

Oraliteracy and Opacity: Resisting Metropolitan Consumption of Caribbean Creole

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A number of cultural theorists have analysed the 'commodification of Otherness' as a form of 'eating the other' (hooks 1992). Here Western (or Northern) cultures visually and metaphorically 'eat' or consume racially marked bodies as a kind of spice or condiment to flavour the bland whiteness of mainstream culture or to enact an expansive 'global culture'. As bell hooks argues, 'the commodification of difference promotes paradigms of consumption wherein whatever difference the Other inhabits is eradicated, via exchange, by a consumer cannibalism that not only displaces the Other but denies the significance of that Other's history through a process of decontextualization' (hooks 1992: 31). The longing for an unattainable

pleasure, argues hooks, 'has led the white west to sustain a romantic fantasy of the "primitive" and the concrete search for a primitive paradise, whether that location be a country or a body, a dark continent or dark flesh, perceived as the perfect embodiment of that possibility' (ibid: 27). Caribbean islands and Caribbean bodies have been made to work as sites for seeking pleasure, in the form of 'consumer cannibalism' of Caribbean 'difference'.

How does embracing or 'eating' the 'creole cultures' of the Caribbean operate to elide or bypass any ethical engagement or responsibility that we living in the North might have towards others living in the Caribbean? In getting closer to Caribbean cultures, in 'becoming Creole', does metropolitan culture in fact again reproduce its domination, reconstitute its centres of knowledge and power, and erase the (neo)colonial relations of violence that enable this proximity in the first place (cf. Ahmed 2000)? Following hooks I want to explore some of the ways in which practices of reading Caribbean literature as a tasting of 'creole' difference serves to reaffirm the power of the dominant by reconstituting the boundaries between Western self and Caribbean 'other'.¹

I. The Imagined Genesis of Creole Languages

The modern academic usage of the term 'creole' originates in the field of linguistics, where there has been a longstanding interest in a range of languages that arose especially in the context of the Atlantic slave trade (but also in parts of the Indian Ocean and other plantation societies). These 'creole

¹ This paper draws in part on arguments made in Mimi Sheller, *Consuming the Caribbean: From Arawaks to Zombies* (Routledge, 2003). I also want to thank participants in the Franklin College conference on 'The Caribbean Unbound' for their comments.

languages' are thought to have arisen from some sort of mixture of European languages with various African languages and other non-European languages, although the original mechanism for their evolution remains empirically unsupported. One commonly accepted hypothesis (cf. Alleyne 1980; Le Page and Tabouret-Keller 1985; Sebba 1997) is that in these special contact zones between radically different linguistic groups in situations of social inequality there first developed a simplified language of convenience or 'contact language' known as a 'pidgin'. People in these areas (especially those who were enslaved and removed from their communities of origin) suffered a radical break in transmission of their native languages and came to speak only the pidgin for most purposes. When the pidgin became extensive enough that a generation of children were brought up speaking it as their mother tongue, it is then thought to have gone through a process of 'complexification', in which it was re-elaborated into a more fully-fledged language, known as a creole language.

Creoles, then, are said to be 'new' languages, evolutionarily 'younger' than non-creole languages, which have developed gradually and organically over centuries without any radical breaks in transmission from one generation to the next. 'In this view', suggests Michel DeGraff, 'Creoles are linguistic neonates whose morphologies lack the features that characterize "older", more "mature" languages' (DeGraff 2001: 54). This theory of language genesis, however, remains highly contested and unproven. In a devastating critique of the commonly accepted story of creole genesis, DeGraff has argued that current theories rest on a set of invalid empirical assumptions and ideologically suspect theoretical suppositions. Drawing on his own extensive

knowledge as a native Haitian Creole-speaker and as a trained linguist, he demonstrates step by step that each assumption about the 'difference' of Creoles from other languages is unsupported by the empirical evidence.

First, DeGraff shows that the basic generalisations and predictions of the Creole prototype as proposed in McWhorter (1998) and in traditional 'catastrophic' Creole genesis scenarios are 'disconfirmed' by the evidence from Haitian Creole, which is considered to be one of the most classic cases of a creole (DeGraff 2001: 87). Haitian Creole is not lacking in the linguistic features and complexities that are usually attributed to 'more mature' languages. Secondly, he demonstrates that there is a preconception permeating creole studies, from before the nineteenth century until today, that Creoles are somehow non-'normal' or non-'regular' languages 'intrinsically marked by one or both of the following related genetic factors:'

(1) their catastrophic genesis as emergency (thus 'simple' and 'optimal') solutions to communicative problems in plurilingual communities; (2) their genesis as failures on the part of 'inferior' beings to acquire 'superior' languages' (ibid: 90).

While the second supposition is clearly racist, the first one also carries with it ideological baggage that has been extremely detrimental to contemporary Creole speakers and to the language and education policies in Creole-speaking societies. The notion that Creoles are morphologically simple or simplified languages (and have had less time to 'develop' than 'normal' languages) is, argues DeGraff, 'empirically untenable, theoretically

unfounded, and methodologically bizarre' (ibid: 97). Yet because of these notions 'Creoles remain among the most stigmatized and undervalued languages of the world, even among self-styled progressive intellectuals, including linguists' (ibid: 98).

Creole languages are largely regarded as oral idioms, lacking in a literature, a history, and even, according to some, the ability to develop 'abstract concepts', they are thought to be highly mutable, open to change, and even vulnerable to 'decreolisation' under the influence of the 'standard' language. The idea of 'creolization' likewise continues to imply a kind of novelty within culture, a dynamic of constant invention, a shifting and morphing which suggests a youthfulness and, dare we say it, immaturity of creole cultures in comparison to more conservative, stable, steady 'old world' cultures. Although these characteristics of dynamism are sometimes cast in a positive light, they may nevertheless carry with them a set of unwarranted assumptions about underlying cultural differences.

II. Eating Caribbean Parole

If we turn to literature, and the ways in which Caribbean literary texts have been consumed in metropolitan centres, we can begin to see the far-reaching effects of theories of creole genesis on interpretations of contemporary Caribbean culture. Caribbean literature has taken on a markedly prominent role in metropolitan literary studies and publishing worlds since the 1980s, when it became increasingly fashionable to read post-colonial and non-Western literatures. With St. Lucian poet Derek Walcott receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1992 and Martinican novelist Patrick

Chamoiseau winning the Prix Goncourt in 1993, there was a growing canonisation of classics of Caribbean literature and poetry. New editions and anthologies appeared bringing new attention to authors such as Claude McKay, E. Kamau Brathwaite, Jean Rhys, Jamaica Kincaid, George Lamming, Samuel Selvon, Caryl Phillips, Maryse Conde, Alejo Carpentier, Juan Bosch and young diaspora writers like Edwidge Danticat, to name but a few. University courses appeared on 'Caribbean Women Writers' and conferences on related themes proliferated in the 1980s and 90s. There was also a growing interest in 'dub poetry' and the oral verse of Jamaican poets like Louise Bennett and Lynton Kwesi Johnson. Then in 2001 V.S. Naipaul (of Trinidadian origin) was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, further crowning Caribbean literature with the metropolitan seal of approval. But how are these literatures being consumed in the metropolitan centres?

Crucial to the reception of Caribbean literature in French and Anglo-American literary studies has been the idea that they have in them something which is 'creole', native to the Caribbean, even if they are written in French, English, Spanish or Dutch. They are described as hybrid literatures, born of the New World, Antillean, rhythmic and polyphonic. Antonio Benitez-Rojo, for example, suggests that,

The literature of the Caribbean can be read as a mestizo text, but also as a stream of texts in flight.... The Caribbean poem and novel are... projects that communicate their own turbulence, their own clash, and their own void, the swirling black hole of social violence produced by the encomienda and the plantation, that is, their otherness, their

peripheral asymmetry with regard to the West. Thus Caribbean literature cannot free itself totally from the multiethnic society upon which it floats, and it tells us of its fragmentation and instability (Benitez-Rojo 1996: 27).

These 'polyrhythmic' texts are thus counterpoised against the West, just as Creole languages are contrasted to 'older' languages: Caribbean language and literature is perceived as being more dynamic, chaotic, improvised, musical, and impure without the clear rules, grammars, and stabilising features of 'mature' languages and literatures. While for Benitez-Rojo this is part of its beauty and grandeur, in view of DeGraff's argument this postmodern praise may also have more troubling implications.

By positing an essential difference of Caribbean literature, rooted in its creolite, it is treated something like the way in which European Surrealists like Andre Breton treated Caribbean painting: it opens up access to the primitive, the natural, the magical, the feminine, the wells of poetic inspiration.² Such interpretations of creolite as civilisation's 'other' and dark mirror are extended to entire cultures and peoples, as can be seen in typical travel journalism on the region. The French Caribbean, in particular, has been characterised as a tropical transmutation of France:

² Andre Betron, the leader of the surrealist movement travelled in the Caribbean where he was very influenced by the 'primitive' style of painting seen there, and the African influences in some artists' work, especially in Haiti. He was accompanied on his trip by the Cuban painter Wilfredo Lam, who was one of the few Caribbean artists to be accepted as part of the European avant-garde (Poupeye 1998).

French is what Guadeloupe is, but it is France carried 3,000 miles in a leaky bag and dropped into a subtropical archipelago: a hot, steamy, volcanic France, beach-frilled, sun-fried and rain-forested, yet for all that, inexorably a sprig of the old country.... French, yes, but West Indian of course to its core.... Thus, blended with French finesse is a winsome Caribbean artlessness, a hot, splashy, noisy directness. Women's clothes are primary-colour bright. Flowers, wild or garden, are big and brashly hued... Fruits like melons, breadfruit and papayas are cannonballs on branches, and their fall can maim. Names tend to be elemental: Basse-Terre, Grande-Terre, Grosse-Montagne, Grand-Bourg, Petit-Bourg.³

In this leaky France, parochial artlessness and brash colours replace civilisation's finesse and sophistication. There is a metonymic slippage from the volcanic and hot landscape, to the noisy and colourful people, to the elemental and direct language. The writer finds the 'clackety french patois' to be 'Twes twes cuwieux'.

Indeed food and language are close companions in the metropolitan consumption of creole cultures. As Celia Britton has shown in relation to the consumption of French Caribbean literature, if in the past exotic fruit was the main export of the French Antilles, now 'the metropolitan French readership consumes Caribbean novels as food'. French Caribbean 'novels are marketed as food' through the use of 'gustatory metaphors' which describe the 'taste' of the language as savoury (Britton 1996: 16). 'The trick' of this

³ Brendan Lehane, 'Q: What's French for Caribbean? A: Guadeloupe', The Independent on Sunday, Travel section, 14 October 2001, p. 21.

tasting, suggests Britton, 'is to make the reader feel that s/he is in unmediated contact with the authentic living "voices" of this exotic culture' (ibid: 18-19).

The writing of Chamoiseau, for example, is described in the New York Times Book Review as Rabelaisian, but with a story 'driven by an African beat, its syncopation measured like the percussive claps of its music. Just as you hear his sentences, you must hear the whole book, the differing intensities in the flows of its story, its "nonlinear" history, add complexity to the melodic line'. Reading is imagined as a form of close contact with 'the other' through the production of an illusion of hearing spoken Creole or hints of the oral 'folk' culture. Other reviewers describe his language as 'lush and colorful', or a 'colorful and exciting patchwork, filled with the sights, sounds, and smells of its exotic locale'.⁴ Insofar as 'creole speech is the source of the stylistic peculiarities of the novels' discourse' (in comparison to metropolitan French novels), as Britton argues, the reader can get closer to the 'exotic' through vicariously consuming the creolite of writing as if it were being heard, smelled, and tasted.⁵

By 'eating their words', Britton argues, French readers are engaged in a particular kind of (un)ethical relation to this exoticised Caribbean culture. Consuming the products of different cultures 'raise[s] the problem of the ethics of understanding. The "alien" object, whether it is a text, as in this case, or some other artefact, offers a resistance to our attempts to understand it' (ibid: 19). Whereas Caribbean theorists like Edouard Glissant have argued that the 'opacity' of language is a positive characteristic 'signifying the resistance which the oppressed put up against being understood, which is equated with

⁴ Various reviews are available on the amazon.com site selling Chamoiseau's novel Texaco.

⁵ Thanks to Andrew Stafford of Lancaster University for bringing this article to my attention.

being objectified and appropriated' (ibid: 19), the use of the gustatory metaphor 'short-circuits' this resistance. It allows the consumer to taste an 'alien' object and savour its difference, without recognising his or her own lack of understanding and objectification of subaltern difference. Britton argues that if 'what we are invited to do to the text is in effect to eat it, then its resistance – its alien or even incomprehensible quality – is simply reduced to part of its exotic, picturesque "saveur"; it becomes something to "get your teeth into"' (ibid: 19-20). Ultimately Caribbean literature (like its digitised 'world music') becomes a commodity valued for its 'flavour' while the first-world subject is positioned and consolidated 'as a consumer' (ibid: 21; cf. hooks 1992: 21).

III. Raw resistance: slackness and oraliteracy

One way in which Creole oral cultures have resisted this commodification and consumption is through their 'rawness'. There has been a movement among some Caribbean (and African) writers to write in their own Nation Language, which requires translation for speakers of so-called 'standard' languages like English or French. If the language is 'raw' enough (e.g., 'deep' on the 'creole continuum', vulgar, rough, crude, sexual, violent, harsh on the ear) it will repel any who might potentially 'eat' it. Only when cooked up in literary form is it 'palatable' to the metropolitan gourmand. As Carolyn Cooper argues in her study of Jamaican vernacular texts, Noises in the Blood,

The vulgar body of knowledge produced by the people... is devalued. In all domains, the 'vulgar' is that which can be traced to 'Africa'; the 'refined' is that which can be traced to 'Europe'.... In the domain of language and verbal creativity, English is 'refined' and Jamaican is 'vulgar'; oral texts are 'vulgar'; written texts are 'refined'.... The subjects of this study are, for the most part, bastard oral texts...products of illicit procreation...perverse invasions of the tightly-closed orifices of the Great Tradition (Cooper 1993: 8-9).

Her own theoretical discourse promotes a transgressive 'oraliteracy' which 'attempts to cross the divide between Slackness and Culture, between Jamaican and English, between the oral and the scribal traditions' (ibid: 12). Taking a stand on the literary consumption of Caribbean texts, she states that her decision 'not to translate into English all of the Jamaican texts analysed in this study is part of this reverse colonisation project. For non-Jamaicans, the apparent inscrutability of these texts is an invitation to engage in the rehumanising act of learning a new language' (ibid: 193).

The use of Nation Language in the writing of theory can achieve a certain amount of resistance to metropolitan consumption. Several other Caribbean academics have experimented with publishing non-literary works in creole languages (e.g., Trouillot 1977) and systems of writing and dictionaries of Caribbean English have appeared. Creole usage, especially insofar as it continues to be stigmatised, remains a tactic against metropolitan consumption and an invitation to 'folk up' theory (Cooper 1993: 14). Of course, to pitch one's camp on the subaltern side one needs to have sufficient

'oraliteracy' to stand at this crossroads, and that usually requires having one foot in that camp already, being in other words 'between camps' (Gilroy 2000). Turning to the 'bastard oral texts' that are her archive, Cooper looks in particular at the lyrical accomplishments of Jamaican Dancehall DJs. In contrast to Paul Gilroy's (1987) reading of the sexist and homophobic lyrics within this genre as politically conservative, however, Cooper suggests that DJ slackness 'can be seen to represent in part a radical, underground confrontation with the patriarchal gender ideology and the pious morality of fundamentalist Jamaican society.' With greater sensitivity to the stylistics of slackness in Jamaican Dancehall, she suggests that,

In its invariant coupling with Culture, Slackness is potentially a politics of subversion. For Slackness is not mere sexual looseness – though it certainly is that. Slackness is a metaphorical revolt against law and order; an undermining of consensual standards of decency. It is the antithesis of Culture. (Cooper 1993: 141).⁶

Reclaiming one's own body and sexuality have become crucial elements of a culture of freedom in post-slavery societies. Even in 'emancipation', the body has remained a contested terrain. Against the forces of a world economy that commodified black bodies, resistance has long taken the form of staking a claim in one's own body.

Nevertheless in metropolitan Northern contexts a prurient interest surrounds the phenomenon of Dancehall, which first seems to have come to the notice of the British media with the 1997 Jamaican-made film Dancehall

⁶ For a similar argument see Denise Noble, 'Ragga Music: Dis/Respecting Black Women and Dis/Reputable Sexualities' in B. Hesse (ed.) Un/settled Multiculturalisms: Diasporas, Entanglements, Transruptions (London and New York: Zed Books, 2000).

Queen (directed by Don Letts and Rick Elgood). While the film dealt with the lives of a mother and daughter who became involved in dancehall in order to 'put food on the table', the lifestyle has been mythologised on British television. Broadcasts by Channel Four such as 'Dance Hall Queens' and 'Exotic Dancers' have shown the 'inside story' of sexual exhibitionism in Jamaica, complemented by series like 'Caribbean Uncovered' on Channel Four and 'Pleasure Island' on ITV, which show the sexual antics of tourists on their Jamaican holidays. A whole series of programmes on Jamaican popular culture in Channel Four's 'Caribbean Summer' programming in July and August 2000 tied into a media build-up of books and music releases of Jamaican music. These appropriations of Caribbean culture have depended significantly on particular constructs of Black sexuality and gender relations as not only dangerous and dysfunctional, but also 'wild' and uncontrolled (although it is the tourists themselves who engage in wild sexual practices). It is the perception of 'excess' in Caribbean culture, a kind of 'natural' carnivalesque vibrancy, which justifies continuing relations of consumption – the apparent inexhaustibility of the Caribbean incites the tourist to further consumption.

Today advertising campaigns for various products such as soft drinks and alcoholic drinks constantly keep before the public the equation of the Caribbean with fun, relaxation, and taking life easy. The deep layering and reiteration of such representations of the Caribbean tends to reinforce an imaginary geography in which it becomes a carnivalesque site for hedonistic consumption of illicit substances (raunchy dancing, sex with 'black' or 'mulatto' others, smoking ganja). These hedonistic practices of holiday

abandon today serve to mark 'the islands' as places differing from the tourist's point of origin. The West Indies are inscribed as 'resorts' beyond civilisation, places where the normal rules of civility can be suspended, especially at the all-inclusive hotel complexes like Jamaica's infamous 'Hedonism II'. Thus the transgression of racial and moral boundaries serves to reinforce the constitution of geographies of difference that define Europe or North America as 'civilised' and the Caribbean as a chain of 'unreal' fantasy islands. These fantasies reflect a long history of the inscription of corruption onto the landscapes and inhabitants of these 'Paradise isles'.

Can 'raw' language, lyrics, and erotic liberation serve as a form of resistance to metropolitan consumption, or does it merely feed the consumer appetite? Given state legislation of what constitutes 'obscenity' won't 'the vulgar body of Jamaican popular culture' (as Cooper refers to it) always be recuperated into projects of making good citizens and workers? M. Jacqui Alexander has posed this problem of 'erotic autonomy' in relation to the contemporary neocolonial (or 'recolonised') state (Alexander 1997):

Women's sexual agency, our sexual and our erotic autonomy have always been troublesome for the state. They pose a challenge to the ideological anchor of an originary nuclear family, a source of legitimation for the state, which perpetuates the fiction that the family is the cornerstone of society. Erotic autonomy signals danger to the heterosexual family and to the nation...operating outside the boundaries of law and, therefore, poised to be disciplined and punished within it (Alexander 1997: 64-5).

Alexander's close reading of legislation on domestic violence and criminalised homosexuality in the Bahamas demonstrates the conjuncture of bodily erotics and the national 'body' in the neocolonial Caribbean. Women's erotic autonomy (for example as lesbian, and perhaps as Dancehall Queen) is policed by the 'recolonised' state in order to enable the 'unequal incorporation of the Bahamas into an international political economy on the basis of serviceability (e.g., tourism)' (ibid: 67).

Tourism, based on the advertising slogan 'It's better in the Bahamas', mobilises the population as 'loyal sexualised citizens to service heterosexuality, tourism, and the nation simultaneously' (ibid: 90). This is not to say that Bahamians are without agency in the processes of touristic commodification, which certainly has its economic benefits, nor that all Bahamians participate in 'servicing' tourism. However there are certain implications of this Faustian bargain with the powerful economic forces of self-commodification. Most importantly,

the significance of tourism lies in its ability to draw together powerful processes of (sexual) commodification and (sexual) citizenship. The state institutionalization of economic viability through heterosexual sex for pleasure links important economic and psychic elements for both the imperial tourist (the invisible subject of colonial law) and for a presumably 'servile' population whom the state is bent on renativizing.... The state actively socializes loyal heterosexual citizens

into tourism, its primary strategy of economic modernization[,] by sexualizing them and positioning them as commodities (ibid: 67-9).

Alexander's analysis calls into question the extent to which the autonomous eroticism of something like Jamaican Dancehall culture can be emancipatory, given the ease of its recontextualisation as a commodified raunchy and primitive 'black' sexuality serving the needs of the national and international tourism and music industries.

I am not in a position to resolve these questions of autonomy and agency, which would require far more knowledge and understanding of the popular cultures of different groups within the complex array of Caribbean societies. Above all, I lack the 'oraliteracy' that would be necessary to undertaking any such analysis. Clearly there is a continual effort by metropolitan music, film, and tourism industries to re-process and re-package the subaltern performance of sexual and racial difference for metropolitan consumption. The question I want to end with, rather, is one that returns to my own positioning as a white 'reader' of Caribbean culture and literature, located in the North and at a long distance from the Caribbean.

I have argued first that there exists a common understanding of creole languages as being in their 'infancy' and thus possessing certain 'juvenile' qualities. This understanding of the differences between 'standard' and 'creole' languages has serious implications for how Caribbean literature is read in non-Caribbean contexts (and for how it is written). I have suggested, secondly, that metropolitan appreciation of Caribbean literature revolves around a notion that in Caribbean writing we can 'hear' the rhythms and 'taste'

the 'flavour' of creole-speaking vernacular cultures. This allows metropolitan readers to feel that they have gotten closer to those cultures in some sense, crossing over into their hybrid world. And finally, I have argued that popular cultures of 'slackness' offer a 'rawness' which some might argue is less easily assimilated by metropolitan consumers. In conclusion I want to suggest that an ethics of postcolonial reading would require an acknowledgement of the unreadability of opaque popular cultures and 'raw' performances of slackness within the terms of 'literate' textuality. Caribbean theorists, writers, and performers who have the 'oraliteracy' to translate between oral and literate cultures, or between Slackness and Culture, also must struggle with the responsibility of articulating their identity yet not 'serving up' Caribbean language, culture, and performance for the Yankee dollar. It is in the failures of our own understanding that we might learn the most from each other.

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