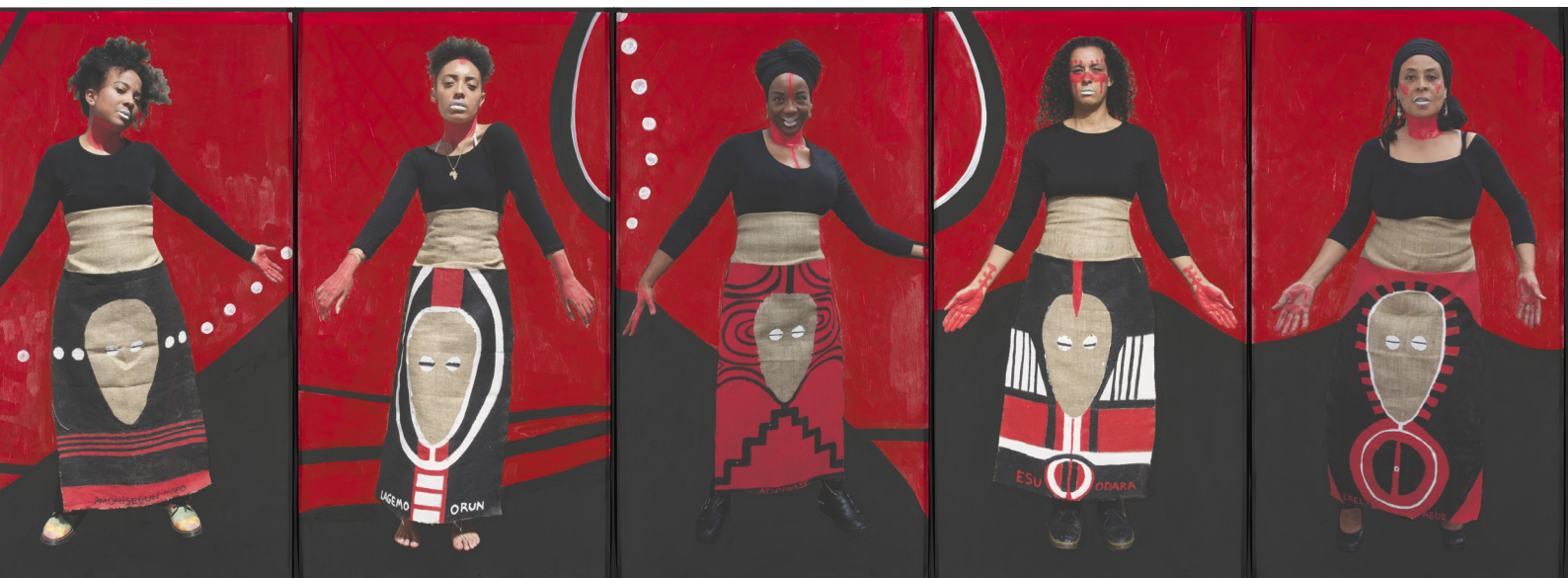


# Diaspora Mas': Dancing Outside Opens the Road

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## Abstract

In this paper I discuss mas' (Carnival) and some of the ways in which an appreciation of mas' was reborn in my practice, with reference to the concept of migration and how this facilitated a metaphorical move, closer to home. Here, I speak from a personal narrative perspective as a woman diaspora artist. This essay does not intend to speak on behalf of others, or to generalise others' experiences of migration – I understand and acknowledge that these experiences are specific to me, located within my own cultural and political context, but it is my hope that there are moments within this, that resonate with others. Although what follows is not overtly gender-based, I acknowledge the inevitable intersection of my experiences with the politics of my presence.

I see mas' forms emerging from circumstances and systems that insist that your presence, behaviour, culture, traditions, rituals, ways of being and doing are inherently, counter to a dominant. This situation of being "counter" derives from dislocation: being located, re-located, transplanted outside of home space – outside of norm, under the diameter. Within the dynamic of the situation of dislocation, there is the urgent need to be free and to be able to define for ourselves, what being free means to us. In my experience, this has meant the need to find spaces, moments, ways to be – the way you feel to be and to do, what you feel to do. That realisation allows us to dream, to see alternatives, to dance with *Esu* and claim agency to manifest, even if temporarily, our freedom. As a result, we inevitably utilise what we have—our bodies, our voice, our bits-and-pieces—in order to make a freedom, collectively and individually, expressing that which we

## Artwork

Esu Series by Dr Adéqlá Dewis  
Acrylic on photographic print paper  
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## Original photos

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dream. This being free permits visibility of selves somewhat suppressed. Mas', as defined by Lloyd Best, is to be what you have to be, and to do what you have to do. My research acknowledges that this performance activity is outside of the everyday (involving masking, exaggeration, layering, re-presentation), but is still connected to it. The performance, costume or play, facilitates ways of engaging socio-political dynamics. Personally, my dislocation comes from moving from Trinidad and Tobago to Wales. That situation involved the natural navigation of finding my footing, the bruising, the confronting, that come from operating outside of home space. Those experiences permit the growth of different self-realizations – a journey back to yourself or back to a self through which you can operate more fully. The realization that we come with the tools that we need in turn, grows visions which was, in my case, a vision to make an art that encouraged me to reconnect with the mas' that I missed.

*<sup>1</sup> I have often found this word problematic as it assumes power of one who tolerates over the other who is being tolerated. I use it here in its democratic definition – as a virtue of showing willingness to be within and around different behaviour, opinions, practices and people.*

## Migration

It was not my ultimate intention to be living away from home for the last 20 years. Two decades ago, I was newlywed and intending to pursue my MA in Fine Arts at University of the Arts in London, but instead I was heading to Wales, where my then-husband had his roots. At that time, I knew little of Welsh history or of the Welsh language. I knew Wales was different to my island home, but I wasn't daunted by that notion of difference. In Trinidad, difference was prosaic and openly acknowledged and spoken about. Our people are made up of many different ethnicities – those of African and Indian descent are the majority, but there are also Indigenous First People, and those of Caucasian, Chinese, Syrian and Lebanese heritages, mixtures of these, and more. My memory of primary school playground conversations included being repeatedly asked the question, "what are you mixed with?" There was an almost obsessive knowing assumption that someone presenting as of obvious African descent was, in the mele of our island history, carrying mixed ancestry. What emerged from this open acknowledgement of difference was not only a genuine tolerance<sup>1</sup> for others—we can work, live, play and make families together—but also a feeling of belonging to this space we had collectively made.

What the island seemed to have balanced well was the celebration of national identity and the nations that contributed to this. Within this concept, there was respect and pride in Emancipation Day, Divali, Indian Arrival Day, Eid, Hosay, Spiritual-Baptist Day, Double 10 Day and so on. I have deliberately simplified this relationship as naturally there are multiple other dynamics at play in people relations, attraction and access to opportunities, including the ways in which we have the default capacity to revel chin-deep in colonial legacies of colourism and shadeism, and so on. Politically, we have often witnessed the adoption of colonial tactics that amplify difference as a way of dividing and creating perceptions of the "other" as a threat, in order to win votes. Yet, within those nuanced relationships, there is a rootedness of place and belonging that permits expressions, vocality and gestures that speak from, and indeed prioritises, the popular over the established, systemic infrastructure. These physical,

creative and vocal articulations acknowledge that we all have a say. The Carnival holds space for that plurality and can be seen as the epitome of those expressions of belonging.

Wales occupies a precarious position as both colonised (by the English) and coloniser (as part of the British Empire). Because of my interest in Carnivals, I was introduced to an area of Cardiff known as Butetown, originally known as Tiger Bay and The Docks before its redevelopment by Cardiff Council. Butetown was known to have a popular Carnival but, at the time of my arrival, it was on hiatus. From as early as the 1800s, this dockland community was said to have been comprised of people from all over the world, where every ethnicity was represented and, as the story goes, they all got along. During the Windrush era—the period between 1948 to 1971, when people from British colonies were invited to Britain to help re-build the 'mother country' after World War 2—Butetown's reputation preceded it, and many Caribbean people saw it as a welcoming destination.

With gentrification and the invention of Cardiff Bay, the Butetown demographic is in transition. Although I felt connected to a version of the mixed heritage of Butetown's identity, reminiscent of a microcosm of my island, the Butetown people and I have inevitably had different processes of becoming. Our identities, perceptions of self and the world, although similar, were forged in direct relation to the socio-political contexts that surrounded us. An example of this distinction is evident in an interview conducted with a Butetown resident on her experience of the Caribbean Windrush generation. A child at the time, she remembers her parents and neighbours scoffing at the ambition these Caribbean people had to move out of the community that had embraced them when they first arrived, and to buy their own homes. There is, of course, ambition in Butetown and, more accurately, we understand that those who identify as Butetown people are not homogenous, as is the same with any group of people. One of the distinctions evident to me at that time—which was not particularly based on my Caribbean-ness<sup>2</sup> versus their Welshness—was the ability to speak out. Whereas I may have been vocal at home, in a land outside of my own, I was more inclined to recognise adverse treatment, to log it (perhaps vent with family) and quietly continue. The Black and Brown Welsh people who surrounded me had grown a fierceness and confidence in vocality that ensured that any adverse situation or treatment was immediately called out. This was perhaps not only borne from their circumstances of becoming, but also their rootedness in *belonging*.

My migration to Wales intersected with being a wife and then eventually becoming a mother. This means that when recalling my experiences of moving from a 'home' space to a new space, I may also be inclined to include dynamics that are more a consequence of the cross-over of these experiences than simply just migration. I felt as if my quiet ease of assimilation may have mitigated some of the harsh reactions to my otherness, but through that ease I may have also facilitated a diminishing of my *Trinidadian-ness*, *Caribbean-ness*, *Adéólá-ness*. Hall said that the beginnings of Caribbean people determines a kind of destiny to migrate,

<sup>2</sup> It is well known that Caribbean people have made colossal impacts on spaces that they move to, including people like Claudia Jones, Stokely Carmichael and Altheia Jones-Lecointe.

but while fulfilling this destiny I ended up making myself smaller and quieter. I had encounters with galleries that said my paintings were too colourful. During the MA at a Welsh institution, my otherness was heightened. It was my presence that ignited the racial politics of my practice. It was my practice that facilitated my need to recognise self-suppressed aspects of presence.

### **Moving Closer to Home**

My parents had recommended that I do my first degree at home, rather than abroad. The thinking behind this was concerned with the opportunity to know myself and my culture deeper, with the critical lens of an emerging academic before venturing into the jaws of the outside world that have gobbled up those Caribbean people, not fully rooted. In my view, those people were predominantly epitomised by ones who visited the United States for the August holiday and returned to the island with a flawless American accent. Having completed my first degree in Trinidad, my MA ought not to have been the ground-shaker that it was. Again, the intersection of the other aspects of becoming wife and mother also played their part.

I entered this phase of my learning with questions around exploring ways of combining my movement practice and my fine art practice. My creative experiments with performance art led to critique around hyper-sexualisation and the politics of the Black female body. This critique was also present, in less-eloquent phrasing, from a local Cardiff Carnival group, by other carnival performers. Interestingly, those performers debasing my spontaneous performance were involved in a Trini-style Carnival tradition that was super-imposed onto the Welsh, Cardiff landscape – a tradition that was very personal to my Carnival experience in Trinidad. Their derogatory words heightened the question around what my body was allowed and not allowed to do – based on a politic that had little to do with Adéplá and everything to do with my perceived *otherness*.

I was once asked, “do you see yourself?” At the time I remember thinking that I did not see myself. The seeing implied a consciousness that had not yet reached maturity – one that echoed Hall’s uncanny experiencing of oneself as both object and subject, of encountering self from the outside as another or an *other* and DuBois’ earlier notion of double consciousness, and seeing self through the lens of a White society. The type of self-consciousness that necessitated itself through that comment, as a requirement of being within this space, perpetuated a level of insecurity. I allowed the insecurity that was already heightened by concepts of European superiority within the art world I encountered here, to lead to the whiting out of my canvases. The intension was to restart, to find my voice, to remove pre-conceptions of what I thought I knew, to dissolve who I thought I was and to begin again from that silence. Within the creative dark silence of this self-made cocoon, I was faced with the realisation of my situation of dislocation. The emerging questions pointed me back to core, to gut, to instinct, to joy: what do I know best? What is mine? How do I speak? In this darkness, I recalled my childhood of drawing and drawing and drawing the female

figure. On my whited-out canvases I drew a figure and then decided to become this perfect figure, by transforming her into a costume. I utilised stockings, canvas, an old vest, and called her cAnfAs. After exploring performance art interventions as cAnfAs at university social gatherings, I took her to Trinidad during the Carnival season. In cAnfAs on a Carnival Tuesday afternoon, two elders declared—amid dancing, costumed bodies—that my art was mas'. These gentlemen gave me permission to be face-to-face with my own performance art, my Jouvay, my mas', an experience that was rooted in my island. Inevitably, the offshoots of this experience were rooted in my body. Body memory, recollection and ritualising nostalgia all played crucial roles in the practice that emerged.

## Mas'

Carnival is the ideal integrated art form, seamlessly combining visual arts, performance, movement and music. My MA question concerned with finding ways of combining my art and movement work, found a comfortable fit within a carnival template. More importantly, the insecurity around exploring my practice within—what was presented as a British or European world of cutting-edge performance art, after being told that the Caribbean was ten-years behind in artistic innovations—began to dissolve. My focus shifted from facing North, to facing South. My question evolved to consider what this notion of mas' was. In that shift, I was not only re-orienting myself towards the familiar, I was also beginning to engage an agency that trusted processes involving body memory, embodiment, recollection and transformation. I knew this thing, and I knew it because it was part of me. This also implied that the mas' was also part of all those who were invested in it.

When I refer to mas', I am considering the popular, the artistic, linguistic and the innovative new re-imaginings of carnival forms and expressions. That perspective embraces a plurality of knowing and being and feeling – a plurality that can often manifest as contentious, but that exhibits precisely the dynamic that carnivals embody best, which is that of embracing all that is outside of the mundane, day-to-day. The other, the trans, the loud, the multiple, the spiritual, the free. For me, Jouvay—which is the pre-dawn Monday morning ritual that heralds the two-days of Carnival—was the epitome of the Carnival season. It embodies the liminal, the transitional, transformation, the darkness of creation, life and death, birth, becoming, healing and community. The opening lines in my presentation for 2017 Carnival: Conference at Leeds Beckett University pays homage to this Jouvay:

**The pitch-black road – made from the black tar that erupts in the belly of the island. Black because it is and even blacker now as the sun slumbers, waiting to be invoked. Didn't the Robber say that on the day he was born the sun refused to shine? Well, on this black day, sleep will have to wait as expectant bodies gather. We know the drill. We've been doing this ritual since 1834.**

As mas' experiences are varied, it was crucial that my research considered the impressions of others in the field to gain a more intimate understanding. This research question of mas' followed me to my PhD and continued to inform my practice. The opportunity to be a PhD candidate at Cardiff University's school of Critical and Cultural Theory presented the framework within which mas' questions could be further explored. It was within that space that conceptualisations and contextualisation around what mas' was for me began to take shape. Here, I considered the intrinsic, elemental makeup of a concept of mas' as well as the ways in which mas' aesthetics could be implemented into art-making or art presentation. These lines of inquiry were also meant to resonate with people who may have been experiencing forms of displacement or social anxiety.

<sup>3</sup> <http://mamadatsmas.blogspot.com>

<sup>4</sup> <http://masmama.blogspot.com>

<sup>5</sup> <http://playyuhselfexp.blogspot.com>

<sup>6</sup> <http://routetoroots2017.blogspot.com>

## Mas' reborn – Speaking out

What then does mas' begin to look like and sound like and feel like when it is severed from its socio-political and cultural context? What are the bare bones of this ritual and can we—like the *La Loba* archetype of Pinkola Estés' writing—gather, re-assemble and bring back a kind of life to these precious embodied 'rememberings', allowing our bodies to once again re-awaken the linear and horizontal lines of communication with our ties to self-empowerment? Can we mark time with these ritual objects and gestures, stripped bare of beads and feathers and scrubbed of glitter, paint and mud and encrusted instead with the stones, earth and coal of the damp Welsh landscape? Can the re-housing of our precious bits and pieces retain the primal power of their original context?

This mas' work exploration began with a collaborative project, *Mama dat is mas*, which explored masking, ritual and representation. In this group performance experiment, we intended to invoke collective memories of carnival and of home, making a temporary space to allow our bodies to ritually inhabit those memories<sup>3</sup>. The mas' experimentation continued into the following project *Mama Mas: Conversations for Transformation*<sup>4</sup>, which looked at experiences of motherhood. Here, the question was around the processes involved in inviting other people (in this case, mothers) to explore a mas' experience of empowerment, which was traditionally only available to carnival revellers, by engaging processes of telling, making, transforming and revealing/public presentation. For the public presentation, the final masking/re-presentation/transformation was photographed and displayed on billboards. The following project, *Play Yuhself*<sup>5</sup>, was a performance experiment that explored processes of accessing 'other' aspects of self. These processes included repetition, exhaustion, community and anonymity. The template here was a return to Jouvay, involving a pre-dawn dance ritual giving our bodies permission to move however they wanted to move. The musicians too had the task of unscripted, spontaneous organic drumming. *Route to Roots*<sup>6</sup> took the form of an artist residency, exploring carnival arts as a way of facilitating African diaspora knowledge exchange. This project involved a live performance that looked both to the past and to the future, through re-imagining a performance ritual that grappled with exploring traditional Egungun

masquerade aesthetics, and the diaspora manifestations of African spirituality within a Carnival processional template. The transformational richness of this residency experience laid for me, in the conversations between the African and African diaspora artists. In many ways, this *Route to Roots* project was the spark that ignited the vision for *Laku Neg* – a burgeoning artist-run company invested in African Diaspora knowledge exchange. My practice involves writing, painting, drawing, performance and spoken word and, through each of these forms, my work continues to face homeward, stretching arms long and wide to connect and explore aspects of home outside of home-space. These art experiences do not replace the nourishment necessitated by a visit back to Trinidad – my investment in mas' simply keeps the connected arteries, unclogged.

I believe that evolution and change are constant. In mas' aesthetic works like the ones I explored, I re-imagined temporary spaces where transformation was necessary, where subversion was possible, where plural voices and opinions were heard, where subdued selves could dance without criticism and where we played and danced for ourselves. Outside, or perhaps on the side of art practice, I recall dancing in a Carnival parade with my first born. He might have been seven or eight years old. We had gotten to a point in the parade where he was feeling a bit tired. As we walked past spectators, an enthusiastic elderly woman, smiling and clapping her hands, said to him, "dance, dance, dance". I looked him squarely in the face and said, "you dance when you want to dance". "Your dance is for no one else but yourself". That spectators partake through observation is fine. For our Black and Brown bodies in this parade, the notions of spectacle and entertainment were too politically-loaded for me to allow his response to the elder's comments to result in an animated dancing boy with bowed head.

I think there is power in reclaiming mas', folk and traditional, ancestral performance aesthetics within the everyday, in allowing aspects to feed approaches to research interactions. Interpretations of mas' allow for ways of understanding our so-called othered bodies in spaces and places – understanding our belonging to this planet, beyond borders. Through mas' we claim imagination and agency to speak, to shout, to sing from a place of rootedness.

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