Creole Concerns

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Okwui Enwezor. The man who greatly accelerated the painfully slow decentring of the West in visual art by seizing the joystick and coolly yanking it in the right direction. The speed with which he moved was breathtaking; during the span of a mere quarter of a century Enwezor dealt the structural racism and misogyny of the artworld a series of mortal blows by rearranging its most paradigmatic global institutions, Documenta11 and the Venice Biennale. Neither has ever been the same since.

The great white Euro-American artworld lumbered into the 21st century virtually intact but 20 years later under the momentum gained by the Black Lives Matter movement; the Herculean work done by Enwezor and his collaborators; the cumulative efforts of the Black arts movement in the UK, at the helm of which stood remarkable agonists such as Rasheed Araeen and our own Stuart Hall; and Thelma Golden and others in the United States, it is possible to see a shift manifesting itself in the increased visibility of non-white, non-EuroAmerican artists, curators, art historians and players, in the metropole and elsewhere. There is a long way to go still, but a lot of ground has been gained.

"We will see…whether Documenta11 is greeted as an interesting diversion; written off as a momentary interruption, a moment of the exotic, a temporary deviation from what 'art' is really about; an interlude of 'cultural diversity' in the onward March of western civilizational discourse. Or whether it represents a more permanent break in the regime which governs the international circulation of the artwork".

This speculation by Stuart Hall at Platform3 of Documenta11 in 2002 about whether the extraordinary intervention by a Nigerian-born curator in which we were participants would have lasting effects is no longer a moot question. We inhabit artworlds profoundly altered not only by Documenta11 but also the series of exhibitions Okwui conceptualized and curated from 1996 onwards.

Platform3 in St Lucia

In this reflection I will first talk about my experience of participating in Documenta11 and then move onto an exhibition concept I developed a few years ago called Visualizing Independence that was entirely inspired by The Short Century and wrap up with an introduction to my current project, the online magazine of writing from the Caribbean, PREE. In this way I would like to pay tribute to figures who have profoundly influenced my own thinking about art and society with their writings and lifework, Okwui Enwezor and Stuart Hall.

Reading the Contemporary: African Art from Theory to the Marketplace published in 1999 is a seminal text offering as it does 22 essays examining contemporary art, film, photography and visual culture from Africa. Edited by Olu Oguibe and Enwezor the book provided a valuable resource for me as I figured out productive ways in which to think and write about art in the Caribbean. I couldn't have imagined then that I was shortly to meet both editors at the seventh Havana Bienale in 2000.

The buzz at that edition of the Bienale was that Okwui Enwezor, the artistic director of Documenta11, was in town with his curatorial team. There were sightings of Enwezor and his entourage snaking through the various events, moving fast, pausing every now and then to shake a hand here or exchange a word with someone there. At one point, to my surprise, I turned around during a performance of Helio Oiticica's work to find the artistic director advancing on me, hand held out, saying he had been told about me and that he would ask for my assistance closer to the time for the documenta "Platform on Creolité".

I knew that Stuart Hall who had been a friend and mentor since 1996 must have recommended me to Enwezor, a thrilling opportunity I wanted to make the most of; so in 2001 I timed my biannual trip to India to allow me to visit my parents in Bangalore and then attend Documenta11's Delhi platform Experiments with Truth: Transitional Justice and the Processes of Truth and Reconciliation[1]. I stayed at the Habitat Centre where I knew the documenta team was being housed. Okwui welcomed me warmly, including me in all the planned activities although I wasn't an official invitee, saying that before I left he wanted to have a word about the proposed platform in the Caribbean for which he was counting on my help.

One of the first things Okwui and the Documenta11 team needed help with was deciding whether to hold the platform on Creolite and Creolization in Jamaica or St. Lucia. What was my opinion? I don't know how much it played into their decision but for various reasons I recommended St. Lucia, principally because it seemed to me that because of its location and history St. Lucia was a living laboratory of French accented Creolization. On the contrary the word 'creole' is hardly heard in Jamaica. I also felt that the insularity of the Jamaican artworld would not provide fertile soil or a hospitable climate for such discussions.

Art discourse in Jamaica remained hermetically sealed within the very "Western institutional aesthetic discourse" Okwui and his curatorial team were trying to get beyond. What they were interested in was the cultivation of a space or public sphere, in which a constellation of thinkers, writers, artists, architects, political activists, lawyers, scholars, and other cultural practitioners would participate.

This was right up my alley. When invited to be part of Platform3 in St. Lucia I was relieved that I wouldn't be expected to produce a traditional art historical narrative or restrict my subject matter to art objects and gallery-oriented artists. For me the context in which art is produced and the discourse surrounding it is just as important as the ultimate artistic output. Okwui's prefacing the final exhibition of artworks in Kassel with four platforms of lively discussion by a range of exceptional practitioners from a variety of fields on current and emerging themes and structures of feeling was the kind of radical intervention I found productive.

"…every single Jamaican Creole word is a bad word"[2]

I had been thinking and writing about what Sarat Maharaj neatly summed up as the management of morality, morals and manners in Jamaica. Fascinated by the Jamaican obsession with notions of respectability, civility and decency coalescing around the policing of 'indecent language' by dancehall DJs, my presentation in St. Lucia (which included video footage of actual performances) focused on the widely divergent values, attitudes and morals between governing elites in Jamaica and the entertainers who invariably originated from the lower reaches of Jamaican society. In these clashes the disciplining arm of the state was almost always used to silence or otherwise censor the outspoken DJs.

When dancehall DJs such as Bounti Killer, Sizzla or Vybz Kartel are deprived of their right to freedom of expression ALL artists and art institutions ought to rally around them. But this was rarely the case in Jamaica. In fact to my surprise I found that lecturers at the Edna Manley College of Art adopted an oppositional position to dancehall, viewing it as a vulgar form that art students should not be supporting or participating in. This moral economy coexisted with avant garde notions of the duty of visual artists to be transgressive in their practices. Yet there seemed to be no recognition that the freedom of a DJ to curse or be sexually explicit on stage is no less sacrosanct than the right of a visual artist to use profane or violent imagery in her/his work. Of course, neither DJs nor visual artists or any cultural producers should use their platforms to promote hatred and animosity towards other groups.

Almost 20 years since my presentation at the Creolite and Creolization workshop of Documenta11 in 2002 demonstrating the double standard that exists in Jamaica around elites who are allowed to operate hotel chains premised on sex tourism and the underclasses who are penalized for uttering "indecent language", nothing much has changed in terms of the law and policing practices.

A small change can be seen in the attempted intervention of a University of the West Indies economics lecturer and government senator, Andre Haughton, who raised the matter of reform of the Town and Communities Act in the Senate arguing that it was high time to exempt dancehall performances from the rigorous policing of "bad wud" or "indecent language". Protesting the vilification of what he called 'harmless words' Haughton said: "Too many aspects of our culture have been unnecessarily vilified. These little things, these words contribute to the uniqueness of Jamaican culture and is what sets us apart from countries across the world." The senator was roundly excoriated for his intervention in print and on radio for days.

Haughton said he was inspired to intervene after police warned Japanese sound system Mighty Crown not to use profanity during the Fully Loaded stage show on August 2, 2019.[3] Only in July 2019, Reggae Sumfest's Dancehall Night had been interrupted by police due to profanity uttered during the performance of deejay Javillani. In the past, hip hop artiste Nicki Minaj had been fined at the same stage show for using the Jamaican expletive "bumboclaat" on stage during her performance.

Jamaican policing reached the heights of brutality, bordering on obscenity, In 2012 when a young woman, Kayann Lamont, eight months pregnant at the time, was shot dead by a policeman for resisting arrest occasioned by her violation of the indecent language laws. The policeman, Corporal Smart, was tried in 2017 for her death but acquitted. The Director of Public Prosecution made much of the fact that the policeman was crying throughout the trial, and that his demeanour was commendable — "he was a very soft-spoken, mild-mannered policeman who had an excellent report from the character witnesses about how he conducted himself professionally".

In contrast the DPP repeatedly emphasised that the 'demeanour' of the witnesses, in particular the two sisters of the deceased worked against them. Their truculent affect was not considered suitable enough to work in their favor while the demeanour of the policeman — 'mild-mannered' 'decent and honourable' according to the defense attorney, sobbing uncontrollably in court during proceedings and verdict — somehow gave him the edge as far as good citizenship was concerned while the dead woman, first in cursing her bad luck at being robbed, and then resisting arrest by the policeman for the 'crime' of doing so had somehow wantonly squandered her right to go about her business. The implication was that her demeanour wasn't one of meekness and obedience so ultimately she was herself responsible for losing her life at the hands of this 'decent and honourable' policeman.

The next example highlights the absurd lengths to which people go to police Patwa in Jamaica.

In 2013 then Justice Minister of Jamaica Mark Golding (now leader of the Opposition), was "stop-ped in his track" in the Senate according to media reports, as he thanked bondholders and workers for their role in ensuring that Jamaica fulfilled requirements for an agreement with the International Monetary Fund:

> *"'Respec' due to those patriotic Jamaicans', Golding said when Senate President Reverend Stanley Redwood broke his strides.*
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> *‚Sorry to break your flow but the language used in the Senate must be standard English', Red-wood told Golding.*
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> *The minister had no choice but to relent, and instead of saying respec' due, resorted to respect is due."*[4]

What I presented at Platform3 of Documenta11 proved to be the beginning of a sustained exami-nation of what I call Jamaica's linguistic identity crisis. Creoles, born out of unprecedented contact between disparate, distinct cultures are actually highly mobile cross-cultural languages capable of rapid change and very comfortable therefore with new technologies and new media of communica-tion. They are inherently languages of negotiation, barter and accommodation, of finding solutions using the slightest of resources. European languages, on the other hand, especially as spoken, prac-tised and codified in the postcolony become rigid grammars used to police and enforce formality, bureaucratic privilege and 'good taste'. The Jamaican postcolonial elite for example is literally trapped in English like flies in amber, again not a phenomenon restricted to Jamaica or the Caribbean but a fairly universal effect.

Much of the dysfunctionality of contemporary Jamaican society is manifest in its attitude to lan-guage. In Jamaica English reigns supreme on the patios of the privileged while patois/Patwa rules the street. Touting itself nevertheless as an English-speaking polity (the only official language of the country) disregard for Patwa, the first language of many Jamaicans, is virtually built into the official institutions of society. This has resulted in the relegation of monolingual Patwa-speakers to second class citizenship, because their language is considered an unsuitable subject for school curricula or for polite or official discourse; therefore, like the proverbial wo/man without a state (or taste), Creole or Patwa speakers are in effect rendered *persona non grata* at the official level.

Safely marooned in the castle of English the middle and upper class elites have managed to keep the masses at bay by using what they call 'Standard English' as a barrier to entry to civic and civil life in Jamaica. Of course, Jamaican English is anything but standard, ridden as it is with all kinds of quaint and archaic patterns of speech, excessive formality and zealous observance of 19th century English grammar. While championing the English language as the argot of science, technology and progress broadly defined, English-speakers in Jamaica are themselves unpersuasive as role models in this con-text being resistant to and suspicious of new technologies, hostile to change and given to looking back in nostalgia and regret rather than sprinting into the future with all the resources a world-domi-nant language such as English has to offer.

I firmly believe like Mahatma Gandhi that "no scheme of self-government, however benevolently or generously it may be bestowed upon us, will ever make us self-governing nation, if we have no respect for the languages our mothers speak".[5] Under the circumstances the ensuing postcolonial mess we are left with in countries such as Jamaica is predictable. Postcolonial Jamaica presents a paradigmatic example of a nation crippled by a linguistic identity crisis. The clash between English and Patwa, official language and the vernacular, the language of high modernity and the popular, has paralyzed the nation's ability to articulate a coherent, trenchant mission statement that speaks for the country as a whole. Policy-makers remain trapped in English while Patwa-speakers race their way into new, uncharted territory.

Visualizing Independence

Leading up to 2012, the year Jamaica celebrated 50 years of independence from Britain I started conceptualizing a Caribbean exhibition along the lines of The Short Century. I share below my notes on the proposed project which was largely an academic exercise as I don't have a curatorial bone in my body:

> *"The celebration of fifty years of independence from the UK in several territories of the Anglophone or Commonwealth Caribbean presents a good opportunity to mount a large-scale, in-depth, interdisciplinary exhibition exploring not only the visual culture of the region during the last fifty years but also certain signal aspects of Caribbean culture and governance as manifested in documents, manifestos, photographs, maps, music, style, popular culture, architecture, systems of formal and informal justice, political structures such as garrisons, and texts of various kinds. The political economy within which artistic production has taken place in the decolonized Caribbean will be prominently featured as will the cultural economy.*
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> *An exhibition is proposed at the National Gallery of Jamaica, which will also travel within the Caribbean and its diaspora, an online catalogue with essays by cluster members and a digital database incorporating rare documents, photos, artworks, graphics and other items from the exhibition. The database will constitute an inventory of selfhood in the Caribbean — how did we become ourselves? What are the material traces of this transformation? What does a liberated Caribbean modernity look like? Sound like? Feel like? What shape would an archive of the texts and documents of Caribbean liberation and independence take? What might we learn from such an archive? How precisely did the formerly enslaved or indentured and other inhabitants of Caribbean plantation societies become modern subjects? Creole subjects? What is their contribution to twentieth-century modernity? To quote David Scott what are the ways in which the modern ruptured our lives shaping and forming new identities, new bodies and new spaces — how precisely were Caribbean citizens CONSCRIPTED by modernity?*
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> *The archive we envisage would include such ephemera as collections of help wanted ads from the region spanning the last five decades; recordings that document the transformation of speech and accents e.g., the speech patterns of radio disc jockeys, news readers, TV dramatizations; print ads of various kinds — consumer, political and public interest; the advent of gun culture as represented in music, films and artworks; architectural plans and drawings; the shift of cultural influence from Britain/Europe to the United States as manifested in fashion, hairstyles, accessories, music; the increasing importance of the barrel as a conveyor of material goods; items such as the ubiquitous BOAC bag or the board game Class Struggle, whose inventor taught at the University of the West Indies; a Patty index showing the change in price of patties (doubles in Trinidad) since Independence; postcards documenting portrayal of the Caribbean over the years; photographs from*

private photo albums; changes in death and burial rituals as manifested by casket design; the bleached body and its manifestations over the decades; carnival styles; book and magazine covers; a catalogue of academic theses and Caribbean Studies projects from the region music videos; album cover art; calendars; stamps; stock certificates; recipes.

Accompanying this archive or database (which will be digitized and made widely available in schools around the region and in the diaspora) would be an exhibition of more conventional art objects, carefully selected to represent the diversity of the region and spanning modern genres into the contemporary. Annalee Davis's Hatchlings — A Requiem, fifteen nests on the shredded treaty of Chaguaramas, Gaston Tabois's John Canoe in Guanaboa Vale, Che Lovelace's madman with soldiers, Christopher Cozier's Attack of the Sandwich Men, Willi Chen's sculptures, the amazing 'intuitive' artists of Jamaica and much else.

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Pree dis!

Finally, I want to end with an introduction to a current project which I hope will flourish in the years to come and which is very much inspired by the pioneering spirit I associate with both Stuart Hall and Okwui, in particular the latter's dedication to creating world-class forums, platforms and publications that confidently straddled the global while operating from and in the global South.
In early 2018, along with a team of writers and editors based in the Caribbean and its diasporas I founded the platform PREE (http://preelit.com), designed to showcase work from, on and about the Caribbean. PREE is slang meaning to 'look at' or eyeball something. The following paragraphs taken from my introduction to our first print anthology, Bookmarked, describe the project more fully:

"PREE is an open access, born digital, magazine of contemporary writing from, on and about the Caribbean. We interpret 'writing' broadly to include any publishable form of creative expression that can be adapted to our online format. Our aim is to be a matrix or mothership for Caribbean creativity of a certain kind, a vehicle for Caribbean writing of substance and quality.

PREE was born out of the desire to be part of shaping the new, of providing an experimental, technologically driven platform to elicit forms of writing emerging from the rapidly transforming environment of the Caribbean; a postcolonial Caribbean not yet fully decolonized, but one willing to participate in the global ebbs and flows that sometimes threaten to overwhelm us. What does the writerly gaze look like almost two decades into the 21st century? Is new writing animating our Creolescapes? Are there new horizons of readership and writership? In what tone of voice and in what accents do we write the archipelago? Can it be written as it is spoken? These are some of the questions we hope to answer with each issue.

PREE provides a platform where Caribbean writers can be proud to have their work published, the equal of any metropolitan outlet in terms of production values and standards. To have your work accepted ***PREE*** *matters, we think, because our editors are exacting. To earn their approval, your writing must be superlative in form, style and content. These have been our aspirations and this inaugural print volume, Bookmarked, allows readers to judge whether we have achieved them.*

Creole voices are very evident in PREE, producing a voluble visibility that defies easy labeling. Where else but in a Caribbean forum can writers from here feel free to express their creoleness and livities without worrying about legibility or being understood? The stories in Bookmarked exploit this freedom with joy and assurance as if responding to Javed Jaghai's pithy provocation on language politics: 'After all these years of swallowing Patwa as soon as it reaches your throat', writes Jaghai, 'vamitiyop, pitiyout, letigo'. For him Patwa and English are opposite ends of the creole continuum, representing the psychic extremes Jamaican/Caribbean folk live between (Swallowing Patwa, Issue 2: Pressure)."

"… We live in an ecology of intense co-existence",[7] said Okwui, speaking of the micro-states and communities that make up the African continent, and the Caribbean is no different. It is high time we started developing our own institutional frameworks for the creative work we want to do. The vernacular moderns of the Caribbean have done so already, through music, dance and sport, areas where the lack of English or some other European language cannot hold them back, they have made invaluable contributions to twentieth century modernity. It is the turn of privileged elites like ourselves to do our bit now in the twenty-first century.

References

1 I was born and brought up in India but have spent the last 32 years in Jamaica.

2 Carolyn Cooper, "Manhood and Aids." (Observer: Jan. 4, 2002).

3 Aaliyah Cunningham, "Opposition senator Dr. Andre Haughton, to introduce a motion to free up 'bad words' in the dancehall!", in: The Foundation Radio Media Network, (August 9 2019), http://www.clintonlindsay.com/2019/08/09/opposition-senator-dr-andre-haughton-to-introduce-a-motion-to-free-up-bad-words-in-the-dancehall/.

4 "English Only In The Senate, President Tells Justice Minister", The Gleaner, (Mar. 8, 2013)

5 MK Gandhi, Third Class in Indian Railways, (1917) p. 10.

6 The model for this exhibit would be Okwui Enwezor's landmark 2001 show The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa, 1945-1994.

7 (Enwezor http://africanah.org/okwui-enwezor/).