

## THE PERFORMATIVE POWER OF CALYPSO: (RE)LOCATING ART IN DEREK WALCOTT'S *PANTOMIME*

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“The lyrics are the meat of the calypso” The Manicou Report

At the 2008 Trinidad and Tobago (T&T) Carnival Dimanche Gras calypso competition in February, calypsonian Singing Sandra performed a song lamenting calypso's current unwillingness to challenge injustices and corrupt political structures. Her complaint concerning calypso's current political docility coincides with Derek Walcott's upcoming 80<sup>th</sup> birthday celebrations in 2010, and the no doubt countless commemorations that the Nobel laureate will receive on that occasion. It seems to me that these two seemingly disparate occurrences offer a timely opportunity for a (re)evaluation of calypso as a Caribbean art form imbued with unique performative powers. Looking at Walcott's celebration of calypso as an act of subversion, resistance and assertion of Creole in his 30-year-old drama *Pantomime* now, when the art form is being questioned by its own practitioners, allows for a (re)location of calypso's transformative role as a simultaneous formal and informal performance of resistance.

At 2008 carnival, Singing Sandra, who placed tenth out of fifteen in the Dimanche Gras competition, sang directly to the loss of calypso's power as an oppositional force in her “I Stand for Trinbago”, a call to times “when calypsonians were the true opposition” urging calypso to face the fact that “T&T in crisis,” and that the music “deal with the issues.” Her song is described in the Manicou Report (a blog-of-sorts dedicated to T&T culture) as:

bemoaning the state of calypso in T&T saying that it has been reduced to “picong on Panday's and Oma's bank account“...the art [is] being prostituted...despite the preponderance of ills overtaking the country like high food prices and crime.... In my opinion, Sandra's song was the best offering of the night because it was calling calypso back to what it used to and needs to be. It was fresh, meaningful and necessary. A lot of people have said calypso is losing its

soul and it was good to see one of the big bards putting her neck out there to say what needed to be said. Tenth place was an insult.

While public outcry over the winning and losing calypsonians is no doubt commonplace at Carnival, the issue at hand relates to a larger question: What is the lost soul of calypso that both Singing Sandra and the Manicou Report describe? This paper examines the character of calypso which emerges in Derek Walcott's 1978 *Pantomime* as one possible answer. In this play, calypso is simultaneously a formal and informal creole performance that necessarily abrogates colonial stereotypes to subsume them, thus creating an entirely new location for the Caribbean artist in an "outperforming" of colonial expectations. The performative power of calypso in *Pantomime*, then, demonstrates calypso's capacity to encapsulate dichotomies – improvisation and acting, pantomime and script – and combine elements of both the "formal" (theater, literature) and "informal/popular" (Carnival, oral cultural performance) to create a purely Caribbean transformative space.

While *Pantomime* is superficially about two artists who have removed themselves from their art – Harry Trewe the dance-hall singer retired to Tobago to run a guest house and escape a tortured relationship with his ex-wife, and Jackson, his Trinidadian employee who has moved to Tobago to give up calypso life – the play is a metaphoric examination of the post-independence relationship between Colony and Empire. Jackson's calypso – not only his songs but his entire repertoire of acting/pantomiming/improvising – is a controlled rebellion against Trewe, a performance woven into the entirety of the play that symbolizes a metaphoric response of the Colony (and more specifically, Carnival) to Empire's incomplete, misconceived and racist conceptions of the Caribbean.

While there is no shortage of academic study on calypso and Carnival's varied histories that extend back long before the production of Walcott's *Pantomime*, it is worthwhile to examine the play's use of the genre now. The dependence of the entire work on this "informal" art within the "formal" framework of theatre, thirty years after its first production, may allow for a contemporary (re)evaluation of calypso's use for performative activism, social agency and social change. *Pantomime*'s thematic is clearly linked to colonial discourse, as Walcott lays out in an early essay, "What the Twilight Says":

Once the New World black had tried to prove that he was as good as his master, when he should have proven not his equality but his difference. It was this distance that could command attention without pleading for respect.

Yet this postcolonial struggle Walcott tackled then may be equally relevant to similar struggles faced today against neocolonialism, globalization and commercialization. Jackson's reaction to Trewe in *Pantomime* is a calypsonian performance that successfully rebels by proving difference; a strategy that may ring true to Singing Sandra's concerns with calypsonians "selling out", becoming too commercialized, and/or not being true to themselves today. Walcott's vision of calypso reveals its unique power to subvert and oppose unjust power structures, and thus allows for a reinterpretation of the ways in which the art form is still valid and necessary today.

*Pantomime* relocates colonialism and the white-black/master-slave/colonizer-colonized dichotomy of *Robinson Crusoe* on the post-Independence neocolonial Plantation: the Caribbean guest house. Jackson tackles his British dance-hall boss's racist neocolonial expectations of him in the varied ways he performs calypso. Trewe's "colonial gaze" views Jackson in contrast to his own "professional" dance-hall background, in contrast to his English citizenship, in contrast to his need for tourist entertainment as something "light". For Trewe, the roles of master and slave can be simply reversed in a narrow vision of a neo-Crusoe Caribbean pantomime based on DeFoe's colonial text. Trewe hopes this "new" pantomime he will perform with Jackson for his guests, in which *Robinson Crusoe* roles are flipped so that Crusoe is the slave and Friday is the master, will make a point "about the hotel industry, about manners, conduct, to generally improve relations all around" (p. 110). The pantomime is ultimately, though, concerned with entertaining – "It's pantomime, Jackson, just keep it light.... Make them laugh" (p. 112).

Trewe's production ideology in itself exposes the extent of his narrow understanding of post-Independence reality; while he tries to convince Jackson of the merits of the show – "imagine first of all the humor and then the impact" (p. 110) and speaks to Jackson "artist to artist" recognizing him as "a real pro", Jackson's calypso is only useful for "light" tourist fare. Trewe does not consider the Caribbean a place where any meaningful or significant artistic representation is possible: "We're trying to do something light, just a little pantomime.... But if you take this thing seriously, we might commit Art, which is a kind of crime in this society" (p. 125).

What Trewe does not realize, however, is that Jackson has been committing Art all along – through pantomime, calypso, script readings, improvisation, acting – through a variegated, multilayered performance both within the formal framework of Trewe's proposed art and around it, and that Jackson has ultimately outperformed him on every level. It is only when Trewe sees how well Jackson pantomimes his reversed Crusoe myth that he asks him to stop, unable to handle Jackson's capability to perform so well, uncomfortable with the master-slave dichotomy when it has been thus exposed. Jackson chooses calypso instead to reveal the dangers of the Crusoe myth, and plays with the inevitability of inversion:

I want to tell you about Robinson Crusoe,  
He tell Friday, when I do so, do so...  
That was the first example of slavery,  
'Cause I am still Friday, and you ain't me...  
But one day, things bound to go in reverse,  
With Crusoe the slave and Friday the boss (p. 117)

When Trewe later admits the limitations of myth reversal and asks Jackson if they can't "make a real straight thing of it" (p. 139) by creating a new performance together, Jackson responds – "You mean like a tragedy. With one joke?" (p. 139). The strategy of this play on words acknowledges that any production to meaningfully tackle the Crusoe dichotomy can not be performed in *contrast* to it, but rather in *difference* to its stereotypes. It simultaneously makes fun of Trewe's attempt to "fix things" by exposing the double irony of demythifying the reversed Crusoe myth. Thus Jackson's performances of Trewe's formal art – his initial pantomiming of Crusoe's arrival and renaming which literally outperforms Trewe's reverse myth, and his subsequent refusal to perform a "de-myth" – are liberational:

The African myth is determined by its opposition to the hegemony of the European myth... simply to juxtapose African mythical narrative to European mythical narrative is to fail to confront the totality of contemporary Caribbean reality. Walcott refuses to be part of the creation of a new myth... The return to the past, to the origin, though necessary, must be incorporated into the critique of contemporary ideological and mythical structures. It must occur by means of liberating narrative rather than mythical narrative (Taylor, 295-296)

*Pantomime* is really then a single but varied calypso performance. Jackson's pantomime of Trewe's wife, intricate plays on words, exaggerated renaming of objects as the anti-Crusoe, "vindictive" hammering, refusal to perform a script and subsequent improvisation of it, even the one moment he steps outside of performance to literally crush the symbol of Empire, Trewe's parrot, fuse a simultaneous acting and improvisational challenge to the polemic Creole/Classical dichotomy.

This multileveled performance demonstrates a much deeper understanding of the complexities involved in seeking a veritable solution to colonial inequalities. In this way, Jackson's calypso and role as calypsonian function at multiple levels to blur the problematic roles of master and servant in a continual performance that at times subtly and at times violently shifts presumed balances of power and exposes the ironies of

(neo)colonial expectations. Jackson's declaration at the end of the play – "Caiso is my true calling. Caiso is my true life," (p. 169) reaffirms the symbolic undercurrent of Walcott's theme: calypso as a multilayered performative strategy. In this way, both the "lost soul" of calypso that Singing Sandra laments as well as Jackson's performance simultaneously embody the act of performance and the performance itself on a concurrently formal/informal stage. As Rawle Gibbons points out:

Carnival... is nothing if not serious and complex theatre. Carnival is the stage on which national issues, communal concerns, ancestral traditions and individual fantasies are played out sometimes all in the same mas! In presenting these themes before an audience, performers engage in an act of imaginative transformation, both defining features of 'theatre' (p. 97).

Walcott's *Pantomime*, just as the laments of the 2008 Dimanche Gras calypsonians and others, may therefore in many ways be equally concerned with the use not only of calypso as performance, but of performance as a calypso – multilayered, formal and informal. Revisiting Walcott then, we can (re)locate postcolonial Caribbean art *in difference* to any stereotypical expectations of it, and see how calypso is inherently imbued with the power to interrogate, perform, subsume and resist – be it colonialism, neocolonialism, commercialization, exploitative tourism – and to continue, in Walcott's own words with "what we in the archipelago still believe in: work and hope".

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