

DANCE AND IDENTITY POLITICS IN CARIBBEAN LITERATURE:
CULTURE, COMMUNITY, AND COMMEMORATION

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For Michael, whose orbit I am blessed to share

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INTRODUCTION

One cultural activity that both tourists and non-natives associate with the Caribbean—dance, especially at Carnival—has different meanings for the dancers, their Caribbean audiences, and island visitors. These varying views on Caribbean dance appear in *The Dragon Can't Dance*, *Praisesong for the Widow*, *The Lonely Londoners*, and *Unburnable*; for these novels depict dance as a means to not only political self-awareness, but also communal belonging. How people in (formerly) colonized areas of the world self-identify both individually and collectively, as Frantz Fanon discusses in *The Wretched of the Earth*, corresponds partly to how they express and defend their culture. By “culture,” the Martiniquan intellectual refers to solidarity based on ethnic classification and national cohesion forged in anti-colonial/revolutionary struggle. However, culture can also serve as a catch-all term for the material and aesthetic “particularisms” (223) of a group. Thus, like the identity of the colonized (which Fanon psychoanalyzes), culture eludes “all simplification” and remains ambiguous (224). His explications center on European and African cultures, but his point is applicable for this study of dance in Caribbean literature; for, when we speak of dance in Caribbean culture, we refer to, firstly, exported Caribbean dance styles in the globalized market (e.g. Rihanna’s moves in her “Rude Boy” music video), secondly, festive dancing advertised by the tourism industry and thirdly, traditional dance practices from as far away as Africa, the Indian subcontinent, and China. Besides these economic and social forces, Caribbean culture also results from an imbricated history of conservatism, assimilation, adaptation and innovation. These layers of intercultural interaction are neatly summarized

in performance studies scholar Diana Taylor's definition of "transculturation," which "denotes the transformative process undergone by all societies as they come in contact with and acquire foreign cultural material, whether willingly or unwillingly" (10). These forces and effects produce the patchwork quality of Caribbean culture that has become increasingly popular in literary studies throughout the 20th and 21st centuries.

However, Caribbean culture has long been a subject of interest to readers from outside the islands—especially to colonizers who simplify culture by equating it with customs. One poignant example of this gross simplification appears in a conversation led by Alfred Drummond, the "colonial administrator" in Marie-Elena John's novel, *Unburnable*. Looking out over Masquerade¹ festivities from a gallery belonging to a leading family in Roseau, Dominica, Drummond reads the revelers' masking practices as mere text, available for his reading/interpreting pleasure (133). He discusses with a younger Englishman the probable tribal heritages of the mask-wearers, based on his knowledge of African cultural practices from having worked in Africa. For him, the "[island] world [was] encoded as text, and that territory [became] a legible space" from which he could study the imported cultures of the enslaved Africans at Masquerade (Lane 3). This Englishman is incapable of recognizing that the masked performers are doing more than representing their African and tribal heritages. They are performing "to demonstrate that they were the highest authority. To have the police back away when they menaced, to have people run in fear when they approached. To command respect. To show they ruled the road in their fearsome *sensay* costumes" (130). Because he is distracted by his anthropological motivations, Drummond cannot grasp the true purpose

¹ In Dominica and elsewhere in the Caribbean, "Masquerade" celebrations eventually came to be known as "Carnival." See John, page 167.

behind the customs and costumes he observes. His approach to studying the revelers' commemorative practices only from a pseudo-anthropological angle discounts the rest of their heritage as rebellious slaves, emancipated people, and Dominicans. Caribbean authors like John can expose this type of simplification by researching and showing readers the historical issues bound up in these cultural practices.

Historically, according to scholar and Trinidadian calypsonian Hollis "Chalkdust" Liverpool, dance and "[c]arnival cultural activities were allowed in all the islands of the Caribbean for these were seen as harmless innocent amusements which were necessary for the happiness of the enslaved Africans" ("Rituals" 97). Yet slave owners nevertheless "feared that the horns and drums that accompanied the dance were being used for communication purposes" to organize slave rebellions ("Rituals" 103). Jamaican dance scholar Rex Nettleford also notes this subtext in the dance, adding that the slaves, through their movements, "cloaked defiance of the power structure through mimicry"—that is, by co-opting European dances (19). Afro-Caribbean dance remained a sanctioned but monitored past-time, however, even after slavery was abolished. To show the Afro-Caribbean population that they were still in control of society, whites reciprocally co-opted African-based dances and installed themselves in the freedmen's Carnival activities ("Rituals" 51). Despite this infiltration of sorts, the Afro-Caribbean celebrants expressed themselves more freely throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries, critiquing with their sexual- and religious-themed masquerades white Creole and European culture "as a method of resistance" (279).² As racial and moral tensions eased, the transcultural

² Liverpool writes in an earlier book that in 1930s Trinidad the upper class looked on calypso-inspired dancing as "jammed behavior," which signified prostitution and debauchery ("Culture" 48). Against those Victorian assumptions about African dance styles, he argues that the music and dance did not take on their modern, overtly lascivious form until Americans became a presence on the islands during World War II.

syncretism produced modern Caribbean dance culture, an aesthetic *mélange* that appealed to people from every class and race. People in the Caribbean began to embrace their cultural similarities, and learned to see their differences as healthy. A prime example of this cultural collectivism can be seen in the efforts of choreographer Beryl McBurnie to share her native Trinidadian dance styles with dancers from other islands in the region. Caribbean scholar Gordon Rohlehr declares that “[her] vision was wide, encompassing the ancestral roots of the various races—African, Indian, Chinese, European, Native Caribbean—whose coming together in the crucible of Caribbean history had engendered the unique and multifaceted collective identity of the region. It was through” her willingness to aesthetically cross-pollinate Caribbean cultures “that the region glimpsed its cultural potential as a federated nation” (Rohlehr 275). As the people in the Caribbean gained more freedom, so also did they dance more.

Like the Dominicans’ masquerades in John’s novel, dance in Caribbean literature is often closely linked with cultural events—especially Carnival, the most popular festivity in the region. To learn about this event (or season, as many in the Caribbean think of Carnival) is to gain a better understanding of Caribbean dance itself. In the twinned islands of Trinidad and Tobago, the hub for many Caribbean Carnivalian practices, dance has a rich, however controversial history. Scholars have for more than fifty years debated whether African or European influences were more dominant in Carnival’s early years. The debate is significant; whoever can claim the heritage of the annual event’s progenitors attains and retains prominence in the Carnival performances. Thus, for the Trinidadian scholar Ian Isidore Smart, the argument that Carnival “is

By that time the steelsbandmen, calypsonians, stickfighters and masqueraders alike had contributed to the formation of this seasonal dance culture, and had all been condemned as “jamettes” (“Culture” 49).

essentially [an African] celebration of fertility” and “warriorhood” serves as a buoy for Afro-Caribbean ethnic solidarity (41-43). His argument and that of fellow “Trinibagonian” Max Harris build from an informed history of the event’s evolution through colonial and post-Emancipation years. Harris explains how “the aristocracy, colonial government, and businessmen joined forces to appropriate, tame, and prettify [Carnival]” (111), so as to control the masses and nullify the role-reversing that, as Mikhail Bakhtin famously contends, was the original intent of the European version of Carnival. The debate over origins suggests a crisis of interpretation among scholars, and perhaps among revelers, too. Whether the early African slaves greatly influenced modern Carnival festivities, they imbued their cultural activities with commemorative values to honor the memory of their forebears. Yet do Carnival revelers still identify and experience that original intent even after European and capitalist forces adopted/adapted Carnival? Is Carnival still a signifier for the resilience of Afro-Caribbean culture when national and international businesses co-opt it from year to year? Smart defends the purposefulness of Carnival, insisting that it “is anything but societal self-denial. It is the essential, the profoundly self-affirming, gesture of a people” (48). However, for Harris, it is simultaneously “a victim” of capitalism and a “powerful folk theatre...layered with hidden transcripts [that act] as a small counterbalance to the forces that would privilege commercial order and official hierarchies of power” (122). Despite their differences, both men feel that Carnival—and, therefore, the practices constituting it—deserves to be appreciated as more than an aesthetic means to a financial end, as more than a pre-packaged tourist event.

When parceled out singly, the practices comprising so rich and complicated an experience as Carnival generate meanings often difficult to apprehend in a phrase, a photo, or a masquerade costume. Caribbean dance by itself offers a rich field of study for Caribbean writers, historians, as well as academics in literary and performance studies. Writer Paule Marshall in *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People* and memoirist Edwidge Danticat in *After the Dance: A Walk through Carnival in Jacmel, Haiti* portray some of the dancing styles of Caribbean Carnival celebrations. Others present dance in non-Carnivalian settings, where dance is a metaphor for joy or nature, such as in *Pluie et vent sur Téliumée Miracle* (in English, *The Bridge of Beyond*) by Simone Schwarz-Bart. Dance in schoolyard play becomes sexual politics in the documentary film *Show Me Your Motion: The Ringplay Games of the Bahamas* by Ian Gregory Strachan. And dance operates as a vodou practice in *Mama Lola: A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn* by Karen McCarthy Brown. Each of these scholars represents different aspects of Caribbean dance for their audiences. Their contributions to the study of Caribbean dance in their various fields and in their own languages demonstrate the topic's popularity among a wide, Caribbean audience.

Dance appears often in Anglophone Caribbean literature, usually when a character chooses to celebrate and emphasize his/her freedom from the physical, emotional, and societal constraints that may normally keep the body in check. This liberating expressiveness also exhibits the dancing subject's will to declare where those boundaries should lie, or if such constraints should exist at all. Caribbean literature often shows a character's political consciousness apparently emerging in chorus with their bodily movement. This study analyzes the symbolic force and political significance of

Caribbean dance—both celebratory (as in Carnival) and defensive (as in warrior dances). Furthermore, this study observes how the weight of Western views on dance influences Caribbean transmutations and translations of cultural behavior, especially within the chosen literary examples of dance, both in ritual acts and spontaneous movements. The four novels I have chosen, published within the fifty-year span ranging from 1956 to 2006, make up a sample of modern Caribbean literature. The earlier novels were produced by men; the latter two, by women. *The Dragon Can't Dance* (1979), by Earl Lovelace, and *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983), by Paule Marshall, offer fascinating insights on the importance of ludic abandon in social dance settings, while addressing identity formation through self-conscious motility. In two more novels an analysis of motions and stances reveals how some dancers feel they must defend themselves from the agendas of others. In Samuel Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* (1956), Caribbean immigrants in London fight for the right to claim/name how their dancerly and musical activities are to be shared with/exposed to the white, London audience. However, in Marie-Elena John's *Unburnable* (2006), characters dance to rebuff or respond to colonialism, racism, colorism, and classism.

These four novels deal primarily with issues related to Anglophone Afro-Caribbean culture and dance. However, these literary choices do not reflect the desire to monolithize dance in the Caribbean novel. On the contrary, these novels demonstrate various constructions of dance and political consciousness in the Caribbean. The locations from which these authors hail and in which these stories are set include a number of places relevant to recent Caribbean history: Carriacou, Dominica, Grenada, Jamaica, Trinidad, the United Kingdom and the United States. For the most part, these

novels do not revise the slave era; they are set in the writer's day and age. Only *Unburnable* takes the reader back three generations to Dominica during the 1940s and 1950s before colonial emancipation. However, it deals less with slavery per se and more with Maroon resistance to colonial culture and government. All four novels depict the sundry migratory patterns of people from or interested in the Caribbean. In *Lovelace* we meet Trinidadian islanders and in *Marshall* we see tourists and islanders together. In *John* and *Selvon* we observe, respectively, how immigrants to the United States and the United Kingdom make movements toward and away from the Caribbean. These novels, therefore, represent broad issues within the African Diaspora, including identity, community and nationality. Sometimes at the center of and sometimes in the periphery surrounding these issues, dance constitutes a significant part of the novels' themes.

Using several theoretical approaches to the study of dance and the African Diaspora can supplement a critical reading of these literary texts and enrich our appreciation. To this end, a combined reading of the novels through the lenses of postcolonial and performance studies follows. Briefly juxtaposing the theories of thinkers in these fields with those in cultural and postmodern studies, I will expose the imbrications of these studies. My work is interdisciplinary, not only because gathering together several discourses yields richer analysis, but also because interdisciplinarity cannot be helped. Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub tease out the complexity of theory's inevitable interlacing to say, "What we call history we usually conceive of as a discipline of inquiry and as a mode of knowledge. What we call narrative we usually conceive of as a mode of discourse and as a literary genre" (93, quoted in Suárez 16). Investigating the obvious overlaps between areas of literary theorization, I will outline why the discussion

of dance and its literary form exposes Caribbean cultural knowledge at risk of being forgotten.

Although I employ the term “postcolonial” throughout this text, I adopt Ania Loomba’s disclaimer that such a word “is not only inadequate to the task of defining contemporary realities in the once-colonised countries, and vague in terms of indicating a specific period of history, but may also cloud the internal social and racial differences of many societies” (13). Nevertheless, as an arena of discourse concerning the effects of colonialism, it has a history relevant to my study. Firstly, postcolonialism refers to the onset of independence from the United Kingdom (which occurred at different times for each Caribbean island); secondly, it refers to the social/political/psychological effects British rule had on colonized societies; and thirdly, it refers to the field of intellectual thought, mostly from the 20th century onwards, concerning dominance and resistance. For the purposes of this study, it is important to note that postcolonial analysis in and about the Caribbean began after the inauguration of Négritude, a literary movement started in the 1930s by Francophone Caribbean poets Léopold Sédar Senghor and Aimé Césaire. These early thinkers perceived how, for colonialism to take root and effectively subdue millions of people for so long, an invented “superiority” had to underpin all colonial activity (Césaire 50). By the 1950s several more colonial exposés had been published, including the Tunisian Albert Memmi’s famous treatise *The Colonizer and the Colonized* in which he outlines two choices for the “colonized”: assimilate in the white, European culture, or reject everything about and everyone from that culture. By the 1960s and 1970s, many postcolonial thinkers moved away from Memmi’s paradigm, focusing instead on race. By the 1980s and 1990s, many theorists were also discussing

nationalism. Seen diversely as political attribution, doctrinal qualification, popular consciousness and patriotic sentiment, nationalism occupied postcolonial thinkers well into the 1990s. However, its discursive popularity began to wane once thinkers like “Eric Hobsbawm... questioned whether nationalism is even an appropriate term for the process of identity formation in post-colonial, multi-ethnic states” (Harney 25). Edward Said, paraphrasing the concerns of Partha Chatterjee, also notes that “nationalism can become a panacea for *not* dealing with economic disparities, social injustice, and the capture of the newly independent state by a nationalist elite” (217). As is typical for academic ebb and flow, these critiques of nationalism accompanied new interests in globalization and transnationalism. In Caribbean studies these discursive changes reflect scholars’ efforts to reveal the intersectionality of race/gender/class and other identificatory categories.

Performance studies is an interdisciplinary approach to the study of action, movement, stasis, theatre and, on a philosophical level, representation. This field, therefore, addresses performance as it relates to language, the body, identity, societal events and literature. Applicable to Caribbean literature, this theoretical field firstly and fundamentally considers how the body becomes recognizable as such through performances. The masquerading or *mas*’ of Carnival, which “[comes] from the French *masque* [and] connotes identity transformations and catharsis,” therefore signifies the intrinsic self-identification of the masquerader (Gourdine 91). This fundamental level of performance underlies the second and third layers of performativity seen in Caribbean literature—the performance of identity politics as language use and as coping/survival mechanism. In the second sense, for example, Judith Raiskin can read Michelle Cliff’s *No Telephone to Heaven*, and say that the characters “choose roles that permit them to

perform the political actions they believe in,” simply by choosing semantically charged words to identify themselves to others (192). Clare, the main character, chooses to be “Jamaican,” although she could claim to be “American” because she spent many of her childhood years in the United States; and Harry/Harriet, her friend, eventually chooses to be “Harriet” after affirming his transgendered identity. In the third sense, performance studies considers how a performer protects and defends him/herself (from physical, emotional, and/or psychological attack) and what those actions mean in a larger, societal context. The post-colonial Caribbean individual, then, confronts culturally contrived definitions of sexuality, gender and race based on colonial restrictions against the self-expression of the enslaved and oppressed. Performance studies is clearly relevant for a wide range of topics concerning Caribbean identity, but applied to literary dance scenes, it reveals aspects of Caribbean literature often glossed over by postcolonial theory.

In combining postcolonial and performance studies, this study will explicate how the novelistic transmutation of dance in Caribbean literature preserves a narrative of resistance and political resilience. This narrative reveals that identity formation in Caribbean literature complexly operates on a politico-cultural scale. Furthermore, this theoretical combination attends to “the idea of a pan-Caribbean ethos and aesthetic [that] now dominates the discourse” on political identity in the Caribbean (Harney 18). The dance scenes analyzed herein give novices an introduction and initiated readers a reminder that, although incomplete within a literary rendition, dance “amounts to a material amalgamation of thinking and doing as world-making activity” (R. Martin 48). Through their politically charged dancing, Caribbean characters counter (the memory/legacy of) colonialism and hegemonic authority, meriting the reader’s attention.

The commemorative act of describing dance in the novel, discussed in the final chapter on ekphrasis, is itself an activity that questions the politics of knowledge. Though this study will not exhaust these Caribbean authors' aesthetic originality and epistemological daring, it gestures towards appreciating their visionary and re-visionary works of imagining and remembering Caribbean autonomy.

CHAPTER ONE: DANCE AS CULTURAL REALIZATION

The relatively young tradition of printed literature in the Caribbean began when literary activity exploded in the middle of the 20th century, around the time that many islands were gaining autonomy from colonialism. As more individuals self-identified apart from and self-protected against the colonial, Caribbean novelists began creating stories to reflect these changes. Before that time, few books were written by members of the Afro-Caribbean population. John Clement Ball traces the postponed development of Anglophone Caribbean fiction, which began in earnest in the 1950s, through its connection with the metropole via the airwaves. With the British radio show *Caribbean Voices* literary activity flourished in the Atlantic Commonwealth (101-103). Many Caribbean writers submitted their works through the mail; some uprooted and migrated to London. Throughout the “cultural revolution” of the 1950s and 1960s (Ramchand 20), Afro-Caribbean writers emerged as the most prominent ethnic group from the region, across linguistic borders, to attract the attention of European publishers.³ These writers flooded London to join the literary circles quickly forming after the advent of *Caribbean Voices* (Ball 107). Their themes centered on their experiences as immigrants, racialized outcasts, and detached members of their families. Most of these writers were men who had either left their families back home or migrated with few family members. Only a few women writers, like Sylvia Wynter and Jean Rhys, produced popular novels during these decades, partially due to economic necessity and traditional gender roles that restricted Caribbean women immigrants to housework and factory labor. Those men and

³ Notable exceptions included Indo-Caribbean writers V.S. Naipaul and Samuel Selvon. Remembered especially for the interracial dialogues within his narratives, Selvon is oftentimes associated with Afro-Caribbean writers.

women who found a means of supporting their literary work explored issues such as self-determination, identity (both existential and national), and community action.

However, West Indians had been interested in, or at least exposed to others' interest in political self-determination long before the 1950s and 1960s. Benedict Anderson opines that nationalistic endeavors in the Western hemisphere started soon after the white "creole states" of the New World had formed (50). Doubtless, though, when the Haitian revolution forced in the era of Emancipation, many people in the Caribbean were profoundly taken by the thought of self-determination. After the revolution, prominent black thinkers from around the "Black Atlantic," like Edward Blyden and Frederick Douglass, supported nationalism as part of their politics and abolitionism (Gilroy 35). Their views contributed to the burgeoning of a Diasporic culture, which Denis Benn traces in the 20th century through the lineages of the racial consciousness movements of Garveyism, Négritude, Rastafarianism, and Black Power. The West Indian Federation, though it did not last very long (ending after only a few years in 1962), was an effort for and expression of political self-determination. Historian and literary critic Stefano Harney tells us that after the Federation fell apart, "refuge in a more cultural nationalism—less state-bound, less political—[led] to a second generation of critics and writers free to dream of a wider Caribbean nationalism based only on culture" (4). Nevertheless, this early effort by West Indians was a sign that the decolonization of the Anglophone Caribbean had begun in earnest.

In London as well as in the islands, calypsonians, poets and novelists textualized their thoughts on selfhood and statehood in response to the idea of Federation, despite the actual Federation's failed launch. The "trans-Caribbean" quality of politico-cultural

movements in the region coincided with another emerging trend—that of Caribbean-run dance schools and touring companies (Rohlehr 293). Throughout the 1950s and 1960s dance instructors such as Ivy Baxter and Beryl McBurnie established regional outlets for their work. Their efforts to emphasize both African and transculturated dance forms buoyed regional pride. A few decades earlier, academic scholars and researchers from outside the region had begun writing and speaking about the importance of studying cultural expressions to learn more about Caribbean peoples. Lisa Lekis and Earl Leaf investigated national and popular dance forms, discussing the dances’ possible origins and what meanings the dances might hold for different Caribbean communities. However, much early ethnography (while the discipline was still being formalized) reflected lower standards than today. Some ethnographers produced research that reflected attitudes we consider today to be inappropriate, colonialist, and voyeuristic. For example, Leaf admits his bias in the first chapter when he considers the erotic in Caribbean dance:

“Pearl Primus, gifted American Negro dancer and interpreter of primitive dances, takes the view that the ‘sex-dancer, that product of frustrated civilized man’ is responsible for the popular misconception about the lewdness of African dancing. I believe, however, that the hard-living West Indian Negro and his voluptuous, free-loving, rum-drinking, hip-swinging, bosom-bouncing, shoulder-shaking, stomach-rolling creole woman, with rhythm in her thighs, are almost wholly responsible” (6).

Although Leaf’s is an extreme example of early ethnographic work on Caribbean dance, his amateurish research and strong bias clearly represent the racist and colonialist characterizations that made narratives of resistance and political resilience a necessity.

By the 1960s and 1970s more culturally grounded analyses of Caribbean dance appeared. In learning to “decolonize their minds,” to adapt a phrase from Ngũgĩ wa

Thiong'o, students of Ivy Baxter and Beryl McBurnie began to recognize that no one could speak more authoritatively about their own dance culture than they. Rex Nettleford was among these dancer-scholars and is well-known in Jamaica and the Caribbean region for both his professional dancing and academic contributions. He helped to generate the new Caribbean consensus that "dance is not only a performing art, it is also an art of community effort that proclaims the virtue of cooperation over unrestrained individualism.... [This] interdependence [is]...the essence of nation building and other forms of communal organization" (21-22). The research that followed this sea-change focused on theatrical independence—performing Caribbean art for Caribbean audiences. Artists throughout the African Diaspora were advocating indigenous stagecraft over European productions or Euro-inspired artistic themes. By the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, it was common practice for scholars to look simultaneously to the past and the future in writing about colonial proscriptions on African-inspired performance, while highlighting emerging dance forms and outlets. Scholars Michèle Alexandre, Jennifer Thorington Springer, Kezia Page, Susanna Sloat, Peter Manuel and Lorna McDaniel address issues as diverse as sexual politics in dance halls, modern expressions of traditional African dance rituals and creolization in Caribbean dance.

This scholarly activity was not solely based upon professional and/or popular dance, though. Much academic work on Caribbean dance draws on dance as portrayed within literature, as in *The Dragon Can't Dance* by Earl Lovelace and *Praisesong for the Widow* by Paule Marshall. These two novels include characters who face personal struggles, both emotional and social, by confronting the deeper meanings dance has as both an individual and group activity. Produced by a Trinidadian and a New Yorker (of

Barbadian parentage) respectively, these novels unpack the issue of self-identity that characterized Caribbean art and thought in the latter half of the 20th century. The theme of dance-as-identity formation, then, characterizes these two novels differently from *The Lonely Londoners* and *Unburnable*, which highlight the theme of dance-as-defensiveness.

THE DRAGON CAN'T DANCE

The Dragon Can't Dance, published in 1979 by Trinidadian Earl Lovelace, centers upon Carnivalian culture in the middle of the 20th century, when Afro-Trinidadian aesthetic and political traditions, including masquerade dancing and steelband music, were co-opted by those in the government and in commercial enterprises. The novel shows various responses within the Afro- and Indo-Caribbean lower classes to these changes, sometimes resisting, sometimes assimilating. However, on a grander scale it deals with the theme of dance-as-identity formation in the development of certain characters and their various methods of resistance. In three different scenes characters contemplate their power to define themselves and the contributions they can offer to society through dance. In two examples the character named Aldrick Prospect engages in this contemplation after watching or dancing with women; in another example, he thinks about his dancing as his lawyer describes it. In all three scenes dance (whether corporal or metaphorical) catalyzes an emotional climax, causing Aldrick to reconsider his identity as an individual and community member.

Episodically introducing several characters from Calvary Hill, Trinidad, *The Dragon Can't Dance* follows most closely the experiences of Aldrick, a popular dancing dragon at Carnival. After realizing that he had never reflected seriously on the political significance of his masked dancing, Aldrick undergoes an existential crisis about his identity as a dragon dancer and his political prowess as a citizen. Fisheye too undergoes a crisis as he is ousted from his own steelband for refusing to conform to rules set out by the band's first-ever sponsor: generally, to make peace with rival bands and refrain from

causing agitation or violence at the festivities. He vehemently feels, as Lovelace said of himself in 1998, “horror [at] the vision of a Carnival torn from its political and social roots, gutted of its power and presented as a neutral aesthetic creation” (“Emancipation” 59). Fisheye radicalizes Aldrick; the two take on the “bad john” persona to express their anger, but end up in jail for being disorderly in a postcolonial society still operating under colonial order. Meanwhile, the other characters adjust differently to the changing culture. Philo, a calypsonian and friend to Aldrick, finally finds his niche in the music market when he changes his lyrical subject from politics to sex. He decides to acquiesce to societal changes, giving the people the music they want to hear, instead of the music he truly wants to perform. Once he is catapulted to international stardom, he is ambivalent towards his former way of life, not sure whether his nostalgia or growing materialism matters more to him. Cleothilda plays his opposite in the sense that she wants to retain her local fame as the customary ‘queen of the band’ at Carnival even after her youth begins to fade. Her chorus “All o’ we is one,” which she shouts out to her neighbors only around Carnival season, represents her desire to control those neighbors by currying favor with them only when she can exploit their festive spirit. These and other characters portray the drama that pulsed throughout the nation in the first two decades after gaining independence from Britain.

Aldrick’s and Fisheye’s stories, in particular, are informed by the history of Caribbean aesthetic practices (such as Carnivalian dance and steelband music) that had shifting political value in the 1960s and 1970s. In Trinidad, where Carnivalian dancing and music arguably began, community-wide festivals existed before the enslaved had anything to truly celebrate. Once they gained their freedom, Lovelace explains in his

article, “The Emancipation-Jouvay Tradition and the Almost Loss of Pan,” how “the colonial administration, by tacking Emancipation onto Carnival, provided Emancipation the opportunity to penetrate the official Carnival and transform it into a stage for the affirmation of freedom and the expression of the triumphing human spirit in a street theatre of song, dance, speech, sound, and movement” (54). The most prominent among the aesthetic forms to emerge after Carnival became a commemorative event was the steelband. The birth of the steelband in the late 1930s and early 1940s brought with it the “naked violence” of the players themselves, who, during Carnival as well as “everyday living,” asserted the musical and dramatic tension the masses felt in response to the privileged few who were already beginning to redefine Carnival (55). This, Lovelace points out, was the time before commercialized, corporately sponsored steelband music. He harkens back to the time when steelbands were composed of musical warriors whose challenge to rivals was based on personal daring and turf rights, rather than music chart popularity or sartorial finery (stamped by the sponsor’s name/logo, no less). The bands’ “badjohn” leaders represented an early expression of critical consciousness among the poor. They realized, as Fisheye did, that the poor needed to gain political representation in the Trinidadian postcolonial state to be able “to break down these shanty towns and clean up the dog shit of the streets and the filth of the gutters...to stand up for the people...to create jobs and make [of them] a nation” (Lovelace, “Dragon” 79-80). Believing that his steelbandsmen could help with these efforts, Fisheye tried to convince his band members to resist selling out to corporate sponsorship; for, once a band got financial backing, they were no longer free to rabble-rouse as they pleased—even for the purpose of political consciousness-raising. Thus, Fisheye turned to those outside his

band who could appreciate his desire to be vocal and active about the plight of the poor.

To him, Aldrick symbolizes the majority of the lower class people who were

unexposed to the formal colonizing education, were forced to draw upon their own resources of memory, myth, genius, and the consciousness of their circumstances to construct, from the fragments of their broken culture, a new culture by which to live. The very fact that these fragments...were continuously under threat forced upon them the need to seek creative means to keep them alive...The aesthetic would also become the political. (56)

Fisheye recognizes this melding of aesthetic/political energy in Aldrick's dancing, so he eventually recruits him to this cause. As a Dragon and member of one of the traditional masquerade bands, Aldrick was accustomed to antagonizing the crowd alongside other mas' players, such as Devils, Imps, and Beasts.

Aldrick's festive role and dance had become a fulcrum upon which his worldview rests, partially due to the traditional significance attached to the Dragon role and partially due to his own interpretation of his mask playing. The Dragon role originated in 1908 as a hellish illustration "inspired by Dante's *The Inferno*" (C. Martin 225). The fantastical and demonic masks metaphorically correspond to the Trinidadians' African heritage and later suffering in slavery, just as other masks represent such historical roles as plantation mistresses and American sailors stationed in the islands during World War II. But for Aldrick, the Dragon means more: each year he prepares a new, "cloth and tin" masterpiece to "asser[t] before the world his self...[to] deman[d] that others *see* him, recognize his personhood, be warned of his dangerousness" (Lovelace, "Dragon" 49-50, italics original). He personifies the celebratory and fierce spirit of Carnival by playing the Dragon, confusing his audience by refusing their money, which traditionally the Dragon would take, metaphorically as an appeasement and practically as a payment for his

performance. This monetary exchange occurs after the “traditional climax of the Dragon dance...known as the ‘crossing of the water’...[which] occurs when the Dragon’s passage is blocked by water in drains or gutters” (Harris 117). The Dragon must stop at the sight of water because it “may be ‘holy’” and, therefore, symbolically fatal (Honoré, quoted in Harris 117). Aldrick’s refusal to perform the traditional role demonstrates that he performs for the sheer pleasure of the spectacle and does not care about the monetary rewards he could glean. Moreover, he refuses the money of the on-looking tourists or middle- and upper class Carnival-goers because he is distraught that the “Carnival...of rebellion” he so loved was becoming a superficial show of extravagance (Lovelace, “Dragon” 135). In this emotional state, he realizes that his growing inability to perform the traditional Dragon influences his ability to participate in his community as a citizen and neighbor.

Aldrick contemplates the symbol of the mask, wondering what others do with their Carnival “self” once the festivities have ended, yet knowing already that for many, the Carnival “self” is only a party costume. He realizes that, as Carnival changes from year to year, there is more at stake than simply the loss of symbolism: the Afro-Trinidadian people are losing their courage to threaten the authorities with their raw force. As a result of this loss, they become helpless as they stop believing that they have any power in *mas’* and *en masse*. Acquiescing and assimilating, they fail to commemorate their ancestors’ rebellion, which, as Aldrick sees it, is the *raison d’être* for Carnival. However, as he sits on a street curb, watching the last of the Carnival-goers expending the last of their energy before Ash Wednesday, he identifies in the moving body of his pretty neighbor, Sylvia, how that “self” can be maintained:

Then he saw Sylvia, dancing still with all her dizzying aliveness, . . . jumping and moving, refusing to let go of that visibility, that self the Carnival gave her; . . . lifting up her arms and leaping as if she wanted to leap out of herself into her self, a self in which she could stay for ever, in which she could *be* for ever. He watched her dancing into the insides of the music, into the Carnival's guts, into its every note, its soul, into every ring of the tall ringing iron; her whole self a shout, a bawl, a cry, a scream, a cyclone of tears rejoicing in a self and praying for a self to live in beyond Carnival and her slave girl costume. (Lovelace, "Dragon" 141)

In awe of her tenacity and bold movements, he sees in her dance everything he misses about the old Carnival. He desires to feel the wholeness that he believes she achieves in dancing, not recognizing that he has romanticized her movements because he is beginning to fall in love with her. Having been unattached for so long (although, we are led to believe, he had many sexual partners) and having played the Dragon for even longer, Aldrick confuses his desires for Sylvia with his desires to see Carnival renewed. In confronting his failure to woo her—which she had hinted he could do by purchasing her the mask she wanted,—Aldrick becomes even more dejected. Because he has no job, he has no means of wooing her. After she rejects him and the Carnival season ends, he increasingly feels that he is wasting his time by spending most of his days preparing the next year's Dragon mask. He doubts whether his preparations and dragon-dancing truly "preserv[e] and rene[w] the older traditions of Afro-Creole society" (Thieme 152). He wonders if the threats he makes in his Dragon costume are only facsimiles of power and whether he will be able to bear the "message" of rebellion in the next Carnival now that the masqueraders like him (such as the Devils or "jab jabs") have given up and gone away (Lovelace, "Dragon" 135).

Aldrick's doubts about his Dragon "self" reach a symbolic crescendo after he abandons thoughts of next year's Carnival and instead seeks a meaningful station in his

community by keeping company with a group of “badjohns” whom Fisheye, the ex-steelbandsman, steers. Each day these fellows attempt to guard their area of town—their “yard”—by standing in opposition to everyone who supports the consumer culture that is changing Carnival. Defending their culture’s traditions and resentful that they can no longer represent their people with their dancing and steelband playing, Aldrick and his foil Fisheye patrol the neighborhood. Lovelace emphasizes Aldrick’s political/existential crisis at this point, revealing how he becomes more civic-minded as he contemplates or, alternately, restrains from *motility*—that is, the spontaneous agency he has as a moving/movable individual. Aldrick and his cohorts stand still, standing up on the street corners, believing that they represent the last bastion on the Hill. They appear to do little, to cause little harm (except through monetary extortion via tolls), but they raise the suspicion of their neighbors Cleothilda and Olive precisely because they are “lively fellar[s] get[ting] serious” (163). This act of non-movement is seen by the police as suspect because their (non-)action bespeaks an “anger older than themselves” that froths underneath their placid stillness (165). One day they break into action again, randomly deciding to fool the police into surrendering their jeep. Throughout their short excursion around town in the jeep and during their stand-off with the police and townspeople, they believe that they can rally the people to their unorganized cause, “to rise up and . . . take power” for themselves (Lovelace, “Dragon” 189). But as their rebellion stalls (primarily because they had not planned it and, therefore, were vulnerable to the police siege), Aldrick begins to have the “feeling of being imprisoned in a dragon costume on Carnival Tuesday” (191). Once they are arrested and go on trial, this feeling becomes stronger, ironically after their lawyer tries to present their actions as the result of too much

“frustration and anger,” defending their overall good intentions (198). The lawyer admits that

[t]he authorities trusted these men to fail, that is why [the police] made no move to stop them. They trusted that they would be unable to make of their frustration anything better than a dragon dance, a threatening gesture....[Their] action...was an attempt to not even seize power,...but to affirm a personhood for themselves, and beyond themselves, to proclaim a personhood for people deprived and illegitimized as they: the people of the Hill, of the slums and shanty towns. (197)

Frustrated that his lawyer diminished their actions, Aldrick affirms instead that “[he] was serious. [He] wanted [them] to take over the town, the island” (199). He had earnestly intended for his actions to be read as threats. After spending some time in jail, however, he struggles to decide whether his actions were more than a grab for power, more than a dragon dance. Furthermore, he realizes that he and the other rebels are encouraged to believe that they had only “played a mas’....played a dragon” and had not brought about any of their hoped-for changes in society, after all (200).

After serving his five years in jail, Aldrick emerges a different man—a man who can no longer sustain the love for “playing a mas’” and is generally apathetic about his role in the community. He temporarily abandons this apathy, however, when he considers dancing—and dancing with a woman—again. He goes to a bar, where he is among his friends who are welcoming him back to the fold. He is trying to enjoy himself in their midst, but he cannot will himself to continue dancing. Neither does he want to engage in conversation with any of the women, for he would rather tell his old friends what the rebellion meant to him, to show them that “[he was] not conquered” (Lovelace, “Dragon” 208). Nevertheless, he is pulled away by Molly, a “new girl,” who tries to dance with him

on the floor. She figures out that he is the ex-convict Dragon dancer simply by conversing with him about dance:

‘What happen, Slim?’ softly, invitingly. She was a new girl and didn’t know his name.

‘But I dance already.’

‘Well, dance again. We come here to have a good time, not so? And how we going to have a good time if you don’t dance?’

‘You playing mas?’ he asked her, trying to change the subject. ‘What you playing?’

‘What mas’ I playing? Devil,’ she said. ‘The band playing devils.’

‘Devil!’ an exclamation jumped out of him. ‘You mean people playing devil again?’ Maybe he had misread the signs. If people were playing devil...if they were expressing the wish to be devil, evil, powerful, then maybe a new spirit was rising again. Oh Jesus, he thought, Oh Jesus!

‘Two thousand strong,’ she said.

Two thousand people playing devil in Port of Spain. He smiled.

‘Not real devil, you know. Fancy devil, with lamé and silk and satin. Pretty devil.’

Pretty devil! Pretty devil. In silk and satin.

‘Oh ho. I used to play a dragon,’ he said. ‘But it wasn’t pretty. It was a real dragon, with fire coming out the mouth and claws on the hands.’

‘Oh...you is the fellar...Aldrick, was in jail for the riot. They talk ‘bout you. Well come and dance, man,’ she said, as if she knew him better now. ‘Come, dragon.’

And he kinda wished he felt to dance....

But just as he had found it difficult to tell it to the men that he had made no accommodation with defeat, that, indeed, he was not defeated, so he was finding it difficult to tell this girl that he didn’t feel to dance. It was a new sadness. It was a great sadness. (208-209)

Like Fisheye, threatened by the corporatization of the steelbands, Aldrick feels threatened by the middle- and upper class’s cooptation of the masquerade. During the five years he was in prison, his community seems to have forfeited their rights to celebrate their unique heritage and to threaten the powers that be with the memory of that rebellious heritage. Aldrick’s sense of community is wrapped up with his sense of freedom to perform as he

pleases. Once he realizes that the Carnival performances he once used to express himself have come to mean less (or mean something entirely different) for his fellow citizens, he feels less connected to his community. Thus, we see Aldrick struggling to understand that, for others, communal “[h]abit is a knowledge and a remembering in...the body” only as long as the community allows those commemorative “habitual practices” to exist (Connerton 94-5). Aldrick is disturbed by what he assumes to be people’s ignorance, seen in their shallowly ludic interpretation of the Carnival event. Its superficial aspect, the making and choosing of costumes—as emphasized in Molly’s conversation about the lamé, silk and satin devils—has become more important to the revelers than the political expression of which the dancing, Aldrick feels, should be a testimony.

Aldrick also feels threatened by his attraction to Molly; he is painfully reminded of the joy he once had in dancing when she repeatedly asks him to dance. This vulnerability frightens him and he steps away from her, disappointed that he feels uncomfortable dancing with a woman and alienated among his old friends. Seeing a deeper meaning in Aldrick’s many disappointments, Max Harris suggests that “Lovelace’s novel may be read as a parable of the commercialization and consequent prettification of Carnival, a process that has led to (or perhaps derived from) what he calls, in a striking phrase, ‘the impotence of dragons’” (117). Wanting to be seen as dangerous by others, but ironically incapable of confronting that which makes him feel endangered—in this case, Molly,—Aldrick is thus rendered impotent on both a figurative and literal level. His dilemmas with women and with his Dragon persona prevent him from coping with the fact that, for many, dancing and Carnival are simply ludic releases from the day-to-day realities of life. Although he and Fisheye were respected as culture-

bearers of Carnival in their heyday, they cannot continue to be so if they pursue only violent methods of communication. As the times change, so also will they have to figure out how to change if they truly want to show the people how to commemorate, yet retain their self-identity. Molly's sartorial comments about the 2,000 devils "in silk and satin," then, foreshadow the final question Aldrick must face: if playing mas' and rioting in front of his neighbors will not get them to notice that he is lobbying for social change, how should he move among them to be effective?

In this novel Earl Lovelace addresses how the Caribbean postcolonial subject self-identifies apart from the larger community because the community fails to observe the commemorative value of Carnivalian dance. Aldrick's attempts to raise consciousness about it in his community fail, however, because neither he nor the community can focus on his message; everyone is too distracted by Aldrick's flaws. Lovelace memorably shows that dance can symbolize the threat of resistance and rebellion, especially in the struggle to define and re-define Carnival. However, Lovelace was not the first writer to address the issues concerning those who lived in the "yard." In his 1930 magazine *Trinidad*, C.L.R. James had shined the light on "'the yard life' (the ghetto) of the urban life of the Caribbean," the revelation of which confirmed "the painful awareness that not only was the society broken down along economic lines but it was also broken down along internal racial lines" (Cudjoe 136, 138). The context Lovelace creates in *The Dragon Can't Dance* reflects the fact that "[b]y 1970 the cry [among the politically conscious Caribbean public] was not for discipline, tolerance and production or for a

mutual aspiration and achievement,” as it had been during the pro-Federation 1960s (Rohlehr 285). What was wanted was “power [for] the people, ‘the people’ meaning black people; and ‘black’, despite all attempts to associate the term with the multiethnic working class...was in 1970 most emotive as a synonym for the diasporan African” (285). Lovelace explores what having this “power” meant to some of those who practiced Carnivalian dance/steelband music and had felt their power as community culture-bearers drain away. Thus, these three dance scenes highlight the efforts of the individual who aspires to not only political power, but also a cultural connection with his local community through dance.

In Paule Marshall’s novel, *Praisesong for the Widow*, dance scenes highlight the opposite situation: a Caribbean community willingly shares its dance culture with Avey, an individual from the Diaspora, and the commemorative aspect of their dancing transforms her understanding of her own cultural identity. However, before Avey meets and dances with her Diasporic community, she distantiates herself from negative stereotypes associated with African American dance. Avey is emotionally overwhelmed by the knowledge that she belongs to a culture proud to remember its African heritage. She is afraid to self-identify as an African American through her dancing styles because she feels burdened by Western assumptions about dance and racist views about the black body. Uncomfortable with her identity and the life she has chosen, she struggles to allow herself to vocalize these feelings and dance.

To address Avey’s complex views on herself and dance, this study includes theoretical approaches from performance studies that are both linguistic and dance-related. This approach supplements the postcolonial approach introduced in analyzing

Lovelace's novel by showing that cultural alienation can begin because of corporal (in)actions *and/or* performative language. That is to say, whereas Aldrick's story generally interests readers because of his misdirected actions, Avey's keeps them turning pages because of her combined struggles—to celebrate her cultural heritage in word *and* dance. The linguist J.L. Austin lay the groundwork for the study of these issues together when he inaugurated the field of performance studies in the mid-1950s, famously lecturing on language's "performativity" in first-person-indicative pairings like, "I promise" or "I christen." These pairings *do* an action in and of themselves through their being said. This performative aspect of language is a word or phrase's ability to enact a purpose. When the postmodernist Jacques Derrida began writing on how language *plays*, however, scholars abandoned Austin's short list of performative phrases and focused instead on reference, representation and the speaker's intention. Derrida advanced the idea that this performative quality of language to play with meaning actually deconstructs the logocentrism to which Westerners are bound (Cavell 49).

These successive understandings of performativity—from phrase to thought process—are mirrored in the scholarly work produced within dance studies. For the better part of the 20th century, dance scholars mostly studied choreography and ethnography—that is, the constituent parts and various expressions of dance. Then major changes began to take place when Judith Butler introduced scholars to "[t]he constructs of gendered performance and performativity" in 1980s and 1990s, marking the start of queer theory (Thomas 87). Around the same time other dance scholars, like Judith Lynne Hanna, Alexandra Carter, Jane Desmond and Randy Martin were searching for deeper meanings behind the motion. Hanna suggests that dance's communicability—its transmission of

meaning and its “continua[1] becoming in the phenomenological sense” (22)—is what makes it so intriguing to dancers and intellectuals alike. Carter implicitly agrees, noting how the “increasing trend toward self-reflection” in the field through phenomenological understandings of the body transformed dance ethnology (119). Desmond’s analysis of this change, however, clarifies its relevance to the linguistic advances in performance studies. She points out that most research on dance before the 1990s “focus[ed] on dances as ‘texts’ rather than on the practices that result in such texts, or the acts of engagement with those ‘texts’” (44). Once dance ethnologists moved beyond acknowledging that they had an intrinsic “bias” as Westerners/outside, they could explore dance’s “politics of knowledge” (45, 53). This sea-change in their approach to dance allowed them to reconsider the value of the dancer’s audience and to see that “dance audiences [are]...a model for a political formation. Audiences...do not just ‘read’ dances. They participate in the making of communities joined by the performer-audience connection” (R. Martin quoted in Desmond 47). Thus, as technical critiques of dance waned, analytical studies of the dance context and the effects of dance on politically conscious audiences became more prevalent. Although many scholars no longer examine dance *as* a text, the study of dance *in* the literary text is still a fresh topic, especially in the underappreciated genre of Caribbean literature. Paule Marshall’s text exemplifies the reciprocal relationship between dancers and their audiences, demonstrating through Avey that audiences learn best by participating in the dance.

PRAISESONG FOR THE WIDOW

Paule Marshall, the daughter of Barbadian parents who migrated to Brooklyn, portrays the emotional journey of a middle-aged, attractive and widowed African American woman named Avey Johnson. While Avey is on a cruise vacation in the Caribbean, a creeping feeling of dissatisfaction—with her choices, her estrangement from her late husband, and her life generally—steals over her. The novel opens with her packing her bags, she having decided to disembark and fly back home from the nearest island. She checks into a hotel in Grenada and spends a miserable night in the wake of bad memories. Wandering along the coast for a diversion, she realizes that she is lost when she meets a new acquaintance, Lebert Joseph, the owner of an old rum shack. She is hesitant to talk with Lebert at first because he speaks openly about his family and inclusively about Avey's own racial heritage, which makes her uncomfortable. However, she decides to trust him and tells him her story, sharing many memories that she usually repressed. After she confides in him, Lebert invites Avey to join the islanders for their annual Carriacou Excursion, a holiday trip to the outlying island located about twenty miles to the north. This excursion is centered on enjoying family reunions and practicing rituals that celebrate their African heritage. She initially refuses to join him, afraid to let herself have an adventure in a strange community. As a middle class woman concerned about money and as a tourist, she feels disinclined to alter her vacation plans. Realizing, though, that she has already altered those plans drastically (based on unexplainable feelings, no less), she finally agrees to go on the Excursion. She discovers en route to Carriacou and in watching the locals' dancing rituals that she is having an identity crisis.

She cannot reconcile the conflicting personas—that is, masks—she wears for her family and American society at large: to her family, she tries to appear self-sufficient and progressive; to the public, she tries to appear dispassionate about the racism that profoundly affected her early adulthood in the decades after World War II. Avey realizes in Carriacou that she started wearing these masks long ago when she stopped dancing and abandoned her African American/Diasporic identity. She decides to let go of her anxieties and finally joins the dance, allowing this experience to alter her entirely as she considers anew her cultural identity. At the novel's end, we see her preparing to go back home, thinking of how she will share these revelations with her children, grandchildren and others.

At the beginning of the novel, Avey subscribes to the belief that she should abstain from and condemn performances of African American dance styles. She developed this opinion as an adult after having repressed childhood memories of positive experiences she had in her African American community. Her earliest memory of dance came from time spent with her great-aunt Cuney on the islands off South Carolina, where she had shown Avey the Ring Shout dance. Cuney no longer participated in the after-service ritual because she once had a falling-out with the church members during a Shout: by “crossing her feet” she had started “dancing,” and by arguing that there was nothing wrong with dancing, she had flouted the assimilated, Christian version of the Shout in which dancing was precisely defined. Once integrated into Christianity, the Shout “most emphatically was not considered dancing....[which] was sinful....So long as the feet were not crossed or lifted from the floor, neither the church nor secular society regarded the movement as dance” (Glass 40). Yet, for Avey at least, “[the movements] held something

of the look [of dance], and it felt like dancing in her blood, so that under cover of the darkness she performed in place the little rhythmic trudge” (Marshall 35). Avey’s other early memories clearly show that she associates African American dance with a break from the workaday world: her parents would sometimes flirtatiously glide together to the rhythm of a jazz tune after work or on vacation; or, on the boat her family took to visit Bear Mountain, a drunken, “violent bunnyhug of a dance” between gambling vacationers would sometimes break out (190). Her child’s mind connected the freedom from the everyday world with freedom from responsibility, not yet realizing that a racist social subtext affected her reasoning.

Avey begins to associate racial identity with dance, first positively and then, over time, negatively. As young newlyweds she and Jay enjoy dancing, not only for each other’s company, but also for the connection they felt with the older Harlem Renaissance generation they both admired. When they were still living in Brooklyn, “Jay might suddenly stage an impromptu dance just for the two of them in the living room, declaring it to be Rockland Place or the Renny” (123, 95). Indulging their imaginations, they drew closer to each other bodily and emotionally. They danced, though they were aware of the racist stereotypes (stereotypes Avey’s own parents had repeated, incidentally) that whites had associated with African American dance, assuming they were free from the effect of these negative associations. Yet because they desired to gain access to and acceptance in a larger community—racially biased (white) America—they began to ignore their psychological and emotional well-being as individuals and as a couple.

Although they had met on the dance floor (126), danced throughout the early years of their marriage, and cherished dance as an integral part of their African heritage,

both Avey and Jay slowly stiffen. Eventually their movements stop altogether as they instead focus on moving up the social ladder, which, they assume, requires that they disassociate themselves from all things African. Through them, Marshall shows us what happens to an already-strained marriage once they allow the encroaching effects of racism and pulsions of Western materialism to dictate the direction of their lives. Avey takes care of their children and works, while Jay goes to school and works. They thus remain too busy to recognize that they are slowly becoming estranged from one another, both emotionally and psychologically. Jay leads the way up the social ladder, thinking he is providing for his family by sacrificing his energy and time; Avey follows, subduing her fears and anxieties as well as she can. Jay allows himself to become entrenched in the depreciatory, sycophantic mentality he dons to achieve a higher social/financial status. Eventually, he parrots the worst racist assumptions about his fellow African Americans, who, he comes to think, had “[n]ot a thing on their minds but cutting up and having a good time” (132). He feels a visceral, personal interest in how his people appear to the lighter-skinned population, saying: “[i]f it was left to me I’d close down every dancehall in Harlem and burn every drum! That’s the only way these Negroes out here’ll begin making any progress!” (132). Avey and Jay (whom she began thinking of more formally as “Jerome” after this point) drift apart after this fault-line cleaved their memories of dancing together, even while they “[grew] to resemble each other....[and] could almost pass for twins” (141). Dance, for them both, becomes a source of shame rather than an enjoyable cultural expression. Focused on pleasing others to gain entrance into a community that would not accept them as they are, they allow this shame to erode their identities.

Praisesong for the Widow articulates the same shame and self-identity issues that performance studies scholars examine. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, who writes on the performance of emotions, opines that “[f]ew words...could be more performative in the Austinian sense than ‘shame’” (32). Even though neither Avey nor Jay says the words, “I am ashamed of myself and my race,” they act as if they are compelled by the words’ power, as if they had thought these words. Jay is embarrassed by his race and uses language vehemently to convince himself and his audience of his earnestness. He acutely desires that his words carry his intention to distantiate himself from other African Americans, since he cannot actually enforce his claim to “close down every dancehall in Harlem” (132). In Sedgwickian terms Avey has “uncertain agency” as a partner to the ashamed Jay and as a person who truly enjoys dancing (76). She is so weighed down and disoriented by this racial and bodily shame that she represses these emotions as long as she can. She harbors these feelings long after Jay’s death, unable to face her self-alienation from her African American community.

Burdened and yet still unaware of her shame, Avey sets sail on a Caribbean cruise ship alongside a couple of women with whom she does not truly share a sense of common ground. The repressed memories of Jay and Aunt Cuney haunt her, and she feels as though she is always forgetting something. As the ship moves along she becomes increasingly sensitive, experiencing a kind of postcolonial synaesthesia that implies the memory of brutality against African slaves crossing the Atlantic: quoits being played on the cruise deck sound like “some blunt instrument repeatedly striking human flesh and bone” (56); a trapshooting clay pigeon “struck her as being somehow alive despite the stiffness—as something human and alive—and she felt a sudden empathy with it” (57);

and an old man lying out in the sun appears to be a skeleton upon first glance (59). Once she reaches Grenada, the negative associative memories subside, but she begins to feel alarmed by something else: A strange feeling of “familiarity, almost an intimacy” with the Carriacouans who greet her,—and sometimes mistake her for one of their own—scares and disorients her all the more (69). She reaches the hotel, awash in memories, associations, assumptions and fears. At this point the timeline of the narrative splits between the present and the past. Dorothy Hamer Denniston suggests that although “[t]he reader may be confused with this juxtaposition of time modes...[Marshall means] to make us *feel* Avey’s dizziness spiraling out of control” (130). At the end of her trance-like remembering, Avey “mourns not the death of the rigid and compulsive Jerome but the more sensitive and culturally attuned Jay. She also mourns her own cultural loss” (136). This loss, Denniston believes, comes from Avey’s realization that she has “suppressed her group identity” (140). Disheartened and ashamed, she wanders away from the hotel beach and unwittingly towards the social affirmation she needs to renew her spirit and body.

By the time she meets and befriends old Lebert Joseph in Grenada, Avey has grown tired of harboring this shame, despite the material gain and social acceptance that resulted from repressing her identity. She literally purges herself of this shame on the boat ride over from Grenada to Carriacou. Insofar as Avey empathetically feels sick, remembering those who were forced to cross the Middle Passage, she senses how her ancestors were “consistently...denied their culture and dignity and conceived of *en masse* rather than as individuals” (Bush 9-10). She recovers in Carriacou with the aid of Lebert’s family and goes to see the Big Drum commemorative ceremonies. Once she

watches the dancing for a while, she cannot help but to enjoy a dancerly connection with those who share her larger Diasporic cultural heritage. She even remembers how her usually-staunch cruise companion, Thomasina Moore, had given herself over to the drumbeats at the port in Cartagena and danced (246). This realization is significant, for Thomasina was one of their lighter-skinned friends around whom Avey and Jerome had felt they had to redefine themselves by disapproving of African American dance culture. Avey seems to forgive the unappealing Thomasina who had called her a “nigger” after finding out that Avey was leaving their preplanned cruise early (27). She lets these thoughts slip away, though, like her fading desire to fit in with others, and

began to dance then. Just as her feet of their own accord had discovered the old steps, her hips under the linen shirtdress began to weave from side to side on their own, stiffly at first and then in a smooth wide arc as her body responded more deeply to the music. And the movement in her hips flowed upward, so that her entire torso was soon swaying. Arms bent, she began working her shoulders in the way the Shouters long ago used to do, thrusting them forward and then back in a strong casting-off motion. Her weaving head was arched high. All of her moving suddenly with a vigor and passion she hadn't felt in years, and with something of the stylishness and sass she had once been known for. *'Girl, you can out-jangle Bojangles.'* Jay saying it with amazement at the Saturday night pretend dances when he would turn the floor over to her. (249-50)

In the heat of dancing, having been accepted among the Carriacouans just for who she is, she can finally allow a flush of pride—pride for her heritage—to wash over her. Avey realizes that it was her “detractors” who had claimed that she belonged to “a people without a culture” (Marshall in Ogundipe-Leslie 21). Lebert Joseph and his family had welcomed her, inviting her to join in the “creole dances” that were purposefully part of the Big Drum ritual to include those who did not know their specific, African tribal heritage. In re-evaluating dance via a Caribbean ritual, Avey rekindles memories of Jay

celebrating their African heritage with his poetry readings and “small [dancing] rituals” (122). She also remembers her Aunt Cuney’s story about the proud Ibos, who upon crossing American shores as new slaves, dismissed their captors and walked back over the Atlantic to their African home. With the inclusion of this ritual, Marshall highlights the importance of self-pride, social support networks and cultural memory. Avey shakes off the shame and feels invigorated by the supportive acknowledgment of her new friends. In gaining a renewed understanding of her heritage, she appreciates how the African American community provides a home for her. She belongs to that group and its heritage; and ultimately, self-definition is a right that belongs to her.

Avey’s dancerly transformation into a self-affirming member of the African Diaspora and emergence as a confident individual signals a rebirth, whereby she sees herself with new eyes and feels free to express her identity however she desires. She will return to her home with a new appreciation of her Diasporic identity because, “[having sifted] through her history to gather up a usable past,” she understands that she still has much to learn about herself, her family, and her community (Thorsson 646). At first, Avey “[saw] herself [neither] as a culture bearer nor as a bridge between generations” (Denniston 133); but, by the end of the novel she finds the value in remembering the cultural pride her Aunt Cuney and Jay had instilled in her. However, she needs to complete this psychological transformation with corporal action by engaging in the creole dances at the Big Drum ritual. In other words, merely dwelling on the memories would be insufficient to bring about much change. She had to learn, as Jamaican-British theorist Stuart Hall says of the Caribbean subject, that “identity is not in the past to be found, but in the future to be constructed” (14). For Avey, that future is one in which she will dance

again and pass on to her children and grandchildren the lessons she learned/remembers. Moving forward physically in dance is therefore a prerequisite to moving forward figuratively once she realizes that her identity rests not in a fixed essential but in always becoming.

In both *Praisesong for the Widow* and *The Dragon Can't Dance* the Caribbean community and individual are intertwined in public dance settings. For Avey, dance itself becomes definitive of community; and, in dancing, she gains a sense of belonging and access to her heritage. Avey's complicated but necessary re-emergence as a dancer allows her to see that "the individual remembers by placing [her]self in the perspective of the group...[and] the memory of the group realizes and manifests itself in [her] individual memories" (Halbwachs 40). After she dances/accepts her status as a member of a larger, cultural community, she understands that she is always becoming herself and can choose in the performance of her identity. For Aldrick, the meanings imbued in the community's dance fade when the community lets go of or forgets the memory of the dance's commemorative value. Only with the active support of the community, as Paul Connerton suggests, can the individual carry forward the community's commemorative practices. Aldrick confronts the truth that the individual has only so much power to sustain cultural traditions on his own, while Avey feels "ordained" to share her cultural pride with others, starting with her family and the schoolchildren her daughter teaches (Marshall 256).

Despite their characters' differences, though, both Marshall and Lovelace explore how, in the Caribbean, dance is often used to explore "questions of identity," including

questions about the political value of the one among the many (Hall 5). The writers' treatments of Avey and Aldrick offer a positive outlook on the project of culture-making, emphasizing that having cultural pride is part of taking pride in one's self-identity. The characters' revisionary efforts towards self-definition are political insofar as they define themselves as powerful subjects and active members in their community's identity formation. But although Marshall and Lovelace's characters ultimately have control over their self-identities (once they realize and take responsibility for that control), their identity formation is nevertheless affected by those who, like the original colonizers of the Caribbean, want them to assimilate. Writers like Samuel Selvon and Marie-Elena John creatively explore how characters' self-identity and sense of community belonging are circumscribed by "who gets the say and who, on the other hand, is silenced in the rhetorical identity (re)invention process" (Sörgel 40). It is to those "on the other hand" situations that we will now turn.

CHAPTER TWO: DANCE AS RESISTANCE AND COMMUNITY CELEBRATION

This chapter addresses the representation of Caribbean dancers who express their identities through their movements, like the characters in *The Dragon Can't Dance* and *Praisesong for the Widow*; however, the following literary scenes show characters dancing not only for self-discovery, but also for self-protection. When the characters' self-identities are questioned, mocked, threatened and undermined by colonial and hegemonic forces, they corporeally respond. In Samuel Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* and Marie-Elena John's *Unburnable*, characters have to defend themselves physically and psychologically by dancing brazenly or violently. The characters in these novels stay aware of how their culture is perceived by colonialists, tourists and Londoners so as to be ready for any offensive—either verbal/physical or passive/aggressive—and are prepared to dance their challenge to authorities and attackers. Although some of the characters still struggle with their self-identity, they have a wider understanding of the problem that “Caribbean culture...[is] continually inscribed by questions of power” (Hall 7). Unlike Earl Lovelace's Aldrick, who failed to communicate his concerns effectively with his community, these characters know how capture the attention of their community and/or oppressors through their dancing. Thus, they dance (either in moving or pausing-posing) to express their defiance of those who try to deprive them of power.

Dancers in Caribbean literature enact rights *as* rites, *as* performances of self-defense. Because these dance performances express the dancer's being—the basic acknowledgement of which was often denied slaves—these performances that remember one's ancestors and defend one's own right to exist are at once political and aesthetic.

Dance in literature, then, as cultural practice and political expression, points to an Afro-Caribbean legacy of resistance worth remembering. The performative rites herein trace the philosophical footsteps of Aimé Césaire and Léopold Sédar Senghor, who, using their poetry and literary prowess, deconstructed Western logic to reveal the “instruments in which Europe had arrogated to herself the right to enslave people whom she preferred to call ‘prelogical’” (Cudjoe 133). At the same time, the conversion of rights into rites is itself a beautiful, commemorative action, deserving of close analysis. Some characters/dancers perform their rites rebelliously, while others exhibit “subversive performativity” that “disturbs, disrupts, and disavows hegemonic formations” (Madison and Hamera xix). The following work identifies this insubordinate behavior in the dancing of characters that memorialize the thousands of Caribbean immigrants who helped to bring about great social changes in the metropole, and eventually, decolonization.

THE LONELY LONDONERS

In Indo-Trinidadian Samuel Selvon's post-World War II modernist novel, *The Lonely Londoners*, the Caribbean immigrant experiences London both as an outsider and as a member of the Diasporic Caribbean community. The story primarily follows the activities and friendships of Moses, who has been living in London for more than a decade. Some chapters, however, are narrated by an omniscient voice and episodically follow the lives of the men and women whom Moses helps or knows. He habitually offers his help to the new arrivals, but does not want to offer too much hospitality and give the newcomers the wrong idea that London will be as good as or better than home. This paradox of feelings comes out in his being sometimes disgruntled and sometimes uninterested in white Londoners, who generally disdain the Caribbean presence. The island immigrants adjust to this subtle racism with varying responses, ranging from soapbox protests against employment and housing discrimination to one-night-stand distractions with white women. The characters more indoctrinated with colonialist ideology, who believe in an ideal Britishness, cope with their racial and cultural Otherness by assimilating and attempting to spin their differences as benign. In each case, the immigrant has to decide how much he or she is willing to change so as to (possibly) gain the Londoners' respect. The two characters Harris and Galahad try to impress the Londoners by mimicking and adopting their behaviors and habits. Moses and a few other characters decide to uphold their Caribbean traditions, but must adjust to the transcultural status they occupy as un-British, British subjects. They do not fare well, though; for, they remain just as alienated from English culture at the end of the novel as they were in the

beginning. Moses's introspection in the final pages suggests that, through writing a novel about his experiences abroad, he could express himself more freely than he could by other artistic means. However, Selvon only broaches the idea of literary influence at the novel's end, when he has already considered the effects of non-literary means of self-expression—namely, dance.

In the major dance scene of this novel, Harris, the novel's quintessential "mimic man" (to borrow V.S. Naipaul's phrase), throws a fête—a party, the likes of which the immigrants had back in the islands. Harris organizes this event to win the approval and business of some white Londoners he invites, bringing in a steelband to treat the Londoners to as near a reproduction of a Caribbean party as he can muster. He is trying to straddle his native Jamaican heritage and his new English identity to remain in the good graces of old friends while making new ones. However, he "lives in constant fear of being embarrassed by his less conforming countrymen" (Ramchand in Selvon 9), because he is (in this scene) alone in his sycophancy. He knows from previous experience in organizing such parties that the interactions between the Caribbean immigrants themselves can distract his guests from the music and dance, sending a message he did not intend. Selvon's descriptions surrounding the interactions between Harris and the Barbadian nicknamed "Five Past Twelve" reveals a growing tension between the immigrants who want to assimilate to English culture and those who want to see a transculturated London:

So there Harris is, standing up by the door in black suit and bow tie, greeting all English people with a pleasant good evening and how do you do, and a not so pleasant evening for the boys, for if is one thing he fraid is that the boys make rab and turn the dance into a brawl...

Of course, none of the boys paying to go to Harris dance, they only breezing in and saying good evening Mr. Harris...

But Five never fail to appear....

'Listen man,' Harris plead with Five, 'I want you to make an effort to behave and comport yourself properly tonight. I have a distinguished gentleman and his wife here tonight. Try to get on decently just for once.'

But nothing could rouse Five more than to approach him like this....

'Ah, you does say so every time I come to any of your fete,' Five say. 'You think you could fool me? You forget I know you from back home. Is only since you hit Brit'n that you getting on so English.' (112-113)

Uneasy in his skin, Harris is threatened by any action that would highlight his non-Englishness, especially because he works hard to perform the Londoners' mannerisms and dialect. He is obsessed with performing an ideal English identity that would guarantee his acceptance among the Londoners. Five Past Twelve prefers to let the Londoners see the aspects of Caribbean culture he most enjoys; so he does as he pleases, despite what Harris has said. He smokes marijuana, mingles with Harris's British guests and incites the other Caribbean "boys" to flout tradition by moving about instead of "stand[ing] still when the band play[s] God Save The Queen" (122). At the previous fête Five Past Twelve annoyed and embarrassed Harris because he was still dancing and "even jocking waist when everybody else was standing at attention" during the ceremonial closing anthem. His refusal to suspend his movements in honor of the Queen symbolizes how the Caribbean immigrant challenges the old order by dint of being outside of and therefore uncontrolled by that old order. Once ashore, the immigrant has the power to affect English culture much more than he could back in the Caribbean. Critic John McLeod calls this irrepressible merry-making impulse among the immigrants the "spacial creolization" of London, which helped to "shape a new passage through the

city” (25). Five Past Twelve’s subversive dancing sets him apart not only as a non-conformist, but also as a postcolonial individual, who, although still technically a British subject, sees how he can help to bring about the empire’s demise simply by being himself—and not, like Harris, pretending to be a Londoner. By refusing to respect British customs and embracing multiculturalism that fits “salad bowl,” rather than “melting pot” imagery, he can to disrupt the social order in a way that no Londoner could (Kalpakli 248). He therefore uses his colony-born status to his advantage, literally *playing* up the differences between himself and the Londoners by dramatizing his own folkways. Dancing when he ought not and dancing more exuberantly than he ought when dancing is allowed, Five Past Twelve counteracts Harris’s fawning behavior.

In the tussle to control and define the party, Tanty, the aunt of the Jamaican Tolroy, also dances in a way that upsets Harris. Similar to Five Past Twelve, Tanty habitually foists her opinion upon others; however, whereas his naughty playfulness reflects a general contrariness to control, her bossiness reflects her concerns for equality and community welfare. Since arriving in London Tanty has identified and addressed several situations she sees as unfair: she convinced the local Chinese grocer to allow shoppers to buy on credit and she helped her niece Agnes to divorce her battering husband using the British court systems. Thus, she acts as an advocate in public, to foster communal growth, and as an adviser in private, to “insis[t] on gender relations within [British] guidelines” (Forbes 88). Assessing the transculturated city with a keen eye, Tanty utilizes the best from both Caribbean and British societies to take advantage of all she can—for herself and those for whom she cares or, at least, feels a matriarchal allegiance. As the chief Afro-Caribbean female figure in this novel mostly about male

characters, she symbolically undertakes the dual struggles for racial and gender equality that the Afro-Caribbean female immigrant faces. Knowing well that she and Agnes fall into a tertiary category after whites (both men and women) and Afro-Caribbean male immigrants, Tanty asserts and enjoys the rights she has, even to the extent of being comically aggressive with a view to expand those rights:

Now all this time Tanty was looking for Harris, and when he take the floor with this sharp thing she spot him dancing. Tanty get up and push away dancers as she advance to Harris.

‘My boy!’ she say, putting she hand on his shoulder, ‘I been looking for you all over. What happening, you avoiding the old lady, eh? Too much young girl here to bother with Tanty, eh?’

Harris get so vex, but he know that if he talk rough to Tanty she might get on ignorant. Lucky for him he was dancing near the outside of the crowd, so he stop and draw aside.

‘Listen,’ he say to Tanty, ‘can’t you see I am dancing with this young lady?’

‘What happen for that?’ Tanty say, eyeing the white girl who look so embarrass. ‘You think I can’t dance too? I had a set already with Tolroy, ask him.’

‘Well,’ Harris say, trying hard to keep his temper, ‘will you kindly wait until I am finished? We shall dance the next set.’

‘You too smart, when the next set come I wouldn’t find you,’ Tanty say, taking a firm hold of Harris. ‘Tell this girl to unlace you: you know what they playing? “Fan Me Saga Boy Fan Me,” and that is my favorite calypso. These English girls don’t know how to dance calypso, man. Lady, excuse him,’ and before Harris know what happening Tanty swing him on the floor, pushing up she fat self against him. The poor fellar can’t do anything, in two-twos Tanty had him in the centre of the floor while she swinging she fat bottom left and right. (116-117)

Tanty is not about to let her chance slip by to impress her opinion upon Harris and his guests. She feels that this event is for the Caribbean people in London—and not for the British audience Harris brings to watch. She grabs control and makes a reality of Louise Bennett’s famous poetic phrase by “colonizing in reverse” the awkward scenario that was designed to fulfill colonial stereotypes (that is, having a group of Afro-

Caribbean people dance for a minority of powerful whites). Claiming a nationalistic prerogative over the English woman by placing herself in the authoritative position, Tanty declares her incapable of dancing properly to calypso music. Despite the Commonwealth status of her homeland, Tanty feels culturally connected with Jamaica, and she vibrantly displays her love for that culture by her defensive and possessive response. On a deeper level she may feel as if the English woman symbolizes English attempts to co-opt Caribbean cultural practices, even in London. The unnamed woman, therefore, is not only trying to usurp Tanty's place in the pecking order of dancers (wherein the older Caribbean woman has the first choice of dance partners); the woman is also imposing her body when, clearly, she has no knowledge of how to move to the rhythms she is hearing. Tanty has the verbal and physical power to intimidate Harris and the English woman with her own dancing body, which briefly shocks the on-looking Moses and Five Past Twelve. However, they realize that as "[she] becomes the carnivalesque face of Caribbean ordering which is really anti-order," Tanty cannot be persuaded from enjoying/enforcing (what she sees as) her rights (Forbes 87). Her characterization, following on that of Five Past Twelve, thereby acts as both commentary and comic relief to reveal Selvon's views about the migration of Caribbean culture in his day—specifically, that the Caribbean immigrants must protect their aesthetic practices from being appropriated by the Londoners.

Tanty's assertiveness on the dance floor can be read as a metaphor for greater issues affecting the immigrant population at that time. British culture in the 1950s was changing in response to the influx from the Commonwealth, and the question of who had authority over those changes was contentious for all. Race complexly divided the

population and, as the following dance scene shows, Londoners racially stereotyped Afro-Caribbean people as being aesthetically exotic. Based on this stereotype, the Londoners occasionally took pleasure in having an immigrant in their company. Moses experiences this cultural racism in a hurried scene written in stream-of-consciousness without punctuation or capitalization. He recounts how he was used for his supposedly inherent (that is, racially-inscribed), entertaining worth:

...one night Moses meet a nice woman driving in a car in Piccadilly and she pick him up and take him to a club in Knightsbridge where it had a party bags of women and fellars all about drinking champagne and whisky this girl who pick him up get high and start to dance the cancan with some other girls when they fling their legs up in the air they going around to the tables where the fellars sitting Moses sit down there wondering how this sort of thing happening in a place where only the high and mighty is but with all of that they feel they can't get big thrills unless they have a black man in the company and when Moses leave afterwards they push five pounds in his hand and pat him on the back and say that was a jolly good show... (109)

This experience exemplifies what Ramchand means when, in his introduction to Selvon's novel, he explains that Selvon writes about the "exiled body" (7). The Caribbean men and women in London were always already racialized—and therefore made into an Other—before they even arrived in London. Moses stands out among the other characters, for it is "his emergence as a thinking character" that engages us as readers in what it means to be an exile (18). Reading the text in a similar vein, Ball argues that Selvon emphasizes the question, "Who are we?" instead of "Who am I?" by showing us how Moses and the others are forced to share a group identity based on their skin color (133). In having to think about how they are perceived as a group, the Caribbean immigrants become interested in making an aesthetic impact on the Londoners. Although the Caribbean immigrants originally traveled abroad to gain what

they believed was not available in their homelands—opportunities for self-improvement and economic gain—they realize that they have it within their power to make a better future for themselves. Furthermore, they realize that they do not have to tolerate or be involved in the Londoners' efforts to co-opt, assimilate or stereotype their dance or other cultural activities. John McLeod calls this culturally unifying realization seen in (or dawning in) Harris, Five Past Twelve, Tanty, and Moses, "utopian," not because of London's inchoate egalitarian opportunities for immigrants, but because the city was a place of celebration for a new community—a pan-Caribbean community (26-27). The Caribbean immigrant, who like Five Past Twelve or Tanty refuses to accept stodgy old England and its racism, effectively remakes its cultural landscape by dancing as they please, unreservedly and authoritatively. Thus through subversive performances which simultaneously refute and poke fun at the Londoners' perceptions of them, the dancing Caribbean immigrants defend their right to define their community's culture.

Although the emphasis of most of the Caribbean arts in the 1950s was on "West Indian society, on self-discovery and self-definition," Selvon's dance scenes introduce characters who are already (or are becoming) confident with their right to self-identify (Pouchet Paquet 64). Five Past Twelve and Tanty represent through their dancing the pride of a burgeoning anti- or postcolonial society. The introspective Moses embodies the dynamic characteristics of one who contemplates the meanings of community and self-identity, yet remains supportive of those who are more confident and outspoken than he. When Selvon presents these characters' cultural independence, he "take[s] up and interrogate[s] the assumption of England as the centre the island merely replicates" (Lane

3), establishing the tradition of cultural resistance for generations of Caribbean writers after him.

As time passed and British colonialism finally ended, other writers began reflecting upon this heritage of resistance by dedicating whole novels to the subversive and rebellious heroisms of previous generations. Marie-Elena John, who writes *Unburnable*, is among the most recent of these writers, though her subject material covers much of the 20th century. However, she differs from the comical and witty Selvon in both content and style, taking a more serious approach to violence and discrimination in the Caribbean. Her representation of the Caribbean subject's identity politics at different points throughout colonialism, decolonization and postcolonialism, focuses on dance performances that are direct responses, rather than subversive gestures. For her characters, dance communicates oftentimes better than words.

UNBURNABLE

In Antiguan Marie-Elena John's novel about hidden family secrets, forbidden sexual expression, and the dichotomy between colonial and African traditions, protagonist Lillian Baptiste seeks to find the answers she needs to make sense of her life's story. She enlists the assistance of her long-time friend and recent lover, Teddy, a famous African American scholar and legal expert. With him she returns to Dominica after a twenty-year absence, hoping to uncover the information she needs to validate her belief that her condemned grandmother was unjustly sentenced to death for murder. Before Lillian was even conceived, a rivalry broke out between her mother, Iris, and Cecile, the wife of the man Iris loved. Cecile's mother, Mrs. Richards, repays Iris violently, and rapes her with a broken soda bottle. In revenge, Iris's mother, Matilda, descends upon Carnival to find the man over whom the fight began. After she finds John Baptiste, we are not sure whether she 'frightens him to death' using Obeah or somehow assassinates him. In any case, he dies and his mother-in-law seeks revenge again—this time against Matilda. Mrs. Richards sends the police to find Matilda in her mountain village. After massacring the villagers who try to defend her, the police find reason to invent and bring supplemental charges against her: they discover several skeletons in the outlying forests of the village. However, the truth about these skeletons, which would clear Matilda of any wrong-doing, is suppressed. Convicted of multiple murders, Matilda hangs. Iris later has an affair with Baptiste's son, which results in the birth of Lillian. Before Lillian knows about any of this, she is adopted out to Icilma, who unintentionally raises the child to be overly self-conscious about her biological family. John reveals in

flashbacks the stories of both Matilda and Iris amidst inserted memories about Lillian's own troubled childhood with her step-mother. For Lillian, then, it is true that "[h]ome...paradoxically becomes both the site of self-recovery and the point of no return" (Chancy xi). She puts her body and emotions at risk to discover her family's "herstory" by exposing the colonial cover-up that prevents her knowing the truth. Throughout this discovery, however, Lillian has to direct her attention outward to her Dominican community and the wider, Diasporic community to realize that much of her shame is a colonial/patriarchal inheritance. Three dance scenes portray groups and individuals important to Lillian in her quest for self- and communal knowledge; they each represent a significant event in three different generations. Each scene symbolizes how communities and individuals in the African Diaspora struggle against and protest colonialism by dancing defensively.

The first significant dance scene opens in the small island of Dominica with the police inspector and his men climbing a high mountain in search of Matilda, who is accused of Obeah and murder. The police were compelled to attempt the dangerous, vertical journey to this inner community among the rural people at the behest of Mrs. Richard, a leading townswoman and the mother-in-law of John Baptiste. In her own right, Matilda is a preeminent community figure in the self-governed mountain village of Noah. Although the feud started because of the forbidden love affair between the children of these two women, the battle between their families and their communities alludes to the overarching struggle to determine the direction of postcolonial Dominica's future during those post-World War II years.⁴ The police, in handling this case as a "favor" for Mrs. Richard, have to overtake the well-hidden, Maroon-like community without the help of

⁴ As a side note, Dominica did not gain its independence until 1978.

locals from the town of Colihaut at the base of the mountain, who normally “does take people to find [Matilda]” but “gave the inspector their backs” this time (151). Venturing upwards to Noah, the police come across a small group of men and women tending crops. As soon as they see the approaching law enforcement, the farmers break into what appears to their audience/enemies to be a salutatory, “beautiful harvest dance”:

They held their hoes in both hands, bringing them up horizontally, up to their faces, and higher, above their heads, and they began twirling the sticks, moving them from hand to hand, while their legs, slow and graceful, began synchronized movements.

The police exchanged looks mocking the country people, so simple as to put on a spontaneous welcome performance at the sight of official uniforms. Under the smirks, though, they were enjoying a sense of importance, honored that they were being welcomed as dignitaries. (152)

However, the farmers’ movements form a line of defense rather than a bucolic greeting. The farmers break into action, killing and maiming the surprised police “before the guns could be cocked and fired” (153). But as the police realize their egotistical fault, they recover their senses and quickly gain the upper hand. Once they shoot the vanguard, they make their way to the top of the mountain, where the other villagers are not “standing” ready, but *dancing* ready for their impending war against the invading policemen.

The overwhelmed inspector and his men succeed by clearing out the remaining fighters from among the houses, driving them into the encircling woods. When they begin to survey the scene, John notes, these “Catholic police” detect the pagan, polygamous lifestyle by “what they imagined would take place here as a commonplace part of the devilry, given the public nakedness and debauchery they had seen with their own eyes before the people ran away” (265). Due to their colonially myopic perspective on the customs of the isolated villagers, the police cannot see that the villagers’ lack of

outfitting *is* part of their wartime decorum, just as the villagers’ “dancing” movements were both a warm-up to and an integral part of the battle. The police, like colonialists and tourists, are blinded by their cultural premises and interpret this dancing *engagement* incorrectly. Furthermore, they underestimate the extent to which cultural and political rites/rights are connected for the Noah inhabitants. As a result of their biased testimony at Matilda’s trial, the truth of the Noah way of life is obscured, suppressed, and forgotten—not to be unearthed until Lilly, Matilda’s adopted-out granddaughter, comes back to Dominica to find out the truth she intuits.⁵

John contrasts the collective movements of the Noah farmers’ in their last stand against the individual dance moves of Iris in the scene that begins the family feud. This scene occurs when Iris rhythmically ambushes her lover, John Baptiste, and his wife, Cecile, during the Masquerade Monday celebrations of Carnival in the 1940s. Sidling up to the couple under a masked disguise, Iris creates through “the shock of her vulgarity” a moment when she can demonstrate sexual and physical dominance over the matrimonial rival (115). She is angry with both of them because the one had misled and left her, while the other, the lighter-skinned and therefore more eligible urbanite, stole away her chance at marriage. She takes revenge by

rubb[ing] her backside around and around, against the front of [John’s] pants...[Iris] had gyrated up to her, she had shown Cecile what she did with her husband, demonstrated to her the act of fornication. She had writhed up to her, pelvis rocking back and forth, in and out, first one leg up, then the other, and with both her hands pulled off Cecile’s mask and then easily ripped off the man’s pajama suit Cecile was wearing.
(115-116)

⁵ Lillian had intuited her grandmother’s innocence, but she did not find out until the end of the novel that the skeletons surrounding Noah belonged to “those whose lives had ended in the disgrace of the death penalty,” according to the Noah judicial system in which Matilda was a judge (286). The skeletons were those of Noah’s convicted criminals.

Iris quickly strips her opponent of her cross-gendered masquerade,⁶ putting her to shame before the townspeople and the swooning Baptiste, and ends her performative rebuff by wrestling Cecile into submission. Cecile is exposed, physically and emotionally, to the humiliation of her family and community, who, in this moment, are too shocked by the violation of custom to save her from Iris's attack. Likewise, they do not (at this point or later in the narrative) understand that Iris's provocative/provoking dance protests Cecile's unfair advantages over her. In terms of class differences, the urban Cecile benefits from privileges associated with her family's colonial connections in the city.⁷ In terms of color, she also wins. Colorism, the variant of racism seen in the Caribbean (and elsewhere, such as the Indian continent), allows the lighter-skinned Cecile to snag Baptiste; whereas, Iris would only ever be his mistress due to her darker, bronzed complexion. Iris realizes that her marital appeal and social status are diminished because of these stigmas; so she attacks the social order and Cecile on the sexually ludic playing field of Carnival. In "recogniz[ing her] deepest feelings," Iris is able to see "the uses of the erotic," and she dances erotically "to pursue genuine change...rather than merely settling for...the same weary drama" she sees in the singlehood of the other darker-skinned women she knows (Lorde 58-59). Thus, she sees her sexuality and physicality as her best line of defense. In representing Iris's struggle in this manner, John gives us an example of how the Afro-Caribbean, and more specifically, female individual

⁶ The tradition of cross-dressing masquerades during Carnival has a long history throughout the Caribbean and does necessitate special commentary for the character of Cecile, except on the level of irony: Iris identifies Cecile by both her proximity to Baptiste and her outfit (his pajamas). Although his clothes secure her modesty, Baptiste himself cannot give Cecile protection when Iris tears off the matrimonial symbol of the pajamas.

⁷ Hers was the "leading family" mentioned in the Introduction who entertained the colonial administrators during Masquerade celebrations.

performs her struggle against colorism and classism by exerting her *right* to dance as she pleases.⁸

In a later scene, John concentrates on the *rite* of dancing in celebration of many peoples' (African-American, Caribbean and African) freedom from colonial tyranny. John explores how dance commemorates anti-colonial efforts, such as the anti-Apartheid movement, in the body's ability to archive culturally-inscribed movements. In the chapter directly after the Noah battle scene, Teddy observes from "the outskirts of [a Washington D.C. club] dance floor, where he kept time," the proud styles of dancers from throughout the African Diaspora (155). This club, The Nile, is famous for its looping tour of international sounds, so that club-goers from every corner of the Diasporic world have multiple chances throughout the night to groove to their native rhythms. Nigerian, Ethiopian, Trinidadian, Martiniquan, and African-American alike have their turn before the reggae sound draws everyone out onto the floor. Because reggae "present[ed] none of the nationalistic dance-floor divides" of the *zouk* or *mbalax* music (156), it gave dancers a relief from having to perform authentically or according to the widely-accepted (or stereotyped version) of their nation's most popular dance style. But the reggae sound is penultimate to the crowning moment in the music lineup, when the anti-Apartheid music commences. For most of the dancers frequenting The Nile, dancing to *this* music commemorates "*their* Struggle" against Apartheid (156 italics original). John suggests that this part of the lineup may be an essential reason for their presence; for, they

carried the memory of their enslavement so close to their consciousness that they could still feel it as an injustice and not as a historical fact....And even though some said that the South

⁸ Sheri Ann Denison offers a different reading on Iris's behavior in her study of insanity in the postcolonial gothic tradition, discussing how the other characters' opinions about Iris affect Lillian's own "mad" behavior (377-378).

Africans had negotiated away their country in exchange for the government, and that there was no justice in Truth and Reconciliation, they still danced their victory dance every Friday night in celebration of one of the few times in history when Black people had fought and come away, free and clear at least on this one level, the winners. (156-157)

In this scene Ernst Renan's estimation that "suffering in common unifies more than joy does" rings true (53). Although Renan makes this comment in reference to "national memories," John's characters supersede the need for a national group identity because the fight against racially-motivated social injustices unified them. This dance scene, along with that of the Noah dancers/warriors, exemplifies how "resistance movements...to colonialism, slavery, racism, and exploitation have always had a great deal to do with harnessing and reconstructing culture" (Davies and Savory Fido 16). Fighting and commemorating through dance, the characters express their beliefs with the full energy of their moving bodies.

On a larger scale, many of these characters display an inclination towards dialectical engagement. In this way, John's writing typifies Foucault's assertion that "one must put 'in play,' show up, transform, and reverse the systems which quietly order us about" (quoted in Simon 201). In showing us the many uses of dance—as war preparation, strategy, and self-defense, in the Noah scene alone—she directs us to see something more fundamental in the other dance scenes: a rebellious attitude against being defined or controlled by others. The rite that is the Noah warriors' self-defense is celebrated by the night club dancers, who remember with their own movements the anti-colonial struggles of people all throughout the Diaspora. Iris's dance for the right to a life free of racial and class discrimination is also echoed in the liberated, erotic moves on the D.C. dance floor. Dancing *en masse*, each individual's fight for rights coalesces into a

ritual. Dancing singly, the individual draws attention to the dancing body's power to challenge authority. Thus, we see sundry instances in the novel where dance symbolizes strong emotions towards historical and personal events. This affective focus upon dance both as emotion and the conduit of emotion—especially emotions associated with personal rights—implies that Caribbean dance is charged with civic energy and autonomous pride.

While *Unburnable* and *The Lonely Londoners* address some of the same issues present in *The Dragon Can't Dance* and *Praisesong for the Widow*, their dance scenes concentrate more on the maintenance and protection of one's established identity and self-definition, rather than discovery of and empowerment through self-identity. Characters like Matilda's farmers and Five Past Twelve exert their power through dancing to protect themselves and maintain their independence. Against impositions, they subvert or rebel to retain their personal and physical liberties. On another front, they clash with assimilationists who bend to colonial forces and traditions. The dancers that John and Selvon create thereby exemplify Paul Connerton's thesis that memory is cultural and is sustained by public, ritual performances of the body; for, it is to protect their memories—and with it, their right to self-identify—that they dance.

As if to mimic the characters' insubordinate dancing, the novels' narrative structures, too, dance. Selvon's purposeful disorderliness in his stream-of-consciousness writing style introduced British and Western readers, newly aware of the burgeoning field of Caribbean literature, to textually and linguistically complex depictions of West Indian

immigrant life. By the late 1970s, critic Michel Fabre insisted that “*The Lonely Londoners*...represents a unique attempt, along the lines of post-modern fiction [sic], to unite the iconoclastic techniques of the West and the iconoclastic techniques of the calypso in order to liberate Trinidadian fiction by negating the monopoly of the ‘great tradition’....Selvon has moulded the folk tradition of the Caribbean into a recognised literary form” (124). Also complimenting his landmark style, Ball describes how “[Selvon’s] episodic narrative shifts fluidly between inside and outside, stasis and movement; it dips gracefully in and out of scenes...reflecting its characters’...mobility and command of urban space” (134-135). Fifty years later, Marie-Elena John’s narrative follows suit: some of her dance scenes are spliced throughout several chapters. Her narrative also jumps non-linearly between three women’s stories, increasing the sense of mystery and highlighting the thick layering of colonial and Western assumptions that have to be peeled away to reveal the narrative’s truth. As if making up for the lost narratives of many Afro-Caribbean women and the late launch of female-authored Caribbean literature, John bounces between the three women’s stories, highlighting the fluid nature of memory. At the same time by focusing on the women’s stories, she implicitly critiques the gender disparities prevalent in many Caribbean novels that privilege men’s perspectives. Thus, Selvon refuses to narrate according to contemporary writing styles or a chronological order, while John provides the untold aspects of women’s lives in the Caribbean. In so doing, they play with the format of their novels and the tradition of Caribbean literature, creating meta-commentaries that broaden their focus on dance as the defense of one’s self-identity and community. The next chapter will

investigate the form of these novels, drawing out the significance of the writers' craft to more fully appreciate dance and aesthetic representation in Caribbean literature.

CHAPTER THREE: EKPHRASIS AND THE MEANING OF DANCE

Caribbean and Diasporic writers highlight the complexity of Caribbean dance by narratively studying characters who dance. Moreover, Lovelace, Marshall, Selvon and John stress that complexity on a theoretical level as well, simply by transforming their experiences and knowledge of Caribbean dance into words on dance. That is to say, these writers raise questions about the transformation of one art into another because they illustrate an intangible art form in the tangible form of literature: Is literary representation more than a transfer of memory and meaning? What is lost or gained in the transfer? And is the loss/gain of memory and meaning necessarily a negative/positive? Philosophically, then, their depictions of dance have larger implications for literary studies. This analysis addresses those questions by following the postmodern thinker Jean-François Lyotard's approach to academic questions themselves. Lyotard prods the critic to ask questions without always expecting an answer. More specifically, he advises critics to question traditional ways of viewing how society operates and to question what "truth" itself is thought to be. In the postcolonial field Paul Gilroy seems to answer Lyotard's challenge in his examination of the role of music and identity in the "Black Atlantic," his trope for the African Diaspora. For him, "[e]xamining the place of music in the black Atlantic world means surveying the self-understanding articulated by the musicians who have made it" (74). In other words, the study of music can complicate the idea of "truth" and its meaning for individual musicians. He bemoans the many modern critics who discuss Afro-based musical forms in terms of cultural authenticity: they praise those styles that putatively reveal the artist's "true" Afro- or Diasporic identity and

censure styles that blend in musical qualities from other cultures (99). Gilroy chooses not to toe the line on either side of the debate about racial/cultural essence, touting instead an “anti-anti-essentialist” view, which allows that some essentialisms may be defensible. The sufficiency of this view he bases on the belief that “black music cannot be reduced to a fixed dialogue between a thinking racial self and a stable racial community,” for it is autotelic, above all, and grows organically in contact with other genres of music (110). He thus contributes to the larger debate surrounding identity formation and artistic expression in the African Diaspora with his insight on music. Drawing from both Lyotard and Gilroy, then, the final part of this investigation focuses on what dance means and how traditional, Western definitions of dance hamper analyses of Caribbean dance in literature. Exploring beyond Western conceptions of Caribbean culture, this study emphasizes the rich, yet elusive meanings of dance in the design of these novels.

How writers describe dance reveals how they think of it, how they define it. Performance studies scholar André Lepecki frames his study of dance by introducing what, until recently, was a common assumption about dance—namely, that “dance ontologically imbricates itself with, is isomorphic to, movement” (2). He argues that dance scholars need to think about dance beyond its traditional, strict definition and most common expression—as “unstoppable motility” (3). Instead, the meanings of dance should include breaks, breaths, postures, and gestures. Analyzing modern dance in the United States, Lepecki juxtaposes his definition of dance with those of essentialists who interpret the dancer’s pausing and/or posing as “down-time,” and therefore, non-discursive (2).⁹ Throughout his study he contends that we must not discount the

⁹ However, his reading of the history of European dance—that it was designed to be an art of fluidity—is not shared by all. See J. Martin’s ‘pose’ theory in Lepecki, page 4.

possibility that a dancer signifies in his/her moments of stillness. Lepecki's investigation encourages us to consider these questions: What makes a dancer a dancer? Is it by dancing that one achieves the title of "dancer" or is there a larger composition of routine performances or behaviors that typifies the "dancer" as one who dances? What should we make of the dancer when she/he stops dancing? When the dancer fails to move in ways that society at large recognizes as dance, has the dance indeed stopped?

These questions are critical for studying dance as an everyday practice and political action in Caribbean literature; for, in reading Earl Lovelace's *Aldrick* in this way, we uncover aspects of Caribbean dance hardly ever appreciated—such as that of the symbolic moving and posing of the dancer beyond the formal dance. Because Aldrick develops his worldview through his dancing, his ability/inability to perform is directly tied to his participation in the community as a citizen and neighbor. As long as he can remember, he always participated in public life *as* a dancer—whether or not he physically moved in a dancerly fashion. As the Dragon, he intends for his stances to transmit messages, just as his motions did. Lovelace portrays Aldrick's social abjection as starting when his neighbors misunderstand the daily stances (against the changing times, the police, capitalism, etc.) that he and Fisheye make by standing around the yard, surveying the physical and social territory over which they stake their claim. Seen as a "badjohn" because of this (literal) stance, rather than a dancer who is finding a means to express his political consciousness in new ways, Aldrick loses his audience. Yet, in trying to think less badly of this man/dancer they genuinely thought was harmless all along, the townspeople and colonial court system eventually deride his "dragon dance" of a revolution to dismiss the political import of his police-carjacking protest (197). Aldrick's

community sees his crime as no more than a performance of the dragon dance, no more than a gesture to get the attention of the authorities by temporarily grabbing power. His efforts fail to make a significant impact because he is not sure of how to wield the power he takes; although he ardently champions a better standard of living for his community, his radical and vague expression of these desires deters them from reciprocating his support. Considered from a Lepeckian angle, then, the significance of Aldrick's moving dances and non-moving poses is found in reading his efforts (albeit, failed) as politically-inspired symbols of dance.

This reexamination of the basic criteria for "dance," though, investigates more than the content by which dance is defined; it also probes the issue of form. Some scholars interpret only the content of the novels, without considering how the literature performs its meaning through its formal properties. Granted, though, this type of scholarship makes valuable contributions to Caribbean studies as Janice Lee Liddell, Jennifer Rahim and John Thieme show in their respective analyses of Paule Marshall's postmenopausal heroine, Samuel Selvon's migratory calypso culture, and Earl Lovelace's nationalist themes. In favor of formal analysis, however, the postmodern critic Susan Sontag famously contends that the "[i]nterpretation [of art] makes [it] manageable" for critics (6). Her argument suggests that to feel comfortable with confronting and/or explicating a piece of art which may be difficult to understand, the critic prefers to interpret its content rather than analyze its form. In fixating on content, the critic stays occupied with the tasks of compiling and contrasting possible meanings. Stating that the "philistinism of interpretation is more rife in literature than in any other art," Sontag indicts literary critics for not appreciating enough the text's form, which provides

meaning more readily than content (6). She implores critics to put down the tool of interpretation, thereby edifying themselves by “recover[ing their] senses... learn[ing] to see more, to hear more, to feel more” (12). Sontag’s opinion is useful in this study, especially for discussing the *transformation* that occurs when Caribbean novelists archive something of their experiences with Caribbean dance by inscribing their memories as imagined forms of dance.

Novelists, like most people, see dance as a performance in which they can invest meaning and make memories of the forms and expressions that seem to capture the ineffable. To make this performance last, people often preserve dance (and music) by rendering it through video, photography, paintings, drawings, sculpture, and literature. While dance and music constitute one category of art, which Diana Taylor calls “the repertoire,” these other forms make up “the archive” (20). She explains that whereas the “archival...sustains power” through its physical constancy, “[t]he repertoire...enacts embodied memory” and “ephemeral, nonreproducible knowledge” (20). Parsed out in this manner, these two categories delineate important boundaries for a postcolonial study of performance, especially ephemeral types of performance. Many dance performances during and after colonialism, seen as resistance/rebellions/revolutions or celebrations, were lost without being archived. Some dances, however, have been remembered and/or imaginatively inscribed by novelists who see the importance of recording and/or creating dance scenes to make up for the loss. This very archiving of the Caribbean dance repertoire in the works of Lovelace, Marshall, Selvon and John throughout colonial and postcolonial history, then, acts as an homage to the self-determination expressed by Caribbean dancers.

Such multilayered implementations of dance, as these novelists show, are possible through *ekphrasis*—that is, the representation of one kind of artwork within another. Ekphrasis is traditionally associated with Greco-Roman or Western European poetry that portrays a visual art, such as painting or drawing. One ekphrastic example often discussed in classical scholarship is that of the engraved images on Achilles' shield in Homer's *Iliad*. More recently scholars have located other artistic forms in literature, using new theoretical lenses to analyze the significances this device gives to modern texts. Mai Al-Nakib's analysis of the Algerian Assia Djébar's musical ekphrasis is one of these studies in postcolonial literature. Tobias Döring's Caribbean-English analysis of V.S. Naipaul's *The Enigma of Arrival*, David Dabydeen's poetry and J.M.W. Turner's paintings is another recent example. My study of dance in Caribbean literature is, to the best of my knowledge, the first of its kind.

This mode of analysis, ekphrasis, although not commonly used in Caribbeanist discourse, poses fascinating problems for literary studies. Firstly, as a literary convention, ekphrasis "is not an innocent activity" because it "engages in the making and unmaking of semiotic power, with the word seeking to rival and replace the image" (Döring 151). The writer's decision either to depict a dance scene in vivid action or to describe the scene through character dialogue is the perfect example of this struggle over semiotic power. That is to say, the writer can let the dance 'speak for itself' ekphrastically through his or her lyrical use of language, or the writer can opt to control more precisely the reader's conception of the dance by channeling the dance's description through another layer of description, such as the voice of a character. Thus, in *The Lonely Londoners* these two choices are juxtaposed in the scene where Moses is made a racial ornament at

an elite, white party and in the scene where Tanty insists on dancing with Harris. The ekphrasis operates when the omniscient narrator tells us that Moses sees his host “dance the cancan with some other girls when they fling their legs up in the air” (109). It operates in the latter scene only towards its end when Samuel Selvon finally shows us that “Tanty swing[s Harris] on the floor, pushing up she fat self against him. The poor fellar can’t do anything, in two-twos Tanty had him in the centre of the floor while she swinging she fat bottom left and right” (116-117). Before Selvon concludes their standoff with ekphrastic description, he shows Harris *pausing* in the middle of a dance, ironically, to tell her that he *is dancing* with someone else. Selvon makes the situation comical by having Tanty take advantage of this awkward moment when Harris is speaking to show us that action—and not persuasion—is more powerful on the dance floor. The scene ends with the image of her body’s momentum setting his in motion as she forces him to accept that the terms of this fête belong to its dancers.

On a secondary level, ekphrasis is a literary convention that “extends the message of the narrative” in which it is nestled (Bartsch and Elsner i). An excellent example of this appears in Paule Marshall’s *Praisesong for the Widow*, when Avey has just met Lebert Joseph in his rum shack and is not yet sure whether she should have divulged so much about herself to him. He transitions from talking about the Big Drum ritual he is about to attend to asking her about the “creole dances” she knows (175). Then suddenly and perhaps without even realizing the effect he is having on her in doing so, Lebert springs into his rendition of the Juba dance, which was in his community traditionally a dance for women:

Singing, he launched into a series of bristling steps back and forth which did call to mind a combative fowl. Each move forward

was accompanied by menacing thrusts of his shoulders and the elbow at his hip. With his other hand he whipped the make-believe skirt insultingly back and forth in his opponent's face. His own face was being held at an angle that suggested a beak poised to strike. All this he affected while darting forward. When forced to retreat, on the other hand, he did so in a pantomime of ruffled feathers and outraged squawks.

At first, the dance had clearly been too much for him and he had had to force his lame, aged body through the strenuous movements. But gradually, as he kept on, the strain and stiffness became less apparent. . . . One by one his defects and the wear and tear of his eighty- or perhaps ninety-odd years fell away and he was dancing after a time with the strength and agility of someone half his age.

Avey Johnson heard herself laugh, and it didn't seem as if she had anything to do with it, but that the man had reached a hand inside her and pulled the weak, short-lived laugh from somewhere out of the numbness there, determined to draw her into his playful mood. Ever since he had jumped up and rushed over to the door and started dancing, she had sat there baffled, not knowing what to make of him, wondering again about his sanity. And now he had made her laugh in spite of the emptiness.

(179-180)

This ekphrastic example shows how Marshall advances the plot through a description of dance. By watching and being amused by Lebert, Avey sees that she can begin trusting this man who honestly enjoys dancing—and performing a woman's dance—in front of her without embarrassing himself. Moreover, because he attaches no shame to his own dancing, unlike Avey, he readily thinks to invite her to go with him on the Carriacou Excursion to “see the Juba done proper” when he observes how much she enjoys watching him (180). Through his dancing Marshall softens Avey's mood, preparing her for the final Big Drum dance scene in which she embraces her heritage by redemptive dancing. Thus by showing the reader Lebert's moves while he is performing for Avey, Marshall engages the reader sympathetically with Avey, so that we better understand

what it takes to sway her. Allowing us to sit beside her as she watches, the ekphrasis emphasizes the extent to which she has distanced herself from dancing.

On a third and yet broader level, ekphrasis operates because the depicted art form loses much of its original expressivity in its transfer to paper; that “loss,” therefore, demarcates the ekphrastic moment (Döring 141). Although this “loss” warrants much discussion for descriptions of paintings and sculptures in literature, it is inscribed most uniquely in the written dance scene. Dance, being essentially ephemeral, unlike the arts which exist in or on physical media, can never be fully captured within/translated into a text. That is to say, because dance is *of* the body (whether moving or posing), dance can never be incorporated into a novel like the visual arts can. This is so because dance is fundamentally fluid, while the visual arts are always already archived. Dance’s ephemerality and non-transmissivity guarantee that some of its aesthetic value will be lost in translation—that is, the writer’s ekphrastic attempt.

However, as Diana Taylor warns, “[d]ebates about the ‘ephemerality’ of performance are...profoundly political” because, the question follows, “Whose memories, traditions, and claims to history disappear if performance practices lack the staying power to transmit vital knowledge?” (5). This, of course, is an excellent question, especially for novels dealing with colonial and postcolonial issues. In Caribbean literature the degree to which an ekphrastic dance performance is able to pass on cultural memories to the reader is important. For instance, in describing the D.C. dance club scene, Marie-Elena John puts Teddy on the outskirts of the floor where he watches others and occasionally dances a little. Nevertheless, she writes, he and others “like him, men and women, riding the beat,... were not at all dancing alone, they were participating in a

communal event” (155). Although they were reticent to join fully in the dancing (perhaps because, as John suggests, they were intimidated by “the nationalistic, dance-floor divides”), these peripheral dancers nevertheless constitute the majority that floods the floor when the reggae and Liberation beats start (156). In their participation John represents the appealing idea of belonging to a worldwide community and highlights the Caribbean and South African cultural and political movements that galvanized people all throughout the African Diaspora. Thus, despite losing some of the details of the experience, which one fully knows from having seen these dances in real life, John describes how completely the movements on the dance floor transform into a politico-cultural ritual. Although itself a depiction, the ekphrastic dance metaphorically “show[s that] what lies beyond narrative regulation...[is] citizenship... [which] must be generated by the very acts of assembly and association that live performance provokes” (R. Martin 60). The special feeling of celebration and group achievement the dancers have is intensified by their choice to dance together in remembrance of their achievements as a Diasporic community.

In noting this intangible aspect of dance, then, ekphrasis may also serve as the author’s criticism of how the Caribbean arts are or have been treated elsewhere. That is to say in the example given above, that by implying the dance club is a truly indescribable “Diasporic Experience,” John cleverly causes readers to recall and reconsider (if only on a subconscious level) other depictions of Caribbean, African, or African American dance they may have read or experienced. John implicitly encourages the reader to think about whether the writers of those other depictions (in either fiction or non-fiction) dared to

claim that their dance descriptions were sufficient or correct.¹⁰ Using ekphrasis as a “postcolonial strategy to engage with inherited representations” of Caribbean dance, John criticizes the imperial/colonial mindset that presumes to possess knowledge about another culture by dint of simply being interested in that culture (Döring 142). Likewise, Bartsch and Elsner highlight the discursive benefit derived from analyzing literature through ekphrasis by explaining how, “[i]n the shift of medium (‘intermediality’) between the described and the description,” or the signifier and the signified, “ekphrasis propose[s] a kind of metaphysics...of the textual” (v-vi). To analyze ekphrasis in the text, then, is to interrogate the politics of writing—the writing of not only that which is ephemeral, but also that which is culturally specific, like the truth about the Noah dancer-warriors’ nakedness. The politics of writing must be interrogated, novelist Toni Morrison avers, because too much power is at stake:

History can be critiqued and analyzed—artists can reinvent it...It can deliver other information and insights. [The rewriting of history is] the urgent enterprise when blood and rage bubbles in the streets...[for,] the past can be more liberating if you can change its lies...[projecting] the brightest of the future and also the best of the past. (quoted in McDaniel 7-8, brackets in original)

Lovelace, Marshall, Selvon and John are aware of and seize this power. Countering examples of British and colonial authority over history in their novels, they transmit their own cultural and political heritage through dancerly writing. Furthermore, because they reclaim authority over historical knowledge and the representation of Caribbean cultural practices, their work has relevance within both postcolonial and performative studies. These writers fulfill the task of researching and/or imagining what the colonial and postcolonial histories hid or forgot; fulfilling that task is tantamount to protecting the

¹⁰ See Earl Leaf’s comments about Caribbean dance in Chapter One for an excellent example of this prescriptive attitude.

Caribbean aesthetic practices—like dance or calypso—that are in danger of being lost or forgotten because they are ephemeral.

Thus, we can, like Paule Marshall, “see writers as image-makers” (Ogundipe 22)—as those who use art—or take inspiration from it—to write new art into existence. This ekphrastic activity implicates the writer in the political endeavor of imagining a new history for readers. The making of culture, too, results from aesthetic practices that imaginatively draw connections between the quotidian and the extraordinary, between stances and moving dances, between the discovery of self-identity and the protection of it. These written images collected together are, then, artifacts which communicate through their very form the “percipient event[s]” comprising a people’s shared history (Scarry 290). From slavery onwards, that shared history, despite being suppressed or undervalued even today, is comprised of various expressions of political consciousness perceived and enacted through cultural means, such as Caribbean dance. Thus, Caribbean writers can, “through ekphrasis,” suggest a future “reality beyond the social and material world of our actual lives” (Bartsch and Elsner vi). Describing dance to create a vision of postcolonial commemoration, Lovelace, Marshall, Selvon and John use the ekphrastic convention of dance to represent the Afro-Caribbean individual’s cultural heritage.

CONCLUSION

As we have seen in *The Dragon Can't Dance*, *Praisesong for the Widow*, *The Lonely Londoners*, and *Unburnable*, some Afro-Caribbean and -Diasporic characters dance to commemorate their endurance as a people despite external and atomizing forces. Through these efforts, they embrace their cultural and group heritage(s), as Aldrick did and Avey re-learned to do. Likewise, these characters dance to express their resistance to the powers that be, protecting their rights and rites. To this end, some of the partygoers at Harris's party in London and the Noah farmers in Dominica realize the need to defend their identities and communities with dance. In exploring both the action and form constituting these characters' dances, this study has examined how their resistant dance, "far from being merely a reaction to imperialism, is an alternative way of conceiving human history" (Said 215-216). Not merely a pastime or an object/event for the benefit of the tourist, Afro-Caribbean dance in these novels recalls the survival of a culture that locates political strength in aesthetic vivacity. As Rex Nettleford says of his own Jamaican brand of dance, Caribbean dance is "itself a political concern...[and] one of the most effective means of communication" because of its ubiquity in Caribbean cultures (19). The characters from these four novels enliven the body politic with their dancing expressivity, shaking up the status quo as they dance. Despite hardships or outside pressures due to the national/racial/gendered/economic labels applied to them, these characters dance to improve their lives and the future of their communities.

This literary analysis is based on a careful survey of how individual characters and communal groups, as bodies-in-motion/bodies-in-poses, purposefully engage an

aesthetics of performance. Characters in Caribbean novels do this by *fête*ing, whereby they liberate themselves temporarily from daily worries and, by dancing freely, whereby they perform small challenges to those who subscribe to colonial norms. They also perform their political force during battles, commemorative rites and informal gatherings. Thus in varying degrees, these characters act on the intention of forming and/or solidifying a nation/community with fellow dancers. The historical interludes in Caribbean history, literature, culture and dance provide the background information needed to appreciate these characters' actions. The novels' treatments of issues like self-identity and self-protection reflect a historical understanding of the Caribbean and the African Diaspora.

This study of dance in Caribbean literature is meant to provoke more discussion within postcolonial and performance studies, especially concerning ekphrastic dance. It uses the ideas of theorists from many fields to focus on ekphrasis as a literary convention that can reveal critical implications in the novel's form. Ekphrasis in dance also locates semiotic power in the action it describes, almost in-corporating the reader into the narrative to reveal the plot's development more vividly. By penning dance scenes which represent memories of dance that risk being forgotten or lost due to the ephemerality of dance, Lovelace, Marshall, Selvon and John create their own history of Caribbean politico-cultural activity. In the combined study of both the content and form of dance in Caribbean literature these four novelists are shown to have preserved Caribbean cultural memories for themselves, their communities, and generations of readers to come. I hope, as Diana Taylor feels about cultural performances in general, that this study illuminates the implications of Caribbean dance in these novels and "tell[s] us a great deal about our desire for access, and reflect[s] the politics of our interpretations" (6). Moreover, I hope

that the dance expressions and identity politics deserving such critical attention enable the reader to have a deeper appreciation of Caribbean literature, history and culture.

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