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Checking Out Me History, Tings an Times, and White Comedy: Reshaping and re-playing the post-colonial identity

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*The main purpose of this article is to show how John Agard's *Checking Out Me History*, Linton Kwesi Johnson's *Tings an Times* and Benjamin Zephaniah's *White Comedy* play along the "spectrum of the spoken word", as Agard himself describes it, and how their words are spoken as concurrent signs of resistance against the colonizing past. They introduce a kind of poetry that, with all its political force, quite literally "makes something happen". In other words, through a shared happening among performer and spectators, these poets stand in front of the post-colonial eyes as the colonized body, with all that it carries, taking advantage of the effective immediacy of the performance while returning back to the origins of poetry, namely its oral tradition. Based on a post-colonial geometry of self-redefinition and historical re-remembering, the past is reclaimed as the personas / performers / writers / speakers carve history into the shape of their own body and carve themselves inside and outside of history. When they confront and question themselves, they confront and question their spectators and history itself as a spectator of its happenings: how can human beings walk in and out of history's play without crossing the lines of complicity and how can the rules of the play be subverted?*

This generation of contemporary Caribbean poets, born in the 50s and writing most of their work somewhere around the 90s, writes for a history that is shaped by what it chooses to leave out of its strictly outlined narrative, and they decide to mark their own signs of exclusion inside of it; they choose to leave out the canonized logos and thus the canonized way of making sense of the world, of explaining, narrating, and narrativizing history. As Bill Ashcroft puts it, "control over language by the imperial center provides the terms by which reality may be constituted"; it provides the names, and naming anything or anyone—in this case reality itself—means owning it and exerting power over it (261). So, these poets need to exert power over the language that controls them, that is, the language of the colonizer, the language through which history was written and from which the colonized were exiled. John Agard, Linton Kwesi Johnson, and Benjamin Zephaniah turn the colonizer's clichés against themselves by calling them out, by acting them out and reacting against them, by playing with them. As Johan Huizinga wrote, "play is older than culture", and it is generative of culture, since everything in civilization is built on play-patterns, and civilization itself "does not come from play like a

baby detaching itself from the womb: it arises in and as play, and never leaves it” (Huizinga 173). Playing any game inside and outside of language requires some rules. For these three poets or *homines ludentes*, the word-game is played according to the rules of comedy, humor, and irony, by not compromising their speech to stereotypical forms of expression and by challenging what is deemed appropriate, serious, historically false or true.

What is really distinctive about Caribbean poetry is the tendency towards fragmented and formless structures, its orality and rhythm, and its rhyming through and for the effect of repetition, and subsequently for the gradual formation and prevalence of a historical identity. Exactly this array of traits of language that makes it seem the language of the ‘other’ is what also resists any label of otherness. Such language offers personal stories of radical singularities; such language finds the power of the ‘I’ in the ‘we’ and therefore introduces a new kind of wholeness where any discriminatory characterizations fall short of defining the identity of the speaker. The structure of the poems shows the need and the vigorous search of a beginning and an ending that most of the time overlap with each other. However, the content defies any possibility of the existence of order, stability, solutions, or answers while raising these issues within the context of post-colonial realities. In general, as the poets carry on in the post-modernist experience of “inadequacy of interpretation and of a disorienting reality, their Caribbean writing exploits precisely this terrain of the unspeakable” (Dash 297). The Caribbean writer praises formlessness of plurality and interprets the sign systems of those who wish to dominate and control, bringing forth the inexhaustibility of a world that resists systematic construction (Dash 297).

To be more specific, Agard in *Checking Out Me History* starts off his search of an identity that is not lost but fragmented and scattered all around the historical landscape of double narratives. Language is his main reunifying tool through its fragmentation. What is interesting about his language is that its content is broken into fragments of meaning by its form, which is by itself no form at all, at least according to the ‘standard use of English’. He uses unconventional syntax of dispersed words written in non-standard spelling, and this way his language becomes representative of his identity. It is an identity that has lost its roots in the originality of the unoriginal, in the mixture of origins. For example, Caribbean Creole runs through the whole text, with phrases like “*she travel far, she still brave*” (61) or “Dem tell me / Wha dem want to tell me” or “I checking out me own history / carving out me identity” (60) escaping the standard grammar rules and forming new ones. The speaker is alienated from himself and he cannot but see himself through the eyes of the colonizer—“Bandage up me eye

with me own history / Blind me to me own identity” (60)—which is just as good as being blind. We also see him using the colonizer’s view of history to refer to his own view of absent history. As a result, throughout the poem, there is a multiplicity of references to historical figures. What stands out is the quality of language in terms of the different kinds of tone he uses. For example, whenever he refers to White myths or figures such as Lord Nelson, Columbus, Florence Nightingale, Robin Hood, or King Cole, he tends to use a more child-like and ironic kind of tone—“Dem tell me bout de man who discover de balloon / and de cow who jump over de moon / Dem tell me bout de dish ran away with de spoon” (61)—in order to reverse the roles, that is, to call the colonizer out for the immaturity of his power, while pointing out the radical becomingness of the colonized.

Whenever Agard alludes to Black historical figures, a glorifying imagery comes into play, introducing such figures as natural forces beyond any restricting control, while also changing the font and writing about them in italics to make them immediately stand out:

Nanny

see-far woman

of mountain dream

fire-woman struggle

hopeful stream

to freedom river (61)

These figures and names, the ‘I’ and the ‘they’, are separated through content, and yet they are united through form or better yet through formlessness. Agard, through his usage of lines such as “Dem tell me / Dem tell me / Wha dem want to tell me” (60), seems to imply that there are two (un)realities: what he was told by the colonizer about his own past and what was never told about his past. He manipulates the colonizer’s standards to retell the so-far Eurocentric non-narratives of Toussaint Louverture, Nanny de Maroon, Mary Seacole, Shaka de great Zulu, de Caribs, de Arawaks. Having acknowledged that there are two narratives, the colonizer’s and Agard’s, he decides to speak through these historical figures and for them. The characterizations ‘historically legitimate’ and ‘illegitimate’ are challenged, as Agard raises questions about historiography and representation. Who has the right to narrate, to speak? What is this “voice of the other in us” (Derrida, qtd. in Spivak 104), and how can one hear it? Who

gives “the permission to narrate” (Said, qtd. in Spivak 79), and what about those who cannot speak? From silence to realization, history, language, and identity are intertwined in a formless structure; in Agard’s poem, repetition ties together a unifying whole of different contradictory pieces of narration, in that the same beginnings bring about different cultural imagery but they all end up carving out the speaker’s identity.

As for Linton Kwesi Johnson’s *Tings an’ Times*, its writer follows Agard’s lead and seems to reflect upon how such carving of a post-colonial identity is realized within the limits of contemporary demoralized societies. The speaker, speaking of himself in the third person singular, as from an embodied distance, and as “a fragile fragment af lite trapped inna di belly a di daak nite” (105), takes advantage of the fragility of the standard structure of sentences and breaks them down in order to put back together whatever it is that constitutes his own self. Here again we have lines with only one word and no syntax, and all this formlessness is manifested through the use of Jamaican patois. Repetition is not only a matter of form but also a matter of content, it becomes the poem itself; while getting to reflect on reality, he stumbles upon the habitual reappearance of corruption and resignation. For example, we encounter repetition in whole stanzas such as:

Duped

Doped

Demoralised

Dizzied

Dozed

Traumatized [...]

fi days

upan

days

upan

days

upan

days [...]
 some sell dem soul
 some get lef out in di cole
 some get elevate
 some get depreciate (107)

This kind of repetition does not only express disappointment, frustration, and anger about the state of “tings an’ times”, but it also wants to communicate the timelessness of this vicious circle that, as the poet says, includes deceit, corruption, nepotism, viciousness, darkness, and oppression. This persistence of repetition also unveils the desire of the speaker to find his way towards true freedom, towards its pure structure and its pure formlessness, and towards the completion of his identity and of his reality “inna di labyrinth af life” (106).

Johnson examines the serious nature of the deep wound that colonialism and racism has left, but he does so without doing away with his sense of humor and irony. For instance, he satirizes the falsehoods of supposed freedoms—“dazzled by di firmament of freedam / him coudn deteck deceit” (104)—and the corrupted side of socialism, spelling out a state of reality that plays with itself to understand and undo itself:

dat an di road to sawshalism
 yu could buck-up nepotism
 him wife dangerous
 him bredda tletcherus
 an him kozn very vicious (104)

Rebellion or the fading myths and the narratives of the past are not enough, and as a result he is not “soh certn not soh sure like before” and the only shreds of certainty of who he is come with an image of the Caribbean nature, of “di glimin sea shore” and of “di salt an di sea” (106). Towards the end, he realizes the fact that there are no glorious heroes, no saviors, no real rebels, but such realization of “di pungent owedah af decay signal seh a bran new life deh pan di way” (109).

Similarly, Benjamin Zephaniah takes this playfulness and makes it the necessary ingredient from which his language feeds on as the post-colonial *White Comedy* unfolds. His language is deeply rooted in creative reversal and subversion as he makes sure that he does not fall short of the readers' or the listeners' expectations by offering them the unexpected. For example, he takes compound words or phrases such as "whitemailed", "white witch", "white magic", "white sheep", "white art", "white spot", "whitewater fever", "whiteleg", "whitelisted", "white book", "white mass", "white death", "whitesmith" (14), situating as the first complement the word 'white' in a place where conventionally the word 'black' is expected, and reversely by situating the word 'black' where the word 'white' is expected, as in the phrase the "Black House" (14). It goes without saying that such subversion of expectations is not just for the sake of playing with language or going against the semantic or grammatical rules; its meaning extends to socio-political matters relating to power and oppression. A resistance to language is a resistance against the current social structures, the relations of power such language expresses and constructs, and the ways by which such language is expressed and constructed. Zephaniah repeats over and over again the word 'white', and subsequently establishes, through this repetition, a White society, a White comedy intending to bring about a Black tragedy. However, he deconstructs such establishment by playing with it, and as he endures the game, he reveals all the White myth-making processes. The poem makes fun of itself and subverts itself. Towards the end, the poet-persona demands more space, or rather he demands a new space upon the ruins of the old form. And yet he ends up claiming his place within the same structure of power that has, for so long, wanted Black people overpowered.

As Homi K. Bhabha states in his essay, "Signs Taken for Wonders", about the cultural authority of the English book, "the edict of Englishness" and Whiteness manage to assimilate the act of subversion and resistance against it. In other words, the colonized subject tends to mimic the colonizer's ways of expression but with a slight subversive differentiation from it:

If the effect of colonial power is seen to be the production of hybridization rather than the noisy command of colonialist authority or the silent repression of native traditions, then an important change of perspective occurs. The ambivalence at the source of traditional discourses on authority enables a form of subversion, founded on the undecidability that turns the discursive conditions of dominance into the grounds of intervention. (...) If, as Steven Lukes rightly says, the acceptance of authority excludes any evaluation of the content of an utterance, and if its source, which must be acknowledged, disavows both conflicting reasons and personal judgement, then can the 'signs' or 'marks' of authority be anything more than 'empty'

presences of strategic devices? Need they be any the less effective because of that? Not less effective but effective in a different form, would be our answer. (Bhabha 43)

Even though Zephaniah condemns such dominance, he points out the fact that he is, either way, surrounded by the limits of this grim “white” system of power as there is no room left for radical marginalities. At any rate, as Zephaniah has stated, he tends to play with words, and the result of such tendency, particularly in this poem, is “the projection of a double vision of British society, a ‘double consciousness’ that appears in both the thematic concerns and forms making his poetry a hybrid, creolised product of meeting of two cultures that transcends racial and cultural boundaries” (Doumerc 195–196).

I have so far referred to these three poets as speakers and as writers, and I waver over these characterizations exactly because they have written their poetry to be spoken out loud, to be performed and to be heard. The Caribbean culture has for so long promoted a more voice-driven and rhythmic approach of poetry, combining it with calypso music, introducing *dup* poetry, and during the 70s, incorporating sound systems that include “homemade speakers, a powerful amplifier, a number of turntables and often a DJ that raps over the music” (Dawson 85). The rhyming schemes, the musicality, the repetition, the phonetic spelling of the written texts all come to add to the oral orientation of the poems. For example, in all of these three poems, phonetic spelling is always present, giving rise not just to the need to perform the poem but also to make the reader speak the language of the creator, both metaphorically and literally. As for the musicality of the pieces, alliterations and assonances prevail in almost every line and their effect on the ear of the reader is even more enhanced by the existence of rhyme. These traits are inherent in their speech, and it is this Caribbean rhythm and music that resound a kind of freedom of fusion, of independence that is opposed to the Western approach to rhythm. For Russell McDougall, this approach is divisive since “we divide music into the standard units of time and rhythm is something we follow” (Chernoff qtd. in McDougall 300).

To give some examples, in Agard’s poem, we see lines filled with rhyming quatrains such the ones throughout lines 36–39 with rhyming pairs of “soul-Seacole”, or in lines 41–44 with the pairs of “far-War” and “go-no”, or the final lines, 50–53, with the pairs of “tell me- tell me” and “history-identity”. The same goes for Linton Kwesi Johnson’s poem, where we get a variety of sound effects, starting off with alliterations of the sounds /d/ and /z/ in lines such as “Duped / Doped/ Demoralised” and “Dizzied / Dozed / Traumatized”, and a rhyming pattern in lines 13–16, where we get rhyming pairs of “cleek” - “deceit” and “intrigue” - “league”, or

in lines 18–19, with pairs such as “sawshalism” - “nepotism” or in lines 20–22, with “dangerous-tretcherus-vicious”. There are also reoccurring rhyming couplets or quartets and internal rhymes—“af di tides a di times”—and more alliterations and assonances. As for Zephaniah’s poem, it continuously plays with sound, as there are alliterations of /t/ in “white spot”, of /r/ in “whitewater fever”, of /w/ in “white watch”, “white wog”, “white witch”, “Wid white”, and “waz whitemailed”; there are also assonances of /e/ in “white economy” and “whitewater fever”. Taking into consideration all the poems, it seems worth mentioning that, through their rhyming pairs, alliterations, and assonances, certain lines are singled out, making their effect meaningfully persistent to the readers/listeners/spectators.

It is exactly this orality of the language that gives rise to the performance of the creators’ bodies. McDougall views the body as a verbal signifier that encodes the condition of culture (296), and Frantz Fanon writes about the performativity of the body: “A slow composition of myself as a body in the middle of a spatial and temporal world – such seems to be the schema. It does not impose itself on me; it is, rather, a definitive structuring of the self and of the world-definitive because it creates a real dialectic between my body and the world” (291). Even though all of these poets comprehend the existence of such a dialectic and welcome the fact that there are no culturally neutral bodies, they defy their confinement within their limits; through exposing their physical self, they try to get a grip of the ontology of their identity. They have repeatedly stated that their main purpose is to perform these poems as written in their own bodies and have done so in different kinds of public places during festivals and happenings. It is not by chance that the stories told are, as I mentioned in the beginning, personal, with strong autobiographical content. The dominant pronoun in their poems is the ‘I’ that sometimes is completely differentiated from the ‘other’, from another ‘they’.

This isolation and this otherness somehow are neutralized by the feeling of oneness the presence of a listening crowd resonates. “In performance poetry the message is the driving force that holds the self-reliant collective together. One of the main undercurrents is free speech; and, as well as regarding autonomy very highly, the scene has an ethos to be quite socially driven” (Tutu 158). These poets try to find their own identity through searching for the original identity of poetry itself, which, as far as Jamaican tradition is concerned, resides in the mode of oral expression. And it suffices to say that this search is connected with the colonial past and the neo-colonial or post-colonial present as they literally re-discover the non-neutral, post-colonial body giving it a voice, and the opportunity to be gazed upon anew by the spectators. They have the opportunity to read and thus interpret and re-identify themselves

while “controlling who is receiving the message and the art and also having control over how their pieces are perceived” (Tutu 159).

Now, in a similar context, Marvin Carlson talks about the system and a resistant performance that strives to create a “community rather than a commodity” (309), disrupting the conventional role of spectator. In this community, “the performance of this kind slips back and forth between a firm declaration of identity and a parody of social clichés that haunt that identity” (311). Also, both performer and spectators complete and actually co-produce the artistic piece, making the performance an expression or a celebration of “a plurivocal world of communicating bodies” (310). A need for equality and the manifestation of it take place through the physical and emotional closeness between the audience and the performer. In this way, the performers/poets support a new form of solidarity that is developed not just among the members of the Black community, bringing forth the universality of identity issues and questions. They also have the power or the chance to be the ones that can possibly include the colonizer that excluded them from the historical narrative. The Caribbean performance introduces a new movement, according to which the body “is not something completed and finished but something open and uncompleted” (Bakhtin qtd. in Dash 297), and likewise history and language are viewed as open projects still under construction. These poets, in their attempt to historically reposition themselves, escape from the strict adherence of Western thought to rationalization by presenting to the public eye the materiality of the human body, the materiality of language. In the context of performance, the exiled subject is “re-integrated in the lost body of the native land” as well as in the lost body of the Jamaican oral tradition; the body of the colonized subject gets over the historical “dismemberment inflicted by the colonizer’s destructive gaze” (Dash 296). These poets want to re-see themselves and get the chance to be re-seen by others. They also get to speak to and for the silenced colonizer, subverting the roles, and giving an alternative perspective from which history can be approached.

These poems quite literally speak for themselves, and through their words, they put into action Achebe’s request to: “Let every people bring their gifts to the great festival of the world’s cultural harvest and mankind will be all the richer for the variety and the distinctiveness of the offerings” (76). On the other hand, there have been writers like Derek Walcott who have claimed that these contemporary writers play by the rules of the colonizer when playing against the imposed social roles. More specifically, in his essay “The Muse of History”, he claims that “they limit memory only to suffering and they limit their language to phonetic pain”, feeling that they must “abuse the master in his own language and this is viewed as servitude not

victory” (Walcott 330). But this generation of poets acknowledges the fact that, as Aimé Césaire claims in his own “Discourse on Colonialism”, “no one colonizes innocently” (4) and that “the West has never been further from being able to live a true humanism – a humanism made to the measure of the world” (22). These poets, to reverse Bhabha’s phrasing, make their wonders into signs infused with meanings, whose recklessness and honesty are not restricted simply within the task of rewriting history or retelling it. They make ontological claims, they make history a bodily affair.

Agard, Johnson, and Zephaniah, in spite of being disillusioned with reality, within which an authentic self seems as nothing but a fleeting notion, insist on trying to grasp a sense of their own material identity, and of the materiality of resistance. In other words, these poets go beyond the above-mentioned roles, as they get rid of the polarities of master and servant or victimizer and victim. They use their own terms, their own names, their own language of cultural fusion that make them who they are. They enjoy the playful orality of their language, the here and the now of their performance, without imposing the comforting oblivion of being in the moment. They recognize the necessity of the past, even if this means that they will have to address the frailty of the self, the destabilization of the present, and the liminality of the future. Yet, in every poem their defeatist ponderings are balanced by a slight glimpse of a potentiality, of an (un)foreseeable social change, by some remnants of resistance against the state of things.

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