

Descriptions, Translations and the Caribbean

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From Fruits to Rastafarians

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...the whole Plant together shows like a Father in the middle, and a dozen Children round him... When the fruit is grown to a ripeness, you shall perceiue it by the smell, which is far beyond the smell of the choicest fruits of Europe, as the taste is beyond theirs... the rind, which is so beautiful, as it grieues us to rob the fruit of such and ornament, nor would we do it, but to enjoy the precious substance it contains; like a Thief, that breaks into a beautiful Cabinet, which we should forbear to do, but for the treasure he expects to find within. (Richard Ligon, on the pineapple, 1657)

There are streets of herbalists where all the medicinal herbs and roots found in the land are sold. There are shops like apothecaries', where they sell ready-made medicines... (Hernàn Cortéz, on Tenochtitlàn, 1521, tr. A. Pagden)

PREFACE

Stemming from colonial and postcolonial studies, descriptions and translations of the New World have served as a channel for dissemination of geographic knowledge, introduction of botany as a new science, exploitation of the plantation compound, and the global dissemination of Caribbean music and Rastafarian culture.

This book's first and second chapters feature a rich corpus of geographical and botanical descriptions and translation. The common thread is the occurrence of 'preterition' ('no words to describe'), in the representation of landscape and exotic 'tropical' vegetation.

The study advocates an ecolinguistic perspective in the preservation of language and traditions, from plant names to songs. Afro-Caribbean phytonymy has suffered an irretrievable loss counteracted by the efforts of multilingual Caribbean lexicography, whereas Linnean scientific binomials still leave empty slots in entries, and plants cannot be identified. There is no cleavage in the two fields of science, both are complementary and mutually reinforcing in the primacy of Caribbean studies. 'Plant ecology in the Caribbean has scarcely entered the broad phase of general descriptive accounts and the stage of intensive local analysis and experimental approach has not been reached' was the premise of a work on the vegetation of Jamaica in the 1950s (Asprey and Robbins 1953: 339). As David Crystal noted in his *Language Death*, stressing the importance of plants and ritual practices, 'Insight from various plant species used by indigenous healers may come from the way they are described in ritual practices, formal oratory, or folktale' (Crystal 2010: 50). Furthermore, in some language only one area of vocabulary may be left, as in Yaku

(Ethiopia), which is reported to survive in its plant names only (2010: 22). The present study has a claim to highlight and problematize issues related to linguistic preservation and cultural resistance. Stemming from the loss of phytonyms and of the preservation of herbal culture, the third chapter highlights the use of vernacular phytonyms in Caribbean traditional songs and chants of herb vendors. The perspective claims to shed light on the progressive loss of cultural traditions and creole phytonymy. If this may seem accidental casualty and fatal subservience to the rule of literacy and the writing system, the first slave traders ‘deliberately mixed people with different language backgrounds in the ships bound for America.

Through the adaptation of plantation chants and market-songs, Chap. 3 documents medicinal herbs and the loss of herbs in adaptations. The stigma of confusion of lexical items and the undue recognition of allonyms are some of the last links in a chain of genocidal acts, as the first the slave traders ‘deliberately mixed people with different language backgrounds on the ships bound for America, so that they could not communicate effectively with each other’ (Crystal 2010: 82), and prevented rebellion on board of ships. This is evident of the curse of Babel and of the loss of Paradise. Likewise, the ‘tropicalization’ of Broadway was the annihilation of the *real* Caribbean and a Mickey Mouse product, as Creoles and its speakers were caricaturized. The song ‘Minnie from Trinidad’ illustrates this practice as it furthers invention to adaptation and censorship in Italy (1948). Caribbean songs were totally rewritten even from English (Jamaican) to English (Standard American English) depriving local performers and community of any recognition.

Things totally changed with the explosion of the Marley phenomenon, as analysed in Chap. 4.

This book is a modest attempt to present details of the past and the emerging present, combining the consciousness of translation of ‘brave new words’. The Bible is always there, from the first contact to the current transformations and translation of the Jamaican Bible, and Marley’s ‘Redemption Song’.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book develops along the paths the authors have beaten, from Africa to the Caribbean. It is the result of many years of shared passion for geographical and botanical exploration, and for Creole linguistics and popular culture. Attendance at seminars and conferences in the Caribbean (University of the West Indies in Jamaica and Barbados) have provided stimulating confrontations and discussion with fellow linguists, lexicographers, Reggae artists, and Rastafarians and a cross-disciplinary emphasis within the methodology of multimodal analysis and translation studies.

Rosanna Masiola is the author of Chap. 1; Renato Tomei of Chaps. 2, 3, and 4. The authors intended the flow of data and references to be smooth and cohesive, in preserving focus, aim, and relevance.

Acknowledgement is due to all the societies for having provided invitations and access to updated sources and documentation, especially in the field of Afro-Caribbean studies and diasporic studies. Attending meetings of the Hakluyt Society, the Royal Geographical Society, the English Academy of Southern Africa, and the Caribbean Society for Caribbean Linguistics have triggered visions of transatlantic frontiers where the sun never sets. It would be churlish not to remember here encounters Rosanna Masiola had with Louis Kelly in the early 1980s and, years after, with George Steiner, and the benefits of constant questioning and awareness that translation is always an ‘exact mystery’ where words come and go, vanish, or are ‘invented’. Renato Tomei has a long list of people to give thanks to, covering all four continents: ELF (English as Lingua Franca), VEAW (World Varieties of English), UWI (University of the West Indies), Reggae University, Yaad, Sunsplash colleague performers and audience,

his bridden, the Rastafarian and Reggae Brotherhood of artists, and DJs all over the world. Tomei (a.k.a. Ras Tewelde and president and founder of the Ngo Youth of the World) has relied on a community that has been a source of data and living corpora.

Although the authors are divided by almost half century, the seeds of this book were sown at the time of their musical awareness and language consciousness in their families when as young as toddlers.

Thanks go to our parents and our extended families, from Italy to Africa, from Greenwich to Shashamane.

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