

“White Skin, Black Kin: Speaking the Unspeakable”

by Joscelyn Gardner,
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Evelyn O’Callaghan

Thanks very much to Denyse Maynard-Greenidge and the Barbados Museum and Historical Society for organizing this exhibition, and for encouraging discussion this evening; and of course, thanks to Joscelyn for this thought-provoking and beautifully wrought installation. *My* field is not art or art history, but West Indian literature, particularly Caribbean writing by women. So attempting to comment on this exhibition is, for me, *really* “speaking the unspeakable”; but I’ll do my best.

The catalogue subtitle, “an intervention into the Barbados Museum Galleries,” suggests that this multi-media installation *actually* constitutes an intervention into received *history*. More specifically - as the title, “White Skin, Black Kin” makes clear - it challenges the supposedly impermeable boundaries between these categories (black and white, us and them) inscribed as fundamental in the official narrative of the Barbadian, indeed the West Indian past. Gardener’s work acknowledges that it’s not that simple. With Edward Kamau Brathwaite, Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy, she reminds us of the plain fact of creolization which means that in fact the story of “white” in the Caribbean is as much the story of “black” and “brown,” and vice versa.. Creole history is essentially *collective*, whatever stereotypical fixities the dominant discourse at any one period may choose to represent for its own political purposes (imperialism, anti-colonialism, nationalism, pan-Africanism etc.).

And this (shared) history also obsesses the writers of Caribbean, who revisit and rewrite the story of the past over and over again from different angles: the version of the winners, the losers, the silenced, the liars, the marginalized, the insiders, the outsiders. No *one* version tells the whole story: the “truth” of Caribbean history is a composite. Joscelyn’s intervention makes a space for *one* set of marginal players in the drama of plantation society: creole women and girls, black, white and all combinations in between. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the story of such women was, if at all, told by male narrators and generally serves as anecdotal evidence or footnotes in the historical record. For example, as Hilary Beckles notes, the representation of women in the slavery period often had little to do with “the actual lives, experiences, and identities of women” and more to do with the naturalization of official discourse. Women, especially white creole women, constitute a subject until recently paid scant serious attention by Caribbean history in its colonial *or* current manifestations. This exhibition addresses the disparity.

And it insists that such stories cannot be told in one medium: how could they, given their marginal, fragmented and multiple manifestations? Certainly West Indian writers increasingly refuse to be bound by generic categories, refuse to tell one-sided, monolithic stories. So too this installation is an aural and visual composite, deliberately and sometimes disturbingly showing and telling at the same time. The formal emphasis on interrelated – or plaited – narratives underlines another challenge to historical simplifications and stereotypes. It suggests something

which I can corroborate from my own research into early writings of the Caribbean by women. That is,

that despite the racially stratified nature of plantation society, the domestic world was an intimate resulting in a surprising level of interdependence between white, black and coloured women. As a result, relationships of power within the household were anything but stable, and that hierarchies and boundaries were always being negotiated and transgressed. The privileged white woman was powerless under patriarchy which mastered her and her children as completely, if rarely as brutally, as other chattels (slaves, animals, land). Such women *had* power over domestic slaves and servants, the majority of whom were female. Yet at every stage of their lives and in the performance of all their roles, white women were crucially dependent on the labour of non-white female slaves and servants, whose *documented* defiance/passive resistance shifted the balance of power and accorded to the latter a certain authority. As domestic managers, they had to contend with intransigent workers. ““Oh!” cried the lady, ‘never speak to me about that woman, I am a martyr to her. I am the victim of all my Negroes’”: thus a harassed housewife in Mrs Wilkins’s 1854 novel, The Slave Son. Their chief purpose in the colonial enterprise was to bear heirs to the master, but soon white mothers handed over these precious children to a non-white nanny who wielded power in terms of her influence on the nurture, socialization and indeed the very safety of those children. And of course, as wives white women sexually shared their men with black and brown women, and inevitably shared their homes with the offspring of such liaisons.

All this, I think, is implicit in Joscelyn’s masterful employment of the topsy-turvy doll, and is teased out more fully in the video engagement with the traditional British form of the “conversation piece” painting. Here, the master’s power is signaled, despite his absence, by his portraits, his hat and stick and of course, his *other* possessions, including “his” women, old and young, black, white and brown; and in the issue of these women (the fair and the dark “sisters” in the companion video interlude); and in the voices we hear as we gaze at the unpeopled nursery, bedroom and drawing room of the Great House. All are haunted – and, paradoxically, brought to life – by the (ghostly) presence of women’s stories, competing with yet complementing each other. I doubt we can ever look at the Museum Galleries again quite so complacently, having been made aware of the “shared lives” and “disparate histories” of these creole women. By overlaying that which was omitted (black and brown “family” in the portrait of a white creole family), the installation unsettles rigid stratifications of African and European, metropolitan and creole cultures in the Museum and ,by extension, in the national consciousness.

It seems to me in this time of increasing polarization – between races and creeds, local and foreign, us and them – that we should welcome such courageous artistic interventions into received history, and into manipulation of historical stereotypes for particular political or national agendas. So Joscelyn’s installation in the Cunard Gallery interrogates the appropriation of the white creole child – The Barbados Girl – for Lawrence’s canonical painting “Pinkie,” the “very spirit of *English* childhood” if you please; just as the writer Jean Rhys challenges the demonization of the Jamaican creole woman as the “madwoman in the attic” of Brönte’s Jane Eyre. Both instances illustrate, as Catherine Hall argues, the extent to which the cultural production of “Englishness” is inextricably related to that of West Indian identities.

I would hope that interventions like this meet with a reception that matches its motivation:

opening minds and hearts to what unites as well as divides, what braids and knots together creole identity even as it also painfully parts and ties down separately. Why bother to listen to the early voices of creole women? Why revisit the visual representations of an earlier time? Because this multiply layered, multiply signifying vision of *connections* fills a gap in the historical record and, to quote Stuart Hall, enables “a different sense of our relationship to the past, and thus a different way of thinking about cultural identity.”

Talking about the early social history of black women in the West Indies, Beckles (1998b, 154)¹ admits the textual versions heavily edit and mediate actual women’s experience and utterance:
the voices of slaves — and ex-slaves [and, I would argue, of all creole women] —
were often made vague by the very writers who committed their thoughts to print.
It is necessary, however, in such difficult circumstances, to ‘feel’ the texture, and
hear the tone, of their indirect or engineered voices.

Feeling the texture, imagining the lives, hearing the voices: this is what the artist challenges us to do. As Gabrielle Hezekiah writes in the catalogue (16), “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 have meant in *their* present and the implications for our own.”

¹“Taking Liberties: Enslaved Women and Anti-slavery in the Caribbean. Gender and Imperialism. Claire Midgely ed. Manchester: Manchester U. Press. 137-157.