Representation as Collective Memory: Carnivalesque and Orality in *Eldorado West One* by Sam Selvon

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Citation: Carlotta Pisano. "Representation as Collective Memory: Carnivalesque and Orality in *Eldorado West One* by Sam Selvon." *Via Panoramica: Revista de Estudos Anglo-Americanos*, série 3, vol. 11, n.º 2, 2022, pp. 50-61. ISSN: 2182-9934. Web: http://ojs.letras.up.pt/. DOI: 10.21747/2182-9934/via11_2a4.

Abstract

In Sam Selvon's seven one-act radio-drama *Eldorado West One*, written for BBC radio in 1969, a universe of colours, contrasts, accents, nostalgia, and struggle that peculiarise the life experience of the Caribbean community in London is at stake. The main characters of the play are the same as in the well-known novel *The Lonely Londoners* (1956), re-represented in a theatrical context, constructed on the orality and urban communication, reinvented through the immediate representation of radio actors and the expression of the Trinidadian Creole Language. The surrounding reality described by Selvon's conscious disillusionment is interwoven with the historical events that have marked British society, such as the massive migration from the Caribbean territories to London, like the Windrush generation in the 50s, that, in the last decades, have shaped the United Kingdom into a cross-cultural society. This essay is an attempt to show, from a linguistic reflection to ethnographic data about Trinidadian Carnival, how we incur in these elements through the play indicated above; through the connection in Selvon's narrative between the Caribbean heritage, in particular the manifestation of the subculture related to the Trinidadian Carnival, the Creole and Calypso music; and the syncretism created by the tradition and the contact with the Western culture, in the era of European decolonisation during the 20th century.

Keywords: Sam Selvon; Caribbean heritage; Carnival; Trinidadian Creole; Calypso

Resumo

No drama radiofónico de sete atos únicos de Sam Selvon, intitulado *Eldorado West One* e escrito para a rádio BBC em 1969, está em jogo um universo de cores, contrastes, sotaques, saudades e lutas que peculiarizam a experiência de vida da comunidade caribenha em Londres.

As personagens principais da peça são as mesmas do conhecido romance *The Lonely Londoners* (1956), re-representados num contexto teatral, construído sobre a oralidade e a comunicação urbana, reinventados através da representação imediata dos atores da rádio e a expressão da língua crioula de Trinidad. A realidade envolvente, descrita pela desilusão consciente de Selvon, está entrelaçada com os acontecimentos históricos que marcaram a sociedade britânica, tais como a massiva migração dos territórios caribenhos para Londres, como aconteceu com a geração Windrush nos anos 50, tendo moldado, nas últimas décadas, o Reino Unido numa sociedade transcultural. Este ensaio é uma tentativa de mostrar, a partir de uma reflexão linguística e dos dados etnográficos sobre o Carnaval de Trinidad, a presença de tais elementos na peça acima indicada, através da conexão na narrativa de Selvon entre a herança caribenha, em particular a manifestação da subcultura relacionada ao Carnaval de Trinidad, à música crioula e Calipso, e ao sincretismo criado pela tradição e pelo contacto com a cultura ocidental, na época da descolonização europeia no século XX.

Palavras-chave: Sam Selvon; Herança caribenha; Carnaval; Crioulo de Trinidad; Calipso

1. **Creole and *Lingua Hospes*, a revolution in radio drama**

To define his work with BBC radio, for which Selvon produced more than twenty plays in two decades, he said: "I think drama for radio is much more imaginative and less limited than writing for the stage . . . I like writing for radio because there is no limit to where one can place characters" (Selvon, *Eldorado West One* 8). With the freedom of writing using direct speech and extending the peculiarities of the characters from his most famous novel, *The Lonely Londoners* (1955), in *Eldorado West One* (1966) Selvon was able to bring the orality of the Caribbean dialect not just through printed pages, but also via radio, stressing the importance of the orality *per se* and the theatrical representation of a small group of Caribbean immigrants; reaching, in this way, the different substrates of the British population, and showing the unlike musicality of the creole and *patois*. Besides the linguistic bias and barriers, the characterisation of Caribbean voices in literature had been an issue in academia and especially for those who were Afro-descendant writers.

Barbadian poet Edward Kamau Brathwaite stated that in the Caribbean, English is not the standard, imported, educated English (266). Still, it is a language that submerged from a different prism of dialectical influence, coming from the uprooted Hindi, Chinese, French, Dutch and Spanish, and from the first linguistic variant of the islands, such as Amerindian languages and the ones brought by the Ashanti people that were the majority in scale for the enslaved people's descendants. Through centuries, people were forced to learn a language along other things, such as values, historical events, and way of living, that belonged to the colonisers (Brathwaite 263). When these creoles are used for poetry and novels, the main problem for Brathwaite is to

represent the embodiment of the environment. This expressivity comes through the oral tradition: "It may be English, but often it is an English which is like a howl, or a shout, or a machine-gun, or the wind, or a wave. It is also like the blues. And sometimes it is English and African at the same time" (Brathwaite 266).

Sam Selvon used the Caribbean variants in all his work; since the beginning of his career, he quickly realised how unsuitable these were to represent his characters' experiences and thoughts. He, therefore, chose Trinidadian Creole English (TCE) and in doing so, he added a new multicultural dimension to the tradition. He heightened awareness of a changing society characterised on the one hand by decolonisation and on the other by immigration from the colonies to London. He was also capable of using a miscellaneous variety of styles, through the manifestation of pride of his cultural belonging and memories, and, by doing that, he "seems to be saying to the reader, 'Man, I is a creolize Trinidian, *oui*' (Wyke 6). He adopted a writing design strictly linked to orality, opting for a colloquial narrative style in tune with everyday stories addressed to a broad audience. The language, here, is a synecdoche in transcoding the migrant experience.

Selvon's style reflects his life's path: he is a West-Indian, born in an East-Indian family with Scottish ancestry, writing about a Black London without owning an African ancestry. This particular standpoint within the fluid diversity of a metropolis like London allows him to be self-defined as an Afro Trinidadian Londoner (Dickinson 70). His tangible cultural heritage allowed him to reveal the characters through various languages. The originality of his style lies in his attempt to capture the language spoken by Caribbean immigrants in London. It is possible to find all the linguistic shades of the cultural pluralism represented in his books through different syntactic structures.

The *lingua hospes hostis* (Derrida, 29), the Master language, the one brought by the colonisers in Trinidad, is reworked, becoming a powerful tool to destroy the alienation related to the painful historical events of the British Caribbean expansion. By the use of an imposed mother tongue, whose font, rules, and laws were located elsewhere (Derrida 50), Selvon exposed himself. He used to state the presence of the otherness as part of the third space between the colonised and the colonisers, where his origin became part of a substructure which cannot have a separation within the meaning and the context where he expressed himself, as stated by Bhabha:

> The pronominal I of the proposition cannot be made to address - in its own words - the subject of enunciation, for this is not personable but remains a spatial relation within the schemata and strategies of discourse . . . this ambivalence is emphasised

> when we realise that there is no way that the content of the proposition will reveal the structure of its positionality; no way that context can be mimetically read off from the content. (36)

According to Brathwaite, the main issue is the full expression of each creole and its musicality:

> Reading is an isolated, individualistic expression. The oral tradition, on the other hand, makes demands not only on the poet but also on the audience to complete the community: the noise and sounds that the poet makes are responded to by the audience and returned to him . . . . And this total expression comes about . . . because people come from a historical experience where they had to rely on their own breath patterns rather than on paraphernalia like books and museums. They had to depend on immanence, their power, rather than technology outside themselves. (273)

In Selvon's case, these barriers are broken through his plays written for the radio, such as *Eldorado West One* (1966), a seven one-act radio drama that was aired on BBC in 1966.

Since the beginning of the 20th century, radio drama has occupied a specific place in mass culture as a new storytelling genre. All the connections with the spectator are made through the audio and sound signals (Crook 7). Radio's global impact on society, from leisure to war, is well documented; it used to be the leading technology to communicate worldwide. The success of radio dramas during the last century should be linked to the importance of orality in the history of humankind before the development of literature since it leans on the same principles: onomatopoeic reliance on rhyme and metrical speech rhythms; plus, it can capture the holophonic sounds of the surrounding environment (Crook 22), providing an immersive auditive experience, being an acoustic performance, which depends on dialogue. It is important to stress that the peculiarity of the communication in theatrical conversations depends on two axes: one internal, within the characters of the play, and another external, related to them and the public (D'Angeli 43). As in a theatre, hearing a radio drama play does not allow the spectator to rewind the conversation as it is possible when he or she is reading a novel; it is about the imminence of the action connected to the words, as Trinidad and Tobago's culture of oral tradition clearly illustrates.

2. Characters and Calypso as a sonic background

Eldorado West One (1966) was written over a decade since Selvon lived in London. This play is focused on two main settings, Trinidad and London, where the affectionate reader can recognise many elements from his short stories and previous novels. The title "is a comic attempt to subvert and demythologise the colonial dream of the streets of London being paved with gold" (Nasta 8). The characters of the *pièce* are West Indians and Africans living their life with struggles and loneliness far away from home. This Eldorado is grey as the city of London and represents the exile of this group of friends, mainly men, who try to colonise England in reverse. The calypso party, the *fête* around the city, and the hustle to find the ingredients for a fresh dish of Trinidadian cuisine represent their comfort zone, from the *maelstrom* of daily life, the jobs, and the routine that suck them down as a powerful whirlpool within the people's ocean of the city, giving them a sparkly hope of *repaysement* (Monteiro, *Elogio do Desconhecido* n.pag.), the feeling of being home.

The play was written between the release *of The Lonely Londoners* (1955) and *Moses Ascending* (1975), and we find the same characters in these two books. We are in the middle of the slow disintegration of the British colonial Empire after the second world war and the direct impact on the West Indies territories because of the immigration politics adopted by the crown. That is when the Windrush generation,[1] with its massive migration to the United Kingdom, will forever change the cultural and social reality of Great Britain. Those events accompanied Selvon's growth and his capability to represent, through the voices of his characters, the challenges and difficulties to adapt to a rough, uncertain, and fluid social situation.

The play, which is characterised by language as a tool to underline the alienness of West Indians in London, through a variety of shades and speech patterns, starts with Moses. A recurrent alter ego of Selvon in his literary production, Moses represents the mimicry in its ephemeral exception of metonymy of presence, forced by the strategy of the dominant and centuries-old authority, fortified through the colonial narrative (Bhabha 129). He is interviewed by a Black British reporter, who symbolises the first generation of Blacks in Britain. Galahad, a historical name referring to Lancelot's son, is a calypsonian figure as, with his tricks, he tries to survive in the immigrant community.

During the play, Calypso is a sonic background, and it declares a cultural performance through the rhythms that lay in the creole's expressions. It can be considered a rhetorical element to define and shape the cultural identity of the

audience (Patton 71). The magical beats of the music that accompany the rhythm of the dialogues between the characters, in the daily challenges where colours, and the measures of their various shadows, are the first barrier to rise within English society.

Let's make a direct reference to the Greek meaning of *Καλύπτω*, hiding, which brings with it myths and stories. We can find a deep sense of this musical genre, used to make statements with allegories and satire against the public government, having the primary function of working as a popular newspaper. Is it not a case that Calypso is the leading music for the Carnival celebration, working as a representation of the Caribbean collective memory (Green and Scher 178). As for the metrics, Calypso uses dactyls, not the iambic pentameter imported by the Crown to the colonies in the West Indies. It is a unique expression of local culture, coming from the Kaiso poetry, made of spontaneous singing which the people from West Africa brought during the times of slavery. The particular position of the tongue and the voice with a deeper tone used to describe the intervallic pattern are part of the dialogue in creole (Brathwaite 272).

In the play, Cap, the Nigerian, Tolroy, Tanty, Big City, and Harris reappear, but there are also new characters. That is the case of Mr Joseph, a white English man exploiting the impact of this mass migration to London. Bob, the white handyman, is also called Friday in *Moses Ascending* (1975). He always tries to support Moses' plan to return to his island, and Crusoe's narrative is inverted. Bob is white and English; he is a libertine and an illiterate, bestial and grotesque as if he summarises the incarnation of all the commonplaces attributed to blacks. He is the modern, white incarnation of the classical figure of Friday in *Robinson Crusoe* (1719). There are moments when he is silenced and does not have his voice, and other when he regains his free will, always waiting for Moses' choices.

The dramatic intention is represented by the continuous stasis in the play: Moses' room is the same for many years, which is metaphorically linked to his desperate idea of return; or the representation of the situation of poverty, challenging to be subverted, such as "Cap Captures a Bird", where the lack of money bring Cap to capture and eat a pigeon (Nasta 11).

The realism of the language allows Selvon to provide a harsh representation of the illiterate, rootless, and mainly male characters represented. They do not own homes or houses, and their lives are characterised by instability and hustling (Nasta 12). However, the described events must be read tragicomically and as satire due to the carnivalesque elements, the *leitmotiv* of this play. The anagnorisis, the recognition of reality, and the peripeteia, the adversities (Aristotle 60) of the main character, Moses Aleotta, belong to typical masks of Trinidadian Carnival; all the

play's context and the elements listed above leave the reader/listener with a bitter-sweet illusion that the reality can change. The stories are about the dreams and disappointments of Moses' brigade, fighting as they face racial and class differences in London.

The same name is metaphorically loaded with epiphanies that do not happen. Moses, *Moshe* in Hebrew, which means one who is taken out of the waters (Derrida and Vattimo 138), summarised the personal story of the character: a migrant born on an island, surrounded by water, taken from the Atlantic to follow his exodus. However, he does not save anyone; he does not take anyone to a promised land; his primary purpose is to save himself and try to come back to the island he left for a better future. Moses, as an insider, is too integrated into English society for his conational friends, but for the English men, he is still too foreign. He is thus trapped in a limbo, typical of the outsider in exile, typical of theatre and allegory, as an incarnation of a Carnival character.

3. Carnival as a ritual and as a literary evasion

Moses wears a Harlequin costume; he is used by Selvon to creolise the city's representation from the liminal space of the character's view (Dickinson 75), being an enslaved person for his daily jobs, humble, and underpaid; wearing a mask specifically during the night, a metaphor for Carnival in Trinidad and his Kings, celebrating life in the dark, as for the enslaved people, when the masters are not watching:

> The slave in Trinidad worked by day and lived at night. Then the world of the white plantations fell away; and in its place was a securer, secret world of fantasy, of Negro "kingdoms," "regiments," bands. The people who were slaves by day saw themselves then as kings, queens, dauphins, and princesses. There were pretty uniforms, flags, and painted wooden swords. Everyone who joined a regiment got a title. At night the Negroes played at being people, mimicking the rites of the upper world. The kings visited and entertained. At gatherings, a "secretary" might sit scribbling away (Naipaul n.pag.)

Selvon is the agent of this synthesis and the emotional impasse, which is reflected in his writing, always looking for an escape from the fixation on repetitive categories of stereotypes sought by the colonial narrative. The link between the global colony and the metropolis becomes central to colonialist ideology, creating feelings of loss and confusion (Bhabha 212) between those who stay and those who decide to inhabit the centre of the empire, in this case, London. The language, the pause, and

the slang are potent tools to "establish a corporate West Indian identity in the face of an alien and rejecting metropolis" (Nasta 10). Words belonging to the creoles are used as shields to protect the characters from the hostility of the natural world, in which Moses dresses a problematic costume to perform his parody, to mark differences instead of similarities (Dickinson 76).

The importance of Carnival, in this context where the language is deterritorialised (Dickinson 82), lies in the fact that it is the ancestral celebration brought by the Caribbean immigrants during the significant exodus to the United Kingdom in the 50s and which was not part of the coloniser obligation. It was an expression of defence of legitimate culture, discredited in front of the official, white, colonial one. It was a form of class struggle where a revolution was performed without really performing it, giving all the people the possibility to improve their *status quo* at least for one night (Gutzmore n.pag.).

The English literary tradition is characterised by cultural elements accumulated through centuries and millennia. They were concealed in the written language but also in the popular form, which was not penetrated by Shakespeare, such as the verbal communication and Carnival, which were reflected in the theatrical spectacles, like mysteries and farces (Bakhtin, *Estética da Criação Verbal* 365). There is an epistemological line between the atavistic and widespread expression of this festivity in the Caribbean islands and the Classic heritage in the Western world. As Bakhtin stated, the speaking subjects of noble declamatory genres have been, through the years, substituted by the writer's figure, who is stripped by the fluidity of the speech that belonged to the sacrality of the Dionysus' priests (Bakhtin, *Estética da criação verbal* 372). For example, as per Aristotle's definition, comedy has been considered an imperfect style derived from dithyramb and phallic procession to celebrate Dionysus. It represents people who belong to the ridiculous associated with a mistake, not an action linked to a malicious evil. It is far from the kind of mistake we find in tragedy since it does not cause any pain or disrepair (Aristotle 152), which is the main element of the *mythos*.

To understand Selvon and the Carnivalesque elements in his writing, we should define the importance of Carnival in his culture, which was also a festivity brought by the Caribbean community in London: the first official Notting Hill Carnival was in 1966, and it was organised every year, as the maximum expression of the cultural heritage of the West Indies. Selvon is a witness and an actor to the changes in British society, and he does not forget his legacy, his roots, and the power of orality mixed into the magnificence of the Carnival expression, inherent to Trinidad.

Trinidadian Carnival is a holy celebration for the islanders. As per the roman catholic tradition, it begins every year at 4 a.m. on Monday before Ash Wednesday, as the same allusion in the name indicated, i.e. *carne vale*, meat, farewell (Benjamin 28), with a specific ritual called *Jouvay,* a peculiar word coming from both French, *jour ouvert,* i.e. open day, and Creole, *jou ouvé*, i.e. Is it daybreak yet? (Green and Scher 48). Between the 13th and the 19th centuries, the celebrations happened simultaneously as the burning and harvesting of the sugarcane; for this reason, they began to be called *Canboulay* from the French word *cannes bruleés,* i.e. burnt canes (Green and Scher 29). The black community had limited participation in the festivity; a turning point was in 1838 when several ex-slaves left the plantations and were relocated at the capital city, Port of Spain. It was then that the syncretism between the colonial and official traditions and the African ones became more substantial and evident through the music, with the swing, singing, dancing, mime, theatrical re-enactments, and a percussive style of music with the steelpan performed loud in the streets, which caused the resignation of the white community in celebrating publicly with the rest of the population (Green and Scher 29).

The *mas*, such as the masquerades, are mainly grotesque and elvish, like the disguises of all-male characters: the Highlander, the Pulchinello, Pirates, Turks, and Death (Green and Scher, 29) or like the *jab* or devil and have the function to demonise the spirits in a cathartic celebration where the *Jumbies* or ghosts are represented and vilified to allow the birth of a new era (Green and Scher 67). During this period of the year, the city of Port of Spain is full of fairs and markets, space outside the natural world; a place where laughter is allowed and where it is possible to revert to the official hierarchy, a paradoxical embranglement between the real and the imaginative spheres (Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* 255).

Carnival is a counter-cultural event and, with his humorous expressions, reports several aspects of the social structure and governance to which every citizen is a subordinate (Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* 76); it is an *exceptional state* refill with extraordinary all over (Benjamin 26). In *Eldorado West One,* the magic to escape from the daily routine and the characters' resilience are connected to the capacity to laugh at the challenges of living as a minority, as migrants, like blacks or browns, in the white capital which was London in the 60s.

Author Jeremy Hawthorn stated that three main characteristics could define Carnival in seriocomical genres:

> First, they are starting point for understanding, evaluating, and shaping reality, which is the living present; second, they do not rely on legend but, consciously, on

> experience and free invention; and third, they are deliberately multi-styled and hetero voices. (Hawthorn 17)

The *kiff-kiff laughers* of Selvon's characters are directly connected to the Carnival laugh, which is universal and timeless (Monteiro, *L'éternel Carnaval sans Retour* 5). This practice was born from a rebellion against the pre-established order, wherein a specific time of the year people could express themselves, their folklore, without being afraid of being different to the approved and socially accepted culture. In a carnivalesque context, Bakhtin believes that laughter allows them to temporarily liberate themselves (*The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* 29). The group acknowledges the identity process, which creates this dualistic opposition and gives the people involved the opportunity to satirise, mock, and critic the official culture now and one century ago, the colonisers (Green and Scher 67).

Carnival is a ritual linked to specific cycles or calendars, which includes a masquerade game where all the social paradoxes are expressed (Monteiro, *L'éternel Carnaval sans retour* 5); it is subversive and egalitarian, born as a spontaneous celebration connected mainly with the end of a season or to celebrate the harvest. In Selvon's play, the carnivalesque elements are displayed, mostly at night, and the Calypso parties represent the rite of passage for the fresh newcomers who arrived from Trinidad. The immigrants discover that a masked, nocturnal, parallel world is possible within the challenges and sacrifices of their daily routine.

In Carnival, there is a conjunction of times, contexts, and structures (Monteiro, *L'éternel Carnaval sans retour* 5). In *Eldorado West One,* the folks promote their *fêtes*: it is a synthesis to express humorously their position in the social structure they are subordinated. In Trinidad, the masquerades were the agents for the subversion of the social norms and the symbolic connection with the enslaved people's emancipation, making Carnival a symbol of freedom. Selvon carnivalizes the literary tradition between Crusoe and Friday, with Moses' white friend Bob, using creole to describe and represent this connection (Dickinson 88), and that is when the synthesis within times, context, and structure happens in the play.

As Monteiro stated, discussing Carnival is complex since it does not respond to binary definitions but embraces the ambivalences of social contradictions: leaving the forced social structure to return to an original Chaos as needed by society to heal the oppression. It is not a trick to recognise the order as necessary but as a fluid element, like a compound of forces that creates new realities (Monteiro, *L'éternel Carnaval sans retour* 2). Thus, it seems that Carnival is a prototype of a sudden escape from the order of things, in a perennial tension in which the action is reduced to a minimum

and circumscribed to time limits, in which what should happen does not often happen. This subversion against an imposed and abstract order is directly linked to the tragic feeling and Aristotelian catharsis (Monteiro, *L'éternel Carnaval sans retour* 4). Aristotle, in turn, borrowed this term from the medical and religious tradition to summarise the content of the mimesis, i.e., the purification from the excess and defect, transforming the pain and pleasure in one to another, compensating them and creating the *energeia* which is living itself (168).

The presence of Carnival in *Eldorado West One* provides the reader/listener with examples of carnivalization and masquerade that create tensions and dualisms both within the radio drama and the academia: Moses and the rest of the group; the British canon and the fluid evolution of creoles; oral and written literature (Dickinson 86). The settings of the play; the representation of the experience of those who were displaced from their little island to the big city; the repetitive lives of the Selvon's protagonists, forced to endure the humblest jobs during the day only to become lovers at the Calypso yard parties during the night, summarise the magic disguise behind the cathartic function of Carnival as life's celebration and as a primary tool for collective memory in *Eldorado West One*.

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[1] The arrival of the Windrush Empire at Tilbury docks was on June 22nd, 1948, when four hundred and ninety-two men from the West Indies disembarked (Olusoga 869). Thus, there was the beginning of an era of renewed relations between Great Britain and the West Indian colonies. At this same time, the British Nationality Act was in the final stages of becoming law, allowing the people of the empire to have the new status of Commonwealth Citizens, with the right to enter and settle in Great Britain (Olusoga 826). After the arrival of the Windrush, the first racial attacks were registered in Liverpool, and between the 1950s and the 1960s, British racism grew against Caribbean migrants. The newcomers had to face many challenges, from the impossibility to rent rooms because of being black to having the possibility only to find primary and humble jobs, even if there were highly qualified people (Olusoga 857). A turning point will be the Commonwealth Immigrants Act in 1962, which determined that Commonwealth citizens, the ones holding passports not directly issued by the government of the United Kingdom but by a government or governor of a British colony, would be subjected to immigration controls at entry (Olusoga 874).