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General Editor, *The Journal of Religion and Theatre*  
Department of Fine Arts  
Michigan Technological University  
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## The Deployment of Humor and Song in Asserting Black Diasporic Identity in Aimé Césaire's *A Tempest*.

Written by  
**Sam Vasquez**

Written in a Western context, Aimé Césaire's *A Tempest* alludes to the struggle of a Black diasporic subject in asserting identity in "literary" and oratory spaces. For the playwright, the primary space for questions is a fictional work that formulates one of the earliest dualistic paradigms of Western and non-Western identity - William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. The author recognizes that it is a mistake to imagine that one can interrogate constructions of diasporic selfhood without critiquing the sites that record identity and through which ideas are transmitted (in this case the canonical text with which Césaire engages). In articulating a reimagined selfhood, he recognizes a need to celebrate and foreground literacy/literary practices outside the Western tradition. Césaire implicitly acknowledges that any Black diasporic identity without the evocation of the vernacular and the presence of the proletariat formulates an incomplete representation of Black identity. For example, the text explores the ways in which the quotidian (represented by the semi deity Eshu Elegbara) deploy song and folklore (often alongside comedy) in articulating a Black diasporic experience. Houston Baker's observations that the vernacular represents a site of "ceaseless input and output"<sup>1</sup> is useful for my understanding of Césaire's deployment of the vernacular as a ceaseless cultural *sharing* of rituals and practices that contributed to the legacy of revisionist spiritual figures like Eshu. I will therefore argue for the ways in which *A Tempest* serves as a referent for exploring and reimagining the limiting constructions of Black diasporic identity (articulated early on in a master narrative) which would posit a marginalized subject as less than human. It becomes necessary to interrogate the hegemonic belief systems have been mapped unto the Black body and the ways in which intangible vernacular strategies such as humor and song mitigate against such constructions.

Césaire continually disrupts and problematizes the dramatic form with the songs that proliferate throughout the text. Additionally, the constant crooning of Eshu signals the

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<sup>1</sup> Baker, Houston A. *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984) 3.

importance of music in the lives of Black diasporic people. The complex and tendentious messages embedded in his performance remind us of the subversive nature of spirituals and work songs. The seeming simplicity of the words, the repetitions, the social relevance of the lyrics and the resemblance to the ballad insert us in a folkloric world. Furthermore, the medleys are often performed not only by a *group* of voices, but by individual characters who continually lapse into song. Such strategies move well beyond the notion of the chorus which one might typically expect of drama. Furthermore, the performance of a considerable number of folk songs evoke the quotidian and create the sense of a choreo-poem that serves as vernacular subtext for the marginalized protagonists. One of the most compelling renditions is Eshu's celebration of his acts of mischief as he sings,

*Eshu can play many tricks,  
Give him twenty dogs!  
You will see his dirty tricks*

*Eshu plays a trick on the Queen  
And makes her so upset that she runs  
Naked in the street*

*Eshu plays a trick on the bride,  
And on the day of the wedding  
She gets into the wrong bed!*

*Eshu can throw a stone yesterday  
And kill a bird today.  
He can make a mess out of order and vice-versa.  
Ah, Eshu is a wonderful bad joke.  
Eshu is not the man to carry a heavy load.  
His head comes to a point. When he dances  
He doesn't have his shoulders ...  
Oh, Eshu is a merry elf!*

*Eshu is a merry elf,  
And he can whip you with his dick,  
He can whip you,  
He can whip you...<sup>2</sup>*

This piece demonstrates the use of inversion to question icons (the queen) that establish the hierarchy between Blacks and Whites. In keeping with what is thematized, the recitation

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<sup>2</sup> Césaire, Aimé. *A Tempest*. trans. Richard Miller (New York: Ubu Repertory Theater, 1992) 48.

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structurally represents the fact that Eshu can "make a mess out of order and vice versa." The song is composed of three tercets, an octave, and concluded with a quatrain. The tercets as well as the other poetic paragraphs establish the fact that the form is *based* on the quatrain. Yet the poetic devices employed frustrate any other attempts at predicting sound. For example, while the last line of each tercet echoes the first line of the respective stanza, first and last lines repeat with a marked difference, in the first case the rhyme is simply a repetition of the same word "tricks," in the second stanzas vowel rhymes graphically conflate the image of the Queens and streets. In the third stanza alliteration provides the link between the first and last lines. While the song flirts with poetic *form* (for example, there are instances of inner rhyme (carry and heavy), traditional rhyme / repetition (tricks and dick, yesterday and today) and assonance rhymes (load and shoulders), aside from line breaks the poetic *diction* gives little indication that this piece is divided into quatrains. Only our knowledge of the ballad form and the not quite traditional poetic paragraphs create such a sense of division. Aurally then, and to some degree visually, one experiences three tercets and three quatrains. The final quatrain stands alone at the end of the song as a declaration / reminder of what is only evoked throughout the rest of the song. Not only is the form of the play complicated by the prevalence of folksongs, but the very songs represent a hybrid form. These foundational elements of poetic diction and their promise of order belie the chaos that is thematized in Eshu's misbehavior. The semi-deity makes a mess out of the order one would typically expect of a recognizable "Western" song. While asserting a complex individual, Césaire introduces an ever fracturing form as analogous to the figure's attempts to disrupt static ideologies.

While the final quatrain functions as appropriate summary and guide for the song, it helps us make sense of the selection in other ways. Ironically, it neatly summarizes Eshu's attempts to flout propriety and order. Most tellingly, "dick" rhymes with "whip" and even returns us to the word "tricks" in stanza one. Both words sum up one final time the vulgarity associated with Eshu. Joanne Gilbert refers to such jokes as "classic examples of the 'tendentious humor' [that] Freud describes."<sup>3</sup> More significant is her observation that "'a non-tendentious joke scarcely ever achieves the sudden burst of laughter which makes the tendentious ones so

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<sup>3</sup> Gilbert, Joanne R. *Performing Marginality: Humor, Gender, and Cultural Critique*. (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2004) 68.

irresistible." As a result "some critics believe that dick jokes<sup>4</sup> provide catharsis for the audience." In a Black Diasporic context Lawrence Levine explicitly links the tradition of such humor to the trickster, and similarly argues that they were deployed in order to "minimize the pain"<sup>5</sup> that often resulted from mistreatment by Whites. Furthermore, Eshu's words remind us of humor's duplicity and duality. While it has historically been used for catharsis for the marginalized, comedy has also been deployed to spread the myth of "extraordinary black sexual prowess and superiority."<sup>6</sup> Such humor therefore not only holds the appealing properties that enable it to communicate alternatives, but has already established an audience to which such a salve might be equally appealing. In this regard, the recuperative efforts of comedy exploit the very form that may have initially caused harm. The insertion of humor here provides a sort of levity that creates a sense of security amidst the fracturing of the text, and reminds us of the significance of the joke in a Black diasporic context; humor provides a safe space for the figure whose identity is continually assaulted. Furthermore, through the inversion of comedy's tendency to fracture, the use of the joke to assert identity demonstrates the ways in which the master's tools can in fact dismantle the master's house.

### Negotiations of Gender and Sexuality

There are moments in which Césaire uses Eshu, a tangible representation of spirituality, to interrogate stereotypes of the Black body. The trickster's vulgarity and allusion to sexuality is not only typical of this figure but reminds us of the racial stereotypes that are mapped

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<sup>4</sup> While Richard Miller's English translation of the term favors the more vulgar word penis, the context of the song demonstrates the ways in which such a connotation/reading is appropriate. As most of Miller's translation is in keeping with the spirit of Césaire usage of standard French, I am less interested in closely analyzing the slippage in language. The distinctions between a translation between Bennett and Hurston versus Césaire might be more dramatic for instance. Undoubtedly there is slippage between the Martinican and his translator. More fruitful for my analysis however, are the moments of slippage within Césaire's own articulations where he employs more graphic or conversational expressions. Furthermore, Joanne Gilbert's discussion which includes various terms demonstrate the ways in which context of the material rather than choices between standard and non-standard language ultimately determine classification. See *Performing Marginality* 68,75, 90.

<sup>5</sup> Levine, Lawrence. *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977) 333.

<sup>6</sup> Levine, Lawrence. *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977) 333.

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onto/made synonymous with notions of Black morality (or perhaps more appropriately used to substantiate arguments about a *lack* of moral decorum). For example, the song gestures toward the male phallus; its prominence is representative of stereotypes of a correspondingly overdeveloped sexual appetite. In *Black Skin, White Masks* Frantz Fanon similarly explores the prevalence of such stereotypes, and argues that when one thinks "of the Negro, one thinks of sex."<sup>7</sup> Therefore, rather than a *lack* of selfhood or a level of invisibility, the text also dramatizes the ways in which Black identity has also been constructed as representing *excess*. Through its over attentiveness to such typecasting, Césaire's text begins to trouble the hierarchy that seeks to demoralize the racially marginalized protagonists. While the tricks to which Eshu alludes have disturbing sexual implications, they also alert us to the figure's dominance over societal mores and pillars in the community. For example, the Queen who runs naked into the streets is not only disrobed but dethroned at Eshu's instigation. Additionally, the ultimate representation of chastity – the bride – "gets into the wrong bed" thereby compromising her societal position. No matter how troubling, the phallic symbol evoked in the final poetic paragraph (which is deployed as a weapon)<sup>8</sup> connotes dominance and by extension evokes a laughing trickster figure who is ideologically and literally in control.

The characterizations of the figure as "over-sexed" are somewhat mitigated by this controlled participation in each act of mischief. There is a marked distance between Eshu and his targets. In stanza two as the Queen runs into the street Eshu's proximity to his subject is unclear. Yet the public display of her body establishes a space in which she is at the mercy of an audience. Ironically, despite her exposure, this open space therefore lacks intimacy and by extension proximity and engagement. Additionally, the queen compromises the protection

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<sup>7</sup> Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. (New York: Grove Press, 1967) 60. This sort of obsession with the Black male body across multiple levels of society is perhaps most profoundly and ironically encapsulated by Sula in Toni Morrison's novel of the same name. Sula asserts,

I mean, I don't know what the fuss is all about. I mean, everything in the world loves you. White men love you. They spend so much time worrying about your penis they forget their own... And white women? They chase you all to every corner of the earth, feel for you under every bed... Colored women worry themselves into bad health just trying to hang on to your cuffs. Even little children - white and black, boys and girls - spend all of their childhood eating their hearts out 'cause they think you don't love them ... and if that ain't enough you love yourselves. Nothing in this world loves a black man more than another black man... So. It looks to me like you the envy of the world 103, 104.

<sup>8</sup> For a similar metaphor see Frantz Fanon's description of the phallus as sword in *Black Skin, White Masks*. (New York: Grove Press, 1967) 169.

inherent to her rank by mingling in such a familiar way with the populace. A similar ambiguity exists in the next stanza in which Eshu's trick on a "bride" lacks any indication of engagement. Furthermore, the fact that it is a "Queen" and a "bride" rather than particularized individuals with which Eshu interacts, further highlights a lack of interest in these women beyond their symbolic value. The distance from/undermining of representatives of female power and chastity not only reveals the semi-deity's dominance but as allegorical representation of Caliban, distance here serves as compelling testimony to contradict the myth of the Black male's obsession with white women.<sup>9</sup> The objectification of female characters is undeniably limiting. Still, Eshu's song reveals the ways in which his interaction with the figures stems from a desire to be mischievous, rather than from any real interest in the women in question. Through this distance Césaire establishes autonomy for the male diasporic individual and through his exploitation of biases, dramatizes the absurdity of reductive stereotypes regarding Black sexuality. In this way Eshu is able to highlight with impunity the shortcomings of stereotypes that would elevate the colonizer at the expense of the Black diasporic figure's identity/morality.

Despite such reimaginings of Black cultural codes, the shortcomings of Eshu as revolutionary voice or revisionist symbol are apparent. Most troubling is the gender inequality that surfaces in the song. Ironically, characters/representatives of domineering institutions that are undermined are women. In fact, with the exception to vague allusions to Sycorax (Caliban's mother), the absence of the Black female in the text is almost palpable.<sup>10</sup> By their very inclusion in the play, and the treatment of these female figures, it becomes apparent that the White woman (even while overshadowed by the presence of the White male), always already exists as subject for discourse. Additionally, Miranda's prominence juxtaposed with Caliban's subordination demonstrates the ways in which "sex-gender attributes are no longer the primary index of 'deferent' difference."<sup>11</sup> Yet, as articulated by Césaire, no such possibility exists for the Black woman. This attention to the arguably White queen and bride, as well as the attention

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<sup>9</sup> Frantz Fanon explores the complex relationship between White woman and Black men. See Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. (New York: Grove Press, 1967) 157.

<sup>10</sup> For a more detailed explication see Sylvia Wynter's discussion in Sylvia Wynter, "Beyond Miranda's Meanings: Un/silencing the 'Demonic Ground' of Caliban's 'Woman'" in Boyce-Davies, Carole and Elaine Savory-Fido. *Out of the Kumbia: Caribbean Women and Literature*. (Trenton: Africa World Press, 1990).

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given Miranda, is in sharp contrast to the literally and figuratively invisible Black woman. In this scene, not only does she lack agency, but is denied even the *possibility* of participating in the discourse regarding voice and sexuality.

This moment demonstrates that whether intentionally or unintentionally Césaire's articulations of diasporic identity not only represent the difficult challenges in negotiating hegemonic constructions, but themselves evince shortcomings in their conception. For example, limiting depictions of women and particularly the Black woman, offer an incomplete picture of Black diasporic identity. Still, the gestures beyond Manichaeic representations that characterize foundational narratives such as Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, and the complications of readings of the Black body through inversion, offer useful reimaginings of Black selfhood. Integral to such a discussion is the way in which identity is articulated in literature. Césaire also interrogates formal attributes of the play through the insertion of songs, folklore and humor. Finally, the vernacular trope of the masked trickster figure Eshu Elegbara demonstrates the ways in which alternative conceptions of genre and hierarchies are sometimes useful in a Black Diasporic context for revising stereotypes and articulating autonomous identity. Finally, *A Tempest* highlights the ways in which such challenges to Western discourse are best communicated through the subversive though permissive platform that is humor.

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<sup>11</sup> Sylvia Wynter, "Beyond Miranda's Meanings: Un/silencing the 'Demonic Ground' of Caliban's 'Woman'" in Boyce-Davies, Carole and Elaine Savory-Fido. *Out of the Kumbla: Caribbean Women and Literature*. (Trenton: Africa World Press, 1990) 358.