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Magic and Identity in Anglophone and Hispanaphone Caribbean Literature

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Abstract

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, literature in the Caribbean underwent a period of significant development. The word "Caribbean" encompasses such a vast cultural, locational, and linguistic span that it is difficult to make generalizations about trends in the literature produced during this period. As a result, the contrast between Hispanophone and Anglophone Caribbean literature has not been thoroughly investigated. In this essay, I will compare and contrast themes from "Viaje a la Semilla" by Cuban author Alejo Carpentier, "Do Angels Wear Brassieres?" by Jamaican author Olive Senior, and "Pressure Drop" by Jamaican author Oku Onuora. I will also briefly discuss works by Afro-Cuban author Nicolás Guillén and Saint Lucian Derek Walcott. Aspects of these works—such as intended audience, political and social influences, and linguistic form—are investigated. Additionally, Caribbean literature is analyzed through the lens of magical realism. The throughline of this study is whether thematically metaphysical questions of belonging which have been attributed to Caribbean literature by previous scholars are maintained in both linguistic traditions. The import of this literature to explore and maintain cultural byways in the face of a diasporic experience is emphasized.

1. Introduction

Literature in the Caribbean experienced a boom in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. However, the word "Caribbean" encompasses such a vast cultural, locational, and linguistic span that it is difficult to make generalizations about trends in the resulting works. The suspended sense of place many Caribbean peoples experienced due to being part of the diaspora—culturally uprooted and displaced, regardless of whether they arrived in the Caribbean from overseas or were forced to leave—pervades their literary content. In his 2010 meditation on Caribbean literature, Edward Baugh suggests that a sense of longing ingrains locationality in the Caribbean experience, stating, "who I am is a function of where I am, or where I think I am" (Baugh, 2010, p. 8). It is in this sense of where the Caribbean writer thinks they are that desire and shared experience begin to show their face (Baugh, 2010). Thematically metaphysical questions of belonging, "home," and a sense of liminality are pervasive in Caribbean literature, regardless of language. The experience of suspended cultural roots—the passionate desire for a nurturing place—is the desire at the heart of Caribbean literature (Baugh, 2010).

This experience, which inhibits Caribbean people from feeling that they have cultural roots, has been termed by Baugh as the Caribbean "of the heart": the passionate desire for a nurturing place (Baugh, 2010). In his piece, Baugh differentiates between "West Indian," a term referring to specifically Anglophone Caribbean territories, and "Caribbean," a larger and more all-encompassing term that can include far-flung areas to which large parts of the Caribbean population have spread, such as London and Miami (Baugh, 2010). For the purposes of this

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essay, I will use these terms in this fashion. Additionally, Hispanophone Caribbean literature is represented by Cuban authors in this analysis.

The Caribbean writers reviewed here convey a dysphoric struggle with identity as a result of colonization. This thematic unity can be observed in the use of magical realism, a writing technique that juxtaposes fantastical elements with the harsh realities of life by both Anglophone and Hispanophone authors (Mikics, 1995, p. 372). For instance, Anglophone Caribbean author Derek Walcott, a native of Saint Lucia who employed the use of magical realism, has written that magical realism is "the authoritative aesthetic response to the Caribbean cultural context" (Mikics 1995, pp. 372). Magical realism is historically associated with Hispanophone writers, including Cuban writer Alejo Carpentier, one of Walcott's inspirations (Mikics, 1995).

In this paper, I will investigate the shared thematic elements of Hispanophone and Anglophone Caribbean literature through a case study of select written works. I argue that as a result of Caribbean people's unique diasporic position, a thematically consistent sense of desire for a nurturing place is stylistically communicated in a manner that addresses and manipulates metaphysical aspects such as time, space, and class to unveil the Caribbean identity. The structures of reality explored through the "magic" of unfamiliar origins speak to their lived reality. I will provide a brief historical and cultural overview, conduct a literary analysis of selected Hispanophone and Anglophone works, and briefly analyze magical realism as it pertains to Caribbean literature. Through this investigation, I hope to shed light on the rich cultural analyses that can be gleaned from Caribbean literature and to inspire further study.

2. Historical and Cultural Background

The Hispanophone literary tradition was conceived and developed in areas of the Caribbean (Cuba, the Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico) which were colonized and held by Spain c. 1500 until they were overtaken by the United States in the 1900s (Torres-Saillant, 1990; Perez-Rosario, 2016). Each linguistic tradition developed directly in response to patterns of colonization (Torres-Saillant, 1990; Perez-Rosario, 2016). The linguistic development of the West Indies toward Anglophile expression was the direct result of British schooling implemented there, an English education. Some West Indian authors identified strongly with English culture as a result of this education (Baugh, 2010; Mikics, 1995). As with everything in the Caribbean, there is crossover; it has not been historically uncommon for inhabitants to move amongst the territories as better opportunities for work present themselves (Giovanetti, 2006). West Indian writers faced the difficulty of a limited or uninterested audience among English readers in the Caribbean (Mervyn, 1967). It was necessary for most to move abroad—primarily to London—to find success (Perez-Rosario, 2016). This relocation influenced who they wrote for, though content tended to focus largely on Caribbean problems (Mervyn, 1967; Baugh, 2010). Linguistic traces of cultural origins show up in both Anglophone and Hispanophone writings. For instance, the Creole in Anglophone Jamaican pieces like "Pressure Drop" by Oku Onuora and "Do Angels Wear Brassieres?" by Olive Senior is still legible enough to the authors' European audiences, while the Spanish used in stories like Alejo Carpentier's Guerra del Tiempo suggests a different intended audience (Morris, 1967).

While much Cuban literature of the 20th century focuses on the Negritude movement and heavily features African subtexts, West Indian literature hones in on a blurred sense of identity as a result of being a part of the diaspora, centering its use of language on a European audience. Cuban authors Alejo Carpentier and Hispano-African Nicolás Guillén—perhaps the most notable poet from Cuba—were influenced by the Negritude

movement in Paris and heavily feature its themes in their writing (Mikics, 1995; Sáinz-Blanco, 1987). The Negritude inspiration found in Cuban texts was likely influenced by the increased racial tensions between people of color in Cuba (Giovanetti, 2006).

After Cuba gained independence from Spain in 1898, a period of occupation by the United States significantly impacted the development of Cuban culture. In the early-mid 20th century, Cubans experienced racial confusion that was unmatched in intensity by the rest of the Caribbean (Giovanetti, 2006; Sáinz-Blano, 1987). Although some racial politics existed before this period, as Afro-Cubans and an influx of West Indians were seen to threaten Cuban job security, Afro-Cubans and Hispanic Cubans were united in worker's rights protests and shared common goals (Giovanetti, 2006). In fact, there was a significant degree of distinction between Afro-Cubans and the Hispanic Cuban population reflected in Cuban literature, often superseding any shared connection to Latin America (Giovanetti, 2006).

3. Hispanophone Literature Review

While Anglophone Caribbean writers directed their pens toward Europe, Hispanophone Cuban writers such as Alejo Carpentier integrated literary techniques from Spanish writers using thematic artifacts hearkening to the cultures of ancestral Africa and Indigenous Caribbean peoples (Mikics, 1995). Other Hispanophone Cuban authors used different methods to a similar end. Nicolas Guillén employed the use of region-specific language to communicate directly with a non-White audience in the face of racial tensions following Cuba's independence from Spain (Sáínz-Blanco, 1987). Guillén's use of linguistic elements convey with nuance what authors like Carpentier achieve through broader thematic strategy; Guillén creates an atmosphere that alludes to the complex multicultural Caribbean experience by displaying its artifacts. Guillén uses the 'jitanjáfora' linguistic technique of incorporating African words and phrases into his writing—even in ways that do not make sense contextually—which contributes to this layered atmosphere when the text is read (Sáinz-Blanco, 1987). For instance, when accompanied with Cuban instruments, the rhythm of Guillén's writing hearkens to traditional African music (Sáinz-Blanco, 1987). Guillén also features African places and religious figures in his texts. With Spanish language, African rhythm and phrases, and a Caribbean setting, Guillén's use of language reaches into the subconscious and pulls up a layered, visceral understanding of the Afro-Cuban identity.

Alejo Carpentier employed magical realism in his 1963 short story collection *Guerra del tiempo*. In the short story "Viaje a la semilla," Carpentier leads the reader through a maze of dreamlike sequences initiated by a scene in which an Afro-Cuban *santero*—a priest of the Santería religion—waves a wand, lights candles, and initiates the turning back of time. While the result of this ritual is made clear in hindsight, it is only when the author casually mentions that "the palm trees lost some of their rings" in the fourth part that the reader fully comprehends that time is moving backwards, that they are witnessing the main character Don Marcial's journey away from both his own death and the dismantling of his estate—which the story begins with—and back to the womb.

Certain aspects of the story seem so steeped in cultural experience that without context, it can be difficult to parse what the author is trying to convey in his layered sense. Take the various artifacts of Caribbean life Carpentier leaves strewn about his scenes: the *santero* who starts Don Marcial's transformation; the *negros* who seem in some senses to be exterior to the story and punctuate with an expression of resistance to colonialism within the confines of the page. The old *traje de chispero*, a costume from a bygone Carnival celebration, greeted with applause by a group of young adults playing dress-up and stealing kisses while playing hide-and seek. A kind of coded cultural intertextuality is formed

between vestiges of oral narrative and the contemporary literary work through the cultural artifacts Carpentier weaves throughout the story (Mikics, 1995).

In the opening scene, Carpentier lays out the framework for the story and his message in his description of Don Marcial's house. The final phrase of Part I of the short story is bisagras desorientadas—dislocated hinges—referring to the doorframe standing absent in the house, which has been dismantled. The foreshadowing implies that the protagonist will be stripped of the life experiences that ornate his own being and return to a reduced state. The vignettes in Carpentier's writing are vivid: perfume oil spilling from the hand of a woman with loosened hair; a jar of water falling to the floor, followed by a flood. Rooting these various splashes of vividity is the metaphorical dislocation of the Caribbean people, interwoven with an expression of a deeper magia that may predate colonialism. The verbiage in the opening sequence denotes a grating, uncomfortable experience as the appreciable remains (restos apreciables) of the house fall methodically, piece by piece. The restos apreciables may be the vestiges of the African and Indigenous cultures which the story is littered with in its depiction of Don Marcial's youth.

The story of Don Marcial is one of privilege. Don Marcial is an entitled heir to a Cuban oligarchy which falls by the time Marical reaches old age. In his childhood, he recalls being pleased to witness his father "punish" (probably rape, unbeknownst to the young Marcial) a young mulata. Generally, the mulatas and negros in this story are treated as objects from Marcial's perspective and as magical beings from Carpentier's perspective. Neither is necessarily unerring from a 21st-century viewpoint, and it is possible that the European-born Carpentier did not have the insight to fully speak to these dynamics. Yet surrounding Don Marcial's experience are the mulatas; the negros; the intoxication of the Caribbean in scent, sound, and touch.

Carpentier utilizes magical realism in a way that is specific to his own philosophy that the reality of Caribbean life is so extraordinary it seems magical. The richness of his language as he describes cultural artifacts and myths within the story demonstrates this magic. The themes of the story are consistent with those of Caribbean literature discussed in other texts: questions regarding the ephemerality of meaning and life are asked without a clear answer; the significance in the life of the protagonist is secondary to the perfume and magic of cross-cultural experience against the backdrop of the Caribbean sun.

4. Analysis of Magical Realism

Carpentier asserted that the "magic" that exists in Caribbean works is rooted in a native cultural history of tradition and belief that finds continuity through colonization, past the gates of liberation, and on into the unknown future. This magic is supposedly unavailable to European writers but inherently exists in Caribbean works (Mikics, 1995).

It is the way in which this fundamental question of identity at the heart of the Caribbean experience is expressed that distinguishes Hispanophone literature from Anglophone literature. David Mikics asserts that the magical realism is the most appropriate form to convey the Caribbean experience in Spanish-language texts due to its dreamlike and ambiguous qualities, that the weight of the various historic events and origins which are impressed so heavily on a lived Caribbean reality are best expressed using this style . Frederic Jameson, building on Alejo Carpentier's ideas, claims that it is the simultaneous coexistence of many traditions, histories, and Indigenous cultures in the "New World" which provide the "magic" in these authors' works. Jameson includes authors like William Faulkner in his definition, stating that in spaces where several cultures or historical periods exist, so too does the potential for magical realist perspectives (Mikics, 1995). In a way, magical

realism is then a form which takes into its defense the reality of the persistence of African and various Indigenous cultural byways in the dominant, colonial culture. Magical realism helps to situate the Caribbean experience itself as a fixed reality that is joined together by various cultural and historical experiences that are being brought through space and time and which color the present while reaching back to the past, a place both of continual transition and remembering.

Importantly, Mikics includes in his discussion of the natural in magical realism a comparison between Derek Walcott and Chilean author Pablo Neruda. Mikics notes that while both Walcott and Neruda recognize the land as imprinted with ancestral happenings, Neruda digs deeper into the experiences of his Chilean ancestors and displays an emphatic understanding, as though he were experiencing their reality through them. Walcott, however, in a manner characteristic of Caribbean thought, expresses confusion at his identity and a distance between himself and any Indigenous identity. Rather than boldly assuming the scars of his ancestors, Walcott describes putting "the shell's howl to his ear" and listening to the ghostly cries of the various peoples who have been forced from their homes overseas to the Caribbean (395). Based on this vignette, the use of Spanish does not necessarily bind the Spanish-speaking Caribbean writer to the Mexican or South American any more than to the European or the African; the searching and dissonance which takes place is unique to Caribbean authorship.

5. Anglophone Literature Review

Yet Carpentier's story lacks some of the weariness of other Caribbean texts. In Carpentier's works, the use of magical realism is clear, and he dips into his understanding of Afro-Cuban religion and pieces from various cultures, including references to Indigenous culture and Santería in order to convey their "magical" permanence. In contrast, Anglophone works such as "Pressure Drop," though also hazy and sun-soaked, do not convey the "magical" as easily. In Jamaican poet Oku Onuora's poem "Pressure Drop," the language, imagery, and content stand inside the despair of oppression, rather than dancing around it as Carpentier's work does. Various lamentations and acknowledgments of the Jamaican experience are expressed in a musical, syncopated lyrical style—which would become known as "dub poetry."

Rather than intimating any dreamlike or distant suffering as Carpentier does, Onuora directly describes the system of oppression from the perspective of the oppressed, who are concerned about having their basic needs met. His explicit and stark style of poetry conveys the harsh realities of poverty and discrimination in three stanzas, which each follow characters dealing with various socioeconomic struggles. Notably, Onuora uses the phrase "pressure drop"—which references the point when the pressure which has been building throughout the stanza comes to a crescendo and drops—to mark the end of each scenario he describes. In the first stanza, Onuora describes a man who is writhing and vulnerable from hunger. He smokes, looks at his surroundings—noting garbage and a dead dog—and exclaims that it is not right. The man is so overwhelmed by his circumstances that he feels he might explode; then, the phrase "pressure drop" ends this stanza. "Pressure Drop" hearkens to the slave ballads of the United States in denoting the hardships experienced specifically by low-income Jamaicans, yet rather than containing themes of hope to overcome one's current circumstances, the stanzas continue to build in tension and to incorporate descriptions of emotional and circumstantial turmoil, ending in a description of a murder before the final pressure drop. The poem could almost be read in a round; the movements described seem to be continual and rotational: pressure builds, then drops, then builds then, drops. The characters here are not able to concern themselves with larger questions of meaning and belonging; they are simply stuck in a cycle of precarious circumstances, looking for a way to eat.

Although Caribbean fiction spans a vast range of places, times, and experiences, perhaps readers can view the other pieces included here as an evolution from conditions of more direct hardship and poverty, denoting an additional piece of the origins of the characteristic liminality in Caribbean writing. The poem is written with nonstandard spelling in a Jamaican dialect and is sometimes difficult to parse without an intimate understanding of Jamaican slang. This suggests that Onuora wrote the poem without the intention of reaching a European audience, which was the standard for Caribbean authors in the 20th century (Mervys, 1967).

The legacies of colonization and a desire to connect with a more genuine identity than that which has been impressed upon them through oppression are the primary driving forces behind Caribbean literature in this period; it is a cultural exploration of the self. Beccka—Trinidadian author Olive Senior's witty child heroine in the short story "Do Angels Wear Brassieres?"—serves as an allegory for the Caribbean mindset toward life and their oppressors. The short story can be read on two levels. On its surface, it is a lighthearted narrative where colonial hierarchies are explicated as an independent-minded Jamaican girl questions the power structures she is exposed to in her interactions with her aunt, mother, neighbors, and religious leaders. On a secondary level, hearkening to magical realism, Senior playfully interweaves the possibility of Beccka as a magical or mythological character, a representative of African values amidst her highly Catholicized and assimilated community. Beccka's neighbor's claim that Beccka is possessed by the devil and Beccka's tongue-in-cheek manner of relating to the world are established at the very beginning of the story. Beccka also "winks at God," who she recognizes in the form of an Anansi spider. The Anansi folk tales are associated with the Akan, a people originating in Africa and later inhabiting the Caribbean via the slave trade, and feature a mischievous god who is capable of using his intelligence to triumph over more powerful enemies. In the vein of devices used by Carpentier and Guillén, Beccka could be said to be an incarnation or representation of Anansi.

In the story, as a response to the neighbor's comments about Beccka's behavior, Beccka's aunt and mother decide to have her sit down with the archdeacon of the church. Senior uses nonstandard spelling to convey a Jamaican dialect both in dialogue and narration. Only the archdeacon, an Englishman who is representative of colonizing or White-influenced forces, speaks without any hint of local dialect. The archdeacon uses phrases like "my dear child!" and "my word!" to respond, in a European-tinged manner, to Beccka's humorous commentary on the Bible. An undercurrent in the story is the use of religion (specifically Catholicism) to bolster and justify colonizing power structures. The efforts of Beccka's aunt and mother to conform to the expectations of the church and society as a whole in order to advance their social standing are seen in their orientation toward the archdeacon. Beccka's mother is noted to be "weeping daily in excitement" that the archdeacon will be visiting them. These efforts go unrewarded, as made apparent by the archdeacon's relative ambivalence toward visiting them: he frequently makes short stops at their house when he is in town solely to take some of their roses, while Beccka's mother's pleads him to grace them for tea. Beccka's absurdist question to the archdeacon during tea—whether angels wear brassieres or not—serves as a foil for the conformity of the adults around her. The inquiry goes unanswered; the adults are flummoxed, and the archdeacon goes home. The young protagonist is often chastised for her intelligent curiosity, for instance, in asking how worms reproduce. She is finally pleased after running away from home and meeting a neighbor who answers her question, admitting that only "as far as he knows," female angels do wear brassieres. The friendship with this neighbor is sustained because he puts off societally scripted responses and thinks from a less constricted perspective.

The interactions between these characters act as a mirror, reflecting the imprint of the slave trade, the eradication of non-colonizing cultures, and the absurdity of some rigid structures in the world through the eyes of a child. Beccka, who might as well be Anansi in child form, throws a wrench into the machine by refusing to fit into it ideologically. Beccka stands out so much against the norms that her aunt even considers drugging her for the archdeacon's visit. Nevertheless, it is in an open-minded and fluid approach to ontological questions (even the silliest of them) that Beccka is pleased. This story exemplifies two qualifying aspects of Caribbean literature. The first is the dynamic and nuanced approach that Caribbean intellectuals take toward ontological and existential questions—the ability to exist in a liminal space and the bravery to investigate it. The second is the acknowledgement of colonial power structures and how these have been historically constrictive forces in Caribbean spaces. With Beccka's character placed adjacent to the Akan Anansi god, Senior's story also slyly nods to the dynamism of Caribbean cultures.

6. Conclusion

Although the audiences these various pieces were written for differ, the bravery to investigate one's locationality, and the longing for a denouement that adequately expresses the complexity of the diasporic experience are central themes of Caribbean literature, regardless of the language in which it is produced. Alejo Carpentier's fascination with Santería and the Negritude movement, along with his upbringing in Cuba, resulted in a rich cultural tapestry within his writing. Oku Okunora's "Pressure Drop" succinctly and powerfully communicates the continual struggle of poverty and oppression. Olive Senior's young Beccka in "Do Angels Wear Brassieres?" flips power structures on their heads, with the brave Anansi girl's intellectually curious take on the world reflective of Jamaican intellectual thought. Utilizing the lens of magical realism and employing close reading to unearth cultural markers embedded in the texts, readers can more fully appreciate the complexity of Caribbean literature. Caribbean literature holds a wealth of cultural significance; it has been used by Caribbean authors as a primary avenue to explore and maintain cultural byways in the face of a diasporic experience. Further analysis of Anglophone, Francophone, and Hispanaphone Caribbean texts' thematic elements—both discussed and not discussed in this essay—should be pursued in future research.

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