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Assi .Lect. Khalid
Salman Sakar

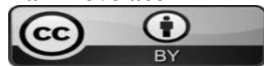
The General
Directorate of
Education in Thi-Qar

Email:

Alhatamykhalid78@gmail.com

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Carnavalesque Resistance: Performing Identity and Cultural Reclamation in Earl Lovelace's *The Dragon Can't Dance*

A B S T R A C T

This research examines Earl Lovelace's *The Dragon Can't Dance* through the theoretical lens of Mikhail Bakhtin's Carnavalesque, exploring how carnival functions as a site of cultural resistance and identity formation in postcolonial Trinidad. Through close textual analysis of key characters - Aldrick, Philo, and Sylvia - this study investigates how Lovelace portrays the carnival as a means of temporarily subverting colonial power structures and a potentially transformative space for cultural reclamation. The research reveals how Lovelace's narrative complicates simplistic notions of resistance by demonstrating both the liberatory potential and the commodification threats facing Caribbean carnival traditions. The findings contribute to post-colonial literary discourse by illuminating the complex intersection of performance, resistance, and cultural identity in Caribbean literature.

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المقاومة الكرنفالية وأداء الهوية وإستعادة الثقافة في رواية التتبن لا يستطيع الرقص للكاتب إيرل لوفليس

م.م. خالد سلمان صكر

مديرية تربية محافظة ذي قار

الملخص:

يتناول هذا البحث رواية "التتبن لا يستطيع الرقص" للكاتب إيرل لوفليس من خلال عدسة النظرية الكرنفالية لميخائيل باختين، ويستكشف كيف يعمل الكرنفال كموقع للمقاومة الثقافية وتشكيل الهوية في ترينيداد ما بعد الاستعمار. من خلال التحليل النصي الدقيق للشخصيات الرئيسية - ألدريك وفيلو وسولفيا - يناقش البحث كيف صور لوفليس الكرنفال كوسيلة لتقويض البنى الاستعمارية بشكل مؤقت. وكفضاء يحمل إمكانية تحويلية لاستعادة الثقافة. تكشف الدراسة كيف يعقد لوفليس الفهم المبسط للمقاومة، من خلال إبراز كل من الإمكانيات التحريرية التي يتيحها الكرنفال والتهديدات المتمثلة في تسليح التقاليد الكرنفالية الكاريبية. وتسهم النتائج في الخطاب الأدبي ما بعد الاستعمار عبر تسليط الضوء على النقاط المعقد بين الأداء والمقاومة والهوية الثقافية في الأدب الكاريبية .

الكلمات المفتاحية : المقاومة الثقافية ، الكرنفال، تشكيل الهوية ، إيرل لوفلاس .

Introduction:

Earl Lovelace stands as a pivotal figure in Caribbean literature, with works that consistently engage with questions of cultural identity, colonialism's aftermath, and the complex social fabric of Trinidad and Tobago. The *Dragon Can't Dance*, published in 1979, emerges during a critical period of postcolonial nation-building and cultural assertion in the Caribbean. The novel centers on the Hill community of Calvary Hill in Port of Spain, using carnival as both setting and metaphor for exploring deeper tensions of resistance and accommodation within Trinidadian society.

Carnival in Trinidad carries profound historical significance, evolving from plantation- era celebrations to become "the most important cultural event in Trinidad and Tobago" (Liverpool 5). As Hollis Liverpool argues, "Carnival originated as an expression of freedom; it was a celebration by ex-slaves of their release from bondage" (10). This historical context makes carnival an ideal lens through which to examine questions of cultural resistance, as it represents both a celebration of freedom and a performance of identity that exists in tension with dominant social structures.

This research addresses the question: How does Lovelace deploy the carnivalesque as a framework for understanding resistance, identity formation, and cultural reclamation in post-colonial Trinidad? I argue that Lovelace presents carnival as a multifaceted cultural performance that simultaneously enables resistance against colonial and neocolonial structures while acknowledging the limitations and commodification threats facing such

resistance. Drawing on Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque, performance theory, and postcolonial approaches to cultural identity, this paper analyzes how characters in *The Dragon Can't Dance* perform both resistance and identity through carnival, revealing the complex interplay between cultural reclamation and the forces that threaten to neutralize it.

Research Questions:

This study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How does Earl Lovelace deploy carnival as a framework for understanding resistance and cultural identity in *The Dragon Can't Dance*?
2. In what ways do characters' performances during carnival simultaneously construct identity and enable resistance to colonial and neo-colonial power structures?
3. How does Lovelace's novel portray the tensions between carnival's potential for liberation and its vulnerability to commercialization and commodification?
4. What does the transformation of carnival within the novel reveal about the changing dynamics of resistance in post-colonial Trinidad?
5. How do gender dynamics interact with carnival performances to create different modes of resistance for male and female characters?

Research Aims:

- a. Analyze how Lovelace's characters embody different aspects of carnival resistance through their varied relationships to carnival traditions
- b. Examine the intersection of performance, identity formation, and cultural resistance in *The Dragon Can't Dance*
- c. Evaluate how Bakhtin's theory of the carnivalesque can be adapted to understand Caribbean carnival traditions
- d. Explore how Lovelace portrays both the liberatory potential and limitations of carnivalesque resistance in post-colonial contexts
- e. Investigate how gender shapes access to carnival's transformative potential
- f. Document the historical evolution of carnival as both cultural celebration and political resistance

Significance of the Study:

This research contributes to literary scholarship in several key ways. First, it offers a nuanced analysis of *The Dragon Can't Dance* that moves beyond simply identifying carnival as a theme to examining how carnival functions as a complex framework for understanding resistance in post-colonial societies. As Helen Tiffin argues, "Caribbean writers often reconfigure European theoretical frameworks to address specifically Caribbean concerns"

(Tiffin 32). This study demonstrates how Lovelace adapts and transforms the concept of the carnivalesque to reflect Trinidad's specific historical and cultural context.

Second, this research bridges literary analysis with cultural studies approaches, recognizing that Lovelace's novel engages with actual cultural practices that carry profound historical and political significance. By connecting Lovelace's fictional representations to historical accounts of Trinidad's carnival traditions, this study contributes to our understanding of how literature participates in broader cultural conversations about identity and resistance.

Third, this analysis contributes to postcolonial literary theory by demonstrating how resistance must be understood as neither purely successful nor completely co-opted, but rather as an ongoing negotiation between liberation and constraint. As Homi Bhabha suggests, colonial resistance often operates through "ambivalence" that challenges binary understandings of domination and resistance (Bhabha 112). This study shows how Lovelace's nuanced portrayal of carnival illuminates this ambivalence, thereby enriching postcolonial theoretical frameworks.

Finally, at a time when global capitalism increasingly commodifies cultural traditions, this study's examination of how Lovelace portrays the commercialization of carnival carries contemporary relevance. It offers insights into how communities might preserve the resistant potential of cultural traditions while navigating the pressures of modernization and globalization.

Literature Review:

Scholarship on Earl Lovelace's work has consistently highlighted his engagement with questions of cultural authenticity, resistance, and the complexities of postcolonial Caribbean identity. Bill Schwarz describes Lovelace as a writer whose work "provides a revelatory narration of the unresolved predicaments of the postcolonial nation" (Schwarz 73), pointing to how his fiction engages with the lived realities of Trinidad's political and cultural transformations.

The significance of carnival in Caribbean literature has received substantial critical attention. Gerard Aching's "Masking and Power: Carnival and Popular Culture in the Caribbean" offers a comprehensive analysis of carnival's dual role as "both a form of resistance to elite culture and a means by which that resistance is tamed" (Aching 8). Aching specifically discusses how *The Dragon Can't Dance* represents "the decline of Carnival's oppositional capacity" (Aching 112) as it becomes increasingly commercialized.

Milla C. Riggio's edited collection "Carnival: Culture in Action" provides important contextual understanding of Trinidad's carnival traditions, with Riggio noting that carnival represents "a complex negotiation between resistance and accommodation"

(Riggio 15). This tension between resistance and accommodation forms a central theme in critical responses to Lovelace's work.

Performance theory offers another productive avenue for analyzing Lovelace's novel. Diana Taylor's concept of the "repertoire" as embodied memory that "enacts embodied memory: performances, gestures, orality, movement, dance, singing—in short, all those acts usually

thought of as ephemeral, nonreproducible knowledge" (Taylor 20) resonates strongly with the novel's depiction of carnival as embodied cultural knowledge and resistance.

Gordon Rohlehr's extensive work on calypso traditions provides crucial context for understanding Philo's character, arguing that calypsonians historically functioned as "the voice of the people" (Rohlehr 152) while also navigating commercial pressures. Rohlehr notes how *The Dragon Can't Dance* captures "the calypsonian's struggle to maintain artistic integrity in the face of commercial pressures" (Rohlehr 155).

Feminist scholars like Carole Boyce Davies have examined how gender shapes resistance in Caribbean contexts, arguing that "women's resistance often takes different forms than men's more visible carnival performances" (Davies 78). This perspective is essential for understanding Sylvia's character and her complex negotiation of resistance outside traditional carnival performances.

While existing scholarship has examined carnival's role in Lovelace's work, less attention has been paid to the specific ways in which carnival performance enables both identity formation and resistance while simultaneously being threatened by commodification. This research addresses this gap by analyzing how Lovelace's

characters embody these tensions through their varied relationships to carnival traditions.

Theoretical Framework:

Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque provides the primary theoretical foundation for this analysis. Bakhtin defines carnival as a time when "all were considered equal during carnival... [a] suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions" (10). This temporary inversion of social hierarchies allows for what Bakhtin terms "grotesque realism," where "the bodily element is deeply positive... the people's second life, organized on the basis of laughter" (19). Applied to the Caribbean context, the carnivalesque illuminates how carnival creates spaces for expressing cultural identity and resistance that might otherwise be suppressed.

However, Bakhtin's European-centered concept requires adaptation when applied to Caribbean contexts. As Gerard Aching notes, "Caribbean carnivals emerged from different historical circumstances than those Bakhtin describes" (15). While European carnivals represented temporary inversions of established order, Caribbean carnivals emerged as expressions of freedom by formerly enslaved peoples. This distinction is crucial for understanding carnival's function in Lovelace's novel as not merely temporary release but as ongoing cultural resistance.

Performance theory, particularly Judith Butler's concept that "identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (25), provides a framework for understanding how carnival costumes and performances constitute rather than simply express identity. Diana Taylor's distinction between the "archive" (enduring materials like texts and documents) and the "repertoire" (embodied practices and knowledge) helps illuminate how carnival performance preserves cultural memory that might otherwise be lost to official historical records.

Édouard Glissant's postcolonial concept of "relation" further enriches this framework by rejecting essentialist notions of identity in favor of understanding Caribbean identities as formed through complex historical relationships and cultural exchanges. Glissant argues that Caribbean identity is characterized by "creolization" that "does not represent a loss of identity, a dilution of being, but rather its enriched affirmation" (134). This concept helps explain how characters in *The Dragon Can't Dance* navigate questions of authentic identity through carnival's creative expressions.

Together, these theoretical approaches enable an analysis of how Lovelace portrays carnival as a site where identity is performed, cultural memory is preserved, and resistance is embodied - while simultaneously acknowledging the threats commercialization poses to carnival's transformative potential.

Methodology:

This research employs close textual analysis of *The Dragon Can't Dance*, focusing particularly on passages that depict carnival preparations, performances, and the characters' relationships with carnival traditions. The analysis centers on three key characters—Aldrick (the dragon dancer), Philo (the calypsonian), and Sylvia (who navigates gender expectations)—examining how their varied relationships with carnival illuminate different aspects of resistance and identity formation. Passages were selected based on their engagement with carnival themes, representations of performance and identity, and moments where characters explicitly or implicitly resist social, economic, or political constraints. These selections are analyzed through the theoretical frameworks outlined above, with particular attention to how Bakhtin's

concepts of the carnivalesque and grotesque realism manifest in Lovelace's Caribbean context. The analysis attends closely to both the content and form of Lovelace's prose, considering how his narrative techniques—including his use of dialect, rhythm, and metaphor—contribute to the novel's exploration of carnival as resistance. This approach recognizes that the novel's form itself embodies aspects of carnival's disruptive potential through its challenge to standard English and conventional narrative structures.

Throughout the analysis, Lovelace's representations are contextualized within the historical development of Trinidad's carnival traditions, drawing on historical and anthropological scholarship to illuminate how the novel engages with real cultural practices and their transformations.

Textual Analysis:

1.1. Aldrick and the Dragon: Embodied Resistance

Aldrick, the novel's protagonist and dragon dancer, embodies the connection between carnival performance and resistance. Lovelace writes that for Aldrick, "the dragon was a creation that he had both inherited and rediscovered for himself, a figure in which he could both hide and reveal himself" (Lovelace 38). This dual function of masking and revealing captures the essence of carnival as both protective disguise and authentic expression, aligning

with Bakhtin's concept of carnival as a space where "the genuine life of a man is achieved only when he... has thrown off all his individual clothing and social position" (Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 251).

Lovelace provides a detailed description of Aldrick's dragon-making process that reveals the intentionality behind this cultural performance:

He worked with his needle and thread, his scissors and glue, bits of cardboard and wire and cloth, sequins and beads, transforming the bits and pieces, the cheap discarded materials, the garbage even, into magnificence... making a beast that would contain the beauty and threat and terror that would both transform him and announce him as himself, as a man, as a power to be reckoned with. He was making a dragon, with snarling teeth and hideous head, a huge tail, a body of vibrating colors, and with scales that rustled when he moved, a sound that was music to his ears (Lovelace, 35-36).

This passage illustrates what Diana Taylor would identify as "the repertoire" of embodied knowledge in action. Aldrick transforms "cheap discarded materials" and even "garbage" into "magnificence," symbolically representing how marginalized communities repurpose the fragments of colonial culture into something that expresses their own identity and power. The transformation process embodies Bakhtin's notion of the grotesque body as regenerative - creating beauty from refuse mirrors the carnivalesque principle of renewal through degradation. The emphasis on transformation - both of materials and of self - connects to Bakhtin's notion of carnival as transformative space where "the world is made anew" (*Rabelais*, 255). The dragon becomes not merely a costume but an embodiment of Aldrick's identity that "both transform[s] him and announce[s] him as himself."

The dragon's significance extends beyond personal expression to encompass community memory and historical resistance:

For him, playing the dragon was not merely a ritual repeated because he had done it the year before, it was for him a new discovery, a new assertion. In his imagination he was Africa, the ancestral Masker, affirming the power of the warrior, the mystery of the magician, prancing and bowing, breathing out fire, lunging against the sky, claiming, escaping, tantalizing audiences who had come to see him surrender (Lovelace, 121).

Here, Lovelace explicitly connects carnival performance with ancestral memory and cultural reclamation. Aldrick becomes not just himself but "Africa, the ancestral Masker," suggesting how carnival performance enables a reconnection with cultural traditions disrupted by colonialism. This aligns with Bakhtin's understanding of carnival as maintaining "unofficial" cultural practices that resist "official" colonial authority. The dragon dance becomes a performance of historical memory that maintains connections to African traditions while adapting them to the Caribbean context. As Liverpool notes, "Masquerade in Trinidad carnival preserved elements of African performance traditions while developing new forms of expression in response to colonial conditions" (Liverpool, 78). The carnival space functions as what Bakhtin calls the "second world" where suppressed cultural identities can be temporarily reclaimed and celebrated.

The novel presents Aldrick's dragon performance as explicitly political, challenging social hierarchies through embodied resistance:

And Aldrick was the dragon, moving with a dancing agility above the road, his feet dancing crazily, while his chest and arms in turn threatened and retreated until, without warning, he swung around to confront them with a terrible lunge, the dragon's breath steaming from his nostrils, a real terror in their midst, to remind them of fear that was not out of thought, fear that was now, present, and he was the dragon, the threat of violence, the primitive warrior challenging the invading technological men (Lovelace, 122).

This passage positions Aldrick's performance as a direct challenge to modernization and technological advancement (the "invading technological men"), showing how carnival performance becomes a mode of resistance against the encroachment of Western capitalist values. The dance embodies what Bakhtin describes as the carnivalesque challenge to official authority - it is "not merely symbolic but embodies 'a real terror,'" suggesting how carnival's inversions of power can generate authentic fear in those who normally hold social power. The dragon represents the "unofficial" cultural authority asserting itself against the "official" power of technological modernization.

However, Lovelace complicates any romanticized notion of resistance by showing Aldrick's growing disillusionment with carnival's political efficacy. Later in the novel, Aldrick questions whether "the dragon dance was no longer a necessary defiance, for the dragon had served its purpose... it was now just another costume" (Lovelace 121). This transformation mirrors what Aching describes as "the commodification of carnival traditions that once served as resistance" (Aching, 114). The carnival's resistance becomes absorbed into the very system it once challenged, illustrating the complex relationship between official and unofficial cultural practices.

1.2. Philo: Calypso as Contested Resistance

The character of Philo, the calypsonian, provides another lens through which to examine carnival's dual nature as resistance and commodity. Philo's calypsos initially represent what Gordon Rohlehr calls "the people's newspaper" (Rohlehr, 153)—a form of social commentary and resistance that operates within the "unofficial" carnival space. Lovelace writes that Philo sang "not for the tourists but for people who understood what calypso was about" (Lovelace 76), establishing his initial position within authentic carnival culture.

Philo's development as a character illustrates the tensions between authentic cultural expression and commercial success, revealing contradictions within carnival resistance:

This calypso singing was not something he had chosen. It was as if the calypso had chosen him, had jumped up on him the night Miss Olive put him out of her room where he had been living for more than a year, and in his drunken madness he had stood up on the pavement and begun to sing: 'If a woman ever make me leave my home / Is on the pavement I going to mourn' (Lovelace, 74).

This origin story for Philo's calypso career connects with Bakhtin's notion of carnival as born from crisis and disruption. The calypso emerges not from calculated artistic ambition

but from "drunken madness" and displacement, representing spontaneous expression rather than calculated performance. This spontaneity embodies the carnivalesque principle of authentic expression arising from life's contradictions and chaos. As Gordon Rohlehr notes, "Calypso historically emerged as spontaneous commentary on daily life, transforming personal experience into public expression" (Rohlehr, 143). The carnival space allows for the transformation of personal crisis into collective cultural expression.

Lovelace demonstrates how Philo's commercialization creates distance between him and the community he once represented:

"But it was not the same Calvary Hill—well, no, it was the same Calvary Hill, but it was not the same Philo... he had a wardrobe of twenty-five pairs of shoes and thirty-seven suits and fourteen pairs of dark glasses... and in the same way that he could raise his voice and hear applause, so too could he snap his fingers and see women materialize" (Lovelace, 199-200).

This passage illustrates how success transforms Philo, with material possessions serving as markers of his distance from the poverty of Calvary Hill. The repetition of numbers—"twenty-five pairs of shoes and thirty-seven suits and fourteen pairs of dark glasses"—emphasizes how Philo now measures his identity through consumption rather than community connection. This transformation embodies what Aching describes as "the co-optation of resistant cultural practices by capitalist consumption" (Aching, 115). Philo's trajectory illustrates the absorption of unofficial carnival culture into official commercial structures.

Yet Lovelace complicates any simple condemnation of Philo by showing his awareness of his own contradictions:

"And when he sang, his voice was not the same either: it was more practiced now, more self-conscious, more careful. He was more certain about what was a calypso and what was not. And his calypsos were no longer about Miss Olive and personal matters. They were about The People and The Party and The Nation and The Race and The Caribbean Man... they were calypsos for all occasions" (Lovelace, 201).

This passage reveals how commercialization transforms not just Philo's lifestyle but his art itself. The shift from personal narratives to abstract concepts like "The People" and "The Nation" represents a movement away from the specific, embodied experiences that originally gave calypso its resistant power. The irony is that in attempting to speak for larger collectives, Philo's calypsos lose their authentic connection to the community. As Rohlehr observes, "The commercialization of calypso often led to a paradoxical

situation where increased visibility came at the cost of decreased authenticity and political edge" (Rohlehr, 158). This demonstrates how official cultural institutions can neutralize the subversive potential of carnival practices.

1.3. Sylvia: Gender, Performance, and Corporeal Resistance

Sylvia's character illuminates how carnival's liberatory potential intersects with gender constraints and reveals the complex ways women negotiate resistance through bodily performance. Unlike Aldrick and Philo, Sylvia does not directly participate in carnival performance, yet she navigates her own forms of resistance through her body and identity, embodying what Bakhtin describes as the "grotesque" female body that challenges conventional boundaries.

Sylvia employs her body as a site of resistance through careful performance of femininity that simultaneously conforms to and subverts patriarchal expectations. Lovelace writes that "she had come to see herself as a prize that she would yield only for a price worth her having" (Lovelace, 27), revealing her strategic awareness of her body as both commodity and source of power. This positioning aligns with Bakhtin's understanding of the grotesque body as both degraded and empowered - Sylvia transforms objectification into agency.

Sylvia's character reveals how gender complicates carnival's resistant potential, as women negotiate different constraints than men:

The looks that followed her when she passed had become for her a celebration, an applause, a power that confirmed her in her beauty... She carried her beauty with a lightness that was not frivolous, with a seriousness that was not proud, offering it as a gift to the Hill, almost in compensation for her not dancing down the Hill on a Carnival day (Lovelace, 27-28).

This passage positions Sylvia's everyday movements as a form of corporeal performance—her beauty becomes "a celebration, an applause, a power"—yet one distinct from carnival participation. Her body becomes what Bakhtin would recognize as a grotesque spectacle that both celebrates and challenges conventional feminine roles. The reference to "not dancing down the Hill on a Carnival day" highlights how gender shapes access to carnival's liberatory potential. While men like Aldrick can directly embody resistance through dragon dancing, Sylvia must find other modes of self-expression and power within patriarchal constraints.

Sylvia's bodily resistance operates through what Gayatri Spivak describes as "strategic essentialism"—using dominant gender categories while subtly reconfiguring their meanings. Spivak argues that subaltern women often must work within patriarchal structures rather than directly opposing them, employing "negotiation rather than pure opposition" (Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, 308). Sylvia's performance of femininity simultaneously reinforces and subverts gender expectations, demonstrating the ambivalent nature of corporeal resistance.

Sylvia's negotiation of societal expectations reveals both resistance and accommodation:

She was the beauty of Calvary Hill... But she was determined not to be conquered easily or cheaply; and during the two years following her mother's death, she had grown to understand herself as the prize, the symbol of the warrior's manhood, his courage, his daring, his strength, his greatness (Lovelace, 26).

This passage reveals the paradox of Sylvia's position within what Bakhtin describes as the ambivalent nature of carnival resistance. She resists being "conquered easily or cheaply,"

asserting agency within a patriarchal framework that positions women as "prizes" and "symbols" of male achievement. Her resistance operates within rather than against the gendered constraints of her society, illustrating the complex negotiations required of women in patriarchal carnival culture. Her body becomes a site of contested meaning—simultaneously objectified and empowered. As Caribbean feminist scholar Carole Boyce Davies notes, "Women in Caribbean societies often found methods of negotiating power within rather than outside of patriarchal structures" (Davies, 87).

However, Lovelace complicates Sylvia's story by showing her pragmatic choice of Guy (the ice cream vendor who represents economic advancement and integration into official commercial structures) over Aldrick:

And it was at that moment that Sylvia knew that she would go with Guy. Because, if the dragon was a king, it was in his own land... the dragon could not cross the bridge to go into the city where the real power was. The dragon was just for Carnival... Aldrick with his great rebellion and his great anger and his dragon was not for a woman who wanted to get someplace in life (Lovelace, 231).

This insight into Sylvia's thinking challenges romanticized notions of resistance by acknowledging its practical limitations. The "city" represents the official power structure of colonial and postcolonial authority—the space of economic and political control that remains largely untouched by carnival's temporary inversions. The dragon's inability to "cross the bridge" symbolizes the geographical and social boundaries that contain carnival resistance within specific spaces and times. The dragon is "just for Carnival"—a temporary inversion rather than a transformation of power structures.

Sylvia's decision reveals the material constraints that shape resistance, particularly for women seeking economic security and social mobility.

Sylvia's choice represents what can be interpreted as both a pragmatic limitation and a strategic form of resistance. Her rejection of romantic carnival resistance in favor of economic advancement challenges the masculine valorization of symbolic rebellion while pursuing tangible social change. This reflects the ambivalent nature of carnival resistance that Bakhtin identifies—it can both reinforce and challenge existing power structures. The practical limitations include economic vulnerability, gender-based restrictions on mobility and opportunity, and the temporary nature of carnival's power inversions. As Liverpool notes, "Caribbean women's resistance must be understood within the context of economic vulnerability and the practical need for survival strategies" (Liverpool, 215).

Sylvia's relationship with Guy reveals both positive and negative aspects of women's roles in carnival culture. Positively, her choice demonstrates strategic thinking and rejection of romanticized poverty in favor of material advancement. She exercises agency in choosing her path rather than accepting the role of passive prize. Negatively, her exclusion from direct carnival participation and her positioning as object of male competition reflect the limitations placed on women within carnival culture. According to Bakhtin's analysis of Rabelais, women's bodies in carnival often function as sites of both celebration and degradation—they are simultaneously empowered as sources of life and renewal, yet constrained by patriarchal

structures that seek to control female sexuality and agency.

In the binary opposition between official and unofficial practices that Bakhtin identifies, Aldrick clearly represents unofficial carnival authority through his dragon

performance, while Guy represents official commercial power through his legitimate business. Philo's trajectory shows the movement from unofficial to official as his calypso becomes commercialized. Sylvia occupies an ambivalent position—she is neither fully within the unofficial carnival culture (as she does not directly participate) nor completely aligned with official structures (as she maintains connections to Calvary Hill community). Her choice of Guy over Aldrick represents a pragmatic navigation between these binary positions, suggesting that women's resistance often requires more complex negotiations than the direct opposition available to men. This ambivalence reflects what Bakhtin describes as the complex relationship between carnival's liberatory potential and its ultimate containment within existing social structures.

1.4. Discussion

The analysis reveals how Lovelace presents carnival as both a vehicle for resistance and identity formation and as a tradition threatened by commercialization and changing social dynamics. Through Aldrick, Philo, and Sylvia, Lovelace illustrates different aspects of carnival's complex relationship to power, identity, and resistance in post-colonial Trinidad.

Different Aspects of Relationship to Power

Each character embodies distinct relationships to power structures that reflect the complex dynamics of post-colonial Trinidad:

Aldrick represents direct confrontation with colonial and neo-colonial authority through embodied performance. His dragon dancing constitutes what Bakhtin identifies as "grotesque realism"—a carnivalesque challenge to official power that temporarily inverts social hierarchies. The colonial legacy manifests in the need for such resistance;

the dragon dance serves as a counter-narrative to colonial cultural dominance, asserting African-Caribbean identity against European hegemony. However, Aldrick's relationship to power is ultimately contained—his resistance remains spatially and temporally limited to carnival periods and specific geographical boundaries (Calvary Hill).

Philo demonstrates the co-optation of resistance by commercial power structures. His trajectory from authentic voice of the oppressed to commercialized entertainer illustrates how capitalist forces neutralize cultural resistance by transforming it into commodity. This represents what Antonio Gramsci would identify as "hegemonic absorption"—the process by which dominant groups maintain control by incorporating and defusing oppositional elements. Philo's transformation reveals how post-colonial societies face not only traditional colonial domination but also neo-colonial economic control through cultural commodification.

Sylvia embodies the most complex relationship to power, operating within what can be understood as a triple oppression: colonial/neo-colonial domination, patriarchal control, and class-based economic constraints. Her resistance operates through strategic negotiations rather than direct confrontation, employing what Gayatri Spivak terms "strategic essentialism"—using dominant categories (feminine beauty, sexual desirability) while subtly reconfiguring their meanings to assert agency.

Sylvia's Transformation and Marxist-Feminist Analysis

Sylvia undergoes a crucial transformation from passive object of male desire to active agent of her own destiny. Initially positioned as the "beauty of Calvary Hill" and the "prize" that men compete for, Sylvia gradually develops critical consciousness about her material conditions and strategic options. Her transformation culminates in her pragmatic choice of Guy over Aldrick—a decision that prioritizes economic security and social mobility over romantic attachment to carnival resistance.

From a Marxist-feminist perspective, Sylvia's transformation reflects the intersection of gender oppression and class exploitation that characterizes women's experiences in post-colonial capitalist societies. Her initial objectification as "prize" reflects what Marxist feminists identify as the commodification of women's bodies under patriarchal capitalism. However, her strategic choice of Guy represents a form of resistance that acknowledges material realities while pursuing individual advancement within existing structures.

Sylvia's decision challenges traditional Marxist notions of collective resistance by prioritizing individual economic mobility over solidarity with community-based cultural resistance. Yet from a feminist perspective, her choice represents rational analysis of her options within a system that offers women limited paths to economic independence. As Marxist feminist Silvia Federici argues, women's survival strategies under capitalism often require "navigating between collective solidarity and individual advancement" (Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*, 184). Sylvia's choice reflects this complex negotiation.

Her transformation also reveals the gendered limitations of carnival resistance. While men like Aldrick can express resistance through direct physical performance, women face constraints that limit their access to such embodied forms of cultural expression. Sylvia's exclusion from carnival participation reflects broader patterns of women's marginalization within male-dominated cultural traditions, even those that purport to be liberatory.

The Question of Structural Change

The transformations these characters undergo throughout the novel—Aldrick's growing disillusionment with carnival's political efficacy, Philo's negotiation of commercial success and artistic integrity, and Sylvia's practical choices about survival—all challenge simplistic notions of resistance. As Bill Schwarz notes, Lovelace "refuses easy romanticization of carnival as pure resistance" (Schwarz 78), instead presenting it as a contested cultural practice constantly negotiating between resistance and accommodation.

Lovelace's portrayal of Aldrick's gradually diminishing faith in the dragon dance as political resistance speaks to broader postcolonial concerns about the efficacy of cultural resistance in the face of economic domination. As Aldrick reflects, "What good was their possession of these few rituals? What reality did they have beyond the Hill?" (Lovelace, 123). This question encapsulates a central concern of the novel: can cultural performance alone constitute meaningful resistance without accompanying structural change?

This question addresses fundamental tensions within postcolonial theory between cultural nationalism and materialist analysis. While cultural resistance preserves identity and maintains community solidarity, it may also serve as a safety valve that prevents more direct challenges to economic exploitation. The novel suggests that without structural economic change, cultural resistance risks becoming mere performance—spectacle rather than substantive opposition.

Similarly, Philo's trajectory from authentic voice of the community to commercial success story illustrates the specific threats commercialization poses to carnival arts.

Rohlehr argues that Lovelace's portrayal of Philo represents "not simply a personal story but an allegory for the broader co-optation of carnival arts by commercial interests in post-independence Trinidad" (Rohlehr 162). This co-optation speaks to what Aching identifies as "the diminishing capacity of carnival to function as resistance in a capitalist economy that commodifies cultural expressions" (Aching, 117).

Gendered Dimensions of Resistance

Sylvia's character adds a crucial gender dimension to the analysis, demonstrating how women's relationships to carnival resistance differ from men's. Her pragmatic decision to choose economic security over romantic attachment to Aldrick and his dragon reflects what Caribbean feminist scholars have identified as "the specific material concerns that shape women's resistance strategies in post-colonial contexts" (Davies 92).

However, it is important to note that while Sylvia is the primary female character through whom these gendered dynamics are explored, she represents broader patterns of women's experience in Caribbean society. Her individual choices illuminate systemic constraints that affect women as a group, even though the novel focuses on her particular story. Sylvia's form of resistance operates through strategic negotiations within patriarchal structures—using her beauty and sexual desirability as forms of power while ultimately prioritizing economic advancement over romantic or cultural loyalty.

This gendered dimension of resistance adds complexity to the novel's exploration of carnival as resistance, revealing how gender intersects with class and colonial legacies to create different possibilities and constraints for different groups within post-colonial society.

Connection to Caribbean Literary Traditions

This nuanced portrayal connects to broader Caribbean literary traditions that grapple with questions of authentic cultural expression in post-colonial contexts. Like writers such as George Lamming and Sam Selvon, Lovelace explores how Caribbean identities are formed through both resistance to and engagement with colonial legacies. However, Lovelace's specific focus on carnival provides a uniquely powerful lens for examining these issues, as carnival itself embodies both resistance and accommodation.

The novel's ambivalent conclusion, with Aldrick abandoning his dragon costume yet still seeking forms of community resistance, suggests that while carnival's traditional forms may be compromised, the spirit of resistance must find new expressions. This aligns with Édouard Glissant's concept of creolization as an ongoing process rather than a fixed state, suggesting that resistance too must continuously evolve in response to changing circumstances.

These findings contribute to our understanding of cultural resistance by demonstrating how resistance is never pure or simple but always entangled with accommodation, commercialization, and practical survival needs. As Aching argues, "resistance is always already compromised, yet still necessary" (Aching, 212)—a complexity that Lovelace's novel powerfully illustrates.

Conclusion

This analysis of *The Dragon Can't Dance* reveals how Lovelace employs carnival as a multifaceted framework for exploring cultural resistance, identity formation, and the challenges facing post-colonial Trinidad. Through characters like Aldrick, Philo, and Sylvia, Lovelace illustrates both the potential and limitations of carnivalesque resistance in a society undergoing rapid social and economic change.

The novel's portrayal of carnival avoids both uncritical celebration and cynical dismissal, instead presenting it as a contested cultural practice that simultaneously enables resistance and faces co-optation. This nuanced portrayal contributes to postcolonial literary studies by demonstrating how cultural practices like carnival embody the complex negotiation between resistance and accommodation that characterizes post-colonial societies.

Key Insights

Lovelace's representation of carnival resistance offers several important insights. First, it demonstrates how cultural performance can simultaneously constitute identity and resistance, with carnival serving as both an expression of selfhood and a challenge to dominant power structures. The dominant power structures explored in this analysis include colonial cultural hegemony (the imposition of European values and the suppression of African-Caribbean traditions), neo-colonial economic control (the commodification of cultural practices and the prioritization of commercial over community values), and patriarchal social organization (the limitation of women's agency and the positioning of women as objects rather than subjects).

Second, the novel reveals how gender shapes access to carnival's transformative potential. While Sylvia represents the primary female perspective in the novel, her experience illuminates broader patterns of how women in Caribbean society must navigate resistance differently than men. Sylvia expresses her resistance through strategic use of her body and sexuality, careful negotiation of economic opportunities, and ultimately through her choice to prioritize material advancement over romantic attachment to cultural resistance. Her resistance operates through what might be called "tactical femininity"—using socially prescribed gender roles to create space for individual agency and advancement.

Third, the analysis illuminates the specific threats commercialization poses to carnival's resistant potential, showing how economic forces can neutralize cultural resistance by transforming it into commodity. This process reveals the ongoing influence of capitalist market forces in post-colonial contexts, where cultural practices become absorbed into global entertainment industries that strip them of their oppositional potential.

Theoretical Contributions

The research further illuminates how performance theory can enrich our understanding of Caribbean literature, showing how carnival performances constitute rather than simply express identity, and how these performances preserve cultural memory that might otherwise be lost. While this analysis has focused primarily on Bakhtinian carnival theory and feminist approaches to embodied resistance, future research might more fully integrate performance theory frameworks such as those developed by Diana Taylor and José Esteban Muñoz to examine how Caribbean cultural practices function as "repertoires" of embodied knowledge that resist archival forms of colonial memory.

By applying Bakhtin's carnivalesque theory to a Caribbean context, this analysis also demonstrates how European theoretical frameworks require adaptation to address the specific historical circumstances of Caribbean cultural practices. The colonial history of the Caribbean, with its particular forms of slavery, indenture, and cultural mixing, creates conditions for carnival that differ significantly from the medieval European contexts that Bakhtin analyzed. Caribbean carnival emerges from the specific dynamics of plantation society and the encounter between African, European, and indigenous cultures, creating forms of resistance that are both similar to and distinct from European carnivalesque traditions.

Ongoing Tensions

As Liverpool observes, "Carnival in Trinidad has always existed in tension between its origins as resistance and its evolution as spectacle" (Liverpool, 225). *The Dragon Can't Dance* powerfully captures this tension, offering a literary examination of how carnival simultaneously enables and contains resistance. Through its nuanced portrayal of characters navigating this tension, Lovelace's novel makes a significant contribution to our understanding of cultural resistance in post-colonial contexts.

The novel ultimately suggests that while traditional forms of cultural resistance may be compromised by commercialization and changing social conditions, the underlying need for resistance persists. The challenge for post-colonial societies is to develop new forms of cultural and political resistance that can address contemporary conditions while maintaining connections to cultural traditions and community solidarity.

Future Research Directions

Future research might expand this analysis to examine how other Caribbean writers represent carnival and cultural resistance, or explore how Lovelace's later works continue to engage with these themes. Additionally, comparative studies examining how carnival functions across different Caribbean islands could further illuminate the relationship between cultural performance and resistance in post-colonial contexts. Such research might investigate how different colonial histories, economic structures, and cultural compositions create variations in carnival practices and their resistant potential across the Caribbean region.

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