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Language and Power!

I explore the concept of language in the English-speaking Caribbean through a feminist postcolonial & anti-colonial lens. I explore language not as a typical linguist would but in the context of language as social fabric which constitutes power. I will organize this paper into two parts. First, I will set the stage with a brief description of the Caribbean landscape through the lens of language. Here I will focus on the case of Trinidad to understand the importance of the English language to the British colonial agenda. I do this to draw forth the argument that the British colonizers understood the power of language and utilized it in their conquests of Empire expansion and consolidation, manifested both socially and institutionally; calculated to a degree where they made great efforts in their time of rule to ensure it became an essential component of identity. Second, I will then contest the colonial discourse of successful domination and imposition of language in the English-speaking Caribbean by highlighting the prominence of multiple hybrids which serve as acts of identity and resistance to the dominant order. The case of Rastafari, Reggae, and Dub Poetry will then be explored to indicate key and globally successful forms of resistance to colonial domination. I put forth that

it was the recognition of the importance of language, and the disciplined focus on resistance through language that gave agency to these downpressed peoples.

Prior to the 'discovery' of the 'New World' the Caribbean was populated through a series of waves of settlement by peoples spanning the period from 4000 B.C. - 1500-1600 A.D. In *Languages of the pre-Columbian languages of the Antilles* (2004) archaeological and linguistic data is used to map the language communities of the Caribbean region. At the time of Spanish intervention there were seven different speech communities in the Antilles (p.123). Evidence shows Ortoiroid sites existing in Trinidad from 5250 to 450 B.C. (Rouse 1992:62; Rouse and Allarie 1979:108-109 cited in Granberry, 2004). In Trinidad and Tobago (TT) there existed at least 10 known pre-Columbian languages spoken by a variety of peoples of different origins. None of these languages remain with native speakers in these islands, though there exists a rich legacy through topographical names (Adonis and Ferriera, 2012).

Columbus claimed Trinidad for Spain on July 31, 1498 on his third voyage to the Americas. Though under Spanish rule for about three hundred years the island was neglected by prospects of other colonies, in such that it was regarded as the colonial slum of the Spanish Empire (Millette, 1970, p.1). Spain recognized the disparate and vulnerable state of the colony and in the latter half of the 18th C began to make efforts to ameliorate the situation. In 1776 a *cedula* was published opening to foreigners the privilege of settling in Spanish colonies on very generous terms. As such there were large influxes of peoples to the island from a variety of different backgrounds. Trinidad became 'a French colony in all but name'; the ratio between French and Spanish citizens was twenty to one (Millette, 1970, p.25).

The outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789 had a consistent and visceral impact on the Caribbean colonies. In Trinidad it served to introduce new elements of instability into a fundamentally unstable society. Ideas of freedom and democracy became subjects of thought and debate amongst all aspects of the society (Millette, 1970, p.23). The revolution in St. Domingue (Haiti) further fuelled these ideas of liberation and revolt in Trinidad. Through this period Trinidad became a haven for refugees, across a full range of classes and castes (Wood, 1986, p.32). This reality became a looming threat to British colonial ambitions, and thus Trinidad became the target of British Empire. Trinidad, because of the 'Principles and Persons which have lately been introduced there', had become

'a course of just alarm and real Danger to several of our most valuable Islands' (Millette, 1970, p.35). As such in 1797 Trinidad was conquered without much resistance from the Spanish, and the first four years of the British sovereign project took form in military occupation. Trinidad became a formal British colony in 1802, Tobago in 1814, and in 1889 the two become one legal entity (Government of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, 2012). Britain obtained TT at the time when slavery began to be phased out, and as a result indentured labourers from India and China were brought from 1845 onwards. This dynamic has contributed significantly to the diverse linguistic repertoire of the island in many ways.
This background is important as it highlights the inseparability of language from ideology and power (Freire, 1996). It was the language of French in this context which was the catalyst for revolutionary ideas in the unique geopolitical context of Trinidad, which overdetermined the British colonial intervention. The response to this unique social setting has been a strictly regimented and institutionalized system of language imposition and constitutional engineering.

English language was initially taught to natives and slaves by missionaries, this initiated the institutionalized discourse of control through 'liberal education' (London, 2003, p.308). From here forward a plan was executed by the colonial power to ensure English was the primary language used both socially and institutionally. "Central to the move was an attempt to construct socially the role of a language, in this case English, and some strong ideological and cultural forces were at work to guarantee dominance not only at the time but also for today and most likely in the future" (London, 2003, p.288). In elementary schools eighty percent of the official allocated learning time was dedicated to English, as such phrases like 'school was English and English was school' (London, 2003, p.287) became relevant.

This British approach to language in TT was not a unique case; the 'Macaulay Minute' set forth an ideological praxis of language from the position of the British Empire. This discourse put forth that languages had a natural hierarchy and as such English was the language of 'useful knowledge' due to its refined body of philology. It was further projected that English would become the language of international communication, and by extension, 'What was good for Hong Kong, symbolically speaking, had to be good for the Gambia' (London, 2003, p.301). The recognition of the impact of this approach in the current context of TT is essential when considering the argument put forth by Smith (2007) in *Imperialism,*

History, Writing, and Theory. It must be noted that English is the vehicle through which these colonial discourses were disseminated, as Hall (2007) puts it, 'discourse is about the production of knowledge through language' (p.56). More specifically, it was literary formulations which gave this discourse its' uniformity and persistence. It is fitting then that it was Edward Said (a professor in European literature) who first identified and nuanced this embodied discourse, which he referred to as Orientalism. The English language cannot be separated from the concept of the 'other', and creation of the 'other' in the discourse directed to the populations of the West. Coming back to Smith's article, 'language carries culture and the language of the colonizer became the means by which the mental universe of the colonized was dominated' (p.336). In her critique of the hegemonic nature of writing, history, and theory Smith is careful not to disregard these points, but recognize them and understand that rejecting them does not diminish their existence or influence. She concludes the paper with a call to recognize the importance of relevant and useful research to indigenous communities and to ensure 'the exercise is about recovering stories from the past. This is inextricably bound to recovery of our language and epistemological foundations' (p.337).

In this second part of this paper I will begin to highlight the inevitable resistance to the colonial order of English language in the Caribbean. A number of these countries speak English officially, thus their populations are counted in the total global English-speaking population. Yet, if one has ever been to Trinidad and Tobago, Jamaica or any of these other places one would question the hegemony embedded in these classifications.

In reality, within each island there is great diversity in how that 'English' is spoken; a reflection of social grouping, ethnicity, race, class, gender, sexuality, education, travel experience, and other factors. Often a foreign tourist needs translation when speaking to some local Caribbean peoples. There are many different names given to these speech forms, depending on who you ask: creole/kweyol, patois/patwah, slang, broken-english, dialect, unique accent and others. The dominant discourse surrounding creoles is characterized by the ever-present colonial dualism whereby the Creole is defined against and in subordination to the Standard. There have been many academic studies across many disciplines on Creoles (Creole Discourse, 2002). What is to be brought forth from this is the resultant deviation from the colonial ideal. Just as Black slaves could never attain the whiteness valued by the colonial order, the peoples of the Caribbean would never

attain the English speech as imposed by the same colonial system. Homi Bhabha (1985) articulates this reality as a form of resistance:

resistance is not necessarily an oppositional act of political intention, nor is it the simple negation or the exclusion of the 'content' of another culture, as difference once perceived... [but] the effect of an ambivalence produced within the rules of recognition of dominating discourses as they articulate the signs of cultural difference. (p.153)

This is an important point with the consideration of the position of the government of Trinidad and Tobago, "Nevertheless, every Trinbagonian speaks English and you will find our charming accent one of the easiest to understand - it's singsong like and full of flavour - just like our people!" (GORTT, 2012). This quote, taken from the government website indicates the lack of critical consciousness and resistance to colonialism/imperialism. As with the statistics, the government's position is an erasure of any resistance to the colonial hegemony. Furthermore it shows who the government speaks to, and thus acknowledges the power hierarchy of foreign interests. This hybrid language, which the government denies, is an unconscious resistance to the colonial system. The next point of interest is the question of the product of a conscious resistance to the colonial system through the power of language.

Throughout the entire process of slavery, in the plantation engine of the capitalist economy of the Caribbean, there has been resistance. Slaves fought for freedom or death, and attempted to flee the plantations into the hills when possible. There in the hills of these islands Maroon communities were established. Each of these islands' histories is dotted with known rebellions against the colonial system. In Jamaica, 'The Legacy of Tacky, Cudjoe, Nanny, Paul Bogle and Sam Sharpe was linked to the struggles of Harriet Tubman, Soujourner Truth, King Ja Ja, Chaka Zulu and King Menelik of Ethiopia' and were known and kept alive to continue the resistance (Campbell, 1987, p. 39). Here the importance of storytelling and oral tradition inherent to African (indigenous) culture is kept alive, and serves its purpose of linking the society to grow together in knowledge. The first Rastas were avid readers, and considered it their duty to keep informed in historical, geographical, and political contexts. In the initial organization there was consciousness with regard to the alienating effect of the power inherent in knowledge (Campbell, 1987, p.123). Thus it became fundamental that critical

attention was placed on language, and the larger medium of communication. A unique, and consciously moulded language was developed; 'Rasta Talk', or 'Dread Talk' (DT). 'This talk sought the deepest expression of racial memory, and the power of this memory was expressed in the lyrics of the Rasta song - reggae.' (Campbell, 1987, p.124).

Rastafarians in Jamaica were in the process of creating a popular culture which was based on the spirit of resistance, combined with good humour and spirit of joy which had become part of the disposition of black peoples of the world. As capitalist relations in the society deepened, and the people had the distinct feeling that capitalism was destroying their personality, the Rastas were a section of the working poor who wanted to break the spirit of competition and individualism which permeated the society and its main institutions. (Campbell, 1987, p.121)

Drawing from Pollard (1994), Dread Talk (DT) arose out of English, consciously 'stepped up' to reflect position in society, philosophy, and resistance against the dominant culture. The language originally arose out of a need to speak and not be understood by the downpressors (slave masters, elite of society). It is the context of the social environment of Caribbean plantation colonies which gave rise to the urgent and resounding challenge of Rastafari. It is this violent system of slavery in all of its insidious manifestations which gave rise to a language and livity of conscious resistance. Rastafari has taken the English given by colonial powers, and 'stepped up' the device on a number of levels. 'Social protest manifests itself in language change. For defiance of society includes defiance of its language' (Pollard, 1994, p.18).

Here Fanon's theory on violence is pertinent. As has been shown above, the colonial agenda of language imposition was a prolonged system of epistemic violence. Thus as Fanon argues, 'at the level of individuals, violence is a cleansing force. It frees the native from his inferiority complex and from his despair and inaction; it makes him fearless and restores self-respect' (Fanon, 1961, p.93). This is core to the approach to language used by Rastafari which recognized the epistemic implications of the colonial system, and subverted it defiantly. This is echoed in Audre Lourde's ever relevant and frequently quoted statement, 'The Master's tools will never dismantle the Master's house' (1984).

Rastafari and the Negritude framework were points of social organization which were race-conscious and anti-

colonial. For Rastafari the platform for self representation is reggae music. For Negritude the platform for self representation is (academic) literary form. The overstanding and lived approach to language identified by Rastafari, is the essence of reggae music. The ability of this music to relate to people across the globe, in all positions (class, race, gender, or any other social construct) is the crux of its tactic of resistance. Negritude remained confined primarily to literary form, thus inaccessible to the large proportions of the social groups whom it spoke of. On the streets the symbols of Rasta and the melody of reggae are never far, while one would have to inquire to notable extents to find one versed in negritude.

The dominant number of reggae artists are male. This brings forth questions of representation within this movement of anti-colonial resistance, but is a complex reality which needs analysis. I will not go into depth here, but I will note that Rastafari cannot be removed from the colonial (patriarchal) structure it grew in resistance to. Rasta has spoken to this question; though pertinent questions are yet to be revealed in the contemporary world. I wonder about the gaps in representation and resistance that such a fact brings forth.

Vaughn Benjamin is the songwriter and lead singer of a contemporary roots/conscious reggae band known as Midnite. The band is known for its precision of beats, humility in live deliverance, and is held in high regard based on the uniqueness and critical content of the vocals. Midnite has produced an extremely large amount of albums, over 50 since their initial release in 1997.

D'bi Young is a Dub Poet of a hybrid generation. Born and raised in Jamaica, she came to Canada to study in her post-secondary years. She is critical of white (liberal) feminism (Young, 2006), for its negation of women of colours' history of organization and self-determination. She also challenges the praxis of an academic literary base, through the use of dub poetry. Though she does not publicly define herself as Rastafari her language and ideology reflect the essence of the position of Rastafari. She has taken her life experience and channelled it into a powerful and growing praxis, which she travels and spreads in art/activist communities globally. The SORPLUSI principles are a product of a matrilineal connection to Dub Poetry in both performance and theorizing about the application of Dub Poetry to society.

Dread Talk, Reggae, and Dub Poetry are all conscious forms of resistance manifested through expression of culture.

The overstanding of the importance of culture, and the role of language in maintaining and renewing culture are the essential points in these modes of resistance. They are rooted in recognition of the systemic reality of oppression which surrounds these societies, while seeking to address and confront this reality in a collective creative process. To understand DT one must have an understanding of English at its core, but once this is attained one begins the personal journey of transcending its limitations epistemologically and culturally. One can begin the journey from understanding to overstanding. This point concludes my intention; to recognize the importance language and to keep it in I consciousness through livity.

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