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POSTCOLONIAL PORTRAITS: “SPEAKING THE UNSPEAKABLE”

> *The subject of the plantations stirred conflicting emotions. I felt proud (how rare the stories!) and sentimental (how touching the cast of family characters). At the same time, the slave business was a crime that had not fully been acknowledged. It would be a mistake to say that I felt guilt for the past. A person cannot be culpable for the act of others, long dead, that he or she could not have influenced. Rather than responsible, I felt accountable for what had happened, called on to try to explain it. I also felt shame about the broken society that had washed up when the tide of slavery receded [. . .]*
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> *When finally I chose to look into the slave past, I felt a remarkable calm [. . .] To complete the legacy, I would try to find descendants of the slaves. The plantation heritage was not “ours”, like a piece of family property, and not “theirs”, belonging to black families, but a shared history. The progeny of slaves and the progeny of slave owners are forever linked. We have been in each other’s lives. We have been in each other’s dreams. We have been in each other’s beds [. . .].* (Ball 1999, 14)

In his landmark book *Slaves in the Family* (1999), Edward Ball, the descendant of a large slaveholding family in the southern US, sums up his mixed feelings regarding his own accountability for his family’s past involvement with slavery. He concludes that his family has in fact *shared* a history with generations of black families, and that this must be acknowledged.

Like Ball, the postcolonial (white) Creole subject wrestles with emotions bound up in the historical detritus of the after-effects of slavery in the Caribbean. The painting by Annalee Davis (born 1963, Barbados) entitled *Putting on my Blackness* (1987 *****) speaks to this agony by pointing to binaries in historical racial stereotyping and the apparent impossibility of crossing societal boundaries established by the plantation system. Here, the artist portrays herself as a solitary naked white figure inside her large plantation house (with British flag in the window) engaged in the act of stepping into a black skin. In the green cane-fields outside, between rows of small huts, a number of naked black bodies (male and female) hold hands in apparent unity around the Barbadian flag. Above these figures, a series of repeating brown triangles with white tips hint at the hierarchical relationship of the racialized bodies. The artist symbolically expresses her wish to join the people of the island by rendering the floor of the plantation house as a ploughed field of dark earth, and also, by trying to climb into a different skin. Her desire appears to be thwarted, however, by her isolation within the walls of the House. In another work, a black and white print from 1989, the artist schematically depicts her naked white self in a ploughed cane-field wildly ripping out her heart, with the words “My friend said I was too white” above her head. The rawness of these two pieces conveys the depth of emotion felt by this Creole woman contemplating her own identity in a land where she experiences a sense of alienation because of her ancestors’ (presumed) historical role in slavery and racial privilege of whiteness.

Marta María Pérez Bravo (born 1959, Cuba) uses the constructed photographic self-portrait to address her (white) Creole identity. Playing on the syncretic characteristics of the Caribbean experience, she explores her history, ancestry, race, and gender, by subverting her medium (the

photograph as document that records truth) and using her body as a canvas of appropriation and protest to (re)construct her identity. Unlike Davis, though, she drains her body of definable colour through the use of black and white photography, and thereby negates the reading of the most pronounced of visual signifiers, the skin. In works such as *Paths* (1990), the artist symbolically identifies her own (white postcolonial) body with that of the slave body. Here, in a fragmented image, the artist's ankles are bound together by a wooden yolk, similar to those used in the slave trade to lace slaves in bondage. The artist is symbolically retracing the steps of the slave body in order to reclaim a *shared* suffering of the trauma of slavery in the repressed memory (collective unconscious) of the Creole.[i]

My own visual art practice likewise addresses (white) Creole identity and articulates my desire to acknowledge the intertwined historical / ancestral relationship between black / white women in the postcolonial Caribbean. Prior to 2000, my visual production expressed an *idealistic* consideration of female Creole identity by proposing creolisation as a "blending" of historical differences that could be achieved through spiritual metamorphosis.[ii] Until then, I had never specifically acknowledged my own *whiteness* (and its privileges) though the metaphor of skin as something that could, or needed to be shed had preoccupied me. Now, addressing the denial, repression, and dissociation that operate in relation to the subject of slavery and white culpability, my work attempts to "speak the unspeakable."[iii] It retrieves the atrocities that lie buried in our collective memory in order to reconcile the past with the present and move toward a metaphorical healing of historical wounds. Because I was born into a colony[iv] that became an independent nation during the period of my early childhood, I represent the first generation of (white) Creoles to be brought up in a postcolonial space where black consciousness has sought to challenge the colonial dogma of the generations before. In the years since Independence, (black) Creoles have taken charge of local governments and the social and cultural agencies within their jurisdiction, and the white Creole subject, though still (relatively) economically privileged, has been effectively culturally marginalized.

In my intervention into the Barbados Museum Galleries, a postcolonial feminist approach is used to negotiate a legitimate space for my (white) Creole voice. In the Temporary Exhibition Gallery, a series of black and white lithographic prints (*Creole Portraits*, 2002-03 *****) that recall nineteenth-century abolitionist illustrations, experiment with representing a Creole identity by constructing ambiguous images of the back of female heads. Playing on Marcus Wood's observation in *Blind Memory* (2000) that slavery's memory has been objectified in museum displays through emphasis on the tools of torture rather than on the slave body, these images subvert the reading of these whips, collars, chains, and branding irons by illustrating them entwined in exquisitely braided hairstyles. Invoking hair as the site that is the second most important corporeal sign of race, these inverted "portraits" seek to "name" the women lost to history. As sites of both ritual enactment of love between women (the slow, careful act of braiding hair) and the pain associated with the physical and mental degradation of slavery, these hybrid images resonate as metaphors for the weight of history in contemporary postcolonial societies. Both attractive and repellant, they seduce the viewer and open up a space for contemplating the *shared* (repugnant) experience of slavery and its after-effects. The strict regulation of the hair into defined Afro-centric styles also ironically conflates eighteenth-century European fixations on hair / wigs[v] (worn by men) as signifying social order, with the (female) Creole's ability to empower herself by expressing her (non-European) postcolonial cultural identity through hair design.

Also displayed in the Temporary Exhibition Gallery is a video installation entitled *White Skin, Black Kin: a Creole Conversation Piece* (2003 *****). Here, the eighteenth-century "conversation piece"[vi] painting is reclaimed as a way of addressing the performance of Creole identity (and patriarchal / colonial power dynamics) on the plantation stage. According to Marcia Pointon, "The frequently rebuilt domestic space was a theatre of representation in the eighteenth century in which narratives of family structures are reshaped and sustained" (Pointon 168). In this re-staged (fictitious) family portrait, the white Creole female appears as "actress-text" in an opulent plantation Great House tableau that unfolds to explore Creole family relationships. Posed against an ideologically invested background of patrilinear ancestry (portraits on the wall), the female

family members (mother and daughters) articulate the gulf between symbolic masculine power and silenced feminine domesticity. I subvert this unequivocal form of portraiture by "re-presenting" the family in its entirety. While the white family members visually articulate (frozen) social and familial propriety in their well-decorated drawing room, the illusory black "family" members are shown to symbolically unravel the inconsistencies within the household through devices of visual and / or sound intervention. Through their constant "ghosted" movement within the pictorial space, and with their "behind the scenes" conversations, the black / interracial family insists on a presence that functions to rupture the artifice of the officially staged (historical) portrait.[vii] Personal narratives and dramatized dialogues overheard by the attentive viewer expose submerged stories of sexual indiscretion. The inclusion of the master's armchair (on which sits a child's topsy-turvy doll) placed near to the c. 1730 *Portrait of Seale-Yearwood Esq.* (removed from the Museum's storage) further helps to allude to these "family" secrets and to destabilize the master narrative.

The multi-media intervention into the Warmington Gallery's four re-created Great House rooms further explores female relationships within the eighteenth-century plantation home at the site of (re)-staged patriarchal power. *A Topsy-Turvy Plantation Home* (2003-04) uses audio, video, and object "interference" to hint at suppressed emotions that may have simmered below the well-ordered historical surface. In the Bedroom, projected onto the mattress of the imposing four-poster bed, the image of a (white) child's hands flipping a cross-racial topsy-turvy doll back and forth as she sings to herself, poignantly alludes to the interchangeability of (sexual) roles by the women of the house. In the Nursery, the voice of a Nanny singing a slave lullaby to her male charge belies the irony of both suckling the master and forcedly abandoning her own child "in de cane-field". The Dining Room and Drawing Room scenarios speak to the inevitable slippages behind the façade of plantation role-playing. An embroidered handkerchief and a pair of needlework scissors are carefully placed on the sofa below the marriage portraits of *Mr. Samuel Brown* and *Mrs Samuel Brown*. The observation that in the former portrait the sitter's right eye appears to have been poked out where the canvas is torn, together with an emotional dialogue between mother and daughter, subtly suggests female desire to escape the rigid discipline of patriarchal / colonial rule.

In the Cunard Gallery, a video portrait entitled *Pinkie: "The Barbadoes Girl"* (2003-04) brings to life the subject of Sir Thomas Lawrence's 1794 painting *Sarah Barrett Moulton ("Pinkie")* and points to the irony of this portrait's provenance. The Gallery contains eighteenth- and nineteenth-century images of Creole life executed by European artists whose patrons employed them to document the Caribbean landscape and its "exotic" peoples for viewers back in the mother country. The insertion of the video re-creation of this painting into this Gallery and its juxtaposition with the 1818 young people's tale *"The Barbadoes Girl"* (a British-authored book from the Museum's collection referred to earlier in this text) speaks to the ironies of colonial stereotyping. The famous eighteenth-century painting portrays a young girl wearing a flowing white dress with pink hat and sash poised in the middle of a dance on the summit of a hill overlooking the English landscape. According to Pointon, her painted image embodied "the very spirit of English childhood" (Pointon 200). As outlined earlier, the pre-emancipation book relates the story of an "uncivilized" (white) Creole girl who is sent to stay with family friends in England. It is ironic then to learn that the subject of Lawrence's painting was none other than a Creole child who had also been sent to England to attend boarding school.[viii] Depicted as a "real" English girl (erased of all Creole identifying features and no longer in her "native" setting), the child in the portrait reveals the dichotomy of Self / Other faced by the non British-born white body.[ix] In reclaiming this portrait for the Cunard Gallery and reinserting the girl's creolity, the work aims to highlight the inconsistencies of the representation of white Creole identity. The historical artifacts that describe the (white) Creole's social construction by European whites as being culturally inferior "Other" are turned topsy-turvy by the revelation of the identity of the portrait's subject.

In the confined space of the Museum's Prisoner's Cell, the multi-media installation *A Tiny Prick* (2002-04) probes the metaphorical prison of the postcolonial (white) Creole conscience. In place of the prison cot, a row of pillows with white pillowcases bearing lithographic "portraits" of Creole women (from the *Creole Portraits* series) are embroidered in white thread with the names

of women lost to anonymity on the Caribbean plantation. White female hands in the act of embroidering (in an early nineteenth-century photograph and in a contemporary video) juxtaposed with wall text from Toni Morrison's *Beloved* ("She had to do something with her hands because she was remembering something she had forgotten she knew. Something privately shameful that had seeped into a slit in her mind.") speak to (white) shame and accountability and to the indelible stamp of slavery which remains branded on the postcolonial Creole memory.

My work probes historical representations of the (white) Creole body in colonial visual and literary sources in order to come to an understanding of (white) Creole identity. I address the historical erasure of white Creole women's subjectivity by rupturing the stereotypical idea of white (female) purity / innocence (still naively clung to by members of postcolonial Caribbean societies). My work suggests that slavery is both a white issue as well as a black issue (since the enslaved do not exist without the enslavers) and that the white subject must be accountable to this history in order to accomplish healing. Caribbean people cannot continue to ignore, repress, or forget the consequences of slavery but must embrace a reconciliatory approach to their Creole heritage.[x] Critical dialogue amidst a diversity of voices is necessary. The binary oppositions through which the colonial subject was written (black woman versus white woman) must be refused. In their place, indigenous heterogeneity and plurality should be acknowledged. The bond between Creole women of all races, as (admittedly unequal) conceptual and historical "victims" of patriarchal oppression and colonial domination, can be a starting place for mutual engagement.

I have found it useful to link my approach to my visual work with the strategies recognized by O'Callaghan in contemporary Caribbean women's literature.[xi] She notes that Creole authors share several characteristics in their writing, including the rejection of linear narrative structures in favour of a multiplicity of voices / perspectives, the representation of a world of fluid boundaries (between self / other), and an eclectic, fragmented structure composed of random, multiple voices. She also observes that their work is often autobiographical (based on journals, diaries, letters, or other "intimate" genres) and that it has a communal focus in recuperating buried / silenced orally transmitted knowledge. Moreover, it "re-examines and counters several female stereotypes" and is often subversive, being motivated by a strong desire for social change (O'Callaghan 6-7). All of these strategies apply to my own visual expression and thus help to locate my work within a growing postcolonial Creole feminist approach to cultural production.

The work of artists like Fred Wilson (New York, 1954) and Jamelie Hassan (Canada, 1948) have also been important in approaching the historical material that is so central to my project.[xii] In my own practice, I have probed artifacts from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, found mainly in the Barbados Museum collection, to unearth the silenced / ghostly historical residue that speaks to (white) female Creole identity. In particular, this research has examined portraiture and its signifying language, objects associated with slavery, and colonial literature and personal documents in order to open up a space to subvert the master discourse (Homi Bhabha). Through an allegorical response to the contemporary Caribbean condition, I aim to reveal the inescapable images and sounds from the past that continue to "haunt" the present.

The use of intervention strategies allows me to allude to the discourse of power signified by the objects and furnishings in the plantation House and to insert *multiple* (female) subjectivities and voices not recognized in the "official" (male) historical canon. Using the historical language of (patriarchal / colonial) inscribed portraiture, I "re-create" my own vision of the past and thereby unlock the shared relationships of Creole women and point to a new and different understanding of Caribbean culture. In my work, I reject a single absolute authoritative voice to reveal the subtle (and sometimes not-so-subtle) falsehoods and contradictions of Caribbean society.

In *Double-Talking* (1992), Linda Hutcheon quotes Umberto Eco's observation that "the past, since it cannot really be destroyed [. . .] must be revisited: but with irony, not innocently" (Hutcheon 16). She notes that irony "allows a kind of retrieval or even repetition of history" but suggests that it is a reflexive repetition that queries established orders inscribed by the past. This "reflexive irony" can unmask entrenched cultural constructions and produce instability about what

in fact constitutes the truth. In my video portraits, the eighteenth-century "conversation piece" is manipulated in order to partake in this strategy of subverting an established history, to suggest another meaning that departs from the dominant view.

My research recognizes that the postcolonial white Creole woman is now trapped in the historical space between a split colonial identity as both a "colonizing" and "colonized" subject / Other (in Western eyes), as well as a patriarchal subject. As such, she is charged with actively negotiating the re-construction of her own identity through the mobilization of her own agency. Stressing the mutual relationship of Creole women within the privileged space of the plantation House (in a shared though disparate history), my project aims to reconcile the many misconceptions with respect to race relations which exist within the postcolonial Caribbean. Within this relational approach to history, the essentialist (colonial) binary construction of *race* is rejected. Instead, I aim to show that in the Caribbean, it is the division into classes based on the historical role of (multiracial) bodies in the colonial plantation House that is paramount to understanding Creole identity and its complexities.[xiii] Today, power continues to be "distributed socially in a very unequal fashion" (Benítez-Rojo 132) to the descendants of those who inhabited the Great House. The white minority still retains economic privilege (particularly through its connection to white Western neo-colonial wealth) though it has been politically and culturally disempowered[xiv] while the *privileged* members of the black majority (also presumed descendants of the plantation Great House history) govern the island nations. As Stuart Hall has noted, "Race is not a pure category in the Caribbean [. . .] even where a strong white local élite is present, race is defined socially" (Watson xv). A rigid class system helps to maintain the old colonial power structures in a multi-coloured guise. The plantation's theater of race has been replaced by a theater of class in which "ghostly" colonial racial signifiers still enjoy some currency but binarized difference is largely relegated to the past.[xv]

My project offers a unique perspective for examining postcolonial racial identity and representation from the point of view of a white artist. While many contemporary artists address identity issues, the subject of racial identity usually only appears focally in works by racially marginalized artists. Comparatively, white artists have failed to both examine their racial identity as a site of privilege and to scrutinize their ownership of colonialism.[xvi] Though grounded in the Caribbean's historical / cultural specificity, my project points to the wider issue of white Western postcolonial guilt and aims to subvert the notion that colonialism's effects are solely an issue of the Other.

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[i] While white Creoles did not suffer the *physical* trauma of slavery and to a large extent benefited from the system, it can be argued that they suffered a dehumanization from the continued infliction of violence and oppression on others (Aimé Césaire). In the postcolonial Caribbean, they "suffer" from the knowledge of this ancestral sin.

[ii] My installation work proposed creolisation as a "blending" of African, European, and Amerindian cultures. The cocooned Creole body, through spiritual metamorphosis, was in the process of transcending racial difference (symbolized by the shedding of layers of skin) to become a "raceless" synthesis of the peoples who had historically settled the Caribbean.

[iii] Homi Bhabha refers to a "ghostly discourse" which is capable of "speaking to unspeakable pasts that have no language".

[iv] I was born in colonial Barbados in 1961. The island achieved independence from Britain in 1966.

[v] Pointon points out that in the eighteenth-century the wearing of wigs by men signified power and that their loss / absence (in portraiture) was connotative of the loss of masculinity and dignity. My lithographic drawings recall illustrations of these wigs found in historical collections. Their reference to contemporary hairstyles worn (mainly) by women subverts their historical significance.

[vi] The conversation piece or family piece was a group portrait of two or more identifiable people engaged in some form of communication with each other (“at employments or diversions proper to their age and sex”) in a private setting that described the habitat of the subjects. It was characterized by the stillness of the figures, and by minute attention to details of furnishing and interior decoration from which the viewer was invited to construct (genealogical) narratives across time relating to the still figures. The “social situations imaged in the conversation piece constituted a network of disconnected signs relating to the discourses of culture and politics” and were often a “mixture of authenticity and invention” (Pointon 159-162).

[vii] The subversive gesture of their presence is particularly relevant to portraiture since historically, this has been the domain of the wealthy and privileged. Servants, slaves, and the lower classes seldom appear in portraiture (individual or group) unless they are placed there as indicators of wealth, exoticism, or power.

[viii] The child’s grandmother commissioned the portrait after the girl had been sent to England from Barbados.

[ix] It is quite possible that the child’s grandmother required that the artist erase all signs of creolity from her granddaughter in the interest of promoting her likeness to English girls (an extension of Creole mimicry).

[x] In Barbados, a National Committee for Reconciliation was established in 1999 to address societal issues surrounding race relations in the island. This committee was not widely welcomed and remained shrouded in secrecy. Its report was placed before Parliament in April 2001 but has remained unavailable to the general public.

[xi] See O’Callaghan, Evelyn. *Woman Version: Theoretical Approaches to West Indian Fiction by Women*. Warwick University Caribbean Studies 1. New York: St. Martin’s P, 1993.

[xii] See Berger, Maurice. *Fred Wilson: Objects and Installations 1979-2000*. Baltimore: U of Maryland Baltimore County, 2001.

[xiii] The identity of the poorer classes (those who historically remained in the fields) is beyond the scope of my discussion.

[xiv] Whites are denied a voice in the political and cultural arenas. Any reference to colonial (white) Creole “heroes” is also suppressed.

[xv] The undoing of slavery has lead to this situation. However, though this was appropriate, and the shift in power dynamics was necessary, the current situation bears examination.

[xvi] Western whites remain, for the most part, ignorant of the impact of race and class on their social status and consciousness. This remains a common misunderstanding in mainstream culture.