

OF WHISPERS AND TRACES IN JOSCELYN GARDNER'S "WHITE SKIN, BLACK KIN: A CREOLE CONVERSATION PIECE"

Our standpoint is that remembrance does not simply become pedagogical when representations of the past are situated and engaged in educational sites such as schools and museums. Rather, whatever its site and social form, remembrance is an inherently pedagogical practice in that it is implicated in the formation and regulation of meanings, feelings, perceptions, identifications, and the imaginative projection of human limits and possibilities. (Roger I. Simon, Sharon Rosenberg and Claudia Eppert)ⁱ

What might it mean to come to terms with the violent past of the Middle Passage as the grounds for inaugurating a creolized pedagogy for the Americas, one that concerns itself with an acknowledgement of how intertwined our histories are? [...] The importance of creolization to this issue of working through is its potential for enabling more complicated analyses of sameness and difference [...] It requires that we think about the possibilities and turbulences of violent cultural sharing that produce new positions of identity and relation. (Rinaldo Walcott)ⁱⁱ

Joscelyn Gardner's *White Skin, Black Kin* is an exploration of identity, relation, sameness and difference in colonial and postcolonial Barbados. It is an attempt to "get at" the lived experiences of connection and overlap, violence and creation which underlie relations in this creolized space. *White Skin, Black Kin* is also an exploration of the gaps and silences in narratives of race and nation. It restores and recuperates these gaps in and through the bodies of white and black creole women.

Gardner has written that Caribbean plantation society was a "visually performative site" and plantation life a "visual spectacle of power and race".ⁱⁱⁱ In the video installation *White Skin, Black Kin: A Creole Conversation Piece*, Gardner re-stages the drama of the eighteenth and nineteenth century Great House. The installation is a gathering of whispers and traces. The silent scene is of a drawing room occupied by three still white female bodies – a mother (with partially hidden infant) and two daughters. The smaller child plays occasionally with a topsy-turvy doll – white and black – and the scene returns to stillness. Three black female bodies move freely about the house while the white occupants remain motionless. They drift in and out of the frame – and of the viewer's consciousness – leaving barely a trace. The audio is quite separate. The listener must place her ear to the wall to hear the characters – a white woman, a black woman, three black women, a black woman and a white woman – all Barbadian and all living in the 1800s.

A Creole Conversation Piece is a re-working of the eighteenth-century artistic form from which it takes its name into a presentation that resembles a series of tableaux vivants (and is strangely reminiscent of a museum life group).^{iv} Gardner's installation introduces the twin notions of domesticity and domestication as these are enacted on and through female bodies in the New World. The visual sequences of *A Creole Conversation Piece* address the structuring absence of blackness in contemporary representations of white creole life. The audio sequences complicate and augment the visual to address questions of white female complicity with the violence of

slavery, white male violence towards black and white women and collusion between white and black women in the face of white male violence.

Gardner's piece raises compelling questions about what it might mean to represent the past in ways which facilitate an understanding of *relationship* and relations in the present. How do we remember? How do we *use* the fragments of history and memory to reconstruct a viable present? How might we engage with the past and the present in ways which respect difference, admit to interconnection and encourage an embodied consciousness of human possibility? If the white creole woman is erased from stories of the plantation and the contemporary nation (except as stereotype) then it is because the stories of black creole women are also not fully told. When whispers and traces are all that is left of the experience of co-presence how do we represent the past? As Gardner might ask, how does one speak the unspeakable?

A Creole Conversation Piece tackles this as a conceptual and formal question. It moves beyond the spectacle of the visual to explore what might exist at its edges. It is a search for traces and it alludes – in the disjuncture between sound and image, movement and stasis – to a near impossibility of representation.

Three black women are inserted into the conversation piece. Each is a ghost-like figure – very real, not at all frightening, but existing at the edges of representation. The “sweeper” initiates the ghost story. She exists literally at the edge of the frame, entering on the left and exiting on the right. Her presence inaugurates a re-reading of the scene of domesticity and is unnoticed and unmarked by the family. The “server” enters and fills several glasses. She is standing directly in front of the *Portrait of Seale-Yearwood Esq.* and Gardner tells us that the master's butler (serving the sangaree in the portrait) may well be his son.^v Presiding over the scene, then, is the master of the house with the evidence of his sexual conquest. The “server” leaves traces within the frame. Her drinks are left behind.

The third ghost is one whom we might call “la coquette”. She seems playful, is not working and appears to take a kind of ownership of the space. She stops to look at the portrait. Might there be some connection here? The smaller child returns to playing with the topsy-turvy doll and the scene returns to the frozen image. The “sweeper” reappears, this time at the back of the room. She spends a long time there, sweeping, fanning, resting briefly. She seems careful and thoughtful. She appears to frame the action while at the same time standing apart from it. The “server” and “la coquette” then appear together. The former seems upset that the latter is not hard at work. “La coquette” accidentally breaks a vase and is scolded by the “server”. The freeze frame returns following their exit. The video is looped after approximately 14 minutes.

The trace of the father / master returns in the second video, *Sisters*, with the presence of a black / mixed race girl and the small child with the topsy-turvy doll. We assume that the two are sisters. There is no need for ghost-like presence here. The first child *embodies* the relationships which pervade the plantation. A child's humming / singing voice permeates the room. The girls play together with their dolls and end in an embrace. The piece is clearly symbolic and would seem to be attempting a transition from the past to the present with a hopeful gesture toward the future.

In installing this exhibition at the Barbados Museum and Historical Society, Gardner makes an incursion into an official space of pedagogy where stories of the nation are told. In using the materials of the museum itself, Gardner expands the notion of remembrance and questions the ability of the archive to render knowledge. In a sense, the installation brings the museum pieces to life – making artifacts of human bodies, implicating the present in the past and the past in the present.^{vi}

The installation forces an acknowledgement of an underlying presence. The sound and images are whispers and traces suggesting the possibilities of untold stories. Yet the listener / viewer can only ever come away with fragments. It is easy to miss the ghost-like figures. The visitor to the gallery must work – press her ear to the wall – to catch the whispers of what might be going

on. Only then can she begin to put together the “conversation piece” as a layered experiment in what it might mean to exist in the gaps of audiovisual language, in the gaps of representation and in the gaps of history. Gardner’s installation pieces make fragmentation and partial knowledge the condition of experience.

If remembrance is inherently pedagogical, as Simon et al suggest, what are the possibilities for identifications and feelings evoked by the installation? How has Gardner used the existing pedagogy of the museum to add another layer of experience? And how might that help us to recognize Walcott’s “touch of the past within the present”^{vii} as a relationship of possibility, loss, trauma and re-creation, of shared lives and differently embodied histories?

The past can never fully be recaptured or redressed – it can only be revisited in a posthumous attempt to come to terms with what lives might have meant in their present and the implications for our own. *A Creole Conversation Piece* initiates a conversation that questions visible evidence and works at the edges of representation to suggest a multi-layered experience of history and memory.

ⁱ Simon, Roger I., Sharon Rosenberg and Claudia Eppert. “Introduction: Between Hope and Despair. The Pedagogical Encounter with Historical Remembrance.” Roger I. Simon, Sharon Rosenberg and Claudia Eppert, eds. *Between Hope and Despair. The Pedagogical Encounter with Historical Remembrance*. Lanham and Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000, 2.

ⁱⁱ Rinaldo Walcott. “Pedagogy and Trauma: The Middle Passage, Slavery, and the Problem of Creolization.” Simon, Rosenberg and Eppert, eds. *Between Hope and Despair. The Pedagogical Encounter with Historical Remembrance*, 139.

ⁱⁱⁱ See Gardner, “Colonial Plantation Theatrics: ‘Staging’ the Creole Body” in this catalogue.

^{iv} See Gardner, “Postcolonial Portraits: ‘Speaking the Unspeakable’” in this catalogue.

^v See Gardner, “Shared Lives, Disparate Histories: The Topsy-Turvy Relationship of Creole Women” in this catalogue.

^{vi} See Simon, Roger I. “The Paradoxical Practice of *Zakhor*: Memories of ‘What Has Never Been My Fault or My Deed’.” Simon, Rosenberg and Eppert, eds. *Between Hope and Despair. The Pedagogical Encounter with Historical Remembrance*, 9-25.

^{vii} Walcott, 146.