The Expression of Caribbean Identity in Earl Lovelace's
The Dragon Can't Dance (1979)

Serigne Mbaye KANDJI

Doctoral School Student,

Laboratoire d'Etudes et de Recherches deAnglophones (LERA)

Faculty of Arts and Humanities

Cheikh Anta Diop University

Dakar, Senegal

Abstract: This article focuses on the theme of Caribbean identity in Earl Lovelace's *the Dragon Can't Dance*. In this novel, Lovelace tends to shows how Caribbean people, in a post independent period affirm their identity that they have been denied of. The geographic space, Calvary Hill which is the representation of Trinidad in its reduced form is the center of a cultural practice named carnival. The article captures also how cross-culturality remains a focal point in the quest of a lost identity. After independence, Caribbean culture remains trapped under the western domination, and Caribbean identity still misunderstood because of the multiplicity of people from different origin. However, with *The Dragon Can't Dance* Lovelace has restored this identity

Keywords: identity, multiculturalism, Caribbean, Culture.

Introduction

Caribbean identity is derived from a collective "group conciousness" that imparts a sense of belonging in a community bound by a common culture. No matter where they come from, Caribbean people have managed to have a unique identity which was an imperative for them in a community governed by a sense of solidarity. I want to explore Earl Lovelace' *The Dragon Can't Dance*as an important pretext of Caribbean identity. Caribbean identity is shaped by the history slavery, colonialism and the indenture system.The choice of this topic is motivated by the fact that Caribbean identity is not static. Moreover, one cannot define this identity through the use of old concepts because it is made of many different identities. There are many people who are not able to categorize themselves into one or even two. The British critics Paul Gilroy parallels the theme of identity via the concept of "double identity". He refers to the migration from Africa to America which began with the Slave Trade and subsequent immigration from the Caribbean islands. In *The Dragon Can't Dance*,

Lovelace articulates a new poetics based on creolization that Edward Glissant calls "the basic symptom of cross-cultural contact"(Glissant 1989: 140). Soit becomes very problematic to define Caribbean identity because each region introduces its culture "from their homeland and widening the web of Caribbeaness" (Kheera Daly, www.academia.edu.sn). Caribbean identity is made up of different experiences because of the circumstances African and Indians underwent in the island. Stuart Hall posits that the definition of identity

> [. . .] recognizes that, as well as the many points of similarity, there are also critical points of deep and significant difference which constitute what we really are, or rather since history has intervened what we have become. We cannot speak for very long with any exactness about one experience, one identity without acknowledging its other side- the ruptures and discontinuities which constitute precisely the Caribbean 'uniqueness'. Cultural identity in this sense, is a matter 'becoming' as well as of 'being'. It belongs to the future as much as the past. It is not something which already exists transcending place, time, and culture (Hall, 1990: 225).

The methodology of this article is based on the postcolonial approaches in the sense that it studies the issue of identity which is based on cultural identities.A survey ofthe characters' role in the*Dragon Can't Dance* will help to show how Lovelace has contributed to the postcolonial Caribbean identity. With an examination under two main heads: "the meeting of culture and interaction of individuals"(Ramchand, 1988: 7) I will be interested in the creole culture and the selfhood of the characters

This paper consists of three parts. The first part will show how by using the concept of creolisation, Lovelace frame the Caribbean identity. In the second I intend todemonstrate howCarnival plays a very big role as it is a cultural element that gives them the opportunity to react against any kind of thread. The third part will help understand the Caribbean as a third space where this identity is displayed

1- **Creolized Caribbean Identity**

Creolisation is traditionally used to refer to the Caribbean, although it is not exclusively to the Caribbean and scholars use the concept to represent others. In *The Dragon Can't Dance* Lovelace frames Creolization, concept that is part and parcel in Caribbean identity. That is what makes Lovelace say in his interview with Patricia that: "we don't see creole culture in the same way. We see people more concerned with looking back of themselves now in term of ethnic culture" (Lovelace, 67).

Hybridity or hybridization, transculturation, syncretism are often used by scholars to refer to cultural blending in postcolonial and cultural studies. From the rural area Pariag comes to the city in order value his culture. His first job in the city is buying empty bottles and re-selling them to Rum companies. This job allows him to widen his world by talking to people. He says: "the main reason he [Pariag] had come to the city to live, was so that he could join up with people, be part of something bigger"(Lovelace 77). It is only by joining the group that he could be more important. Moments later his job become fruitful and he starts selling roasted peanuts and boiled and fried chhena at the race track. Pariag's integration and his business development hints that for a truly prosperous region, one must accept other and interact with them. On other side, the calypsonian Philo invites Aldrick for a drink so that he can listen to the calypso. This is the ideal of the West Indian identity: everyone brings their individual identity in the collective one.Creoliazation comes from Creole which derives from the Spanish criollo, the word describes those of European descent who were born in New World. Creole designates someone born in the colonies, regardless of race and class, as well as some new cultural and linguistic forms. Creolization is a process in which creole cultures emerge in the New World. Resulted from slavery and later from the indenture system, there was a mixture between indigenous, African and European descents which came to be understood as Creolization.

The word is also used to distinguish the Afro-descendants who were born in the New World in comparison to African-born slaves. Edward K. Brathwaite describes creolization as the interaction of four cultural presences which are Amerindian, European, African and Asian in the new world (Brathwaite 1970: 344). This contributed to the establishment of the colonizing European culture on the environment and the cultural orientation of the area. The mulatto-creolization in the Caribbean is the first stage in the process of cultural diversity, in which Europe and Africa provided the main cultural presences that shaped the culture of the English Caribbean. The acculturation of Blacks into the white colonizer's cultural values and traditions was an imperative for the colonized to gain social credibility. Then, his definition of mulatto-creolization should probably be re-categorized attending to the complexity and heterogeneity of creolization in the English Caribbean. Dash on the other hands bases his analysis of creolization on the resistance developed by the oppressed. In fact, this cultural resistance to European domination in the Caribbean has facilitated the process of creolization. Dash argues that

> [t]he oppressed and exploited were not merely the passive victims of an oppressive system
> but rather, through a pattern of apparent consent, opposition and overt resistance, managed
> to create unprecedented cultural transformation from a series of dialectical relations that
> united oppressors and oppressed (Dash, 1996: 47).

Through *The Dragon Can't Dance*Lovelace restructures the hostile relationship between Indians and Africans by using this concept of creolization. When the Indians, Africans and Europeans interacted, they developed a creolized ethnic identity. Pariag scrupulously enter the creole culture by encountering Belliram, a man with whom he first starts his business. Lovelace's description of Belliram shows how creole culture is important in Caribbean identity.

> Belliram was from San Juan. He liked to cuss and get on like creole people. He was always boasting about his creole girlfriends and about the dances he went to. The biggest thing in his life talking with Pariag about the time he played masquerade portraying Viva Zapata in Corregidorssteelband(Lovelace 83).

Lovelace believes that for the development of Indo-Caribbean community in Trinidad, the Indians have to get out of their "Indianness". They should move out of the encapsulating scenario of their native cultural traditions and accept to mix with the other cultural groups in the society; to form a unique identity which would become a creole culture. Lovelace is right when he acknowledged the necessity of moving the Indian out of his Indianness for the development of the Indo-Caribbean community in Trinidad and Tobago. When Pariah joins the community of Calvary Hill, he wants to preserve his Indianness. He says: "No. We didn't have to melt into one. I woulda be me for my own self" (Lovelace, 224). So, this makes his integration difficult. What readers may consider to be assimilation to the western world is for Lovelace a means by which the Indian and African culture are expanded over the Caribbean area. Brathwaite corroborates Lovelace's arguments in of what he calls "pluralism" which reinforces the relationship between Afro-Trinidadians and Indo-Trinidadians. Braithwaite argues that: "the acceptance and continuation of the idea of 'plural' society, with the consequences and assumptions already outlined, has been […] absorbed into the bloodstream of West Indian thought by the last of the orientation" (qtd by Kavin, 2005: 4).

The fact of showing important elements that confirm the creole culture of Trinidad does not exclude some racist behaviour pertaining to creolization in the daily life of Caribbean people. In fact, *Dragon* depicts the stagnation of racial beliefs concerning creolization and the way some characters use it in the novel. Aldrick describes Miss Cleothilda a mulatto creole in the followings:

> her nose lifted above the city, her long hair plaited in two plaits, like a schoolgirl, choking with that importance and beauty which she maintained as a queenship which not only she, but the people who shared the yard with her, had the duty to recognise and responsibility to uphold (Lovelace, 17).

So, Miss Cleothilda's creolization is not based on the principle of unity it is rather is based on the fact of maintaining her queenship. By doing so, she maintains a separate, unique, un-mixed identity and culture.

Many other authors like Lovelace have portrayed in their novels the transcultural process that defines the Caribbean identity. In this regard, Samuel Selvon, who supported the idea of a unified and creolised Caribbean, envisaged the formation of the Indo-Trinidadian subject as the formation of the Caribbean man with convergence of Indian, European and African legacies. By taking example from his socio-cultural context, he explains this by referring to his own growth as a Trinidadian subject. Salvon states:

> As I say, growing up in that sort of [creolised] atmosphere I identified as much with Blacks as with Indians; in fact, strictly speaking, if you talk about the creolising process, you're not Indian, you're not Black, you're not even white; you assimilate all these cultures and you turn out to be a different man who is the Caribbean man[1](Selvon, 1992: 232).

Selvon's invocations of creolization certifies Lovelace's notion of cultural hybridity which has been a paramount importance to Caribbean nationalism. Lovelace's discourse on hybridity is a proof that he gives credit to the homogenising and exclusionary idea of nationalism. In his article"Creolization and Creole Societies" Nigel Bolland explains the participation of creole culture in the development of Caribbean identity. For Bolland, cultures and societies that allow Caribbean people to participate in different times and in different ways in a variety of activities in the way that they need not to be mutually exclusive (Bolland 1992). Although, the more people have an open and organic view of creolization, the more they understand the dialectical view of creolization which helps keep in mind that the various ways people contribute culturally depends on the distribution of power in the society. This being said, 'creoleness' becomes then not a culture that is historically fixed but it has been shaped by the historical circumstances.

Moreover, in the quest of the Caribbean identity, creolization has played an important linguistic role. Lovelace uses also Caribbean English Creole in his narrative to show Creole how languages are syncretic linguistic systems formed through the interaction of European, African, and Asian. However, we notice that they differ from each other due to the different socio-historical, cultural, and

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[1]Selvon, Samuel. Interview. New World Adams: Conversations with Contemporary West Indian

Writers.By Daryl C. Dance. Yorkshire: Peepal Tree, 1992. P. 232.

political factors in their process of development in the different territories. Anglophone Caribbean territories experienced colonial domination by different European powers at various historical times, while it has practically disappeared in the Caribbean islands; the importation of indentured servants from Asia in the largest territories (Trinidad and Tobago, Guyana, and Jamaica), among others. These factors contributed to the development of different Creole languages in the region with English as their main linguistic base. That is why we can speak of a Jamaican English Creole or a Barbadian/ Belizean/ Trinidadian English Creole, among other Creole languages in the region. If there are people who reject the English Creole forms and adopt the Standard English for social status, in *Dragon*, Lovelacere considers these Creole languages through appropriation, modification, and adaptation of the English language of the colonizer. In this sense, Kenneth Ramchand has noted three different stages in the development of Creole language. The first stage corresponds to the early period of colonization, when the language spoken by black slaves living in the slave community within the Plantation was a kind of dialect in which African languages were slightly influenced by flawed English. In the second stage approximately at the turn of the eighteenth century, the linguistic base of Creole was already English and the number of African linguistic words was lesser. This was due to the interaction between African slaves and white masters.The third stage in the development of Creole is produced by the increased social contacts between black slaves and whites, which provoked a growing influence of Creole in the English language of the masters(Ramchand 2004).

The cultural identity that Lovelace expresses not only shows the celebration of the oral traditional and the socio-cultural universe of the oppressed cultural groups in Trinidad and Tobago, but also highlights his idea of creolization that affirms the cultural identity against western cultural domination. In the formal context of this narrative, this assertion and defence of a creolised cultural identity translates itself into the validating representation of the oral tradition and culture in the conventional scribal context of narrative bequeathed by the European literary tradition. Consequently, the Creole language comes to support the hybridity of this genre as a linguistic manifestation from the Anglo-Caribbean oral culture legitimated in the literary context of *Dragon*, while its use promotes an expression of cultural identity in the development of a culturally situated and identified fictional narrative.

However, the concept in itself bears the prejudiced, colonial residue of hierarchy. It marks the ranked positions on the chain of culture where people of European origin are superior to people of African and Indian origins. Lovelace highlights this in the character of Miss Cleothilda a mulatto woman. The latter associates her mulattoness with racism while disassociating herself to the rest of her community.

A Carnivalesque Caribbean Identity

The Trinidadian carnival that Lovelace presents in The *Dragon Can't Dance*is a hybrid European and African cultural forces of festivity, played to represent a communal and social rebellion. The elements found in this festivity in the *Dragon* are references of the origins of carnival in medieval European society. If these elements are downplayed in the novel, they are essentially registered in. For instance, Lovelace portrays Mardi-gras, with all its history of masque, frivolity, grotesqueness and potential revolt.

Like the practitioners of the European carnivalesque, Lovelace's characters use masque and gesture to transform themselves while affirming their cultural identity in the performativity of carnival. In his article "To Be Dragon and Man: The Cultural Politics of Carnival in Earl Lovelace's *The Dragon Can't Dance*" Richard McGuire explains that the European medieval festivals of misrule, which dates back to Roman carnival, the Trinidadian goers of carnival asserted themselves through masque to be at least as important as the officious owners of grandiose cathedrals and opulent homesteads. In Guire's view, Aldrick's words: "This is people taller than cathedrals; this is people more beautiful than avenues with trees" (Lovelace, 115) corroborate Lovelace's idea of language here, which constructs cathedrals as synecdoches of power, alludes to the radical cultural politics of early European carnival in daring to equal the loftiness of society's masters.

Also, when Aldrick sews his carnival costume, he recognises what Bakhtin would call "medieval carnival's potential for offering its participants a second life" (Lovelace, 4). To wear masque is a political gesture to construct a respected, even feared, subversive alter-identity, which will be understood in the eyes of one's community and most importantly, one's oppressors. Through his masquerade, he wants others to see him, recognize his personhood, and be warned of his dangerousness.

Caribbean as Third Space Identity

Many authors have attempted to define the concept of third space.Third space' can be defined as:

> the intersection where new knowledge and discourses emerge from the blending and merger of understanding and experiences from a child's home, community, and peer network with the more formalized learning encountered in schooling (https://www.igi-global.com/dictionary/it-is-real-colouring/30021).

This term refers to a psychological space that learners progressively build when they become increasingly aware of culture, and develop a broader perspective and openness to different cultural elements. In the process of learning, there is a more critical perspective of their culture. When learners

find themselves mediating between two languages, two cultures and two worlds, they will reach this "third place" that is essential to develop sophisticated trans- lingual and transcultural competences.

The concept of third space is flexible in term of definition and location of the theoretical and artistic views. The third space is examined from starting points which have recently moved from the marginal to the center. When we talk about this notion of third space, the themes are related to forming identity and politics of representation of identity. The third space can be also defined as an area where the content of concept and statements is hotly debated. It gives many ways to perceive "who you are, where we are from,where want to go. It creates opportunities which promote something different, new and previously unidentified. The Third Space of carnival in Lovelace's sense is concerned with shifting away from essentialist and negative ideas about any particular cultural identity. It espouses the notion that individuals of a particular social type possess certain essential characteristics. And that, these are found in particular cultural practices towards the idea that cultural identities are not fixed in any essential practices and articulation within specific circumstances that allow them all to exist harmoniously within the space

Lovelace shows that this Third Space is a space of voices and unfixed cultural identities. It is a site of transformation. The Third Space eliminates boundaries between centre and peripherysubordination and transgression and creates a new world where any difference is to be affirmed. In *The Dragon Can't Dance*, Aldrick embodies the aspirations toward achieving integrity of being by playing while urging his followers to downgrade all kinds of western ideologies. He also made collapse negative notions of difference. It is in the third space that Lovelace deconstructs the western hegemonic assumption of stable subjectivity and meaning. In this space notions of "self and other" by the western grand narratives is destabilized. Pariag's frustration and instability stem from his inability to belong to any particular community and culture. Through Pariag's 'in-between space' or a 'Third Space', identity is ambivalent and crucially challenged in the hegemonic colonial setting.

Considering the context of the definition of this notion of Third Space, Edward Soja breaks from the traditional artistic representation of the physical place. In his theory of "trialistics of space", he gives his definition by basing his analysis on three concepts: The first he calls *Firstspace* centres the physical place in which he favours "materiality and to aim toward a formal science of space" (Edward, 1989: 75). In the second part that he calls the *Secondspace*, he explains that there is a constructive space in the mind of people; a cognitive space. It is the perception we have of the physical space. The third part or *Thirdspace* is the combination of both physical space and the perceptive space which he calls the lived experience. Lovelace combines the first two parts to spotlightthe lived experience of Caribbean people that he materializes with characters in both novels.

In his materialization, Lovelace proposes a cultural blinding (creolization) that does not only solidify their identity but also is an antidote of western hegemony.

This Third Space or cognitive space that Lovelace highlights does not allow us to say that he neglects the physical space. Itis a cultural space that gives voice to minority people and acknowledges the hybridity of cultures in defiance of ethnocentric traditions (Bhabha: 1994). There is an emphasis on the existence of differing cultural conditions and historical narratives and the importance of not simply acknowledging and valuing them, but interrogating how they can be properly understood. The cultural hybridity represented in the Third Space is conceptualised in terms of the 'borderline conditions' that exist there. The idea of a third space has been used to express the culmination of a journey towards the finding of an identity and the forming of a sense of self.

The study of Third Space can also be grounded by Pierre Bourdieu and his concepts of habitus and field. These concepts could help to illuminate our analysis. Bourdieu's concepts of habitus, capital and field are inter-related and interdependent. The interactions, events and cultural practices in society are three-fold interaction and itis very telling in therelation between Pariag and the inhabitants of Calvary Hill. The social space for interactions is the field. A field can be likened to a pitch for playing a game or a field of forces. Habitus refers to an individual's dispositions and history and what each individual brings to the interaction. Habitus both shapes the interaction and is shaped by the interaction. Capital refers to the individual's place within the field. A third space is often understood as a location for exploring issues of dominance, power and emancipation. It is a means to imagine new ways of working, new ways of talking and original, transformative ways of relating.

> the Third Space is transformative...It is a space peculiar to itself, that is not simply the space between or the sum of different cultures, but a space where the enunciation of cultures is a transformative, emancipatory act (Waterhouse, McLaughlin & McLellan, Morgan, 2009: 3).

In Lovelace's novel space is described as hybrid and focus on the 'creation of hybrid identity that relies upon cultural experiences.

Conclusion

The Dragon Can't Dance is a means through which Lovelace manages to capture the rumours and the stereotypes in the thoughts and actions of his characters. This study of Caribbean identity in Earl Lovelace's *The Dragon Can't Dance* has revealed that the notion of identity is very complex. In fact, coming from different nations, Caribbean people live in harmony and this is possible thanks to

their acceptance of one another's culture and beliefs. Lovelace's use of a creolised, carnivalesque and third spaceidentity lets readers understand how Caribbean cultural communities are different and separate … and the diverse bases on which they have tended to define themselves. Despite this diversity, they gather their respective cultures to assert their identity. Lovelace's characters develop an expression of resistance that is prevalent and observable in their daily life. It is especially evident during the celebration of carnival with Aldrick's dragon costume. Fisheye the badjohn struggles against the foreign powers that want sponsors to take over the steel band that binds the members of the community. Philo's revolutionary calypso and Pariag's desire to integrate the community are Lovelace's pretexts of showing people's need of a recognized identity.

All these characters' roles are an alternative version of how Caribbean people fight against the western hegemony in order to show their true identity. Through these characters, Lovelace has shown us how within the destitute community, the yearning to live and have hope is no different for people anywhere in the world.

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