

Tout Moun

Caribbean Journal of Cultural Studies

*Creating a Caribbean Sense of Place:
Calypso, Spoken Word and the Oral Tradition*

Vol 6: No. 1 ▪ August 2021

<http://www.mainlib.uwi.tt/epubs/toutmoun/index1.htm>

© The University of the West Indies, Department of Literary Cultural and Communication Studies

INTRODUCTION

VOICE TRACKS:

CREATING A CARIBBEAN SENSE OF PLACE



Amílcar Sanatan

The theme of this issue was inspired by fiery debate in a carnival-themed public forum. Louis Regis' words were once at the heart of it. On February 12, 2009, Regis provoked an audience in the “Is Calypso Dying?” forum hosted by the Sir Arthur Lewis Institute of Social and Economic Studies (SALISES) at the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine Campus. Alongside him on the panel was calypsonian, Francine “Singing Francine” Edwards, General Secretary of the Trinidad Unified Calypsonians’ Organisation (TUCO), Lutalo “Brother Resistance” Masimba and the Director of the iconic soca band and production company Xtatik, Elizabeth Montano. What bacchanal did Regis bring to the academic forum that carnival? Regis pointed out that calypso in the 20th century Trinidad and Tobago had produced thought-provoking and creative songs on the history of the nation but he lamented the state in which the art form had found itself in the face of calypso tent closures, declining numbers of attendees at Dimanche Gras and the replacement of calypso with soca as the definitive sound of the carnival parade. Further, he stated that soca artistes had failed to produce the lyrical quality and political consciousness as a previous generation of calypsonians had done. He acknowledged the potential of ragga soca by Maximus Dan and Bunji Garlin to deliver social commentary to young audiences but he viewed them as minor exceptions in the large field of soca performers.

Soca music and its multiple sub-fields such as groovy soca, chutney soca and ragga soca, introduced new musical compositions, technologies, performance spaces, aesthetics, representations and body politics. Calypso, an art form once constructed and later upheld as a dominant symbol of popular culture and nationalism in the post-independent state, was in decline. As the sound of carnival was channelled through the soca anthems on big trucks, calypso served a niche in carnival heritage. Truly, what had transformed was “the range of permissible expressions and experiences during Carnival” (Guilbault 203) and our understanding of it.

In the years that followed, Regis, gathered multiple newspaper clippings and opened himself up to insights of his peers and their research. He frequently instigated classroom discussions on contemporary soca performers who complicated discrete boundaries between calypso and soca such as Fay-Ann Lyons. He also became increasingly interested in the spoken word movement of the day. For him, the emergent voices in spoken word continued calypso's tradition of social commentary and storytelling. Vladimir Lucien shares a similar observation, commending, "the spoken word forms which, of late, have been doing – in their social commentary and their utter rootedness in the space and society – what calypso has done for the last fifty years of the 20th century." Regis developed a scholarly interest in the ways current soca and spoken word performers reshaped post-independence popular culture and society. He was set on understanding calypso and spoken word on a continuum of the oral tradition in the Caribbean.

This special issue of *Tout Moun* is dedicated to Louis Regis. The breadth of the discussions reflects his passionate pursuit of and commitment to popular culture expressions of the Caribbean. This issue seeks to interpret the contestations of power and meaning in space in the oral tradition with attention to race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class and age. However, it is not enough to gesture towards the oral tradition or genuflect upon its altar as a popular, authentic or alternative mode of literary production to print. Denise deCaires Narain, fittingly articulates the need to employ a "critical vocabulary which would allow a shift away from simple celebration – or apology" (deCaires Narain 101).



Louis Regis and David Rudder at Daaga Hall Auditorium, the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine Campus.
2012. Photograph retrieved from Clydeen McDonald.

Building on these “critical vocabularies”, two pieces in this issue revisit the history of the oral tradition and interrogate the ideological power relations that undergirded it. Patricia Mohammed’s **Who Taking Advantage Ah Who: Sparrow and Caribbean Man/Woman Relations** brings historical depth to the iconic calypsonian, The Mighty Sparrow and his gender politics expressed in songs between the 1950s and 1980s. Mohammed emphasises that binary flows of power are abandoned in Sparrow’s oeuvre; instead, the calypsonian tackles issues of unequal gendered power relations through themes of intimacy, love and the desire for control in a multi-dimensional approach. Relatedly, O’Neil Joseph explores gender in calypso by examining sexual and geographic omissions in Caribbean historiography in **Disrupting the Art form: Tobago Women and Calypso, 1960-2000**. Joseph centres the voices of women calypsonians in the 20th century and highlights the pioneering performers and disruptive cultural moments in the male-dominated Tobago calypso landscape.

Freedom Undefined: Breaking (Neo)colonial Stereotypes through Voice and Performance in the Poetry of Grace Nichols by Hannah Regis facilitates a literary dialogue on the representation of Afro-Caribbean women. Regis explores the ways the voices of women in call and response as well as performances of the carnivalesque are inherent in the everyday expressions of Caribbean people. Everyday interactions of people are productive spaces for expression of the oral tradition where meanings are negotiated.

The submissions to this issue remind us that carnival remains a generative site for the reproduction and transformation of social relations. Amanda McIntyre’s photo essay, **The Baby Doll: Memory, Myths and Mas** is an organic reflection on feminist activism and her mas-making practice as the traditional carnival character, the Baby Doll. The photographer, Jason Audain, captures McIntyre’s portraits in Belmont, Trinidad and Tobago. The piece foregrounds women’s resistance to sexist oppression in the Caribbean.

A World of Poetry and Spoken Word also draws on biography and focuses on the varying tributaries of literary and oral traditions that shape the consciousness of contemporary spoken word poets. The essay explores the cultural confidence of a new generation of writers and performers that boldly claim the oral tradition in a more inclusive vision for Caribbean literature.

Adding to this issue’s reinforcement of inter-generational dialogue and understanding, a range of young scholars and arts practitioners have conducted interviews with pioneers of the oral tradition. Essah Cozett Díaz’s, **Reclaiming Roots through Performance: An Interview with Eintou Pearl Springer** stands out among the archival interviews that disproportionately focus on male icons in the oral tradition. Díaz’s interview with Springer details the legacy of West African traditions and creative arts activism in the 1970 Black Power Revolution. Making reference to the Black Power Revolution, Marisha Duncan’s, **My Life is a Rapso: An Interview**

with **Brother Resistance on Rapso and Cultural Activism in Trinidad and Tobago** provides insights into the experiences of Brother Resistance who helped construct the rapso music genre, its aesthetics and then the political organisation of the art form during his career. Duncan makes powerful connections between the demands for racial justice in the wake of the Black Lives Matter protests in the United States of America and persisting structural problems of anti-black racism in the Caribbean. The Rapso community suffered a great loss when Brother Resistance exited life's stage on July 13th 2021. We extend condolences to his family and deeply mourn his passing.

These interviews lay the groundwork for understanding Matthew Murrell's, **Wielding Spoken Word as Weapon: The Making of an Artiste** which shows the ways in which spoken word has become a creative vehicle for self-development in Barbados, through its exploration of African, Caribbean and national identities.

Writing and Performing the Nation: An Interview with Paul Keens-Douglas on Orality and Caribbean Literature focuses on the personal experiences of one of the most prolific practitioners of the oral tradition in the Caribbean. Paul Keens-Douglas is celebrated in Trinidad and Tobago, the Caribbean and the regional diaspora for his cultural legacy in storytelling and poetry. Keens-Douglas' commitment to the stage and his releases in print and multimedia formats have allowed his work to benefit from posterity.

Andre Badoo's, **Play the Devil: Florentino and the Devil** by Alberto Torrealba review of Timothy Adès translation of the classic Venezuelan poem, 'Florentino and the Devil' offers a wider scope in the framing of the oral tradition in the Caribbean. In the review, Badoo explores connections between poetry, music and folk cultures that exist in the Caribbean and the Americas. In line with the political themes that run throughout the issue, he contemplates the historic relationship of Trinidad and Venezuela as one that can map new political possibilities within the current context of Venezuelan migration and displacement in the Caribbean.

Tributes in the form of eulogy are featured in this issue. Rawle Gibbons and Gordon Rohlehr offer tributes to Louis Regis that provide an intimate account of his background as a student, archivist, calypso scholar and "South man" from Trinidad and Tobago. In the same degree, Fédon Honoré invokes the memory of famed Midnight Robber, Brian Honoré, in **A Retrospective on Brian Honoré, the Midnight Robber**.

The editors thank Mark Gilbert for the symbol used on the first page of each essay. It was commissioned for the CARIFESTA XIV academic symposium held in 2019 on the theme "Journey Round Myself." Nicholas Huggins also generously shared his artwork, "The Mighty Shadow" and "Shadow as Robber," for the cover of the journal issue.

In the time that this issue was edited, the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent lockdown measures disrupted the literary and performance landscape around the world. Bookstores that were unable to transition to the online space quickly enough closed indefinitely. Performing arts groups struggling to sustain livelihoods without gigs petitioned governments for relief grants. The idea of a “successful show” was left in the hands of tech-savvy marketers and young social media influencers who could attract the largest crowd on Facebook and Instagram Live. The “COVID-Compliant Carnival” meant that Trinidad and Tobago’s National Carnival Commission (NCC) digital Dimanche Gras was a curated musical show and not a competition.

Still, calypsonians, soca artistes, rapso women and men and spoken word poets produced digital content throughout the pandemic to mediate and meditate on the deepening vulnerabilities of life in the pandemic with creative possibility. Maria Nunes’ interview with Wendell Manwarren, *Carnival Imagination*, Derron Sandy’s spoken word tribute to Louis Regis, *Spoken Word and Funerals* and Ruth Osman and Arielle John’s jazz and spoken word collaboration, *Blue* capture the resilience and creative imagination of people in the Caribbean space through hardship and crisis.

The essays, interviews, commentaries and creative submissions in this issue highlight the multiple legacies and offshoots of the oral tradition in the Caribbean. The celebration of Louis Regis’ life and work compels us towards re-reading texts, performances, stages and historical contexts for a deeper understanding of the oral tradition, the Caribbean and ourselves.

WORKS CITED

deCaires Narain, Denise. *Contemporary Caribbean Women’s Poetry: Making Style*. Routledge, 2002.

Guilbault, Jocelyne. *Governing Sound: The Cultural Politics of Trinidad’s Carnival Musics*. The University of Chicago Press, 2007.

Lucien, Vladimir. “New Caribbean Editorial.” *Cordite Poetry Review* 81, 15 May 2017. <http://cordite.org.au/essays/new-caribbean-editorial/>. Accessed 5 May 2021.