Preface: Talking About Culture: Re-thinking the Popular

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PREFACE

Talking About Culture: Re-thinking the Popular

Nadi Edwards

Since the late 1920s, Caribbean popular culture has been the subject of an incessant critical conversation among the cultural practitioners, intellectuals and critics of the region. This conversation is evident in the numerous attempts to produce local models of politics, aesthetics and philosophy, and it frames the discourses of political and cultural decolonization, the sentiments of the nationalist moment, and the claims of citizenship, identity and belonging. The popular has often been conflated with the national in ways that emphasize the latter as a primary ontological category, a foundational principle that is both source and destination of cultural practices. This is the principle that subtends Frantz Fanon's incisive assertion of the nation as the guarantor of a national culture, and it also resonates in C.L.R. James's reading of the Trinidad Carnival as a possible model for a Caribbean political imaginary, a democratic space which inscribes freedom in its very modalities of collective participation, and non-hierarchical creative performance. There are other assertions that deploy the popular in the service of a variety of ethnonationalisms and reductive populisms that stake out the interests of particular groups in the conflictual terrain of postcolonial nation states. Regardless of intent and effect, the varied assertions point to the centrality of popular culture in Caribbean thought.

In this light, it is instructive to recall earlier approaches to Caribbean popular cultural forms. For example, Trinidadian popular culture was appropriated by the writers of the 1930s in order to initiate a decolonized literary and critical practice. The barrack-yard culture of Port of Spain, with its expressive vehicles of picong, calypso and Carnival, provided local aesthetic models that enabled C.L.R James, Alfred Mendes and others to produce a self-consciously local literature. Several generations of Caribbean creative artists and intellectuals have utilized this model of creative appropriation and adaptation of the popular as a touchstone of their commitment to adequately represent and engage the region's realities. Popular culture, in this sense, linked the nationalist projects of political and cultural autonomy; its presence conferred authenticity on emergent national literatures, visual arts, dance and theatre. Given the émigré status of much of the region's literati, popular culture also signified the nostalgia of homeland, the expressive umbilical cord that linked writers in metropolitan exile to the distant sources of their art.

In the anglophone Caribbean, the acrimonious and divisive debates around culture and criticism highlighted the paramount status of popular culture as the ground of nativist aesthetics and philosophy. To revisit the debates of the late 1960s and early 1970s is to sense the importance of the popular in Caribbean critical thought, and to recognize the ways in which the contradictions, conflicts and contentious divisions within cultural and national formations were often glossed over in the desire to present popular cultural forms as embodiments of a national consensus.

This desire, replete with its symbolic constructions, resonates within the present attempts to pin Trinidadianness or Jamaicanness onto specific expressive forms such as Carnival and reggae, respectively. But this desire is destined to be thwarted by the intractable, complex and conflictual nature of popular forms which often subvert the codes of propriety that are expected of representative cultural practices. The searing critiques of the nation state that abound in reggae and calypso, the "slackness" and perceived antisocial nihilism of raggamuffin dancehall music, and the bacchanal of soca are often antithetical to the idea of the nation promulgated by political elites. The popular, in its noisy corporeality, its carnivalesque mobility and its border crossing propensity cannot be easily accommodated as a respectable citizen, despite its indisputable status as native. The contradictory status of the popular can be seen in the current debates about the negative effects of popular music forms such as dancehall on the region's youth. The debates, often couched in the ethico-moral discourse of "values and attitudes", pit those who see dancehall as an agent of social pathology against those who argue for a more complex understanding of the genre. The scapegoating of popular cultural forms points, in many ways, to the enervation of the institutional structures

of the state, and the crises engendered by decades of International Monetary Fund and World Bank structural adjustment, political corruption, and socioeconomic stagnation. As the social costs of neoliberal economic policies mount, as drugs, guns and internecine violence take their horrific toll on fragile societies, the representations of dancehall become the ground for another critical conversation, another culture war marked by generational differences as well as different claims on the character of culture.

The current controversy also highlights the differential status accorded various popular cultural forms as well as the dialectic of celebration and denigration that marks the critical conversation on popular culture. While cricket, calypso, carnival, reggae and folk religions are now icons of Caribbeanness, their extant canonical status rests on a conflict-riddled history of struggle for acceptance by the Caribbean middle classes and political elites. Ironically, the celebrants of one generation often become the most severe critics of a later generation's taste. The virulent debates about the merits of older kaiso over contemporary soca and its hybrid forms, or reggae's priestly chant over dancehall's profane rhymes underscore these generational differences. Such debates tend to occlude the reality of continuities between older and later forms and the adaptations and reinventions that inhere in the dynamic of the popular. The latter constitutes its own critical and creative conversation, a fact that the calypsonian Black Stalin expresses incisively in his definition of the calypso as "man talking to man".

In this light, this special issue of *Small Axe* is merely a millennial intervention in the larger conversation that constitutes Caribbean culture and criticism. The articles collected here, while reflecting a range of intellectual positions and perspectives, are all grounded in the conjunctural sensitivities of the present moment of globalization and the concomitant rethinking of nationalism, national culture, national sovereignty and identity. These concerns frame the present but they also critically refract the past by rereading and rerouting older themes of exile through the contemporary prism of diaspora; thus Carol Duncan reads the venerable theme of the folk in terms of the fluid reinventions of Aunt Jemima stereotypes by Afro-Caribbean women in Toronto; and Rinaldo Walcott interrogates notions of race, nation and cultural authenticity in terms of the dislocating ambiguities and multiple crossings that inhere in contemporary Black Canadian popular culture. The persistent question of representation is also confronted in Gordon Rohlehr's exploration of the role and responsibility of the calypsonian in representing the nation, and in Winthrop Holder's interview with Black Stalin. Curwen Best examines the interplay of technology and culture evinced in the emergence of ring-bang as a post-soca musical form. The subversive politics of multicultural Englishness emerge in Loretta Collins's analysis of ragamuffin "yardie fiction"

and Jan Lowe's reading of the epic dialogic narratives of Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*. Curdella Forbes reminds us of the relationship between the colonial literary canon and the Caribbean popular in her reading of William Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* from a Glissantian perspective. Mike Alleyne's review of Chris Morrow's book on reggae album cover art pays attention to the latter's status as "a widely contested cultural space, subject to unprecedented textual and intertextual assessment", a space that reveals the various thematic trends and strands of reggae's evolution.

This special issue of *Small Axe*, given its focus on the anglophone Caribbean, does not claim to be representative or even inclusive. But it addresses many of our contemporary concerns regarding popular culture in the age of globalization. In these articles, the clamour of race, gender, class, nation and identity is recognized as the incessant backbeat, the cross-cutting rhythms and clashing sounds of a noisy, animated conversation on culture. Welcome to the dialogue.