FEMALE VOICE AND PERSPECTIVE IN CARIBBEAN WRITING[1]

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This article is an investigation into how female identities are portrayed in literature from the Caribbean. It is an exploration of 'Female Voice' as it is represented in various works by Caribbean women authors. It addresses Female Identity as it pertains to the Caribbean and adds new insight into Caribbean women's writing. Since this literature is voluminous, I focus on just a few authors, with the understanding that their writing was to some degree inspired by a sense of belonging to a certain cultural grouping that had a locale, history and heritage in common.

The postcolonial is not merely a historical or economic phenomenon but it encompasses class, race, ethnicity and language; all of the discourses and identity formations that go into the shaping of nations and nationalism. A study of postcolonial writing then should highlight authors resisting colonial domination, and in some instances, even rewriting history, breaking perhaps with Western or Eurocentric concepts in an attempt to portray correctly their national culture.

It will be remembered that a significant part of what gives the Caribbean its distinct flavor is the onset of the sugar industry there in the mid 17th century. It was this industry that set in motion forces that ultimately led to a particular type of mingling of races, cultures and identities. Vera Kutzinski's *Sugar's Secret: Race and the Erotics of Cuban Nationalism* (1993) gives us insight into the process of *mestizaje* which resulted from the need for cheap labour to establish and maintain the sugar economy in Cuba. Kutzinski begins with a quote by Nicolás Guillén *"Sin azucar no hay país"* [Without sugar there is no country]. This quote in the preface is appropriate since the sugar trade has been the driving force behind the Cuban economy for the past two centuries. Kutzinski explores *cubanidad*, racial and political issues, as well as the skewed perspectives of past Cuban and Caribbean authors. Kutzinsky paints a picture of how the *mulatta* was viewed in visual arts (cigar and cigarette lithographs), dance (Cuban Son), poetry and fiction. While sugar production caused a synthesis, a blending and mixing of cultures, races, rhythms, sounds and colors, it also forged social alliances and sparked conflicts across class and racial barriers. Cuba's initial

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Sugar's Secrets are no longer secret thanks to women authors who voice their heritage, experience, culture and, especially their perspectives in their artistic renderings.

This paper inquires into Caribbean women's multiple, hybrid identities and attempts to understand the many nuances that are written into the literary explorations of these identities. Caribbean narratives suggest that an acknowledgment of the dynamics of identity is a necessary condition for a possibility of dialogue between classes, races, genders and cultures. Narratives allow for the staging of multiple points of view, perspectives, and in the analyzing thereof, the inter-subjective undercurrents of self become visible and thus allow us to gain further insight into the network of relations that make up the Caribbean self and society. Caribbean women authors write about change, adaptation, hybrid societies, and a sense of loss of self or at least of a fragmented self which is seeking 'wholeness' as an antidote against a further fragmentation. Caribbean women's literature reflects this struggle for wholeness.

Françoise Lionnet in *Postcolonial Representations* (1995) advances a comparative critique of works by female authors. Lionnet concentrates on female writings with the idea that it is important to view certain beliefs, cultural practices and values as the result of both global and local social constructions of 'femaleness'. Lionnet contends that each individual literary work must retain its individuality and must in no way be subsumed under some 'universal' or stereotypical framework. Nevertheless, she wants to present the writing of Caribbean women as threads in a tapestry-like paradigm of women's perspectives globally, including but not restricted to, the Caribbean.

In her book she showcases work by authors who write across the frontiers of memories of triumph and of pain, of personal experiences and of shared cultural, ethnic and postcolonial viewpoints. These stories offer the reader an opening to socially and culturally contextualized knowledge, understanding and transformation of historical legacies of ignorance, scorn, violence, slavery, and racial and gender inequalities.

Stimulated by open resistance to the colonial project, 20th century Caribbean literary production increased and congealed into a body of work with a recognizably regional flavor. Until quite recently, Caribbean women writers faced discrimination stemming from the fact they had no meaningful and recognized literary voice. Caught within the straightjacket of the unitary standard European language of their metropolitan colonizers, women writers began their search for identity by writing novels and poems in which they argue not for the existence of one fixed identity, but instead for multiple identities which are adaptive and responsive to a variety of conditions. The voice of women which was once silent, began to be heard.

In *Francophone Women Writers of Africa and the Caribbean* (2000), Renée Larrier states that "...as we approach a new millennium, there has been a virtual explosion of activity as African women along with African American and Caribbean women have sold an unprecedented number of novels, short stories, poems and autobiographies" (p. 1). In the very act of writing, these authors write themselves into existence. And since literature can exist beyond the length of a human life, these authors have not only succeeded in making their voices and perspectives known to their present readers but also to future ones. Larrier argues that despite the fact that African and Caribbean women's perspectives have traditionally been overlooked, even in such otherwise progressive frameworks as *négritude* and *creolité*, Caribbean women authors have managed to make their female voices and perspectives heard, whether they write in Creole, English, French, Dutch, Spanish, or some other language (p. 119).

The setting of Maryse Condé's novel, *Traversée de la Mangrove* (1995) (*Crossing the Mangrove*), which was translated by her husband Richard Philcox into English, is Rivière au Sel, a small fictional village in Guadeloupe, the former French colony in the Caribbean where she was born, and which is now a part of France. In the novel, Francis Sancher, who was not born in Rivière au Sel, comes to live among its inhabitants who try to find out the background of this secretive and often melancholic man, who has predicted his own death. One day he is indeed found dead with no sign of illness or injury.

The setting of Sancher's wake is a clever device used by Condé to introduce the other characters of her book, who have come to pay their last respects. The wake offers the reader a look into a community tradition where respect for the departed is explicit, but where less respectful implicit feelings about the deceased can be detected under the surface. One by one, Condé lets each mourner speak with their inner voice and though some are genuinely grieved over the departure of Francis Sancher, others secretly rejoice as they sit in Sancher's house and on his verandah eating soup, telling stories, joking, and laughing. They reminisce about meeting Sancher and how their encounters with him changed or influenced their lives.

Condé lends authenticity to the various narrative voices by allowing her characters to speak about their innermost feelings and hopes and by her use of Guadeloupe Creole. Although all of the characters express to one degree or another a collective Guadeloupean identity, individual identities are foregrounded. The reader receives a first person introduction to the characters because Condé lets each character introduce themselves. In the process, however, the reader also gains valuable insight into the culture and history of Guadeloupe. Condé skillfully uses the interplay of feelings of inferiority or superiority according to skin color, hair texture, level of education, sexual conduct, and birthplace to depict some of the fundamental faultlines that

simultaneously define and destabilize the contours of Guadeloupean and Caribbean society.

One of the characteristics of the testimonial genre is that it often arises in a context of struggle and oppression. Another trait of the testimonial is that is must be written in the first person. In many Latin American and Caribbean testimonials, the individual narrating the events is illiterate, without the means or connections to write and publish their story on their own; consequently the genre of a testimonial often involves the recording and subsequent transcription and translation of an oral account as told by the subject of the testimonial to an interlocutor, who is often an educated individual. *Leonora: The Buried Story of Guadeloupe* (1994) by Dany Bébel-Gisler is a testimonial in which Leonora, a Creole-speaking rural woman who quit school at the age of fourteen recounts her life in Guadeloupean society. The story uses a comprehensive exposition and exploration of Leonora's individual identities and voices to expose and explore the collective identities and voices of the African descended populations of Guadeloupe and the rest of the Caribbean.
Leonora recounts her living and working experiences on a cane plantation, where she was raised and then raises her own family. Through confronting the anxieties of an unhappy marriage, she becomes aware of her capacity to transform her reality through her discourse, her resistance to circumstances, and her personal enlightenment. Leonora comes to understand herself, her community, her country's colonial past, her culture and her place therein, partly through the establishment of a dialogical relation with the reader. A powerful element in this dialogue is her use of Creole rather than French, because in doing so, Leonora expresses and claims sovereignty over an important aspect of how meaning is collectively created in Guadeloupe. Thus both Leonora and Dany Bébel-Gisler assert, validate, and celebrate a distinct creole identity. In translating Leonora's words from Creole into French, Bébel-Gisler allows this otherwise invisible story to be acknowledged and appreciated by a larger audience.

Michelle Cliff was born in Jamaica and educated in New York City. Her books often focus on language issues, especially on how Standard English and Patois (Jamaican Creole) reflect different identities as well as different positionings within the social hierarchies of colonial Jamaica. In *Abeng* (1984), Michelle Cliff's protagonist is Clare Savage. Clare's first name alludes to Cliff's own light skin colour, something which causes her much of the pain that becomes a key thread woven into many of her texts. Clare Savage's light skin color in a predominantly black population causes friction, even within her own family. Clare, perhaps like her creator Michelle Cliff, feels fragmented and incomplete. Clare's divided racial identity is presented through opposition between her lighter skinned father Boy Savage, who tries to 'pass for

white' and represents the European heritage of Jamaica, and her darker skinned mother Kitty Freeman Savage, who represents the African heritage of Jamaica. The inclusion of a grandmother figure is an attempt by Cliff to link the African ancestors, their stories, healing practices and Maroon movement to her Jamaican culture. Rather than choosing a single racial identity, Cliff (through Clare), acknowledges the complex and contradictory inter-relationships of gender, race and class. Thus Clare does not adopt the unitary and exclusive options for mono-identification as 'white' or 'black' that the dominant society imposes, but instead creates her own multiplex and inclusive option for the type of pluri-identification that has been the norm rather than the exception in West Africa and the Indigenous Caribbean from before the arrival of the Europeans..

A final example of a huge and ever growing list of books by Caribbean women authors is Miriam Sluis' book *Zoutrif* (2008). Sluis invites us to accompany her as she traces the 400 year-old history of a plantation called *Zoutrif* on the island of Curaçao. In the process, she locates the key factors that have shaped the ways in which Afro-Curaçaoans approach questions of culture and identity primarily in the colonial system of racialized slavery and servitude, and only secondarily in more recent waves of industrialization and globalization. Sluis describes the phenomenon '*paga tera*' and writes of the struggle of the islanders even after Abolition. One of her characters comments:

> "Op Rif hebben we tenminste zekerheid: werk, een huis en te eten. Martein bewerkt hier zijn stukje land en die paar dagen dat we voor niets op het land van de shon moeten werken horen erbij. Het is wel altijd net als onze eigen oogst ook moet worden binnengehaalt. Maar als Martein er kwaad om wordt, leg ik hem uit dat paga tera onze huur is, die we eens per jaar op die manier moeten betalen." (p. 146)
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> [At least on Rif we have assurance: work, a home and food. Martein works on his piece of land and those few days that we have to work for gratis on the land of the *shon* [landowner] simply are not to be escaped. It does seem though that this work has to be done just when it is time to bring in our own harvest. But when Martein gets angry about it, then I explain to him that '*paga tera*' our rent must be paid in this manner each and every year.] (translation by present author)

Miriam Sluis recounts a conversation with Dr. Jandi Paula about the nature of racism and slavery under Dutch colonialism, where Dr. Paula contends that:

> "De Nederlandse kolonisator was een perfecte kolonisator. Rassentimenten zitten by ons zeer diep. Dieper dan op Trinidad en op Jamaica bij voorbeeld. Het is niet een kwestie van de slavernij. Het is voortgezet. Het is gehandhaafd gebleven, het is nooit stopgezet." (p. 154)
>
> [The Dutch colonizer was the perfect colonizer. Racial sentiments are deeply imbedded in us. Deeper still than on Trinidad and Jamaica for example. It is not actually a question of slavery. It has continued. It has been maintained, it was never done with.]

Sluis also quotes Aart Broek as arguing that the feelings of shame and inferiority instilled in African descended Curaçaoans under the Dutch still insidiously saturates daily life on the island:

> "Het is niemand eenvoudig te ontsnappen aan vormen van beschaming door de omgeving waarin men zich geborgen meent en die onvermijdelijk wordt ervaren als achtenswaardig referentiepunt." (p. 155)
>
> [No one can simply escape the manifestations of shame that are undeniably linked to the environment where one considers himself safe and which is inescapably experienced as an imposing point of reference.]

This is a same argument that Kay Erickson makes in *Trauma, Exploration in Memory* (1995) when she explains that trauma involves a continual reliving of some tormenting experience often in the form of flashbacks. She argues that it is that which is not yet understood, which the memory continually reminds us about in trying to come to terms with it. Miriam Sluis argues that the circumstances of having had to live according to the laws of the 'shons' in the past still affect the patterns of identification and interaction which people display in their day to day lives today. Sluis gives the various leading characters in *Zoutrif* - the owners, the field slaves and even the large lookout boulder called, *El Indjan,* a voice. She is able, in this way, to draw the reader into sharing their innermost feelings toward themselves and others.

Kathleen Balutansky (1997) explains that Caribbean women authors provide a rendition of societies in which ordinary women live and find ways to express their long silenced voices. In her attempts to formulate a type of literary criticism designed to explore the implications and consequences of gender on literature and literary theory Balutansky finds that in works written by women featuring female protagonists, there are textual clues and meanings which are perhaps not immediately apparent to readers in patriarchal societies. She cautions against reading these texts

simply as mirror images of male reality, for this reduces Caribbean women's identity to a stereotypical imitation or inversion. She argues that female protagonists created by women authors are not just snapshots of ordinary women, but that they are often larger than life representations of women's perspectives on various Caribbean issues.

This article has attempted to show how Caribbean female authors have engaged a variety of colonial, geographical, cultural and political perspectives in their texts to initiate a transatlantic dialogue, which as much as possible avoids stereotypical representations of women. We have seen how Maryse Condé, Dany Bébel-Gisler, Michelle Cliff, and Miriam Sluis reconstruct the Caribbean imaginary by interspersing the colonial language with a creole vocabulary which lends authenticity to the experiences of their characters. It becomes apparent that creating female voices that express the author's as well as her characters' experiences is an effective way of articulating women authors' perspectives. Re-appropriating previously disowned and silenced voices, Caribbean women authors write to transmit knowledge and culture by creating a space in the fabric of their culture for their memories, personal experiences and shared cultural, ethnic and postcolonial viewpoints.
In conclusion, I offer a quote from Pamela Mordecai and Betty Wilson who write in *Her True-True Name: An Anthology of Women's Writings from the Caribbean* (1989):

> "We come finally to the issue of identity and the quest for wholeness central to Caribbean literature and a continuing preoccupation of both male and female writers. The contribution of women rests on two crucial foundation stones, both already mentioned: first, their commitment to introducing personal, private matters into the domain of fiction and setting them at the heart of things; second, their exploiting the possibility of language, as the men simply have not done." (p. xv)

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