representation rewritten. In recirculating memory, I believe Julien touches a vein that runs deep toward the horizon of the transnational; not as much a reconnection to establish a central root system, as one that raises the consideration of selfhood as one moves forward in relation to national identity.

Fundamentally my pieces are fusions of the conceptual *character* and the concrete *costume*. Where the character defines a manner of being, of action, and of performance internally, the costume is an external expression of *character*. At the most basic level, a costume is inhabited and in turn influences through amplified representational performance. The character on the other hand is embodied, the character can exist outside the costume, in the mind and body. Historically it is arguable that these basic ideas about costume versus character were apparent in the performance of traditional characters. A person, such as Aldrick in 'The Dragon Can't Dance' exemplifies this in his portrayal of the Dragon. The costume and the character are amalgamations of his experiences made physical, yet both are based on pre-existing structural traditions. The Dragon had a particular style, a ritual dance, a way of being-in-

the-world, and while traditions such as this survive to this day, they are faint echoes of the past. No longer are the majority of costumes a combination of these two forms of being; we are left with an aestheticized, commercialized, or puritan version.

In her practice, Trinidadian artist Tracey Sankar explores a deep personal relationship between characters and costumes. For the last two years, she has manifested a connection between herself and those of the traditional characters of carnival's past. In 2015, Sankar created her hybrid La Diablesse from the folkloric character of the same name, the Voudou deity Erzulie Freda and the Christian Madonna, both entities associated with love and sorrow. After the death of her husband in October 2015, her 2016 portrayal of La Diablesse invoked her own sorrow and aligned it to the twin currents within the Goddess Erzulie Freda and the Virgin Mary. Spectators were shocked at the portrayal, which had done away with neutralized portrayals of traditional characters that echo only aesthetics. Instead she had brought about an invocation of the character La Diablesse that tapped into her own emotionality and in turn informed her performance. (Assing 56-58)

Characters

Bookman

The Bookman Figure is a character out of Devil Mas, a roving parade of the denizens of hell that runs according to the imagined hierarchy of hell seemingly born from Pandemonium itself. From the Jab-molassie to the Dragon or Beast this Mas is defined by it is grotesque and interactive performances. The Bookman figure is defined by Professor Jeff Henry as;

> Hell's recording secretary and indeed travels the streets with a book and pen. Contained within the performance of this character is the writing within his book, indicating spectators that are then written into the book, either to die or [be] implicated for their sins. "The mad scramble to get out of the way when bookman dips his pen for fresh ink is something to behold" (Henry 127)

Establishing the historic record of the Bookman is primary to a subversion of this character, for it serves as a pivot between past and present. The record is what lashes out from this character with force; the book and pen that it holds is the weapon of imperialism, sword and shield of empire entrenched in colonial hegemonic power. My incarnation of the Bookman is a monolith to this history of patriarchal violence perpetuated through pen and paper, through the written word that indicates the spoken. He rises as a phallic spike, barbed at the crown with three faces bearded with twisting mouths and gnashing teeth. The three-sided figure calls into the air the figure of Hecate, Greco-Roman goddess of crossroads and magic, a dark entity within mythology. (Bulfinch 134) A spike sprouts from lips festooned with misshapen teeth, a dark tongue poised to strike higher into power. The skeletal hands grasp the book with pen poised to codify some new terror into law. This barbed, bloody, toothy phallus bursts like a ruptured nightmare from the historic seat of government within Trinidad and Tobago, the British colonial architecture of the Red House of Parliament, the centre of an ongoing bureaucratic, corrupt pendulum.

Figure 1 Bookman: 28x10x10in, Cone 6 Stoneware Clay & Glazes, Enamel, Feathers, 2017

Corbeaux

Dipping into the creative processes that form characters out of social critique through satire I have formed the character of the Corbeaux man. Playing on the transformative aspects of Mas/Carnival and the intrinsic attributes wherein a person is shifted or changed through costume I have attempted to capture this process in mid-transformation, joining human and avian. Corbeaux is the colloquial term used to indicate vultures that are native to Trinidad, primarily Coragyps Atratus, the Black Vulture. Imbued in this character is the unfortunate relationship between vultures and waste, corruption, and disease. Pushing this further is the conflation of this transformed Corbeaux man and the corruption inherent in politics, the corruptive touch of power and wealth. Madness, gluttony, avarice, and greed are changing the very nature of the performer captured temporally in ceramic form. Oil, gold, blood, teeth, tongues, all are implicated in his transformation into a harassing, self-eviscerating creature resplendent in parasites yet gripped by the ecstasy of the powers at work through him. The alternate title for this manifestation: "U aiN't Cee me Pee oN eM" draws directly from the two major political parties within Trinidad the UNC (United National Congress) and the PNM (Peoples National Movement). These parties have been largely divided by class and race, with African-descended Trinidadians aligning with the PNM, and Indian-descended Trinidadians with the UNC. Both parties have histories of corruption and continue to have issues with transparency.

Figure 2 Corbeaux: 14x7x8in, Cone 6 Stoneware Clay & Glazes, Enamel, Black Cock Feathers, Swarovski crystals, 2017

Colonalisa

In the grand tradition of feminine representations of national identity, imagined here is a personification of the forces that rolled into the Caribbean aboard ships destined for change. Her form is gargantuan in contrast to the seemingly tiny ships that trail in her wake, Columbus' Nina, Pinta and Santa Maria. In her arms, she carries a bundle of sugarcane, the crop that drove the Caribbean cycles of invasion and settlement and ultimately blossomed into the Slave trade. Like Lady Liberty, Colonalisa holds her burden tenderly, a prize fit for the future. In her left arm, she carries the Trident of Britannia, denoting European dominance at sea, and the lasting control of the waters of the Atlantic and Caribbean seas.

Her back is covered in ecclesiastical structures that grow tumorous from her flesh, a religion-disease carried as ships carried plagues. Their crosses rise from her back in a quiver, a fan of power. Her body is pitch black, black of the oil that continues to build the Caribbean economy, but also the black of the bodies that physically built the Caribbean archipelago. Her head and the hand that holds the Trident are the milky white of the Europeans who held their gaze on gold and heaven with little regard for those peopling the Caribbean before their arrival. Within her elaborate phallic headpiece are the three crowns of the European powers that shaped the region, The Tudor crown of England, the Crown of Charlemagne of France, and the highest, the Crown of Isabella of Castille, the sovereign of Spain. The train of her sea-dress carries the ships of Columbus, yet they trail blood, denoting the Middle Passage of the slave trade, those peoples forever altered in their brutal journey from West Africa to the Caribbean shores.

Stuart Hall thinks of the process of creolization in the Caribbean in terms of three presences or présence, Africane, the subterranean trace or voice of "Africa" that continues to survive; Européenne, the colonizing, constant voice and as Hall puts it, "the one we can never not hear", and lastly the présence Américaine (Hall 33). In Colonalisa I see a fragment of the horror that is the Présence Américaine, which Hall describes as the encounter of the old world and the new, of differing worlds meeting, the prelude to rape. Colonalisa is bedecked in the regalia of Europe, sailing towards new conquests, the prelude to horrors.

Figure 3 Colonalisa: 20.5x21x11in, Cone 6 Stoneware Clay & Glazes, Enamel, Wood, Gold Leaf, Polymer Clay. 2017

Dragon

A major player within devil mas is the figure of the Dragon or beast. This costumed performer often played mas with real or faux chains binding his limbs, said chains being held by the nefarious and lurching jab molassie. The Dragon is bound by chains, a containment of its unspeakable power, yet in order for the Dragon to function it must adhere to precise rituals. An example of one such Dragon ritual is the performance of the water crossing. At the threshold of a bridge, drain, or strategically spilled water, the Dragon must perform a stylized and inherited dance in order to proceed. (Henry 131) Untold power and binding ritual, the dragon character has emerged in Trinidadian literature in many permutations. The apex of this literary representation is found in the character of Aldrick of Earl Lovelace's novel "The Dragon Can't Dance". Aldrick sews his life story into his dragon with every scale and stitch, eventually embodying the Dragon during Carnival, after which it is discarded, having served its purpose. In my piece, I see the cycle of Mas/Carnival and the underlying tone of one perspective of Trinidad, a powerful potential trapped within a cycle. Much like the ouroboros, my Dragon lets forth his tongue, which becomes his tail; while the reverse is also true, his tail is thrust into his mouth to become his tongue.

Figure 4 Dragon: 19x10x19.5in, Cone 6 Stoneware Clay & Glazes, Steel Chain, 2017

Negre-Jardin, Negue Jadin, Neg-Jade

The Negre-Jardin or Neg-Jade is a Carnival character out of the 19th century. Formed from the plantocracy, it parodied the cannes brulées, an event in which a sugarcane fire was dealt with by bands from different estates. The Negue Jadin character served as the parodied, blackened slave-driver with whips, blaring horns, and blazing torches. (Crowley 21) Beginning as a mimicry by the whites of their enslaved captives, it was reappropriated by the enslaved after emancipation. As Liverpool writes, "They were in a special way, carrying out an act of passive resistance by reminding the authorities of their once enslaved past and of their determination not to be enslaved again. (Liverpool 236) This character is at worst a racial collision and at best a reminder of the tensions and horrors of the period it exemplifies. The Negre-Jardin as first performed by the whites of the plantocracy was dressed as the enslaved and the field workers would embody a grim pantomime of the trauma they were inflicting daily. The character was later re-appropriated by enslaved Africans of the estates, where the costume remained a black field worker, though now it was the enslaved playing the master playing the enslaved. My manifestation of this character is an echo of the ploys of appropriation and reappropriation. The black male body, the seat of objectified labour to the white plantocracy, rises above a consuming sludge of pure whiteness. Masked in the European fashion of the coy, blushing youth, the bubbling whiteness oozes from cracks in his body. My Negue Jadin cracks the whip backwards into his own flesh. Each length of the whip is capped with a clawed hand that seeks to open points in the skin where the whiteness may ooze further outwards. Behind the work is a consideration of the insidiousness of

whiteness, the forming of bubbles of operation, social bubbles for safe operation and existence. My Negue Jadin is a consideration of my own exterior and interior. The contrast between a white body and what is considered within the Global North to be a black culture within. Yet it is the societal constructs of whites in Trinidad that I nod to in the forming of bubbles, areas of classist operation that are intrinsically exclusionary.

Figure 5 Negre Jadin: 20x9x10in, Cone 6 Stoneware Clay & Glazes, Enamel, Wire, Leather, 2017

Jab-Molassie

The Jab Molassie characters are a roving band of hellish horned hoodlums. Covered in oil, paint, grease, mud, or clay these devils performed as part of the larger Devil Mas Band. In Trinidad, there is a village called Paramin where the Jab-Molassie is treasured and treated with respect as a nearly sacred tradition within Mas/Carnival. These devils lurch forward with grasping hands to snatch money from terrified crowds; the twist and stretch of sinewy muscle under paint is visible and dances the razor's edge of sexual delight. The jab molassie were known for fantastic facial expressions; they rolled their eyes and stuck their tongues in and out in rhythm with the drumming and the blowing of the whistle. "One could never tell where they were looking [or] at whom they were looking". (Henry 40) Jeff Henry laments the contemporary trivialization of the performance of the Jab Molassie. Gone are the syncopated, intricate movements to percussive rhythms. Henry writes: The character in reality should tell the story of the brutality of bondage and subjugation. Instead what has unfolded over the years is [an] accent on the evil of an African ritual which in Christian terms is connected to the 'devil and hell' (Henry 42) In its place, according to Henry is an empty shell that creates a space of shock and vulgarity. In my incarnation of these characters the group is an orgiastic collective, playing on the phallus as the primary representation of masculinity. Each Jab Molassie is in various stages of transformation between grotesque devil and human, with differing levels of emphasis on either the former or the latter. They point, accuse, harass, and invite the viewer into their hedonistic and homoerotic field of engagement. The phallus is interwoven in their forms, either gargantuan, or meager, questing or climaxing.

It penetrates demand and subjugates attention to the vulgar. The critical intent of this work is a navigation of masculinity, of both the toxic and fragile masculinities I've lived and been abraded by, and the order it seeks to impose in an insidious and imperialistic way. Yet here in the Jab Molassie it squelches outward in insecurity; it demands your validation of its mighty member, though underneath lies its insignificance. Man seeks to find validation in existence by virtue of power, of change in the face of an indifferent reality. Toxic masculinity cannot internalize this attitude and instead pushes for further conquest as progress.

Figure 6 Jab-Molassie: 16x36x24in, Cone 6 Stoneware Clay & Glazes, Enamel, Acrylic Paint, Wood, 2017

La Diablesse

The La Diablesse character is a horrifying character that brings together male fear and feminine retribution. She is best spotted with her cloven goat/cow hoof, the rustle of chains in her clothes, and the smell of fresh dark earth about her person. She is a seducer with ties to the demonic succubus and lamia of Greco-Roman mythologies. She draws strength by ensnaring young men and causing their deaths. My manifestation of La Diablesse is a masculine construct, a pillar of male fear, the dark and secretive horror of castration, of male powerlessness. As a phantasm, the La Diablesse is unbounded by physical realities, allowing for masculine constructions of feminine perfection to be grafted onto horror. In delight she is a danger, questing to destroy the male through removal of the phallus, the historic seat of power in representational culture.

My La Diablesse knows of her male origin, she owns the fracturing of the male psyche, seductively delivering preconceptions of what overt female sexuality, in relation to the male gaze, 'should' be. At that moment of successful seduction, the reality of her castrationary origin rends reality and the male is subjected to his deepest, darkest fear, the loss of his penis, ergo the loss of power. She is the result of the violence of the male gaze on the female body, an avenger created out of the perpetrator. I allude in this violence to the Greco-Roman entity of the furies, a triple deity of revenge and torture, indicative of an irreconcilable transgression. (Bulfinch 9)

Figure 7 La Diablesse: 18x8x7in, Cone 6 Stoneware Clay & Glazes, Enamel, Swarovski Crystals, 2017

Chapter Four

Positions in the Sun/Sea

I exist in a bubble of assumed privilege based on perceptions of my race, while simultaneously I am a racial minority within Trinidad. In the Toronto ocean of socio-economic class structures, I am part of a racial majority based purely on my skin, which then is ruptured by my accented speech that can negate or amplify the preconceptions of others. This rupture in positionality has informed a great deal of my work, and has prompted a desire to unpack the histories I embody as a creolized subject. This desire extends across borders, linking Canada and Trinidad in my transnationality: a foot on each shore, one toe nuzzled in the Caribbean Sea, another in a Great Lake. Yet it is the insidious nature of whiteness in the Global North with which I seek to grapple. Whiteness as cultural annihilation. The concept of whiteness can so easily seem caustic, ready to subsume and consume and regurgitate blankness, non-culture. Fear then of my own whiteness is an element on which I have begun to reflect. In Trinidad, whites, known colloquially as French creoles regardless of heritage, occupy a minority of the population and are generally privileged, or operate under assumed privilege. White communities can operate within socio-economic bubbles, and while not strictly racially defined are classist. The separation of classes within Trinidad is interlaced with variables that define groups loosely into cultural elites, business elites, politicians and other obvious societal roles. Yet in Carnival there is both the action and simulacrum of coming together, being a people regardless of race or presumed race.

I reject the notion that there is a racialized body that epitomizes Trinidadian

realities. This essentialist perspective of Trinidad and Tobago is founded on exoticism and the primacy of representations of the region geared solely towards tourism. While Trinidad does not rely on this industry, I would argue that by proxy the default perspective of the nation is of the tropical idyll, which belies the true complexity of the island and its peoples. This frame of thinking enforces the action of limiting Caribbean cultural validity, wherein each endeavour is either compared to foreign, Eurocentric standards or they are fetishized into a commodified and sterilized form, which is then marketed to the consumer.

Understanding the perspective of the Global North of the Caribbean is an element in parcelling out my own experiences within this framework. Exposure to Caribbean literature or history within North America is arguably confined to media representations that all too often are built solely on stereotypical projections. Tourism to the region crafts an illusionary lens through which visitors may pass, retaining only a simulacrum to share with their peers at home once the vacation has ended. Thus, understanding of the Caribbean as a whole is bound up in pop culture references through Reggae, Resorts and Racialization, and any pathway towards truth becomes mired in comforting stereotyping that only serves fetishization and exoticism.

The stone truth remains that many Caribbean islands must rely on tourism for the success of their economies, and thus spirit and soul are lost to consumerism and capitalism. A larger market for costumes has pushed both material sourcing and labour outside the country. Designers conjure up costume mock-ups that are sent to be constructed abroad and imported into the country for revelers. Costumes lack any

character or spirit beyond colour; patterns are repeated ad infinitum; focus is placed primarily on the female gender in terms of a hypersexual aesthetic. I offer no judgement further than the observation that these two intrinsic components of Caribbean identity are at risk once Capitalistic and Consumerist agendas are normalized within Carnival. I will not address the economic necessities and realities further, as they are beyond the scope of this paper. Yet the lingering taste of neocolonialism smacks bitter. In "Globalization, Diaspora and Caribbean Popular Culture" Garth L Green writes:

> The status of carnival as representative of Trinidadian Culture is in doubt. Beyond the usual concerns about commercialism, greed, vulgarity and loss of meaning, there are fears that in an international market Carnival is seen as nothing more than a fantasy of sexuality and hedonism, appealing to the fetishist imagination of the potential tourist (Green 307)

To compare contemporary mas directly to the past is a point-blank mistake that puts the questioner in the awkward position of being asked to ignore the river that connects one to the other. Carnival of the past had a history that was far more tangible and far more present. There were concrete reasons to provoke, and challenge, and react to a time of brutality and savagery on the part of the plantocracy and eventually the elites of the early 20th century.

The last few decades of the 20th century saw the rise of one of Trinidad's most iconic figures, the self-proclaimed "Masman" Peter Minshall. Minshall studied theatre in the United Kingdom and at the age of 35 produced a Hummingbird costume that startled the nation into an exuberance that he would repeatedly instill with each major band he produced. (Aching 87) From the depths of Hell Minshall raised kinetic sculptures that glorified the human body; energy made into narratives that left the viewer gasping. His

1983 narrative entitled “River” was a startling and unapologetic critique of human fascination with technology and the pollution of our environment. Trinidadian artist Christopher Cozier in Nicholas Laughlin’s “That is Mas”(Laughlin 22) comments, “If something like this were to happen in one of the alleged power locations for art theory, there would be mines of text”. (Laughlin 22)

Furthermore, positing the shortcomings of the perspectives of the Global North on Mas is curator Claire Tancons, “the few books about so-called Carnival arts favor an anthropological perspective and tend to acknowledge tradition over creativity and general Caribbean art books make little, if any, room for Carnival”. (Laughlin 23) The 21st century has seen the shift of Minshall away from Mas, leading many to deplore Mas bands since as having lost a part of itself. The power of Minshall lies in bringing out the creativity of Mas, and yet that power also lies within the revelers themselves. Without Minshall or the inevitable Minshall successor what has taken over center stage is a parade of the blands. Costumes are soulless clones shifted in hue, any attempts at changing this are counter to the machinations of Capitalist and Consumerist agendas at work within Carnival. Bands wish to produce high quantities of low quality costumes that will be priced at exorbitant rates. Here lies the delirious paradox; consumers will pay any price for the experience, because ultimately the experience is pure magic. And yet Minshall’s work has set a standard, and though that standard is skewed towards the Eurocentric, he has proven definitively that Mas is an art form - an ever evolving, ever creolizing, ever unfolding sunburst of exuberance. Mas gives so much to any Trinidadian artist privileged enough to grow up with it.

> Mas has always been a medium in which to imagine relations with the world outside Trinidad, to creatively negotiate the worries, dreams, and aspirations arising from our awareness of our place in global narratives. In this way too it is a resource for our contemporary artists as they play themselves on the international art stage. (Laughlin 27)

Closing Reflections

My goal has never been to sequester my permutations of Mas/Carnival into a dusty menagerie, nor to have them serve as illustrations that seek to depict an unknown culture to outsiders. I seek to reinvestigate traditional characters to serve yet another voice within a choir that sings the value of history and critical reflection, towards a brighter future. Ecclesiastical language aside, the goal of my work is to have insiders reconsider the value of the nature of traditional Mas, Carnival and folklore characters, and outsiders reconsider their narrow view of Trinidad and Tobago, and the region at large. I hope that within the breadth of this project Trinidadians both at home and abroad, particularly here in the Global North, can revisit memories of Carnival and thereby reconsider their own positionality as creolized subjects within a greater transnational discussion. Further, I believe that queering the representations and memories of these characters within the mas and folklore serves as a vital tool in rearticulating and readdressing marginalized histories within Trinidad. The shift towards queer representation within my work allows an opening where further consideration can be given to the presence or absence of queer representation in Trinidadian culture. Most critically I posit that the queering of these manifestations informs my own consideration of queerness both within and without Trinidad, with a vital move towards a more stable navigation of my own developing queer identity.

Furthermore, it is my hope that in coming back into contact with the characters, costumes, and histories within Mas/Carnival, connections can be made to instill national pride in where we have come from as Trinidadians, but also where we may go in refashioning futures, in allowing for the survival and eventual thriving of these investigations of our past. There is hope in the ongoing engagement with traditional Mas/Carnival characters today. Characters walk the streets during Carnival times; costumes are formed with intent and narratives, even though these exist at the margins of an ever expanding "Pretty Mas". We as creolized subjects operating within the transnational boundaries of Trinbagonian-ness must continue to subvert, challenge, engage, and renegotiate representation along ever developing connections. Every person who plays Mas as the Jab-Molassie or La Diablesse, or who navigates their own path through differing material representations of the power of Mas/Carnival, adds inexorably to its survivance as a way of rearticulating our selfhood as it blossoms ever inward and outward.

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