Caribbean Critical Thought and "Drag" Performances of Indigenization

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The rigid nature of the plantation encouraged forms of resistance, two of which have a shaping force on our cultures: the camouflaged escape of the carnival, which I feel constitutes a desperate way out of the confining world of the plantation, and the armed flight of marronage, which is the most widespread act of defiance in that area of civilisation that concerns us.
Édouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse*

In this introduction I lean more towards offering a bricolage of ideas than a coherent argument.[1] My aim is to invite readers to expand and modify, and to keep or discard them as they think and play with these fragments. I hope this format enables thinking anew, and that these bits of ideas provoke more generative thought when brought together than they might when apart.

Caribbean Critical Theory

This fragment invites thinking with critical theory that engages the limits and exclusionary violence of the European canon. Such critical theory is concerned with the ways in which relations and practices that coconstitute modernity/coloniality (Quijano 2000) shape histories, ecologies, the production of knowledges, and the making of cultural formations. It problematizes meanings of "the human," of justice, and of freedom. As critical praxis, it challenges dominant ways of seeing and doing. To this end, it draws on a genealogy of radical anticolonial and decolonial thought and related creative and political practices. It reworks these for the present with a view to form a more humane, ecologically

1 This contribution is an expanded version of my keynote address at the conference *Facing Drag* at the University of Music and Performing Arts Vienna in 2022 that gave birth to this volume. My gratitude extends to the conference organizers, presenters, and attendees. Special thanks to Evelyn Annuß for including me in this conversation.

conscious, and just world. This corpus includes the performing arts, literature, thinking behind and contestations within anticolonial political struggles—and more.

As a South African scholar shaped by histories of bricolage, I do not claim expertise in Caribbean critical thought. I am learning, too. That said, two historical features of the Caribbean archipelago shape its sustained and substantive contribution to critical theory. The first is its location as a key node of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century slave plantocracies and the second, its subjugated inhabitants' persistent struggles against these architectures of dehumanizing dominance. Against the backdrop of post-1994 South Africa and the afterlife of its specific colonial history, hegemonic and binary North American ideas about "race" are of little value as I attempt to make sense of the worlds that shape me and those that try to place me in ways that suit their arrangements. Instead, I find resonance in Caribbean Critical Theory[2] of both the archipelago and its diaspora. This sonorous mutuality emerged before I learned about histories of connection between radical anticolonial Caribbean intellectuals on the one hand, and on the other, such thinkers of the 1930s and 1940s in South Africa.[3]

This resonance is embedded in five key praxes. First, vehement contestation of the European idea of "race." Second, a conception of this idea of "race" as intricately linked to bounded conceptions of culture and to hierarchical class relations. Third, a conception of sociocultural worlds as imbued with power relations and at the same time as intertwined, not pure. Fourth, a carefully deliberate demystification of white worlds which includes illustration that European thought and practice is situated, not universal. And fifth, attentiveness to the cosmological worlds of the subjugated and the ways in which these shape historical and political processes. These synchronicities are testimony to

2 Among the key theorists are Jean Price-Mars (1876—1969), C. L. R. James (1901—1989), Aimé Césaire (1913—2008), Frantz Fanon (1925—1961), Édouard Glissant (1928—2011), Edward Brathwaite (1930—2020), Sylvia Wynter (b. 1928), Anthony Bogues, Paget Henry, and scholars of the Caribbean Philosophical Society as well as its journal, *The CLR James Journal*.

3 Among these are Isaac Bangani Tabata, author of *The Awakening of a People* (1950) and other texts; Ben Kies who wrote the essay, "The Contribution of the Non-European Peoples to World Civilisation" (1953); and Dora Taylor, writing as Nosipho Majeke, author of *The Role of Missionaries in Conquest* (1952). In addition to her critical political and cultural essays, Dora Taylor is also the author of two posthumously published novels, *Rage of Life* (2009) and *Kathie* (2008), and of a collection of short stories, *Don't Tread on My Dreams* (2008), among other creative works. For an analysis of these authors' contributions, see Soudien 2019.

the global circulation of ideas among anticolonial intellectuals and to questions of cultural and political entanglements.

However, unlike the Caribbean archipelago's slave plantocracies, the Cape Colony—which emerged from Dutch colonists' establishment of a refreshment station at the Cape—was characterized by household slavery and various forms of indentured and unfree labor. It was a key thoroughfare between two significant nodes of the global slave trade: to the west, St. Helena Island in the South Atlantic (Yon 2007); and to the east, the Indian Ocean islands (Hofmeyr 2007) and the East African coast. Without negating the specificities of each context, Caribbean Critical Theory remains valuable for understanding the ways that the history of the Cape Colony tacks migrations—forced and voluntary—to cultural formations as continuous processes forged in contexts of inequality. Caribbean Critical Theory is concerned with these among other significant processes.

Indigenization

In her unpublished monograph, *Black Metamorphosis*, Sylvia Wynter draws on Jean Price-Mars (1876—1969) to theorize Black experiences historically formed on slave plantations in the "New World." Price-Mars is remembered as a leading Haitian anticolonial intellectual and diplomat of the early twentieth century. He trained as a physician and served as professor of history and geography at the prestigious Lycée Alexander Pétion for twelve years. While Price-Mars's thought was understandably influenced by aspects of a key discourse of the early-twentieth century, namely, the relationship between "levels of civilisation" and the environment (Price-Mars 1983, 55—71), he nevertheless contested the European idea of "race" and fought against racism. He was among the first to emphasize the significance of the syncretic sociocultural worlds made by the enslaved in the "New World," and to see these social formations as "indigenized," the second fragment offered in this introduction. Despite challenges from his peers for his lack of attention to the political economy of Haiti, he remained a highly respected scholar and a leading political figure (ibid., ix—xxviii).

Reading Price-Mars, Wynter posits that experiences formed on plantations are best located within two interconnected historical processes. The first is Europe's violent socioeconomic conversion of people of the African continent *from* members of polities that drew material subsistence from the earth and from various forms of bartering *into* commodities to be bought, broken by labor and violence, sold, and disposed. She writes about this process as the transformation of African peoples "from the human subject[s] of [their] own cultures into the inhuman object of the European culture" (Wynter n. d., 10), and into the homogenized and commodified "negro" (ibid. 2—10; 24).

The second is African people's generative responses, amid suffering, to being ripped out of the worlds in which their subjectivities were in formation; to being unwillingly "planted" in the "New World" in which they were forced to live; and to Europe's dehumanizing forcible conversion. For Wynter, these responses are about the enslaved transforming themselves from "negro" into "native" of the "New World" through the process of "indigenization" (ibid., 2, 7, 63). This entails making oneself part of "the new soil" and of making "the new soil" part of oneself, by weaving symbolisms of belonging, remembrance, and resistance *out of* and *into* the landscape (ibid., 18, 46). Thus, "indigenization" as a process of (re)making place is qualitatively distinct from the concept "indigenous" which commonly refers to inhabitants of a place *before* the arrival of colonists.

For Sylvia Wynter, "indigenization" is shaped by the double-existence of the enslaved: existence as close-to-fully-human on the plot, provision ground, or the commons cultivated for mutual subsistence and as a symbolic place of rehumaning; and existence on the plantation as commodities, machines, as lesser humans to be owned and exploited. In this context, making "the plot" a place both for shared material survival and of symbolic significance reveals cultural creation as a practice of freedom—albeit limited and precarious. This practice is part of sociality with an ethos that challenges the forms of exploitation and alienation of the plantation. "The plot" offered the enslaved grounds for making sense of their "new" world ("new" by force, not by choice) in ways that enabled a hold onto freedom both in the moment, and for the future. Their relation to their "new" world as grounding inhabitants stands in contrast to the white creole's occupant relation which often meant a transient or absentee relation to the "New World" (ibid., 61). And, later, it stands in contrast to the Black creole elite's identification with the metropole and their distancing relation from the everyday practices of the "low people." For the most part, this elite saw themselves as "civilized," "westernized" fully assimilated into the "high culture" of the metropoles and therefore worthy of the privileges reserved for their colonizers. For this elite the "low people" engaged in "low cultures" from their "primitive" and "superstitious" African pasts, a "condition" from which the elite saw themselves as freed. They saw the carnival as part of "low culture."

My contribution deals with the "camouflaged escape of the carnival" (Glissant 1992, 248), as Glissant puts it, as a form of dragging. This reading underlines connections between South African and Caribbean cultural practices and concomitant critical thought that goes beyond theorizations situated in the Global North. My focus on the carnival as the masked public face of the enslaved, formerly enslaved, and their descendants complements questions of *marronage*—the flight of enslaved peoples from plantations to set up free, self-governing communities, of maroon societies, in proximate mountainous

regions and on land that is not occupied by planters. My emphasis, however, is on theoretical entanglements that emerge from practices of camouflage in the wake of (post)colonial violence, not on the politics of militant fugitivity.

The Middle Passage, Masks, and Masquerades

Masks, masquerades, and their meanings constitute the third fragment offered in this introduction. In one of her earlier essays, Wynter (1970) conceptualizes Jonkunnu in Jamaica as a popular cultural performance in the form of a masquerade or dragging that emerges from and enacts a process of "indigenization." This performance was one among ceremonies and forms of communication that involved the use of music and masks. She suggests that reworked memories of the use of various masks—in parts of Africa with which they had become distantly familiar—in their efforts to rearticulate an inhabitant knowledge from which to make a Black counterworld. This knowledge enabled enslaved people to rehuman their "new," unfamiliar, and wounding environment in the wake of the Middle Passage, i. e., the forced transoceanic transportation of Africans and various island populations—who were captured by slavers along the circuit of maritime trade routes—across the Indian Ocean and the North, South, and East Atlantic Oceans (Lewis 2024).

With this counterknowledge enslaved people subverted dominant norms and during carnivals they used masks to disguise such subversion. They also used masks to embody different gendered modes of being and to embody animal and ancestral spirits in rituals that supported living, and that integrated dying into living (Henry 2013, 67). Such embodiment engenders and compresses the symbolic powers of a performer. It also facilitates passing on such powers among performers and between performers and their receptive viewers. Moreover, preparations for the masquerade—costume designs, choreography, musical composition, mask-making, and devising subversive ways with language and performance—constitute forms of intellect, ways of obfuscating political resistance, ways of coming to know, ways of imagining and of interpreting (Wynter 1970). These ways of coming to know stitch together, and into the new place, mindbody and memory; pain and joy; body and technology; the senses and the emotions; human and nonhuman forms of life; and members of a community. They weave different contexts into a tapestry of torn-away place, slave-ship place, plantation place, plot place, spiritual place, and the place of masquerade. They suture different times: before time, abyss time, plantation time, plot time, ancestral time, and masquerade time.

In Wynter's 1973 play titled *Maskarade* (2012), masquerade-place-and-time is ordinary-place-and-time, in other words, the normative social order,

momentarily "reversed" or turned on its head. Such turning upside-down of norms is especially apparent in enslaved communities' use of their intimate knowledge of goings on in the masters' houses to mock planters' power. In this masked procession participants walk history into the present, walk the present into futures, walk the political into the personal, walk the human with other life forms, and breathe life into archives.

Wynter's conception of "indigenization" as a rehumanizing process by the enslaved and of Jonkunnu in Jamaica as its public enactment, does not engender a romanticization of slavery. On the contrary, it challenges Afro-pessimist notions of slavery and of Black living as social death by highlighting the agency of slaves as political beings who actively struggle for freedom amid catastrophes. Similarly, drawing on nineteenth-century court records of the Cape Colony, Yvette Christiaansë's (2006) historical novel *Unconfessed* offers a literary rendition of the political agency of the enslaved in that context, and of their conception of freedom as an ongoing process of struggle, not a static state enshrined in law. In this vein, the central character of this novel, Sila van Mozambiek, tells us: "Freedom is looking and looking" (Christiansë 2006, 321). These conceptions resonate with Price-Mars's argument that nighttime *Voodoo* assemblies among the enslaved in Haiti (from the sixteenth through the nineteenth century) were both ritualistic and political in character (Price-Mars 1983, 50). He posits that religious rituals inspired among the enslaved a "confidence in the correction of things [in the material world] that form[ed] the potential for action" (ibid., 174).

Return and Opening

I return briefly to the resonances noted at the beginning between Caribbean Critical Theory and understanding the history of the Cape Colony as central to slave trade routes across the Indian Ocean, the South Atlantic and from East Africa. These echoes may assist analyses of the Cape Town Carnival which, historically, was criticized for its use of grotesque blackface. The political work of *this* form of masquerade—its obscured subversion, rehumaning, and remaking of place—is distinct from that of nineteenth-century blackface minstrelsy of the urban north of the United States.

As Wynter writes, US blackface minstrelsy makes the Black person "the object of rather than the mechanism of satire" (Wynter n.d., 759). Masquerades by white men in blackface appropriate Black cultural forms and use these to reinscribe always insecure racial boundaries to their own and their audiences' benefit. Moreover, this form of blackface minstrelsy "depended on the material relations of slavery, and obscured these relations [from viewers], by pretending

that slavery was amusing, right, and natural" (Lott 1992, 28). The racialization of "the human," of property, and of sexuality underpins these dominant depictions of Black people and reveals white Americans' racial fears and fantasies (Lott 1992) as well as projections of their tabooed desires onto Black people's bodies (Wynter, 1979).

This racialization of "the human" is echoed in the use of blackface in South Africa in the twenty-first century. On August 9, 2014, a South African national broadsheet, the *Mail and Guardian*, reported that two white female students at the University of Pretoria dressed in what is seen in this context as domestic workers' clothing, smeared their faces and arms with black paint, wore headscarves, and padded their bottoms, in my view, in a way reminiscent of eighteenth-century misrepresentations of Sara Baartman. The two students were suspended from university residence, but not from the institution.[4] On September 30 of that same year, this broadsheet reported that two white male students at the University of Stellenbosch who claimed to impersonate the tennis stars Serena and Venus Williams, blackened their faces and wore wigs and attire meant to represent these two Black American women. In this case the university opted for a "teaching moment" as a form of dialogic intervention, not disciplinary action. In both instances, the students had dressed up for a party and had photographs taken of themselves which were circulated on social media.[5] The debate about whether and in which ways *individuals* should be held accountable for such actions in a context where *systemic* racism persists despite the formal end of apartheid, continues in South Africa.

However, this is a very different form of blackface than the one used in the context of the Cape Town Minstrel Carnival. In her early work, Nadia Davids explores its history and contemporary reimaginings (Davids 2007). This is a masquerade of somewhat similar register to Wynter's conception of Jonkunnu in Jamaica, and to more recent scholarly interpretations of contemporary reimaginings of various such masquerades in the Caribbean (Innes, Rutherford, and Bogar 2013). Davids locates the Cape Town Minstrel Carnival in the context of slavery at the Cape in the eighteenth century and "Emancipation Day" in 1834, and contemporaneously, in the institutionalized racialization of space in colonial and apartheid South Africa in the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries. She conceives of this carnival as a "walking" and "moving" performance of resistance, and an enactment of reclaiming and memorializing

4 https://mg.co.za/article/2014-08-09-blackface-students-suspended-from-residences/, accessed December 19, 2024.

5 www.aljazeera.com/news/2014/9/27/south-african-college-in-blackface-scandal, accessed December 19, 2024. See also www.politicsweb.co.za/documents/report-of-the-su-purpleface-inquiry#google_vignette, accessed December 19, 2024.

place on the part of subjugated communities from inner city District Six and in the wake of similar twentieth-century forced removals by the apartheid state. Like many other neighborhoods across South Africa whose residents were subjected to forced removals, District Six was racially and culturally heterogeneous and situated close to the center of Cape Town. The apartheid state bulldozed residents' homes to rubble and displaced them to townships far away from the city center. Today, this history is memorialized in various ways.[6] The carnival as a practice of indigenization and memorialization is an example of the resonance between Caribbean Critical Theory and theorizations of specific aspects of South African history.

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6 One is reinvented forms of annual carnival organized under the auspices of the District Six Museum. The museum opened in December 1994 and is shaped by the former residents' contributions of photographs, oral histories, and remnants from the remains of what were once their homes. In line with such memorialization, South End Museum in Gqeberha, formerly Port Elizabeth, was opened in 2001.

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