

CAN ANYTHING GOOD COME OUT OF CEDROS? 'NATION LANGUAGE' IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY TRINIDAD

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"Creole," declared the Martinican authors of *Eloge de la Créolité* in 1989, "the first language for us Caribbeans, Guyanese and Mascarins, is the initial means of communication of our innermost selves, our collective unconscious, of our common genius, and it remains the river of our alluvial Creoleness" (qtd. in and trans. Condé, 95). Here, Creole languages are the primary and fundamental sediment of an essential, 'innermost self' for Caribbean and other subjects. In a less rhapsodic tone, Maryse Condé has noted that the validation of Creole by nationalists as "the language of resistance born surreptitiously in the plantation and allowing the slaves to communicate among themselves by excluding the master" (95) ignores the simultaneous existence of several African languages during slavery, a fact that renders Creole a language of "unity and compromise [between] slaves from different origins and masters" (95). The opposition between French as "the language of colonization" (95) and Creole as "the core of resistance" (95) is, therefore, "simplistic" (95).

Impatient with claims about the mere presence of Creole language "[guaranteeing] the authenticity of Antillean writing" (95), Condé asks if Creole does not in fact serve to exoticize Caribbean cultures for a French reading public, as with its connection to explicit sex in the novels of Raphaël Confiant and others. For Condé, this is a celebration of a dubious Caribbean carnivalesque that merely confirms the place of the over-sexed 'other' in metropolitan French culture. Other commentators question nationalists' investment in the authenticity of Creole, as when Jean Métellus insists that Haitian Creole was "born from a French language at a time when French itself had not yet been homogenized. And it is this Creole that was instilled into -- or rather imposed on -- the slaves." (120).

The celebration and caution that attend Creole are not, of course, limited to the Francophone Caribbean. In a well-known formulation, Kamau Brathwaite opposed the officially-sanctioned, 'standard' European languages spoken and written by middle- and upper-class élites of the Caribbean, to 'nation language,' the Creole languages spoken by the majority of the Caribbean people. For him, embrace of the latter and repudiation of the former by the region's intellectuals are central to the recovery of an authentic Caribbean identity, since the unruliness or 'noise' associated with Creole speech represents the radical and hitherto marginalized energies of the region. By this account, then, Creole is always-already distinct from elite, official modes, and the ability of 'nation language' to transform intellectual production into authentic, national discourses is self-evident. Other commentators insist that creolization is "a process of *contention*" (Bolland 72), that it is "marked by situation" rather than "atemporal" and thus we would do well to attend to its histories and tensions.¹ Are there shifts in the stories we can tell about creolization, and about Creole languages more specifically -- stories that might differ not only from region to region, but across time? Does the link between Creole languages and an authentic, national self in the discourses of Brathwaite and the Martiniquan Creolists have historical precedent? What of the interaction between intellectuals and those for whom they claim to speak, or between male nationalists and female speakers? Finally, to return to the initial reference to 'our collective unconscious' and 'our common genius,' might there be a tension between a rhetorical appeal to collectivity and a lived experience in which subjects are *variously* connected to Creole speech and to the nation?

Perhaps Cedros in southwestern Trinidad is as good a place to look as any in an attempt to historicize current accounts of 'nation language.' Rather than indicating a naturalized

¹The latter two quotes in this sentence are from a public talk by Michel-Rolph Trouillot which I attended.

correspondence between Creole usage and authentic national, class or racial identities, the work of the nineteenth-century Black intellectual John Jacob Thomas indicates how Creole regulates rather than merely reflects such identities. Almost twenty years after its publication to great acclaim in Port of Spain in 1869, Thomas gave this explanation of how he, "then only an obscure young teacher in a remote district of this out-of-the-way dependency of Great Britain," came to write his Theory and Practice of Creole Grammar:

The thing, like most notable facts in human affairs, was the outcome of a very simple incident. In fact, it sprang out of my having paid a visit to a sick friend -- the Rev. J. W. Mathews -- who, together with his entire household, consisting of five persons, was writhing in the purgatorial agonies of the redoubtable "Cedros Fever." A native of Barbados, proficient in classics, and other branches of the then so-called "liberal" education, Mr. Mathews was, as often happened with scholars with reference to modern languages at that period, utterly helpless as regarded the French, which, as a matter of fact, he had never heard spoken nor even looked at in books. What, then, must have been his plight with regard to unliterary Creole, after only a few weeks' sojourn amongst people who spoke that alone! On the occasion of my calling, as above stated, to see the poor fever-stricken family I found the reverend patient utterly distracted at his inability to make his own wants and those of the other sufferers in the house understood by the only servant they had -- a Cedros girl who knew not one syllable of English! Mr. Mathews, in course of a conversation between us on the subject, expressed his astonishment that not a grammatical text-book, nor even a vocabulary, existed for helping strangers in the matter of understanding and of making themselves understood by, the mass of the population who spoke the patois exclusively. Nor was my own wonder less than his on witnessing, as I then did, not only the inconvenience but the positive danger of that state of things. As the matter was one which fell within the scope of my regular private studies, I resolved then and there to attempt supplying this glaring need.²

Thomas's "Preface" to the Creole Grammar indicated his desire to increase the access of Trinidad's Creole-speaking masses to legal and other services. At the same time, the credit which he received from élites regarding his ability to reduce supposedly 'wild' speech to the philological codes of the day, might tell us something of the means by which intellectuals such as himself acquired prestige by means of their proximity to Creole speech, while non-élites continued to be marginalized because of their 'failure' to master other linguistic codes.

In the quoted passage, for instance, we see the 'labours' of being posted in Cedros. The diligent schoolmaster and the learned Barbadian clergyman are like minds in the unlettered 'purgatory' of a coastal location many times removed from a civilized center.³ A 'remote

²Port of Spain Gazette August 10, 1887. Thomas taught in the (primary) ward school at Cedros during the period 1866-1869, before being appointed to positions in the Civil Service. In the 1870s he was occasionally appointed Acting Clerk of the Peace or Acting Stipendiary Magistrate in Cedros.

³One could travel by steam ship from Port of Spain to Cedros on Mondays, Thursdays and Saturdays, leaving Port of Spain at 7 am and arriving at 2 pm. "There is also a land communication, partly along the beach and partly through the forest, over some of the points which project into the sea; this road is a mere bridle-path, and the traveller must always time his journey with the ebb of the tide, unless he should prefer being exposed to be drenched by the waves at the flow, or even prevented altogether from proceeding" (L. De Verteuil 322).

district' in an 'out-of-the-way dependency,' Cedros offers fever, isolation, and Creole speech. Classically trained though he may be, Rev. Mathews (Black? Coloured? White?) is lost in Cedros. His 'liberal' education, which Thomas may be gently scoffing at here as inadequate to the needs of the region, has left him without a mastery of French. Though French would not solve all of his problems in a place where only 'unliterary Creole' is spoken, he would certainly not feel as completely adrift as he does -- an Anglophone Barbadian in a Francophone world.

In one sense, then, there is an implied hegemonic power accorded to Creole, since even *élites* proficient in the classics are helpless without it. No amount of formal education will help them if they do not know the language. On the other hand, Creole speakers are not represented here as autonomous or even competent. Their speech is 'unliterary,' and they speak *only* Creole. The 'Cedros girl' is defined in terms of her *lack* of English, rather than her mastery of the language spoken by the 'mass of the population.' Thomas, as master of both English and Creole, will be the mediator between the foreign clergyman's family and the local woman who serves them. His grammar will make the language comprehensible to churchmen and others, bringing light where there is darkness, and order where there is chaos. It will cure the Cedros fever.

Here, the grammar is made necessary by the presence of outsiders: local realities need to be translated for the foreigner. This is a collaboration of *élites*, one in the know and one who is not, but both marked by their distance from 'unliterary' Creole speakers. Those among whom they labour, bringing religious, moral and intellectual light, can hardly appreciate their efforts, and will have no need of a Creole grammar. Thomas, engaged in 'regular private studies' at night in addition to laboring in the schoolroom by day, writes a grammar explaining its tenses and conjugating its verbs, even as he is mastering the Greek and Latin which his own schooling as a non-propertyed, newly-middle-class Black schoolteacher, has denied him. If anything, the Grammar is more crucial to his own acquisition of prestige in a context where his intellectual labour is all the capital he has, than it is to the masses whose speech he records.

This is not to say that the role of the masses was not crucial to the conception and production of the Grammar. Working at night for almost three years, Thomas says he painstakingly recorded the proverbs and songs that he heard all around him. The Creole speakers in Cedros and the French dictionary were his two sources of reference for his research:

As regards French, I had but a few school-grammars and two third-rate dictionaries, at whose mercy I stood for everything not within my previous knowledge. . . . I laboured almost unceasingly at my task; sometimes threading my way with confidence, frequently having to condemn or re-write whole pages, which a chance remark of a passer-by or closer inquiry had proved erroneous. (v)

Here is a labourer who is dependent upon the 'primary source' of the passer-by for the validity of his conclusions, in one sense indicating the integrity of his methods, and in another confirming his vulnerability: does the 'chance remark' cover all possible errors, and might it not be a remark typical only of Cedros, rather than the rest of Trinidad? But Thomas is also well aware of the hierarchies governing his field of inquiry: some grammars and dictionaries are for *students* rather than scholars, and some are even worse: 'third-rate.'

Local reviewers praised Thomas for his efforts:

The preparatory studies -- the real labors -- for Thomas's work were made at Cedros, in the midst -- if we except a few planters and managers -- of a rude, ignorant and illiterate population, far from book, far from assistance and

encouragement of any sort. Study in a place like Cedros, is certainly pursuit of knowledge under extraordinary difficulties, and he who, in such a place, trains his mind and stores it as Mr. Thomas has done, deserves preeminently the honourable and mis-used title of a *self-made man*.⁴

Here, Cedros marks the limits of civilization and demonstrates to the newspaper's readers Thomas's labours, not unlike the labours being undertaken during that period in surveying Trinidad's interior. Sylvester Devenish, the most prominent of these surveyors, published texts in Creole, along with other White and Coloured élites -- religious catechism, adaptations of La Fontaine, satires of the Governor, proverbs. They regarded Creole as an important dimension of their strong connection to Trinidad, the Francophone Caribbean more generally, and a wider Francophone world including Louisiana and Mauritius. Such texts indicate some of the sources to which Thomas had access when he was writing his Creole Grammar, but also suggest a local upper-class audience whose authority to judge him he must have felt very keenly. In a territory where resident and expatriate English officials exercised political dominance, Francophone nationalists championed Creole language as a means of insisting on their cultural dominance and of resisting anglicization.

However, the nationalists defended Creole in the context of their mastery of other languages. The ability to move easily and elegantly amongst languages was an important sign of social status: Devenish was said to have "picked up a working knowledge of modern Greek, became fluent in Spanish and acquired a smattering of Italian, Polish and Hebrew. Later also a little Ibo" (A. De Verteuil 105). Here, not all of these languages would have conferred obvious distinction, but Devenish did not require marks of 'obvious' distinction, given his racial and class status. A 'smattering,' rather than mastery as such, indicated a rugged, practical cosmopolitanism ('a working knowledge of Modern Greek'). 'Hindustanee' was one of the languages of which Thomas was known to have a working knowledge, in addition to Greek, Latin, French, Spanish, Italian and German. His 'knowledge' of Hindi reflected the presence of thousands of immigrants from the Indian subcontinent and the bureaucratic need to provide translation for them. This 'knowledge' gave him and other élites the right to 'place' these indentured immigrants (as well as others from West Africa, China and elsewhere) on the margins of 'Creole' identity, according to their supposed cultural traits.

Creole, then, was the first, if not the only language of most of Trinidad's working-class and peasantry, though percentages shifted with the influx of immigrants from non-Francophone territories throughout the nineteenth century. Creole knitted together lower, middle and upper echelons of the society, helping to demarcate 'insiders' from 'outsiders.' However, whereas speaking *only* Creole marked non-élites as lacking in distinction, speaking Creole marked speakers of English and French as well-heeled members of the society.

Thomas was both a nationalist who was involved in determining who could be an 'authentic' Trinidadian in the face of the influx of thousands of immigrants, and a pan-Africanist who was committed to the rehabilitation of the Africa and its diaspora within respectable, bourgeois parameters. In Part 1 of the Creole Grammar, he states: "when -- as in the case of Africans in the West Indies and America -- a barbarous nation adopts a foreign speech, these approximations will be a prominent feature in the dialect thus formed" (1). One example offered is the treatment of "this poor letter" -- the 'r' -- which for "pure *Patois* speakers is almost non-existent" (4). The absent 'r' marks the Creole speaker, then, as ignorant, rude, even foreign, to go back to an early meaning of 'barbarous.' Thomas's Creole Grammar redeems the 'barbarous nation' by showing its speakers, as well as their

⁴Trinidad Chronicle, June 1871.

language, to be normal and valuable, rather than pathological, members of the nation. He does so by making clear his own ability to pronounce words masterfully, as he and other gentlemen -- scholars, priests, surveyors, missionaries, travel writers -- interpret and fix persons according to racial and national rules.

A 'Cedros girl' provides Thomas with an opportunity to reiterate the rules of grammar and nation. As he notes her unseemly speech he underscores his own mastery as a well-bred and respectable interpreter. In this sense, his Creole Grammar was part of a conservative project to fix the precise contours of what could count as Creole, in the face of the influx of groups from all over the Caribbean and the globe. Anyone entering Trinidad from the mid-century onwards would have to conform to this paradigm, including those Amerindians from the South American mainland making their yearly pilgrimages to Trinidad's interior through places like Cedros. Committed as they seem to be to the policing of borders, can Creole speakers, or Creole identities more generally, fathom these peregrinations across Cedros's waters, teeming with Walcott's silver tarpon?⁵

A multiplicity of interests informs the defence of Creole speech, Creole poetics, or a Creole condition, at any given time, whether this defence is made (trans)nationally, regionally, or along ethnic lines. It would be as possible to repudiate the validity of same-sex desire as it would be to affirm it, using Caribbean Creole languages to appeal to the way things used to be, or the way things ought to be or should be. When Louise 'Miss Lou' Bennett died in the summer of 2006, it was clear that for some Jamaican commentators, Creole speech was 'good' when associated with her, and thus with the good manners, politeness and willingness to master 'good English' of a gentler era, but 'bad' when associated with chaotic driving and dancehall aesthetics. Some marvelled that Miss Lou's poetry was published in The Gleaner in the 1940s and 1950s, given the language's 'transgressive' character, and that newspaper's association with the *status quo*. Thomas's late nineteenth-century situation reminds us that nationalists -- and we might add poets and critics -- are at once oppositional and conservative in the ways in which they put Creole to use.

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⁵I am thinking here of Wilson Harris's contention that limbo, voodoo, Carib bush-baby omens and other non-sanctioned discourses still remain to be acknowledged in the process of unearthing new perspectives of Caribbean history and society. The Walcott reference is to his "Tarpon": "At Cedros, thudding the dead sand/in spasms, the tarpon/gaped with a gold eye, drowned/thickly, thrashing with brute pain/this sea I breathe" (61).

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