

*“The grass that they cut and trample and dig out and sprout roots
again”*: *The Spiritual Baptist Church in Earl Lovelace’s
The Wine of Astonishment*

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Abstract: Earl Lovelace’s fiction can be said to, ultimately, work as a force to give validity to the Creole culture created out of the coming together of many worlds in the Caribbean. As in his novel *The Dragon Can’t Dance*, which celebrated those Creole art forms around Carnival, in his next novel, *The Wine of Astonishment* (1982),ⁱ Lovelace celebrates yet another Creole institution, the Trinidadian African-derived church of the Spiritual Baptists. In the novel the Spiritual Baptist church, made to be seen as the darkness from which natives needed to be weaned by colonial authorities, is celebrated and acknowledged as one of the basis that allowed for the creation of a new society away from the colonial narrowness. In *The Wine of Astonishment*, the resistance put up by Spiritual Baptist practitioners, in spite of the prohibition and violence endured, is acknowledged, celebrated and recognised as one of the milestones in Caribbean history. This article will trace, as reflected in the novel, the evolution of the Spiritual Baptist church, and will analyse its symbolical relation to another art form created in the New World: the steel pan movement. All in all, this article will examine the survival of this Trinidadian African-derived church together with the emergence of the steelpan as two of the most salient testimonies of cultural survival and creolisation of the nation.

Keywords: Earl Lovelace, Creole art forms, Spiritual Baptist church, steel pan, resistance

At the heart of Earl Lovelace’s works lies the assumption that fiction is an instrument of social transformation. Lovelace’s works celebrate and give validity to those Creole cultural forms born in the New World that survived years of disdain and banning by both colonial and postcolonial authorities. The author from the twin-island republic of Trinidad and Tobago acknowledges the liberating and restorative power of fiction and believes fiction can help achieve a sense of self that it is rooted in the culture of the *ordinary people*,ⁱⁱ in what people do to create culture and create a sense of belonging. Thus, the aim of *The Wine of*

Astonishment is to contribute to a change in the region's attitude towards the culture produced by the ordinary working people of the region, towards the still prevailing attitude that, as Trinidadian writer and scholar Merle Hodge points out, associates culture with a capital C as "something other than whatever we actually practise every day of our lives" (Hodge, 2004: 4). In fact, Hodge describes the situation of the culture produced on Caribbean soil by Caribbean people in the following manner:

The culture of the Caribbean, the set of arrangements for survival developed by the people who have lived together in this environment over the past five centuries, remains an unrecognized, unavowed phenomenon, still largely proceeding as an underground movement. (Hodge, 2004: 1)

Against this state of affairs, the novel intends to stress the necessity for West Indian indigenous cultural forms and institutions to be recognized and valued, in particular as regards the Spiritual Baptist church. Lovelace recognises the survival of the Spiritual Baptist church after years of struggling against disdain, police brutality and eventually its banning as one of the pillars that sustain West Indian culture.

African-based religions or Creolized religious systems born in the New World were developed in secrecy and were at the heart of the resistance and rebellion against a plantation society founded on violence. They allowed the most oppressed sectors of colonial Caribbean societies to manifest their spirituality as well as to express the cultural and political practices suppressed by colonial force, and thus protect the health of the community. In Trinidad and Tobago, the two most important expressions of African-based or African-derived religions are the Spiritual Baptists, also known as the Shouter Baptists, and the Orisha or Shango. Both religions are based on syncretisms of West African and Christian traditions. According to Trinidadian scholar Rhoda Reddock, the Spiritual Baptist church, the most prevalent stream, "developed in the later days of the nineteenth century among the ex-enslaved who under the force of being Christianised sought to re-establish and continue their West African religious traditions" (Reddock, 2002: 122).

Set in the decade spanning World War Two and the postwar period in the fictitious Trinidadian village of Bonasse, *The Wine of Astonishment* begins with a depiction of its Spiritual Baptist congregation. In their humble church, which is home to their ceremonies, they worship in the Baptist way:

We have this church in the village. We have this church. The walls make out of mud, the roof covered with carrat leaves: a simple hut with no steeple or cross or acolytes or white priests or Latin ceremonies. But is our own. Black people own it... We have this church where we gather to sing hymns and ring the bell and shout hallelujah and speak in tongues when the Spirit come; and we carry the Word to the downtrodden and the forgotten and the lame and the beaten, and we touch black people soul. (1982: 32)

Black-owned and independent from any European church hierarchy, Spiritual Baptist faith was outlawed from 1917 to 1951 by the British Colonial Government. In the *Shouters Prohibition Ordinance* the church was outlawed on grounds of non-tolerable practices and its association with magic and sorcery. Herskovits and Herskovits, the famous United States Africanists, explain the main reasons given by the Trinidad's Attorney General of the time to justify the banning. First, it was argued that that Spiritual Baptist practices were deemed as non-tolerable in a well-conducted community, and secondly, it was also argued that the neighbourhood in which the Spiritual Baptists meeting took place was made almost impossible for residential occupation (Herskovits, 1947: 330). Once the ordinance was in force, as described in the novel, police could arrest practitioners of the Spiritual Baptist faith for practicing their religion:

They pass the law against us that make it a crime on the whole island for people to worship God in the Spiritual Baptist religion. Now if we ring the bell, that was against the law. If we clap we hands and catch the Spirit, the police could arrest us. (Lovelace, 1982: 34)

Among the Spiritual Baptists practices deemed as intolerable and indecent we find the ones aforementioned, such as handclapping, the ringing of the bell, dancing, shouting, chanting and what the colonial government would consider the most unacceptable practice of all: spirit possession.ⁱⁱⁱ Spirit possession, in Trinidadian English Creole *catching the spirit* or *catching the power*, is one of the fundamental features around which Afro-Caribbean religions are centred. In the ritual of spirit possession, people transcend their materiality by becoming spirits and the deities manifest themselves through the bodies of the initiated. In *Creole Religions of the Caribbean*, Fernández Olmos and Paravisini-Gebert state that “spiritual power is internalised and mobilized in human beings who become, through the experience of possession, a real live altar in which the presence of the supernatural beings can be invoked” (Fernández Olmos and Paravisini-Genret, 2011: 120). It is significant to note how such central element of spirit possession has been one of the practices most targeted and misrepresented in a wide variety of textual and visual narratives. In particular, Hollywood horror and non-horror productions have most frequently offered negative and diminishing images of African-derived religions. These disempowering visual narratives have mainly equated spirit possession to frantic unwanted crises. However, these crises so widely depicted in Hollywood productions do rarely occur and when they do, Gerdès Fleurant states, these only occur to the noninitiates who “have not yet learned to sustain the weight of lwa...”^{iv} (Fleurant 1998: xxvii). These narratives failed to understand that spirit possession is one of the “significant aspects of religious rituals of Africa [which] are generally opened to only the initiated” (Ayiejina and Gibbons, 1999: 42). Thus, these crises together with voodoo dolls or zombies -other aspects belonging to African-derived religions- are marginal features that Western productions have chosen to put the focus on in order to offer a diminishing picture and, thus, signal African-derived religions as a set of evil or black magic practices.

Importantly, spirit possession, apart from being described as a practice in the Spiritual Baptist church, takes on another dimension in the novel through the character of Eva. The narrator of *The Wine of Astonishment*, Eva, is the wife of

the Spiritual Baptist leader. Eva is the character chosen as a narrator- a traditional Afro-Caribbean storyteller- to retell what occurs to the almost one hundred community members mentioned in the novel. Nonetheless in the same manner as the church is seen as communal property, so is the story, since it is not so much the individual creation of Eva or the church leader, but it belongs to everyone. Merle Hodge asserts that Eva's is not a personal voice, but that at every turn the narrator acknowledges the community's participation in the telling of the story. So Eva "does not so much retell episodes told to her, as yield to the voices of those who witnessed the action" (Hodge 2007: 276). This way, the narrative voice not only stresses the importance of community but it could be argued that it also highlights the phenomenon of spirit possession. UWI scholar and writer Funso Aiyejina has seen in Eva's role a reflection of the phenomenon of possession characteristic of the Afro-Caribbean religions. He likens the narrator to the medium in African-derived religions rituals "who loses his or her own voice and inherits the voice and manner of the possessing deity" (Aiyejina 1996: 13). Therefore, throughout the novel the character of Eva becomes a multi-vocal narrator regularly possessed by the spirit of other characters.

The novel also reflects the democratic dimension of the Spiritual Baptist church. In contrast to most mainstream belief systems, each congregation forms a democratic organization where the individual is not subjected to a monolithic structure, but one where, as Lovelace states, "anyone can testify, anyone can dream, God can speak through anyone" (Lovelace, 2003: 53). Reddock also points out that one characteristic of all Afro-Christian religions in the Caribbean has been the participation of women at levels that are not evident in other mainstream belief systems. This participation translates in that in the Spiritual Baptist church women, as the novel reflects, are not only restricted to being members and participants but also leaders (Reddock: 2002, 123).

As a consequence of the passing of the *Shouters Prohibition Ordinance*, the congregation of Shouter Baptists in Bonasse have to endure much suffering and hardship. First of all, the congregation is forced to move out of the village, "high up on a steep hill and hidden behind half-dead mango trees" (Lovelace, 1982: 32). Secondly, they are constrained to hold more subdued services characterised by quieter praying and singing instead of bell ringing and catching the power. Moreover, the novel depicts how the numbers of Spiritual Baptist decreased dramatically. Conversion to more accepted churches such as the Roman Catholic Church or the Methodist Church brought many social and economic advantages to the convert, thus all throughout the banning, the congregation of Bonasse witnesses how the number of devotees slowly diminishes. Importantly, as regards their legal status, the banning made Spiritual Baptists practitioners criminals. Thus, the novel illustrates how for the practitioner to be oneself and practice one's own faith meant to be infringing the law. An integral part of your identity, the one that established a connection with your African heritage and provided, in Barbadian writer and scholar, George Lamming's words, "a historical continuity" (quoted in Pouchet Paquet 1982: 3) was outlawed. Eva recounts how Bee, her husband and leader of the church, summons the community after the banning to decode for them the political agenda hidden behind the prohibition:

And Bee talk, giving us the history of the trials and tribulations we go through in this Babylon country, where no matter what we do to be ourselves they try to make us illegal, to cut us from our God and self and leave us naked without defence.” (Lovelace 1982: 37)

Bee clearly recognises that these are the kind of measures that have unsuccessfully attempted, since their arrival at the New World, to erase the Africa in them. Colonial authorities in Trinidad and Tobago did not only ban African-derived religious worshipping but also any cultural art form whose roots were to be found in Africa such as dancing, drumming, and stickfighting, all on the pretext that they were too noisy and their respective practices disturbed decent people. As was the regular pattern in colonial control, Creole traditions that came out of the result of the interaction of the different cultures that were brought to the Caribbean, were prohibited. For this reason, Lovelace argues that the Spiritual Baptists, as all the other African institutions or art forms, were made to be seen as uncivilized, as the darkness from which natives needed to be weaned. To bring the light of their civilization, colonial authorities had to create a darkness in which their light could shine. In other words, for the colonizers to take control of the colonized, “the colonizers had to establish as darkness the culture of the African and to do so they had to legislate darkness” (Lovelace 2003: 3). Even the author himself recalls when as a child, growing up in Tobago in his maternal grandparents Methodist household, Calypso, Carnival, Orisha and all the cultural aspects that were connected to Africa, were viewed as instruments of the devil (Lovelace 2003: 9).

After the hard long thirty-five years of prohibition, when the congregation in *The Wine of Astonishment* reunites again, the numbers have decimated, but Bee celebrates their survival. In the first sermon after the banning has been lifted, Bee acknowledges the enduring force that has made the congregation resist. He defines their communal effort and the congregation itself with the words used for the title of this paper: “The grass that they cut and trample and dig out and sprout roots again” (Lovelace 1982: 59). Bee preaches about all the impeding circumstances which have not managed to tear down the community:

And Bee preach about the tribulation and about the running and dodging and hiding and he preach about the scattering of the people when we scatter like sparks from a fire to die, but we do not die, instead come back again to be here to praise the Lord and to magnify His name. (Lovelace, 1982: 144)

Although the congregation had to endure all kinds of difficulties, the fire of the community did not extinguish. Instead, the fire -read the congregation- is, thanks to the resistance offered, well alive. However, in this first service in the old Spiritual way after the lifting of the ban, even though many members of the congregation try, no-one is successful at catching the fire and the Spirit does not come:

The Spirit wouldn't come, everything we try. It was sorrowful bad. And those of us like Sister Elaine and Mother Ruth and Brother Theophilus who wait all these years was confuse because the Spirit

wouldn't come; and Bee was preaching, trying with his voice to call the Spirit, trying with the incense, and the lighted candles and the bell and bowl of flowers and the holy water to bring the Spirit in, but the Spirit wouldn't come that day. It wouldn't come... wouldn't come. (Lovelace 1982: 144)

Thus, for the first time after the long years of banning, the congregation is able to worship the old way again, with handclapping, chanting, shouting and bell ringing but inexplicably the Spirit would not come. On their way back home after the service, Eva and Bee reflect on the possible causes that could explain why the Spirit did not come. Amidst the disappointment, sadness and sense of guilt that the spirit's non-appearance had brought to the whole community, Bee, Eva and their children come across a rehearsal session at the steelband tent. At that point they realize that the Spirit has not, as the congregation feared, abandoned the community, instead it has been reassembled in the Trinidadian musical percussion instrument made from a steel oil-drum:

In the next yard there, with bamboo for posts and coconut branches for a roof, is a steelband tent, and in this tent is the steel pans, and playing these pans is some young fellows, bare-back and with tear-up clothes ... I listening to the music; for the music that those boys playing on the steelband have in it the same Spirit that we miss in our church; the same Spirit; and listening to them, my heart swell and it is like resurrection morning. I watch Bee, Bee watch me. I don't say nothing to him and he don't say nothing to me, the both of us bow, nod, as if, yes, God is great, and like if we passing in front of something holy. (Lovelace, 1982: 146)

This closing paragraph portraying this epiphanic moment opens a new window of hope for the community. The new circumstances fruit of a history of prohibition and resistance have now offered a new location in Trinidadian culture where the Spirit is also to be found. The novel is thus proposing that that same Spirit the Spiritual Baptist worshippers have been catching is now also present in the steelpan movement. Trinidadian culture has now further expanded and also embraces a new form of folk-based communion: the steelband.

The steelpan, said to be the only instrument created in the 20th century, was born in the 1930's in Trinidad. It was born precisely in Laventille, a hill overlooking the capital of the country, Port of Spain, mainly populated by African-descended people at the bottom of the economic ladder. In Laventille, after the banning of the African skin drum, people untrained in acoustic engineering, as Trinidadian scholar Anthony Neil points out, were able to discover that it was possible to cause musical notes to emanate from a sunken oil drum (Neil,1985:8). Interestingly, the now national instrument of Trinidad and Tobago went through a parallel history to that of Spiritual Baptists. Created and practised by the ordinary people, it also endured banning and persecution from the colonial government. That is why Lovelace asserts that both the Spiritual Baptist church and the steelband have gone through similar experiences in their respective histories, and "now stand now and forever as the everlasting monument to human endurance and human dignity (Lovelace, 2003: 37). Thus, along with the Spiritual Baptist

Church, the steelband movement that emerged in the 1930's has empowered and continues to empower the ordinary people and it has helped overcome the negative self-image caused by the degradation and rejection they had been subjected to by the ruling and upper classes of the society.

In this sense, Earl Lovelace can be said to fit George Lamming's definition of the Caribbean writer. Lamming sees the writer as engaged in the shaping of national consciousness and giving alternative directions to society. Lamming lists the following set of functions for the Caribbean writer to fulfil:

Throughout the literature of the Caribbean, this theme of spiritual dispossession and self-mutilation remains central to the thought and perception of your writers... it is the function of the writer to return a society to itself; and in this respect, your writers have been the major historians of the feeling of your people. To separate them by open or hidden forms of censorship from a generation which needs to be provided with a firm sense of historical continuity would be to inflict upon us a second stage of isolation. (qtd. in Pouchet Paquet 1982: 3)

According to Lamming, the writer records and interprets the New World created in the Caribbean and provides a sense of historical continuity negated by the colonial mentality, and therefore liberates the younger generations from a cycle of spiritual dispossession and self-mutilation. Therefore, Lovelace is in line with Lamming's definition of the Caribbean writer, since his endeavour all through his works has been the examination and validation of what has been created by Caribbean people on Caribbean soil.

All in all, the novel shows how the Spiritual Baptist church is a living proof of the Caribbean people's resistance to the Colonial authorities' attempt at erasing Africa from the Caribbean. It also proves the attempt at inflicting Spiritual dispossession onto Caribbean people unsuccessful, since as it happens in the novel both spirit and spiritual dispossession are unsuccessful. And finally it also refutes the famous statement by probably the best known Trinidadian writer and recipient of the Nobel Prize for Literature, V.S. Naipaul, that "History is built around achievement and creation; and nothing was created in the West Indies" (V.S. Naipaul 1962: 20). In contrast, Lovelace proves that West Indians have created a rich Creole culture to be proud of that came out of the result of the interaction of the different cultures that were brought to the Caribbean. Lovelace asserts that West Indians "must begin to focus on what we have done, created, achieved as we have confronted the experience of oppression in the Caribbean and we need to examine our own creativity and achievements to value them" (Lovelace 2003: 36). Thus, in *The Wine of Astonishment* Lovelace examines, acknowledges and celebrates what has been created in the West Indies and stresses that for Trinidadian society to further advance, it is a dire necessary to value all that has been created.

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ⁱ Although *The Wine of Astonishment* was published after *The Dragon Can't Dance*, it was, nonetheless, written before his most renowned novel *The Dragon Can't Dance*.

ⁱⁱ "By ordinary people, I mean those who are not the elite by property, education or privilege and status... I mean, in fact, those who might be said to have struggled against colonialism, affirming themselves as people through maintaining and establishing religion, cultural practices and by warring against attempts to dehumanize them or place them as a lower order of human beings" (Lovelace, 2003: 102).

ⁱⁱⁱ In 1883, long before the actual banning of the faith, Reddock points out, the colonial government also introduced a "Music Bill" which was later codified into a law in which the playing of drums, tambours and chac chacs (rattles) was prohibited from 6:00 am to 10:00 pm. This forced the Spiritual Baptists to use other methods to compensate for the prohibited drums and rattles.

^{iv} Even though Fleurant makes reference to another Caribbean African-derived religion, Haitian Vodou, I believe the practice is the same therefore it also applies to the Spiritual Baptist Church. Thus, he refers to the *lwa*, the term used to refer to the spirits that possess Vodou practitioners.

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