Popular Culture and Nationalism

Can't beat me drum
In my own, my native land.
Can't have we Carnival
In my own, my native land,
In my own, native land.

in my own native land,
Moon passa dancer, come moon vile
(I cannot dance as I wish).

Hollis Liverpool (2001: 331) cites this stickfighter's song as evidence that lower-class black people in the 1880s already identified themselves as Trinidadians rather than Africans, a sentiment that suggests an early precedent for nationalist thinking, and which appears to parallel the creole identity of French-descended Trinidadians. Indeed the cultural alliance between blacks and French creoles in the late nineteenth century helped to keep carnival alive and to propel it into the new era of formal competitions and modernist reform (chap. 9). Despite this history of lower-class participation, however, it is usually the educated elite, including black and coloured people of middle-class status, that are credited or blamed for modernist reform in the arts and for the nationalist movement generally. This parallels the tendency of scholars to treat nationalism as an elite ideology. The case of the steelband in Trinidad suggests, however, that “the masses” should share more credit for nationalism's successes and failures than most academic
theories would admit. As an epilogue to this study, therefore, I would like to consider the implications of such “popular nationalism” for Trinidad and for the study of culture generally.

POPULAR NATIONALISM

The most well defined use of the term “popular nationalism” that I have seen comes from Benedict Anderson (1991), who contrasts it with the “official nationalism” of hereditary rulers such as the Russian czars or the kings of Siam, who justified and consolidated their power through the modern ideology of the nation-state. Anderson’s popular nationalism is generated, in contrast, by intellectuals and administrators who have no stake in the old order, and it is a progressive force in relation to the monarchies and empires they sought to replace. Although Anderson’s discussion of popular nationalism does not include anything quite so plebeian as the steelband movement, it nonetheless opens a way to imagining a popular nationalism that takes shape in and through popular culture—a nationalism that is generated by interactions between diverse individuals and groups, and that is not easily controlled by a single constituency.

Such a usage would contradict the very definition of nationalism that some scholars hold to. Turino, for example, holds that the term “nationalism” should be reserved for projects of state-building, and defines musical nationalism, in particular, as “the conscious use of any preexisting or newly created music in the service of a political nationalist movement” (2000: 190). He insists that a distinction must be drawn between “explicit political nationalism [and] nationalist sentiment (vaguer feelings of belonging to a nation)” (2000: 262). Though this is a useful distinction for some analytical purposes, it tends to privilege the agency of politicians. The fact is that political nationalism invariably depends on nationalist sentiment, and so nationalist sentiment—whether or not it is congruent with politicians’ interests—contributes to the character and the course of nationalism.

One theorist who has tried to explain the role of sentiment in nationalism is John Hutchinson, who finds it useful to distinguish between cultural nationalism and political nationalism. Hutchinson notes that cultural nationalists (especially artists) often promote national sentiments that are incompatible with the project of political nationalists. ¹ With their focus on

¹ Hutchinson cites Irish artists’ promotion of Celtic language and culture, which alienated the English-educated intelligentsia. Similarly, the steelband’s association with Black Pride movements and African culture presented a problem at the time of independence for Trinidad politicians who didn’t want to alienate the Indian community.
moral regeneration, rather than political organizing, cultural nationalists are also less troubled by the paradoxes of nationalism, Hutchinson argues: “As an integrative movement, [cultural nationalism] repudiates both traditionalism and modernism as degenerations from a national vision that combines the virtues of each: the sense of unique identity given by the former with the idea of the community, embraced by the latter, as an active and equal participant in human progress” (1987: 33). Though Hutchinson is mainly concerned with writers, painters, or composers whom one might associate with an elite position, he opens up the possibility of a nationalism that is not limited to or constrained by considerations of elite control. His description of the artist’s untroubled integration of tradition and modernity, for example, rings true for lower-class steelband musicians in Trinidad, whose impulse to rearrange the classics for carnival were antithetical to the elite ideology of promoting “local” culture.

Indeed, the case of the steelband challenges us to think beyond definitions of nationalism that portray it as an exclusively political or exclusively elite phenomenon; and the steelband is not unique in this regard. Scholarship on popular music during the last few decades raises questions about the ability of any elite to control people’s definitions of or feelings about their nation. Marisol Berriós-Miranda’s work (2003) on salsa music, for example, demonstrates the consolidation of Puerto Rican national sentiment through popular music, in what she calls a process of “expressive liberation” that defies Puerto Rico’s colonial subjugation and makes common cause with urban Latinos all over the Americas. The meanings attached to salsa music, furthermore, are generated not only by producers of the music, but also through the active participation of listeners and dancers. Frances Aparicio’s ethnographic study of working-class Puerto Rican women in Michigan provides examples of “how listeners reinterpret specific [salsa] lyrics, transforming them and literally rewriting them to be able to identify and seek pleasure and reaffirmation in their life situation” (1998: 235). Though such people may not expect their “rewritings” to carry political weight, their ideas and sentiments always have the potential to motivate larger political actions.

Kelly Askew points out that in the case of Tanzanian naaabh music, for example, “some of the least privileged citizens of one emergent African nation hijacked and reconfigured the process of nationalism” (2002: 12). In Askew’s examples, the participation of thousands of people at festive events both promotes and complicates the state’s efforts to define expressive forms and meanings, as audience response (especially in the form of tipping) validates some singers and not others. Collective performances thus become a medium for the exchange and critique of ideas—a medium that Askew correctly observes has been overlooked in most theories of nationalism because
of “the literate bias subsumed within the Eurocentric bias” (2002: 10) of Western scholars. Askew’s critique is directed especially at Anderson’s influential theory that print and print capitalism is a fundamental impetus to “imagining community” at the abstract level of a nation. What Askew calls the “national imaginary” encompasses even more diverse media and more diverse points of view than Anderson’s “imagined community.”

Popular culture also differs from print capitalism in the way community is experienced. Festive gatherings such as janaab performances create a community that is not merely imagined but tangible—seen, felt, smelled, and heard—and forge compelling bonds of affect and style. In Trinidad, carnival festivities may bring a significant proportion of the national community together in the same time and place, so one might argue that the role of festival in nationalism is especially significant in such small nation-states. Television, radio, Internet, and other modern media, however, also act as surrogates for the festive experience of community, creating the possibility of affective bonding in much larger national and transnational populations. As Arjun Appadurai points out:

The revolution of print capitalism, and the cultural affinities and dialogues unleashed by it, were only modest precursors to the world we live in now. For in the last century, there has been a technological explosion, largely in the domain of transportation and information, which makes the interactions of a print-dominated world seem as hard won and as easily erased as the print revolution made earlier forms of cultural traffic appear. (1990: 2)

This revolution in the flow of people and ideas has made individuals more preoccupied than ever with the work of defining their identities and their sense of community in an unstable world. In this context, “culture becomes ... an arena for conscious choice, justification and representation” (Appadurai 1990: 18). Such active choice complicates state control, or indeed any unified control, over national sentiment, and also creates the possibility for transnational identities that defy the typology of nation-states.

The idea of the nation-state continues to appeal, it seems, to our human need for community, and yet state efforts to define national culture are clearly complicated by the variety of choices and the diverse avenues of communication that modern technologies make possible. Ulf Hannerz (1987) proposes that popular culture in Nigeria, for example, seems to have accomplished what the government could not, as radio, television, and cinema have begun to give real meaning to “the nation of Nigeria”—an idea that, in the absence of these shared idioms, was abstract and arbitrary. While acknowledging the importance of nation, Hannerz proposes the term “creolization” (instead of “modernization”) to describe the development of
Nigeria’s national culture, challenging the dominance of European thought and values.

Earlier uses of this term in Caribbean cultural discourse were similarly intended to accentuate non-European contributions to these new societies, and to question the dominance of the upper classes in shaping society and culture (e.g., E. Brathwaite 1974; Craig 1974). This antihierarchical dimension of creolization is clearly significant in the Caribbean, where everyone is a newcomer (native cultures and people having been largely lost). Yet even in the Caribbean the cruel hierarchy of plantation society constitutes an established order that resists change, and that depends on distinctions of high and low culture to justify privilege. One cannot simply assume that the promotion of “people’s culture” challenges this hierarchy, because new cultural forms may be appropriated to justify the privilege of elites. An aspiring creole elite promoted calypso and steelband, for example, as authentic expressions of the Trinidadian people, but some of them also tried (not necessarily successfully) to abstract these art forms from their traditional contexts, to make them comparable to the chanson and the symphony of the old European elite. Creolization, on the other hand, is generally thought of as a social and cultural force that challenges hierarchy and privilege, that takes place not merely through the promotion of new and hybrid forms, but through the input of diverse communities. Thus creolization challenges the ideological separation between elite culture and popular culture that justifies hierarchy and resists diversity. I will turn now to a consideration of this separation.

POPULAR CULTURE AND MODERNIST REFORM

The idea that the middle and upper classes’ cosmopolitan education and values are incompatible with authentic lower-class expressive traditions pervades the literature on nationalism. Ernst Gellner writes, for example, that “the basic deception and self-deception practised by nationalism is this: nationalism is, essentially, the general imposition of a high culture on society, where previously low cultures had taken up the lives of the majority” (1994: 65). This deception involves the incorporation of popular culture icons into a format that is more congruent with elite aesthetics—folk tales compiled in books by the brothers Grimm, for example, or folk dances staged by the Ballet Folklorico de Mexico. The common people’s arts are thereby “elevated” to a new status, but in such a way that the common people themselves do not need to be involved.

Trinidadian intellectuals have identified this problem in their own nationalist movement. Barbara Powie, for example, writing about the emerg-
ing sense of cultural nationalism among the Trinidadian middle class around 1950, described a group of people who were “pre-occupied with the cultivation of negative personal character” (1951: 225), as a result of a long habit of trying to distance themselves from their African heritage. She suggests that their attitudes were beginning to change, but in rather superficial ways:

The middle class are at last inclined to take pride in something which is Trinidadian. In doing so they are developing a sense of nationality, or rather, expressing the emergence of this sense. But behind this new attitude there still lurks the old attitude to national unity. White is still the colour to respect and bow to, black is still the colour to despise. The coloured people have not yet grasped the fact that it is the craftsmanship, artistry, and inventiveness of the lower class which has given Carnival its wider appeal as a special attraction of Trinidad. (1951: 231)

A decade later, C. L. R. James similarly observed that the middle-class politicians who took the reins of the newly independent nation of Trinidad and Tobago still held to the “unshakable principle that they [were] in status, education, morals and manners, separate and distinct from the masses of the people” (1962: 86–88).

This social and cultural gap between the elite and the masses has caused some Trinidadians to mistrust the government’s stewardship of culture, and has generated a discourse of authenticity that valorizes the lower-class carnival arts while denouncing cultural reforms perceived as elitist. A letter to the Guardian newspaper from Father Terrence Julien in 1973, for example, expresses anguish over the way even steelband music was becoming “colonized”:

On Friday night I went to the Queen’s Park Savannah to hear the finals of the Steelband Festival. I left halfway through, sick in my stomach at the most pathetic sight I have had to endure for years—the colonisation of the calypso and the steel pan. There before our very eyes were groups of performing Trinidadians, like so many classes, sitting a musical G.C.E. [General Certificate of Education] under the expert ears of examiner in chief—Professor Tom Manoff, of the Manhattan School of Music.

It is the most painful experience to have grown up during the movement for “political independence” and “massa day done” and to have to face the

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2 General Certificate of Education exams in a variety of subjects were designed and corrected at Cambridge and London universities and administered as a diploma exam in high schools throughout the British empire.

3 “Massa Day Done” (Master’s Day Is Done) was the title of a famous speech given by Trinidad’s first prime minister, Eric Williams, in which he proclaimed the end of colonial authority and influence.
sickening fact that the movement in our society is not towards independence through creativity but towards total enslavement through meticulous aping.

I don't know which was more pathetic! The “conductors” or the “orchestras” trying to achieve the correct frenzy and mannerisms of Toscanini, agonisingly wringing out from their classes the correct answers to the European Test Piece. Or the bloodless abortion of the calypso-road-march as “symphonised” by these steel orchestras. (Dec. 13)

A corollary to this polemic—which accuses panmen of betraying their culture by “aping” the concert stage behavior of symphony musicians—is that middle-class participation in street carnival is similarly inauthentic. In his novel The Dragon Can't Dance, Earl Lovelace ridicules the pretense that carnival brings all classes together, portraying the participation of light-skinned sponsors in steelbands as a tragic negation of behind the bridge community solidarity:

For Desperadoes was the baddest band in the island, the band where the people was one. When they appeared on the road with new pans and emblem and waving a new flag; Sampoco Oil Company Gay Desperadoes, well, [Fisheye] nearly went out his head. Gay? Gay Desperadoes. That was the end. And instead of the little fellers pushing the pans, you had the sponsors, the sponsor’s wife and the sponsor’s daughter and the sponsor’s friends, a whole section of them, their faces reddened by the excitement and the sun, smiling and jumping out of time. singing, All Ah We Is One. (1979: 68)

The polemical habit of valorizing lower-class culture while portraying middle-class influences in carnival as a detriment has become something of an orthodoxy in Trinidad; but like all orthodoxies, it has its enemies. Trinidadian journalist and radio host Morgan Job, in particular, has made a career of challenging the politically correct view that lower-class culture should be the model for national culture.

It is mischievous to tell a nation, composed as Trinidad and Tobago is, that Best Village² (Afrocentric). calypso and Panorama is our culture. This is dangerous nonsense good to keep illiterates happy in their favourite dreamland immune from the wasteland of the spirit in which they exist, while worshipping at the shrine of false and fallen heroes, their minds numbed and intoxicated with ignorance. (1994)

Job advocates Culture with a capital C, urging Trinidadians to “[enlarge their] experience through contact with powerful individual minds and the

²Best Village is a competition showcasing the arts and crafts of villages all over Trinidad.
inheritance of our European, Indian and Chinese ancestors.” He cites the
music of Beethoven and “Naavada and his raaginis of Locanakavi and Saaran
agadeva” as worthy musical icons. Such statements may recall an earlier
generation of Trinidadian intellectuals and artists (including C. L. R. James and
Beryl McBurnie) who unapologetically embraced “high” culture paradigms
in their efforts to develop and uplift Caribbean culture. The tables have
turned since their time, however, and Job now finds it necessary to focus on
the defense of high culture instead of the improvement of folk culture.
Whether one reads Lovelace or Job, however, the rhetorical tendency to
separate the concepts of local and foreign, elite and popular, high and low
obscures an important reality: the musical experiences of real people do not
respect those boundaries. The diverse range of experiences that motivates
any particular musician, for example, cannot be completely accounted for
by broadly defined class or ethnic attitudes. What musical preferences might
one expect from a man who came from a poor family, went to an elite
school, listened to classical records at his friend’s house and on the radio,
and learned to play music in a panyard from laborers and illiterates? We
could assume that one of these experiences represents his “true” class posi-
tion, and the others merely influence this position, and there might be some
merit in such an interpretation. As Pierre Bourdieu notes, however, “an act
of classification depends on the practical function it fulfills” (1987: 510). It
might be more useful, therefore, to think of such a musician’s preferences
and opinions as interpretive stances he takes in regard to particular ques-
tions, and to acknowledge that the same person may take a lower-class stance
in one context and a middle-class stance in another. For example, the inter-
pretive stances taken at different times by journalist Pete Simon (chap. 5)
suggest permeability and overlap between different class identities. He iden-
tified with the pride that lower-class pannen took in rendering the works of
Mozart and Beethoven faithfully; but with regard to carnival celebrations,
he sided with middle-class cultural nationalists in denouncing the steel-
band’s penchant for playing “foreign” music. While any given opinion on
the steelband, carnival, or another cultural question may reinforce binary
oppositions like local and foreign, the collective opinions of the individual,
expressed in a variety of contexts, are likely to show a more complex under-
standing of the interactions and middle ground between these categories.

In regard to this complexity of individual views on culture, Morgan Job’s
popularity is instructive. Although Job himself takes unrealistically extreme
positions, I would not dismiss his impatience with populism and political
correctness as an exclusively elitist point of view. Indeed, I have heard many
working-class Trinidadians express appreciation for Job. Though that may
be due in part to their carnivalesque enjoyment of contrariness (Job is a sort
of intellectual “shock jock”), I am sure that Job’s concern for refinement and
upliftment are shared by people from different walks of life, many of whom may also support Best Village, calypso, and Panorama. And if these performance events differ from earlier community-based models, it is partly because people from lower-class communities were interested in making changes and played creative roles in shaping them.

Thus, though the Panorama competition in some ways exemplifies the cosmopolitan values of presentation and control, it also partakes of the participatory and unpredictable nature of festive performance and of popular culture generally. This pattern of shared control has also been observed in other Caribbean examples of modernist reform. Kate Rumsey shows, for example, how difficult it was for officials of the Haitian Bureau d'Ethnologie in the 1940s to enforce in their dance shows "a conservative fixing of identity—one which the performance of folklore, in any context, would always exceed" (1997). And Katherine Hagedorn, observing that representations of sacred Santeria music and dance by Cuba's Conjunto Folklorico continue to be meaningful to traditional religious practitioners, explains that "offense [to the religious community] is avoided precisely because the religious practitioners themselves have taken part and continue to take part in the process of borrowing and reshaping the religious material; that is, the rendering is impelled both by the community of religious practitioners and by the secular, state-run institution" (2001: 66). Hagedorn also stresses the audience's role in "the negotiation and perpetuation of meaning" (58), which requires her to consider the influence not only of performers and government officials, but also of religious believers, tourists, and hustlers.

These examples suggest that modernist reformism need not be starkly opposed to community tradition, that it is not an exclusively elite concern but the product of dialogue and contention between politicians, intellectuals, artists, and audiences, none of whom has a definitive say in its outcome. It is of course important to recognize the hegemonic function of modernist reform, and to consider that it is likely to privilege middle-class cosmopolitan values over lower-class values to the extent that: (1) it is pitched to a middle-class, cosmopolitan, or tourist audience; (2) it substitutes professional or folkloric-oriented performers for community-oriented performers; (3) it substitutes a presentational mode of performance for a participatory mode. If Panorama has lost some of its former vitality, then, that might be attributed to a changing audience (more tourists, more expatriates, fewer youth and working-class adults) and decreased community participation in steelband performance generally. Community representation in Panorama is still strong, however, especially among performers, and participatory impulses have proven remarkably persistent. Despite concerns about Panorama's role in the "concertization" of the steelband, the aesthetics of Panorama performances cannot be simply equated with those of the concert hall.
or opposed to those of the carnival parade. The case of the steelband also underscores the folly of assuming that a concert/presentational mode is for the elite while a street/presentational mode is for the masses. Laborers have delighted in the refinement of the North Stars rendering Strauss on stage; business executives have reveled in the festive communion of Desperadoes going down the road; and Panorama performances draw on both of these experiences to create something new.

SUMMARY: TAKING PLAY SERIOUSLY

Those who mistrust popular culture may ignore its impulses toward refinement and order, whereas those who celebrate popular culture often draw attention to its defiant and transgressive impulses. Either way, we (academics, critics, and others) tend to reinforce a distinction between the playfulness of popular culture and the serious business of running an institution or a state. Where popular culture is valued, it is often precisely for its separation from or opposition to the establishment. Johannes Fabian argues, for example, that the discursive distinction between “popular culture” and “culture” implies an awareness of alternatives to a dominant norm, a belief in “the existence of spaces of freedom and creativity in situations of oppression and supposedly passive mass consumption” (1998: 2). The question then becomes whether these spaces of freedom can effect significant changes. Much of the literature on carnival, in particular, is devoted to an inconclusive debate about whether its seasonal outpouring of playful energy has a lasting social impact or is merely a psychological “safety valve” that protects the status quo. David Kertzer, for example, cites historical examples of carnivals in Europe that developed into full-scale peasant revolts, but he also notes that European rulers and elites recognized “the safety valve effect of rites of rebellion . . . long before it was first formulated by anthropologists” (1988: 144). Neither safety valve nor peasant massacre, however, is a very reassuring metaphor for the role of play in social organization. In either case, play appears to lack the element of responsibility and hence seriousness.

Huizinga, however, points out the problem with opposing play to seriousness:

To our way of thinking, play is the direct opposite of seriousness. . . . Examined more closely, however, the contrast between play and seriousness proves to be neither conclusive nor fixed. We can say: play is non-seriousness. But apart from the fact that this proposition tells us nothing about the positive qualities of play, it is extraordinarily easy to refute. As soon as we proceed
from “play is non-seriousness” to “play is not serious,” the contrast leaves us in the lurch—for some play can be very serious indeed. (1950: 5)

Any theory of popular culture’s role in nationalism must address the seriousness of play. Consider the way college boys in Trinidad in the 1950s risked expulsion from school (a very serious risk for a middle-class teenage boy) to beat pan. Their playful engagement opened a floodgate of middle-class participation in the street carnival and helped the steel pan to achieve a new legitimacy. This illustrates not only the serious attraction of play, but also the shifting boundaries between “serious” and “frivolous” play. It is not so much that people do not regard play as serious, that is, but rather that people make ideological distinctions between those forms of play that are to be regarded as serious and those that are not. What is the difference between the president’s review of the troops on Independence Day accompanied by a military band, and the stylized posing of the stickfighter accompanied by drumming and singing? What is the difference between an English impresario wooing Franz Joseph Haydn to London to compose and perform new works, and Rudolph Charles wooing Corbeaux Jack up the Hill to tune steel pans for Desperados? The notion of “popular nationalism” exhorts us to consider that people at all levels of society, not just the rich and powerful, have a stake in building community, and that they engage this project in a variety of creative, performative, and competitive ways.

One way in which the play of political leaders sometimes differs from the play of common people, however, is in its predictability. Roberto DaMatta’s observation that competition is “incompatible with hierarchized social systems” (see chap. 9) helps to explain why play in general is so exciting: because its outcome is contested, unpredictable, and charged with the thrill of new possibilities. Governments sometimes engage in such unpredictable contests, as in the case of war (Huizinga 1950: 89–104). But powerful people also try to stack the odds in their favor, which can render play less satisfying. Some of Panorama’s tensions and controversies, in particular, are rooted in the inherent contradiction of attempting to control play, of harnessing its unpredictable energy to a specific political agenda. Who wants to play if the outcome is decided ahead of time? Panorama’s ideological force depends on popular participation, but that same participation generates new and unexpected ideas that politicians seek to contain. The unpredictability of play is thus both necessary and problematic for those who wield power.

The steelband began as an expression of people who did not wield power in the political sense—people who were located literally or figuratively “behind the bridge,” on the margins of society, and for whom the play of carni-
val presented more opportunities than risks. Thanks to the creativity of young musicians, the support of their communities, and the work of well-connected people who were receptive to its possibilities, the steelband movement in Trinidad and Tobago became an arena for the coming together of high and low, local and foreign, presentation and participation. In this way it created space in the national dialogue for people who did not presume to control their world but who engaged life with a spirit of striving and play. As the steelband movement today assumes broader responsibilities, its challenge is to hold onto that spirit.