



## *Postcolonial Literatures as Disrespected Literatures?*

by Simona Bertacco

**ABSTRACT:** This essay focuses on the challenges as well as the joys of reading postcolonial literary texts that are composed and printed in multiple, alternating languages. What postcolonial texts make manifest through their syntax, vocabulary, and style is the wide array of creative expression that the simultaneous presence of multiple languages makes available to the writer. A literary analysis able to appreciate this creative potential is in order if we want to go beyond an outdated understanding of literature and its forms. It is in fact in the act of reading that a lot of the disrespect surrounding postcolonial literature manifests itself. Caribbean literature marks an ideal place to start exploring the possibilities of a postcolonial literary analysis. A region “once deemed the antithesis of civilization” (Ashcroft) has become one of the most creative laboratories of verbal art, both written and oral, thanks to its radical creolization of the colonial languages. In the second part of my essay, I will present a model of literary analysis that uses as its crucial categories those coming from the traditionally disrespected language of the region: *Creole*.

**KEY WORDS:** postcolonial literatures; Creole writing; literary respect; accent; dialect; reading



## THE ACCENT IN POSTCOLONIAL LITERATURE

Give me the right word and the right accent and I will move the world. What a dream for a writer! Because written words have their accent too. [...] And then there is that accent. Another difficulty. For who is going to tell whether the accent is right or wrong till the word is shouted, and fails to be heard, perhaps, and goes down-wind, leaving the world unmoved?

(Joseph Conrad, *A Personal Record*)

Until she was ten years old my daughter used to speak without rolling her “R” and replaced this sound with a voiced labiodental fricative [v]. While this hardly affected her when she spoke English—the language of the American environment in which she was growing up—it was very noticeable when she spoke Italian, the first language she had learned. She used to say ‘amo[v]e’ instead of ‘amo[r]e’, for love, and, in my Italian family and group of friends, we have all taken to using and writing ‘AmoVe’ for ‘sweetheart’ when Ada is part of the conversation. And then—by virtue of what seemed an organic development—‘AmoVe’ became the term of endearment for all the little ones in our extended family, marked by a capitalized ‘V’ in our spellings, to make sure it would not go unnoticed, as so much was condensed in that accented word, both in terms of tender feelings and in terms of cultural belonging.

This private anecdote allows me a point of entrance into the exploration of reading the accents in postcolonial literary texts, texts that are often born at the intersection of oral, written and performative modes of communication. As a concept, the accent offers an appropriate framework to consider the reception of literatures that emerge out of multilingual and multicultural environments. In fact, the accent marks and, by doing so, un-does the (standard/normal/normative) word—as Anita Starosta argues in her essay on translation and the global humanities (164); at the same time, however, it also makes the word, spoken as well as written, “[b]ecause written words have their accent too” (2) as Conrad writes in the preface to *A Personal Record*.<sup>1</sup> Who gets to decide whether an accent is good or bad, right or wrong? These questions are crucial in literary studies, as they point to issues of respect and acceptance that are raised whenever we talk about accents in literature, and to the ancillary, but not less important, question of whether we, as critics, “mishear, misunderstand, disrespect and disregard”<sup>2</sup> these literatures in the formal contexts that are proper to our profession. In other words, are we, readers and critics, part and parcel of the problem that “Disrespected Literatures” as an area of concern is making visible in this issue of *Altre Modernità*?

Postcolonial literatures are literatures from countries that were at some point in time colonies of European nations. The underlying assumption is that they are written in the former colonial languages. While this represented an adequate descriptor when the discipline was established in the mid-twentieth century, today the linguistic matrix

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<sup>1</sup> I owe this reference to Joseph Conrad’s *A Personal Record* and the notion of “accented criticism” to Starosta’s article.

<sup>2</sup> From John Rickford’s Presidential Address to the Linguistic Society of America’s annual winter meeting in 2016, quoted in the Editorial for this issue.



of postcolonial literatures is not containable within the boundaries of former colonial languages but is inclusive of the indigenous languages as well as the creole forms that developed after colonial contact. The notion that a text could be in several languages or in a creole language complicates the traditional model—mostly monolingual and national—of literary study. As Rebecca Walcott argues in *Born Translated*, literature scholars have traditionally relied on the distinctness of languages (Walcott 44). That is how we organize literary histories (Italian, English, German, etc.), literature anthologies and syllabi. The corpus of postcolonial literatures has made continuing along these lines an impossible practice and has pushed for new approaches (region-based rather than linguistic) and new concepts (hybridity, creolité, and so forth). What changes, in the moment of reading, when the language of a literary text is not—or not only—the standard version of the European language of colonial occupation, but a creole language, a language, that is, that finds its origins in language contact and fusion? More importantly: how would our practices of reading change if we stopped assuming monolingualism as a constitutive feature of the literary text, and instead we paid attention to its *constitutive* language games? Literary analysis traditionally scrutinizes language, but it is mostly style that is at the center of the attention. What postcolonial texts make manifest through their syntax, their vocabulary, and stylistic choices—and what makes them particularly compelling—is the wide array of creative expressions, or style, that is made available to the writer by the presence of multiple languages. However, in order to see the style, one needs to see the languages first.

Caribbean literature marks an ideal place to explore the issue of respect in postcolonial literary studies: the terms and the categories that are crucial to access and understand it, in fact, come from the traditionally disrespected type of languages of the region—*creole*—and the process of their making—*creolization*. In an ironic turning of the tables, a region once deemed the antithesis of civilization has become one of the most creative laboratories of verbal art—both written and oral—thanks to its “radical creolization” (Ashcroft “Archipelago” 89) of the former colonial languages. An illustrative example of what I am referring to occurred in the days immediately following the death of Derek Walcott in St. Lucia, on 17 March 2017, which saw the entire world pay tribute to this global icon of Anglophone poetry. Television channels, newspapers, social media would circulate his poems or post videos of Walcott reading his own poetry, or of other poets performing it. There was one video that stood out to me: it shows Linton Kwesi Johnson reading Walcott’s poem “Love After Love”.<sup>3</sup> It is particularly relevant to this discussion for how it encapsulates what makes Caribbean literary culture so uncontainable in traditional literary categories—its organic intermingling of the scribal and oral traditions. Linton Kwesi Johnson, based in the United Kingdom but originally from Jamaica, is famous especially within the genre of Jamaican dub poetry—the form of performance poetry with closest ties to reggae music. Walcott, on the other hand, was to a large extent a poet of the *scribal order* and very well-read in the traditions that, despite the critiques he earned for doing it, he claimed as his own. Johnson’s performance, then, brings together the two different modes of Caribbean poetry and, by doing this, results particularly powerful.

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<sup>3</sup> Derek Walcott tribute: Linton Kwesi Johnson reads “Love After Love” - BBC Newsnight. [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n\\_3QbH\\_aNm](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n_3QbH_aNm) (Accessed 2 Mar. 2018).



From Vic Reid's to Sam Selvon's early experiments with Creole in fiction; from Kamau Brathwaite's to Louise Bennett's flamboyant innovations in poetry; in the stories of Caribbeanness told by V.S. Naipaul and Merle Hodge; in the accents brilliantly recorded in Earl Lovelace's and Velma Pollard's works; sung by Linton Kwesi Johnson and NourbeSe Philip; or chiseled in their poems by Derek Walcott and Dionne Brand, many Caribbean writers have explored in their works the possibilities of a language that can be fully Antillean. Such a language, as Glissant put it in *Poetics of Relation* (1990), would be capable of translating the Antilles into history, by escaping the passivity associated with an imposed language of fixed forms (the colonial language) as well as the folklore traps of an oral language without a written form (which any creole initially is), disrespected in the intellectual and literary fields but nonetheless used as a major mode of artistic expression. A lot has changed in the way in which Caribbean creoles<sup>4</sup> are seen and used in the twenty-nine years since Glissant published *A Poetics of Relation* in 1990. If we link together the Antillean notions of *creolizing* (as the process through which new languages and cultures develop in a context of colonial and postcolonial contact) and *créolité* (as one of the major intellectual movements of the region), we can actually understand the extent to which Creole permeates every act of writing in the Caribbean, even when that writing is not in Creole or not only in Creole. This is what the linguist Barbara Lalla calls the "Gestalt" perception of Creole (Lalla *Creole and Respec'* 61) as an overall and unavoidable element in Caribbean literatures. However, while Lalla considers the phenomenon from the insider's perspective of a Creole speaker and reader, in this essay, I will look at it as an outside reader, that is a reader who does not speak Creole, but who studies literature that uses it, to explore the possibilities of reading it may offer.

It is in fact in the act of reading, that is to say, in the very moment that makes the literary happen, that a lot of the disrespect surrounding postcolonial literatures manifests itself. The term "disrespect" may seem inappropriate to refer to a body of literature—postcolonial literature—that is regularly studied today within schools and universities globally. Yet it is appropriate if we consider *how* postcolonial literature—not just Caribbean literature—is taught and studied. By disrespect I refer to the fact that the postcolonial literary text has quite consistently been valued more for its supposed political nature than for its literariness, its aesthetic component set aside as secondary or not essential to the communication of its socio-political message. The core of the issue can be summarized using Fredric Jameson's words: "The third-world novel will not offer us the *satisfactions* of Proust or Joyce" (65, emphasis added). Contained in these two lines are both the question of the contingency of literary value and the straightforward realization that in order to name—in Gerard Genette's terms (1972)—the figures of a text, the reader has in the first place to be able to see them. (Bertacco "Postcolonialism" 324-329) In postcolonial literary terms, this means that the language games at play in the texts have, in addition to being identified, to be perceived as offering us aesthetic pleasure or "satisfaction" as Jameson points out. This constitutes a

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<sup>4</sup> I will hereafter gather the various types of creoles together under the simple rubric Creole, as is commonly done in literary studies and used in the sources that I cite. I will capitalize Creole when referring to a specific type of creole, therefore following the typographic convention used with standard languages, and use the term uncapitalized in all other circumstances.



challenge, but also a great opportunity that we face as twenty-first century readers, critics, and translators.

## CREOLE POETICS AND RESPEC'

At the beginning was the shout—the beginning is, for us, the time when Creole was created as a means of communication between the master and his slaves. It was then that the peculiar syntax of the shout took hold. To the Antillean the word is first and foremost a sound. Noise is a speech. Din is a discourse. We must first understand that.

(E. Glissant, "Free and Forced Poetics" 96)

The Caribbean region constitutes perhaps one of the world's most extensive and most varied site of creolization as a result of the very different histories of enslavement and colonization that unfolded on each of the Caribbean islands. Caribbean creoles have developed along different lines, and they stand in quite different relations to the European languages from which they come. Barbara Lalla matter-of-factly points out that "while Creole has minority language status in relation to an international language, there is growing acknowledgment and insistence on the obvious fact that Creole speakers have majority status within the region" (Lalla, *Creole and Respec'* 104). From the standpoint of the non-Caribbean reader, then, it might be useful to imagine what a creole poetics looks like, what writers and artists are doing with it, and what possibilities of reading it offers. The significance of code choice in Caribbean writing is indeed generating serious consideration by scholars of many different disciplines. There are excellent studies of Creole use in Caribbean literary discourse from the linguistic side (Simmons-MacDonald, Robertson; Casas; Allsopp and Rickford; Lalla *Caribbean*) and there are important works analyzing Creole from the literary side (Glissant *Poetics*, "Free"; Ashcroft, Tiffin, Griffith; Terada; Brathwaite; Ashcroft *Caliban's Voice*); however, a literary reading of creolized texts, combining the two disciplinary approaches, is what this essay is proposing.

In (English) literary studies, the closest term that we have to describe the use that some writers are making of Creole in their works is dialect writing—I am thinking about a tradition holding together writers as diverse as Thomas Hardy, Charles Dickens, Rudyard Kipling, Robert Burns, Emily Brontë down to contemporary writers such as Irvine Welsh, James Kelman, Jonathan Safran-Foer and Junot Díaz. However, the assumed inferiority of dialect to standard language that the term implies represents an insurmountable problem in that it marks dialect writing as *writing with an accent* from a presupposed position of *accentlessness*. Kamau Brathwaite's seminal essay "History of the Voice" (1993) goes straight to the heart of this problematic legacy of linguistic prestige in the Caribbean cultural context and establishes Creole as the *nation language* of the region and not as its dialect:



Dialect is “inferior” English. Dialect is the language when you want to make fun of someone. Caricature speaks in dialect. Dialect has a long history coming from the plantation where people’s dignity was distorted through their languages and the descriptions which the dialect gave to them. Nation language, on the other hand, is the *submerged* area of that dialect that is much more closely allied to the African aspect of experience in the Caribbean. It may be in English, but often it is in an English which is like a howl, or a shout, or a machine-gun, or the wind, or a wave. It is also like the blues. (266)

Nation language, in Brathwaite’s definition, is opposed to the written word. For Brathwaite, “the poetry, the culture itself, exists not in the dictionary but in the tradition of the spoken word. [...] When it is written, you lose the sound or the noise, and therefore you lose part of the meaning” (265). This kind of “noise” in written texts is in fact a transcription of an oral phenomenon. However, when it happens in writing, it signals not only that the writers are engaging in a counter-poetics or in “an active way of taking the community back”, as Evelyn Ch’ien argues in her book *Weird English* (6), but also that they consider these forms part of how their work means, essential to their style. In other words, these forms are an essential component of their poetics. Creolization in Caribbean writing points to an intentional subversion of the power dynamics in language use in polyglossic contexts, and to a creative experimentation with spelling and grammar rules. Creolizing within literary texts is not only a way to embody a native or local voice, but it is, fully, a matter of literary form. It makes perfect sense, then, to talk about a Creole poetics. And there is no better way to understand how it functions than by turning to the literary texts themselves.

## CREOLIZED TEXTS: AN INVITATION TO READING

Organic communities may count on ties of affection, but diverse societies like ours need to develop respect.

(Doris Sommer, *Bilingual Aesthetics* 138-9)

Among the artists featured in this issue, I cannot but mention a writer and a scholar who has contributed enormously to the reevaluation of the folk and creole tradition that, in her own words, “accounts for the lifestyle and the way of seeing things peculiar to the people who form the bulk of our Caribbean populations” (Pollard “The Dust” 122). The writer and scholar in question is Velma Pollard. In an essay, providing an exquisite close reading of the poem “The Dust” by Kamau Brathwaite, Pollard succinctly states the urgency of the work that, from very different perspectives, we are all doing in this issue of *Altre Modernità*: “It is not possible to put off any longer the appraisal of our more “typical” works using a frame of reference that is peculiarly our own, particularly when we dare to point the way to young readers” (122).

Velma Pollard grew up in Woodside, a small rural village in Jamaica. Trained as a teacher first and as a linguist, later, Pollard has profoundly contributed not only to what Caribbean literature is today, but also to how it is being studied and taught. While earning an MA in Education at McGill University, in fact, Pollard developed an interest for specific aspects of Jamaican Creole for the use of teachers of English. The creole that



developed in Jamaica is more African in lexicon and syntax, and therefore less comprehensible to most English speakers, than that of any other Anglophone Caribbean territory (Breiner). It is no surprise that Pollard's academic books *From Jamaican Creole to Standard English: A Handbook for Teachers* (1993) and *Dread Talk, the Language of the Rastafari* (1994) were both successful and adopted in Jamaican schools. However, it is her work as a writer that has started gaining a lot of well-deserved critical attention in the past few years, as it traces a long fascinating arc of critical reflections and creative output.

In the interview included in this issue, Velma Pollard summarizes her early life in the following terms: "Home, church, school, community were the influences". We see these groups come to life in her fictional worlds and her use of Jamaican creole, as she explains in her own piece included in this issue, is instrumental to this operation. The following passage is a good example of Pollard's creative use of Jamaican Creole or *Patwa*. It comes from one of the stories contained in the collection *Considering Woman I* (1989) and it describes the funeral of the narrator's mother who was in the US when she passed away, so had to be sent back home in a coffin:

It wasn't our funeral. It was a spectacle.

The afternoon was hot; inside the church it was hotter. Outside, I stood as far as I could from the grave and watched several of them pointing at me, their eyes full of tears: "Dats de little wan she lef wid Miss Angie" Near to me was a woman in a fur hat, close fitting, with a ribbon at the side. She wore a dress of the same yellow gold as the hat, long earrings and costume jewellery of the same yellow gold.

I could hear the trembling voices from the grave –

"I know not oh I know not  
What joys await me there ..."

– And fur hat, beside me, trying to outdo them so her friend could hear her:

"A didn know ar but a sih dih face; is fat kill ar noh?" (My mother was rather busty but that was as far as the fat went.)

She didn't wait for an answer but continued: "A nevva sih wan of dese deds that come back from England yet." (No one had taken the trouble to tell her it was America not England.) (Pollard, *Considering* 42)

In these fourteen lines, the shift between Jamaican Standard English, the Biblical English of the hymn, and Jamaican Creole gives a movement and a richness in echoes to the scene that one language alone would not have achieved. Readers hear the different sounds inside their heads, they grasp the significance of the scene, enjoy the contrast between the spoken words of "fur hat", expressed in Jamaican Creole, and the written reflection of the narrator's consciousness bracketed and expressed in standard English, the oral and the scribal orders, as well as relish (i.e. the satisfactions Jameson mentioned in relation to Proust and Joyce) the rendering of the funeral as a social event, as a spectacle, that the narrator is conveying. The use of Creole in this passage does not represent a problem of accessibility for the non-Creole speaking reader, and this was a legitimate concern for the earlier generations of Caribbean writers. The language games played by the writer enable the "Gestalt" perspective suggested above: as readers, we



simply can't forget that Creole is part of the sound system the text emerges out of. It is not given to us as a possibility of reading.

This excerpt represents an *earlier stage* of creole poetics, as the creolized language is used within a dialogue where it is understood as the language of the represented character, the lady in yellow, and not of the narrator of the text. Jamaican creole acts a mark of a local voice and of a place. But it also stands for cultural difference. As Ashcroft argues, linguistic variations become synecdochic of the writer's culture—the part that stands for the whole—rather than universal representations of the world (Ashcroft *Caliban's Voice* 175). The inserted Creole passages in fact create a gap in the literary texture, a gap between the author's cultural worlds and their respective ideas of artfulness. Velma Pollard's choice to signify that point of non-coincidence by using English differently is brilliant. While not a subversion of the power and prestige dynamics between English and Creole—it could in fact be said that the narrator's flawless English belittles the creole-speaking character—the sections in Creole have a liveliness that counter-balances the power status of Standard English. Most importantly, they stand as an intentional act on the part of the writer and Pollard's own reflection on her use of Creole in the afterword to the short story collection emphasizes this metalinguistic aspect:

The problem of presenting on the page a language which is without a tradition of writing, and so one which has not been standardized, has existed ever since West Indians began to try to represent authentic Caribbean voices. Linguists have the easy recourse to using a phonetic script but the average reader would have neither the training nor the patience to read this. And so without any agreement as to how sounds should be represented, writers have tried to set down something which is recognizable to people who read English but which reproduces the sounds of the creole. [...] Some of you will still be alive when a standardized writing system for Jamaican Creole will have emerged. (Pollard *Considering Woman* 77)

Velma Pollard's words proved indeed prophetic: the average reader now can have both the training and the patience to read Creole as more than local color or a characterizing tool, but as a quintessential part of the writer's style.

My second example pays homage to Derek Walcott (1930-2017) and allows me to close this section of textual analysis with a brief reflection on the right to signify that is evoked, powerfully, by a creole poetics. Walcott is not commonly associated with creole writing or orality (Ismond); yet—and not surprisingly for a writer who began his career in theatre—he wrote a good body of verse in Creole. This second example is an instance in which we see the use by an Anglophone writer of a French-based Creole, to get a better grasp of the linguistic and cultural complexity of creole poetics. Possession of Saint Lucia, Walcott's home island, went back and forth between England and France more than ten times during the colonial period. The resulting pattern of language distribution is, therefore, complicated and divided along colonial language lines: there are areas—mostly rural—that are prevalently French-creole speaking, Catholic and black; and areas—mostly towns—that are Protestant and dominated by English and English-based creole. Walcott was raised by an English-speaking Protestant family in Castries, the island's capital, and he learned French in school. He would have heard the French-based creole everywhere, but there were strong social inhibitions against





speaking it. As Laurence Breiner writes, “it was the language associated with the Catholic rural poor, not the class to which his family belonged” (31).

At the end of the chapter titled “How Newness Enters the World”, in *The Location of Culture*, Homi Bhabha writes: “Nowhere in contemporary postcolonial poetry have I found the concept of the right to signify more profoundly evoked than in Derek Walcott’s poem on the colonization of the Caribbean as the possession of a space through the power of naming” (Bhabha 231). The poem Bhabha is referring to is entitled “Sainte Lucie”, in St. Lucian Creole, it was published in the collection *Sea Grapes* in 1976, and it showcases Walcott’s call to language, to all the languages he felt he had at his disposal as a Caribbean poet. Indeed, as we read through the lines, the naming process of imperialism is translated, by means of Walcott’s use of Creole, into “another sign of agency and identity” (Bhabha 232), and, I would add, of poetry.

II  
Pomme arac,  
otaheite apple,  
pomme cythère,  
pomme granate,  
moubain,  
z’anananas  
the pineapple’s  
Aztec helmet,  
pomme,  
[...]  
Come back to me,  
my language.  
Come back,  
cacao,  
grigri,  
solitaire  
ciseau  
the scissor-bird (Walcott 310)

The incantatory tone of these lines, that read like a prayer, conveys a sense of serenity, rather than the violence of conquest, and a seamless movement from English to St Lucian Creole and back, as if each language led, organically, to the other, the same way as the nouns listed lead—matter-of-factly—to the fruits, the animals, and the landscape of the island. The invocation to language in the poem performs symbolically a double function: it (re)names the surrounding nature, while creating a communal tongue. The prayer, as critics have pointed out, inaugurates for Walcott a new relationship to creole. The tongue, however, is double. Section III contains—as the headnote says—a “narrative Creole song heard on the back of an open truck travelling to Vieuxfort” (314), written entirely in the French Creole of St. Lucia, while section IV contains its translation into English. Therefore there are two poems in the poem and each is a slightly different version of the other. Thematically and structurally, then, the poem speaks through translation:



generations going  
generations gone,  
moi c'est gens St. Lucie.  
C'est la moi sortie;  
is there I born. (314)

What we see in this poem is that translation and a refusal to translate work hand in hand in Creole poetics. *Ciseau* is rendered as the scissor-bird, but no translation is given for *grigri, solitaire, moi c'est gens St. Lucie*. And this is perhaps the compositional signature of Walcott's creole poetics: his own artistic manipulation of the many languages at his disposal via a skillful use of traditional poetic and rhetorical devices. In the lines above, for instance, four languages—Standard English, St Lucia English Creole, Standard French and St Lucia French Creole—are held together by their sounds, rather than by their graphological similarity (*going* rhymes with *gone*; *moi* and *c'est* are tied in a chiasmus in the central lines; *gens* creates a semi-rhyme with *born*; and *Lucie* with *sortie*). This is an illustrative example of what creole poetics is and can do: the pronunciation of the word—the way the word is read aloud rather than the way in which the word is written—holds the key for the reader to access and enjoy the artfulness of the poem. As in the example by Pollard, the presence of creole languages cannot be avoided in our experience of the text. Indeed, it is Creole that makes our access to the text possible.

Evelyn Ch'ien calls these kinds of texts "forms of polycultural expression" (6) in which the way language is used "wants to do more with English than communicate *what* the subject is; it also wants to show *who* the speaker is and *how* the speaker can appropriate the language." (8) What the authors I have mentioned are collectively doing is, on the one hand, making creole accessible to a wider audience, while, on the other, broadening that wider audience's conception of what kind of people speak creole, and of the variety of ways creole can be used. In my reading, I chose to approach creole textuality as translational, that is, as a textuality that, in the material process of writing involves another language and, rather than hiding it, flaunts it for its aesthetic potential. I made the point that working with more than one language, when it is formally and thematically showcased in the texts, deploys language as a metasign and, therefore, needs to be considered in the literary analysis. To conclude, if the newness introduced by postcolonial writing reconstitutes what is considered "Literature", we need readings that respond to textual newness with new models of analysis.

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