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DANCING A PERHIPHERAL QUADRILLE

ASHANTI HARRIS

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In Conversation With

Dr Ranjana Thapalyal

“Ah seein dem comin down de road like fire burning
up de place”



Image: Curtis Eustace, carnival costume.

RT: Ashanti, you've shared a chapter from Sign Posts of the Jumbie, a novel by Trinidadian writer, Faustin Charles¹, citing its deep influence on this work

AH: I first came across this book at the Walter Rodney Book Shop Collection² in the No Colour Bar³ exhibition in London. Walter Rodney⁴ was a writer and activist from Guyana whose assassination led Bogle-L'Ouverture Publications⁵, one of the first independent black publishing companies in the UK, to be renamed the Walter Rodney Book Shop⁶. I was drawn to it because of the word Jumbie, a Caribbean word for ghosts. I had been thinking quite a lot about Jumbies, and how they represent the many ways that the past finds a form in the present.

The exhibition is particularly inspired by chapter 23 of the book. The main character is a carpenter and this chapter is his continuous, unpunctuated description of the Carnival parade. It's the perspective of a maker. He's describing the material processes that have gone into it such as gold leafing, carving, hammering, wire bending.

But he's also describing what he sees in intent, and what he sees is the history of the Caribbean being played out in Carnival floats and in Carnival bands. He describes the French, the British, the Dutch. He describes Indian, African, Indigenous Amerindian heritage. He describes just everything. Everything is there until eventually at the end, at the final float - the descriptions change, and it sends a bit of a shudder down my spine.

The final float is the American Band and it's not that they're American, but it's the fact that this band seems to entirely represent war. So, in the space of the twinkling and beadwork and shimmering and dancing, there's a description of grenades, machine guns, tanks, fighting, and the Carnival presence is almost taken out of it completely.

It's that final description that's just very blatantly violent. And if you know the history of the Caribbean, you know how much violence is embedded within all of these other histories - the Dutch, the British, within slavery, indentureship, but it's been amalgamated into this kind of Carnival identity. Whereas there's something about the way that this final Carnival band is presented that asks you to question what is colonialism now, what form does it take?



Something that I've always found really interesting and complicated about Caribbean heritage, culture and identity is the fact that it is almost entirely built out of violence. The revolution, the global cultures embedded within Caribbean culture, are all products of - and a direct response to - colonialism, and there's an interesting and painful tension within that. It feels complicated, it doesn't quite sit right in your body. But then I feel these tensions and complications of Caribbean identity play themselves out in cultural forms like Carnival. In many ways the dance, music, and art of carnival are processing this history and both the collective and individual's relationship to it.

RT: There's also an evidencing of diverse groups of peoples who have been colonised in different ways. He talks about the floats of descendants of Indian indentured labourers⁷. There are the "Hindu Worshippers and Keepers of the Temple of Brahma", Krishna, the Taj Mahal. But it's also a history of what the Indians took with them. He mentions Vedic scriptures. So they took a lot of this knowledge with them but they also clearly took the caste system with them, because there is a description of "Kshatriya, a group of warriors".

AH: The Caribbean is an absolute melting pot of cultures, heritage and identities, even in my family. My grandmother has both indigenous Caribbean Amerindian, and also Afro Caribbean heritage. My father's birth father has Afro Caribbean heritage, his stepfather, who he was raised by, has Chinese heritage, his oldest sibling's father has Amerindian heritage. My name combines an African first name, an Indian middle name and a Scottish surname. So even just in one family, the number of cultures that are represented are huge. This is really common across the Caribbean and Caribbean diaspora, and even though there is often separation, and in many cases tension between the different cultural groups, they're all part of Caribbean identity and shared heritage.

RT: In the final paragraph the carpenter says, "In Carnival Ah does always make history and make new fashions". He seems to be saying that in Carnival I am in charge of history. I can make new history. I see all this past before me and I am can now step in and make a new one.

AH: This is an idea that is explored throughout. The future and the past are both products of the present moment. The past is what you have decided to remember and bring with you. The future is what you decide to take forward. Both of these things are formed in the present moment.

I really feel that in this sentence. In Carnival, he's making his history, he's physically making it, as the builder making the bands that represent history. But he's also the maker of history because everybody's history is the one they choose or make in that present moment. People say that history is written by the victors. Actually, history is written by the person who's telling it, in this moment. The Carnival bands are also creating something new. Their new fashion, new music, new style of dancing that's come from this history but, ultimately, it's something new, something they have imagined that they want to become.

So there's something really gorgeous in that sentence. Later in the same section he says:

"Me de once pissin tail boy from de country is always big an important at Carnival time Carnival time is wen Ah seein de pas comin back to de present an makin for de future a masterful life."

I think that speaks to Carnival tradition where the world is turned upside down. Class systems are completely removed and you can live out another way of being. The Carnival is also a way of interrogating your day-to-day life, the context that you're part of and your own existence, by turning it on its head. But the last bit "I'm seeing the past coming back to the present and making for the future a masterful life" feels very sinister, coming after the description of the bands that are so full of war. Because this book is written in the 1980s, it is probably referencing what is happening in that present day⁸, what war looks like, and what form it takes. And there is something sinister in this, that to me speaks of history repeating itself, and each individual's responsibility within that. It's like it's asking you, what are you gonna make with that masterful life?"

RT: You said that the carpenter is literally making history through his craft. I was struck throughout how much and how beautifully he describes materials and juxtapositions - of the taffetas to the smooth silk, the wooden carvings and metal sheets. This brings me to your Quadrille work. You were inspired by this book for a work about Carnival, but I can see a real continuity with some of your earlier work. Had you read the book when you did Jumbies?

AH: This exhibition is a coming together of quite a few different projects. I never finish a project and then start a new one from scratch. The ideas pass on

and shape the next thing. Thinking about Jumbies⁹ and the way that the past can find a new form in the present has been a recurring theme in my work. Last year I created *An Exercise in Exorcism*¹⁰ a performance that explored the ways that painful and traumatic pasts never stay in the past. Even if the world changes, you still feel them, they're always there. They always have a presence. And one way that people safeguard themselves and their future communities against these insidious invisible presences is by giving them a form as a ghost or a Jumbie. Naming them as something to be afraid of and justifying the feelings of fear in different spaces or moments.

In Guyana and elsewhere in the Caribbean, silk-cotton trees are believed to be haunted. There are different ghosts that inhabit them. I found out that silk-cotton trees, because they are so tall and strong, were used to hang people.

Not anymore, but that era is still felt. It's been given a new form in these ghosts that inhabit the tree, and you cannot go to that tree and not feel an eerie presence. I guess when you go to a place that is "haunted", you get a shiver down your spine. What is that shiver? Some kind of inherited memory of the trauma that is attached to this site? So that's one of the things that I've been exploring over the past few years.

Alongside this, I was also researching oil production, specifically looking at Georgetown, the capital of Guyana where I was born. Georgetown was twinned with Aberdeen a few years ago, not long after there was a discovery of oil producing sandstone off its coast, and Guyana became an oil producing nation. And there was something quite interesting and insidious to me about this connection between Aberdeen and the capital of a new oil country. Guyana has a long history of violent forms of extraction and this history is linked with Scotland in several ways. There is the most violent extraction that was the transatlantic slave trade, in which we know Scotland played a prominent role, with Glasgow being one of the major ports of the triangle trade. Much less known is that by the 1790s, the majority of European colonisers within Guyana were Scots. So there's this first extraction, the violent extraction of human beings from one place to another. That extraction becomes indentureship, bringing people from India and China to Guyana. Then there is also the extraction of the land through farming. As a British colony, Guyana was known as the breadbasket of the Caribbean, feeding the rest of the colonies. And also ecological extraction through mining - gold,



bauxite, diamonds and many other minerals. And now oil. And so I went on to think about extraction and its relationship to Guyanese identity.

Gold is a really important part of my Guyanese identity. I have a set of gold earrings that were my grandma's that she gave to me. These are more special than any other gold earrings because these are Guyanese gold earrings. And I think about how my dad worked in the gold mining industry as well. He was a geologist and a good chunk of his professional life was in gold mining. And then I was thinking about oil. Other countries in the Caribbean already



produced oil, so I looked at the role of Exxon Mobil there, since it also leads oil extraction in Guyana, and read 1970s articles about oil production in Africa and Trinidad. I started finding, again, kind of peripheral things. They've always been there, but they've never been directly in front of you. They've always been kind of floating around the edge. Even thinking about steel pans, the instruments are made from oil drums that have been bashed into an instrument. It's another peripheral connection to industry, and the other kind of colonisation that we don't talk about - the corporations and the industry and the money and that kind of thing that's going on side by side. Yet these

things have also become an important part of Caribbean identity, like steel pans. They are the main element of Carnival. They are the sound of Carnival. So again, I find myself in this tangly place of tension and in some ways, this exhibition is one of my ways of working through these tensions. In this exhibition, I'm making sculptures that are inspired by steel pans. They have sequins, they twinkle, they glitter. But they haven't been given their tune yet. So when you play them, there is a kind of sinister "off" feeling.

RT: How does this knowledge of the embeddedness of history in materials, and the complexities of using something like the steel pan to represent the Caribbean, play into the structures that you've made for this exhibition?

AH: In one of the texts that you shared, "What They Came with: Carnival and the Persistence of African Performance Aesthetics in the Diaspora" by Esiaba Irobi¹¹, there was a section about African performance aesthetics, but also African philosophy, that travelled to the Caribbean with people, and is played out through Carnival. I was really drawn to the section that states that the body is the place through which we encounter the world, so it should also be through the body that we process our experiences of the world.

In African philosophy, the processing of life, being, and of the individual and collective is embedded within dance, music, sculpture and art making, because all of these things are a product of the physical body, they are made by the body. This has always been the way that I have processed these things – through making. Whether that be making a dance with people, or making an object or collaging things together, its always using my body or my actions to physically process and understand something. I needed to have the action of taking the oil drum, cutting it down and trying to turn it into an instrument. I also needed to have the very human process of sourcing the oil drum, searching online marketplaces, talking to the mechanics who are using them, driving across the country to collect the drum, having a conversation with them about who they are and why they have an oil drum that they are getting rid of. Talking about what other things it's used for. Telling them I want to make an instrument for a carnival and then engaging in conversations that come up from there. This process was just as important for me as the act of cutting the drum down, getting out the grinders, feeling the flames and putting on the PPE. And that process is just as important as inviting the three dancers who I'm working with into a room and figuring out how we can collectively

dance and make sounds with these oil drums. At every one of these stages, everyone involved is processing history, identity and all the associated complexities, and also considering the future through our bodies. Another part of the process is that many people make a carnival, and that also applies to this exhibition. I have been lucky to work with incredibly skilled people to weld the wings, cast the hooks, sew the sequins and apply the gold leaf. The amazing technicians at Edinburgh Sculpture Workshop, my wonderful assistant Zephyr, the performers, the people who let me cast their faces and all the other experts I had the privilege to work with, all have a hand in this exhibition – it is a story of many!

There are six sculptures from steel drums, four of which are part of a larger float, and two of which are individual sculptures. The sculptures are inspired by steel pans but they haven't received their tune. They still have a flat surface awaiting the experience of being beaten and shaped and finding their tune. I guess they are becoming the future sounds that they're going to be. And what I really like about them, as I said earlier, is the fact that when you play them, there's something kind of "off" sounding. You see them, you think steel pans, Carnival, but when you play them and you have this kind of "off" sound - it makes you question, are they steel drums? Is this Carnival? What else might they be? And maybe it draws the audience to some of these peripheral things.

Another sculpture is a large pair of wings inspired by a Carnival costume, with a harness and can be worn. A lot of traditional cultural processes are embedded in the wings. One is wire bending, which is a traditional way of making Carnival costumes. As technologies and materials have changed, many costumes are made from lighter materials like carbon fibre, but wire bending is very traditional. Wire is bent into the shape, welded together and then covered. I really wanted to work with this form. This costume is really the skeleton. It's the bones of a Carnival costume. It's the wire frame that would be covered. Like the drums that are waiting to receive their tune, the wings are the frame that's waiting to receive its skin. I've been thinking about this exhibition as a Carnival in the making, so everything is on its way to becoming what it is finally going to be. Even the dances. The choreography I'm working on with the dancers, we've been doing a series where we all teach each other a dance that we feel in some way represents us. It's first us getting to know each other as individuals through movement and bringing them together in the form of a Quadrille, a dance made for four points in space. But this quadrille is presented



by only three performers. There is always an empty point in space for these peripheral thoughts to occupy. I am also thinking of the performance as a rehearsal or a dance in the making. It might change week by week, becoming the dance it's going to be.

RT: So, it's a point in a continuum in the way that history, and the moment that we are in it is. It's a point in the continuum and therein lies the hope and the despair of all of it!

AH: The hope! That is an important thing to talk about. The joy and the hope that exist in this Carnival that we're making as well. The wings are inspired by the winged being, which is really commonly seen in Carnival. It takes different forms depending on the time, depending on what's in fashion. The winged being could be a bird, it could be a butterfly, it could be an angel. There's lots of interpretation of where this winged being has come from. But one interpretation that really appeals is that the winged being has come from African heritage within Carnival, and it represents a god who carries the culture and the heritage to the new world, and also carries the souls of the people back to the old world. So, the winged being is the connection between two places, and it's bringing both people and objects and thoughts and ideas backwards and forwards between the two spaces. Having something that represented that to-and-fro of culture between places felt really important.

I had been working with a process of making copper mesh masks from face casts. I made casts of nine people, who also have a relationship with African, Caribbean or Afro-Caribbean cultural heritage, to become part of this sculpture. Whilst making the casts, I also had really lovely conversations with the sitters. A friend whose face is in the wings told me about Oya, one of the orishas¹¹ from Yoruba mythology. Oya is the goddess of the weather, but the reason my friend told me about her was because Oya is associated with the number nine. And it was completely serendipitous that I had nine people to be cast for this sculpture. At one point it was going to be eight and I said absolutely not. It has to be nine. This was before I had this information. I like the idea that this kind of inherited knowledge also plays out in making and sculpting, and the creative process. I had to make these nine masks, then have my friend tell me the significance of them.

RT: We know that African religions and Christianity became syncretised in the

Americas. Is there similar syncretisation of Indian, Chinese, or Middle Eastern religions with Christianity or African religions in the Caribbean?

AH: I would say that Carnival is a massive syncretisation of all of these different cultural practices. I was reading that the sequins in carnival originally were mirrors and that came from Islamic tradition that was brought over from India, becoming the Caribbean Hosay Festival – a celebration of Muharram. In these traditions the mirrors enabled the wearer to reflect all that surrounds them. Some of that became syncretised into Carnival. As time has gone by and technologies have changed, mirrors have become beads, to become sequins today. Then they've also changed shapes becoming more diamond like. But the meaning has still come from that original cultural practice, and that's still represented.

RT: Now, this is the first question that popped into my head, but I've saved it to last for some reason. Where do you want people to fly with these wings? Where do you want to fly to?

AH: That's a very Blind Date question! I would like people to fly where ever the wings take them. I love the fact that already a friend has looked at the wings and the nine faces took her to Oya. I love the idea that somebody else is going to look at it and something will take them somewhere else. Or somebody is going to read the text of the drums, and it's going to take them to the story. Somebody else might see something reflected in the sequins on the wings, and it will take them somewhere else. I like the idea that the installation and performance represent so many peripheral things that they have the power and the capacity to take people anywhere.

End

Dr. Ranjana Thapalyal is an Indian born artist and academic based in Scotland. Her practice spans ceramics, painting, ephemeral mixed media assemblages and writing. Research areas include materiality in art, cultural identity, and the metaphysical self in relation to all of these. She lectured in studio and theory departments at Glasgow School of Art for many years. Recent writing can be found in *Art Monthly*, *MAP*, *Nowness Asia* and in her book, *Education as Mutual Translation, a Yoruba and Ancient Indian Interface for Pedagogy in the Creative Arts* (Brill 2018).

Notes for Further Reading

¹ www.peepaltreepress.com/authors/faustin-charles

² www.nocolourbar.org/walter-rodney-bookshop

³ www.nocolourbar.org/walter-rodney-bookshop

⁴ www.nocolourbar.org/_files/ugd/a96552_09d965ab81b14f56ac12291bc69b2769.pdf

⁵ www.youtube.com/watch?v=kaLgaw_8c9I

⁶ www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/help-with-your-research/research-guides/indian-indentured-labourers/#2-who-were-the-indian-indentured-laboure

⁷ www.history.com/this-day-in-history/united-states-invades-grenada

⁸ www.ashantiharris.com/jumbies

⁹ www.ashantiharris.com/exercise

¹⁰ www.worldcat.org/identities/lccn-n88180986/

¹¹ www.worldhistory.org/Orisha/

Image Credits

Cover: Harris Family Photos from Guyana Carnival 1987-2013

Centre Pages: Portrait of Ashanti Harris by Emilia Beatriz, 2019.

Throughout: Ashanti Harris in production at Edinburgh Sculpture Workshop.

Ashanti Harris is a multi-disciplinary artist and researcher based in Glasgow. Working with dance, performance, sculpture and installation, Ashanti's work disrupts historical narratives and reimagines them from a Caribbean diasporic perspective. As part of her creative practice, she is co-director of the dance company Project X – platforming dance of the African and Caribbean diaspora in Scotland; and works collaboratively as part of the collective Glasgow Open Dance School (G.O.D.S) – facilitating experimental movement workshops and research groups. She is also lecturer in Contemporary Performance at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland and co-facilitates the British Art Network research group The Re-Action of Black Performance. Recent commissions and exhibitions include: An Exercise in Exorcism, GoMA, Glasgow (2021) JUMBIES, Glasgow International, Glasgow (2021); This Woman's Work, Third Horizon Film Festival, Miami (2021); Miraculous Noise, Viborg Kunsthall, Viborg (2021); OHCE, Radiophrenia, 87.9fm (2020); Being Present, OGR, Torino (2020); In The Open, The Common Guild, Glasgow (2020); The Index Impulse, Alchemy Film Festival, Hawick (2020); Pre-Ramble, David Dale, Glasgow (2020); The Skeleton of a Name, Transmission Gallery, Glasgow (2019)

Credits

Performed By

KJ Clarke-Davis
Jess Paris
Hamshya Rajkumar

Production & Fabrication

Zephyr Liddell – Artist assistant and textile technician
Stephen Murray – Workshop technician
Emma Hislop – Welding technician and technical support
Méabh Breathnach – Casting technician and technical support
Antoine Dauré – Technical support
Emily Smit-Dicks – Sewing technician
Sachee Simmons – Sewing technician
James Graham – Gold Leaf Gilding
Jen Martin – Sound editing

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