Birthing and Burying a Dragon: Masking and Unmasking Afro-Caribbean Sexual and Masculine Identity in Earl Lovelace's *The Dragon Can't Dance*

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Imperialism, spanning close to four centuries in the West Indies, left an indelible socio-cultural and politico-historical legacy across the crucible. Included in this legacy was the white hegemonic Conquistador figure's masculinity, characterized by power, control, hardness and rigidity, seen as the ideal in this region of the Global South. The ramification for the constructs and narratives of sex and gender was far-reaching as the emergent Empire-resultant Afro-Saxon way of life, perpetuated by Caribbean men who were black in skin but white in ideology, emulated the white plantation owners in almost every aspect of life in the post-emancipation period and extending into the early 20th century. Saidiya V. Hartman's dictum that "white propertied men modelled masculinity" (176) lends credibility to this notion. Indeed, it becomes mere litotes considering the overwhelming number of slaves that would have lived and died on the plantations of the West Indies compared to the relatively few that were freed after slavery was abolished. The sheer impact that the white Conquistador figure would have had on the construction of the African's masculine identity in the years of Imperialism becomes mind-boggling. Hartman speaks of the prevailing perception of "the prospects of citizenship and manhood as inseparable from the assimilation of whiteness. After all, if blacks modelled themselves after whites, they, too, might receive the rewards that the latter enjoyed. As men and citizens, blacks were implicitly involved in the mimetic enactment of identity and entitlements" (153-154). Despite this, the clarion call for resistance to this way of life was slowly being answered by a subsequent generation of Black men.

Colonization placed an obligation on the Afro-centric man to either acquiesce to the way of life and values of the colonizer, underpinned by denigration and self-denial, or revolt against it and therefore run the risk of being ostracized. A contextualization of masculinity, rooted in the plantation system, came to define the emergent Afro-Caribbean man paving the way for rebellion in different forms. This becomes grounded in Paula Morgan and Valerie Youssef's argument about "the inaccessibility of markers of masculinity valorized in hegemonic society (wealth, status and secure advantageous employment) and criminal subcultures which valorize alternative masculinities and alternative pathways" (167). Various tools

of masculinity were thus engendered to reclaim power that was perceived as having been stolen from them by the white colonizer. And some Empire-resistant masculinities marked by hypermasculine attributes that compensate for the lack of access to resources, and therefore the power of the white man, emerged. Violence and aggression, resistance to institutionalized political authority, and polygamous practices and values vis-à-vis heteronormative sexual conquests of women became valorized attributes of many poor, urban black men. This very reductive and negative stereotyping of some Afro-Caribbean men has its genesis in the impact of stifled and emasculated masculinity among the African slaves, at the dictate of the white Conquistador figure. Orlando Patterson argues that

> Incapable of asserting his authority either as husband or father… the object of whatever affection he may possess, beaten, abused and often raped before his very eyes, and with his female partner often in closer link with the source of all power in the society, it is no wonder that the male slave eventually came to lose all pretensions to masculine pride and develop the irresponsible parental and sexual attitudes that are to be found even today. (167-168)

The consequence of this is a rampant licentiousness among the African slave's descendants that concretize the sweeping generalizations of the Afro-Caribbean man as sexually irresponsible and incapable of restraint. This perception has been extended throughout the diaspora and Patterson exemplifies its impact even on contemporary American societies:

> Bringing a child into the world became a virtual obligation of manhood and of ethnic survival that did not entail any consideration of the means whereby one would support it. Afro-Americans, and American society at large (like Afro-Caribbean and Afro-Latin societies), are still living with the devastating consequences of this male attitude toward reproduction" (42).

But such a reductive stereotyping of monolithic claims about working-class Afro-Caribbean men needs to be nuanced. Social class, ethno-racial elements and geography may be the primary variables that impact male gender identities for some black men but certainly not for all, despite similarities in these three vagaries. Other men who do not subscribe to hypermasculinity in violence, disorder and sexual relations are shaped by an interplay of other factors. These include religion, union status, age, employability, and other elements of culture. The necessity to qualify such perceptions for a particular social class of men, within a particular socio-cultural frame, has been largely ignored thereby perpetuating the reductive stereotype. And boys in such urban geo-political environments across the Caribbean have been gender socialized by men along this hypermasculinity frame resulting particularly in male Afro-Caribbean identities among the lower socio-economic bracket, thereby sustaining the stereotypes. Sean

Nixon claims that the use of black masculinity to signify hypermasculinity has a long history, shaped by a pathologizing of blackness, and has been the site historically of profound fantasies about black men's sexuality and physical prowess (305).

Evocation of this related category of hypermasculine men is found in Lovelace's mid-20th century novel *The Dragon Can't Dance* which represents the dominant Afro-Caribbean urban male as a socially constructed being. The majority of Lovelace's Afro-ethnic male characters are placed along a trajectory as the quintessential sexual figure in the making, rebelling against the established order. This is in an effort to propel their own constructions of masculine identity in an emerging postcolonial world. The novel teems with brusque terms of human sexuality in a game between the hunter and the hunted, predicated on the notion of conquest. Such relationships become a crucial theme as they emerge and (d)evolve over time with a profound focus on shaping Caribbean manhood and sexuality along particular patriarchal lines of endorsed male dominance and expected female subservience.

Lovelace's fiction is set in Calvary Hill, Laventille, post-Independence Trinidad and Tobago, as the catch-all district for the poor urban Afro-Trinidadian. The reader is acutely aware of both the aspirations and despair of the characters as Lovelace highlights the political sociology of the working-class struggle for survival and existence in a changing world. As he masterfully choreographs and culturally nuances the carnival dance of his finely sketched characters, the author discloses the conundrums of the lower strata Afro-Caribbean man and his condition. This occupies the novel's temporal setting from pre-Independence Trinidad until after the 1970 Black Power Movement, as he highlights a settlement where racial tensions are complemented by a regimented class system. Additionally, the novel's title reflects a negative connotation through use of the contraction "can't" implying the lack of ability or an incapacity to achieve. This alludes to the state of social and economic affairs with the majority of men and their corresponding subordinate masculinities in the text. Nigel O. Bolland claims that "despite the political power of the conqueror, each colony was the product of a dialectic, in which the social institutions and cultural values of the conquered was one of the terms of the dialectic."(37) Dialectical theory draws attention, unequivocally, to the elements of resistance that are inherent in the domination/subordination relationship. Lovelace focuses on the inner workings of the struggles of the novel's men in their attempts to define themselves and to assert their sexual, gender and national identities as they move in resistance mode to the conquering power of the colonizer.

The censorious historical occurrence embedded in the narrative is the Black Power Movement of 1970 developing as a global

phenomenon, including Trinidad and Tobago. Lovelace creates this emblematic scenario to interrogate the reaction of the Afro-Caribbean man to changing social realities that have come to define fledgling political Independence territories of the New World. This in turn points to the Afro-Caribbean man's need to negotiate a workable consciousness through a temporal frame, with the bitter experience of colonization just behind and an uncertain future ahead. Says Lovelace:

> … one thing that fascinates me is the quality of the continuing African struggle against enslavement and its aftermath, not only against the fact of it, its obvious brutality and exploitative nature, but the presumptions of it, the idea that there are greater and lesser peoples and that a more powerful people should make beasts of burden of a weaker people.

Coupled with such subordination, the absence of power among African men during the period of slavery has nurtured a yearning to attain such at any cost, as depicted in this novel.

Compounding the complex anxiety of the situation was the reality that many of the households in the novel – and during this socio-historical period – were headed by females. This yielded a power collision between existing black Caribbean matriarchy and a repertoire of subordinate masculinities that were exemplifying the emerging Afro-centric masculinity. Hartman captures the essence of the related challenge experienced by black men to prove their manhood as being the direct psychological repercussion of slavery. The anxiety and discomfort surrounding black manliness were registered in the ambivalent demand to "show thyself a man." The command to "show thyself a man" brings to mind the compulsory display of black value on the auction block. Dread and desire inflected the directive, as the free man was required to prove his manhood and remain a humble subordinate (197, 154-155). This delicate balancing act demanded that he display and cloak true manliness with the facility of an exhibitionist – now you see it; now you don't. The obligation to display the self in this fashion was at odds with the declared intent of the directive. How did the subject displayed before the scrutinizing gaze enact masculinity? Would the flaunting of black manhood before white inquisitors, skeptics, and enemies establish the vitality and worthiness of the race? Contemporary gender theorist R.W. Connell's concept of the positivist approach to manhood that describes what men actually are at any point in time may be applicable to Afro-Caribbean characters in Lovelace's work (303). The normative definition of masculinity more aptly characterizes this type of man's adult self in matters of sexuality and the man's role in sexual relations. For some it is clear that the penis is a personal transcendental signifier that magically catapults a boy into the realm of manhood. Their impression of manhood is that their female partners perceive them as men as long as they can satisfy them sexually, in keeping with Connell's essentialist definition of masculinity.

This was the dilemma that formed part of the lineage of the male African slave handed down almost as a birthright to each successive offspring in the New World, including the Caribbean. Each African man of these generations had to forge a response in constructing his masculinity that would validate his manhood, for himself first, and then for others. For some, this tool was a sense of warriorhood manifested in the image of the bad-john, the figure of resistance. Literary critic Kenneth Ramchand affirms that "the bad-john is the extreme case of the person wanting to be seen or acknowledged as a person" (313). For others, the tool becomes the calypso, steelpan and dance associated with the carnival culture of the Afro-centric people in the hills of Laventille. Paula Morgan claims: "Indeed, calypso, along with Carnival, is often cited as possessing the power to convey the 'Trinidadian' spirit" and worldview in the way that few other cultural practices can. Associated with lower-strata Afro-Trinidadian cultural identity, calypso is a hybrid form … for sustained counter discourse with the hegemonic worldview." (1-2) Carnival and its device of masking in Lovelace's fiction allow a brief respite from the residents' true selves that have been fashioned and moulded into the existence that is theirs. Critic Linden Lewis reveals that carnival "serves to obscure and defer the pain and suffering of life in the slums of Trinidad" (165). The dragon masquerade, played by Aldrick Prospect, the novel's protagonist, brings the Afro-Caribbean man's psychological retaliation of slavery to the fore on Carnival days:

> For two full days Aldrick was a dragon in Port of Spain …dancing the bad-devil dance… He was Manzanilla, Calvary Hill, Congo, Dahomey, Ghana. He was Africa, the ancestral Masker, affirming the power of the warrior, prancing and bowing, breathing out fire, lunging against his chains, threatening with his claws, saying to the city: 'I is a dragon. I have fire in my belly and claws on my hands; watch me! Note me well, for I am ready to burn down your city. I am ready to tear you apart, limb by limb.' (The novel, 123-124)

Here, Lovelace's use of the dragon costume is more than his character's powerful response to slavery. It fulfils the masking that is required as a disguise for Aldrick who, in reality, shies away from confronting his social reality during the other days of the year. This would prescribe the need for a personal modern construction of masculine identity, a task he was not prepared to address. Yet it was one necessary to confront the hegemonic masculinity that served to emasculate enslaved African men of their original and ancestral identities. This is manifested in Lovelace's characterization of Aldrick's dragon dance, by referring to lands in the continental homeland. Carnival and masking were crucial to Aldrick's sense of self and, for him, the dragon costume became fundamental to his hypermasculine identity.

For the majority of boys and men on the Hill, however, the tool they rely on to assert their masculine identities is a hypermasculine and heteronormative approach to wanton sexual relations. Sexual potency and conquest of women becomes their personal dragon. Patterson's dictum of irresponsible behaviour among Afro-Caribbean men that is a direct offshoot of the colonial encounter comes to fruition here (1967, 67-68). With the lack of social amenities, minimal or non-existent opportunities for growth, and rampant unemployment characteristic of the Hill, the evident anti-hegemonic masculinity reflects a culture of dispossession among men. They simply rely on the fact that, by virtue of biology, they are men, and so enjoy the patriarchal dividend that goes along with being men. A corollary dimension of this complicit masculinity construct is that women themselves accept these conditions thereby validating related masculine identities. The more fundamental question of what constitutes masculinity and masculine privilege is thus resolved within this socio-economic landscape in a manner that has women acquiesce to various subcultural identities of their menfolk. And within Caribbean matriarchal households, notions of male privilege remain very much intact thus paving the way for a cyclic perpetuation in the process of male gender socialization.

It is this complicit masculine identity, therefore, that leads men deeming it their *right* to dominate women and impart sanctions on those who refuse to play the hunter/hunted game. The absence of corporate and class power forges a coercive power that comes to characterize the gender relations manifested on the Hill. Notable in Lovelace's imaginary is that within the realm of male-female gender relations, the absence of any overriding form of power underscored by violence becomes a marker of ascendancy as (re)claimed power becomes sexual power. And in this paradoxical novel, sexual power is largely male heteronormative sexual power. Since male gender socialization practices are almost devoid of the home and family in this evocation, men resort to developing their masculine identity on the street, in the company of the peer group, in an effort to retain their individual power that is crucial to their masculinity.

The novel's characters come together to spin a complex web of physical relationships, generating an avid portrayal of male-female relationships along lines of potent male sexuality. It is indeed a high-stakes construction of masculinity as the eventual outcome is one that characterizes most Afro-Caribbean men on the Hill, who share similar socio-economic woes in their quest to attain power. Morgan and Youssef argue that "a crucial measure for dissipating powerlessness became the projection of the male as a walking phallus, bringing the illusion of unimaginable sexual potency to use in the subjugation of women." (182) The resultant power play is enacted in the intense and acute sexual objectification of women as throughout the novel, women are likened to fruit. Thus, "young men get off street corners where they

had watched and waited…the area high-school girls ripening…" (11) while they all yearn for the prized Sylvia, Lovelace's heroine as, "at seventeen, [she] was ripening like a mango rose" (24). The street as a male gendered space becomes a collective marker of Caribbean male identity of the lower strata Afro-Caribbean male. In this respect, Gary Brana-Shute, a socio-political anthropologist whose major work entails exploration of working-class Afro-Surinamese men, surmises:

> The street corner behavior demonstrated by lower-class West Indian males is in response to a system that demands nothing more from them. Given their circumstances, the mating system, the attitudes of women (which may or may not be deserved), household organization, and the men's marginal position in the occupational hierarchy - all relationships characterized by loose, shifting, non-committal, and irregular interaction - these men must congregate and interact in their shop sanctuary. Besides, the men enjoy the drinking, camaraderie, bally-hoo, and story-telling and that is reason enough. (75)

This is manifested in Lovelace's novel, as the street facilitates the congregation for male adolescents who do not subscribe to formal education pursuits as do their female counterparts. Instead, they maintain a stance of anti-formal education and patriarchal control over the schoolgirls in their pursuit of power, "… holding over them the promise of violence and the threat of abuse to keep them respectful, to discourage them from passing them by with that wonderful show of contempt such schoolgirls seem to be required to master to lift them above these slums and these 'hooligans', their brethren, standing at street corners" (11). These young men are collectively metamorphosed as fruit merchants who weigh and assess the female form to determine at which point they are ripe enough to be plucked and consumed. This is in line with Puerto Rican anthropologist Rafael Ramirez who depicts the dominant lower strata Afro-Caribbean male as possessing attributes of the seducer and the conqueror who saw "women as objects of pleasure, solely for penetration, *para comersela* (to be eaten)" (45), in his highly acclaimed work on *What it Means to be a Man: Reflections on Puerto Rican Masculinity* (1999). It is an entrenched concept that Luis Palés Matos, an influential figure of the 1920s negrismo movement in the Hispanophone Caribbean, courted when he claimed Black female bodies are seen by men as fruit for the male gaze to devour (1978). There is hardly any sense of permanence to females in this novel, as fruits are perishables that are worthwhile for a season, after which they are spoilt, begin to rot and must be discarded. Metaphorically, Calvary Hill has no refrigeration in the mosaic of male sexuality that allows woman/fruit to be preserved and maintained, perpetuating the toxic hypermasculine perspective towards female bodies. The reality is that, with the exception of the East Indian couple, Pariag and Dolly, men and women have no real relationships, only a meeting of sexual organs.

Sexuality, and the attitudes of the dominant lower strata Afro-Caribbean men towards it, saturate the identities of male characters in this novel in its entirety. Girls and women are not held in any esteem and only serve a sexual purpose, one almost enshrined in the unspoken laws of the Hill: "Generations of girls graduate from these beginnings to night clubs, to brothels, to the city's streets, to live in that strict and lascivious modesty, like wrongsided nuns, on their way to become battle-axes, the mother superiors of whoredom" (30). The implied author is acknowledged at the beginning of Chapter Two with the line, "Sylvia ain't have no man" (24) thereby subscribing to the prevailing notion held by men in the novel that women are relative to the presence or absence of men. Throughout, there is the notion of woman being incomplete, or less than, without a male partner. Sylvia becomes the epitome of beauty and male desire in the hills and Lovelace spares no description of the physical surroundings to mirror the simmering sexual tension that threatens to erupt in an ejaculatory manifestation of rank sexual abandon and bliss for the men as "the Hill hot" and "a few of them had already delved fumbling hands beneath her dress, a few of them, growing up here in this tight space, this hot yard" (24). This dramatic unfolding is not surprising in light of Morgan and Youssef's assertion that "the post-emancipation lower-strata, Afro-Caribbean boisterous and scandal-ridden gender relations became the focus of the living theatre of the barrack-yard" (183). Sylvia's sexual objectification is pronounced as we learn that:

> Everywhere she turns the young men of the area, who had grown up with her, turn and ask her: 'Sylvia, you playing in the band?' their eyes sweeping up her ankles, along the softening curves of her thighs and breasts, desiring her, wishing, each one of them, to have her jumping up with him in the band for Carnival, when with the help of rum and the rhythm of abandon and surrender that conquered everyone, he would find his way into her flesh. (24)

Lovelace's connotative vocabulary is underpinned by intense sexuality as the modus operandi of gender relations in the pageant that is the yard: *delve, growing, tight space, hot,* and Sylvia is the pageant's prize.

Against the backdrop of the sexual canopy that covers the Hill in the novel, Ramirez succinctly and comprehensively construes the poor urban Afro-Caribbean man's sexuality in frank terms:

> The pleasures of our sexuality are an inherent element of our subjectivity… Women, especially when they are young and attractive, are considered sexual objects to be enjoyed, seduced and penetrated. A real man pleases and satisfies his women while he chases, punishes, repudiates or devaluates those who do not respond to his advances. Some appeal to physical and verbal aggression. Sexual harassment and violence are part of this orientation to conquer and seduce women in a complex articulation of sexuality, power and pleasure. (1997, 30)

Two elements of sexual identities that feed men's constructions of masculinities are embedded here. The first, and certainly the more alarming, is that such an assessment of male Afro-Caribbean sexuality here conjures similarities between Empire-resistant masculinity and the hegemonic masculinity of the white Conquistador figure exacted from the African slave. *Both* constructions of masculinities are characterized by heterosexual orientation in large measure; *both* perceive women as objects to be sexually ravaged; *both* exact systems of punishment for refusal to engage in sexual activities; *both* engage in aggression and violence, suggestive of ultimate rape as well, against reluctant women; indeed, *both* preach the need for conquest and seduction. This evaluation of sexual habits and philosophies allows for a repertoire of intertwined but equally disturbing rhetorical questions: Is the sexual identity of men a generic phenomenon that can be transported across time and space regardless of the man it characterizes? Are colour and class the only differing variables between the white hegemonic plantation owner and slave trader of the colonial encounter, and the descendant of the African slave? Was the psychological rape of the enslaved African male so intense, so pronounced, so macabre, at the hands of the Whites, that there affords no opportunity for recovery or redemption of the dominant lower strata Afro-Caribbean man's own notion of manhood, devoid of retracing the steps of his conqueror? Does masculinity subsume an inherent need for conquest and control? And, if so, does sexual power substitute for economic and other forms of power? Is there no reprieve for women whose only element of change is simply the man who executes her physical rape and psychological pillage? Are all men of a particular ethnic frame or social class depictive of a masculine identity like this? Are all men *regardless* of their ethnic frame or social class depictive of such a sexual identity?

To answer in the affirmative to all – indeed, to any – of these questions is to share in the despair of the social conditions of life manifested in Lovelace's fictional enquiry. It would suggest that it is more than simply the commonality of the biological penis that makes a man a man. Rather, it would advocate that regardless of differences in social constructs, geography, cultural background, linguistic competencies, ethnic attributes and social class, all men's gender identities are the same and therefore their behavioural patterns would be the same. In essence, it would indicate that all men are a dragon of one kind or another who dances his dance to wield power over women and less powerful men. Moreover, it would imply that gender relations, gender sensitivity, and gender justice are doomed to fit the dictates of the patriarchal curse without any prospect for change. Additionally, it would mean that women everywhere are powerless as agents of positive change, incapable of experiencing growth and development, either as companions to men or as individuals. And, finally, it would

entail the assumption that men are only capable of having sexual relationships with women, or other men, divorced from a degree of love and intimacy and caring. Such a perspective dovetails with Caribbean anthropologist Linden Lewis' own mantra: "We cannot reduce our masculinity to our sexuality, for then we are bound to feel less than men if that single dimension of our identity – a dimension that we consider to be foundational - is challenged or shaken in some way" (27). Indeed, sexuality, and the ability to use the biological penis effectively as a marker of masculine identity become innate to gender identity among Lovelace's round and flat male characters alike. But to adhere to the dictum of the penis being the *sole* marker of Afro-Caribbean male gender identity, however, would be to ascribe the Afro-Caribbean man to Frantz Fanon's hypothesis that "one is no longer aware of the Negro but only of a penis; the Negro is eclipsed. He is turned into a penis. He *is* a penis" (169-170). Whereas sexuality can clearly be perceived as a fundamental dimension of masculine identity, to accept Fanon's synecdoche that the penis is to negate the capacity of the Afro-Caribbean man to reflect other prominent dimensions of masculine identity.

The second element, and perhaps the less contentious, is that Ramirez's use of the label "a real man," along with the subsequent behavioural pattern of sexuality that follows in his evaluation of masculinity constructs, reflects a heterocentric ideology of masculinity. The highlight of "women" as the receptive individuals involved in the "complex articulation of sexuality, power and pleasure" is insightful. It confirms that homocentric qualities and non-heteronormative orientations ostracize certain males from the realm of 'real' manhood. These heteronormative and homophobic underpinnings are couched in Ramirez's appraisal in various ways. Firstly, by his focus on an active *singular* masculine agent involved in the penetration of *plural* women, he depicts society's endorsement of the double standard of male polygamy but female monogamy. Jamaican anthropological researchers Brown and Chevannes lend credibility to Ramirez's societal realities, and to Lovelace's imaginary as being an authentic social reflection of these realities (23). This is seen in their research among black urban Afro-Caribbean males operating within harsh economic climates, where manhood is demonstrated by sexual prowess, and measured by the number of female sexual partners one has. Secondly, there is the unspoken understanding of implementing measures to police required male behaviour that maintains the 'inherent' status quo of men as one of power and privilege. And, thirdly, the absolute negation of same-sex possibilities among men is obvious as the anthropologist speaks of society's collective notion of "a real man" as the hunter in a game that features women as prey.

Lovelace's creative work certainly reflects an entrenched philosophy of heteronormativity that creates a related behavioural and

sexual code for men on the Hill. The notion of fictive kin that permeates the communal type of dwelling in the Hill's yard, soon becomes lost as childhood graduates into adolescence. The boys that Sylvia had grown up with now become the hunters as they survey their prey – their former 'sister' in fictive kin – and the sum of her body parts is now assessed as far greater than her whole being as a woman. These boys become young men well marinated in the process of male gender socialization as they conform to the norms and values of masculinity on the Hill, lusting and hankering for multiple pieces of female flesh. According to Bailey *et al*., who researched the adolescent urban black male's attitude toward sex and gender in the English-speaking Caribbean, "for males, multiple partnerships could become also a matter of status. The term 'one burner' applied to a faithful male was a phrase of derision" (66). And Lovelace makes it abundantly clear to the reader that, apart from the Indian Pariag, there is no 'one burner' among his male characters. Seemingly, no value of love or marriage is evident during the process of maturation as male sexuality is autonomous and independent of these attributes. For many men, intimacy is purely physical with the man fulfilling his role of conqueror and the woman subscribing to the function of perpetual whore, either by coercion or by choice.

An exception to this is the Indian couple Pariag and Dolly who leave their rural, Indo-based village to reside on the Afro-centric Hill. Ostracized by the neighbours, Pariag and Dolly stay by themselves and are aptly referred to as "The Spectators" in Lovelace's naming of chapters as they look on without being a part of the Hill. Perhaps their own ethno-racial identities were the true demarcating point of divergence between them and the other residents of the Hill. Perhaps it was their different cultural background, or maybe their values. Maybe it was their close communion shared between man and wife in a sustained monogamous relationship. But whatever it was, Pariag did not subscribe to the sexual values and behaviours of the other men on the Hill.

Another exception, though one that must be qualified, is found with the characters Philo and Jo Ann. Born out of sexual lust for Jo Ann, this relationship was one marked by an intervening lack of achievement and subsequent material success. Philo always craved Jo Ann but his affection was spurned until he became a calypsonian of national caliber. Only then did Jo Ann warm to him, inviting him into her bedroom. Philo, a product of the Hill, would have had several sexual relations with different women in earlier years. But he felt something for Jo Ann that could not be quenched through multiple sex partners; at the novel's end, he returned to the Hill and the reader is left to conclude whether or not he accepts Jo Ann's offer of sex. It is safe to read Philo's masculinity as one that wanted something more than

simply sex out of a relationship, perhaps something emotional and more meaningful.

Finally, Aldrick's own identity is indicative of a man who engaged in sex with other women but whose heart belongs to Sylvia. Aldrick is caught like the fabled douen of Trinidad folklore, with feet and face in opposite directions. He was a stalwart in the collective masculinity of the Hill, paying homage to the "Trinity of Idleness, Laziness and Waste" (3) yet he was one who wanted more. His annual Carnival dragon masquerade never changed, depictive of the permanence of the quality of life on the Hill. But this year, in the middle of the Carnival parade, he stopped his dance. With blinding realization, Aldrick came to terms with his inability to sustain his (mask)culine identity as one marked by the religion of the Holy Trinity of the Hill. Aldrick came to realize that he was in love with Sylvia and no doctrine or person could hold him back from exploring what that held for him, and for his sense of self. His role as a hunter had changed at this point; the dragon as he knew it had died and in its place a new masculine figure was emerging to hunt Sylvia differently.

In Sylvia's circumstance, some midpoint is found in being the hunter and the hunted. Indeed, striking contradictions are employed most frequently in the author's characterization of Sylvia. Lovelace limns every man on the Hill's fantasy of a woman, and as virtually all the Hill's Afro-based characters are mesmerized by her, it is fitting that the extent of her power is regularly mostly conveyed in terms of paradox. Already at seventeen, this "virgin fucked but untouched" (25) possesses a "knowing innocence," intuitively aware of the sacrificial role she plays in pacifying, and delaying payment of the monies owed by her overburdened and economically deprived mother to Mr. Guy, the landlord. Sylvia is young but she spent her life on the Hill with these young and old men. She is aware of her physical beauty and the sexuality she oozes that builds to a climax for many of the men who objectify her body. According to prominent Caribbean feminist scholar and activist, Rhoda Reddock, sexual objectification allows for the enjoyment of sexual activity without engagement with the person involved. Sexual activity is therefore separated from intimacy and reflected in the terms used to describe women who are found to be sexually attractive. Afro-American gender theorist, Nathan McCall, questions the role of men and their inability to relate to what women truly want, as he surmises in his research:

> While girls learned to view males as objects of love, we boys learned to regard females as mere objects. For many guys, that notion creates a major emotional disconnect. That disconnect makes it easier to regard females as something less on the human scale. Once that disconnect occurs, it's entirely possible to discount a female's humanity; it's entirely possible to subject a woman to sexual harassment, or worse, rape. (195)

And, indeed, these values of overt male privilege and empowerment are juxtaposed to reduced female voice and visibility found within plot, page and protagonist of Lovelace's work. At seventeen, Sylvia has been sexually ravaged in the fantasy of these men who plunder her body in their minds and repeatedly have their fill of her in their psyche. They relegate her to "the whoredom that was her destiny, if not her calling" (23). And the ultimate dehumanization of her personhood is felt in the intense description of her dignity being metaphorically stripped in one of the most brutal accounts of the privileging of male sexuality in West Indian literature:

> She had watched the whole act, felt the trembling knees, the groping hands, the hard thing scraping against the web of fine hair butting around, trying with no help from her to pierce the dark crevice between her thighs. She had watched, felt, the whole performance as if she wasn't there, from a distance, was already engaged in the apprenticeship of being the whore. (25)

Sylvia's dissociation from the vile attempts of the men on the Hill to engage her in non-consensual sex is born out of the need for survival. She plays the part of the alluring young girl who visits Mr. Guy to relay the information that rent will be late this month, knowing full well her sexuality was enough to entice the landlord and so have him defer the money due. So too, she learns that her powerful sexuality was also a burden. Her recourse was to psychologically distance herself from the actions of the young men as her own contrived measure of self-preservation. And for her it worked.

A penis-as-power metaphor is applicable to the sexuality of the Hill's men in keeping with their complicit masculine identity. Ramirez posits that an association of the male genitals with power is prominent among lower strata men in the Caribbean as they tend to possess less power and control and so specially emphasize the power that emerges from their genitals (29). This revelation of male Afro-Caribbean sexuality is relegated not only to adolescents but to adult men as well. Along with the omniscient narrator, the other male characters including Mr. Guy and Aldrick all appear fascinated by Sylvia. Guy cunningly cups her breasts, feigning fatherly affection, yearning for her; the other men all ogle her and crave her, the narrator glorifies her, and Aldrick's sexual intercourse with the prostitute, Inez, becomes transcendental as he makes love to Sylvia vicariously through the sex act with Inez.

Initially, Sylvia is projected as a materialistic young girl, willing to give herself to any man who is in a position to buy her a carnival costume: "But Sylvia ain't have no man: and these young men hot to get under her dress ain't working nowhere" (27). After expressing her desire for a simple costume to Aldrick, he spurns her, because although she fascinates him, he is unable to accept the social responsibility that she implies merely by her presence. Providing for her goes against the

status quo of the masculine construct that pervades the Hill. According to historian David Trotman, whose research interests include ethnic and immigration history, "[t]he idea of the congenital laziness of the African and those of African descent was one of the major pillars of the justifications of slavery and died hard in the 19th century" (207). Indeed, it is this aversion to work and labour on the part of Aldrick, and the other men on the Hill, that serve in part to forge masculine identities as they most faithfully upheld the code and "lived the reality of non-possession as a way of life" (105), and which disallows Aldrick to supply Sylvia with a Carnival costume. When she bashfully asks him if she should portray a princess or a slave girl, he smiles and declares, "You is a princess already… Play a slave girl" (34). Ironically, Aldrick sees through the mask worn by Sylvia to identify her true self as a female worthy of value instead of woman perceived as object. Yet, his self-myopia prevents him from shedding his own mask of violent and aggressive dragon to embrace his true self that may find communion with Sylvia.

At this juncture, any feelings of love or intimacy that may have been brewing between Aldrick and Sylvia were insufficient to harm his dragon. But the apparent simple dialogue between these two principal characters serves as an element of foreshadowing of the redeeming role and emerging voice of women in the text, manifested by Sylvia who becomes Lovelace's true hero at the novel's end. Lovelace's trope of masking becomes fundamental in camouflaging Sylvia's true person as emotionally stable, self-assured and determined. Aldrick's perception of Sylvia as 'royalty' and his advice to her to 'play' a slave-girl alludes to the notion of being 'other,' during Carnival, than what is real. It is a position of Sylvia being level-headed and focused on achieving a positive pre-determined destiny instead of being frivolous and superficial. This is reinforced near the novel's end, as a post-imprisoned, enlightened Aldrick speaks with a renegotiated masculinity after the dragon's demise, and a newfound respect for Sylvia's reconstructed femininity, "You's a real princess, girl … You is a queen, girl … You don't want nobody to take care of you, to hide you, to imprison you. You want to be a self that is free, girl: to grow, girl: to be. To be yourself, girl … You's a queen, girl" (202-203). Aldrick celebrates positive womanhood here couched in very intimate language.

Currently, however, Sylvia's thoughts of obtaining a costume are all-consuming and, in the absence of receiving one from Aldrick, eventually surrenders herself to Mr. Guy. The old lecher becomes overwhelmingly consumed by thoughts of sexually exploiting her as his voice is "promising and pleading, hushing her, edging her into a moist darkness filled with burnings" as he whispers hoarsely, "And… any costume you want, just tell me. Tonight! Come upstairs tonight, I will give it to you" (27). The sexual innuendo is not lost on Sylvia who

plays her part well in Lovelace's band of masqueraders as they engage in the quest for selfhood. Bailey *et al.*'s assertion that "money was seen as an absolutely vital resource for a male in relationships and much of his status was given in the equation where money was exchanged for sex" (77) is well noted here as it applies to Mr. Guy. Lewis considers that "Aldrick reflects on Sylvia's pragmatism" (171), rationalizing that, to quote from Lovelace's text, "Maybe she had not so much chosen Guy as refused the impotence of dragons" (Lovelace, 217). Aldrick is well aware that his dragon persona was slowly dying in direct proportion to his growing affection for Sylvia. He becomes engulfed with thoughts of Sylvia getting her costume from Guy but still fails to abandon his masculinity construct that revolves around the pivot of non-possession. It is a brutal man-versus-himself conflict that builds to a personal psychological crescendo until Carnival Tuesday when he realizes that his masque of the dragon simply can't dance, a reflection of his incapacity to act in his quest to attain selfhood as he is overwhelmed with feelings for Sylvia:

> Aldrick thought: 'You know, tomorrow is no Carnival.' And he understood then what it meant when people say that they wished every day was Carnival. For the reign of kings and princesses was ending, costumes used today to display the selves of people were going to be taken off. What of those selves? What of the selves of these thousands? What of his own self? (125)

A major breakthrough in Aldrick's reconstruction of masculinity is evident as he purposes, then and there, to follow his heart and give himself to Sylvia. The dragon is no more and he realizes that his love for her was what his true self was defined by: "And suddenly, he wanted to touch Sylvia, to tell her in his touching what had just been revealed to him. He found himself moving towards her, gliding through the spaces between the dancers to her side. 'Sylvia!' He reached out a hand to touch her. To receive her blessing and to bless her, to cheer her and be cheered by her" (127-128). Here, the dragon mask, birthed as a dimension of Empire-resistant masculinity, has fallen off Aldrick's masculine identity to lay bare the space for a new and emerging masculinity, one that Aldrick realized as necessary for his desire to be fulfilled.

Freud (in Nixon, 317) summarizes two major types of desire: the desire to *have* another person (object cathexis) and a desire to *be* another person (identification). Aldrick's growing unquenchable thirst for Sylvia reflects object cathexis. In Aldrick's gesture, motivated by his renewed sense of self, the Afro-Caribbean man's attitude to sexuality becomes something other than what has personified it among the complicit masculinities of the lower strata Afro-Caribbean man since slavery; he strongly desires to have Sylvia. But there is a gentleman's grace as his outreached hand is not the groping hand of the male youth and adult of the Hills; not a searching, prying and

plundering hand that attempts to pick a well-ripened fruit; not a hand catalyzed by the physiological need for sexual gratification; but rather, a hand of blessing, of communion, of intimacy devoid of sexuality. It is this gesture that counters the prevailing image of male sexuality in the Hills among generations of working-class Afro-Caribbean men; an image that offers hope for a recalibrated masculinity that does not seek a grandiose approach to male sexuality as pivotal to any notion of masculine identity. Aldrick comes to personify the novel's two major themes, as proffered by Ramchand: "There is first the theme of the liberation of the individual from imposed roles and attitudes, the salvaging of the real self from the role self; and the second is an exploration of New World identity and possibility" (176-177). Aldrick was indeed becoming liberated of the shackles of a failed masculinity and love was the agency that spurred the liberation.

Initially rebuffed by a Sylvia angry with him for having been made to subject herself to Mr. Guy for her costume ("No, mister!' she said. 'I have my man'!" [128]), Aldrick becomes more introspective and withdraws from life in the Yard. He colludes with the warrior Fisheye and other disaffected men in forging a masculine identity underpinned by rebelliousness. Sylvia's rebuff had birthed in him a new dragon, this time one characterized by violence and opposition to the law of the land. Lovelace allows this new dragon to roam the streets as he retells "the story of the 1970 Black Power uprisings in Trinidad as parody" (Lewis, 172). Imprisoned for his role in a subsequent aborted coup d'état, Aldrick spends five long years in contemplation. And when he was released from State prison, it was also a firm release from the metaphorical prison of the dragon in all its forms. Aldrick had renegotiated his masculinity and, upon his release, confronts Sylvia and declares his love for her, "Now I know I ain't a dragon … Funny, eh? Years. And now I know I is more than just to play a masquerade once a year for two days, to live for two days" (198). This is the real Aldrick, the one without the mask. It is as Lewis declared, "This is Aldrick, the Dragon unmasked as it were, yet more himself than the pose could ever be." (172) Aldrick is more powerful than ever in his new masculinity.

Sylvia and Aldrick reunite by the novel's end as an allusion is made to their rendezvous and her subsequent denial of a materialistic self to all the fineries of life that Mr. Guy is willing to purchase for her. It is this attribute, more than any other, which pivots Sylvia as Lovelace's true hero who negotiates her sense of self and feminine identity in a crucible of an almost pre-determined, abysmal existence, as has come to be the lot for many of the girls on the Hill. It is reflective of her capacity to conquer self-interests and materialistic taste and so conquer self. It is in conquering self that Sylvia emerges as a determined, assured woman who knew what she wanted and did not hesitate to pursue it.

This sense of self becomes potent at the end of Sylvia's journey in forming her own identity and so mirrors a dual motif of West Indian literature – the quest for an identity and the search for belonging. The author propels this positive dimension of a young girl who has matured in thought and action with, if not the promise, at least the capacity of the image of women on the Hill to be transformed from one of reductive and sweeping whoredom to one of instructive and distilled wisdom. At the same time, Aldrick's growth and development is mirrored in Sylvia's attainment of selfhood and identity as he reconstructs his masculine identity. Like Sylvia's ultimate notion of self in relation to expectations on the Hill, Aldrick's is one of redemption that runs counter to the masculine identities of the other men on the Hill. In effect, he – former pioneer of the dominant hegemony of the Hills (one hundred and twenty-five years after Emancipation, Aldrick Prospect was seen as an aristocrat in the tradition of the Hill's religion with its Trinity of Idleness, Laziness and Waste [11]) – now reflects the chief subordinate masculinity. It now reeks of the attributes of passion, promise and progress, as indicators of a newly formed subordination to the dominant hegemonic practices of promiscuity, polygamy and prowess that define lower strata Afro-Caribbean men on the Hill, the ones that defined a former Aldrick.

Indeed, the real challenge in Lovelace's novel has been successfully addressed. It was the self-imposed quest of his protagonist, Aldrick, to shelve his personal androcentric nature as he engaged in a process of self-discovery. Violence, intransigence to established authority and licentious sexual relations were merely attributes of a transient masquerade. Perhaps they were necessary at a point in time as core to Empire-resistant masculinity. But the postcolonial world cannot be successfully navigated if life remains psychologically imprisoned in another place and time. It is this understanding that eventually led to a taming of Aldrick's dragon persona as he traded a one-dimensional masculinist self for a holistic androgynous being. Truly, Aldrick is testimony to a highly elusive salvation that was so metaphorically alluded to in the opening chapter of a brilliant novel that culminates in a renewal of hope for Afro-Caribbean men and women everywhere.

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