

***Writer defined literary concerns and Caribbean Creole: three case studies***

I take as my starting point for this paper the suggestion from linguist, Mick Short that criticism 'can benefit from a fusion of 'literary' and 'linguistic' method.'<sup>1</sup> Short's position is a useful one for those interested in criticism which interfaces with the literary and the linguistic. Indeed, it is from the perspective of the literary that this paper is explored. Texts by three Caribbean writers: Olive Senior, Merle Hodge and Jacob Ross are central to this paper.<sup>2</sup> Each writer, Senior from Jamaica; Hodge from Trinidad and Ross from Grenada, draws upon the 'Caribbean demotic' to use M.Nourbese Philip's terminology (Philip:1993) in quite distinctive ways.<sup>3</sup> In the discussion which follows, I share Le Page &Tabouret-Keller's assumption that the 'Anglophone Caribbean' constitutes a single cultural region in respect of language, but that each territory also has its own idiosyncratic cultural and linguistic identity.<sup>4</sup> I also share, with Whorf (1956) and Burton (Carter: 1991) assumptions that the world is linguistically constructed. This is not to reiterate notions of determinism but rather reinforce a plurality of ways of expressing 'reality'. The texts selected reflect such plurality in constructing reality using the language continuum available to anglophone Caribbean speakers from Creole to standard English.

Mick Short argues the need for an awareness among fellow linguists of 'defined literary concerns' a reference primarily related to concerns of the critic.<sup>5</sup> But what of the writer's concerns? Anglophone Caribbean heritage writers who constitute the focus of this paper share a specific interest in the use of Creole as literary language. I refer specifically to texts and interviews by Olive Senior, Merle Hodge and Jacob Ross which become subject to a range of interpretative critical responses three of which are foregrounded here. Firstly, there is the phenomenon of critical silence which is not atypically the reception of African-Caribbean texts; alternatively, there is acculturation through critical appropriation of the text which effectively negates its specificity. The third concern is publishers' bias which renders the Creole literary text less acceptable as publishable cultural product. Olive Senior in interview sums up the position as follows: "Mainstream publishers don't like Creole and and they are not very interested in the subject matter."<sup>6</sup>

Three case studies examined here through practical stylistics allow such application to the study of contemporaneous Caribbean literature to be interrogated so as to form the basis of the exploration which forms the present discussion. I question the extent to which linguistic analysis can ignore the effects produced by Creole literary texts in favour of the effects produced within a literary work and I argue that the continuing trend towards the use of Creole releases a far reaching network of competing meanings still too little understood. The approach to the texts which I shall use may be described as partially deictic, drawing upon John

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<sup>1</sup>From Short, M.H. 'Prelude I' to a Literary Linguistics' (Carter:1991, p55)

<sup>2</sup>I refer to extracts by Olive Senior, Merle Hodge and Jacob Ross offered as specific 'texts' in the paper.

<sup>3</sup>See M. Nourbese Philip:1993, p.89

<sup>4</sup>Le Page &Tabouret-Keller:1985, p.87.

<sup>5</sup>See Carter: 1991, p54.

<sup>6</sup>See Mango Season, Volume 7, December 1996 ISSN: 1369-0205.



know he have daughter? Look here!...' Ma Zelline now fretted to herself in patois as she marched me off towards the back door. (from: Hodge, *For The Life of Laetitia*, p92-4x).

*For The Life of Laetitia* (1996) is Merle Hodge's second novel. More so than Hodge's debut novel, *Crick Crack Monkey* (1970), the later novel *For The Life of Laetitia* is identifiably marketed for schools.<sup>7</sup> The extract indicated as Text I is taken from approximately half way through the 185 pages, small format, first person narrative. Time is managed chronologically throughout the novel and focuses upon Laetitia's first term at secondary school which, because of its location in the city, the girl is able to attend only by dint of living with her estranged father, Cephas, his wife and child rather than with her grandmother, Ma, who has raised her. It is the weekend. The text above indicates an ordinary day in La Puerta. What is extraordinary is Laetitia's visit to Ma Zelline which is explained in the text. Time appears to be of little significance in the text above other than that, for differing reasons, Laetitia's time in La Puerta is perceived as lengthy, 'all this time' and, significantly, that the visit constitutes time stolen by Laetitia. Laetitia's plight is revealed in 'I better go back now' and the explanation which follows.

Like time in the novel, place is certain and details about La Puerta given in the opening pages locates it as a town not unfamiliar to local Trinidadian readers. The first person narration reveals a Standard English (SE) speaker comfortable with the distinctive register of the older woman, Ma Zelline. Ma Zelline's demonstrative 'So, ti-mamzelle' locates the addressee as both a Creole speaker and an older woman. The contracted and hyphenated lexical item 'ti-mamzelle' derives from the French 'petite' (little) and 'mademoiselle' (miss). Other French lexical items indicated, such as 'soucouyant', 'ma commSre' and 'bonjay' (derivative of 'bonjour') signal Trinidad Creole which is confirmed in some of the peculiarities of Zelline's syntax researched by Warner-Lewis and confirmed as featuring both French Creole and English Creole (1991:159.) The Creole signifiers are revealed as constructing a fictional reality features of which, like the metaphoric 'pot turn down' and the giving of Laetitia remain strange to readers from outside of the culture.

## **Text II: Olive Senior**

I hope you don't hear already, Sar, what that foolish Doctor Bartholomew saying about me all over town? Is him should lock up in Bellevue and all the people inside there set free, you know. But he couldn't keep me lock up for I smarter than all of them. That's what Teacher used to tell me. I come brighter than all the other pickney around. And tree never grow in my face neither. Beg you a little food there nuh before the light turn green. A who you calling dutty? A why you a wind up yu window and mek up yu face? You know say is Francina Myrtella Jones you a talk to? And since when dutty bwoy like you think you can eggs-up so talk to Miss Catherine daughter that studying to turn teacher? Why you a turn yu head a gwan seh you no see me? I know you see me alright for, though I don't behave as if I notice, I know all you young men sitting on the bridge every day there eying me as I pass. Would like to drag me down, drag me right down to your level. Have my name outa road like how you all have Canepiece Icilda. And that is why I hold up my head and wear two slip under my skirt. And I don't pay you all no mind. For what I would want with any of you? Then wait, you not even giving me a two cents there and I don't eat from morning? Gwan, you ol' red nayga you. From I see you drive up I shouldha know seh is that Bartholomew send you. Send you to torment me. You ugly just like him, to rah. Go weh!

<sup>7</sup>See uniformed schoolgirl cover, UK edition (1996).

Hello, my sweet little darling. What you have to give me today? I don't eat a thing from morning. Mother, I wouldn't tell you a lie in front of your little girl. Is same so my little one did look, you know? Seven pound, six and a half ounce she did weigh, and pretty like a picture. Is bad-minded people make them take her away. Thank you, Mother. God bless you and the little darling. Say who take her? Well me have to whisper it for me don't want the breeze to catch it. But is that Elfrida Campbell, that's who. The one that did say me did grudge her Jimmy Watson. Then you nuh remember her? Is she and her mother burn bad candle for me mek me buck mi foot and fall. For I never had those intentions. No such intentions. Is two slip I wear under my skirt for I was studying to be teacher. Is Miss Catherine my mother, you know. Say the light changing? You gone? God bless you, my precious daughter. (from: Senior, 'You Think I mad, Miss?', 1995:76)

Unlike the previous text, Senior's comprises a series of monologues the speaker of which is identified, line 6, above, as Francina Myrtella Jones, within the second of the series upon which the short story 'You Think I mad, Miss?' is structured. Time and place are indicated in the first monologue, not given. In the same sentence the reader learns that the speaker 'don't eat nutten from mornin'; while place is suggested earlier in the phrasal 'by the roadside' and confirmed in 'quick before the light change.' The markers of time and place are few and invariably suggested by (traffic) lights which 'turn green' or 'change'. Time, however, is less important to the piece than mood and the monologues reveal the somewhat erratic mood swings of the speaker who addresses the anonymous listener initially as 'Sar'. By line 7, above, the listener is referred to as a 'dutty bwoy' and a further 7 lines on is called an 'ol red nayga you'. In contrast, the listener is positively addressed in the second monologue as 'Mother' and she or a third person, possibly her little girl is referred to as 'my sweet little darling' and 'my precious daughter'. Despite the endearments, Francina Myrtella Jones's moods alternate between intimacy and anger with the effect that each cumulative monologue develops the unreliability of the narrator's account. The shifting first person perspective discerned in the account soon gives way to confusion as the reader increasingly doubts that the speaker 'knows' as much as she says she does.

The syntax and vocabulary of the text specifically the Jamaican locative expressions, 'carochies', (rubbish) 'and wappen-bappen' (slum house) evoke downtown Kingston (Cassidy & Le Page:1967) even as the broken monologues illuminate the madness suggested in the rhetorical title of the story. Together the atmosphere created is one of benign curiosity concerning the plight of the judgmental and confused speaker as the narrative unfolds tempered by Senior's ironic humour. Repetitious Creole sentences such as the verb fronted 'Is two slip I wear under my skirt' serve as much to lighten the mood as to illustrate the character's madness. The text is intensely interrogative. Six questions appear in the first monologue and five in the second, a pattern which persists throughout the story with the effect that questions are raised immediately about the fictional reality being constructed through the narrative. Francina Myrtella Jones is disturbing as a character, not merely because of her madness, but also because of how the social reality of her world has constructed her. Even taking into account her unreliability as a narrator, nonetheless, her intelligence which she describes as 'smarter' 'and brighter' as becomes someone intent upon 'studying to become teacher' is credible. So, by what process did the narrator become mad? Or, is she indeed mad? Clues to the power relations and social conditions adversely affecting Francina are cumulative within the text. What basis for the release of literary meanings might linguistics offer in relation to this text?

### Text III: Jacob Ross

Granny didn't have no problem when the white man tell she that she stupid. She didn't give im back no forward answer. She didn't even cuss im afterwards behind hi back and call im no sandfly, no beke, no big guts, half bake so-and-so from Englan. No red-arse, no lobster-face, no bleach-out nothing. And I tell meself it wasn't fair cuz if was me dat even raise me eyelash too fast at she, she woudda grab the palette by de door an all now so I woudda be rubbing me skin an bawling.

I tell meself dat mebbe she tired becuz this quarrel with Missa Coleridge start off longtime. Long befo my modder leave me with she an say how she goin to Trinidad to make a livin and she was goin to send money and after a lil time she goin send for me. I still waitin, like I still waitin fo my granny to put some words in Missa Coleridge tail. Nobody never talk to my granny like dat an get away just so. People always comin an askin if we want to buy someting; provision, fish, sweetie, even costylmetics from de Avon lady (Granny does always ask de lady whey she does want her to put dem tings she sellin) and once a man come offerin to sell a lil donkey and Granny ask him rough what he want she to do with a lil jackass, ain't he think it have nuff Jackass around here arready. De man look at she an ask she if she talkin bout sheself an I sure he still regret it becuz she tell im a coupla tings dat make im look like if he wish he never born far less to step inside my Granny yard an ask she if she wan to buy donkey.

Now I never afraid o nobody. An I had three mind to put some serious wud in Missa Coleridge tail meself, specially when my Granny wasn't goin ter do it! People always tellin de Ole Lady how I rude but if is one time I feel glad foh mih rudeness was when dat man come an tell my granmodder how she stupid. Ah tell yuh I feel it, I feel it in mih bones. BIG PEOPLE does get away with too much freshness, jus because dey feel dey BIG. In fact if it wasn't for Granny palette, and de fact dat BIG PEOPLE does go an tell she all de tings I does say back to dem, it have lot o time I does feel to put some serious wuds in BIG PEOPLE tail, specially when dem aggravate me and tell me dat I got too much mouth. I does want to ask dem if dem have myopia, if dem arthritis reach up in dem eye: if dem don't have no acquaintanship wit measurement; if dem cyah see dat is a little mouth I have. Cause I like to put wuds. I like to learn an practise wuds especially fo people who talk to me as if I is dey child, as if I don't have no modder just because she gone away an never send fo me.

(from: Jacob Ross 'De Laughin Tree' (forthcoming))

Jacob Ross's text, taken from the opening page of 'De Laughin Tree', a forthcoming anthology, offers few direct references to place. 'Englan', mentioned in relation to 'the white man' in the opening line and 'Trinidad', mentioned in relation to the narrator's mother, both appear in the text before the more central element of 'Granny yard'. The text comes to us from the narrator's point of view and offers few biographical details in the opening paragraph. What is known is that the anonymous narrator is a grandchild. Some orientation is indicated in the use of lexical items such as 'beke' and 'modder', even if only at the level of selection as anglophone non-Jamaican. In addition, consistent use of the first person 'I' rather than 'mi' suggests Eastern Caribbean and Grenadian rather than a Vincentian location. (Le Page & Tabouret-Keller: 1985, p88). Like Senior's text, mood is important to Ross's. The anonymous first person narrator's anger becomes evident in the emphatic listing of negatives representative of the disapproved behaviour on the part of Granny, in the face of 'the white man's' words. The use of 'the' white man assumes a shared knowledge in the opening sentence. The sentence which follows offers, however, a more intimate sharing, this time of 'behind hi back' type behaviour with which Granny should have engaged. Thus, the old woman's lack of 'forward answer' ideally framed in the narrator's eyes as a 'cuss' is listed, on reflection, as a possible minimum seven such cusses: 'sandfly', 'big guts', 'half bake so-and-so', 'red-arse', 'lobster-face', and so on, all given within the first three lines. In the child's eyes, the white man

has crossed a boundary situation and possibly broken a taboo which no-one had got away with 'just so'. 'This' quarrel had, however, started 'longtime'; it carried a history. Time expressions such as 'long befo', 'afterwards' and 'one time' serve to heighten the narrator's point of view.

If time and place are of little significance to the text, people are readily brought into the consciousness of the reader for not only is conflict perceived at the outset by the narrator between Granny and Missa Coleridge. The narrator's conflictual relationship with the distant mother, along with Granny's quarrel are aligned within the discourse in that the narrator awaits the resolution of both in similar vein, as indicated in the repeated statement, 'I still waitin'. The first paragraph in its ranging from Missa Coleridge and Granny to the 'Avon lady' and casual donkey seller, suggests a community, though one which remains unnamed above. But it is the orthographically differentiated 'BIG PEOPLE' of the second paragraph that reveals the narrator as a child, albeit an indignant one. The child's use of vocabulary such as 'costylmetics' and 'acquaintanship' reinforces the hit and miss habit of putting 'wuds' practised by the narrator. It reveals something too of the speech community and the tension experienced by a young person inclined to 'put some serious words'. The anonymous narrator, then, is established in problematic relation to the familiar community.

The perfunctory stylistic analysis engaged with this far has necessarily been very limited. I have not attempted, for example, to establish whether the kinds of meanings already indicated in various texts work across whole short stories or the novel discussed. In a sense, the exercise has represented, for one primarily concerned with literary criticism, something of a luxury since systematic linguistic analysis does not at present constitute everyday practice in the practical criticism with which I am familiar. Ronald Carter's definition of practical stylistics as 'a process of literary text analysis' premised upon 'primary interpretative procedures' in the reading of literary texts as 'linguistic procedures' usefully serves to illuminate my interest in this field. (Carter:1991:4)

Is linguistics a luxury to the critic? At present linguistics appears, from this side of the critical divide, to be the remote pursuit of a select, perhaps exclusive minority. So, what has tempted me to explore a crossing of the divide? Caribbean literature, and specifically Caribbean women's literature which I have taught for the last ten years in UK universities, is becoming less marginalised and increasingly more accepted within education institutions in the Caribbean and abroad. Much of what is exciting in anglophone Caribbean literature engages with Creole, the lingua franca of post-colonial, post independent West Indies which effectively comprise the anglophone Caribbean. Interpretative procedures for reading the literature currently involve, at most, a passing acknowledgement of linguistic practice. That Carter is arguing for linguistic procedures even in relation to literature from a shared language heritage highlights students' need for linguistic approaches to texts rich with Creole language use. My experience of teaching Caribbean literature indicates that students undertake, by and large, the interpretation of a language, Creole, that is not shared thus compounding interpretation challenges of Creole literature.

Writers' concern with anglophone Creole lies in part with its stylistic identity. Yet, more immediate debate has centred on ways in which the language itself is riddled with issues of power and status (Hodge:19??; Nichols:19??, Philip:1991). Such concerns give some indication of the complexities which Creole presents as literary language and the need for interpretative methodology which address the specific features of the language. That the power relationships mirrored in the language reflect the context out of which the language has evolved serves as further argument for a linguistic procedures to address questions about Creole in the literature.

To return to the focus of the paper, Creole itself is a writer defined literary concern identified by authors such as Senior, Hodge and Ross both in their fictional texts and in more discursive writing. So far, the discussion has referred, rather simplistically to Creole rather than Creoles. Lexical items from the texts perused indicate, however, even within the small sample of texts, a linguistic history distinctively related to the region's multi-ethnic, multi-lingual history. The tools of linguistic description are best placed to examine such issues so as to allow wider access to the literary student.

## Conclusion

This exploration has served to illustrate and hopefully contextualise some recent developments in Anglophone Caribbean writing specifically concerned with issues of Creole. The relative lack of critical attention to such texts, itself a phenomenon partially related to location of the writer, serves to highlight a need for linguistics to increasingly address literary issues in the field of Creole. For this reason, I question the extent to which linguistic analysis can ignore the effects produced by Creole literary texts in favour of the effects produced within a literary work. Texts which privilege Creole, effectively invite practical stylistic analysis not merely as exercises in linguistics per se, but in order to offer a different basis for interpretation and a much needed contribution to the critical reception of Creole texts. The continuing trend towards the use of Creole as literary language releases a far reaching network of competing meanings still too little understood. Deidre Burton in a provocative chapter arguing for a new stylistics committed to literature offers a challenge to linguists which I also share specifically in relation to Creole texts. Burton's radical programme envisages stylistics pointing the way to an understanding of how 'the language of a given text constructs its own (fictional) reality'. In addition, Burton argues for stylistics to show how 'every day reality' may be perceived as a 'series of 'fictional' constructs available to be mapped against 'alternative constructions of reality.' The alternative constructions of reality which the Creole text offers is one I invite linguists to elucidate for an increasing number of interested readers of the literature.

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