

MEASURING MAS: A METAPHYSICAL-BAKHTINIAN PERSPECTIVE ON THE TRINIDADIAN CARNIVALESQUE

Chelsea Dana Sinanan

The University of the West Indies, St. Augustine

The coastal road giddied down precipices
to the sweep of Dennery; two sea-gnawed islets
shielding its bay as they endured the size
of shawling Atlantic combers. Their sunsets
were rose as cathedral ceilings with saffron
canyons of cumuli. The chronology of clouds

Derek Walcott, *Tiepolo's Hound*

[...] who braids the fraying fibers of memory into accord?
Traces the beach footprints of our children back to the first tracks
of the Ciboney?
Who plaits scattered flowers of islands and springs of continent into
a votive wreath
cast in appeasement on the ocean restless with the unrestituted dead,
to sea us into the altering calm of Sunday mornings, trees in
surplices of light
and the allaying litany of the waves' asking and the sand's assenting?
Kendel Hippolyte, "Avocado"

In contemplation of aesthetics, before much else, the term "Caribbean" lures one to imagine picturesque beaches lined with coconut trees and adjoining waters the bluest, most brilliant sapphires would envy. Add some tanned locals who dress in bright colours and bear accents that are nothing short of song, and we have the telling of an entire region. Caribbean literature basks in a homebase of very particular aesthetics, as appears in

the way Walcott venerates sunsets, or how Hippolyte can leave you smitten with the ocean, even if you detest the feeling of sand between your toes. It is a sacred apparatus we use in speaking of our own – a language embedded under our thick skin. As a daughter of these soils, I'll admit my love for saltwater runs deep and my accent *does* border melody; however, in my islands, pillars of cultural hybridity, resilience, creativity, and incredible diversity are often relegated to the shadows by postcard-worthy beachfronts. Resist the appealing landscape of islands nestled comfortably between the Americas, relayed by poets and travel brochures with parallel passion – and venture with me to take an alternative look at the region.

Ending the chain of Caribbean islands, located closest to Venezuela, is the twin island republic of Trinidad and Tobago. We are a small lot of 1.4 million citizens, whose ancestors primarily came from Asia, Africa, and Europe. As such, the most absolute truth of our shores is that we are a complex concoction of culture: our food, our faces, our music, our language, have all been derived from a history of bountiful mixture. From this vast amalgam of people and practice, one particular phenomenon makes Trinidad a very suitable candidate to represent the region: many people will even be more familiar with the spectacle of colour, music, and revelry, the instant abduction of the senses known as Carnival, than with the term, Trinidad.

/// *Waiz dis?*¹

For two days of the year, Trinidadians take off their workplace attire and slip into a world which is fantastical, melodious, liberating, and – dare I say – more authentic. The Trinidadian Carnival occurs on the Monday and Tuesday preceding the observance of Ash Wednesday (the onset of Lent in the Christian calendar). Carnival Monday opens with *j'ouvert*, for which major streets of the capital cities are cordoned off from vehicular traffic so that revellers can parade whilst blanketing their bodies – and by proxy, the streets – in mud, paint, powder, and for some bands, even chocolate. The revelry that begins around midnight and lasts just beyond sunrise is nothing short of spiritual. Later, on Monday and all of Tuesday, the spectacle that is the Parade of the Bands allows thousands of masqueraders to parade in Trinidad's major cities of Port-of-Spain and San Fernando. The masqueraders don incredible costumes: from floor-length lamé capes complementing devilish masks, to minute bejewelled bikinis, to

¹ Trinidadian vernacular for “What is this?”

coarse organic suits assembled from dried leaves. Carnival creates a space for everyone to “play a mas.”² These two days are ushered in by a barrage of activities beginning as early as July the year before, when Carnival bands launch their costume offerings. In the last quarter of the year the first soca³ music is heard and by January, *fetes*⁴ begin, to ensure that revelers are competently ready for Carnival Monday and Tuesday, which occurs anytime between mid-February to early March depending on the Christian calendar of the year in question.

To describe the Trinidadian Carnival using the medium of words exclusively is in itself a futile task, yet I will attempt exactly that. As I said, this phenomenon is capable of abducting the senses. Imagine the most pleasant kind of kidnapping; I can tell you Carnival *feels like* your thighs and shoulders closely pressed against a good friend’s while you are both crammed into a single seat on a bus, packed much like sardines in a tin, heading to the first *fete* of the season. You know this signifies definitively that Carnival has arrived – the euphoria cast upon the Trinidadian calendar in the earliest part of the year has inebriated the island and you succumb to its omnipresence. The night ahead will be saturated with dance, song, laughter, and liquor. At the moment, you are not worried about how legal it is for the vehicle to be filled to such capacity, nor if the incredible outfit you picked out after trying on at least half a dozen is getting crushed; your only concern is whether your favourite soca *artiste* will be performing while you are stuck in bumper-to-bumper traffic amidst thousands with the same agenda.

Carnival *looks like* the luminescent glare that ricochets off the costumes of King and Queen contenders – costumes that soar so brilliantly into the night air, the stars gaze in envy. These ornate ensembles made of wire, fabric, mesh, cane, and innumerable embellishments, convey elaborate stories, and depict mystical characters. The wearers compete before a panel of judges and a crowd of onlookers for the coveted titles. Every colour on the spectrum graces the stage and the performers dance, jump, and shake the gargantuan regalia they are tasked with carrying before an audience of young and old who have flocked to the Queen’s Park Savannah stage.

² Phrase used to denote engagement in Carnival revelry.

³ Soca is a genre of music indigenous to Trinidad and Tobago, featuring African and East Indian musical forms. It is a contemporary and often more fast-paced derivative of calypso music, another Trinidadian musical style of social commentary. The name “soca” is an abbreviation of soul-calypso.

⁴ *Fetes* are large Carnival parties that feature musical performances, dancing, the consumption of alcohol, etc. The term shows the strong influence of the French in the early foundations of Trinidadian Carnival.

This is the epicentre, the heartbeat of Trinidadian Carnival, where masqueraders give their all. The cameras are here, the nation's eyes are fixed upon them, the most fast-paced soca of the season is played, and all heaven breaks loose – there is dancing, jumping, waving, and singing; every last ancestor in each masquerader's line takes the stage with them in spirit.

Carnival *tastes like* clay and paint (strange, I know). The clay comes specifically from mud unearthed in some remote crevice of the island and is mixed with water to form a consistency just perfect to daub on human skin, with such completeness you'd question your existence in the taxonomic cohort *Homo sapiens* by 3 a.m. When *j'ouvert* intoxication takes root and the perfect stranger beside you squeezes the contents of a small bottle into a cold Carnival Monday morning and vibrant pink paint catches your wide-open lips as you sing soca lyrics at the top of your lungs, that's how Carnival tastes like paint. It is important to note that in this instance, more than in any other in the Trinidadian Carnival, it is near impossible to distinguish who is who. The muddy jubilant specimen you are dancing with may be a doctor, a schoolteacher, a person who asks for spare change outside a shop, someone who has polar opposite political views to you, someone you may not give a second glance to on the street – it does not matter; in the space and time of *j'ouvert*, I am you, he, she, they, and vice versa.

After you have slept off the magic that is *j'ouvert* for a few hours – till no later than midday – you make your way back into the madness. Here you will find that Carnival *smells like* the fried-chicken cart conveniently parked in the Queen's Park Savannah to maximise sales to patrons famished from dancing in the blazing heat. On Monday, masqueraders don the more casual of their two outfits/costumes; these make for maximum enjoyment as people climb atop walls, arches, storefronts, or any architectural structure that seems feasible enough. The routine rules of conduct slip away into a deep slumber for these two days. As Bakhtin would say of the carnivalesque, it “build[s] its own world versus the official world, its own church versus the official church, its own state versus the official state” (1981: 112).

Carnival Tuesday *sounds like* the trail of steel-bred magic that lingers behind the cart of a pan side.⁵ A wooden platform, outfitted with wheels and a perimeter of metal barriers, houses a small orchestra of steelpan. These instruments, which were born in Trinidad, emerged at first from rhythmic

⁵ A pan side is a steel orchestra, comprised of a particular group of pannists, committed to the creation and performance of compositions comprising popular soca and international hits. Pan sides hail from different parts of the country and compete in the small, medium, and large band categories in the Panorama competition.

tinkering with discarded steel oil drums. A variety of hammers take these oil drums from waste to symphonic splendour and create the branding sound of the Trinidadian Carnival. The ladies playing the cello pans move in such perfect tandem with the composition that even the braids in their hair seem to harmonise with the melody bouncing off the steel faces of the pans. The sound is the most voracious infection you can imagine, and no waist can resist moving to its mercy.

Behind these major happenings, there is a vibrant community of wire-benders, musicians, performers, artists, costume designers, *fete* promoters, and infinite others keeping a keen eye on the heartbeat of the festival and brewing an ever-reliable supply of the unique concoction that is the Carnival-scape we hold so dear.

Of all possible social practices, the carnival [...] is the one that best expresses the strategies that the people of the Caribbean have for speaking at once of themselves and their relation with the world, with history, with tradition, with nature, with God [...] When we relate any other expression of the culture [...] to the Carnival, we are in a position to learn more about the intricacies and complexities of the Caribbean as a sociocultural system. (Benítez-Rojo 1996: 294)

The challenge of demystifying the labyrinth that is the Trinidadian carnivalesque is one familiar to the halls of academia, the arts, and even to many a rum shop;⁶ this inquiry unifies the disciplines of sociology and the literary arts. Metaphorically, this is fitting as Carnival itself is a negotiation between orthodox discipline and Art. Because of the way the women dance and for the unbridled flow of spirit (liquor and revelry), it is often said that we lack discipline. However, making the Carnival costumes, with their gemstones and delicate feathers meticulously placed by hand, by the millions, takes a very high degree of discipline.

In sociology, the ever-popular Piaget/Vygotsky debate concerns the construction of inter- and intra-personal knowledge. Piaget's assertions that a child's development precedes learning from their environment is challenged by Vygotsky's endorsement of the dual appearance of culture development initially on a social plane (an inter-psychological experience)

⁶ A rum shop is an informal bar common throughout Trinidadian communities as a place of gathering, discussion, and relaxation accessible to all social classes.

and subsequently on a personal plane (an intra-psychological experience) (Wertsch 1997).

In the literary realm, Mikhail Bakhtin's "Discourse in the Novel" also concerns knowledge construction. In this work, Bakhtin famously calls for a new approach to analysing the novel. In putting forward the concepts of dialogism, heteroglossia, and chronotope, he sought to remove the novel from its previous residence within the poetic genre and to define an alternative realm, where a more multifaceted lens could be used to view such forms of literature. My investigation extrapolates these Bakhtinian tenets from the confines of literary criticism to analyse the world of Trinidadian Carnival culture.

Dialogism occurs when meaning in a text is derived from the complex interaction between different voices and their independent consciousnesses (Bakhtin 1981). The exchange of messages amongst multifarious facets in a novel, which in turn relay new messages, phenomena, and plot developments to the reader, is where the dialogic principle is at play. Within the world of the Trinidadian carnivalesque, these different voices/institutions are present in the form of band leaders, the government, masqueraders, religion, the media, and so forth.

Heteroglossia refers to the varying languages used in a novel in connection with different conceptualisations of the world. It is the use of competing alternatives of speech, based on the historical, social, physical, and psychological conditions present (Kershner 2010). Within the context of this project, I have expanded the notion to non-verbal communication, including how costuming, murals, and accoutrements are used to communicate certain messages to an audience.

Chronotope is a method of interrogating a text according to the temporal and spatial categories being represented. The distinctiveness of Bakhtin's concept in relation to alternative uses of time and space in literary analyses lies in the fact that neither category is privileged; they are absolutely interdependent (Bakhtin 1981). Here chronotope is used to assess how space and time affect Carnival expression and in turn how Carnival expressions affect space and time.

Variety endows the Carnival discourse with a richness unlike any other. In order to consider that richness through the lens of social constructivism and Mikhail Bakhtin, a qualitative approach seemed most suitable. During the course of narrative interviews with experienced Carnival practitioners, I asked questions conceived from the intersection of Piaget, Vygotsky, and

Bakhtin. A band leader and a visual artist best illustrate the aesthetic negotiations occurring in the Carnival space.

First, I find Valmiki Maharaj (Val) in a quaint office nestled in the Lost Tribe mas camp,⁷ flanked with sheets of paper bearing sketches of almost otherworldly costumes and enough colour to dispel even the subtlest hint of melancholy. There's an instant electricity to this man; his hand bobs in expressive gesture. In the background, posters of his costumes dare to perform a balancing act between spiritual and sexy – two descriptors often at war with each other in the Carnival arena. Val speaks with a passion deep as a seabed and an ardent curiosity easily capable of enthralling non-believers. He has worn the hat of designer many times before and currently moulds Trinidadian culture in the capacity of creative director of the carnival band The Lost Tribe.

Second, a giant of the local art sphere lifts a paintbrush, quietly and with discipline, in a studio beautifully congested with innumerable canvases of acrylics, oils, with watercolours, charcoals, and trunks of wood made magic by chisel and godly patience. Donald “Jackie” Hinkson is a stalwart in the documentation of Trinidadian life. With the meticulous rise and fall of his arms he makes blank canvases into social commentary, in murals which are over 100 feet wide and tower above his sturdy frame. Beer bottle or bystander, no one and nothing can escape Jackie's wit. His paint-daubed clothes and sandals perfectly complement his robust laugh as he benevolently shares tales of a lifelong career.

/// Metaphysics of the Mas

Reflection and Creation

In his seminal work, “Development and Learning,” Piaget (1964: 176) profoundly states that

Knowledge is not a copy of reality. To know an object, to know an event, is not simply to look at it and make a mental copy, or image, of it. To know an object is to act on it. To know it is to modify, to transform the object, and to understand the process of this transformation, and as a consequence to understand the way the object is constructed.

⁷ The homebase of a Carnival band, where costumes are displayed, and masqueraders register to be part of one of many sections/costumes offered for the upcoming Carnival.

Jackie Hinkson, in this way, manipulates the aesthetic of the Trinidadian carnivalesque by modifying and transforming traditional elements in wittingly novel fashion. A host of traditional characters exist in the local festival space. These characters don fanciful costumes that take many forms, including embellished sailor uniforms (Fancy Sailor), long dresses with frills, padded at the breast and bottom (Dame Lorraine), dragon suits, complete with a mask, scales, and tail (Dragon band) and many more. These characters are not as ubiquitous as the masqueraders in embellished swimsuits; however, they populate the Carnival space in a way that brings a degree of completeness and validation of the Carnival aesthetic wherever they appear. Traditional characters hold significant meaning to the culture as they are the products of rebellion against the colonial structure intersecting with mockery, satire, and creativity. These characters provide a venue for negotiating “new” and “metaphysical” with little to no inhibition, and in each instance, they interact with integral dimensions of social life. According to Moten (2017):

(Black) performances are resistances of the object and the object is in that it resists, is in that it is always the practice of resistance. And if we understand race, class, gender, and sexuality as the materiality of social identity, as the surplus effect and condition of possibility of production, then we can also understand the ongoing, resistive force of such materiality as it plays itself out in/as the work of art. This is to say that these four articulating structures must not only be granted historicity, politics, and practice, but aesthesis as well.

In his artistic work, Jackie Hinkson has summoned every last traditional character of Trinidadian history. Take the Midnight Robber for instance, a threatening figure, dressed in trousers, a shirt, a cape, and wide-brimmed top hat, all black; he usually has macabre embellishments such as skeletal remains, coffins, tombstones, or other decorations of that kind; the carnival character carries a whistle to call attention to his person before reciting a monologue reeking with bravado, dread, and satire. Jackie, in his work, is not at all hesitant to depict robbers, though the images evoke fear in young children and discomfort in many a grown spectator.

He reflects upon the historical stature of the image: “60, 65 years ago, when the more disadvantaged class was bigger – in those days when I saw things like moko jumbies or robbers or bats – their movements, their dances – there was an element of protest or resistance.” Standing tall, span-

ning the full height of his mural, is one of Jackie's robbers, complete with bravado and dreadfulness, but not all black, not even a little. This robber's cape is a \$100 Trinidadian bill⁸ rendered in stunning hues of blue as if it had just been pulled from someone's wallet; and atop this robber's hat there is no coffin, but an oil rig, representing Trinidad's main avenue of wealth generation. This pairing nods to the metaphysical foundation of the robber as one who emerges to warn or threaten the populace, but moves from a message about death to allude to Trinidad's overreliance on the oil industry in a highly competitive international market. The Midnight Robber "exemplifies many of the practices that are central to Caribbean carnival culture: resistance to officialdom, linguistic innovation, and the disruptive nature of play, parody, and humour" (Marshall 2016: 210).

In more recent mural work, Jackie expands his social commentary beyond local shores, with a Midnight Robber depicting disturbances in American democracy in January 2021. This robber's cape is the American flag and his headpiece is the Capitol building, brimmed with the arms of an oncoming mob. Intertwining these visual features with the inherent connotation of threat the character possesses, embodies Tunali's suggestion that "art seems to relinquish its status as a reified set of objects in the aesthetic arena of street protests and to assert its role as politics" (2018: 378). Jackie Hinkson said of this work:

I wanted to say something about how I felt about things happening around me, and in the world, more and more. I'd be using figurative imagery and that is when I began to mesh or interweave carnival imagery as metaphor into my figurative work [...] I brought together carnival imagery and social observation [...] so these words are not literal capturing, rendering, of Carnival. It's more than that – it's layers beyond that.

This type of interaction between carnival character and social issue puts Bakhtin's dialogism at play, in this instance, deriving nuanced understandings from the particular interaction of aesthetic and meaning.

In contemplation of the dialogic principle, the band leader Valmiki Maharaj conceives a visual that proves to be a culmination of interactions between carnival, femininity, masculinity, resistance, and class. The Dame Lorraine is a traditional carnival character which originated in the plantation history of Trinidad while the country was under French rule in the

⁸ The \$100 bill is the largest note of currency in Trinidad and Tobago.

eighteenth century and is imitative of the attire worn to elite masquerade balls. Class and gender stereotypes were mocked from the perspective of the less powerful through the mas. A costume – worn by men – comprised of a fan, a hat, necklaces, and a dress filled with exaggerated body parts assembled from rags and pillows, was initially referred to as “Ma Gwo Bunda” (Madame Big Bottom) and “Ma Gros Tete” (Madame Big Breasts) but later became known as the Dame Lorraine (Henry & Henry 2020). This vein of mimicry refers to the ridicule of a perceived superior culture by a perceived inferior culture; it reinforces difference based on an interpretation of power that ultimately results in a clear distinction of powerful and “lesser” groups (Bhabha 1984). Val says:

So I sat and analysed the Dame Lorraine. It’s based on mimicry, but the mimicry of our people has led to all our traditional characters – not only based on “The master was doing that, I want to do that,” it was also based on the fact that it *was* the master. Just like gangsters wearing gold chains, Dame Lorraines at the time were wearing things that were luxurious, that made them feel like the lady of the house, empowered, this bourgeoisie, elite.

Subsequent to this analysis, Val was inspired to translate the metaphysical basis of the Dame Lorraine into contemporary aesthetics. In the production “Lavway,”⁹ he presented the character in the form of a drag queen. Val met with both praise and resistance; he explained that there could be no truer modern-day equivalent of the negotiation between gender and power that conceived the traditional character than in the depiction of drag today.

Both Dame Lorraines and drag artists rely on theatrical interactions, competing notions of gender performance, and references to luxury and empowerment. To contextualise these characteristics in wider literature, in regard to theatre, the masquerade (Dame Lorraine) was historically referred to as “a bawdy folk play [...] [wherein] participants wore vulgar costumes and sang and danced to string band accompaniment” (Cowley 1996: 137–138). Ironically, these vulgar costumes were fashioned after women of the French elite (particularly trying to capture the narrow-corseted waist) and appealed to contesting performances of gender. Martin (2004) mentions that the Dame Lorraine costume was often worn by cross-dressing men outfitted with padded bottoms and breasts. In like manner, a drag artist gets into persona through actions that centre around undressing and

⁹ A Carnival-inspired production aired for Carnival 2021 in the absence of the Parade of the Bands.

dressing up, slipping from one gender archetype into another. These acts bring out the very possibility of constructing/deconstructing masculinity, while reconstructing an artificial and generally exaggerated femininity (da Rosa & Felipe 2021: 6)

The Dame Lorraine, represented in drag, brings Bakhtin's chronotope into the conversation. The particular *space* of coloured slaves in the social hierarchy of colonial Trinidad, at a *time* of pomp in the pre-Lenten festivities of the French aristocracy, birthed the aesthetic and sentiment of the Dame Lorraine. This portrayal, while inspired by the plantation class, by no means served an integrative agenda (Henry & Henry 2020) but rather alludes to a notion that historically compounded segregation within Carnival. Conversely, if we analyse how this character – particularly in the modern featurette – in turn affects space and time, the introduction of drag immediately renegotiates the rules of space and access in the Trinidadian Carnival to be more inclusive and marks a watershed moment in the acknowledgement and celebration of non-binary gender expression. There is something almost comical about the irony of exclusion and inclusion in these parallels, which present an interesting challenge to the theme of metaphysical traces of new aesthetics.

This is not the first time Val has used Carnival to communicate strong and necessary messages to his audience, but in discussing Bakhtin's heteroglossia, he said that "Carnival is a language – in terms of the way we approach costuming and design, our shapes and forms and things that we consider the visual language of carnival, and I think that could be translated into telling so many stories." Two such stories are told in the Lost Tribe productions of "Taj" and "Anansi."

Connection

"Taj" took to the streets in Carnival 2019 and won the coveted "Large Band of the Year"¹⁰ title. This production was inspired by the East Indian heritage of a large portion of the populace of Trinidad and Tobago. The costumes featured fabrics reminiscent of traditional Indian textiles, elephants (which are considered sacred in Indian and Hindu culture), Indian jewelry, and various other aesthetic features representative of South Asian culture. Maharaj stated that "it's a connection between them [masqueraders]

¹⁰ Carnival bands compete with their various costumes to be crowned Band of the Year in small, medium, and large band categories. This competition is judged by a number of experienced Carnival practitioners from various fields.

and their ancestry. That's a huge-huge thing for them. Lost Tribe people will make it about their connection to this island." Bakhtin's heteroglossia refers to the use of varied communicative forms, and in this context, carnival costuming has been used to connect revellers to an important facet of their history. It is important to note here that the masqueraders of the band this year were not exclusively Trinidadians who identify ethnically as East Indian but people of all ethnicities, races, colours, and phenotypes. Such is the truth of Trinidadian culture; we are a mixture of so many people and places, and you need not look like a culture for it to affect you immeasurably in this small space. For many people/masqueraders, it was an opportunity to learn more about elements of Indian culture and to have their own personal connection to it in this unique way and space.

The year after, 2020, "Anansi," the folkloric West African spider trickster, and his band of colleagues landed on the streets of Port-of-Spain. The two major ethnic groups of Trinidad and Tobago are East Indian (40.3%) and African (40%). Just as "Taj" forged an aesthetic connection to the ancestry and foundations of Indian culture, so "Anansi" did for African culture. In Trinidad, the Anansi stories are embedded in the primary school curriculum and are also told in less formal settings; thus in addition to connecting to roots of African culture, this portrayal was nostalgic to a certain degree. The band featured sections inspired by core characters from the Anansi tales including Gbe (bird), Tau (lion), N'yame (sky father), Agemọ (chameleon) and of course Anansi (spider). The most Trinidadian way to aesthetically acknowledge the meaning of something is to put it into a Carnival costume. "Every act of European significance, every African culture trait that could be remembered, every incident that took place during the year, found itself on the carnival stage" (Liverpool 1990: 40). In further understanding the importance of portrayal, we can look to Anthony's offering of the Ikeji festival of Arondizuogu, Nigeria (2017: 167): "Each time this festival is celebrated, the story of the Arondizuogu people is retold, which in turn renews the life stream of the community by creating a new energy and giving sanction to the Arondizuogu authentic identity."

These stories rooted deep in foreign continents became the spectacle thousands flocked to see, to understand, and to connect with, from various parts of the island and various regions of the world, whether as masqueraders or spectators. The existence of these presentations in 2019 and 2020 speaks to the resilience of Indian and African cultures in withstanding the atrocities of plantation history; propagating themselves in such a mainstream capacity within Caribbean culture. Val reflects that "it could be

Anansi, it could be a dragon, a butterfly – no matter what we make here, when they [the Lost Tribe masqueraders] touch that road they feel like they are part of something that is so much bigger than them.” This statement solidifies the notion of Bakhtin’s heteroglossia, the convention of altering language (non-worded forms, here the language is that of costuming) to perfectly adhere to historical, social, physical, and psychological contexts (the Trinidadian carnivalesque), to achieve the effective communication of messages (one of ancestral connection and autonomy over a heritage which has been historically misrepresented) to a target audience.

Compounding this notion, Kuei-chen (2022: 64) writes that

[t]he study of costume involves various dimensions, ranging from its techniques, social structure, ideology, and identity. Clothing is both a physical representation of material culture, and also an abstract code for communication. Throughout history, people define themselves, reveal their identity, and convey collective ethnic values with the production and reproduction of clothing. However, cultural dynamics coincides with both human agency and multi-layered identities. Cultural patterns are not confined within the normal concept of “traditional clothing.” In this changing time and space, different cultures encounter, interact, negotiate, and compromise with each other. As a means to identify oneself and formulate senses of identity, elements of clothing will be changed, appropriated, and reformulated.

Val posits that the visual languages of Carnival, namely costuming, design, shape, and form, are utilised to tell many stories within the Trinidadian carnivalesque. Delving into the metaphysical foundations of storytelling in the Caribbean, this artform has been utilised as an instrument of decolonisation in retaliation against Western ethics, philosophy, and intellectuality (Araya 2014). Looking into Caribbean history, Araya (2014) presents the Anansi character as a direct challenge to Western constructions of being, in that Anansi does not fall exclusively into the category of animal, human, or divinity. This ambiguity denies these stories residence within the moral framework of the imperial powers. In a space where L.T. Smith claims “new colonies were the laboratories of Western science, theories generated from the exploration and exploitation of colonies, and of the people who had prior ownership of these lands, formed the totalizing appropriation of the Other” (1999: 65). This liminal state of existence in

the tradition of storytelling in the Caribbean inherently rebels against the historical narratives of the dominant colonial strata in society. Aesthetically, the contemporary world of the masquerade presents an avenue where locals can claim the autonomy of the narrative being peddled to the world. Carnival costuming and, by extension, carnival bands, indulge the liminal state Araya describes. Masqueraders on Carnival Tuesday are nothing short of entities that move through ambiguous dimensions of being in their portrayals. Numerous variables, including music, light, space, feathers, headpieces, and flags, become instruments which the spirit of Carnival employs to resist conservative narratives of being. The inherent challenge to the West instituted in both these tales and portrayals appeals to core post-colonial agendas of revolution.

It is not enough to write a revolutionary hymn to be a part of the African revolution, one has to join with the people to make this revolution. Make it with the people and the hymns will automatically follow. For an act to be authentic, one has to be a vital part of Africa and its thinking, part of all that popular energy mobilised for the liberation, progress and happiness of Africa. Outside this single struggle there is no place for either the artist or the intellectual who is not committed and totally mobilized with the people in the great fight waged by Africa and suffering humanity. (Ahmed Sékou Touré after: Fanon 2004: 145)

Cited in Fanon's discourse "On National Culture," Touré captures quite vividly the importance of the integrative dimension of creation. In like fashion, the Trinidadian Carnival demands this vein of authenticity for the achievement of "liberation, progress and happiness" (Fanon 2004: 145). As evidenced by Jackie's murals, which beat in tandem with the social pulse of current affairs, and Val's manipulation of costumes appealing to the energetic force in the sphere of masquerade, this meaningful symbiosis between creator and creation grounds the aesthetics of mas. In fashioning these visual elements for and through the people of the carnivalesque, Jackie and Val catalyse their own brands of discourse on the metaphysical components of reflection, creation, and connection in the Trinidadian Carnival.

/// Conclusion

Limbs bereft of the syntactic splendour that is calypso often do not know how to resist the compulsion to dance upon first encountering it. Carnival is a space of play where you are at once earthly and divine, ancestor and child. We are born to this culture where we write our narratives in song, in dress, in tradition, and in spirit. We embed our lives, our creativity, and our souls in this sacrament. And every year it blesses our people for generations to come, with inspiration, solace, and liberation. The inherent sentiment of Carnival is one so deeply rooted in Caribbean life that an attempt to void its influence would be near futile in the regional space. The visual architecture registered in the artforms of Carnival present a venue for the debate, challenge, and patronage of the metaphysical underpinnings of the phenomenon. The notions of reflection, creation, and connection are integral to the mas discourse and have been manifested in countless creative endeavours. The features explored here represent the current state of Carnival culture, where economics, politics, gender, class, ancestry, and post-colonialism intersect. The combination of social constructivism and Bakhtin's dialogism, heteroglossia, and chronotope provides a lens through which a deeper commentary on Trinidadian Carnival can be made from elements that have often only been admired for their aesthetic appeal. Artists have found ways to straddle the warring worlds of cultural continuity and cultural innovation in ways which are truly indigenous to the local sphere and fervently admired by international audiences.

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/// Abstract

Carnival is a space of play where you are at once earthly and divine. We are born to this culture, writing our narratives in song, dress, tradition and spirit. As Trinidadians, we embed our lives, our creativity, and our souls into this sacrament. And every year it blesses our people with inspiration, solace and liberation. The theoretical premise of this paper combines social constructivism and Mikhail Bakhtin's dialogism, heteroglossia, and chronotope to investigate aesthetic architecture within the Trinidadian carnivalesque (mas). A series of narrative interviews were conducted with Carnival band leader Valmiki Maharaj and visual artist Jackie Hinkson, gathering core meanings, intentions, and processes of creation attached to the Trinidadian brand of Carnival. This work highlights the aesthetic manifestations of reflection, creation, and connection as represented in murals, costuming, and carnival accoutrements, whilst acknowledging the cultural and historical frameworks that support these structures.

Keywords:

aesthetics, Carnival, connection, Trinidad, Bakhtin

/// Abstrakt

Pomiar mas(karady): metafizyczno-bachtinowska perspektywa trynidadzkiej karnawalizacji

Karnawał to przestrzeń zabawy znaczeniami, w której jest się jednocześnie ziemskim i boskim. My, Trynidadczycy, urodziliśmy się w tej kulturze, a następnie pisaliśmy nasze opowieści pieśnią, strojem, tradycją i duchem. To w sakramencie karnawału osadzamy nasze życia, naszą kreatywność i nasze dusze. I każdego roku błogosławi nas on inspiracją, koi i wyzwala.

Teoretyczne założenia artykułu łączą społeczny konstruktywizm z opisanymi przez Michaiła Bachtina dialogicznością, heteroglosją i chronotopem w celu zbadania architektury estetycznej trynidadzkiej karnawalizacji (*mas*). W tekście przedstawiono rezultaty serii wywiadów narracyjnych z liderem zespołu karnawalowego Valmikiem Maharajem i artystą wizualnym Jackiem Hinksonem na temat podstawowych znaczeń, intencji i procesu tworzenia związanych z trynidadzkim gatunkiem karnawału. Opracowanie podkreśla estetyczne przejawy refleksji, kreacji i połączeń na podstawie murali, kostiumów i scenografii karnawału, równocześnie uznając kulturowe i historyczne ramy, które podtrzymują te struktury.

Słowa kluczowe:

estetyka, karnawał, połączenie, Trynidad, Bachtin

/// Chelsea Dana Sinanan – tutors Sociology and Caribbean Society in the Department of Behavioural Sciences at the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago. She holds undergraduate and postgraduate qualifications in Leadership & Management, and Sociology. Her work reflects her interest in the interdisciplinary investigation of the cultural landscape of the Caribbean and its diaspora. She is currently working on projects in the areas of traditional costume design and Trinidadian Carnival.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4133-4707>

E-mail: chelsea_dana@hotmail.com