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Spread the Word: *Synergia* and Trinidad and Tobago's Re-versed Poetics

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Synergia: a fusion of art, jazz & poetry.

Produced by Rachel Collymore in conjunction with the Poetic Vibes Collective.

March 2011. Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago: Playa de Ibiza.

In the hip Port-of-Spain lounge Playa de Ibiza, I attended my first “formal” Trinidad and Tobago (TT) spoken word event in March 2011. Produced by Rachel Collymore in conjunction with the Poetic Vibes collective, the third edition of *Synergia: a fusion of art, jazz & poetry* blended spoken word, musical and live-painting performances. Perhaps because of its ambivalent definition as an art form and the challenges involved in documenting works that are performed rather than published, spoken word is infrequently addressed by scholars. Yet the small but vibrant spoken word movement erupting in TT urges us to re-contextualize the importance and influence of alternative literary art forms in the Caribbean.

Performative traditions are deeply embedded in much of TT's cultural practices: from the autochthonous musical genres of calypso and rapso to the Carnival-crafted “robber talk” of the notorious Midnight Robbers, orality is central to myriad forms of Trinbagonian cultural expression. Milla C. Riggio posits that young Trinbagonians' performative adeptness stems from “an unusual degree of physical self-confidence flowing from their experiences of self-presentation in one festive performance or another, most obviously in Carnival” (8). It should come as no surprise then, that spoken word poetry crafted for performance around elements of tone, rhythm and dramatic presentation should take strong hold as an expressive art form here.

Historically rooted in millennia of oral and poetic traditions, contemporary spoken word has been influenced by varied twenty and twenty-first century artistic movements and genres, including the Harlem Renaissance, jazz, Dub, Beat and Nuyorican poetry, rap, hip-hop and R&B, among others. Since the 1990s, popular slam competition circuits in the US have catapulted the form to commercialized popularity, and wide distribution of performances on social media sites such as youtube and facebook have lent it increased weight in global youth culture. Popularized among Trinbagonian youth by the HBO series *DEF Poetry Jams* and *Brave*

New Voices since the mid-2000s, the ways the art form is currently being practiced throughout the dual-island nation builds on, adds to and transforms both local and regional traditions in new and exciting ways.

The thriving contemporary spoken word of TT is intricately linked to the material and social conditions of the young artistes who produce it. These conditions foreground generational shifts in style and aesthetics from the immediate predecessors of the genre, yet highlight commonalities across long-standing TT oral and performative traditions. Most practicing artistes have been directly informed by the currents of spoken word emerging from the University of the West Indies (UWI)-St. Augustine campus, a presence shaped in large part by Wordsmiths. Since 2006, this active group of poets-in-training, housed in the Department of Creative and Festival Arts under the tutelage of Camille Quamina, has “graduated” some of the most active members of the spoken word community. Initially formed to prepare a group of UWI students for a slam competition in Washington D.C., many Wordsmiths members or those influenced by their work have gone on to forge independent artistic groups that center spoken word and/or develop spoken word and open mic events across TT. The current spoken word scene spans degrees of formality from academic to impromptu to swanky and engages a broad audience: U.WE Speak open mics invite university students to test the waters of their budding talents in monthly slams; professionally staged shows by up-and-coming artistes are recorded and produced for revenue; literary festivals and academic conferences feature spoken word performers; one-time shows are held to raise money for particular causes; religious activities incorporate spoken word; monthly shows in specific venues blend professional and amateur music and poetry talent; workshops offer spoken word as an educational tool; and street performances may occur *ad hoc* any Carnival season. While the majority of currently practicing spoken word poets most enthusiastically took up the genre after exposure to US forms, their practice of it is energetically crafted in locally and regionally-centered traditions of festive, poetic and oral performance.

The March 2011 *Synergia* event at Playa de Ibiza combined the cozy feel of a small jazz club with the polished sound, light and orchestration of a cosmopolitan venue. Catering primarily to an audience of progressive professionals and artists (who could afford the TT\$100 entrance fee), the show interspersed singing, spoken word and instrumental acts that often overlapped with one another. The three featured spoken word artistes—Anisty Cyrus, Aisha Perry and Derron Sandy—performed original pieces that covered a range of topics from adolescent suicide

to the importance of Marcus Garvey's work in the African diaspora. In collaboration with the musical efforts of talented instrumentalists and singers, these twenty-something poets demonstrated an impressive range of content, performative styles and poise.

While all of the spoken word was passionately delivered and hard-hitting, several outstanding pieces were particularly well-developed and delivered. To the mellow, steady percussion of steel pan beats, Aisha's pan-African tribute to the work of Marcus Garvey opened and closed with incantation—"Marcus Garvey sayin' know me, cuz we a rebel for we black history." Urging the audience to recognize that knowing your history allows you to more effectively shape your future, Aisha insisted that "intellect is the only weaponry."

Derron's jolting and provocatively performed "This is love" traced a budding romance through descriptive visualizations of dream-like "scenes" that charged the oral performance with persuasive cinematographic effect. Beginning with sweetly humorous overtones, a young couple meets, fall in love, formalize their union and become parents-to-be. In a tragic twist, the dream shatters into nightmare when they are violently accosted in their home by thieves and left for dead.

Unflinching and bravely accusatory, Derron's second piece challenged the limits of freedom expounded by US rhetoric: "Who created this unrest?" Astutely interrogating the complicity of the oil industry and US corporate greed with civil strife in the Middle East, Derron posits "all the money going into one man pocket, and in his land is where he reaps the first profit, now able to predict global collapses this one man prophet." Powerfully symbolizing the ways civil freedoms are masked by the empty rhetoric of the star spangled banner, the poet blindfolded himself with a red, white and blue ribbon before delivering the closing line: "Just in case, I never bought a Barack shirt anyway."

The sweet hymn that opened Anisty's first piece with brief, lilting song broke quickly into a tone of ironic solemnity as she presented a chilling memorial service for her own funeral. Relating the societal pressures she faced as a young woman in Trinidadian society, this piece recalled her short life and people's often false impressions of her seeming happiness post-mortem, after her suicide.

In opposing tone, "Salt" was an exhilarating, fiery embrace of the deeply painful and exorbitantly pleasurable. A unifying metaphor for pan-Caribbean socio-cultural ties, this piece positions salt as an underlying foundation of multiple Caribbean experiences: in the sweat of

celebratory jumping up, in the pain of tears, licked up with the shots taken to chase away loss, in the deliciously varied ethnic foods of the islands. Delivered to the background of upbeat percussion, Anisty's sound-off lists the layered symbolisms of salt in a tribute to the ways Caribbean people are united through their "seasoning."

The insightful poetry of Anisty, Aisha and Derron meaningfully and profoundly reflected on their society through comprehensive, multifocal artistic expression. Grounded in their lived experiences as young Trinidadians, the form and content of these poets extend TT traditions of using artistic expression as a vehicle for critique—perhaps most saliently in calypso—to spoken word. The poetic discourse developed by their social, cultural and political commentary throws into relief the ways their generation is directly impacted by both current local challenges (inflated poverty, pursuant crime and from August to December 2011 a government-declared State of Emergency and curfew) and global unrest (strife in the Middle East), as well as long-standing regional tropes (African diasporic culture and multi-ethnic identities). Within the comprehensive show, the spoken word of *Synergia* incorporated performative techniques and content in an exhilarating blend of dramatic performance—complete with the use of costumes, props, body movement and dance—instrumentation and profound, eloquent poetry. The scope of topics, styles, rhythms and collaborative performances between the three poets kept the mood of the show consistently engaging; the loungey ambience of the close, shadowed venue incited thoughtful reflection as well as communal reaction to pieces with hard-hitting messages. Much of the magic of *Synergia* is its energetically charged fusion of poetic vocals, singing, locally-infused rhythms and talented musical accompaniment, as the purpose of a blended show is precisely for voices, pan, guitar, keyboard, flute and drums to flow into each other. Refreshing and insightful to experience, the "fusion" feel of *Synergia* can also be distracting if your goal is to focus on a poet's every word. As is the case with any live performance, a balanced measure of sound is a difficult task requiring professional attention. Several spoken word pieces were not completely intelligible because instruments competed with the poets' voices, a detail that could be easily corrected in future shows and would make the spoken word performances more powerful overall.

Technicalities aside, *Synergia*'s spoken word demonstrates some of the ways oral and poetic traditions continue to evolve and interact with both local and international aesthetic and literary trends. It is thus one impressive representation of spoken word's growing impact within

TT and the Caribbean more broadly. This fusion show importantly demonstrates the permeable boundaries and interconnected matrices of Caribbean arts—literary, musical and dramatic—and the energizing potential of their mutual engagement. A September edition of *Synergia* raised funds for Trinbagonian artistes to travel to the International Spoken Word Festival in Nairobi, Kenya in October 2011, yet another demonstration of the form's extension to varied socio-cultural contexts.

Through its blend of extra-regional aesthetics and localized traditions, dialogue with Caribbean histories and their persisting legacies of inequality and dynamic use of digital social media for production and dissemination, TT spoken word is re-versing Caribbean literary endeavors in invigorating ways. A powerful vehicle for social critique, a complex and intriguing genre for scholarly study and a stylistically attractive form for regional educational enterprises, contemporary TT spoken word enthusiastically expands Caribbean literary canons. Spread the word!

Works Cited

Riggio, Milla C. 1998. "Resistance and identity: Carnival in Trinidad and Tobago." *TDR* 42, no. 3: 7-23.