

Emily Zobel Marshall

Leeds Beckett University

e.marshall@leedsbeckett.ac.uk

Resistance through ‘Robber Talk’: Storytelling Strategies and the Carnival Trickster

The Midnight Robber is a quintessential Trinidadian carnival ‘badman.’ Dressed in a black sombrero adorned with skulls and coffin-shaped shoes, his long, eloquent speeches descend from the West African ‘griot’ (storyteller) tradition and detail the vengeance he will wreak on his oppressors.

He exemplifies many of the practices that are central to Caribbean carnival culture - resistance to officialdom, linguistic innovation and the disruptive nature of play, parody and humour. Elements of the Midnight Robber’s dress and speech are directly descended from West African dress and oral traditions (Warner-Lewis, 1991, p.83). Like other tricksters of West African origin in the Americas, Anansi and Brer Rabbit, the Midnight Robber relies on his verbal agility to thwart officialdom and triumph over his adversaries. He is, as Rodger Abrahams identified, a Caribbean ‘Man of Words’, and deeply imbedded in Caribbean speech-making traditions (Abrahams, 1983). This article will examine the cultural trajectory of the Midnight Robber and then go on to explore his journey from oral to literary form in the twenty-first century, demonstrating how Jamaican author Nalo Hopkinson and Trinidadian Keith Jardim have drawn from his revolutionary energy to challenge authoritarian power through linguistic and literary skill.

The parallels between the Midnight Robber and trickster figures Anansi and Brer Rabbit are numerous. Anansi is symbolic of the malleability and ambiguity of language and the roots of the tales can be traced back to the Asante of Ghana (Marshall, 2012). Asante storytellers and listeners delighted in Anansi’s use of tricky word-play and double-entendres to get the better of his adversaries, and for this reason a spider design decorated the staffs of Asante royal spokesmen, otherwise known as court ‘linguists’ (Yanka, p. 11). Like Anansi, the Midnight Robber’s trickster qualities are not only his verbal agility and his rootedness in African influenced Caribbean oral traditions; he is also a shape-shifter with the ability to perform multiple roles.

Morally deviant, the Midnight Robber boastfully proclaims to be both terrorist and savior; a criminal extraordinaire and breaker of institutional and supernatural laws. The Midnight Robber, Anansi and Brer Rabbit each harness the forces of creation; ‘my father was King Grabbla, who grab the sun, moon, stars’, claims the Midnight Robber (Crowley, p.47). In West African and Caribbean tales Anansi is also creator, bringing both stories and wisdom to humankind, as well as snakes and diseases (Marshall, 2012; Danquah, 1944, p. 199). These tricksters are agents of destruction and creation who offer a psychological release to listeners, onlookers, storytellers and Mas players. With their focus on turning the tables on the powerful using intelligence and verbal skills, they formed part of a discourse of resistance to colonial power and the traumatic legacy of slavery in the Americas.

However, as a twentieth-century Mas character, there is a marked difference between the Midnight Robber and folkloric tricksters in the Americas. Anansi and Brer rabbit are rarely represented in carnival parades in the US or the Caribbean. The Midnight Robber is the twentieth and twenty-first century *carnival* manifestation of the traditional West African-rooted Caribbean trickster figure; a post-emancipation performance of phenomenal power and skillfully oratory played out on the streets rather than in the storytellers circle.

Carnival dominates the ebb and flow of life in Trinidad. Trinidadian author Robert Antoni masterfully evokes the calm before the storm that is the ‘human hurricane’ in his novel *Carnival* (2005):

On this West Indian Island we board up once a year for a human hurricane. In the cool air you could feel the lull before the storm. The sudden stillness. Yet in the apparent vacuum you felt an electrical charge. Foreboding: some catastrophic, atmospheric event was about to take place. Even the birds were quite. They knew. The potcakes up in the surrounding hills. An eerie silence.

(Antoni, 2006, p.147)

Earle Lovelace, whose novels and short stories have brought to life the centrality of carnival and Mas in Trinidadian culture and society to an international readership, describes the emancipatory power of carnival in *The Dragon Can't Dance* (1979). Among the shacks of Laventille, ‘when Carnival coming’, the poor and disposed ‘walk with a tall hot beauty between the garbage and dog shit, proclaiming life, exulting in the bare bones of their person and their skin’ (Lovelace, 1998, p.5). The Mas players who perform the Robber, like tellers and listeners of Anansi and Brer Rabbit tales, are able to transcend their lowly status on the social and economic hierarchy and, albeit temporarily, become omnipotent. Trinidadian

Theater-Carnival practitioner Tony Hall's play, *Jean and Dinah, Who Have Been Locked Away in a World Famous Calypso Since 1956 Speak Their Minds Publicly* (2001) (the title is inspired by the Trinidadian calypso 'Jean and Dinah' sung by Mighty Sparrow) is a tale of 'Jamette' history and consciousness. Jamette is a term used to describe those perceived to living below the diameter of respectability, and Jamettes Jean and Dinah, two aging prostitutes who have had to sell their labour and their bodies to survive, come to terms with their past through the transformative process of playing Mas on the streets on Jouvay morning. In the opening scene, Dinah, dressed in black robes and carrying a small shoe-box sized coffin with a skeleton inside, confronts the audience as the Midnight Robber:

I fight man with stick, gun, bomb, hatchet, even saw. Any kinda weapon that good for war. My battle scars does heal before I get them. Young fella, you ent make me out. You ent make me out, you know. I will torment you and destroy you boy, yeah! With wine. (*She gyrates her waistline.*) Watch me good! Watch me good! Bacchanal!!!

(Hall, 2002, p.67)

Dinah describes herself as the 'Grand Jamette' and, through the medium of Robber-talk, Hall enables her to defend and transcend the abuse of her body by men in a furious and skillful outburst of speech-making (Hall, 2002, p.67). As a writer, like Hall, Robert Antoni has a special interest in the Midnight Robber as he considers him the most 'literary of the Old Mas figures', born from the rich Trinidadian Calypso tradition of 'impromptu' and social commentary (Mas in the Making, 2010). In his abuse of people, Antoni points out that he is also 'wicked', revealing the 'dark underside of carnival' (Mas in the Making, 2010). Taking great pleasure in terrifying children and adults alike, the Midnight Robber is the repository of nightmares who enables audiences to revel in his rule-breaking by allowing their fears to manifest themselves in his performance – but at a safe distance.

Antoni laments the decline of the Midnight Robber figure in 'the sheer volume of the music that overwhelms carnival', which he feels suppresses the voice of the individual performer. He goes on to argue, however, that the internationally renowned carnival designer Peter Minshall has captured the energy, drama and theater of Old Mas and transformed it on a 'grand scale' into a 'theater of the street', in which the language of the individual is replaced by the theatrical energy and 'language' of an entire band (Mas in the Making, 2010). The problem in this transition, however, is that not many Trinidadians have the money to be able to afford to play Mas in a band like Minshall's and buy his pricy costumes, whereas the

individual Old Mas performer had the autonomy to create a costume according to their means.



Peter Minshall's 1980 "Midnight Robber"



Dinah as Midnight Robber in Tony Hall's play Jean and Dinah, Little Carib Theatre, Port of Spain, 2006

It is the literary nature of the Midnight Robber that positions him as the ideal Postcolonial literary protagonist and social commentator. As is made clear in stories by Jardime and Hopkinson, he functions in the text as a tester and breaker of boundaries and a conduit for social change and reinvention. He also allows the author to create a trickster narrative, implementing the figure of the Midnight Robber to highlight the fallibility of language and meaning. ‘Robber-talk’ like ‘Anansi-talk’ means ‘lying talk’ in Jamaica and Trinidad (the Red House, the seat of the Trinidad and Tobago parliament, is dubbed by Trinidadians ‘the house of Robber-talk’), but Robber-talk may also be the voice of truth in a corrupt society (Honoré, 1998, p.126). Just as Brer Rabbit and Anansi have been taken up by African American authors Ralph Ellison, Alice Walker, Toni Morrison and Caribbean writers Andrew Salkey and Earle Lovelace to push back the boundaries of literary experimentation and challenge racism and inequality, Jardime and Hopkinson rework the Old Midnight Robber Mas to create trickster narratives which help readers envision a more equitable Caribbean future. Yet the journey towards this future is a fraught and challenging one; through the manifestation of the trickster figure, authors inject uncertainty and ambiguity into their narratives, reveling in their role as author-tricksters.

The Midnight Robber first appears at the turn of the 20th century in carnival bands of thirty or forty Masqueraders (Wuest, 1990, p.43). He was one of the few Mas character whose speeches were central to his role. He confronted carnival audiences with his ‘Robber-talk’, a unique blend of Creole and old-fashioned so-called ‘Standard English’, and if his Robber-talk is good, he was rewarded with money. The ‘bigger’ the words he used – the more complex, unusual and bombastic – the greater his payment from the crowd. Daniel Crowley notes in *The Caribbean Quarterly* (1956) that the combined effect of the Midnight Robber’s outfit and speech could be so unsettling that the crowd quickly paid up (Crowley, 1956, p.263).

His grand and verbose speeches describe the injustices he has suffered at the abusive and corrupt hands of those in power. When he describes himself as the abuser he claims to be more powerful than the elements, the sun the moon and the stars, and so awful that he leaves mothers and children terrorised by fear (Wuest, 1990, p.49). The Devil and Deity rolled into one, he can lay claim to great tyranny – a destructive colonial force that brings misery to the Caribbean. Yet while he might describe himself as Columbus, at the same time he exposes the colonial crimes of the ‘dog[s] of the Saxon[s]’ (p.47). In a less nuanced performance of colonial resistance, he plays the part of an African King who has been stolen into slavery and escaped. He is now an outlaw who seeks revenge on his former Masters (Wuest, 1990, p.47).

‘A cyclone in human form’, the Midnight Robber is dangerous, yet full of humour, and always ready to self-satirise, referring to his audience as ‘mock-men’ while clearly performing the role himself. One of his most comical and enduring claims (recorded by scholar Ruth Wuest in speeches in the 1950s and 80s) is; ‘at the age of three I drowned my mother Cecelia in a spoonful of water’ (Wuest, 1990, pp. 47-48). The Midnight Robber is a metafiction, bringing the audience’s attention to his performativity, to its fictive nature, ridiculing his own outrageous claims, empty threats and ridiculous pomposity. They may be comical, but the speeches of the Robber are also replete with coded messages. They can be ‘spoken to’ power, in the official carnival space, in the capital on the streets, yet they expose the historical wrongs and legacy of empire and slavery in Trinidad. They are profoundly subversive – like the Anansi trickster, the Midnight Robber has free reign to say anything he pleases.

Ruth Wuest argues that in the 1950’s bands of Midnight Robber had been reduced to no more than seven Mas players and his popularity waned throughout the following decades. Her conclusion is that independence in 1962 killed the popularity of the Midnight Robber due to the new ‘cultural-assertiveness for which the Robber lacked words’ (Wuest, 1990, p.52). Perhaps this was the case – under colonial rule he symbolised a freedom of expression and anger that diminished in the post-independence Trinidad. However, since Wuest’s article was published in 1990, the Midnight Robber has experienced a revival, and the 2016 carnival saw several bands of Robbers, especially played by children. Yet, like Minshall’s 1980’s Midnight Robber, these ones were ‘voiceless,’ for the tradition of speech making on the streets has clearly diminished. The commercialisation of modern Carnival, which has been criticized by some as primarily a ‘beads and bikini’ Mas in which only the economically privileged can afford the expensive costumes and take to the streets, may be partly to blame for the diminishing of Old Mas characters. One might argue that due to the centrality of music and beautiful bodies in today’s carnival, nobody has time to stop and listen to a long Midnight Robber speech detailing historical wrongdoings; this is now a milieu where the political is replaced by the spectacle. In 2013 the Midnight Robber designed by artist Marina Poppa for the Leeds West Indian carnival (the first UK Caribbean-style street carnival) delivered his own traditional Robber-talk speech in Leeds Town Hall. The speech was then recorded and played as the parade took place on the road, but few could hear the words as they were drowned out by the pounding music.



Children in Robber bands, Port of Spain, Trinidad Carnival 2016



Leeds West Indian Carnival 2013, Harrison Bunday's "Midnight Robber", designed by Marina Poppa, Callaloo Carnival Arts, and played by Simon Namsoo

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The Midnight Robber's immense power comes from Caribbean oral storytelling traditions. Speeches are handed down from one Robber to the next, testimony to the centrality of the oral tradition to carnival culture. One Masquerader known as 'King of the Graveyard' in 1980 explained that: 'at one time I had as much as sixty-four speeches in my brain and you don't have to walk with a book to have them there' (Wuest, 1990, p. 44). Daniel Crowley

notes in 1956 that many elements of the Midnight Robber speeches were directly lifted from secondary school texts books taught to Trinidadian school children; there are numerous references to a passage on the 'Destruction of Port Royal' in the 5th *Standard Reader*, as well as quotations from canonical literary and poetic texts such as Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1791). The subversion of the colonial educational text by the Robber is highly significant and can be aligned with the type of 'writing back' strategies employed by postcolonial authors Jean Rhys in *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) and J. M Coetzee in *Foe* (1986), a literary strategy which questions the authority of the English literary canon, challenges colonial power and destabilises problematic Western representations of 'the other' (Said, 1978; Crowley, 1956, p.269).

The Midnight Robber is a liminal figure and language is his power and his weapon; 'my tongue is like the blast of a gun' he claims (Honoré, 1988, p.126). His linguistic prowess echoes Brathwaite's 'Nation Language' – he subverts upper class 'Standard English' spoken by the former white ruling elite and his language functions as a device to deceive as he bends and changes it to suit a Caribbean context. It is malleable on his tongue and he endlessly plays with its meaning. In this way the Midnight Robber is firmly embedded in the oral tradition that African American theorist Henry Louis Gates has identified as 'signifyin' (he drops the 'g' to reflect African American oral speech), a boasting, mocking, playfulness in language, a type of linguistic dexterity and the ability to 'show off' with words. Signifyin' is speaking with the sole purpose of putting your gift as an orator on display, a tradition alive and well in modern rap battles and the hip-hop scene. Gates argues that signifyin' is a highly sophisticated and intelligent form unique to the black community in the Americas (Gates, 1988).

The Midnight Robber is partly born out of the great Western cowboy movie icons of the 1920s and 30s, such as Jesse James (Wuest, 1990, p.45; Honoré, 1988, p.125; Crowley, 1956; Hill, 1967, p. 90). But in a parody of North American influence and fused with Creole culture, this is the cowboy costume reworked and 'signified' upon; this is repetition with a difference, for the hat is no ordinary cowboy hat but has dangling skulls or even electric lights hanging from its brim and can be worn with outrageous shoes in the shape of crocodiles or alligators. Maureen Warner-Lewis points out that Midnight Robber's hat is yet another traditional West African motif in Trinidad Carnival. She explains that the 'hat is a replica of the chief's hats worn in the coastal area of Nigeria between Lagos and Calabar' and that the tassels fringing the brim are 'indigenous icons of chieftaincy such as the beaded

tassels hanging from certain kings' crowns among the Yoruba' (Warner-Lewis, 1991, p. 183). The speeches too have West African roots; the 'idiosyncratic, long-winded boast' 'recall the boastful tone of some African Masquerades' (Warner-Lewis, 1991, p. 183). This cross-cultural fertilisation destabilises the power of European and North American influence in the Caribbean as that which is from the 'outside' is fused with African traditions and the home-grown.

The Midnight Robber's predecessors are Pierrot Grenade and Wild Indian of the 19th century Trinidad carnival. Pierrot Grenade, who still makes an appearance in contemporary Trinidadian carnival, dresses in rags but is a master speller and challenges other Pierrot's to do battle with him. Pierrot Grenade is a satirical fusion of 'Nègres Jardin', based on a stereotype of the Grenadian migrant worker, and the immaculately turned out French Pierrot (Wuest, 1990, p. 44). Like the Midnight Robber, Pierrot Grenade demonstrates his strength and potency through creating new words, as described by Errol Hill in *The Trinidad Carnival: Mandate for a National Theatre* (1972):

'The spelling technique...is to break a given work into its syllabic component, to make of each syllable a new word, and to build a story around all the new syllable-words. By developing his story upon one syllable at a time, he reaches a point where he can bring them all together to spell the original word' (Errol Hill, 1972, p. 92).

Like Pierrot Grenade, the Midnight Robber also creates new words and revels in their sounds; 'for I fought, conquer, ate, and drunk de blood, de luciphobia, de hyfiphobian and de hypollos which weighed no less than fourteen tones' (Wuest, 1990, p.49).

Jamaican author Nalo Hopkinson's science fiction novel *The Midnight Robber* (2003) draws from the Midnight Robber's revolutionary energy and linguistic prowess to create an alternative vision of the Caribbean future. It is written in a fusion of Creole and 'Standard English' and its poignant epigraph is the poem 'Stolen' by David Findley. The poem draws our attention to the profound power of Creolised English and the Midnight Robber's subversive Robber-talk:

*'I stole the torturer's tongue!
[...] watch him try an' claim as his own this long, strong old tongue's
new-remembered rhythms...*

hear this long tongue!
fear this long tongue!
I know this tall tale to be mine too, and I'll live or die by it.
I stole the torturer's tongue!

(Findley in Hopkinson, 2000, epigraph).

Hopkinson's protagonist Tan-Tan lives on a futuristic Caribbean planet named 'Toussaint' (from Toussaint Louverture) which is controlled by an all-seeing, omnipotent 'Granny Nanny', named after the famous Jamaican Nanny of the Maroons. Granny Nanny is a benevolent sentient computer that rules the planet with her 'Nansi Web'. The planet is a fair and just society, populated by a Caribbean people who are still in touch with their historical roots and celebrate their folklore, yet due to Nanny's control, they have limited freedoms.

Nanny communicates through 'Nanny Song', a reworking of Brathwaite's concept of 'Nation Language' (1984). Nanny Song is a type of language based on new sounds, and it's understanding the song which is key to the survival of the Caribbean community in Toussaint (yet only Calypsonians can *fully* decode the Nanny song). Each inhabitant on Toussaint has their own personal Eshu (a reference to the West African trickster deity), a small Nano chip in their ears that guides and protects them through a disembodied voice, from birth. Toussaint is not only controlled by the oral, by 'Nanny Song' and the voice of Eshu, but the novel itself is an oral tale told by Tan-Tan's Eshu to her son, who is born at the end of the novel, about Tan-Tan's life before motherhood. Eshu, typically, adopts an Anansi persona, tricking the reader and making them work hard to create meaning and follow the thread of the story he spins:

'Well, maybe I find a way to come through the one-way veil to bring you a story, nuh? Maybe I is a master weaver. I spin the threads. I twist warp 'cross weft. I move my shuttle in and out, and smooth smooth, I weaving you my story, oui?'

(Hopkinson, 2000, pp. 2–3)

Hopkinson's creation is very much a 'Speakerly Text', as defined by Henry Louis Gates Jr. in that it replicates the patterns of oral speech and incorporates the oral tradition onto the page (Gates, 1998). She further hybridizes the 'torturer's tongue' by amalgamating a variety of languages and modes of address found in the Caribbean. She switches from Trinidadian

Creole, Standard English, French, Spanish and Jamaican Rastafarian ‘Dread talk’ (which she identifies as a ‘language of resistance’) (Hopkinson (2006) “Code Sliding.” Internet [Accessed: 10 Aug. 2014]). Hopkinson explains that linguists have identified the hybrid form she uses as ‘code-sliding’ – in her view a deeply significant narrative voice seeped in the oral that *speaks back* to the colonial past:

‘I am fascinated with the notion of breaking an imposed language apart and remixing it. To speak in the hacked language is not just to speak in an accent or a Creole; to say the words aloud is an act of referencing history and claiming space.’

(Hopkinson, Code Sliding, 2016)

Tan-Tan is kidnapped by her abusive father to another dimension, New Half Way Tree (here Hopkinson creates a futuristic Kingston landmark), during carnival, wearing her beloved Midnight Robber costume. New Half Way Tree is a place full of exiles from Toussaint, and without Granny Nanny to rule and protect them they revert to the old ways of humans – greed, lust, violence. It is also a place where the monsters from Caribbean folklore come alive; Tan-Tan is hounded by enormous rolling calves wrapped in chains with eyes like fireballs and huge Moko Jumbies come out of the forest in deadly attack.

In New Half Way Tree, Tan-Tan must learn to become the trickster rather than the dupe in order to survive. Following the brutal trauma of being raped by her father and falling pregnant, she metamorphoses into both an Anansi figure and the ‘Robber Queen.’ Hopkinson recasts the traditional male Midnight Robber and places a young black pregnant woman at the centre of the Mas. When she plays the Robber Queen, Tan-Tan is able to perform great feats and becomes the stuff of legend; so famous do her exploits become that people begin to tell Anansi stories about her. Two full-length Anansi stories are incorporated into the novel, ‘Tan-Tan and Dry Bone’ (pp.198-212) and ‘Tan-Tan and the Rolling Calf’ (pp. 290-296) in which Tan-Tan, as the Anansi trickster, must defeat her powerful adversaries using her wit and cunning.

Anansi and the Robber Queen imbue Tan-Tan with the power she needs to fight back against those that wish to harm her. When she is raped by her father she feels the strength of the Robber Queen surge through her and defends herself with a knife; ‘it must have been the Robber Queen, the outlaw woman, who quick like a snake got the knife braced at her breastbone just as Antonio slammed his heavy body onto the blade’ (p.168). When Tan-Tan

wears her newly designed New Half Way Tree Robber Queen outfit, made by her tailor friend Melonhead, it transforms her; she is brave and defiant, wise and dangerous, behind the mask she fears no one. As well as her huge 'goat wool' black hat, velvet cape edged with bright ribbons and belt (extra-large and especially designed for her pregnancy – her 'soon-to-be-baby was well hidden') she carries two holsters for her cap guns and sheathes for her knife and machete (Hopkinson, 2000, pp. 312-313). Her greatest weapon, her Robber-talk, centres around stories of the injustices she has suffered, and through storytelling she is freed; 'her voice swelled with power as the Robber Queen persona came upon her' (Hopkinson, 2000, pp. 317–318). 'Power coursed through Tan-Tan, the Robber Queen's power – the power of words' (Hopkinson, 2000, p. 319). Through her Robber Queen speeches Tan-Tan cements ancestral bonds to the powerful African, Taino and Caribbean women that came before her, transcending her human form to *become* her Mas character:

'Not wo - man; I name Tan-Tan, a 'T' and an 'AN'; I is the AN-acaona, Taino redeemer; the AN-nie Christmas, keel boat steamer; the Yaa As-AN-tewa; Ashanti warrior queen; the NAN-ny, Maroon Granny; meaning Nanna, mother, caretaker to a nation. You won't confound these people with your massive fib-ulation!' And Tan-Tan the Midnight Robber stood tall, guns crossed at her chest. Let her opponent match that.

(Hopkinson 2000, p. 320)

Through her speech the heavily pregnant Tan-Tan is able to defeat her Stepmother Janisette, who has been relentlessly pursuing her for supposedly seducing and then killing Antonio, Tan-Tan's father. Through challenging Janisette as the Robber Queen, Tan-Tan narrowly escapes being run over by Janisette's tank and forces her to accept the horrifying truth of Tan-Tan's rape and subsequent pregnancy. As a result of the victory, Tan-Tan goes on to find the courage to welcome the birth of her son, the first baby to be born with an Eshu in his ear in New Half Way Tree and symbolically named 'Tubman'. Tubman signals a passage towards a better future for the exiled Caribbean people and mythical creatures of New Half Way Tree and planet Toussaint; he bridges the gap between the Old and New Worlds.

In Keith Jardim's short story 'The White People Maid', from the collection, *Near Open Water* (2011) the protagonist Cynthia is a black maid who works for the spiteful and distrusting white Mrs. Gomes (or 'Old Bitch,' as she is referred to by Cynthia) who lives in a

‘high society’ compound (Jardim, 2011, p.64). Another ‘Speakerly’ text, Cynthia’s narrative is also written in a powerful blend of Creole and ‘Standard English.’

Old Bitch and her intensely disagreeable daughter, ‘Paris Hilton’ (‘because of the way that woman does move’), are continually accusing Cynthia of stealing things – her cell phone, gold bracelet, a diamond earring. What makes Cynthia so furious is that she is innocent, and never do they apologise once the precious misplaced object is relocated. The story is set in the run-up to carnival, and everywhere carnival music is playing on the radio, the descriptions of which form a type of soundtrack to the unfolding tale. Cynthia is not feeling celebratory but deeply troubled by the state of affairs in Trinidad, a ‘place for bacchanal’ (p.68) where ‘living is a stressful thing’ (p.69). In Trinidad she thinks, it’s not God but ‘is the Devil what watching people’ (p.68). One thing she is sure of, however, is that God certainly wouldn’t bother with ‘all them white-ass, Port-of-Spain, Catholics housewife’, to think that ‘is blasphemy – for so!’ (p.68).

Salvation comes in the form of the Midnight Robber. While on an errand for sleeping tablets for her Mistress at a local Pharmacy, Cynthia witnesses a terrifying robbery by two young men who shoot a guard and ‘chop’ an ‘elderly woman’ (p.70). In a state of shock, she then loses her cell-phone in a gutter and starts to rant at the Lord for letting her island fall into such lawlessness. Suddenly, she catches sight of the Midnight Robber coming up the road, and his presence forms a counter-narrative to the individualistic and destructive acts of lawlessness committed by the pharmacy Robbers (p.70). On seeing the Midnight Robber she thinks:

Well Lord, what’s this? Carnival eh reach yet but so these people playing they Mas.
And too besides, I had thought the Robber was no more. In this modern Trinidad, my father say, everything that is the real Trinidad getting throw away (p.72).

Jardim’s Midnight Robber represents an example of poverty transcended through performance. Dressed in a pair of ‘old sneakers’ beneath his flowing, raggedy cloak and a hat with egg-sized depictions of the ‘politicians of the day’ hanging from it, he is clearly poor yet the ramshackle outfit does not diminish his power to speak the truth or his credibility (p.73). The Robber describes himself as Lazarus:

[...] I am Lazarus, Lord of Death! who has tricked both life and death and found a home in this dread Trinidad for many a year now. I travel in your dreams to be here!

I have argued with God, struck down the Devil, and Jesus was my playmate...before I make him into a curry roti and eat him all up!

(Jardim, 2011, p.72)

Fearless and sacrilegious, this Robber's empowering speech is typically bombastic and he brags about his historical omnipotence. He tells Cynthia *'in 1942 when Columbus discover the New World, I was there with a guiding hand'* (p.73). He is both benevolent and threatening, he advises her; *'Tread softly, find peace and happiness as best you can in this Trinidad [...]'* but *'beware the wrath of the Midnight Robber in Trinidad!'* (p.73). As he leaves he shouts up at the stars, telling them they better behave or he will *'fly up and rearrange them with a backhoe'* (p.73).

The encounter leaves Cynthia completely shaken but deeply inspired. In her next altercation with Old Bitch she finds the voice to defend herself against her bullying mistress, for the encounter has equipped her with a mastery of language. While Old Bitch swears at Cynthia like a *'Laventille Old Nigger'* (which surprises Cynthia, she never knew white people could *'cuss so'*), and brawls *'about how ungrateful black people is'*, she responds by calling Old Bitch a *'fetid obscenity'*. Cynthia explains that she overheard her father throw the insult at a neighbor. At the time, her father was studying for his teaching certificate and found the words in *'a big dictionary – The Chambers English Dictionary'* (p.74). Drawing from the tradition of incorporating the language of colonial textbooks and classics from the English literary canon into Robber-talk, Cynthia reclaims the language of the colonizer and former Masters and refashions it. She addresses the reader, proudly; *'it sound powerful – that real insulting in English, you hear?'* (p.74). The insult has its desired affect; Old Bitch freezes *'when she hear them two words'* and a look of revelation passes over her face. When she recovers, she tells Cynthia to *'Get [her] black ass out of this compound'* (p.75). The meeting with the unscrupulous Midnight Robber has also encouraged Cynthia to question her own moral compass, and Cynthia reveals to the reader that in a final act of defiance she has stolen Old Bitch's cell phone. With the heels of her shoes she *'mash it up fine-fine'* – an act of vengeance for a year's worth of *'blasted abuse'* and unfounded accusations of thievery (p.76).

The story ends with a moment of epiphany. Cynthia, while hoping she might encounter the Robber again, looks up at the stars and sees the outline of the Midnight Robber, like Orion, *'with he black sombrero and black cape stretching out across the long dark*

universe' and realizes the future lies not in a White people's God but with the homegrown morally ambiguous and endlessly creative trickster wordsmith; 'only a Midnight Robber', she decides, 'could save this Trinidad' (p.76).

Through their incorporation of the traditional Midnight Robber figure, with all his (and her) anarchic fury, playful mockery and linguistic talent on display, into their narratives, Jardim and Hopkinson contribute to the continuation of speech-making traditions unique to the Caribbean. While it is impossible to fully imbue the written form with the oral, they successfully use Robber-talk to bring to life the Old Mas, create new 'code-switching' hybrid Caribbean linguistic forms and challenge abuses power, epitomized by Tan-Tan's sexually abusive father and the racist Old Bitch. In doing so they not only reclaim the 'torturer's tongue' by *speaking back* subversively to the colonial past, but also bring the transcultural carnival trickster to a global audience and thus help ensure his (and her) continued relevance in the contemporary Caribbean and its diaspora.

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