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**A New Wor(l)d Order: Language in the Fiction of
the New Caribbean Diaspora**

Bénédicte Ledent

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A New Wor(l)d Order: Language in the Fiction of the New Caribbean Diaspora

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Abstract

Language has always been a major issue for post-colonial writers, being at once an instrument used by the colonial power and one of the prime avenues of resistance to this oppression. For displaced West Indian writers in particular, English has been a significant tool for self-assertion, all the more ambiguous because it is their “mother tongue” while being the tongue of their ancestors’ masters as well. This paper analyses how the younger novelists of the Caribbean diaspora use and transform the English language in their search for a new diasporic, cross-cultural identity. Robert Antoni, Michelle Cliff, Fred D’Aguiar, David Dabydeen, M. Nourbese Philip and Caryl Phillips will be among the writers mentioned in this paper. While some of them resort to non-standard linguistic forms and thereby deal head on with the tension be-

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tween local languages and the need for international communication, others have had a more oblique approach to linguistic change, one that involves not so much lexis as tone and rhythm and often operates by rehabilitating silenced voices from the past. I will attempt to demonstrate how these writers have turned speech into a site of creolization expressive of what Caryl Phillips has called “A New World Order”.

The problem of language is too basic to allow us
to hope to state it all here.

(Fanon, 1952: 27)

Language has always been a crucial issue for post-colonial writers. Understandably so. Along with religion, language has left the most visible traces of the European conquests and colonizing enterprises that started in the fifteenth century and still shape the political geography of the world as we know it today. No wonder therefore if the post-colonial sphere is still divided along linguistic lines that send back to the former colonizing powers and which are almost immutable, because they now delimit nation-states. Thus Africa is divided into Anglophone, Francophone and Lusophone regions, while the societies of the Caribbean, in spite of unquestionably similar historical roots that go back to the slave-trade, remain partitioned between Dutch-speaking, English-speaking, French-speaking and Spanish-speaking states. There have been attempts to mobilize writers from an

entire area, regardless of their language, but these have been few and far between and not always successful. There have been exceptions, of course. Let me just mention two of them that relate to writers on whom I will focus today: in 1998 Caryl Phillips initiated a Caribbean series for Faber which contains books in English but also translations from the various languages spoken in the Caribbean; **(note 1)** more recently, in November 2001, Fred D'Aguiar got the British Council in Madrid to organize a conference entitled "Voces del Caribe" which brought together writers from the whole Caribbean area on the premise that if they spoke different languages (by which I mean "langues"), they had the same imaginary language (that is "langage"), expressed, for example, in their common interest in the sea as metaphor.

In spite of such initiatives, post-colonial writers have found it difficult to transcend the linguistic barriers raised by colonialism, for a series of reasons among which the cultural policies of their states, the bashfulness of publishing houses when it comes to translation or more simply a fear of the linguistic other. Most of these writers have nonetheless addressed the issue of language in their writing, whether directly or in a more roundabout way. In this they are spurred by the strange paradox that language, while being the prime instrument of

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colonial power, thus a symbol of the age-long oppression of their people, is also a crucial tool of resistance to such an oppression and a prime avenue of self-definition. Therefore most post-colonial writing until the 1980s seems to have been born out of the tension created by a double process of linguistic abrogation and appropriation that implies, according to the authors of *The Empire Writes Back*, “a refusal of the categories of the imperial culture” (Ashcroft, 1989: 38), i.e., in the case of writers from Anglophone countries, a rejection of “received English which speaks from the Centre” (39), going hand in hand with an attempt to make the language “‘bear the burden’ of one’s own cultural experience” (38), in other words to make it a site of difference. Although this process of appropriation has occasionally led to some form of re-centering and to an unhealthy focus on authenticity, it has opened up in most cases onto a creative re-visioning of the language. As we will see, today’s writers tend to focus on the process of appropriation which can range from the use of the vernacular to a more subtle but nonetheless effective subversion of the tongue of the former colonizer.

The ambiguity surrounding the language question in the post-colonial world is compounded for the Caribbean writers by the fact that, unlike African or, say, Indian writers, they have

no indigenous language to fall back on. For as Celia Britton points out in a book entitled *Edouard Glissant and Postcolonial Theory: Strategies of Language and Resistance*, “Creole is a creation of colonialism; it arose out of the contact between European and African languages, but since the latter were lost with the first generations of slaves, Creole was forced to position itself solely in relation to the dominant European language, which it opposes while being continuously influenced by it” (Britton, 1999: 2). So, if most Caribbean societies are in fact polyglossic, either because they had successive European colonizers (like St Lucia) or experienced post-emancipation migratory waves (like Trinidad), their literary tradition still depends on the imperial language which is at once the master tongue and, in spite of a possibly different form, the mother tongue as well.

This original linguistic schizophrenia has sparked off a fabulously creative use of language on the part of Caribbean writers. Whereas this paper will focus on Anglophone novelists of the new generation, it is necessary to say a few words about how the earlier generation of West Indian writers handled this language complexity. Several names immediately come to mind. Among them, Claude McKay who, at the beginning of the twentieth century, pioneered the use of Jamaican idiom, a

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language that provided him “a sensitive indicator of the speaker’s identity and context” (James, 1999: 121). (note 2) The same could be said of poets Una Marson and Louise Bennett (Firth, 2001: 187-189). And of Sam Selvon, too, who in his landmark novel *The Lonely Londoners* (1956) used a deliberately recreated Trinidadian language for the whole narrative, that is, not only for the direct speech, which had been done previously, but to render his characters’ consciousness, which was new. Worth mentioning are also poets Kamau Brathwaite and Derek Walcott who, in their very different styles, have tackled the speech issue in the West Indies in most of their writing. The former by demonstrating in his poetry the validity of what he has called “nation language”, which to him is essentially oral, thus includes words as much as rhythm and music (Brathwaite, 1984: 13). The latter, who describes himself in the often quoted poem “A Far Cry from Africa” as torn “between Africa and the English tongue I love” (Walcott, 1962: 18), relied in his early poems on contrastive registers to convey the cultural intricacy of his native society.

Finally, this extremely brief survey cannot bypass Wilson Harris who, like his fellow writers, has used language in his exploration of an emerging West Indian literary sensibility focusing on the ordinary man. But unlike most of them, with the pos-

sible exception of Walcott, Harris has slowly given up Creole, which was nonetheless present in his early novels. Instead, he has challenged English from the inside, using language as a kind of verbal Trojan horse in his always unfinished quest for a new fictional idiom which “[is] capable of harmonizing into a seamless whole ‘the music of the elements’, man’s connection with his environment, as well as his historical and social experience” (Maes-Jelinek, 2002: xii). **(note 3)** In this regard, as in many others, Harris can be viewed as a precursor of the younger generation who, like him, live away from the Caribbean and have had to devise linguistic strategies to put their own cross-culturality into words.

If most of the younger writers straddle several cultures, in other words share a diasporic identity, this does not mean that they have a uniform approach to language, which may, in addition, vary for each writer according to the genre (s)he uses, whether drama, fiction or poetry or according to the setting of the work. In this paper, I am going to try and analyse how the younger fiction writers of the Caribbean Diaspora use language in their writing. The following survey is part of work-in-progress and, as a tentative foray into the field, far from being exhaustive. For the sake of clarity, I’ll distinguish two major approaches to the language question, although these are not

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waterproof categories, but can sometimes overlap or coexist in the writing of the same author. On the one hand, there are writers who insist on using non-standard lexical and grammatical forms, whether they strive for verisimilitude or want to recreate a literary vernacular. On the other, there are writers whose undermining of the master tongue is less visible, because their linguistic “maroonage” is subterranean and relies on less tangible elements like tone, rhythm and structure.

What Kenneth Ramchand asserts about the previous generation of writers, i.e. that a few of them used demotic language “for purposes of coarse realism”, also applies to a handful of younger novelists, mostly from Jamaica (Ramchand, 1983: 96). An example of this is Patricia Powell whose use of Jamaican English in *Me Dying Trial* (1993) and *A Small Gathering of Bones* (1994) sounds a bit strained in its attempt at a genuine reproduction of the vernacular. Joan Riley, also from Jamaica but now based in England, provides another instance of this realistic trend. While in her novel *A Kindness to the Children* (1992), she integrates Creole more naturally and even uses it to express the inner thoughts of Jean, a mentally deranged woman, one has the impression that, in her early fiction at least, she employs West Indian English in direct speech as a token of authenticity, in the same way as “teeth-sucking” or

“teeth-kissing” - a typically West Indian habit expressing irritation, is used extensively in other naturalistic novels. The gap between the Standard English narration and the patois spoken by some of her characters can be read as the marker of a dual heritage, as the problematization of some form of acute “unbelonging” embodied by Hyacinth, the heroine of Riley’s first novel, *The Unbelonging* (1985). However, it also derives from the writer’s adamant insistence on not divorcing context from content. Moreover, Riley’s attachment to “real” voices may also be explained by her avowed lack of literary background. While most of the younger writers under study here are graduates from famous English or American universities, Riley claims that “oral culture” is her only reference (Riley, 1993: 18).

Not all writers have such a plainly utilitarian attitude to the demotic as Riley’s. For some of them, like David Dabydeen, a writer of Guyanese origin, Creole is a really subversive tool because, he says, its splintering and “savage lyricism” (Dabydeen, 1989b: 76) reflect “the brokenness and suffering of its original users” (Dabydeen, 1989a: 121). This, of course, particularly applies to his poetry, especially *Slave Song* and *Coolie Odyssey*, but in his fiction, too, Dabydeen deliberately resorts to non-standard English. However, his recreations

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of idioms diverging from the norm are not always successful because too self-conscious. The broken English spoken by nineteenth century indentured labourers from India in *The Counting House*, for example, tends to be contrived, which spoils the potential lyricism of the narrative. And in the same novel, the moving power of the testimony of the African Miriam is undermined by her exaggeratedly clumsy language: “Who believe what testimony come from Miriam mouth who only accustom to hear me bad-talk and badam-bam?” (Dabydeen, 1996: 159), as if Dabydeen’s linguistic playfulness refused to accommodate emotion. If equally playful, the variety of registers covered by Mungo’s voice (in turn poetic and coarse, inarticulate and sophisticated) in *A Harlot’s Progress* at least confirms Dabydeen’s linguistic virtuosity and highlights the manipulative potential of language, in itself a revisionary perspective on the master tongue of yore.

A not altogether dissimilar linguistic exuberance can be found in the fiction of some white Creole writers, perhaps the expression of a desire to belong to the Caribbean and assert an identity that their complexion does not make visible, very much like the androgynous or transvestite characters that people their fiction. Lawrence Scott in *Witchbroom* (1992) and Pauline Melville in her appropriately entitled *The Ventrilo-*

quist's Tale (1997) constantly draw attention to the lushness of their own prose through the figure of their trickster narrator. Their occasional inclusion of Amerindian words, plus Hindi, Latin and Spanish phrases in *Witchbroom*, dramatizes the palimpsestic nature of the New World, in the field of language too where "the magic of the old is still vibrant in the metaphor for transforming and understanding the new" (Scott, 1992: 227). So, for Scott's narrator, language is the product of a complex alchemical process that involves both history and imagination:

I knew that no words here would have been possible without the poetry, prose, history, painting, sculpture, the mobility of mas, the invention of pan, calypso and the spoken voice which had come out of the yard of this archipelago, and which invaded my ears, sitting on the sill of the Demerara window (Scott, 1992: 270).

Such linguistic syncretism is also typical of Robert Antoni, another white Creole writer who tackles the language question rather conspicuously. Like other original stylists of the Caribbean idiom, such as Selvon, Scott and Lovelace, Antoni has roots in Trinidad. His rendition of Caribbean speech is highly baroque, to say the least, and is associated with experimental narrative form and structure reminiscent of James Joyce. The linguistic extravaganza of his first novel *Divina Trace* (1991) seems to call into question, as John Hawley points

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out, “all language as an adequate mimesis for experience” (Hawley, 1993: 94) and therefore makes the piecing together of a communal Caribbean identity a difficult enterprise. Language is still crucial to his second novel, *Blessed is the Fruit* (1997), which contrasts then eventually entwines standard English and Caribbean Creole. Language starts as a barrier between the two female protagonists who belong to different racial groups, and ends up as a bridge between them, a new means of communication embodied in the still unborn Bolom, the blessed fruit of the title. [\(note 4\)](#)

Unlike the two groups of writers I have just delineated, i.e. on the one hand those defined by a naturalistic rendition of Caribbean demotic and on the other those who recreate a stylized language – an altogether more intellectual and self-conscious approach – there are some writers of fiction for whom language is a crucial yet subterranean/submarine issue, as if some form of linguistic modesty prevented them from tackling the problem head on, though it could also be viewed as a natural development of a literary tradition in exile. The works of these novelists, Fred D’Aguiar, Jamaica Kincaid and Caryl Phillips among others, are written in Standard English, in an elegant, apparently simple prose. Yet this smooth surface conceals a more complex discourse, in the same way as the

surface of the Atlantic Ocean hides a violent history, embodied by the many victims of the Middle Passage, a recurrent image in the writing of these novelists.

Kincaid's prose, which contains very little dialect, yet sounds unmistakably Caribbean, may exemplify such a development. Quite significantly, Kincaid, a writer from Antigua, sees the Caribbean linguistic conundrum from her typically pessimistic perspective; for her, Caribbean people have no tongue of their own, and she sums up the Caribbean writer's dilemma thus:

For isn't it odd that the only language I have in which to speak of this crime is the language of the criminal who committed the crime? And what can that mean? For the language of the criminal can contain only the goodness of the criminal's deed. The language of the criminal can explain and express the deed only from the criminal's point of view. It cannot contain the horror of the deed, the injustice of the deed, the agony, the humiliation inflicted on me. Kincaid, 1988 : 31-32)

In *The Autobiography of My Mother* (1996), her main character Xuela lives in a bilingual society with French patois "the language of the captive, the illegitimate" (Kincaid, 1996: 74) on the one hand, and "plain English", the language of school, on the other. Nevertheless this linguistic schizophrenia never transpires concretely in the narrative, which includes almost no dialogue and is entirely written in unsophisticated Standard

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English from the inside of Xuela's consciousness. It seems to me, however, that her language bears clear traces of Caribbean orality, as shown in the following example:

For my father, the sea, the big and beautiful sea, sometimes a shimmering sheet of blue, sometimes a shimmering sheet of black, sometimes a shimmering sheet of gray, could hold no such largesse of inspiration, could hold no such abundance of comfort, could hold no such anything of any good [...] (Kincaid, 1996 : 191).

Unlike idiom or usage, characteristics linked to orality such as repetitions, rhythm or non-linear structures are more likely to survive than the vernacular because they belong to a deeper level of consciousness, which may lead to a more insidious creolization of the novel in English. Therein probably lies one of the most durable affirmations of diasporic Caribbeanness, which also surfaces, for example, in the lack of narrative focus to be found in David Dabydeen's first novel, *The Intended* (1991), which, according to the novelist, was modelled on Creole and its confusion of past, present and future tenses (Dabydeen, 1990: 118).

A similar musical and rhythmic quality can be found in the many Caribbean novels of the New Diaspora that rehabilitate silenced voices from the past, mostly by Fred D'Aguiar and Caryl Phillips. In a way, these have taken up the challenge

that faces the Caribbean writer and which Marlene Nourbese Phillip describes as follows:

The challenge, therefore, facing the African Caribbean writer who is at all sensitive to language and to the issues that language generates, is to use the language in such a way that the historical realities are not erased or obliterated, so that English is revealed as the tainted tongue it truly is. Only in so doing will English be redeemed (Phillip, 1989: 85).

In their fiction, D'Aguiar and Phillips could never be accused, like the persona of John Agard's famous poem "Listen Mr Oxford Don", of "mugging de Queen's English", assaulting "de Oxford dictionary" and "inciting rhyme to riot" (Agard, 1988: 5). In a rather discreet way, they are what Derek Walcott has described as "mulattoes of style" (Walcott, 1998: 4). They have turned English into a site of creolization, which they convey through polyphony, through an intertextuality that addresses both the "master" and the "mother" canon, or through a predilection for bold metaphors. For example, both use the trope of cannibalism which is equated with slavery in D'Aguiar's *The Longest Memory* (1994) and with Europe in Phillips's *The Nature of Blood* (1997).

Clearly, for them writing is what Michelle Cliff has called a "Journey into Speech", which

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... demands of us retracing the African part of ourselves, reclaiming as our own, and as our subject, a history sunk under the sea, or scattered as potash in the canefields, or gone to bush, or trapped in a class system notable for its rigidity and absolute dependence on color stratification. On a past bleached from our minds. ... It means also, I think, mixing in the forms taught us by the oppressor, undermining his language and co-opting his style, and turning it to our purpose (Cliff, 1985: 14).

Even though these writers also include dialogue in West Indian English in their fiction set in the Caribbean, what they strive for is not so much linguistic as emotional authenticity. The challenge facing them is finding “the true tone of the human voice” (Fumagalli, 2001: 279), which for Derek Walcott should be equated with the vernacular, as demonstrated in a recent book entitled *The Flight of the Vernacular* by Maria Cristina Fumagalli where she analyses Derek Walcott’s and Seamus Heaney’s attitude to language through their relation to Dante.

To conclude, let me take the narrative style of Caryl Phillips’s later novels as an example of this evolution away from the literal vernacular towards a new word order that is expressive of *The New World Order* that Phillips addresses in his eponymous collection of essays. A lot could be said about his extensive use of similes in his early novels; about his use of

the present tense in his 1989 novel *Higher Ground* to convey the apparent *historylessness* of the African; about his short verbless sentences in *Crossing the River* and *The Nature of Blood* suggestive of the suffering caused by the slave-trade and the Holocaust; about the presence of such formal features as repetition and contrapuntal structure which may echo Creole (O'Callaghan, 1984). But even more important, I believe, is the way Phillips dramatizes the linguistic dilemma of the Caribbean by showing the central role played by language (or its absence) in human relationships. Quite significantly, many of his displaced characters speak in a clearly borrowed voice, neither Standard English nor Caribbean dialect, but a reconstructed English. While this language may indicate, as C. L. Innes rightly points out, "loss of speech, and distortions of self" (Innes, 1995: 26), it concurrently transcends the original linguistic binarism and suggests that imagination combined with an exploration of the past can be a way of accommodating the speech confusion of the Caribbean exiles who, unlike other immigrants, "have to learn a new form of the same language" (Mc Crum, 1986: 350). What is more, Phillips's fiction no longer portrays Calibans, that is individuals who are, in George Lamming's words, "colonised by language, and excluded by language" (Lamming, 1960: 15), but rather ambivalent Othello-like figures who, though more educated and

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sophisticated than Caliban, still find it hard to fully master the language of the “European Tribe”.

It is difficult, if not impossible to predict what the language of diasporic Caribbean fiction will develop into, but one can safely assume that Creole will gradually recede in favour of a new language that will be, yet will not be, fully English. Whatever happens, this new generation of writers can say with Ella, the main character in Erna Brodber’s *Louisiana*, “I am becoming. Language is the key” (Brodber, 1994: 117).

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**A New Wor(l)d Order: Language in the Fiction of the
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1. For example, Maryse Condé, *Windward Heights*, translated from the French by Richard Philcox; Frank Martinus Arion, *Double Play*, translated from the Dutch by Paul Vincent; Antonio Benítez-Rojo, *A View from the Mangrove*, translated from the Spanish by James Maraniss.
2. Louis James's book contains a very informative chapter devoted to "Language" which mostly concentrates on the first generation of writers (120-134).
3. See also Drake who points out that some features of Harris's writing, like his use of "and ... and... and", which could be taken as ambiguity, are rather "grammatical expression of parallel possibility" (Drake: 72).
4. Language play a similar role, as both border and bridge, in Dionne Brand's novel *In Another Place, Not Here* (1996) whose black heroines are socially different this time, thus situated at both ends of the Caribbean linguistic continuum, but both made speechless by the city of Toronto where they immigrate.