Patricia J. Saunders

The Meeting Place of Creole Culture:

A CONVERSATION WITH EARL LOVELACE

BORN IN TOCO, TRINIDAD, EARL LOVELACE HAS REMAINED A CONSISTENT purveyor of the cultural and political landscape of Trinidad for over forty years, bringing his own brand of social commentary to reading audiences in the Caribbean, Canada, Europe, and the United States. Lovelace is author of several novels, including *While Gods Are Falling, The Schoolmaster, The Wine of Astonishment, The Dragon Can't Dance,* and a collection of plays entitled *Jestina's Calypso.* His most recent novel, *Salt,* won the Commonwealth Writers Prize in 1997, a prize given annually for the best book in the English-speaking family of nations. However, to appreciate Lovelace's contributions to Caribbean literature, one would have to understand the social and cultural milieu from which his perspectives and creative insights are borne and take shape. Recently, I sat down with Mr. Lovelace to discuss how the cultural and political perspectives in his last novel, *Salt,* compared to those expressed by his protagonists in *The Dragon Can't Dance.* Our opening discussion revealed (once again) a long-standing insistence on the value of personal investment that I have come to respect in Earl Lovelace and his work. Rather than settling for the pursuits of academic curiosity, Lovelace put a very intriguing question to me as we started this conversation: he asked about my investment in reading his works, what questions they raised for me and why. These questions, he said, would be the basis for our conversation, since they were indeed the things that interested him most in this process, not the academic exercise of talking about his writing. Though the question caught me off guard, it created a space for me to come to appreciate the extent to which Earl Lovelace makes himself and his reading audience accountable in the practice of (to borrow his phrase) "cultivating culture."

Lovelace's critical perspectives on post-independence nationalism and cultural identity in Trinidad have informed my own scholarly work in Caribbean literature through his dogged persistence about the relationship between cultural expression and social transformation. Our conversation, therefore, began with this observation and extended into a very candid discussion about culture, identity, reparation(s), and racial politics in Trinidad and Tobago, the United States, and other parts of the Black Diaspora. As is evident in Lovelace's responses, his views on these issues reflect a critical perspective

informed by a pre-independence sensibility to the possibilities of a nation poised to redefine itself and its cultural, political and economic relationships to the world. However, this sensibility, like the writer it produced, is tempered by the frustration of post-independence, the Eric Williams era in Trinidad and Tobago, the Black Power Movement, the 1990 coup attempt, and the current tense political and cultural climate in Trinidad and Tobago. My point of entry, therefore, considered the changes in the cultural and political climates of *The Dragon Can't Dance* and *Salt* and how, if at all, these changes are reflected in the relationships within the communities represented in these novels. In the following discussion, one can begin to appreciate Lovelace's insights on the far-reaching implications of how we translate and experience selfhood, community, and culture in a Caribbean context.

PATRICIA SAUNDERS

In both *The Dragon Can't Dance* and *Salt,* there is a focus on the importance of community in shaping nationalist politics in the Caribbean. However, there seems to be a more optimistic view of Caribbean community and "local" politics in *Salt* than was represented in *The Dragon Can't Dance.* What accounts for the changes in the communities, and what encouraged this optimism in your writing?

EARL LOVELACE

In *The Dragon,* the people on the Hill had just gone through the experience of the 1970s, a newly independent country and the frustrations with the failure of independence to improve the lives of the common man. As I think about it actually, I would not say that the novel is really "optimistic" in its scope.

PS: *The Dragon* is set in a period of experimentation as the people on the Hill (Aldrick and Pariag for example) are "trying their hand," or testing the waters to see what independence will mean for the ethnic, class, and gender stratifications in Trinidad. This is the kind of tenuous optimism to which I'm referring here. Would you say that uncertainty rather than optimism is what drives the community, whether in a positive or negative manner? Or maybe I should say "the communities" because there is an ongoing struggle within the "community" and the people who inhabit this space.

EL: Creole culture is a meeting place in which both groups (Africans and Indians) are seeking to enter this space with a sense of Being. Aldrick and the people in the yard have been carrying on a longer struggle. He has become the "dragon" and all it

symbolizes in relation to the whole country that refuses to recognize the plight of people in the yards. Pariag comes to join, requiring himself to be a part of the yard. He brings a bicycle, not understanding the values within the community of the Hill, and this conflict emerges out of a conflict between material possession or material culture and spiritual struggle or spiritual culture.

PS: In *Salt,* there is an effort to locate cultural practices that can represent the complexity of the communities, much in the same manner as Aldrick's Dragon. Why is this effort such a central part of your novels? How do these efforts speak to the need to articulate a "national" culture in spite of the complex histories that are the fabric of a country such as Trinidad and Tobago?

EL: In *Dragon,* there is a different notion of community. Pariag, for example, makes an effort to join the Creole culture, in spite of the cultural tensions and misunderstandings. In *Salt,* however, we don't see Creole culture in the same way. We see people more concerned with looking back at themselves now in terms of ethnic culture, African culture. There is a retracing of steps, returning to emancipation and its effects on Africans in the Caribbean and coming forward from there. We see that it was an ironic emancipation that emancipated people into nothingness. In the case of Indians in Trinidad, there is a similar return to their cultural heritage in India and moving toward the political struggles of today within the framework of, not necessarily A nationalist party, but different nationalist parties. Not necessarily nationalist either, but different *parties* in which winning means having to assume some kind of a nationalist agenda.

Look at the situation in Trinidad today with the UNC (United National Congress) in power, an "Indian party" that now has to become a "nationalist" party. Not the nationalism of the PNM (People National Movement) in its early days when it stood by itself almost. Any party that wins an election in Trinidad has to put itself forth as a nationalist party.

PS: So it sounds as though the nationalism to which you refer has to be a very broad-based nationalism. More like a nationalism capable of maintaining itself in the face of and with the support of competing nationalisms that are struggling to make themselves seen and heard. This is a pretty formidable task, wouldn't you agree?

EL: This is a very good point and a very good way of characterizing the situation. Yes, each of these nationalisms brings different ideas, expectations, each adding and

clarifying the desired position as the country proceeds. In this context, *Salt* doesn't begin with the same ground as *Dragon.*

PS: Different ground, yes, but certainly a continuous effort to sort out the cultural and political challenges facing these communities. This effort takes a variety of forms in your novels, particularly in *The Wine of Astonishment, The Dragon Can't Dance,* and then again in *Salt.* There seems to be a persistence and commitment to this project, wouldn't you say? Why is this?

EL: Yes, there is a continued effort to sort through the issues of culture, identity, and politics. Both texts try to deal frontally with Creole culture, looking back at times to see how we've arrived at this point and what we can learn from it. One of the major differences in *Salt* that pulls it in a different direction from *Dragon* is the question of reparations. This is one of many questions raised.

PS: Throughout *Salt,* there is a kind of tenuousness or skepticism about how people will respond to the question of Reparations. What produces this skepticism, and is it a productive skepticism?

EL: The question of reparations is one that I've been dealing with for a very long time now. In fact, I was one of the first people to articulate this question publicly here in Trinidad, and two Afro-Trinidadians were the first people to respond negatively. This didn't surprise me.

PS: Why didn't this surprise you? What were some of your expectations when you first raised this issue? And how did you respond to skeptics on this issue?

EL: Well, in the novel I make it clear that reparations are something that is absolutely necessary. In fact the novel anticipates these responses, it expects a resistance to the idea because the society is not ready. In fact, they've never been ready. They didn't have reparations when they should have had it, and the communities have had to live with this and they continue to do so until today. So the novel examines why this skepticism is there, what functions it serves, what drives it. When we begin to face this question of reparations, it requires people to give up a lot. People don't want to give up either victimhood or power as oppressors, or both, since the two are not exclusive. And also, people don't feel the sense of loss involved in the institution of slavery.

I feel there has been so much of an effort to distract people from this sense of

loss, because facing it will mean dealing with the extent to which people have been devalued. There is no sense of the value of people, and without this people cannot move to the point of understanding their loss, what has been lost. There has been a lot of discussion about designating a "day of forgiveness" for the atrocities of slavery. But forgiveness doesn't work in this context; it is not as simple as it seems. If a person injures you, you cannot forgive that person until some kind of gesture of amends is made for the damage that has been done. Forgiveness is not possible otherwise. If you accept the injurious behavior without this act of reparations, then what the injured party is saying is that they accept this kind of behavior for themselves or against their person. So it could never make sense to talk about forgiveness; it can't come up in this situation.

PS: Would you say, then, that some of the tenuousness around this issue has to do with the difficulty and even fear of facing history? How can we begin to think about the resistance to the idea of reparations without dealing first with the terror, if you will, of the history of slavery? In fact, we have to think about this terror as having implications for both the enslaved as well as slave owners, wouldn't you agree?

EL: This is in large part what the book tries to address. But before we address that, there is an important point people need to understand about this whole debate. There are two terms that tend to get conflated in this discussion, *reparation* and *reparations*. *Reparations* occur if a country looses a war, and then they have to pay compensation to victims of the war. So you will notice that there have been reparations paid to the Japanese and the Germans and so forth, all have lost wars. If you don't lose a war, you have nothing to pay anyone. So, people who have been victimized by the victors of the war have no compensation to receive.

Now, in the case of reparation, this is more along the lines of an individual relationship, a human relationship. A good example of such an instance is when two lovers are in a relationship and one party injures the other. The injuring party makes some gesture to let the other person know that she/he is sorry and wants the relationship to continue in spite of the injury or offence against the other party. Often it might be something as simple as bringing flowers and saying "I'm sorry." This gesture suggests a starting-over, an effort to acknowledge the wrong but trying to continue with the knowledge of the injury by both parties. In a situation where there is a violation of anyone, both people lose. However, the violator and the violated lose different things. The violator loses a sense of self in carrying out this

violation. They lose their relationship or connection to the very rules by which people are supposed to live, the rules which govern human beings. The violated lose trust, respect and confidence in themselves and in the person who has violated them. The gesture, therefore, while it cannot undo the harm, is offered in an effort to restore in the violated (and the violator) some sense of faith, respect, and revaluation of the relationship.

PS: This is a very important distinction you are making here. It really recasts the terms of this debate in a very different light. At a fundamental level, it boils down to a valuing of human relationships. The monetary aspects of reparations have grabbed the headlines where this discussion is concerned. But your approach speaks to a much more spiritual process, a process of self-revaluation that must take place in order for there to be any movement in the direction of forgiveness. So, your emphasis on the gesture is not about compensation, but about revaluation?

EL: If this gesture is not made, the injured party can *try* to continue in the relationship. However, no matter how much they tell themselves they have moved on, the fact of the matter is they will always know that they have devalued themselves by accepting that violation against their person as par for the course. Thus, there is no way Africans could ever accept the enslavement of Africans, the brutality involved in the process and all of the other atrocities.

There is another aspect of the absence of the gesture that has to do with the nature of the relationship between the two parties once both realize that there is no reparation forthcoming. In this specific instance, black people have been further violated in order to justify the absence of the gesture, to assuage any guilt and responsibility of the Europeans. In our case, it's not even about a historical past, but its about the ongoing violation that is taking place today. The practice of presenting people with negative images of themselves is a violation of that Self. This is a violation that affects black people and white people alike because it is a contrived image. If you look closely at media representations of black people globally, the association of blackness with disaster throughout is very commonplace.

PS: As I am listening to your perspectives on the issue of reparation, I have to consider them in light of our earlier discussions about culture. What, then, in light of these representations, is the role or import of culture for effecting social change in this

arena? This kind of constant devaluation must have a long-lasting impact on the psyches of people in this position. Can culture act as a buffer or counteract the processes of devaluation taking place in the absence of a gesture?

EL: The constant, persistent processes of devaluing blackness are among the reasons so many people of African descent are tenuous about the idea of reparation. You see, in a situation such as the one we have right now, there is too much emphasis on who will be paid, not who has been injured. But to return to your question of the role of culture as an intervention in this process, I would ask you to note that so much of black culture generally has been about affirmation of self. In the process of trying to liberate oneself from this process, one also needs to affirm a self. Not the Self that they tell you is yourself, but a Self. A good example of the impact of this is the use of the term "slave." Now, Africans have been enslaved; I think we understand that. But still we must notice how the term persists; when blacks are supposedly freed from slavery, they become a "ex-slaves." So their designation now becomes "slave"; they belong nowhere and they are nobody. Another example is when you hear about the baseball player Jackie Robinson, who broke the color barrier. They erected a color barrier; they removed the color barrier; so the impression is given that there is some hoop that you have to jump through, some hurdle that you have to overcome in order to be human.

PS: The example you just provided gives us a false sense of agency. If the person is erecting the barrier is also taking it down, is it then a false sense of accomplishment? So there is a limit to how much this person can be revalued?

EL: Precisely, Robinson didn't erect a barrier; they put up a barrier against him and then they took it down. What was the barrier that he broke? As long as things like that continue, we will have a diminished sense of self. There are so many things that continue to diminish people. So we are, to a large extent, living in what can be called a culture on the defensive. We have to defend ourselves in what it means to be human, affirming in order to defend.

PS: If we consider the importance of image-making, the role of the writer, painter, or artist is a very important one, since they too are in the business of making and disseminating images. What would be your charge, then, to writers in the Caribbean as they engage in the processes of image-making or revaluing humanity? How, in a place like Trinidad and Tobago, can an artist go about representing images that are

so diverse, so multifarious in their cultural, social, and political meanings? Doesn't this make the idea of national culture difficult to sustain?

EL: Well, when we think about culture we have to think about cultivation. One cultivates culture through practice; it's a lived experience. But when you haven't done it before, when you haven't practiced it before in order to call it forth you might, for example, put up a red ribbon on the door and walk four times around it before entering the room, because this is your ancestral rite.

PS: This is a very interesting way of thinking about cultural practices and how they take on meaning through lived experiences. I am often amazed that when I am in the US and begin to talk to Indian colleagues (from India, not the West Indies) about things, words, or symbols that are considered "Indian" in Trinidad, they often remark that they have never heard of such a thing, nor do they know what it means or represents. These instances make me think very seriously about the role of creativity and the imagination in, as you say, cultivating culture and cultural traditions. How then can we begin to parse through this plethora of cultural significations to arrive at a common cultural meeting place?

EL: People need to create. Actually, the need for people to create is an interesting one. People go back (historically) even though they have no lived relationship to the place, tradition, or space they are returning to. When we talk about "going back," it's a return to something we have a feel for; it is not something that is totally foreign, *per sé.* It's not that things come from nowhere; there is some connection. The return functions as an occasion for black people to say look, we come from somewhere, and we didn't arrive here culturally empty-handed. Then on the other hand, you have Indians, who were always closer to India than we have been to Africa. They have been able to maintain relationships because there were priests who preserved the religious rights and other cultural practices. I think Africans have been engaged in a meeting place of culture, which is Creole culture. This space hasn't been very kind to us, but it is the place where we've had to battle. It was in this arena that steel-band was born and struggled, where the Shouter Baptists were created and outlawed, Shango was created and put down, stick fighting banned, and laws prohibiting what calypsonians could and could not sing about.

The Creole cultural area has been an arena where we have created and where we have been pushed back in a kind of way. It was never a space that "belonged" to

Africans. It's interesting how people have seen this area as the African domain. When you look at it, it's not the African domain at all, its where Africans have had tremendous struggle. In the area of sports it was different in the old days because sports set up rules. If you read C. L. R. James' *Beyond A Boundary*, you see that there are rules of engagement, and no matter who you are or your social position, if you were playing the game, these were the rules. And within this framework, we would see who would win the match. Now, who was chosen for the team and played in the match was another story. But overall, sport was an area in which people felt they were expressing their being, their Selves.

Now if you consider a time like the 1970s, when black people declared that Independence was not working because black people are being discriminated against in the very society that has a black government, no real change has taken place. Around this time, Black Power was a call, not to separatism, but to society as a whole, saying: this society must allow black people access to power. This society must allow for black dignity; we demand black dignity in this meeting place of culture. We don't require it in separate villages where people can say: okay, we are black and over here by ourselves and you can stay over there by yourself. It's within the open society that this struggle has to take place. I think what has happened is that people have retreated from the meeting place and gone off into little enclaves and have sought their empowerment, almost cut off from this central place.

I think this is the problem in Trinidad and Tobago. And it's a problem because nobody has maintained the ideals of justice, fair play, and dignity for everyone within the meeting place of cultures. People are talking about Indian culture over on one side and African culture on the other. With this approach, African culture cannot carry itself forward (in economic and cultural terms) in any way that I can see. On Emancipation Day in Trinidad, I didn't see an Indian. Where is the meeting place? Where do we meet? Certainly, Emancipation Day has to be a meeting place, because emancipation is about seeking to liberate this society.

PS: Well, that is definitely a good point. Emancipation symbolized a move forward in cultural, economic, and political terms for the entire country. Its effects extended beyond the African population. Indians, Chinese, and many other migrant laborers saw the benefits as well as the uncertainties that came with emancipation. It certainly had a larger impact on the entire country; its effects cut across class, race, gender, and ethnicity.

EL: Africans didn't need emancipation by themselves. If Africans were by themselves, what would they need emancipation from? Emancipation is *from* something, whether it was from servitude in the Caribbean as Indians to freedom from servitude as Africans. Symbols of emancipation that are presented here are now about various heroes in the Caribbean, about what has happened in Africa, having a Sphinx, inviting African scholars to talk about the glory of the Nile.

PS: But wouldn't you say that these symbols are being erected in order to locate blacks in relation to a specific source in a similar fashion to Indo-Trinidadians reconnecting to India and Indian history and traditions?

EL: There are many ways you can define yourself. If I say that I am from nowhere, I am a newborn person in the Caribbean; I have no specific line I can go back to. What invalidates that? Everyone comes from somewhere, everyone is somebody, and everybody requires respect. If Africa didn't have the history it had, would that mean we could kill Africans? If India didn't have a long history, would that mean we should punish them and put them under undue duress? I think that the basis on which we engage in our existence as New World people, the most significant actually, is that we came here as ordinary people. We came as Africans stripped of name and rank. Africa might claim us and we might claim Africa, but I don't see a grand necessity for that. I see more of a necessity in seeking to fight the battles in Africa, not simply to shelter under the ancient history but to deal with what is happening to Africa and Africans today. It's not enough to say I'm going to get my identity from the Nile. We have to also get our identity from the thousands of hungry people too, or homeless people, sick people. I'm not saying there wasn't a time for identifying with Africa; I was one of the first people to wear a dashiki in Trinidad. Maybe it is because I went through that stage before that I'm taking this position.

PS: So, is it fair to say that this identification with Africa has served its purpose and run its course as a political and cultural symbol?

EL: Africa continues to serve this purpose; it's just not a place where one can stay. I'm not trying to come down hard on what Emancipation Day is about; there is just a lot more that needs to be done to make this one of the cultural meeting places.

PS: We can think about these same issues in the context of Indian Arrival Day. This, like Emancipation Day, is a cultural manifestation that is supposed to speak to the

larger population, to the others in the society, about this cultural experience. So it's not really for the benefit (solely) of those who arrived.

EL: Precisely. I have never been invited to attend any of the Indian Arrival Day celebrations. Indians aren't usually invited to participate in Emancipation Day unless they are invited as officials of government. I'm hoping that we will get to the point where these two celebrations, as cultural expressions, will become more of a cultural meeting place. If we leave people, as we have, to go to the little enclaves, then they cultivate the most self-serving aspects of our communities. There is no challenge in the enclaves. It is through the challenges that we work out things with others in the community. You see, the enclaves are too comfortable and comforting and this space is not really a home. In an instance such as this, what we are doing is using part of ourselves to express our whole Selves. No matter how large the piece, it is not the whole, so it's not our whole Self.

PS: When we think about expressing Self through cultural representations, we see the significance of images for making sense of our worlds. What do you think about Carnival as a cultural meeting place? Has the separatism affected Carnival in such a way as to prevent it from serving this purpose?

EL: Carnival is a way of presenting the idea of your Self. But remember, this is not your whole Self. If you think about the dragon within the context of the entire mas', the Dragon might be the central idea of struggle within all of the pretty mas taking place around it. When you take that away, when the dragon goes the way of the middle class, it no longer carries the history and experiences of people on the people of the Hill. In taking over some of these figures, the middle class strips the figures of the spirit of rebellion in order to "play" the dragon mas.' One might ask, could Peter Minshall bring a dragon? As I think about this, I saw his RED, and it make me think of the dragon, the spirit of rebellion. It would be interesting to see how different people play Dragon, how middle class people would play it, how different artists would play a dragon.

PS: So, are you saying that what goes into the Dragon, the fabric, colors, size, movements, is part of the lived reality of those represented by the dragon?

EL: Yes, this is precisely what I mean when I ask: can someone play a dragon? Can they carry all of the symbols, meanings, and histories, and dance the dragon?

PS: Speaking of Carnival, what are your views on the push to commodification, or as some would say, "globalization," of Trinidad Carnival? What does it mean to have Trinidad Carnival, say, in the Canada, London, or the United States? For example, in New York City, the Carnival takes place just before or around Labor Day. I find this Carnival very interesting because it has been transformed from an essentially Trinidad Carnival to a pan-Caribbean cultural celebration. There is an amalgamation of floats, ole mas costumes, steel bands, mud bands, Puerto Rican and Cuban music, Jamaican dancehall music, and so on. And of course, we cannot miss the irony involved, since the Carnival draws millions of Latin American and Caribbean people and their American-born descendants to New York City. This year, there were more than 2 million people in attendance. Caribbean people comprise a rather large population of laborers that have migrated to the United States, a trend that dates as far back as the early 1900s. So, one the one hand you have the Labor Day parade celebrating America's laborers, but in a very different cultural context, in a more commercial context I would say.

EL: This is a very interesting observation you're making, and an important one too. The idea of Carnival is about people becoming other things. We have to ask ourselves: what are the identities of all of these becomings? People play mas in Carnival, put on masks, hide their Selves and try on new ones, whatever they may be. For example, when you consider a person playing a Roman soldier or Buccaneer, it's not that they are wedded to this mas or even that sensibility. It's the fundamental peopleness that is in progress in playing mas. And it is this aspect of the Carnival that is so valuable for this region, because the same thing the Carnival does in New York, it is doing in London. Very recently I came to look at the word "identity" in a new way. I was thinking about whether you could choose who you are.

PS: But even in choosing, we have to ask ourselves what the choices we make mean for our lived experiences. For example, in my case, I was born here in Trinidad, but have been living abroad for a long time. When I say I choose to be a West Indian, I have to think about what this means while I'm here in Trinidad and how does this choice translate once I am in the United States?

EL: Well, what is important in these choices is how they affect the way you live. You would have to ask yourself what center you choose to live from. If you say you choose to be a Caribbean person, you're saying that you don't want to be associ-

ated with this world power, that you want to be part of a people entering a different cultural meeting place. If you choose to be an American but are born in the Caribbean, it doesn't mean you are no longer a West Indian. It simply means that your mind space includes a metropolitan, international perspective. It's only in the sense of choice and how you inhabit and articulate your self that I can really talk about identity. Very often, people talk about black novelists writing about identity, that their novels are about identity. What about white novels and novelists, aren't they also about identity? Do blacks have an identity that they lack, or vice versa? These are some of the things the conclusion of *Salt* anticipates, all of these questions about identity and even the value of these questions.

EL: This has been a very engaging discussion. I'm not quite sure how to end it, as I think we could go on talking about these issues for a long time still. However, as I know you have other things on your plate, I want to thank you very much for taking the time out to share and exchange ideas with me. I am eagerly anticipating your next novel and look forward to sharing my thoughts with you about it.

EL: Well, yes, I'm working on something right now, but won't say much more than that about it. But this has been a very good conversation and has given me the opportunity to revisit some ideas and examine new approaches to some of them. I wish you the best with the completion of your book and we will talk again soon. I'm sure.