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Oraliteracy and Textual Opacity: Resisting Metropolitan Consumption of Caribbean Creole

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The incorporation of 'creole' vernacular languages into texts written in 'standard' languages is an especially fraught crossroads of intercultural communication. This article considers the difference between a kind of literary tourism in which non-Caribbean readers 'taste' the flavour of creole language within Caribbean literature versus an 'oraliteracy' that would recognise the full autonomy and complexity of creole languages. Rather than reading textual linguistic hybridity as an unproblematic form of intercultural communication, it is suggested that metropolitan consumption of literary representations of creole vernaculars can serve to naturalise cultural boundaries and reinforce racist stereotypes – especially in postcolonial situations.

Zafè mete lang kreyòl yo nan mitan liv ki ekri nan lang ki fin tabli tèt yo tankou nòm lengwistik, se yon kalfou danjere nan kesyon kominikasyon intèkiltirèl. Atik sila la vle reflechi sou diferans ki genyen ant yon kalite touris literè kote yon lektè ki pa natif-natal rejyon karayib la vin 'fè yon ti goute' sòs lang kreyòl la nan plat manje Literati karayib la. Bagay sa a se yon bagay ki pa gen okenn rapò ak sa yo rele 'literatòl' ki, pou tèt pa l, ta vle rekonèt tout endependans ak kompleksite lang kreyòl yo. Olye ke li intèprete kesyon melanj lengwistik la tankou yon fòm kominikasyon intèkiltirèl ki san pwoblèm, atik sa a vle fè moun konprann ke mòd konsomasyon lang kreyòl yo anndan literati gwo peyi metwopòl kapab sèvi pou fè moun vin abitye ak zòn fwontyè kiltirèl epi tou li ka ranfòse estereotip rasis (espesyalman nan sityasyon poskolonyal yo).

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The study of 'language and intercultural communication' concerns not only the attempt of different language speakers to speak to each other, but also the ways in which encounters between different languages are textually represented, written, staged and read. This article is especially concerned with such textual communications, and in particular the power dynamics within them. The representation of linguistic encounters often involves a crossing of borders: of culture, class, race, etc. Yet the crossing of such boundaries is often as much about the reconstitution of the border as it is about its transgression. Carolyn Cooper's work perhaps more than any other has addressed some of these issues in regard to the passage between scribal English and vernacular Creoles. Here I will consider the textual representation of Caribbean vernaculars, and in particular how they have been displaced and consumed in metropolitan contexts.

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' (Sheller, 2003). As 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)

How does embracing or 'eating' the 'creole cultures' of the Caribbean operate to elide or bypass any ethical responsibility that we living in the north might have towards others living in the Caribbean? In decontextualising 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 begin with some commonplace understandings of 'creoles' as a distinctive type of language; I then turn to the metropolitan consumption of *creolité* in literature; and I conclude with some reflections on oraliteracy, opacity and linguistic 'rawness' as modes of resistance to being cooked, served up and eaten by literary/culinary intercultural consumers.

The Imagined Genesis of Creole Languages

In linguistics 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), known as 'creole languages'. Although the original mechanism for their evolution remains empirically unsupported, one commonly accepted hypothesis (Alleyne, 1980; Le Page & Tabouret-Keller, 1985; Sebba, 1997) is that in 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 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 19th 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. (DeGraff, 2001: 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 (2001: 97), 'empirically untenable, theoretically unfounded, and methodologically bizarre'. 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' (DeGraff, 2001: 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 'creolisation' likewise continues to imply a kind of novelty within culture, a dynamic of constant invention, a shifting and morphing, all of which suggests a youthfulness and 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 nevertheless carry with them a set of unwarranted assumptions about underlying cultural differences. It is these assumptions that I wish to explore, in turning to the literary gourmandise.

Eating Caribbean *Parole*

In the consumption of Caribbean literary texts in Euroamerican cultural contexts, 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 postcolonial and non-Western literatures. With the St. Lucian poet Derek Walcott receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1992, Martinican novelist Patrick Chamoiseau winning the Prix Goncourt in 1993, and V.S. Naipaul (of Trinidadian origin) the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2001, there has been a growing canonisation of classics of Caribbean literature and poetry. New editions and anthologies have appeared bringing new attention to authors such as Claude McKay, Kamau Brathwaite, Jean Rhys, Jamaica Kincaid, George Lamming, Samuel Selvon, Caryl Phillips, Maryse Condé, Alejo Carpentier, Juan Bosch and young diaspora writers like Edwidge Danticat, to name but a few. 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 even when texts are written in French, English, Spanish or Dutch, they have in them something which is 'creole', or native to the Caribbean. They are described as hybrid literatures, born of the New World, Antillean, rhythmic and polyphonic. 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 old world literatures, just as Creole languages are contrasted to 'older' languages: Caribbean language and literature are both 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 *creolité*, it is treated something like the way in which European Surrealists like André 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 *creolité* 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:

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. (Lehane, 2001: 21)

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 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' (Britton, 1996: 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'.³ 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 writing as if it were being heard, smelled and tasted.⁴

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' (Britton, 1996: 19). Whereas Caribbean theorists like

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 being objectified and appropriated' (Britton, 1996: 19), the use of the gustatory metaphor 'short-circuits' this resistance. It allows the consumer to taste the 'alien' object, to savour its spicy 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"' (Britton, 1996: 19–20). Does Caribbean literature ultimately become a commodity valued for its 'flavour', as Britton argues, while the first-world subject is positioned and consolidated 'as a consumer' (Britton, 1996: 21; cf. Hooks, 1992: 21)?

Rawness, Slackness and Oraliteracy

One way in which Créole 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 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' (Cooper, 1993: 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' (Cooper, 1993: 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 nonliterary 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 consump-

tion *and* an invitation to 'folk up' theory, as Cooper puts it (Cooper, 1993: 14). Yet in becoming the cultural informant, as Cooper observes, there is always the risk of being branded 'the informer'. The question for the writer, the literary critic, or the crossover DJ always remains: for whom do we translate our culture? For what purpose do we serve it up to others? Can 'raw' language, lyrics and 'erotic autonomy' (Alexander, 1997) serve as a form of resistance to metropolitan consumption, or does it merely feed the consumer's appetite for the racialised/sexualised other (Noble, 2000)?

But I do not want to interrogate the cultural producers who navigate these dilemmas; my interest for now is with the consumer of creole cultural productions. What is our position, as we read 'other literatures in English', savour their flavour, and turn our open ears to their polyphonic rhythms? Are we learning another language or are we merely (post)colonial tourists enjoying the native colour? Certainly touristic appropriations of Caribbean culture have long relied on constructs of Caribbean culture as having a kind of 'natural' erotic vibrancy. 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 fantasies reflect a long colonial history of the inscription of corruption onto the landscapes and inhabitants of these 'Paradise isles' (see Alexander 1997; Sheller, 2003).

The question I want to end with, then, 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). It suggests that it is easy to understand, simple, playful and uncomplicated.

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 is arguably 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 or opacity of popular cultures and 'raw' performances within the terms of 'literate' textuality. Rather than always believing in our endless capacity for intercultural communication across creole continuums, we would do well to pause on that which we cannot understand, that which we cannot swallow. Rather than assuming that we can assimilate the tastes and flavours of creole languages through Caribbean literature, we should recognise that these are distinct languages that need to be learned like any others, and taught, and translated. It is perhaps in the failures

of our own understanding and the partiality of our failing translations that we might learn the most from each other.

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Notes

1. This paper draws in part on arguments made in Sheller (2003). I also want to thank participants in the Franklin College conference on 'The Caribbean Unbound' (April 2003) for their comments.
2. André Breton, 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).
3. Various reviews are available on the amazon.com site selling Chamoiseau's novel *Texaco*.
4. Thanks to Andrew Stafford of Lancaster University for bringing this article to my attention.

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