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## **ABSTRACT**

This study aims to review the use of folklore within bodies of work extending across the genres of prose fiction, art and poetry. This is done to provide a critical insight into art and literature influenced by Trinidad and Tobago folklore. This is because folklore serves as a direct link to the past and is a part of our Caribbean identity. Oral tradition transmits various knowledges in the process of human learning and insight about life and the world around us. Qualitative research methods were used through the form of email interviews with author and poet Dr Jennifer Rahim as well as art scholar and critic Dr Marsha Pearce to assist in adding insight to the study. Additionally, selected creative works from Paul Keens-Douglas, Rahim and Leroy Clarke are analysed regarding how folklore characters are represented in these forms— narrative, poems, and drawings. The findings of the study indicate that folklore continues to be part of the cultural knowledge of Trinidad and Tobago and passed down through the generations via the oral tradition; yet, as time passes, even while they also fall back on conventional portrayals of folkloric figures, the writer and the artist rewrite and redraw the them in innovative ways to relay important messages to their readers, listeners, and viewers.

Keywords: folklore, oral tradition, art, literature, Trinidad and Tobago

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# INTRODUCTION

## Rationale

Folk tradition in the English-speaking Caribbean is regarded with both ambivalence and sentimentality. Folk tradition is integral to the childhood of many West Indians, and the stories hold deep cultural, moral and spiritual values. West Indian societies are rooted in a strong oral tradition. As African and Amerindian cultures were exposed to each other, new oral forms emerged and interacted with Western culture and art. This thesis seeks to provide a critical insight into the use of art and literature influenced by Trinidad and Tobago folklore. Oral tradition is a cultural heritage of peoples who came to the Caribbean from all continents of the world. Proverbs, folktales, music, dances, customs, knowledge and practices related to traditional health remedies as well as religious rites and rituals passed down orally through generations, and ancestral utterances are all examples of Caribbean oral traditions. This oral tradition represents the transmission of traditional knowledges as a process of human constitution and also serves as a continuous reminder of the resistance to European colonization. Folklore is another way in which we keep resisting by orally transmitting history, memory, and traditional knowledges. The violence of the Middle Passage, slavery, indentureship, and plantation systems not only caused historic fissures among the Afro- and Indo-Caribbean populations but also caused indescribable and unimaginable catastrophes. The aftermath of this loss, migration and violence was exacerbated by the attempted forced extinction of cultural properties in the colonial Caribbean. Yet African, Indian, and other indigenous Caribbean cultural, aesthetic, and linguistic forms still prevailed. It is a testimony to the talent and commitment of writers and other creative practitioners in this region.

## Thesis Statement

This thesis seeks to capture the essence of the cultural meanings of folklore and its creative applications by discussing and comparing the works of selected Trinidadian authors and poets Paul Keens-Douglas and Jennifer Rahim, and the late artist and poet LeRoy Clarke.

## Parameters

The thesis delimits its focus by specifically discussing and analyzing Keens-Douglas's short stories "Jumbie, Duppy an' Spirit" and "Jumbie Chase Me" from *Is Town Say So!: Dialect Poetry & Short Stories* (1981) and "As Ah Was Sayin...": *Selected Works of Paul Keens-Douglas – Volume Three* (2008), respectively; Rahim's poems "Soucouyant Considers Flight" and "La Diabliesse Resurrect" from her newest poetry collection *Sanctuaries of Invention* (2021), and her short story "On Becoming a Snake-Woman" in her collection *Songster and Other Stories* (2007); and an overall discussion of Clarke's phase of work from 1973-1976 named *Douens* comprising artwork—his drawing and paintings—and a poetry collection of the same title (1976; 1981).

## Objectives

The objectives of the study are:

1. to identify the ways in which folklore is part of the cultural and oral traditions of Trinidad and Tobago,
2. to illustrate how the oral tradition of Trinidad and Tobago folklore continues to be passed down through the works of writers and artists

3. to evaluate how familiar folkloric characters are represented in selected Trinidad art and scribal literature.



### Chapter Outline

The study comprises three body chapters—each is centred on Keens-Douglas, Rahim and Clarke, respectively—in which well-known folkloric figures in Trinidad and Tobago are the core of the investigation. Chapter One gives a Review of the Literature and how this present study contributes to scholarly work done on Trinidad and Tobago folklore. Chapter Two then focuses on the two short stories by Keens-Douglas—one of which is graphically represented on the page as a poem in keeping with Keens-Douglas’s oeuvre of ‘dialect poetry’. While one story is only about the jumbie and la diablesse characters, the other references a number of other known folklore characters found across particular Caribbean islands; but this paper specifically explores the ones in the narrative which are associated with Trinidad and Tobago such as the Phantom figure (see Figure 1). Keens-Douglas’s use of the Creole dialect, humour, elements of prose, literary devices and discursive strategies, cultural and real-world contexts, and storytelling conventions are analysed. In Chapter Three, Rahim’s short story about a female in the folklore tradition, Mama Dglo (see Figure 2), is examined. Chapter Four also shifts to a focus on poetry with the selection of two recently published poems by Rahim in which, respectively, other female folklore characters of the Soucouyant (see Figure 3) and La Diablesse (see Figure 4) are of focal concern, with Greek mythology being incorporated into the persona’s discussion of the soucouyant. For Chapter Three, Clarke’s poetry and art about the child folklore character, the douen (see Figure 5), and the concept of ‘douendom’ as metaphor for citizen’s attitudes and behaviours in the island nation are explored. The presence of the La Diablesse, Soucouyant and

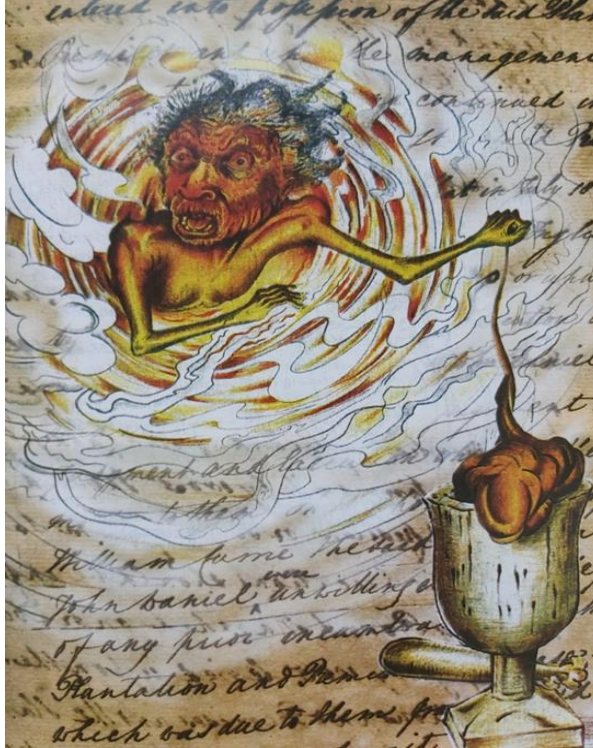
Mama Dglo figures in his work is also noted. The introductory and concluding chapters forecast and recapitulate the main ideas of the study, respectively.

### Methodology

Qualitative research methods are employed in the form of email interviews with Rahim as well as with art scholar and critic Marsha Pearce to provide further insight into selected pieces under study. In addition, close readings of the short stories and poems are undertaken—paying attention, too, to genre considerations regarding how folkloric characters and themes are represented in the short-story and poetic forms.

Figures	Images	Descriptions
#1		<p><u>The Phantom</u></p> <p>“A folklore character; a very tall, misty white figure who stands at crossroads, and traps those who pass between his legs.”</p> <p>Photo and Description Source:  <a href="https://triniinxisle.com">https://triniinxisle.com</a></p>
#2		<p><u>Mama Glow/Mama Dglo</u></p> <p>“A folklore character in the form of a beautiful woman, sometimes snake-like, with long hair and a fish-like tail who lives in rivers.”</p> <p>Photo Source: <i>Folklore Legends of Trinidad and Tobago</i> by Gerard Besson</p> <p>Description Source:  <a href="https://triniinxisle.com">https://triniinxisle.com</a></p>

#3



Soucouyant

“A person, usually an old woman, who sheds her skin, travels as a ball of fire and sucks people’s blood, leaving a blue mark.”

Photo Source: *Folklore Legends of Trinidad and Tobago* by Gerard Besson

Description Source:  
<https://triniinxisle.com>

#4



La Diabliesse (Lajables)

“The Devil Woman, roams at night. She has eyes like burning coals and a face resembling that of a corpse but hides it under a beautiful wide-brimmed hat and a veil over her face. She is dressed exquisitely in a blouse with puffy sleeves and long, petticoated, skirts. She has one cloven foot which she tries to hide under her long skirts.”

Photo Source: *Folklore Legends of Trinidad and Tobago* by Gerard Besson

Description Source:  
<https://aminoapps.com>

#5



Douens

“Douens (Dwens) are the souls of children who have died before they were baptized. They are doomed to roam the earth forever.”

Photo Source: *Folklore Legends of Trinidad and Tobago* by Gerard Besson

Description Source:  
<http://www.tntisland.com>

## CHAPTER ONE

History is both passed down orally and also written and archived, with the latter involving important events heavily documented by scholars so that the deeds of humankind will not be forgotten and if need be we can look back at past events and know how to navigate the present and future. Folklore was originally and largely passed by word of mouth; its stories being shared from one generation to the next—tales, folk songs, riddles and ritual all play a part in forming this experience. A critical review of the literature on these topics for this study includes texts about Trinidad and Tobago folklore. This review will not explore Caribbean folktales or stories that exist outside of Trinidad and Tobago. The belief system upon which folklore consists include folktales, bush medicine, prayers and songs—these cultural traditions are full of compelling elements where mystery and magic become tools to explore the unknown. This oral tradition embodies cultural expressions and had also stood as a form of mutiny against colonialism.

Studies on other oral folk traditions like “rapso” (a Trinidadian musical genre which grew out of political unrest and has elements of rap and soca) have been noted to “incorporate culturally and socially relevant curricula, accessible resources, multiple forms of engagement and expression, and performance, thus creating opportunities for enhanced relationships” (Dyanis A. Popova et al). Echoes of these are found in published research on folklore relevant to this study. Gerard Besson’s book *Folklore and Legends of Trinidad and Tobago* explores a treasure trove of folklore legends with personal anecdotes by Besson himself in which he speaks about his childhood and the beginning of his storytelling journey. Besson is a well-known expert in this field of folklore studies and his book proved useful in investigating this HUMN 3099 project topic. For most Caribbean people, folklore is first encountered at home and therefore has

strong links to childhood. Besson's book consists of Trinidad and Tobago folklore stories with depictions of each character. "From Orature to Literature in Jamaican and Trinidadian Children's Folk Traditions" by Cynthia James is another noteworthy discussion on folk tradition and lore. It highlights the moral, cultural, and spiritual values embedded into old, treasured stories; how they impact children; and also how they are linked to the creation of a Caribbean linguistic identity. *Tabanca and Other Stories: Based on the Folklore of Trinidad and Tobago* by Tricia Chin is a self-published anthology comprising ten stories influenced by traditions and folklore with themes of tragedy, grief and horror, etcetera, taking the reader back to times of their childhood. Folklorist and storyteller Al Ramsawack's *Folklore Stories of Trinidad and Tobago* also contributed significantly to his oeuvre on the subject. Ramsawack, who was conferred a national award—Humming Bird Silver Medal for Folklore/Culture in 2004—was upon his passing in 2021 hailed for his "stories [which] gave extensive life to the details of jumbies, Papa Bois, soucouyants, Lagahoo, Mama D'Lo, douens, jins, bhutes, La Diabliesse and other characters that populate the region's folk tales and oral histories" (Wired 868.com).

The pieces selected for this present study all contribute to keeping folklore alive by discussing folklore's impact on children and adults, its link to our identity as Caribbean people, and the retelling of old classics with a new twist. This study will fill the gap in analysing the creative applications of folklore and to demonstrate the ways in which they are presented in various media. This work does not intend to create new forms of folktales or tradition but to study existing work and how they are presented in selected literature and art.

## CHAPTER TWO

What is folklore? Folklore is part of our cultural DNA. It is an amalgamation of the history, art, stories and practices of a people; yet while being the past, it is also the present, existing through vibrant traditions and creative expressions. Folklore is also a method of communication for shedding light on the things which are vital to our community. We tell a story for many different reasons: to entertain, to teach, to connect with others, or perhaps explain the world around us. Storytelling is an essential part of being human. It is a technique for creating and recreating a cohesive story for different purposes and is a thread that brings individuals together in a broader structure of human experience. Modes of storytelling can also be relayed via other artforms such as visual art and poetry which are the foci of this project. In both pre-and post-industrial societies, the earliest method of storytelling was conveyed verbally, entailing direct communication with the audience. Legends, myths and folktales comprise the storyteller's oeuvre. The latter type of storytelling (written narration) has become more and more popular in modern times and with the advent of the printing press. People continue to tell stories verbally today such as Paul Keens-Douglas during his annual Talk Tent and other shows where he performs on stage to a live audience. Other examples are via television, film, radio plays and comics, all of which transmit narrative through aural and visual mediums. This leads us to our present study on folklore and its application in modern short fiction, poetry and art in the works of Keens-Douglas, Rahim and Clarke.

Paul Keens-Douglas is a Trinidadian dialect poet, author and preeminent Caribbean storyteller. He has a wide background in the creative and theatre arts, leading to his soulful and biting performances on stage which can alternatively take a comedic turn. As an exponent of and contributor to Caribbean oral traditions his contributions are invaluable.

In his very short story “Jumbie Chase Me”, Keens-Douglas references the Jumbie and La Diabliesse folklore figures. When the main character of the story thinks he is being pursued by a jumbie as he walks home on the roadway from the town to the country and so begins to run in fright, a woman ahead of him thinks he is a bandit pursuing her; and then when she begins to run in fear, the man ahead of her also begins running in alarm because he believes he is being pursued by a la diabliesse. They each in turn seek refuge and safety in a rum shop, respectively “shoutin’”, “Quick, quick shut de door, ah La Diabliesse behind me! [...] screamin’”, “Get yu gun, get yu gun bandits comin’! [...] gasp out [...] “Jumbie! Jumbie” (*“As Ah Was Sayin’...”* 79). Hence, the narrator—who is retelling the incident told to him by his friend who mistakenly thought he was being pursued by a jumbie—recounts: “An’ everybody in de shop keep quiet, quiet, quiet waitin’ to see if de Jumbie, de Bandit or de La Diabliesse go come in de shop” (79). The humorous plot underscores how the two folkloric creatures are ingrained in the psyche and fear of people those who travel at night—the time of day associated with their presence and therefore when they can be encountered. The story also evokes the oral tradition related to retellings of jumbie stories by word of mouth—with the textual constructs of narrator and narratee, repetitive devices, and the use of the Creole dialect which is the vernacular language.

In “Jumbies, Duppies an’ Spirits”, a narrative presented in verse form, Keens-Douglas elaborates on five of the various Trinidad and Tobago folklore characters: the Phantom, La Diabliesse, Soucouyant, Mama Glo and Douen. He presents each—these five called by different names in, along with other figures specific to, other Caribbean countries—referencing where they originate, presenting the intentions of the creature and ending with a witty yet serious message before moving on to others. Keens-Douglas starts the piece off by setting the mood.

Tonite we goin’ to talk ‘bout Jumbie, Duppy an’ Spirit.

Now ah don't want to frighten allyu,  
 But dem is part ah we folklore too;  
 Never mind some people don't believe in dem,  
 Jus' wait till dey bounce up one,  
 Den yu go hear ah different story.  
 Yes man, in de ole days, on ah moonlight nite,  
 We used to get together to ole talk in de yard,  
 An' sooner or later somebody would start up ah ghost  
     story,  
 An' after dat is story after story. (in *Is Town Say So!*, 83)

At the outset some elements of the oral tradition, storytelling, and orality are also evident as was seen in “Jumbie Chase Me”: shared cultural knowledge, first-person voice and perspective, and the use of the Creole dialect. These oral aspects are augmented in the audio of Keens-Douglas’s YouTube site for this story, in which his voice performance relays the tone and mood even more starkly for the listener. The introduction sets the pace, mood and tone of the narrative and softens the tension with a comical reference each audience member in a live or YouTube platform setting and the narratee in the textual construct would understand, some of them being afraid of or disbelieving of ghost stories. Keens-Douglas references child as well as adult male and female folklore characters well known in Trinidad and Tobago.

The narrator in “Jumbies, Duppies an’ Spirits” expresses the common definition of the douen as “de spirit of ah chile dat dead without gettin’ baptise” (85). Douens have feet which are pointed backwards, and these creatures are sometimes only visible to other children. The narrator warns the audience of boastful parents who believe their child to be “smart or intelligent” because s/he talk to and play by themselves, with the punch line—and irony—being, though, that “Is Douen he playing wid” (85).

The male character mentioned is the Phantom figure and Keens-Douglas uses epizeuxis (“tall, tall”), a device of repetition in which there are no intervening words and found throughout

his oeuvre, to emphasize his height: he “is ah tall, tall man / ‘Bout forty foot tall” (87) and anyone who attempts to pass between his legs—because “he does stan’ up wid he two foot / Spread right across de road” (87)—is “mash up fine, fine” (87) when he closes his legs shut. This second example of epizeuxis foregrounds the severity of the outcome when encountering the phantom. The reference to this figure is also a cautionary tale by the narrator who both highlights the reckless curiosity of Trinidadians and indirectly warns the audience against taking undue risks: “But what I want to know, is who so stupid, / To see ah man forty foot tall, / In de middle ah de road, on ah dark nite, Go’ pass between he two foot” (87). The use of the Creole dialect, which would be the mother tongue of the majority of his audience, helps to enhance the meaning within the satire embedded in Keens-Douglas’s humour; he is known to use jokes for didactic and satirical purposes to address serious topics and situations facing the Trinidad and Tobago populace.

Among the other Trinidad and Tobago folkloric characters depicted in Keens-Douglas’s story is the La Diabliesse, a devil woman who roams in the dark of night with eyes like coals and a face resembling a corpse. She hides her face with a wide-brimmed hat and her cloven feet with long skirts. Despite this she can charm men into going home with her, luring them into her trap in the deep of the woods. After some time, she disappears leaving the man to find his way home in the dark until he either gets attacked by wild hogs or falls to his death. Keens-Douglas tells the story of the la diabliesse using discursive strategies such as repetition for emphasis as well as visual imagery to provide a vivid description of the folk character. For example, he says, “An she always wearing a big hat to hide she face, / An’ ah long dress down to de groun’ to hide she foot, / Because La Diabliesse have one good foot / An one cow foot/ Now-a-days ah hear dey wearin’ pants-suit !!” (65) This comedic relief in the midst of a horror story—which includes the

modernization of the character through reference to the pants-suit—allows the storyteller to lure the listening and reading audience. Additionally, the humour helps both to undercut and dissipate the fearful mood and tone of the story’s plot.

Another familiar female character is the Soucouyant, who the narrator describes as “de ole woman who could take off she skin / An’ fly like ah ball ah fire cross de sky, / An’ come an’ suck allyu like Dracula” (88). This is also a well-established description of the soucouyant known to Trinidad and Tobago audiences. The first simile evokes the visual imagery associated with this creature; and the second reinforces her vampiric trait shared with the most popular, filmic vampire character known to audiences. Notably, unlike the *la diablesse* and the *Mama Dglo*, the soucouyant is portrayed in the folklore as old and unattractive with no sex appeal, and one that preys on everyone and not just men. These have the effect of reinforcing why the soucouyant is another fearsome figure in the folklore tradition.

“Mama D’leau, or Mama Glo, de Goddess of de river” (89) as Keens-Douglas refers to her is described as, “A beautiful woman with the upper body of a human woman and the lower body of a long anaconda snake which coils into a large form and makes a loud cracking sound when she snaps it on the surface of the water. She has long flowing hair which she combs constantly” (TnTisland). Keens-Douglas makes reference to this latter attribute—“Dey say yu does see dis beautiful woman / On ah stone in de middle ah de river, combin’ she long hair, an’ singin’!” (89)—while craftily delivering the fact that she kills her victims: “An’ man who try an’ talk to she does disappear. Dey say she does take dem to live wit’ she under de water. But yu know man can’t live under water, so dem days done” (89). Like the *la diablesse*, this female folkloric character uses her physical beauty and charms to bring danger and death to admiring men besotted by her; and her singing is reminiscent of and equivalent to the mermaid or siren of

European lore who lured sailors to their doom with her enticing voice. At the end of his story, the narrator declares: “Now I not sure dat everyting I tell allyu is true yu know, I only tellin’ yu what I hear, So don’t go an’ say I say. When ole people tellin’ yu ting dey don’t tell yu how or why, Dey does jus’ tell. So I jus’ tellin’!” (91). This declaration, in addition to the narrator’s repetition of the phrase “Dey say” throughout the story, therefore harks back to the oral tradition related to folklore as well as the idea of disbelief and uncertainty as to whether folklore figures like these really exist. The Mama Dglo figure also makes an appearance in and is integral to Jennifer Rahim’s short story “On Becoming a Snake-Woman” which a focus of the following chapter.

“Jumbies, Duppies an’ Spirits” provides, to those who already know, common descriptions of the Douen, Phantom, La Diabliesse, Soucouyant and Mama Glo with respect to what they look like and do. But, the story also serves to raise awareness for those who were previously unaware about these folklore characters and, hence, in written form carrying on the oral storytelling tradition from which these characters emerged. This literary example also offers morals or messages about each of the five figures, with themes that can be transferred to our everyday lives like making sensible decisions and avoiding danger; and our beliefs in the existence of supernatural beings and how they interact with us in the natural world, for instance.

## CHAPTER THREE

A discussion and analysis of Jennifer Rahim's short story "On Becoming a Snake Woman" and her poems "Soucouyant Considers Flight" and "La Diabliesse Resurrect", from the collections *Songster and Other Stories* and *Sanctuaries of Invention*, respectively, are the subjects of this chapter. These include an email interview with Rahim regarding her knowledge of folklore; its influence on and representations in her writing; her conscious choice to focus on female folkloric characters; and her intertextual linking of folklore myth in West Indian and Greek literature. Her story, like Keens-Douglas's, entails elements of orality within a narrative recounted by a first-person voice and perspective; and it portrays the cultural tradition of passing down folklore via word of mouth by an adult to a child.

"On Becoming a Snake Woman" highlights binary oppositions of modern and traditional/folk beliefs and practices, including those of religion; rural and urban lifestyles and opportunities; facts and myths; formal and informal education, symbolized as well in Standard English and Creole usage—"Teacher said I must always speak proper English if I want to get far in this world. She should know", says the unnamed, young first-person narrator-protagonist (in *Songster and Other Stories* 14, italics in original text). Throughout the story, when the girl is speaking directly to her mother her words are depicted in italics. These oppositions are primarily embodied in the female characters of Mama Dglo who is purported to live "far up the river" (12), the village healer Miss Germaine to whom people often go to cure their sicknesses and ailments, Teacher, and Mama who is the mother of the narrator-protagonist. For example, Miss Germaine represents a storyteller, establishing a bridge between the older generation and the new—connecting them with folktales and old legends. Aside from her mother, the narrator-protagonist had two important female figures in her life: namely, her teacher and Miss

Germaine; their teachings both holding value while being so distinctly different. But from each she took what she needed.

While Teacher explains to the young girl and her classmates that the river in the village is formed from rainfall, Miss Germaine thinks differently:

*Mama, even though I try to explain to Miss Germaine that rainwater is what make a river, she refuse to believe me. Her story is that the water is on account of a woman living deep inside the mountains and she always crying. Night and day she weeping. I ask her why the woman so sad, but she have no answer. Mama, Miss Germaine trying to make me believe that the water flowing in the river is really tears. You believe her, Mama? (9)*

It is left up to the reader to determine whether this weeping woman is Mama Dglo because it is not explicitly stated if this is so. With respect to direct reference to this folklore creature, however, these descriptors are related by the young girl:

*[...] listen to what Miss Germaine tell me. If I go too far up the river, Mama Dglo going to hold me. You ever see Mama Dglo, Mama? Miss Germaine swear she ugly like sin that need forgiving. But from what I hear, Mama Dglo really love herself because she so busy with her hair. As you always say, Mama, beauty not always what people see. Anyway, I feel you must be right about Miss Germaine and how she like to make up stories to keep me sitting right there in her kitchen. In all the time I up this river, I never see a single soul that look like her. But you know what? I hear bamboo breaking in the bush and I tell Miss Germaine so. I think Miss Germaine smarter than even Teacher because she tell me that what I really hearing is not bamboo breaking, but Mama Dglo striking her snake-body on the water, and if she ever catch up with me, I go disappear [...] Mama, if Mama Dglo living way upstream like Miss Germaine say, how come I never see her? [...] Miss Germaine said that Mama Dglo has a gold comb, but she forgetful and sometimes she leaves it on the rocks. She said if I find the comb I will get rich. [...] Anyway, I don't see what no ugly person doing with a gold comb. That make no sense to me. So I feel that part of the story wrong. The ugly part I mean. Somebody*

*see her wrong. Mama, please tell me what it is that make a person ugly?...You know what, Mama? I never once see that comb [...]* (12, 13 and 14)

Mama, who is a village washerwoman, prefers that her daughter follow the scientific and matter-of-fact lessons delivered by Teacher in the classroom rather than the folk teachings of Miss Germaine. The mother insists: ““Listen to Teacher,” she say. “What she teach come from books. Not Miss Germaine. She only good at making up jumbie tales””(10). The young daughter ultimately disbelieves what the latter has told her about the existence of the snake woman because, for instance, she never actually sees Mama Dglo and like her mother wants the classroom education she receives to be a means of betterment for her future, especially since Teacher has a high opinion of her intellectual ability and she wants to pass her examination for a school in the town (16): *“I want to learn more than washing and baking. So I going to do like you tell me and listen to all Teacher have to teach. That is what I thinking. When I get big, I want to know what make this world”* (13).

Despite holding respect for Miss Germaine, the narrator uses her own reasoning to differentiate what she believes to be true or false. This, however, does not take away from her credence in folklore. The girl’s beliefs also ultimately vacillate between what both Teacher and Miss Germaine say.

The story’s title therefore holds irony since the reader can infer that it is the girl who is becoming a snake-woman, even if that notion entails metaphorical signification. This metaphor relates to Rahim’s self-declared attempt to re-invent the meanings surrounding Mama Dglo (see email interview below), debunking the negative aspects associated with how she is usually defined and assigning to her notions of female empowerment and strength. This then gives an indication of the hope and success which can be forecast for the girl’s future. The river where

Mama Dglo is purported to live can be deemed symbolic of the rural environment where the girl resides, whereas the sea symbolizes this future in the shape of her education, as well as the town and its prospects: *“Mama, very soon I going to follow this river to the sea. All my answers in the sea, waiting for me”* (16). Her initial perception of Mama Dglo was intertwined with fear—of this creature which lived upstream yet is never seen. She pondered further on the validity of Mama Dglo’s nature and if she truly is as repugnant as described. To her Mama Dglo was not someone to be feared; the true threat was your mind and the thoughts that they developed. If anything, Mama Dglo would save her if something bad was to happen. Very importantly, therefore, at the close of the narrative Rahim rewrites the characterization of Mama Dglo, who is transformed in the girl’s imagination from the traditionally known fearsome figure to a heroic and protective one: *“Your mind is the main thing that could attack you by the river where it only have bush and water. That true, Mama? What else could happen to a girl by the river? And Mama Dglo would save her if anything bad was going to happen?”* (15).

In her poem “Soucouyant Considers Flight”, Rahim conveys the perspective of the soucouyant. This poem seamlessly interweaves Greek mythology and Caribbean folklore. Yet here the myths are reinvented. There is mention of the well-known mythical characters Icarus, his father Daedalus, Theseus, and Minotaur; and the Caribbean soucouyant figure is cast as the sister of Icarus. Rahim answers a question no one thought to ask. How did the soucouyant learn to fly?

Of course, Icarus won the ticket up. [...]  
He felt, first, the rush of space and the lure of light,  
and feeling his power veered  
from the consigned middle line,  
forgot that he was so poorly rigged.  
Yes, the small splash in Brueghel’s flat sea was he.

Who cares? She did.  
For seeing him tumble to ground in meltdown,  
she discovered the trick  
as she flung to sky that ball of twine  
her father had left behind.

To save herself, she must become, herself,  
a flying orb of flame. [...] (excerpts of poem in *Sanctuaries of Invention* 62)

Viewing the soucouyant in this light is refreshing since most folkloric characters are seen in a negative light, with their attributes instilling fear or disgust; but, Rahim's take on the characters comes with a twist. In "On Becoming a Snake Woman" the narrator loses her fear for Mama Dglo, considering her to be a protector; while in this poem Rahim's soucouyant has rewritten her own story on learning to fly which essentially means discovering her own freedom through someone else's mistakes. The themes of self-discovery, innocence, and experience stand out with respect to Icarus and the soucouyant at the beginning of their journeys; the former being too reckless leading to his demise, while the latter is wise in her discovery.

Rahim's other poem "La Diabliesse Resurrect" also reinvents the female folkloric creature which comes out at night—which the persona describes as, "In any hemisphere, / jumbie hour is real-time horror" (63). The la diabliesse is metaphorically portrayed as women who have been trafficked and sexually abused from the days of slavery to the present, for instance, but achieve "redemption" and "retributive" (63) justice against their perpetrators who, reminiscent of LeRoy Clarke's poem "Soucouyant" (see Chapter Four), are metaphorized as supposed upstanding members of society. An excerpt from the poem states:

Tonight, she is somebody's daughter  
trafficked across oceans, flesh supplied  
for soul-eaters who pay taxes, harbour

allegiances, kiss their children, talk  
of heaven and return to a home,  
somebody's showered hero.

Somewhere, she's living contraband  
in a wilderness of burdened mattresses,  
and unyielding floors, numbed up  
that mountain. Her face averted,  
she sees through pane and cover of trees  
a scaffolded sky her tomorrow's climb.

Then, one redemption night,  
La Diabliesse-self resurrect to walk  
the plantations of the world.

Demon-woman with danger  
under her dress, hunter, hunting you.  
Watch how vile cow-foot appears

from the abyss of your crime –  
a hydra network and devil-demand  
that target her Who is *she*?

The one of many who escapes you,  
lives to swallow you like a plunge off  
that cliff... [...] (63, italics in original text)

This poem is about history and retribution. A la diabliesse with a past, a story, she is no longer an unknowing evil lurking to find anyone, including those with good souls to destroy. She only attacks men because they are the ones who attacked her first. Rahim's poem ties together the old and the new, a "jumbie" character, possibly originating from French creole culture, and a different perspective on her true intentions. Her evil is now no longer an action but a reaction to past crimes committed.

In the email interview with this researcher, Rahim provides further thoughts on her prose and poetry examined above:

**KP:** When you were younger, what was the nature of your experience hearing and reading about West Indian folklore—through oral storytelling by adults, your reading of folktales, etcetera—and to what extent were these impactful and how?

**JR:** I think I can speak to my encounter with folklore figures in the context of family gossip. That was the place I met their foreboding larger than life presences with reference to family members, persons in the community or from the social circle of adults. Interestingly, as I remember, women were called soucouyants and so on as a judgement on their perceived sexual “misbehaviours” or self-serving, covetous attitudes: “She is ah socouyant. She suck de man dry” — that kind of talk. Douens, for instance, were conjured to keep wayward children in line. And those “devil” women were evoked to warn menfolk about the consequences of their extra-marital straying or general philandering. All of this was of course couched in a certain degree of coded subterfuge. I had an uncle, for instance, who was notorious for walking backwards into my grandmother’s house when he arrived late at night to leave any bad spirits behind him. These characters, as I think about them now, were part of a kind of socialization strategy used by adults to caution and to discourage certain behaviours or relationships, or to critique undesirable behaviours of adults.

**KP:** What do you bear in mind as a creative writer when considering a literary representation of our folklore tradition in your poetry and prose?

**JR:** I think I am mostly trying to reinvent negative stereotyping of the female characters, for sure. I am also trying to see how they can be contemporized to speak to current social issues and sexist and restrictive gender constructions.

**KP:** My HUMN 3099 project analyses your short narrative “On Becoming a Snake-Woman” and your two poems “Soucouyant Considers Flight” and “La Diabliesse Resurrect”. Was your focus on *female* folklore characters—Mama Dglo, Soucouyant, and La Diabliesse—a deliberate choice?

**JR:** The simple answer is yes. As with the question above, I am always struck at how global mythologies, inclusive of folklore, construct women as diabolical, ugly or damned, especially women who are deemed to be unmanageable or unnatural, especially when they choose to retaliate, to seek justice for themselves, or choose to simply be themselves earn

disfavour for being “different”. I believe the root of this representational tradition is the fear of women’s power and with that, the need to keep women convinced that it is better to comply and conform, rather than to dare to break with the impossible expectations that they are relegated to fulfill. These witches, whores, monsters are imagined to sustain deep seated myths about “right” ‘acceptable” womanhood that serve patriarchy best. They are forewarnings of punishment—the consequences of transgression.

**KP:** What inspired you to write the short story “On Becoming a Snake-Woman”?

**JR:** A number of things sparked my interest in the Mama Dglo tale. Perhaps her hybrid nature as snake and woman—so absolutely “Other” yet recognizable. There was too the Biblical connotation with the temptation of Eve and her construction as the temptress, evil-woman. Again, I was searching for a way to reinvent her, if only in the imagination of the girl in the story who dreamed of a different future for herself outside the village. I was living in central Trinidad at the time and witnessed the slow but steady destruction of the forests, as well as the way girls ended up teenage mothers, and felt helpless. The fact that together with Papa Bois, she was the guardian of the forest drew me—the idea that one could become something so mysterious, simultaneously repulsive, powerful and attractive. Maybe, as I think about it now, there was something inaccessible about her, inaccessible to violation perhaps—like a mermaid, in a way.

**KP:** “Soucouyant Considers Flight” lends for an interesting exploration of intertextual linkages between West Indian and Greek literature because of its intriguing blend of a familiar West Indian folklore figure, the soucouyant, along with Daedalus, Icarus, Theseus and Minotaur from Greek mythology. Why did you decide to incorporate Greek mythology in your poem?

**JR:** I suppose as an exercise in counter discourse. The Icarus myth is about agency and the gift of creativity, but is entirely male-centred. So I imagined a sister for Icarus. Icarus messed up but his sister would make her own way, with her own discovered power—and not imprisoned by the instruction of any authority (“the Father”). I wanted a positive image for the Soucouyant, who tends to be negatively cast as the skinless, anonymous, self-consuming night flyer. In the poem, I made her an inventor, a self determined agent in order to break her out of the Greek myth where I imagine her (in her absence) to be Ariadne, the woman Theseus abandons on the island after using her idea of the thread to

escape the labyrinth, as well as the life-drawing blood-sucker that is the Soucouyant of folklore. In the poem, when she surfaces, or breaks out of the dark labyrinth, she symbolizes, for me, creative and powerful feminine energy.

In crafting her stories and poems, Jennifer Rahim casts both old and new depictions of the Mama Dglo, Soucouyant and La Diabliesse—providing readers with inventive and contemporary gendered points of view of these female folklore characters.

## CHAPTER FOUR

When considering Caribbean art ranging from paintings to drawings the late Leroy Clarke is a beacon whose art holds strong symbolism. One of the foundations for his work was the Shango Baptist faith. For him painting and writing were “ritual acts of sublimation of the original and historical suffering of the Caribbean peoples, which transform the unspeakable and the unbreakable into aesthetic realizations” (*Open Edition Journals*). It is clear Clarke did not limit himself to one artistic form. His body of work extends to art and poetry allowing the viewer and reader to witness different perspectives. The works of Leroy Clarke, the words and images, are dense and meaningful. There is a unique beauty of everything he produced.

Understanding a bit about his background will assist in connecting better with his work. Born in 1938 in Gonzales, Belmont Clarke devoted his life to art. His first exhibition was held in 1966 titled, “A Labor of Love”. He became well known for his art and soon settled in Harlem, United States where he became friends with members of the Black Panthers. The Black Panther party is “A black revolutionary party [which] evolved into a Marxist revolutionary group that fought for African American weapon rights, exemption from “white American” sanctions, and financial compensation for years of racial exploitation, in addition to fighting for political and economic equality” (Howard University). His philosophy and ideologies aligned with this group as he contemplated Trinidad and Tobago’s dominant and destructive leadership under British colonization. He brings to paper and canvas a reflection of his suffering and frustration, and of those who lived under 400 years of rule. Yet his art is never stagnant, and his love and respect for Caribbean folklore is represented through *Douens*, a notable body of work with a strong link to his spiritual journey.

*Douens* comprised over two hundred and fifty paintings honouring Caribbean artists and drawing inspiration and imagination from folktale characters. Clarke expresses the main themes of his art as follows: “There is a common theme in my paintings, my poetry and my other writings [...] essays and articles. This theme is the commitment to the search for the social and spiritual aspects that make up humanity. However, my main concern is to push the “black people” towards self-awareness, so that they can see themselves as African” (*Open-Source Journals* 9). Patricia Donatien -Yssa an artist-painter and lecturer at the University of the Antilles and Guyana states that,

Leroy Clarke is not a painter who writes, or a poet who paints, he is a being of creation. A man whose spirituality is so strong that it propels him in many directions. The priest of Shango put his faith and his dual art at the service of both political and artistic recognition of the Caribbean. He impels his energy in his creation for the emergence of a new culture, born of the decadence of the colonial world and of an aesthetic rooted in the symbolic nudity of misery and suffering metamorphosed into flowers of hope.

Clarke’s work on “douendum” held roots in Trinidad and Tobago folklore with an inner message for Caribbean people. Jeremy Taylor in his magazine article “Leroy Clarke: Warrior Art” notes how,

Douens are the sad, playful characters of Trinidad and Tobago folklore, the children who died before they were baptised and whose feet point backwards. LeRoy saw in them a symbol of “the plight of third world peoples under the tutelage of conquerors. I had begun to see us after all these years as giddy and lost people.” [...] The image of the douens, the lost souls, was powerful: people began to bewail *douendom*. “They say — O God, boy, the douendom. For me that’s an achievement.” Other figures from the shadows of the folk imagination were recast too: the dehumanising soucouyant, the sucker of blood; the beckoning La Diabliesse, the Mama d’reau. It was a radical way of relating old and familiar insights and images to the turbulent society of the late 20th century Caribbean.

In Clarke's poem "Gossip of No-Name-No-Feet" from the book *Douens: poems and drawings*, he refers to himself in both first- and third-person voice—"here too a scorpion / trapped with tiny fish in her south mouth / whose was I...? / he was born in Gonzales / after a long night of quarrels..." (p.9)—demonstrating, with reference to his birth-sign, birthplace and birth circumstances, another kind of the aforementioned "self-awareness" he proclaimed as an objective and concern of his art. In the poem "Soucouyant", he makes a culminating and defining statement that is foregrounded because it is left for the closing stanza where he draws a symbolic parallel between the folkloric figure and those from all echelons of Trinidad and Tobago society—but especially those who are perceived as respectable and influential—who vampirically prey on others:

the soucouyant, her eyes a million flies  
wide and sharp, in her perch,  
vomits her roll  
of doctors and lawyers  
her teachers, pets and pains  
underwriters...and you  
may-invent-any-man-here...

Soucouyant..soucouyant. (97)

The accompanying artwork of the same titles, "Gossip of No-Name-No-Feet" (see Figure 6) and "Soucouyant" (see Figure 7), are line drawings. The former drawing possesses a sort of minimalistic style expressing a douen in a disparate way. It is observed that "Line is the most basic visual element. Lines can be used to define shapes and figures, but also to indicate motion, emotion, and other elements" (Khan Academy). Additionally, repetition is a common theme in Clarke's work, and he is willing to use raw images to shock and surprise the viewer. This use of repetition and accumulation are factors of dynamism and energy. Dynamism is a term used to

described art and is “applied to both abstract and figurative works that suggest movement and energy” (Artsy). Marsha Pearce, art scholar and critic, as well as lecturer and coordinator of the Visual Arts programme at The University of the West Indies, St. Augustine offers an insightful perspective of Clarke’s drawings below. Pearce also speaks on how his poetry and art each reflect the other. An email interview was conducted with her by this researcher, particularly with regard to “Gossip of No-Name-No-Feet” and “Soucouyant”:

**KP:** LeRoy Clarke’s artwork and poem titled “Gossip of No-Name-No-Feet” refer to the folklore character of the douen. While another Trinidad and Tobago folkloric character the soucouyant is traditionally seen as a female figure, in his artwork which accompanies the poem “Soucouyant” she can instead almost be deemed as being unisex or non-binary. What characteristic features of LeRoy Clarke’s oeuvre as an artist are evident in both these drawings?

**MP:** Clarke breaks up his compositions, exploring visual fragmentation and the summation of various pieces to arrive at a wholeness that addresses Caribbean identities. His drawings render lines in maze-like formations that invite a journey inward—a spiritual pathway—back to ourselves.

**KP:** How do Clarke’s drawings, in contrast to his paintings, contribute to his representations of the douen and soucouyant in these two examples? That is, how do the distinctive aspects of drawing as an art lend to his representations of these figures?

**MP:** Linework is a strong feature of Clarke’s drawings and paintings. The drawings differ in the sense that, in the absence of pigment, the viewer’s eye is focused on the artist’s sure hand, his confident carrying of a line from one point to another. The viewer can also see the beauty of the shape and form of Clarke’s images. Ideas of confidence and

beauty are important for this book titled DOUENS, since Clarke is addressing his concept of douendum [sic], a state he used to describe a people lost in the wake of independence.

**KP:** If you as an art scholar and critic were to view only the drawings “Gossip of No-Name-No-Feet” and “Soucouyant” (and therefore not read the poems of the same names) what would your personal and professional opinions and interpretations of them be?

**MP:** The images suggest Clarke is crafting his own visual language, his own vision of characters that live in our (T&T) oral tradition. In other words, the drawings give new life to local myths, taking them from the realm of what is talked about and heard of, to what is visible or seen. The images offer an interpretive tangibility.

**KP:** Clarke was both an artist and a poet. Can you as an art scholar and critic determine how Clarke’s poetry impacted or influenced his visual art, and vice versa?

**MP:** Poetry is about going beneath the surface of things; it has a meter or rhythmic structure. It comprises lines in verse. Like poetry, Clarke’s images are about the inner meanings of our people. They involve a search for and uncovering of our rhythms. Each image, in essence, is a verse of powerful lines. His poetry and images also invite us to consider the relationship between images and words—the way an image can utter the ineffable, and the way words can anchor or point to meanings in an image.

Figure 6 – “Gossip of No-Name-No-Feet”

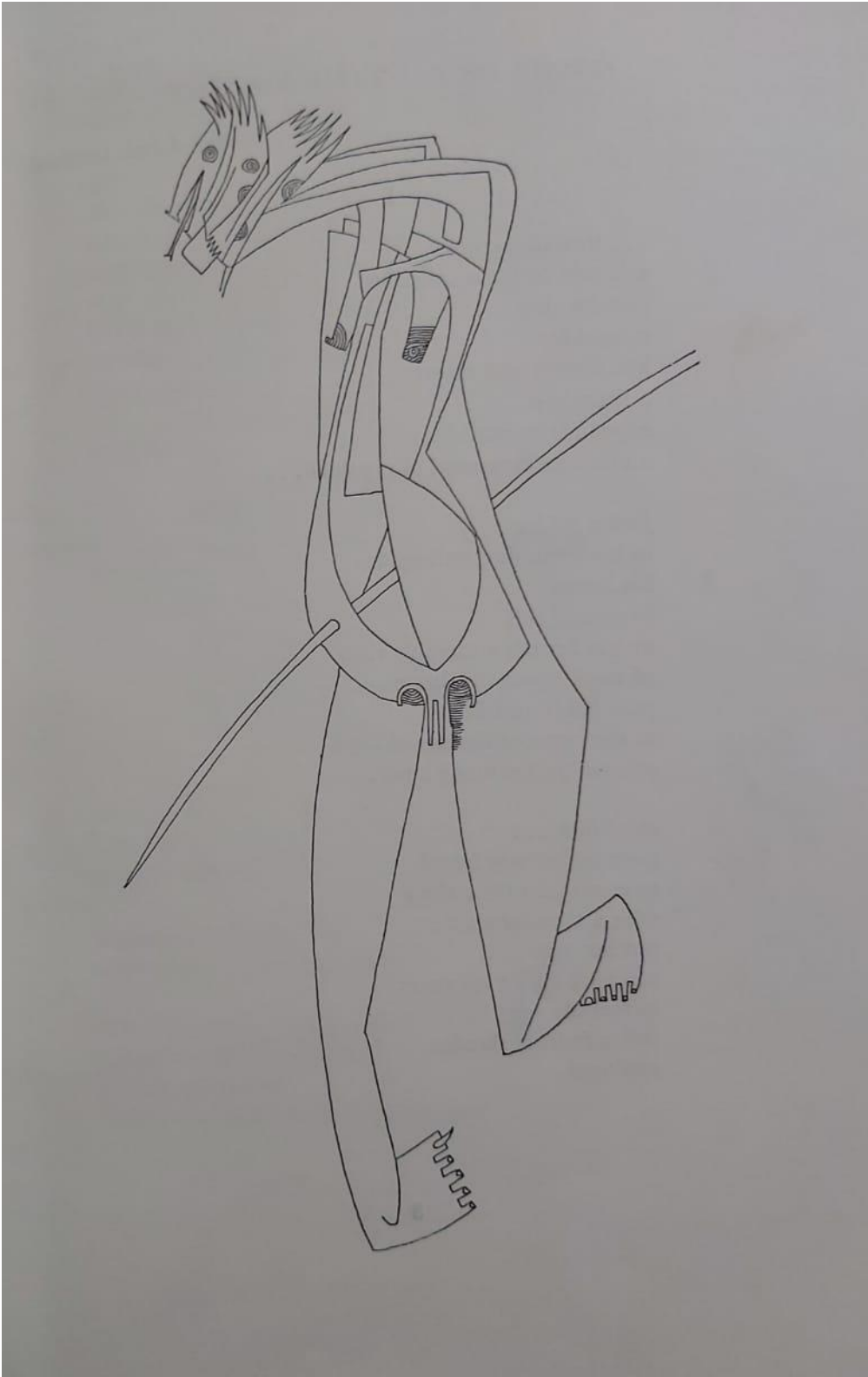
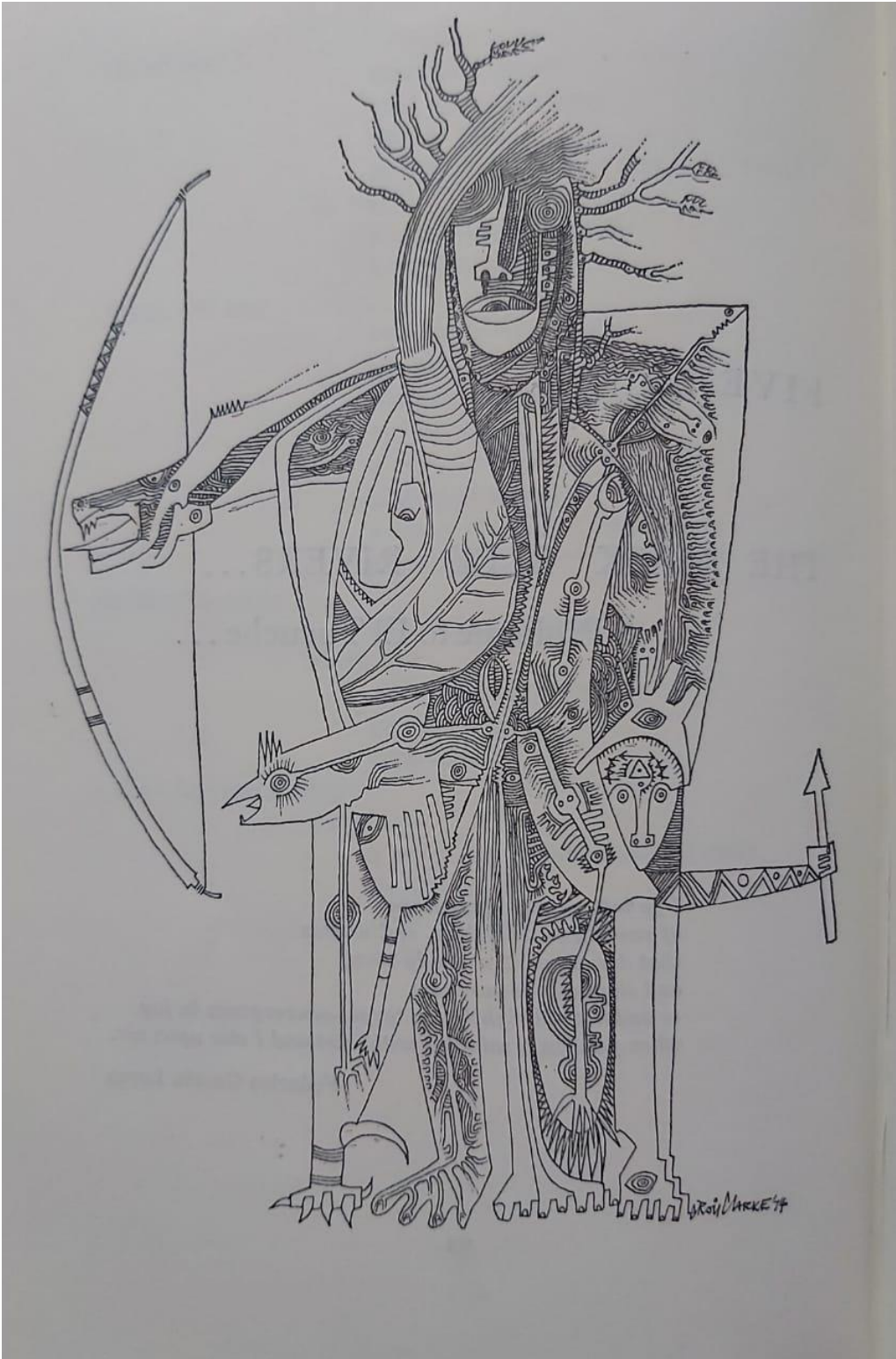


Figure 7 – “Soucouyant”



Jennifer Rahim and Leroy Clarke have both revolutionized folkloric characters in a manner that is unique to themselves. Although folktales are already so rich, Rahim uses these familiar characters like a canvas, making additions to what is already there to create a unique final product. Her interest lies in the empowerment of women and the debunking of stereotypical roles within these tales; each poem gives a backstory to the women—no longer are they simply “evil” or angry. Instead, propelled by their motivations, whether retributive or reactionary, restrictive gender constructions are broken and they are left with more depth. Leroy Clarke’s main concern lay in the self-awareness of African people in the hope that it leads them to see themselves as African. At the very essence of Clarke’s work there is faith and spirituality. He held a very close link with the Shango Baptist faith and ritual was part of his artistic approach. The immediate sacrifice is performed, and Clarke claimed that in this state he was able to “create from chaos and transform raw matter into a mirror of his imagination, his message, his energy and his hypersensitivity” (*Open-Source Journals*). This sacrifice consists of pouring rum in the four corners of the room where one is going to work, chanting incantations and offering light. His art was largely influenced by Yoruba culture, but this is not a singular approach; we can see this in other artists, poets and writers like Aimé Césaire and Wilfredo Lam. To Clarke the result of a people’s history being falsified and fragmented is a loss of themselves, and through admitting who they are and what holds them back the only way they can progress is to gain self-awareness, so that they can see themselves as African. This leads back to the concept of “douendum”, a state he used to describe a people lost in the wake of independence.

## CONCLUSION

Art is subjective. There is no correct or incorrect way to do it. It is a method of understanding and expressing the world. In this discussion we can make note of the multifarious ways in which folklore can be transmitted to words and art, and how old and class folktales are imbued with fresh perspectives.

This research aimed to illustrate how folklore is passed down through the works of writers and artists, evaluating how familiar folkloric characters are represented in selected Trinidad art and scribal literature. Based on the analysis of the works of Paul Keens-Douglas, Jennifer Rahim and Leroy Clarke, the results indicate that folklore is passed down through assorted means with each artist, poet and writer using folklore as a way to traverse or connect to topics that they hold dear to them. Each individual has their own approach—some lighthearted, some resolved to change the perception of a group, while another may be committed and resolute in using these folktales to make a change to Caribbean identities. All pieces of work are valuable as they carve out a space for what folklore is and what it can be. This research clearly illustrates that folklore is still alive in art and literature.

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