

INTRODUCTION

A Jour Ouvert

Oho. Like it starting, oui? Don't be frightened, sweetness: is for the best. I go be with you the whole time. Trust me and let me distract you little bit with one anansi story.

—Nalo Hopkinson, *Midnight Robber*

Let's talk, then.

—Plato, *Phaedrus*

LABOR DAY. CROWN HEIGHTS, BROOKLYN, 1999: there I was, standing half-naked in the middle of Eastern Parkway, covered from head to foot in blue paint. Head *bad*. My costume: horns, shorts, jungle boots, a rough tail, and a nearly empty leather rum pouch around my neck. *Watch me, nah!* A former Caliban, reclaiming myself in Brooklyn. A comfortably clichéd champion of my culture. A displaced Trini. A shameless measure of the condition that my physical appearance had defined, indulging in one of the few “pleasures of exile.”¹ More Caribbean than I had ever had cause to be when I was in Trinidad.

The day had already begun to cool, and our band—the “Blue Devils”—had long since dispersed, its members moving back along the parade route to mix into the other bands, letting their drying, sweat-salted paint rub off onto bare skins and sequins that loosened with every gyration, trying to make the day last for as long as they could. Before long, I too would go back to join them. To have a time—wining, chipping, drinking, jumping, grabbing, pushing. But before I did, there I was, an overseasoned “bacchanalist” standing in blue, watching people twist and turn. And for a moment, I was that stripped man, driven back to the

self-astonishing, elemental force that has driven me, at different times, to turmoil and to peace: the mind. For as Derek Walcott writes, the mind forms the basis of the Antillean experience: a shipwreck of fragments, echoes, a tribal vocabulary, and partially remembered customs that are not decayed but strong.² Stronger than ever. From a distance, those of us in the crowd—swelling, as we are often told, to the millions—seemed indistinguishable from one another, which is the case with crowds. More remarkable was the fact that up close, in the midst, when the differences were most apparent and seemed to matter less and less, all I was thinking about was home. Trinidad. And a familiar lamentation: home. Home: these faces, bodies writhing in the sun, too busy to acknowledge the cooling of the season, whose pleasure barricaded them as they waited for gunshots to cut (offbeat) through the soca, the stiffening bodies of police who resented them and barricaded their pleasure with disgust.

Home: the Caribbean. And I had never missed it more.

Strange it is that millions engaged in the contiguous struggle for pleasure could evoke a few islands and their citizens, citizens who, I am certain, would find it strange that I would choose to practice hyperawareness in the midst of a fête. But this is the case with crowds, as well as memories and histories: they help us reenact what Walcott calls “the gathering of broken pieces [that] is the care and pain of the Antilles.”³ Recuperative work. The kind of work that makes the perfect kind of sense (and that rum and revelry are unable to mask).

It occurred to me that a people should want to demonstrate, in no uncertain terms, that they consider themselves as worthy of recognition as any other people, not merely to get by from day to day, situation to situation, with neither a say nor a stake in the way those situations (and their very lives) unfold, but to have some role in shaping their destiny *as a people*. It should be as basic an imperative as the need to survive or to secure food and shelter for oneself and one’s family. It is an imperative that is not so ambitious or impossible as attempting to undermine hegemony altogether; rather, it is one of having a reasonable stake in the status quo. Or at least it ought to mediate the conditions of our public interactions and some of our private ones. It occurred to me that our performances ought to be more than metaphors of our desires that dissipate when the situations change, when the euphoria of a sanctioned chance to explode in the public passes into memory. As I see it, then, one of the objectives of rhetoric seen from a cultural perspective is to preserve and solidify the prevailing aspects of identity among members of a particular social group. Another is to gain a deeper, more robust self-conscious understanding of effective discourse practices among members of that group and, in so doing, achieve the sort of praxis that can equip the members of that group for the life they imagine. And by designating such practices “effective,” I refer to rhetorical activity’s capacity to empower *rhetors*—practitioners of rhetoric—and members of the audience through active engage-

ment, not simply to persuade them of this or that position. I am concerned with all these things.

People passed.

Half-naked kindred.

Stop.

Look. Look. Look again.

Stop. There is still more to come.

Wait, exactly how many Carnivals had I missed?

What if this Carnival, the opportunities we have to cohere, and the direction of our efforts were used to make something meaningful and lasting? But who was I trying to fool, really? Honestly, not even myself. I knew well enough what some of us did as individuals—those we count vicariously among our ranks—but what more could more of us do? Good questions, I thought.

Yes, but there would be a more appropriate time and place for that kind of thinking. More time to declare, on the grounds of fundamental subjectivity, that the vernacular rhetor, as much as the circumstances that bind him or her, is the occasion to which every situation that concerns this rhetor must be related. Instead, I acknowledged the profundity of the moment and went back to doing what I had come to do: wine, chip, drink, jump, grab, and push. But is this not the operation of nostalgia, that the methodological misstep of self-report can be so seductive, even at the expense of more validated evidence? Yes. Yes.

In the more than ten years since I stood on the Parkway, half-naked in blue, watching Carnival fade, I have had the time to consider my place. As I strive to establish a critical stance on the Caribbean, its people, and their rhetoric(s) in the less comfortable clothes of a researcher, the luxury of nostalgia has given way to restlessness. In the interstices, as I move from text to text, from topic to topic, I have been able to condense the flurry of earlier questions into two: What is the role of rhetoric in Caribbean popular culture? And if there is such a thing as Caribbean rhetoric—and there is—what is it? The initial exploration of these questions forms the focus of this book.

Having said that, I immediately find myself in a dilemma that will affect my course throughout the rest of this book: the attempt to *do* will often be overshadowed by the pressure to *outdo*. I find some comfort from the paradox, though, encouraged as I am by the fact that the possibility for rhetorical activity in the ecstatic rhythms of that evening could not be subdued by dollar vans and walk-ups any more than they could be subdued by slavery or colonialism. They must in some way be acknowledged. Caribbean rhetorical performances, as a practice of judgment and a critical redress to situations that necessitate forms of display, unfold as a vernacular response to situations that come about as the result of the greatest offense—*invisibility* and *silencing*. So, to put it plainly, the fundamental motive of the Caribbean practitioner is to be recognized—to be seen and heard—

in a way that capitalizes on the implied consensus of an audience familiar with his or her strategies. All rhetorical activity will therefore be oriented toward the attainment of that idea.

No rhetorical activity is possible without motive, which exists at the epistemic core of Caribbean expressive culture. For even though, as Burke writes, “the situations are real . . . [and] the strategies for handling them have public content,”⁷⁴ the successful deployment of those strategies—though in response to concrete situations—depends on the specific attitudes of the group for whom those strategies bear the most relevance and meaning. Therefore, while it would be acceptable to say that “in so far as situations overlap from individual to individual, or from one historical period to another, the strategies [can be thought to] possess universal relevance,”⁷⁵ such a concession becomes possible *only* in the most fundamental way: we are human beings; we recognize, make use of, and respond to symbols and situations as only human beings can.

This is, however, not the case when applied to specific contexts, their available inferences, and particular meanings, to which Farrell’s discussion of the enthymeme’s efficiency may be suitably applied: “While most cultures will profess to a conception of what is good or just, honorable or honest, the individuated meanings of any such conception are entirely dependent on the lifeworld or received traditions of the membership groups themselves.”⁷⁶ The *casadoo* resonates differently for some than for others whose navel strings are buried on rocky hilltops or mangroves. This is no mystery. In fact, a different sense of motive becomes clear when we consider (1) expressive strategies that help practitioners size up the situations of slavery, colonialism, neocolonialism, and nationalism; (2) the tools necessary for identifying sociolinguistic structure and outstanding elements; and (3) the prevailing attitudes toward language as an epistemic phenomenon that inhere at the fulcrum of experience and expression in specifically Caribbean contexts, making them specifically Caribbean. For some, the breakdown of the West Indies Federation in 1962 continues to show how nationalism in its narrowest forms can mimic staunch individualism and have fragmenting effects. Many still hold a grudge on behalf of their separate island nations, “overseas departments,” and protectorates—not all independent, but sovereign in their own complicated rights. Yet these same people harbor a restless desire for a unity that has yet to reveal itself in meaningful ways, ways that lead to the materialization of those desires at all levels of society. As a prevalent rhetorical problematic, then, *how* we Caribbeans see ourselves becomes particularly relevant when we reflect on the larger democratic concerns we face and especially given the diverse composition of our Caribbean roots.⁷⁷ I believe an understanding of our rhetorical traditions helps address this, and it is from this corrective angle that I wish to embark on a discussion of what is expressed among Caribbean practitioners, as well as how and to what end.

That said, this project is constrained by the obvious factors: not only my specific expertise but also the impossibility of paying adequate attention to each tradition, all of them replete with their own complexities. The limitations are to be expected. Nonetheless, with regard to the full and equal participation of Caribbean people in all societies of which they are a part, this book is concerned with understanding and articulating the scope of the rhetorical tradition that enables participation among rhetors who consider themselves part of a Caribbean social formation and the network of desires it produces.⁸ The book is also a response to the “Ellisonian-like invisibility” of Caribbean issues and concerns in the field of rhetoric.⁹ Notable mention has been reserved for related fields—sociolinguistics, anthropology, education, composition studies—and from time to time the reader may catch glimpses and opportunities to discuss such issues more extensively. On the whole, however, the field of rhetoric in particular has been slow to pay close enough attention to this gradually increasing part of global society. Most important, although we members of the Caribbean community obviously all engage in and utilize rhetoric to our own ends, this book more specifically addresses how we identify similarities and engage differences, how we utilize traditional rhetorical methods to express and assert ourselves, and how we interact—successfully or unsuccessfully—in the wider public.

Implicit in my formulation of a Caribbean rhetorical tradition are two assumptions that recur and complicate any straightforward reading of the texts included here. First and foremost is the reference to “Caribbean” and what it means to the project—specifically, to whom does it refer? Most simply, I refer to those whose origins can be traced to the region, but the virtue of one’s birthplace, though often a determining factor in one’s allegiance, is matched in this project with the subscription to a characteristic way of framing the world and making meaning within it. I do not mean to invoke hegemony here (itself a privilege of an expressly *nonvernacular* power structure); rather, I am pointing to the spiritually possessing qualities of ideology and identification that result from the interplay of knowledge and interpretive practices that in turn emerge in recognizable forms within an array of texts produced by people who see themselves as Caribbean (though they may not have been born in the area). My second assumption is that the traditions—which are many and varied—are in fact deliberately rhetorical. This is a highly defensible claim based on the basic notion that extant traditions persist in response to rhetorical situations that prompt their emergence, and any response to a rhetorical situation is inherently rhetorical.¹⁰ The more important question, then, is not whether Caribbean traditions are rhetorical but whether the adherence to them bespeaks a deep, abiding rhetorical knowledge. I believe it does.

My understanding of rhetoric also corresponds to Catherine John’s suggestion that the range of expressions peculiar to Caribbean people is evidence of

a highly complex system of mediated communication and an enduring collective identification with “an alternate register of consciousness, one that at its most profound seems to connect to ancestral knowledge in both conscious and unconscious ways.”¹¹ Thus, while I do not claim that this is a singularly Caribbean rhetoric, I do claim that the examples I have selected typify a broad range of discourses reflecting the complex consciousness of the people connected to the Caribbean region. Each Caribbean rhetorical tradition, as a specific subset of that range of discourses, is a definitive symbolic action achieved by practitioners who deeply understand vernacular elements and strategically use them in changing contexts to interpret and articulate the world continuously. The identification with aspects of extant forms of knowing therefore becomes one of the fundamental imperatives of Caribbean discourse, giving shape to the more abstract and somewhat supernatural suggestions of the elements that constitute Caribbean identity on a rhetorical level. It enables us to put that knowing to use in the construction of identity and to have an impact on the societies of which we are a part.

Because rhetoric relies heavily on the intersection of myriad social and idiosyncratic factors and involves the mere probability of persuasion rather than the certainty of it, I must acknowledge the possibility that for any number of very practical reasons, a particular rhetorical appeal—whether collective or individual—simply may not take. While identification, agreement, and action are all possible, none necessarily manifests. The implicit persuasive aspect of rhetoric is therefore contingent on the general willingness of the social formations I identify to be referred to as such, a fact that will influence the degree to which rhetors either accept or reject the agenda of representation and assertion that, I believe, is explicit in this project. This can complicate the successful rhetorical enactment of what it means to be Caribbean in these times. In the perceived absence of an urgent need to identify as a supranational (regional) bloc, subnational differences among Caribbeans often rear up and cause narrow nationalistic nostalgia to prevail or persistent wounds to make their way into lore and calcify into culture, functioning as the localized embodiments of a rather abstract sense of emergent ethos: Jamaicans are overly aggressive; Trinidadians are very tricky; Bajans are just arrogant.

In fact, the choice to self-identify or differentiate is ongoing as those involved move between expressions of subnational and supranational identities with what seems the greatest of ease. And yet a sense of “being Caribbean” perseveres even as we flirt with the risks of greater dispersal and erasure in an inescapably globalized life, the unrelenting familiarity on which we rely for a greater sense of who we are and where we can successfully belong. This dynamic, like all rhetoric, is contingent on the situations we face and on a combination of personal, social, cultural, economic, and political leanings. I refer, for example, to the persisting

sub- versus supranational tensions among natives of different Caribbean nations, contradicting the familiar (and false) notion that “all of we is one.” This popular myth of ethnic and cultural unity has been used to characterize the Caribbean ethos as a desire for an implicit unity that has yet to be achieved. It relies on the presumption that “all of we agree.” This is not necessarily always the case, however, as the conditions for “agreement” can frequently break down at various points of interaction and in times of peace or conflict.

Additionally, and as a result of the dilemmas caused by our variable affirmations, this discussion presumes that as a group, we Caribbeans remain in the dawn of our self-definition in global society. And we may stay there as long as the issue of a definable identity fails to be mediated on every level of our respective social interactions. This fact places us in a rather precarious position because of the vulnerability and susceptibility to competing social forces, not to mention the debilitating effects of hegemony. This position, however, provides an opportunity to construct an ethos that rests stably enough on a framework of traditional practices that persist and enable meaningful identification with others who share a stake in the effort to be seen and heard.

Using identification as one of the motives and consequences of an effective performance of shared meanings, Caribbean rhetoric builds on the sense of the familiar (*doxa*) in order to underscore shared interests and shared benefits that are probable in a given situation, meanings that have been acquired through experience and cataloged as a living archive of knowledge and expression that can then be activated, revised, and applied for particular consequences. All are based on a fundamental desire to be a part of the world and improve the quality of life while here. Highlighting this imperative as rhetoric requires leaving it open to critique. Nevertheless, with identification as an exemplary aim of symbolic action in general, Caribbean rhetorical performance allows its practitioners to effectively incorporate “products of . . . [the] highly energized interaction of history and memory [that] stand at the nexus of personal and collective memory” and put them to use in a range of social contexts.¹² Identification is, simply put, a fundamental carnivalesque process because it functions as an articulation of collective agency and cultural intention, existing in conflicting or oppressive situations as the expression of a realistic desire for successful participation in contemporary society and the benefits promised by it. Such participation enables (but again does not promise) productive change that is initiated by a representative social formation, in this case one consisting mainly of Caribbean people.

I approach this type of activity in terms of what I call the *Caribbean carnivalesque*, drawing on the most pervasive form of Caribbean public expression—Carnival—as a framing trope. Because this term involves the strategic interplay of numerous rhetorical modes and perspectives rather than a narrow reference to Carnival as a means of defining the Caribbean and its people, I use it here as

a means by which Caribbean people can define the(ir) world and a lens through which they can see it. And while much scholarly work has examined aspects of the social, economic, political, and educational conditions that Caribbean people face, my project specifically addresses how they shape and are shaped by these conditions instead of merely reacting to them. Put another way, to pursue a Caribbean rhetoric is not only to ask *what* it is or whether there are dimensions we could identify as characteristically Caribbean but also to uncover the *practical use* to which it could ultimately be put given what we understand of the way rhetoric operates in local, regional, and transnational contexts. Raymie McKerrow's thought reinforces the exploration of these varied phenomena:

To approach mediated communication as rhetorical is to see it in its fragmented, unconnected, even contradictory or momentarily oppositional mode of presentation. The task is to construct addresses out of the fabric of mediated experience prior to passing judgment on what those addresses might tell us about our social world. The process one employs is thus geared to uncovering the "dense web," not by means of a simple speaker-audience interaction, but also by means of a "pulling together" of disparate scraps of discourse which, when constructed as an argument, serve to illuminate otherwise hidden or taken for granted social practices.¹³

At stake is the struggle for a degree of agency that could facilitate meaningful participation among Caribbean people toward the critical attainment of a shared vision of prosperity, equality, and depth. Rather than rehearse the exoticism to which we (and our rhetorical traditions) are often subjected, I want to suggest a more practical view of Caribbean displays that rely on the vernacular tradition as a means of redress, of critical (re)invention. It can serve as an essential measure for effecting real change in a world full of nihilism and despair, fear and apathy, injustices and cruelties in our homes, streets, and schools.

The many iterations and enactments of the carnivalesque—whether in festivals, novels, videos, or the movement of bodies—are the contemporary expressions of that same legacy of display. They provide exemplary responses to rhetorical situations that allow us to explore the efficacy of an alternative approach (and analytical response) that can be considered "Caribbean" and demonstrative of what Wilson Harris called the "epic stratagems available to the Caribbean man in the dilemmas of history which surround him." According to Harris, the patent lack of "criteria for arts of originality springing out of an age of limbo" has forced audiences unfamiliar with these situations to compensate by imposing an inadequate notion of "Caribbeanness" to bridge the gaps in their own misconceptions.¹⁴ Collectively, these texts can do some bridging work of their own because they constitute a nexus for the interplay and eventual negotiations of the Caribbean ethos, reflecting a vernacular awareness and the deliberate

enactment of Caribbeanness toward material ends.¹⁵ The interplay is such that if one were to consider *where* the rhetoric of Caribbean folk could be located, an answer would necessarily involve an alternative way of seeing that is, in fact, self-reflective, self-conscious, self-contained, and self-interested and that identifies *prima facie* with the vernacular subject. So what historically intransigent audiences missed—the fundamental intimacy of the relationship between an oppressive colonial social climate and the expression of public opinion—can be detected in the interstices, beyond the obscurities, where a sense of the Caribbean rhetorical tradition was actively and more effectively displayed.

The goal is not to explain the Caribbean to the reader. Rather, it is to initiate and (by way of description, analysis, and some speculation) sustain a conversation about the tasks we Caribbeans face. I must confess, though, that my Westernized conceit sometimes makes me wish I did not have to do this work, just as I wish that I had not been thinking of such half-deep and wholly unpoetic things on such a wonderful, dangerous day in Brooklyn. That is, I wish not that someone else had done it but that it would not have to be done at all. I wish that the entire corpus of Caribbean rhetorical activity were self-evident to whosoever cares enough to look at it and understand (without being told) that the people who embark on these activities have already understood themselves and continuously devise the reasons to address and transcend their respective situations. That yes, these activities are done *for their own sake*—that is, according to shifting agendas that manage both to elude and to demonstrate sophisticated thought that may be validated by this or that institution—but it is a sake with its own rationale. I wish more people—swelling, say, to a few million—understood that these reasons may or may not subscribe to particular methodologies; that they may or may not fit neatly into the host of terms available to us; that we could embrace these displays, become witnesses to their nature, their original otherness; and (whether we refer to them as rhetors, practitioners, speakers, actors, or dancers) that these are *people* who understand themselves better than we could hope to explain.

But here we are: at the tail end of a festival, I stumble upon a beginning.
Some things *must* be done.