

**The Baby and the Bathwater: a Review of Evelyn
O'Callaghan's Woman Version: Theoretical Approaches to
West Indian Fiction by Women**

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Although a recent review welcomes Evelyn O'Callaghan's Woman Version as an important contribution to the study of Caribbean women writers, its repeated and, it seems to me, misguided emphasis throughout is on the myriad ways in which it was disappointing.¹ One major complaint was that O'Callaghan failed to 'fly' "with her own ideas entirely" (211). Firstly, I think it scarcely bears repeating that, at the most obvious level, one's 'ideas' do not emerge in a vacuum. The reviewer's own critical stance is itself entirely unoriginal, informed as it is by that expressivism (the view that ideas pre-exist language which serves to express them) which Saussure's critique of ideational and referential theories of language as well as Marxist, Feminist and other materialist accounts of the sociology of knowledge demolished a long time ago.²

Paul Gilroy's criticism of Patricia Hill Collin's defence of standpoint epistemology is extremely instructive here. Although he sides with her criticism of the mind-body dualism which permeates Western rationality, he describes her answer to the separation of thinking from being as a desire to "collapse them back into each other so that they form a functional unity that can be uncritically celebrated" (52). Although Collins may argue, in Gilroy's words, that there is no essential woman "that can focus the emancipatory project of feminist politics" (52) and that a feminist epistemology must construct "its own standpoint addressed to that lack" (52), Gilroy argues correctly that another version of essentialism is smuggled in through the back-door in the process. It is useful to quote Gilroy in his entirety in this respect:

it is striking how the image of an integral, humanist, and thoroughly Cartesian racial subject underpins and animates the construct of self that has been situated at the core of this 'Black women's standpoint--those experiences and ideas on self, and community, and society.' . . . *Experience-centred knowledge claims, mediated if at all by input from the intellectual vanguard, simply end up substituting the standpoint of black women for its forerunner rooted in the lives of white men.* (My emphasis; 53)

Gilroy's comments evidently have immense implications for any project, Feminist, Post-Colonial or otherwise, predicated upon the what is in the final analysis a masculine and Eurocentric model of the self.

That the reviewer realises, notwithstanding her earlier strictures, that one can in fact never entirely 'fly' with one's own ideas is indicated by her later statement that "[t]oo much identification with the international level of theory, whether postcolonial or postmodern, weakens the development of original perspectives rooted in local cultural identity and experience" (211). 'Original' is now qualified by the impress upon one's consciousness of one's immediate social location (an implicit analogy with the process of osmosis is drawn here). However, her attention turns at this point towards what she considers to be O'Callaghan's excessive preoccupation with foreign theory. This criticism of O'Callaghan's theoretical forays is informed, I would suggest, by an uncritical acceptance of empiricist and rationalist models of the relationship between the subject and object of knowledge which both modern and postmodern philosophical thought since at least David Hume have endlessly and justifiably problematised. This skepticism has had, in turn, an indispensable impact upon developments in Twentieth Century Literary Theory in the course of which the focus has shifted from a concern with evaluation to the hermeneutic act itself, that is, the precise nature of the relationship between interpreter and 'text.' When the reviewer states that she found Woman Version "least interesting when it became too involved in distracting references to European theorists like Bakhtin and Irigary [*sic*]" (211), she is being simply too dismissive of theoretical speculations which absolutely demand our consideration precisely because they have immense implications for the very basis of our being-in-the-world--which is preeminently an interpretative one--far less for our practice as literary critics. Moreover, it is gross simplification and something of red herring to aver that

theorists like Bakhtin and Irigaray merely built their theories “out of what was local and immediate to them” (211). Besides gesturing to some ill-defined process of *bricolage* whereby the critic/theorist picks and chooses from among the ‘local’ and the ‘immediate’ (whatever those means precisely) in order to construct his or her theories, such a blanket statement has the effect of lumping all theorists of European origin in one seamless, monolithic category that blithely ignores immense class, gender and ethnic divisions and the consequently immense struggle of ‘abrogation and appropriation’ (to use the famous formula of Ashcroft *et al.*) which marks the history of social, political and literary thought even within Europe.

O’Callaghan’s text is most successful, I would contend, precisely when it engages with absolutely essential theoretical questions. Given the necessarily perspectival nature of all knowledge, she clearly recognises the necessity of considerable self-conscious theorising for all literary critics. Her work is especially interesting, moreover, when she tackles those questions concerning what Fido describes as the “use and abuse of foreign theory by the local critic” (212). There is simply no question, in my view, that O’Callaghan hedges “bets a bit too much” (212) in this respect. If O’Callaghan hesitates, indeed, even agonises a long time over the relation between the local and the metropolitan, it is because, firstly, she is aware of the immensely complicated nature of the issues at hand to which there are no easy black and white solutions and, secondly, she is conscious of the absolute indispensability for critics of West Indian literature of engaging with the linguistic, political and other questions thrown up for consideration by both metropolitan theorists and their Post-Colonial interlocutors, no matter what the differences between the heritage of the former and that of the latter. Indeed, if O’Callaghan has achieved anything at all in Woman Version, it is to show that a brief acquaintance with Eagleton’s polemical Literary Theory: an Introduction or some other such

primer is simply no substitute for a sustained engagement with the philosophical intricacies of Postmodernism and the consequences thereof for all forms of literary criticism. O'Callaghan is merely pursuing in this regard the difficult road already mapped out for her by Abdul JanMohammed, Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhabha, among others

In returning several times to the ongoing negotiation between Postmodernism and Post-Colonial theory, O'Callaghan also reveals a healthy sensitivity towards the most important arguments directed against so-called 'Theory.' She mentions in this connection, with some measure of justifiable sympathy, the "offputting jargon" (101), its "rarefied" (102) air of abstraction, its frequent, seemingly tangential relation to the literary text (criticism has become, for many, an occasion to pontificate and to philosophise rather than a study of the text in hand) and the ubiquitous suspicion concerning the relevance of the foreign to the local. I would add to these an unfortunate and unjustified conflation of 'Theory' with what is merely a particular American variant of Deconstruction (the Yale school) whose myopic indebtedness to the almost purely textual focus of New Criticism has led to the untenable charge that all 'Theory' is idealist. Such a charge not only ignores the immeasurable contributions made by materialist schools of criticism such as Marxism and Psychoanalysis (including more recent Post-structuralist 'versions' thereof) but is also predicated upon an utter misunderstanding of Derrida's oftquoted '*Il n'y a pas d'hors-texte*,' a statement that owes much to Lacan's materialist notion of the misleadingly-named Symbolic Order.

O'Callaghan's most important theoretical insight in Woman Version may very well be the analogy which she perceptively draws between the process of 'abrogation and appropriation' which informs literary decolonisation and a similar 'creolising' ethos that ought to inform the relation of the Post-Colonial critic to Postmodernism: "post-colonial discourse may appropriate what it requires

from European theory” (109), she avers. The Empire Writes Back, O’Callaghan is right to point out, clearly demonstrates how “indigenous theoretical practices” (105) necessarily “interact and overlap with other models” (105). As she also points out, “[c]ritics in the Caribbean don’t simply *assume* the truth of ‘imported’ theory but adapt and modify it, argue against it, and force it into counter-discursive roles” (105). In situating herself theoretically in this way, O’Callaghan makes a strong claim, in my view, to possession of precisely that “voice which is both connected to the local and conversant with the international” (211) which Fido describes, notwithstanding her foregoing strictures on the necessity of ‘originality,’ as *the* imperative for the West Indian critic.

O’Callaghan’s subject in Woman Version is prose fiction by West Indian women writers. This is a field of study which, by her own admission, was to all intents and purposes practically non-existent as recently as the late seventies and even eighties. The musical metaphor which she applies to West Indian women’s writing--it is viewable, she argues, as a “kind of re-mix or dub version, which utilizes elements from the ‘master tape’ of Caribbean literary discourse (combining, stretching, modifying them in new ways); . . . and generally alters by recontextualization to create a *unique* literary entity” (11)--as well as her view of the “‘original’” (11) itself as a “selection from a plethora of tracks (potential meanings) laid down in the pre-version” (11-2) represent a significant and exciting reworking of the Derridean notion of the *supplément* and/or the Bakhtinian notion of parody within the context of Caribbean culture. (Glyne Griffith’s recent study Deconstruction, Imperialism and the West Indian Novel is a stimulating one precisely because of its analogous emphasis on the ‘supplemental’ relationship of the West Indian novel to the most important narratives of imperialist discourse.) The upshot of all this? O’Callaghan posits that recent West Indian fiction by women share with many of their Postmodernist counterparts a certain deconstructive tendency, that is, an

“insistence on questioning the received order, exploring political and other structures that support the dominant discourse, not least by interrogating the necessary rightness of binary opposites” (104), as well as a certain skeptical impulse, engaging in a “constant investigation and relativizing of *all* ‘ways of knowing’” (104). O’Callaghan is at pains to emphasise throughout that these counter-discursive activities are directed as much at the tradition of male West Indian writers which preceded these female writers and at patriarchal structures within the West Indies as at the racist purveyors and practitioners of colonialist discourse.

O’Callaghan’s guiding principal is succinctly stated toward the end of the book:

considered as a group, West Indian female-authored texts follow divergent ideological trajectories and pursue what can be perceived as conflicting options. If the writers occupy multiple ‘subject positions’, so do critics as far as theoretical approaches are concerned. The literature can accommodate ideological/theoretical pluralism. . . .
(110)

O’Callaghan suggests that there is a need, thus, for “modified and/or synthetic theoretical approaches which can and do take account of the multiplicity, complexity, and the intersection of apparently conflicting orientations which we find in the writing” (111). O’Callaghan’s book certainly follows a theoretically eclectic approach. The first chapter, for example, tackles important questions of literary history and deals with a controversial subject. Informed by the importance of tracing literary foremothers and of establishing a female tradition to the feminist project (see Elaine Showalter, for example), her immediate focus here is on the complications attendant upon such an undertaking in the West Indies given the fact that, due to the literary silence (for the most part) of black women for economic, social and educational reasons, nearly all the earliest women writers to which contemporary criticism has access were white. Her rejection of Brathwaite’s dubious argument that, in her words, the “white writer’s perception and the representation of experience does not relate to,

nor is it relevant to, that of the non-white majority” (21) is a compelling one by virtue of its reliance upon both Brathwaite’s own notion of ‘creolization’ and his view of Caribbean culture as the function of a certain “productive friction” (21). O’Callaghan quotes Brathwaite’s own words to telling effect in order to argue against the creation of new canonical orthodoxies and hegemonies in the guise of political correctness: “[T]here will be no ‘one West Indian voice’ in West Indian literature, . . . because there *is* no ‘one West Indian voice” (21).

O’Callaghan advances a number of salient reasons for studying the works of these early white women writers. They provide, firstly, great insight by virtue of their slightly different perspective into the patriarchal nature of the master narratives of empire. Perhaps equally importantly, they elucidate the complex nature of the *colonising* subject whose subjectivity has, given the over-riding preoccupation on the part of critics like JanMohammed, Bhabha and Spivak with the *colonised* subject, most often been elided. O’Callaghan posits that the female colonising subject occupied an anomalous space, functioning both as peripheral perpetuator and victim of oppression. Thirdly, they anticipate in this respect certain features characteristic of the works of later white West Indian women writers such as Rhys and Allfrey who would, perhaps in a more poignant fashion, give voice to the white creole’s “double alienation from ‘native black and European white experience” (28):

With neither blackness, nor ‘Englishness’, nor economic independence to sustain her, she is excluded from all groups that matter to her and subjected to cruel paradoxes: having privilege without power; sharing oppression without the solidarity and support of fellow victims. (34)

Drawing principally upon R.D. Laing’s notion of the divided self, O’Callaghan’s argument in Chapter Two is that the ‘madwoman’ and related motifs in texts as disparate as Wide Sargasso Sea, Beka Lamb, and Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home function to reinterpret the ubiquitous

'quest for identity' theme in West Indian literature, serving as metonyms of the "debilitating 'illness' of the self which still haunts Caribbean societies in the wake of the colonial encounter" (46). Madness in these texts serves frequently also, however, an emancipatory function, offering a "kind of liberation from constraining attitudes and values" (46) that can lead ultimately to a "rebirth of an integrated self" (46), not by creating positive images in response to debilitating stereotypes but by demonstrating the futility of all such stereotypes as "life-models" (47) for women. She argues, gesturing towards Althusser's conception of the way in which ideology moulds subjectivity, that the madwoman in these texts resists "interpellation according to *any* rigid, 'normative' dictates about what it means to be a woman of or in the region" (47).

Indeed, O'Callaghan pursues this line of thought in the following chapter. Her focus is on the way in which a text such as Annie John both demonstrates the "construction of colonial woman within imperial and patriarchal discourse, *and* disrupts the hegemony of such discourse by questioning its assumptions" (59) and showing the "flawed reasoning of Western mythology" (59). This understanding of the capacity of the Post-Colonial text both to expose and to subversively rewrite hegemonic master narratives in this way which O'Callaghan shares with Ashcroft *et al.* is in itself indebted both to Bakhtin's critique of the asocial and monological character of Saussurean linguistics (Bakhtin was of the view that language reflects the struggle between competing socio-linguistic points of view or fixes on reality that are representative of various social groupings) and to his view of the novel as *the* art form which foregrounds the dialogical character of language. This view of the dialogical logic both of language and of the novel is taken to its extreme in Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque, his term for parodic and travesty forms of language and literature in which the received order of things is subjected to extreme mockery and ridicule. O'Callaghan makes use of the

latter model in Chapter Five in order to suggest that Grace Nichol's Whole of a Morning Sky is paradigmatic of the way in which West Indian women's writing can, in a humorous way, operate to decentre "patriarchal discourse by uncovering the fallacy of privilege *necessarily* accruing to certain forms of behaviour, certain institutions and values" (85). "[I]rreverence at the expense of 'respectability' and authoritarian posturing destabilizes hegemonic discourse; . . . such strategies can be seen as having a transformative, if not revolutionary, impact upon patriarchal discourse" (96), she writes.

O'Callaghan argues in Chapter Three that Jane and Louisa Will Soon Come Home also performs a deconstructive function: it refuses the "binary opposites within which the colonial subject was written, and insists on the acknowledgement of indigenous heterogeneity and plurality" (64). Acknowledging in Chapter Four the tension that exists between the necessity for feminists to locate a female subject and the Poststructuralist decentering of the subject, O'Callaghan seizes upon Michael Dash's view that Caribbean writers had long anticipated the contemporary preoccupation with the subject in order to suggest what may very well be the most important achievement of contemporary West Indian women writers. She contends that although the "necessity for locating a coherent female subject *is* important" (76) for these writers, their texts "reflect unease" (76) with the masculine and Eurocentric model of "'unitary, self-directing, isolated ego' which postmodernism has . . . suspended" (76). Drawing upon Patricia Waugh's conception of a different kind of feminine subject--a "collective concept of subjectivity which foregrounds the construction of identity in relationship" (qtd. in O'Callaghan 76), O'Callaghan advances the interesting argument that the signal achievement of a writer such as Brodber in Myal may be the way in which she effects an "engineering of her female character/subject (as integrated subject rather than alienated zombi) by the collectivity of her society"

(77). Ella's bringing into being as a subject is the "collective effort" of a group within Grove Town society comprising "different nationalities, races, sexes and backgrounds" (78) that "transcend spatial boundaries" (78) and "cross boundaries of time" (78). What O'Callaghan describes as the text's (almost) postmodernist "narrative eclecticism" (77)--to wit, the medley of narrative voices, the utilisation of "formal techniques that challenge genre distinction and conventions of realism that self-consciously play with fictional expectations" (79) is inextricably linked to this engineering process, she suggests.

My biggest criticism of Woman Version is less the choice *per se* of R.D. Laing's (by now) slightly dated Existentialist 'version' of Psychoanalysis in order to explain both the retreat into madness of several of the female protagonists which people these texts and the effect of the inculcation of ideal stereotypes of womanhood via a Eurocentric education upon the non-European female subject than the relegation of Lacan's important notion of the mirror stage to a mere footnote in Chapter Two.³ (Lacan's notion of the Symbolic order is referred to briefly on page 75.) Lacan's view of the perpetual alienation of identity in relation to images of otherness as well as Bhabha's work in this area (see, for example, his essay "Remembering Fanon") provide, to my mind, a more adequate formulation of the decentering of the colonised subject in general and of the feminine in particular which is O'Callaghan's immediate subject. It would, for example, explain the frequency of the mirror motif in a text like Wide Sargasso Sea, providing an almost indispensable model for understanding Antoinette's search for a viable self-image in the models of womanhood offered her. It would offer an interesting account, too, of Nellie's relation to her 'cracked doll' in Jane and Louisa. Althusser's appropriation, in turn, of the Lacanian notion of the imaginary in order to explicate the *process* by which the subject is ideologically interpellated as well as his colleague Balibar's

collaboration with Pierre Macherey in order to account for the interpellative function of literature would cast great light, I would contend, upon the psychic maturation of a character such as Tee in Crick Crack Monkey, the tension created within her between the two very different ways of life signified by her two aunts, her insertion into the colonial educational apparatus, her imaginary relation to her ideal double Helen and her subsequent ‘zombification.’ Indeed, it is towards precisely such a Lacan-inspired view of the psyche which O’Callaghan repeatedly seems to gesture without, however, ever fully articulating it: *pace* her description of Crick Crack Monkey as a demonstration of “how colonial woman has been written in a certain way, ‘consolidated within texts of colonial education, and how the confrontation of colonized female with this fixed ‘Otherness’ leads to trauma” (69).

O’Callaghan’s Woman Version represents, in sum, a significant addition to the study of West Indian literature in general and, in particular, of perhaps the most significant body of works to have emerged recently therein. In terms of its engagement with Literary Theory and with the most pressing questions surrounding its relevance for the Post-Colonial critic, its assimilation of a wide range of critical readings of the literary texts in question, and the fluid and cogent quality of its practical analyses, it sets a standard which other such studies to come would do well to emulate. The time is ripe, in my view, for a similarly guided and theoretically-informed return to, for example, the mainly male-authored ‘mainstream’ of West Indian fiction. I await anxiously, therefore, the day when O’Callaghan will take the time to translate into book-form the focus of her most recent undergraduate course on the ‘in-betweenity’ which characterises some recent West Indian writing such as The Enigma of Arrival and Omeros and of which she has given us only tantalising hints in a few of her most recent contributions to the annual conference on West Indian literature hosted by the University

of the West Indies.

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Endnotes

1. The review in question is by Elaine Fido.

2. See, in this connection, references in Fido's review to what she describes as the "real voice" (211) of O'Callaghan's book which is "muffled" (211), she argues, as the book develops. See, too, her stress upon the necessity to "speak from the inside of culture" (212). It is useful to recall here Derrida's view in Of Grammatology that there has long been a certain prejudice within Western culture against writing and, by contrast, a certain privileging of speech as more immediate and closer to the heart, as it were, than is writing. Speech is considered within this schema to be only at one remove from thought and thus almost synonymous with it.

3. For Laing, the absence of ontological essence at the core of personal identity leads to psychic dissociation, to be precise, the split between a 'true' and a 'false' self which, in the absence of its own, usually acts according to other people's standards and expectations.