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"I Stole the Torturer's Tongue": Caribbean Carnival Speaks Back to the Canon

Postcolonial literary theory has been long preoccupied with the examination of the how postcolonial literatures "write back" to canonical texts and in doing so, readdress and challenge damaging racial and cultural representations. Traditional Mas characters found in Caribbean carnivals such as the Midnight Robber and Pierrot Grenade have long incorporated speechifying practices into their performances, ritualised oral performances which both draw from and "speak back" to an English literary canon imposed by decades of colonial schooling.

Through interviews I conducted with the last remaining Midnight Robber band in Port of Spain during Trinidad carnival (2017), and an analysis of "Zulu" "krews" in New Orleans and Carriacou "Shakespeare mas" bands, during which performers are whipped if they are unable to recite lines from Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* correctly, this article examines how traditional carnival masquerade "speaks" back to the legacies of colonial education through complex rituals of mimicry and resistance.

The article also scrutinises the spaces in which Caribbean carnival and the legacies of colonial power collide, exploring how ritualised carnival traditions revisit and reframe violent and traumatic memories of enslavement. Finally, the article asserts that carnival speechifying traditions provide an educational model that encourage postcolonial Caribbean communities to engage with historical memory and decolonise both the mind[1] and the spirit.

Racial Inversion and the Carnival Trickster: Black and White Minstrels and the Zulu Krews

I have long been fascinated by the figure of the trickster in the oral cultures and literatures of the African diaspora. My first book, *Anansi's Journey: A Story of Jamaican Cultural Resistance* (2012)[2] demonstrates how the West African spider trickster and folk hero became symbolic of the resistance and survival strategies of black slaves on the Jamaican plantations. My second book continues to focus on the cultural trajectory of the diasporic African trickster, but in an American setting. *American Trickster: Trauma, Tradition and Brer Rabbit* (2019)[3] exposes the stark differences in the cultural journeys of Brer Rabbit and Anansi. Brer Rabbit, as a result of folklore collections by white American journalist Joel Chandler Harris and the work of other folklorists in the late nineteenth-century, quickly moved from the oral to the page. Brer Rabbit tales compiled by late nineteenth-century collectors were steeped in a nostalgia for the plantation past. These collections thrust the trickster rabbit into mainstream white American culture and he was emptied of his potentially potent symbolism as a black resistance figure. Brer Rabbit temporarily became a mechanism through which to further denigrate black Americans, perpetuate racist serotypes and feed into the moral and cultural discourse which upheld and defended slavery and later, Jim Crow segregation.[4]

We find trickster figures throughout Caribbean carnival, at home in the Caribbean and in carnivals across the diaspora. The trickster, with his ability to side-step social rules and create chaos in established systems, continues to act as a wish-fulfilment for people living in deprived and oppressive circumstances. As I demonstrate in *American Trickster*, the trickster's talent is also their ability to "trick" or outmanoeuvre the cyclical nature of trauma and resist the label of victimhood[5]. The trickster is anarchic, often violent, sexually potent and vengeful. Importantly, it is through language that the trickster facilitates his trick –

through being a man-of-words[6] and implementing skills of linguistic dexterity to outwit dangerous and powerful opponents. As African American cultural critic Henry Louis Gates Jr. outlines, this celebration of language and its malleability is central to the cultures of the African diaspora and nowhere more present than in the many different Creoles spoken across the Caribbean.[7]

One of the ways in which racist stereotypes of blackness have been challenged in the Americas is through the incorporation and transformation of negative stereotypes of blackness into the carnival tradition. "Mimicry," Homi K. Bhabha famously writes, "is at once resemblance and menace".[8] In the carnival space traditional mas can operate as a complex form of mimicry[9] entwined with confrontational violence which echoes, reflects and refracts the violence of enslavement and transform it into an often uncomfortable and confrontational mas.

In Trinidad traditional mas fuses Indian and African cultural forms. Approximately forty percent of the population of Trinidad are of Indian descent as Indians were brought to the island as indentured labours from 1845 and 1917.[10] Carnival incorporates many aspects of Indian culture from the street foods enjoyed during carnival (doubles and roti are a example) to the Jab-Jab masquerade whose costume is Indian influenced and often played by a masquerader of Indian decent. [11] Numerous Caribbean scholars have sought to examine carnival as symbolic of this unique type of cultural Creolisation in the Caribbean. Kevin Adonic Browne outlines a form of "carnival poetics" in his prize-winning photo-book *High Mas: Carnival and the Poetics of Caribbean Culture* (2018). Browne argues, in his self-reflexive and inventive text, that carnival poetics is the recognition that you don't just "play" mas—you *live* it. Mas, Browne insists, is never only symbolic. Each performer brings themselves to the role and decides how they want to be viewed; there is a deeply individual motive at work in each mas performance.[12] Cuban poet and author Antonio Benítez-Rojo

also uses Carnival as a central discourse of Caribbean cultural dynamics in the closing chapter of *The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective* (1992). Here he conceptualizes "Caribbeaness" through carnival as a complex sociocultural interplay:

> A system full of noise and opacity, a nonlinear system, an unpredictable system, in short a chaotic system beyond the total reach of any specific kind of knowledge or interpretation of the world.[13]

Benítez-Rojo argues that the analysis of Caribbean culture has been too strongly focused on either African cultural retentions or "New World" cultural clashes. Critics have missed something fundamental about the complexity of the varied, multi-faceted nature and "chaotic coexistence"[14] of Caribbean culture and identity, a "cultural sea without frontiers" [15] whose flows criss-cross and connect the cultures of Africa to the diaspora and beyond. Like Browne, Benítez-Rojo sees carnival as an expression of the attempt to unify that which ultimately cannot be unified and as the most representative cultural expression of the multiplicity of Caribbeaness:

> Of all possible sociocultural practices, the carnival—or any other equivalent festival—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.[16]

A fascinating example of the strategies that people have for speaking of their place in the world through carnival is found outside the Caribbean in the carnival traditions of New Orleans. The New Orleans Mardi Gras is celebrated across Louisiana for the two weeks preceding shrove Tuesday until the end of ash Wednesday. During US segregation, which ended in 1960 in Louisiana, African Americans and white Americans formed two distinct processions; one black, one white. Rex, the King of Carnival, would be picked from amongst the city's business elites (some of the white members of the Rex parade would blacken their

faces) while Rex's nemesis, King Zulu, was the monarch chosen from the African American community by the organisation called "the Zulu Social aid and Pleasure club" established in 1909.[17]

The "Zulus" perform a type of inversion of the American minstrel masquerade, with white clownish paint over their black skin around their eyes and on their cheeks and mouths. They paint the rest of their faces black and they dance in grass skirts. They throw beads and coconuts to the crowd, a practice that, astonishingly, continues to this day, and to catch one of the Zulus coconuts is highly prized.[18] The Zulus in the parade are stereotypes of the kind of "savage" Africans depicted in colonial educational texts and they bestow their "high officials" with names such as "The Big Shot of Africa", "The Witch doctor" (who carries bones and evokes images of Cannibalism) "Governor" and "Province Prince". [19] Their mas is directly influenced by vaudeville shows at popular in the early twentieth century in the US.

There was pressure from the US civil right movement in the 1960s to stop the parade as it was deemed as degrading to African Americans. The protesters published a statement in the newspaper *Louisiana Weekly*:

> We, the Negroes of New Orleans, are in the midst of a fight for our rights and for a recognition of our human dignity which underlies those rights. Therefore, we resent and repudiate the Zulu Parade, in which Negroes are paid by white merchants to wander through the city drinking to excess, dressed as uncivilized savages and throwing cocoanuts like monkeys. This caricature does not represent Us. Rather, it represents a warped picture against us. Therefore, we petition all citizens of New Orleans to boycott the Zulu Parade. If we want respect from others, we must first demand it from ourselves.[20]

The Zulus are still played by working-class African Americans and the krew is still sponsored by the "Zulu Social aid and Pleasure club".[21] They passionately defend their mas, the wearing of blackface and point to the importance of tradition and the good charity works supported by the club which benefit the African American community. On Mardi Gras

morning, their floats follow a route that (the white) King Rex and his "krew" follow an hour later. Carnival scholar Joseph Roach states; "every year there is a new Rex and a new King Zulu, and every year they are supposed to look and act as they always have". Roach describes how, famously, on Mardi Gras morning in 1991, King Zulu started off late and collided with the Rex parade, which Roach interprets as a deliberate trickster's move by the Zulu band to undermine the Rex parade and disrupt the carefully planned route and schedule. Roach describes observing the performers, who eventually came parallel with one other, and points out that they each ignored one another as they performed their histories of oppressor and oppressed. [22]

The key question here is why the Zulus appear to simultaneously to parody *and* reinforce racist stereotypes? As Roach asks, for what reason has the Zulu parade "walked such a thin line between ridiculing and reinforcing race-conscious imagery that [these] Mardi Gras festivities perpetually re invoke?".[23] Clearly the performance offers the opportunity for the Zulus to make fun of racial stereotypes perpetuated by white supremacists and racists. It highlights the prejudiced portrayal of Africa and African descendants as laughable fantasies and invites audiences to ridicule ideas about an African culture perceived as primitive and backward. There are clear connections between this performance and the trickster's ability to turn the table on the powerful and reverse binaries. As Roach puts it: "King Zulu lets Rex drink with gusto from the deep bowl of racist laughter, but only after the Trickster has pissed in the soup".[24]

Similarly to the Zulus, the "Yankee Minstrels" of Trinidad carnival are a masquerade which draw from *and* empty the minstrel stereotype of its racist signifiers. This masquerade, which is no longer found on the streets of Port of Spain, was based on American minstrel shows which toured America and the Caribbean in the late ninetieth-century. The Yankee minstrels are an "imitation of an imitation"; black performers pretending be white

performers dressed up as minstrels. Instead of blackening their faces with burnt cork, the Trinidad minstrels *whitened* their faces *over* a black charcoal base, put red spots on their cheeks and wear an "Uncle Sam" costume of "scissor tailed coat, tight stripped trousers, white gloves and a tall beaver hat". They also sing traditional minstrel songs such as *Swanee River* and *Who's Sorry Now?* on the guitar with a dance routine to accompanied their mas. [25]

Here we see black American mimicry being "counter-mimicked".[26] This inversion of the blackface routine, played out in the carnival space in Trinidad, emulated real African American performances in minstrel shows. The blackface is laid on and then symbolically placed under erasure by the white make-up. Carnival scholar Hollis Liverpool writes that the band "resurrected the songs of the enslaved as well as the "Negro spirituals" mocked white planters and focused on the joys of freedom".[27] As Hollis Liverpool also points out, many of the minstrels in the Trinidad carnival in the 1920s and 30s saw themselves as being a part of the pan Africa movement.[28] "Uncle Sam" and its segregation policies and racist ideology become the target of Trinidadian satire in this mas and a "stunning example of the subversive appropriation of racist appropriation".[29]

The anti-racist struggle against racially demeaning and damaging stereotypes in the late nineteenth and twentieth century in the Americas called for a complex layering of racial codes and signifiers. While the ideology of black inferiority was not always challenged head-on in carnival culture, negative stereotypes of blackness were subtly undermined and eroded through performances which masked strategies of resistance. Like the "Yankee Minstrels" and the "Zulu" krews, these carnival acts empty racist ideology of its damaging signifiers through trickster tactics which bring to the attention of spectator the falsity of racial construction.

The Midnight Robber: Language as a Weapon

The Midnight Robber is another mas character that appropriates white American cultural forms and recasts them as symbols of black resistance. The Midnight Robber, a macho mas nearly always performed by a man, is part highwayman, part cowboy and part agent of death and destruction. The robber costume draws from clothes worn by cowboys in American movies which were wildly popular in the Caribbean, with its obsession with the trickster outlaw, epitomized by the Wild West gunslinger who makes his own laws to survive, in the 1940s and 50s. This is a parody of North American influences fused with Creole culture as the cowboy costume is reworked and combined with west African costuming. Maureen Warner-Lewis points out that Midnight Robber's hat is "a replica of the chiefs' hats worn in the coastal area of Nigeria between Lagos and Calabar" and that the tassels fringing the brim are "indigenous icons of chieftaincy such as the beaded tassels hanging from certain kings' crowns among the Yoruba".[30] Alongside his hat, the Midnight Robber often wears a cape adorned with skulls and carries a replica gun – yet it is his speech that is his most fearsome weapon.

The Midnight Robber is one of the few remaining traditional mas characters who "throws" long-winded speeches at his audience to challenge and confront them. Traditionally, he holds passers-by to ransom and revels in detailing the vengeance he will wreak on his oppressors through grand, verbose monologues in exchange for a prompt cash payment. He will only move on what he has received money from onlookers for his grandiloquence and his speeches detail the injustices he has suffered and highlight the corruption and abuse of power of the establishment.

The Midnight Robber's language is his power and his weapon; "my tongue is like the blast of a gun" he claims.[31] Other traditional mas characters who have speeches as part of

their repertoire are “Indians”, who speak in an incomprehensible tongue, Pierrot Grenade, who challenges other Pierrots to a spelling competition and claims to be able to spell any word as well as (as examined later) Shakespeare masqueraders.

Like Anansi, the Midnight Robber is a master of oratory who uses his linguistic skill (boasting, mockery, sly humor) to turn the tables on his oppressors. Speeches are committed to memory and handed down from one robber to the next. Here we see a continuation of the centrality of the West African “griot”, the storyteller who plays a key role in traditional West African communities. The Midnight Robber’s “robber talk” is a unique blend of Creole and old-fashioned, Shakespearian English and the “bigger” the words the more the Robber can demand as payment from onlookers.

However, like all the masquerades under analysis here, the Midnight Robber’s relationship to power is both complex and ambiguous. While he is clearly a figure who highlights the misdeeds of the powerful and the injustices of colonial history, he sometimes aligns himself with power; he might describe himself as Columbus, the colonial oppressor, but at the same time expose the colonial crimes of the “dog[s] of the Saxon[s]”.[32]

The Mystery Raiders of Port of Spain

In 2017 I interviewed the “The Mystery Raiders”, the last remaining traditional Midnight Robber band in Trinidad. My first interviewee was the late Charles Harrington, aka King Olender, who died in 2018. Harrington was the oldest Midnight Robbers in Trinidad and I visited him in his small house overlooking the capital. He was bed-ridden, so I talked to him as he lay on an impressive circular divan he had made himself using his skills as a carpenter. His room was small and bare and he was clearly unwell. I worried that I would be placing

him under unnecessary strain by interviewing him, but he was eager to talk and share his experiences as a carnival performer.

Harrington told me that he had been playing the Midnight Robber mas since he was a teenager after seeing a Midnight Robber masquerader as a boy and following him around, entranced by his outfit and his impressive mastery of language.[33] As his skills in carpentry grew, he was able to construct more elaborate costumes and transformed himself into the Midnight Robber "King Olender." During one carnival, Harrington hired an assistant costume maker, but decided never to request help again as no assistant could be trusted to make his outfit in the correct manner and follow his unique costuming vision. Every year, all year round, Charles would work on his costume, which would never be the same as the one he wore for the last carnival. For him, the two days of carnival were a culmination of pain-staking costume designing, making and rehearsing speeches.

Harrington left school early, but described his speeches as "a kind a poetry". He used to train boys who wanted to play the Robber mas, and insisted that creating and learning the speeches helped the boys develop academically: "Every exam they take in school they pass". He pointed out that learning the speeches not only improved their written and oral language skills but also helped them remember their lessons: "Don't take them home and learn school book", Harrington insisted, "let them learn the Robber speech, let them learn the Robber speech and they learn they lessons. [The speeches] helped them a lot, but you see plenty parent don't know that, don't know that".

This is clear example of the ways in which carnival traditions Creolise the colonially embedded Caribbean education system, resisting the domination of western poetry and literature and creating homegrown cultural forms which challenge the literary and educational hierarchy. Harrington also felt that the speeches empowered him, "feels got

power. Like a man with a gun". Wearing the costume and "throwing" speeches was transformative for Harrington; his mas, as with many players, had become fused with his character. The transformation was not just in the carnival space, but a part of his everyday existence.

One Midnight Robber Masquerader known as "King of the Graveyard" in 1980 explained to researcher Ruth Wuest that: "at one time I had as much as sixty-four speeches in my brain and you don't have to walk with a book to have them there" (Wuest, 1990, p. 44). Harrington boasted that in his youth he had committed over two hundred speeches to memory;: "Nearly everything you can think about, I have a speech for it". He showed me clippings from newspapers that presented him in his former glory, as one of the most celebrated Midnight Robbers in Port of Spain. From his circular bed, he recited the speeches he still remembered. His threats of vengeance and omnipotent power threw his frail and diminished state in sharp relief.

King Olander, as performed by Harrington, was ruthless and a true agent of death and destruction. Like the trickster, the Midnight Robber destroys the current order, injects chaos and creates havoc in the world so that a new world order can be born afresh. One of Harrington's speeches detailed the killing of infants and spoke of his many crimes, past and present:

> In the early 15th and 16th century
> Invoking my past criminal crimes
> After robbing the bank of Monte Carlo
> Followed by hundreds of policemen
> I then entered an infant hospital
> For shelter, but I attacked by someone
> And in my escape, I had to kill two infant dead
> Leaving 500 policeman dead, 600 wounded
> To add to my crimes
> And as I walk through the streets
> People at de windows and doors say-
> "Dear God that cold blooded murderer
> Who left blood under his barefoot"

I am known in this.
Everywhere I walk the earth beneath me
Tremble with fear
And death walks with me

Harrington would find robbers at carnival time to battle with, and sometimes these verbal battles could turn to "licks". The key was to know speeches well and also listening carefully to your opponent: "you see, when come to battle, come to battle, you have to remember them then. […] I thirty bring for them. You listening while you listening to the brother speaking, and you have to look to remember yours too. So there's a two way battle there. A duel." Back then, said Harrington, "I could have make speech on the spot". Harrington would also incorporate his opponents' speeches into his own to turn the tables on his rival;: "You make it a part, you make a part. You take that part from there". He explained:

> Whenever he say a word that you like, a word or two, in his speech, you can make a speech with it. You can make a speech with that. Like once, me and a fella battling […]. He make a speech like this; He will kill me, stab me, all of this. Well then I have speech answer for that. You understand? My speech – I will go. You going to record it?"

And so Harrington "threw" me his speech:

You gonna stand and a- face me
In a single-handed gun battle.
But these well-trained fingers of mine
Never missed a feel
[I] have the two fingers
[on] red hot shooting iron
Penetrate through the body […]
I am army steel cut copper jet
Iron tune, and brass strong
No sword, hatchet, dagger nor bullet
Can penetrate through this body of mine
That miraculous part of me that is supernatural
that I am more defensive than any combination

Why waste your shot?
You can't even give me a beauty spot!

Harrington even made an impromptu speech about me; “You want a speech for you too? [laughter]. They’re for young people too you know!”. He improvised a speech about our interview and his immediate request to be paid for it before it started, to which I readily compiled.

> Stop my pretty little miss!
> How come you
> Buy certain exchange?
> Perhaps in my *dendom* of the sun, mystique?
> When I was young and a certain romantic boy
> Good like you
> I would never destroy you
> But now I have no feelings for love
> And my romantic days have already past
> So if you want to live for eternity
> Go *deep* down in your pocket,
> And give someone’s purse to me
> A stylish warrior would [take?] your soul
> But today I’m telling one who’ll [lose] their tongue
> I’m shedding blood –
> I’m old, you’re young!

In the days that followed I spent time at the “Mystery Raiders” Midnight Robber mas camp interviewing the band. The camp was at band organizer Anthony Collymore’s house and Collymore described himself as a “reluctant robber”, as he found the performance challenging and never quite experienced that moment of possession during the mas; he never felt he *became* the robber.[34] He had inherited the organizational role from one of the most well-known and respected Midnight Robbers in Trinidad, Brian Honoré and now Brian’s son, Fédon, was in the Mystery Raiders band. When Brian passed away, Collymore inherited from Brian a duty of care for the ageing Midnight Robbers in the band, like Charles Harrington and Esau Millington, whom he visited regularly.

I interviewed the robbers about their masquerade; what compelled them to take to the road every year? The planning, the organization, the time, the energy, the expense and also the shared sense of not being respected due to the popularity of the "beads and bikini" mas - did this not put them off? Collymore explained that there was a lack of appreciation for "old mas"; for example, during one of their last performances, which was being filmed as they took to the stage. The local TV station cut to an advertisement break during the Midnight Robber speeches and then cut back to more beautiful, wining (gyrating) women adorned with feathers and sequins.

The Mystery Raiders discussed the ancient history of the masquerade, how the hats were the same design as the ones worn by Nigerian chiefs and the speeches similar in rhythm and theme to those of West African storytelling traditions. In the face of neo-colonialism, crime and corruption in Trinidad, the Midnight Robber, according to the Raiders, was a speaker of the truth, bringing the country's attention to both historical and contemporary wrongdoings. They also explained that, at a personal level, the speeches and the mas camp itself, with its atmosphere of camaraderie, helped a person feel empowered to overcome shyness, feelings of social inadequacy or awkwardness. As Harrington describes, the mas made him feel strong – when you put on the costume you feel fearless: "you change different" and "you not afraid of nobody".[35] It is this key element of carnival that current carnival theory often overlooks; a framework for examining the personal effects of the masquerade and the profound spiritual, emotional and psychological impact of playing mas. Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, whose theories of the "Carnivalesque" have dominated carnival scholarship, do little to help us understand the profoundly transformative effect that playing mas has on the individual, as Tola Dabiri explores in her article in this essay collection.[36]

Midnight Robber Fédon Honoré directly linked the practice of traditional mas to storytelling, both popular Caribbean cultural forms which he felt were being received by the Trinidadian media and public with diminished interest:

> Carnival isn't what it used to be. I think everything about the Carnival used to be about telling a story, there was a visual story, an oral story. This society we live in has lost its patience […]. To tell a story you have to listen to a story, you have to see it unfold. And you have to not tell me the end, you know. The twist doesn't work if you tell it right away, you have to see the build up to it and I think that there is a general impatience, and sort of - fascination with getting […] instant gratification that is reflected by a lot of what we see on the road on Carnival day itself. People don't have time for stories. [37]

Hélène Cécile, Fédon's partner and the only woman in the band, used her speeches to challenge violence against women's bodies in the Caribbean and misogyny through her performance. Cécile explained the potential of the Midnight Robber to fight sexism, even though women are traditionally excluded from the mas. Cécile chose to fuse two traditional mas characters, *La Diablesse* [38] and the Midnight Robber, to best suit her identity as a young Trinidadian woman:

> I'm trying to conserve all my courage for the [Midnight Robber] speech, but I'm going to definitely speak about what men have been doing to women and essentially say […] don't cross us because we are powerful too, and I will essentially take my revenge for everything that you've have done to us…
>
> I've only been playing for three years but I have actually noticed a change in myself in terms of confidence […]. I am not afraid any more of raising my voice and saying "*I'm not standing for this!*"[39]

The speeches delivered by the Midnight Robbers detailed their anger at contemporary social and ecological issues. John Stollmeyer, a Trinidadian conceptual artist and ecologist who plays with the Mystery Raiders, had been playing his character King Cobo since 1990. In the 2017 carnival he covered himself in mud from a place of spiritual significance for his

performance. Stollmeyer believes that "all of us have to evolve more sustainable lifestyles".[40] Through his speeches he brings attention to the damage done by human beings to our planet and our future by wanton consumerism and endless greed. In his "King Mal-Kobo Robber Talk", performed during Trinidad carnival 2019, he positioned himself as a "cosmic trickster" to raise awareness:

> I am the cosmic trickster, the mythic shape-shifter, paradox incarnate; the archetypal fool.
>
> At the crossroads of decision in every moment, I am the measure of courage, honesty and integrity,
> Who embraces the principle of disorder from which the energies of life spring, the forces of chaos and mystery.
> That force, careless of taboos that shatters all boundaries and brings down border walls.
> I have come to relieve you of your blind faith in consumer culture that is enshrined in your malls. [41]

After several visits to the mas camp, the Mystery Raiders unexpectedly invited me to go on the road with them on carnival Tuesday. They would lend me a hat, a cape and a whistle and I could then see for myself what it was like to play the Midnight Robber. On carnival day I realized logistics of the whole operation were complicated. Getting the full-sized coffin (a key prop) strapped to the roof of the truck and then down again, waiting for band members to arrive, a last-minute costume crisis and an unanticipated downpour proved to be challenging in all sorts of ways. Being on the road with the Mystery Raiders was a sharp contrast to the beads and bikini mas; there was no focus on drinking, dancing or looking attractive. Far from being hedonistic, this was a serious business. This was a ritual, and one which took place not just during the moment on the road, but throughout the year. Speeches were delivered on the Savannah stage and after much thought I decided my Midnight Robber persona was "Queen Anansi Robber." My speech focused on my mixed-race heritage, complex positionality in Trinidad and love of the trickster figure:

Queen Anansi Robber

My Father came from England
My mother from the Caribbean
Here I stand before you
On your Trini island
I may look like a nice woman
But fear me, or you'll pay
I'll haunt you through your nights
And rip holes in your day
A foreign agent of destruction
With a foot in black and white
I see you mock men coming
And you are an ugly sight
Don't smile and look at me
And ask me where I'm from
I'm Queen Anansi Robber
And I will rob your song
The spider trickster moves through I
And I is watching you
I'll mash your mind and take your heart
Me telling you*, fe true*

Trinidadian poet Vahani Capildeo (who identifies as gender neutral) also draws from "robber talk" in their work and on-stage Midnight Robber [42] "monologue" performances, which start with an ear-splitting scream. In their poetry collection *Skin Can't Hold* (2019) Capildeo"s "Stranger Invader" Midnight Robber declares furiously; "It is futile to hide/ I am death multiplied" […]. "At the age of minus six hundred and sixty six, I met the Seraphim and cut off their pricks".[43] The Stranger Invader is merciless, blighting the poor and powerful alike; in the Caribbean, they sicken Columbus's men and when colonisers take away the language of the enslaved, Stranger Invader chews on their tongues.

Shakespeare Mas in Carriacou: **The Sweet Book**

Now I want to turn to the Shakespeare Masqueraders from Carriacou as examples of speechifying traditions that transform Eurocentric and problematic racial ideologies embedded in canonical texts and colonial education. The tiny island of Carriacou sits at the the southernmost of the Grenadines. It has reputation for being less touristy, less popular with the yachting crowd and more isolated than its sister islands. Carriacou was a French colony from 1762, following French defeat in the Seven Years War, it became a British colony until 1974 and a dependency of its larger sister island Grenada.

Shakespeare mas players play their mas on Shrove Tuesday. The speeches thrown by players are directly lifted from primary school text books taught to Grenadian school children. In the Midnight Robber's speeches there are also sections from canonical colonial textbooks with numerous references to a passage on the "Destruction of Port Royal" in the *Nelson's West Indian Reader* (*Book Five)*, as well as quotations from literary and poetic texts such as Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1791).[44] Similarly, the speeches of the Shakespeare masqueraders are adapted from passages of Shakespeare's *Julius Cesar* and are directly lifted from the *Royal Reader* colonial text books. The *Royal Reader*s were used throughout the British Empire as a Primary school textbooks and were central to Caribbean schooling from the 1880s through to the 1970s.[45]

The Shakespeare mas players wear colourful clothing and carry sticks or electrical cables or dried bulls penises as whips.[46] The whip here is symbolic of plantation punishments as well as the punishments children would receive in colonial schools for not reciting passages from their schoolbooks properly. The 'licks' of the whip can also be symbolised as the 'licks' of the tongue; the tongue as the whip is an instrument of terror that rains linguistic blows down on opponents. The mas players challenge one another to recite passages from

Julius Caesar and are whipped if they don't do so properly. Each player is accompanied by a "peacemaker" who makes sure that things don't get out of hand. Key speeches are Antony's funeral oration, Cassius forgiveness speech, "Cassius is aweary of the world," and "Calpurnia's plea to Caesar". Players will ask their opponents: "Will you relate to me Mark Antony's speech over Caesar's dead body?". His opponent will respond, "Go back and relate," and then ask: "Will you relate the speech about Caesar's will?".[47]

The Royal Readers, published by Thomas Nelson in the UK, were republished from the 1970s onwards as *Nelson's West Indian Readers* and complied by J.O Cutteridge. Both schoolbooks were published by Thomas Nelson and sons and *Nelson's West Indian Readers* supposedly had a more Caribbean emphasis than the *Royal Readers*. The textbook contain many swashbuckling tales of conquer and passages from canonical English texts such as the biographies of Queen Victoria, Napoleon and William the Conqueror. Typical passages include "The Voyages of Columbus" and "The Buccaneers" [48], and none of the passages are arranged in any type of narrative sequence but fragmented and piecemeal.[49] Schoolchildren digested excerpts from *Julius Caesar* randomly, in a series of disconnected scenes. They would have to fill in the gaps themselves; even the titles of the books and their authors are at times excluded from the readers.

Scholar Valerie Joseph examines "how the contents of the *Royal Readers* communicated the ideological lessons of colonial domination".[50] Joseph demonstrates that in Grenada, *Royal Reader* text books exerted a type of "historical erasure" to impose imperial power:

> A close analysis of three stories in volume *Royal Readers* No. 4 reveals the textbooks communicate several unstated and often unrecognized tenets of ideological whiteness, instilled by the colonial authorities to augment a project of subjugated and unquestioning acquiescence to their imperial power […].[51]

According to Joseph, the lessons remained in the memories of the inhabitants of Granada "for decades after school was over":

> These books upheld the achievements of British heroes such as Hawkins, Drake, Rodney, Nelson, Wellington, and Gordon to colonials for emulation; and assured [students] that law, order, and good government was theirs automatically because they were under Britain.[52]

Indeed, this is evident in *Nelson's West Indian Reader,* a passage first published in 1928 and entitled "Lesson 22, 'Descriptive Extracts-I: (a) Port of Spain in 1869" which is an excerpt from Charles Kinsley's *At Last: Christmas in the West Indies* (1871), an autobiographical account of his time in the Caribbean:

> When you have ceased looking at the women and their ways, you become aware of the strange variety of races which people the city. Here passes a Coolie Hindu with nothing but a *dhoti* on his loins. [He is] a white-bearded, delicate featured old gentleman, his thin limbs and small hands contrasting strangle with the brawny Negroes round.

The Chinese have "doleful" expressions, "Negresses" wear "gaudy" dresses and the inhabitants are "all aiding in the general work of doing nothing".[53] Clearly, for Caribbean schoolchildren to absorb these deeply problematic stereotypes of their own people and islands, unchallenged, at a developmental age would have wrought long-standing damage on the psyche.

During carnival, Shakespeare mas players in Carriacou come from villages such as Top Hill and Hillsborough with crowns of "ficus roots" (a tree with vine like roots at the surface of the ground) and wire-mesh masks adorned with screens painted with animals. Often the men carry a battered edition of the *Royal Reader*, "like his father and grandfather before him".[54] The Shakespeare mas is a type of "counter discourse", it resists the dominant cultural order. Here we see the lampooning and comic inversion of the pretentions of school teachers and colonial educators, as well as that of the colonial order. Like the trickster, the

mas player must be a "man of words" and be able to recite the "great book" with great skill in an act of destabilising mimicry.

Why *Julius Caesar*?

The reasons for choosing *Julius Caesar* and not Shakespeare's other plays or other passages from the *Royal Reader* are complex. What we see here is a mixture of denunciation and appreciation for Shakespeare. The play is, after all, about the power of language. If focuses on speeches and poetry and the linguistic sway needed to win the hearts of men and women, the people of Rome, through oratory – the trickster's gift. *Julius Caesar* is considered by inhabitants of Carriacou to be "sweeter" than other of Shakespeare's plays and the structure of the play, with its famous speeches, makes it easier for participants to "throw" speeches at one another.[55] With its themes exploring fate, free will, the tensions between the good of the people pitted against the desires of rulers, the speeches speak to the lives of the people of Carriacou, as well as allowing for players to display their gifts of oratory, to memorise and manipulate the great "book", creolize it through carnival performance and symbolically comment on the injustices of slavery and colonialism through the use of the whip, dried bull's penis , stick or electrical cable. They also reflect the turbulent history of Grenada which, after independence from Britain in 1973, experienced the execution of the Marxist Prime Minister Maurice Bishop. Bishop and his New Jewel Party had led an armed uprising and taken control of the government in 1979. This historical context is combined with the need to seal the "torturer's tongue" and use it beyond his capabilities.

Stealing the Torturer's Tongue

The subversion of the colonial educational text and stereotypes of blackness by the Zulu krews, the Midnight Robbers and the Shakespeare Masqueraders is highly significant and can be aligned with the type of "writing back" strategies employed by postcolonial authors Jean Rhys in *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) and J. M Coetzee in *Foe* (1986)[56], a literary strategy which questions the authority of the English literary canon, challenges colonial power and destabilises problematic Western representations of "the other".[57]

The linguistic prowess of Midnight Robber and Shakespeare Mas players echo Brathwaite's "Nation Language" – they subvert upper class "Standard English" spoken by the former white ruling elite and their language functions as a device to deceive as they bend and change it to suit a Caribbean context. This is a form of mimicry with an acutely decentering force at its heart.

Carnival continues to provide a creative medium for scrutinizing an oppressive and traumatic past as well as highlighting flaws in contemporary society. Traditional masquerades keep creative traditions of carnival alive and, at a deeply personal and psychological level, playing mas is transformative. In this way the Midnight Robber and the Shakespeare Mas player are firmly embedded in the oral tradition that African American theorist Henry Louis Gates has identified as "signifyin"; a boasting, mocking, playfulness in language, a type of linguistic dexterity and the ability to "show off" with words.[58] I want to end with the poem "Stolen Song" by David Findley, which forms the epigraph to Caribbean Canadian speculative fiction author Nalo Hopkinson's futuristic, feminist portryal of the Midnight Robber in her novel *Midnight Robber* (2012). The poem draws our attention to the profound power of the Creolisation of standard English in the face of enslavement and

colonial rule, epitomised by speechifying mas players who speak, rather than write, back to the English canon:

I stole the torturers tongue!

[...]

watch him try an' claim as his own this long, strong old tongue's
new-remembered rhythms . . .
hear this long tongue!
fear this long tongue!
know this tall tale to be mine too, and I'll live or die by it.
I stole the torturer's tongue![59]

Endnotes

[1] Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o explains in *Decolonising the Mind* (1986) that culture is carried specifically by language. Wa Thiong'o writes "language as culture is the collective memory bank of a people's experience in history. Culture is almost indistinguishable from language". Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1886), 15.
[2] Emily Zobel Marshall, *Anansi's Journey* (Kingston: UWI Press, 2012).
[3] Emily Zobel Marshall, *American Trickster: Trauma, Tradition and Brer Rabbit* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2019).
[4] *American Trickster: Trauma, Tradition and Brer Rabbit* also demonstrates that Brer Rabbit was eventually reclaimed by twentieth-century African-American novelists whose protagonists' "trick" their way out of limiting stereotypes, break down social and cultural boundaries and offer readers practical and psychological methods for challenging the traumatic legacies of slavery and racism.
[5] For a further discussion of trauma and the trickster see the introduction to Emily Zobel Marshall's *American Trickster: Trauma, Tradition and Brer Rabbit* (London: Rowman and Littlefield, 2019).
[6] For a further discussion see Rodger D. Abrahams, *The Man-of-Words in the West Indies: Performance and the Emergence of Creole Culture* (London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1983).
[7] Henry Louis Gates Jr. established the centrality of the trickster to African American writing when he demonstrated the ways in which the African American trickster Eshu symbolises linguistic and literary strategies which are so *uniquely* African American that, according to Gates, they must be analysed within a specifically African American theoretical model. See: Henry Louis Gates Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).
[8] From "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse" in Homi K Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 86.
[9] Zora Neale Hurston challenges what she calls the "gospel" truth that "the Negro is lacking in originality" by arguing that "mimicry is an art in itself" rather than any desire "to be like the one imitated". See Zora Neale Hurston in Henry Louis Gates Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 118.
[10] Academic Viranjini Munasinghe explains in *Callaloo or Tossed Salad?: East Indians and the Cultural Politics of Identity in Trinidad* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2001) that between 1845 and 1917 (when indenture was abolished) approximately 143,939 Indians came to Trinidad to work. For further information on Indian culture and carnival in Trinidad also see Burton Sankeralli's article "Indian Presence in Carnival", *TDR,* 42, 3 (1998), 203-212.
[11] The excellent online traditional mas resource "Traditional Mas Archive" states that the Jab Jab mas "was once regarded as being played primarily by masqueraders of East Indian ethnicity, and was referred to in a 1956 publication as "Coolie Devils" (Caribbean Quarterly, Volume 4)." In "Jab Jab" (2019) <http://www.traditionalmas.com/project/jab-jab-2/>.

[12] Kevin Adonis Browne, *High Mas: Carnival and the Poetics of Caribbean Culture* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2018), 30.
[13] Antonio Benítez-Rojo, *The Repeating Island: The Caribbean and the Postmodern Perspective*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 295.
[14] Benítez-Rojo, *The Repeating Island*, 303.
[15] Benítez-Rojo, *The Repeating Island*, 295.
[16] Kevin Adonis Browne, *High Mas: Carnival and the Poetics of Caribbean Culture* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2018), 294. This discussion of Benítez-Rojo and Browne's work on carnival also appears in Emily Zobel Marshall "Carnival, Calypso, and Dancehall Cultures: Making the Popular Political in Contemporary Caribbean Writing" in Ronald Cummings and Alison Donnell (eds.), *Caribbean Literature in Transition, Volume Three: 1970-2015* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

[17] Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (Colombia: Columbia University Press, 1996).
[18] Roach, *Cities of the Dead,* 18.
[19] Roach *Cities of the Dead.*
[20] George Swetnam (ed), *Keystone Folklore Quarterly: Quarter Journal of the Pennsylvania Forlklore Society*. 9 (1964): 159–160.
[21] Roach, *Cities of the Dead*, 19.
[22] Roach, *Cities of the Dead,* 19.
[23] Roach, *Cities of the Dead,* 21.
[24] Roach, *Cities of the Dead*, 24.
[25]In "Minstrels" (2019) < http://www.traditionalmas.com/project/minstrels/ > and Hollis Liverpool in Louis Chude-Sokei, *The Last "Darky": Bert Williams, Black-On-Black Minstrelsy, and The African Diaspora* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 148.
[26] Chude-Sokei, *The Last "Darky*", 148.
[27] Hollis Liverpool in Chude-Sokei, *The Last "Darky*", 148.
[28] Chude-Sokei, *The Last "Darky*, 149.
[29] Hollis Liverpool in Chude-Sokei, *The Last "Darky*",149.
[30] Maureen Warner Lewis, *Guinea's Other Suns: The African Dynamic in Trinidad Culture* (Dover, U.S: Majority Press, 1991), 183.

[31] Brian Honoré, "The Midnight Robber: Master of Metaphor, Baron of Bombast." *TDR*, 42, 3, (1998), 126.
[32] Ruth Wuest, "The Robber in Trinidad Carnival" *Caribbean Quarterly.* 36, (1990), 42-53. For more information on the Midnight Robber in Caribbean carnival see Emily Zobel Marshall "Resistance Through 'Robber Talk': Storytelling Strategies and the Carnival Trickster". *Caribbean Quarterly, 62,* (2016).

[33] Charles Harrington, interview with author February 2017, Port of Spain. [Recording in possession of the author].
[34] Anthony Collymore, interview with author February 2017, Port of Spain. [Recording in possession of the author].
[35] Charles Harrington, interview with author February 2017, Port of Spain. [Recording in possession of the author].
[36] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World.* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).
[37] Fédon Honoré, interview with author February 2017, Port of Spain. [Recording in possession of the author].
[38] La Diablesse, who also features prominently in Kevin Browne's *High Mas* (2018), has her origins in French Caribbean and Grenadian folklore. She takes the form of a beautiful woman with a cloven hoof who leads men to their deaths. Enticed by her beauty they follow her into the forest and fall to their death over a clifftop.
[39] Hélène Cécile, interview with author February 2017, Port of Spain. [Recording in possession of the author].
[40] John Stollmeyer shares his world vision and explains that he would like to see a world in which "food is free again and everyone is their own artist, doctor and priest/ess. The culture is loaded with participatory ritual celebration of seasonal changes. Making art, which just means expressing our skills, singing and dancing are everyday activities." Interview with John Stollmeyer by Adele Todd (2014) <https://thebookman.wordpress.com/2008/11/04/i-n-t-e-r-v-i-e-w-s-johnny-stollmeyer/ >
[41] John Stollymeyer, "King Mal-Kobo Robber Talk". Sent via email to the author, Sept 20, 2019.
[42] Ruth Wuest, "The Robber in Trinidad Carnival", *Caribbean Quarterly.* 36, (1990), 42-53.
[43] Vahani Capildeo*, Skin Can Hold* (London: Carcanet, 2019). n.p.

[44] Daniel J Crowley, "The Midnight Robbers". *Caribbean Quarterly*, 4, (1956), 263-274.
Another key Shakespeare masquerade scholar is late UWI academic Gisselle Rampual, author of

"Shakespeare Mas: Performance and Recontextualisation of Julius Caesar on the Caribbean Carnival Stage" in Michael Dobson and Estelle Rivier-Arnaud (eds.) *Rewriting Shakespeare's Plays for the Contemporary Stage* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholar Publishing, 2017). 83-94.

[45] Dionne Craig, "Commonplace Literacy and the Colonial Scene: The Case of Carriacou's Shakespeare Mas" in Dionne Craig and Parmita Kapadia (eds.), *Native Shakespeares, Indigenous Appropriations on a Global Stage Dionne* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 37-57.
[46] Craig, "Commonplace Literacy", 38.

[47] Joan M. Fayer and Joan F. McMurray in "The Carriacou Mas' as Syncretic Artifact." *The Journal of American Folklore*. 112. 443 (1999), 58-73. Fayer and McMurray state that: "During interviews with various residents, there were impromptu recitations from the biographies of Napoleon, William Tell, William the Conqueror, Queen Victoria, and Henry V. The passages were recited with pride. Even with a limited familiarity with the series, the sources can be identified in the readers."64.

[48] J. O. Cutteridge. *Nelson's West Indian Reader, Book Five*. (Cheltenham: Nelson Thornes, 2013).
[49] Albert James Arnold, Julio Rodríguez-Luis and J. Michael Dash (eds.), *A History of Literature in the Caribbean: English- and Dutch-speaking Countries.* (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamin Publishing Company, 1994), 46.
[50] Valerie Joseph, "How Thomas Nelson and Sons' *Royal Readers* Textbooks Helped Instil the Standards of Whiteness into Colonized Black Caribbean Subjects and Their Descendants", *Transforming Anthropology*, 20, 2 (2012), 147.
[51] Joseph "How Thomas Nelson and Sons' *Royal Readers* Textbooks Helped Instil the Standards of Whiteness into Colonized Black Caribbean Subjects and Their Descendants", 146.
[52] Smith and Comitas (1992, 24) in Valerie Joseph "How Thomas Nelson and Sons' Royal Readers Textbooks Helped Instil the Standards of Whiteness into Colonized Black Caribbean Subjects and Their Descendants", 146
[53] J. O. Cutteridge. *Nelson's West Indian Reader, Book Five*. (Cheltenham: Nelson Thornes, 2013), 131.
[54] Dionne Craig, "Commonplace Literacy and the Colonial Scene: The Case of Carriacou"s Shakespeare Mas" in Dionne Craig and Parmita Kapadia (eds.), *Native Shakespeares, Indigenous Appropriations on a Global Stage* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), 38.
[55] Joan M. Fayer and Joan F. McMurray, "The Carriacou Mas' as Syncretic Artifact." *The Journal of American Folklore*. 112. 443 (1999), 64.
[56] Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) and J. M Coetzee's *Foe* (1986) "write back" to negative colonial representations of the Caribbean and blackness. Rhys addresses Charlotte Brontë problematic portrayal of "Bertha" as a "mad" Creole in *Jane Eyre* (1847) and Coetzee rewrites Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) to scrutinize the portrayal of "man Friday".
[57] Edward Said, *Orientalism*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978); Daniel J Crowley, "The Midnight Robbers". *Caribbean Quarterly*, 4, (1956), 269.
[58] Henry Louis Gates Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).
[59] David Findley in Nalo Hopkinson, *Midnight Robber* (New York: Hatchette Book Group, 2000), Epigraph.