

Creolization in Robert Antoni's *Blessed is the Fruit*: A Linguistic Analysis

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With the exception of reggae, creolization is no doubt one of the major Caribbean contributions to the world of universal culture. Originating in the area's complex and often painful early experience of migration and cosmopolitanism, it has recently been summed up as "a syncretic process of transverse dynamics that endlessly reworks and transforms the cultural patterns of varied social and historical experiences and identities."¹ Although cultural interbreeding, and the unique forms of civilization it has led to, have characterized the Caribbean from the fifteenth century onwards, they were not openly acknowledged before the end of the twentieth century. Indeed, in spite of earlier individual attempts to highlight the cross-cultural roots of the area, for example that of the Cubans José Martí and Nicolás Guillén,² racial purity and national compartmentalization long remained the norm under the influence of the colonial agenda. Now, however, plurality and impurity have been recognized and praised, even to the point of becoming stereotypes, as potential wombs of ontological enrichment. One cannot help thinking, however, that the popularity of these notions has been facilitated by the fact that they now more clearly apply to a Western world that is increasingly on the move, thus undergoing intensive creolization as well.

If 'creolization' has become one of the key notions in the field of cultural studies and their interest in identity issues, one should nonetheless beware of its ideological appropriation and of its idealization, which, as J. Michael Dash points out, can "turn the Caribbean into a centre of exemplary creolity."³ Major Caribbean artists like Edward Kamau Brathwaite, Édouard Glissant, Wilson Harris, and Derek Walcott have sidestepped such a pitfall by constantly highlighting creolization as a process (as opposed to a state or an end in itself) but also by presenting it as a site of cross-cultural harmony as much as one of conflict. This complex view of creolization has, it seems, much affected the younger generation of West Indian writers. Many of them address this phenomenon of cultural hybridization from their point of view as artists who, in their majority, belong, yet do not fully belong, to the West

¹ *Caribbean Creolization: Reflections on the Cultural Dynamics of Language, Literature, and Identity*, ed. Kathleen M. Balutansky & Marie-Agnès Sourieau (Gainesville: UP of Florida, 1998): 3.

² Mentioned in Maryse Condé, "Créolité without the Creole Language?" in Balutansky & Sourieau, ed. *Caribbean Creolization*, 106.

³ J. Michael Dash, "Psychology, Creolization, and Hybridization," in *New National and Post-Colonial Literatures: An Introduction*, ed. Bruce King (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996): 51.

where they have settled. While Lawrence Scott's and Caryl Phillips's treatment of creolization in *Witchbroom* (1992) and *Crossing the River* (1993) is rightly described by Dash as, respectively, carnivalesque and diasporic, I would like to attempt to demonstrate why Robert Antoni's approach to this theme in *Blessed is the Fruit* (1997) could be defined as 'linguistic'. Though born in the USA, Antoni has roots in the Caribbean – Trinidad and the Bahamas – where he was brought up. He now divides his life between Miami and Barcelona.

By a linguistic treatment of creolization in *Blessed is the Fruit*, I do not simply refer to its use of stylized forms of creole language or of creole words as a potential means of subversion and appropriation, as if, to quote Maryse Condé, "by their very presence the words injected the marginalized and despised culture into the heart of the dominant one and in so doing, destroyed the latter's hegemony."⁴ Even if this use of creole is still advocated by 'creolists' like Patrick Chamoiseau, Raphaël Confiant and Jean Bernabé, in their *Éloge de la Créolité*, resorting to non-standard forms of the colonial language in Caribbean fiction has been shown by several scholars to go generally well beyond this counter-discursive yet representational function to acquire a more symbolic or expressive role. Thus Denise de Caires Narain, as a conclusion to her reading of Erna Brodber's *Myal* "Creole does not signal 'native' essence or authenticity, but is used strategically to suggest ways in which it might provide a powerful medium for dialogue with other words and other worlds."⁵

Similarly, in *Blessed is the Fruit*, Antoni uses language in general, not only creole, as a meaningful locus of interaction between individuals, hence as a crucial site for the cross-cultural process that is at the heart of creolization. So, if language is meant to have any 'mimetic' role in this novel, it is not by duplicating, more or less faithfully, the language situation in the mid-twentieth-century Caribbean. After all, Antoni's language in this novel is mostly an idiosyncratic re-creation. By calling Antoni's approach linguistic, I mean, rather, to say that language in *Blessed is the Fruit* is an embodiment of the way in which people, both the formerly colonizing and the formerly colonized, interact in order to produce new tools of communication that match the characters' own unique experience of life while at the same time bearing the traces of their encounter with the Other. To this extent, then, the use of creole in this novel, though far from being realistic in the traditional sense of the word, can be said to testify to what Christian Mair and Andrea Sand have called "a deeper realism," perhaps more emotional than sociological, "based on the selective use of meaningful Creole elements,

⁴ Condé, "Créolité without the Creole Language?," 103.

⁵ Denise de Caires Narain, "Caribbean Creole: The Real Thing? Writing and Reading the Creole in a Selection of Caribbean Texts," in *Reading the 'New' Literatures in a Postcolonial Era*, ed. Susheila Nasta (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2000): 125. See also Christian Mair, "The Treasures of Whose Tongue? The Language Issue in Caribbean Fiction," in *Defining New Idioms and Alternative Forms of Expression*, ed. Eckhard Breitinger (Cross/Cultures 23 / ASNEL Papers 1; Amsterdam & Atlanta GA: Rodopi, 1996): 237-44.

which is obviously far better suited to capturing the dynamic social reality of the [...] Caribbean."⁶

Let us now take a closer look at how Antoni's novel enacts creolization through language. *Blessed is the Fruit* is a complex book, both linguistically and structurally, which requires concentration. Like Antoni's first novel, *Divina Trace* (1991), it is set on the fictional island of Corpus Christi, apparently modelled on Trinidad. The main characters are two women in their thirties: Lilla Grandsol, an impoverished white Creole abandoned by her English husband, who eloped to England with a black man, and Velma Bootman, her black servant of ten years, her "opposite, [her] twin sister,"⁷ who came to work for her after countless hardships, among them the death of her four children. Like *Divina Trace*, too, *Blessed is the Fruit* is built on the structure of the rosary, a Catholic prayer which provides one of the keys to its title.⁸ This rosary comprises only three chaplets (each one made up of five sections divided in turn into ten subsections) which leave out the "Our Father" and the "Gloria," an indication of the elusive yet devastating place of men in the two women's lives. The first chaplet, entitled "d'Esperance Estate," after Lilla's decaying mansion, is a first-person narration of her life, marked by her lonely childhood, her education at a Catholic convent and her unhappy marriage; in the second, called "A World of Canes," Velma relates her sad existence, made up of starvation, rape and loss; and, finally, a fragmented third chaplet, which both frames and interrupts the other two, is called "Bolom,"⁹ after Velma's yet unborn child, whom she has vainly tried to abort and to whom the two women's narratives are addressed. Like Jesus in the Catholic prayer, Bolom is the blessed fruit of Velma's womb, for his virtual yet redemptive presence unites the two women, who become his mothers: "One black, one white; one African, one European. Two mothers and no father: somehow that strikes me as perfectly sensible. As perfectly West Indian, Bolom" (51). So, Bolom becomes for Lilla the will to defy "Our collective Caribbean fate" (51), while to Vel he represents a "sweet dream" (399) after a "nightmare lasting five-hundred years long" (398). Obviously, the book ends on a positive note, with the three characters, Lilla, Vel and Bolom, looking towards a new life together. The novel as a whole, however, points to a more complex reality, perhaps best exemplified in the love-hate embrace that, at one point, brings together Lilla's father and their servant Di as two entangled figures about whom the child Lilla cannot tell "whether they

⁶ Christian Mair & Andrea Sand, "Caribbean English: Structure and Status of an Emerging Variety," in *Anglistentag 1997 Giessen: Proceedings*, ed. Raimund Borgmeier, Herbert Grabes & Andreas H. Jucker (Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 1998): 187-98.

⁷ Robert Antoni, *Blessed is the Fruit* (1997; London: Faber & Faber, 1998): 30. Further page references to this edition are in the main text.

⁸ On the rosary in *Divina Trace*, see Rhonda Cobham, "Of Boloms, Mirrors and Monkeymen: What's Real and What's Not in Robert Antoni's *Divina Trace*" in *Postcolonial Theory and the Emergence of a Global Society*, ed. Gordon Collier, Dieter Riemenschneider & Frank Schulze-Engler (ACOLIT Special Issue 3; Frankfurt am Main: Institut für England- und Amerikakunde, 1998): 102-36.

⁹ Bolom is also a character in Derek Walcott's play *Ti-Jean and His Brothers*, in *Dream on Monkey Mountain and Other Plays* (1979; New

are trying to clasp tighter together, or to shove each other brutally away" (77).

However intricate and convoluted the narrative, what occupies the reader's attention from the start is the quality of the language, at once dense and bearing such markers of orality as rhythm, repetition and fragmentation. Another outstanding feature is the juxtaposition of two distinct yet similar voices which are at first kept apart then actually intertwine in alternating lines in the dream-like central section, evocative of Édouard Glissant's words: "creolization carries in itself the adventure of multilingualism along with the extraordinary explosion of cultures. But this explosion of cultures does not mean their scattering nor their mutual dilution. It is the violent manifestation of their assented, free sharing."¹⁰ Admittedly, the two women are separated by race and class, as their diverging preoccupations illustrate: Vel's obsession with survival has her count "carrots" and "pennies," while Lilla's more 'elevated' worries are conveyed in "karats" (189) and "Holy Mary" (221). Yet, as suggested by the novel's layout, the two women share symmetrical experiences of loss and abandonment and both strive, consciously or unconsciously, to bridge the divide that separates them.

This double movement of separation and communion, this constant tension between diversity and unity, which informs any dynamic vision of creolization, emerges clearly when one analyses the two protagonists' discourses. From the very first lines of the novel, in which he places side by side three slightly different versions of the "Holy Mary" automatically mumbled by Lilla, Antoni seems to suggest the importance of linguistic details, such as punctuation, to determine the meaning of our utterances. He also highlights the individual ability to change the content of messages, even unconsciously, since in Lilla's mouth the "now and at the hour of our death amen" becomes "now at the hour of our, of our [...] life" (3). While this anticipates the life-urge present throughout the novel as a whole, particularly its closing pages, it also testifies to Lilla's subversion of the orthodox discourse of Catholicism, which has colonized her mind in a way and is represented as opposed to *métissage* of any kind. But more importantly, perhaps, it persuades the reader of the need for a careful exploration of the linguistic message of this 400-page-long narrative.

The scope of this essay does not allow me to do much more than focus on selected passages that illustrate how the language of the two protagonists combines an unrealized yearning to find the other with a constant urge to stick to oneself. This dual, always incomplete quest is metaphorized, as I have already suggested, by the yet unborn Bolom, who, interestingly, only exists through the narratives of the two women, hence textually, or

York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1999): 81-166. Not only is Walcott's Bolom a foetus, too, but the linguistic issue is central to his play as well.

¹⁰ Édouard Glissant, *Poétique de la Relation* (Paris: Gallimard, 1990): 46-47. Translated in Balutansky & Sourieau, ed. *Caribbean*

through his own dream. But this impossible quest for the other is also represented by a transparent plastic page, a device reminiscent of the mirror-page in *Divina Trace*, which is placed right in the middle of the dream-sequence mentioned above. In fact, it corresponds to the exact centre of the novel (205-206), meaningfully interrupting the preposition "between," which it hyphenates, as it were:

I say let us dream now of our two races black and white

I say let we dream now of two peoples white and black

together in one child let's dream of birth shattering this invincible glass pane

together in one child let we dream of birth swallowing this invisible glass pain

be-

be-

[transparent plastic sheet]

tween we forever you Bolom melt from out we mouth in broken glassbottle of words

tween us forever you Bolom smash it now to hell and let us kiss one another at last

let we wake from this old-age nightmare and live side by side happy here in this

let us awaken from this age-old nightmare and live happily together here in this

big old board-house two peoples two language two race to cleave together in one

old colonial house two people of two languages two races brought together in one

child one hope for all the world unite up here under this galvanize-tin roof...

child one hope for all the world united here under this corrugated-zinc roof...

(204-207)

Like language, the plastic sheet is an "invisible [barrier] of words" (214) that "comes between people" (71), similar to the window-pane that earlier in the story receives the secret kisses between Lilla and her childhood friend Dulcianne (who turns out to be Lilla's half-sister). But because of its transparency and its ability to reflect, it allows people to fade into each other as well, while also, like an "inverted mirror" (380), reversing the order of the speakers. In addition, this page can be displaced by the reader or simply taken out of the book, which implies that divisions between men are subjective and possibly moveable but nonetheless

materially real. In short, this plastic separation can be said to be "the womb of simultaneous densities and transparencies in the language of originality" which, according to Wilson Harris, informs the paradoxes of creoleness, "through and beyond" which "bridges of innermost content" can be thrown.¹¹

As already visible in the extract quoted above, the language used by Lilla is basically acrolectal, since her grammar is quite close to that of standard English, which matches her position as a descendant of the plantocracy (even if one of her grandmothers was a slave). Yet her discourse bears the traces of her wish to separate herself from "high white" society and its hypocritical agenda of purity and respectability, and to come closer to the people around her. So, while her grammatical frame remains, like her skin, a token of her Englishness, her utterances are peppered with creole lexis. Most of these words are borrowed from the local speech, but some are also of her own making, perhaps traces of the multilingual environment of her childhood when she could hear her mother use French, her father English, and Di patois and Yoruba. Lilla's language is most visibly creolized when she wants to establish contact with the local population (when she goes to market, for example, she uses her "rankest Creole"; 9), but also when confronted with the narrow-mindedness of the white establishment. Here is an example from her "dey-boo" ball at the local segregated British club when a boy remarks that she is not wearing any underwear:

And Bolom, it seemed the idea of my not wearing underclothing – the very concept of it, together with the story circulating that I swam naked in the river regularly too – was enough to turn them all to wadjanks. Turn them all tabanca. Too-tool-bay. Tarangee-banee. Send them all assassataps. (114)

Yet the most recurrent marker of Lilla's idiosyncratic "island speech" (125) is not to be found in the vocabulary proper, but in a non-standard form of the adverbial phrase "a-tall," which is automatically creolized because of its unconventional spelling. In Vel's narrative, however, it appears in its traditional form, thus ironically suggesting Lilla's failure to belong to Vel's world.

Unlike Lilla's, Vel's language tends to be basilectal, insofar as it is based on creole grammar, characterized by the absence of copulas in progressive forms, the absence of marked passives, the use of -s for the first person singular, and so on.

¹¹ Wilson Harris, "Creoleness: The Crossroads of a Civilization?," in Balutansky & Sourieau, ed. *Caribbean Creolization*, 26 and 29.

Time soon come I approaching a woman now. Getting pretty, real pretty. I walking with my little minidress Tantee May give me to make the style then. I walking with my little bag, my clasp and thing. Mistress Pantin, she give me little Pons, you know in them days didn't had much of cream, just Pons. Pons Cold Cream, I could remember, and powder, like Cashmere Bouquet. I could remember them two good. Mistress Pantin give me little Pons, and I catch a few cents from somewhere, I buy little powder, little Cashmere. And nail-polish. I hide them away secret in a little box. I had my little white shoebox, all my things wrap nice in tissue, that I uses to keep hid under a bush side the house. (234)

While Lilla introduces creole words into her narrative, Vel resorts to English words like "nuniforms" (255, 261, 276, 284) or "extrement" (329). Like the foreign fruit, apples and grapes, that she buys one day for her family, foreign words exert an irresistible attraction on Vel because of their social prestige. Yet because she gets these words wrong most of the time, they expose her failed attempts at Englishness rather than empower her. Her malapropisms become the markers of her social and cultural alienation.

This interplay between the languages of the two protagonists is an illuminating rendering of what linguists have called the creole continuum, which implies that "the Creole complex of the region is not simply an aggregation of discrete dialect forms but an overlapping of ways of speaking."¹² Thus it partakes of an unmeasurable phenomenon of trying to reach the other by inverting substrates and superstrates: in short, through some form of linguistic cross-dressing. Quite appropriately, transvestism is a central and recurrent motive in *Blessed is the Fruit*, concerning most characters in the novel. A telling example occurs when Lilla and her husband Daisy dress as man and woman for Carnival, and make love fervently in their costumes: "the idea, somehow, of making love to ourselves. Of embracing our own self. Our own selfsame other – own inverted mirror-image, separated from us by the pane of glass" (142). In a similar vein, the novel contains several cases of reworkings of conventional genealogy, which also points to the inadequacy of language to seize reality and its many metamorphoses: Lilla and Vel are just "like husband and wife" (211), Daisy is to Lilla "the father [she] never had" (201), and later, when his homosexuality is revealed, she consoles him "as though he were [her] own child" (182); finally, Mistress Pantin is to Vel "the mummy [she] never had" (201). Words can imprison people and ideas, so much so that "in the end all those words don't amount to nothing. Don't say nothing" (337). Silence may then become a special language that can give access to human feelings much better than words themselves

¹² Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths & Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (London: Routledge, 1989): 45.

because it creates "an unspoken understanding between [people] – all the more clear and binding because it was never given voice" (143). Like the golden key that Lilla finally gives to Velma, language is a paradox that can indeed be used to lock oneself up, but, more positively, that can also be used, even in its silent form, to open doors onto a future where otherness has pride of place.

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