

Translational Space and Creolising Aesthetics in Three Women's Novels: the Radical Diasporic (Re)turn

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Abstract: Proposing the notion of *translational space*, I consider the classroom and the literary text as crucial though differentiated spaces of translation. The idea of translational space borrows from Doreen Massey's elaboration of space as a "complex web of relations of domination and subordination, of solidarity and cooperation" (81). I interlink the complexity of Massey's "web" with an intention by the radical Other to translate, and interrogate how selected Caribbean diasporic texts might be shown to engage a process of translation, and for whom, particularly in light of George Lamming's pronouncement concerning the West Indian writer, that "[h]e writes always for the foreign reader" (43). What is the translational impetus of a later generation of writers who Lamming was unable to imagine, namely, women authors of the region? I consider the translational space created by those authors' challenging of canonical traditions that not only break through publication barriers, but place black women protagonists as central to their writing. The crux of my enquiry is the diasporic imaginary—represented in Beryl Gilroy's *In Praise of Love and Children*, Andrea Levy's *Small Island*, and Velma Pollard's *Karl*—an imaginary which, centring black women characters is also concerned with a dialogic representation of the Other. I highlight issues of Creole or Caribbean identity that such an imaginary figures in its aesthetics and I foreground the diaspora as contested space whether public or intimate. Additionally in these texts, the (re)turn, as I consider it, affords a contemporary contextual *presencing* in dialogue with a violently muted historical past. Arising from this, my larger questions concern the meanings that might be inferred from such a Creole diasporic imaginary and its representation in terms of aesthetics and translational space. I explore the fictional representation of Caribbean lives "on the move" in Cresswell's terms (2) and their transnational representation. In their gendering of creolisation, diaspora and race, how do the writers translate the spatial interface that their characters negotiate? Whether in memories of Toronto in Pollard's writing or in the London of Levy's and Gilroy's fiction, how do these texts represent space not only as cultural crossings but also as translational space within the new triangle that contests and dislodges notions of identity?

[I]n matters of race, silence and evasion have historically ruled literary discourse. Evasion has fostered another, substitute language in which the issues are encoded, foreclosing open debate.

Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark*

In this article I understand the diaspora to be a crucial site of Caribbean literary production and mobility affording perspectives considered in this discussion to be from the radical Other. Having argued issues of othering elsewhere, and specifically in relation to African-Caribbean women's writing,¹ I examine here the possibilities for translation of such literary culture by focusing upon the creolising aesthetics indicated in the literary space of this diasporic imaginary. I am referring to aesthetics in the sense of its typical use (not in respect of specific eighteenth century thought) but as "inquiry into the substance and dynamics of the "literary"" (Otter 119). Additionally, borrowing from Doreen Massey's elaboration of space as a "complex web of relations of domination and subordination, of solidarity and cooperation" (81), I consider as crucial though differentiated spaces of translation,

both the literary text and the classroom, the latter serving to regulate mobility by determining whether or how the Caribbean text might be taught. Thus, it is the potential of the classroom for the signifying translated encounter that is of special interest to my discussion. The texts of particular concern are *Karl* (2008) by Velma Pollard, *In Praise of Love and Children* (1996) by Beryl Gilroy, and *Small Island* (2004) by Andrea Levy. That the authors' diasporic (re)turn² signifies mobility into the literary world—in the sense of Brathwaite's meaning of being "let through"—as the published producers of knowledge valued enough to be objects of study in elite institutions, is, to borrow from Tim Cresswell, "full of meaning" (2). I am interested in such meanings in relation to the radical Other.

It should be emphasised at the outset that Massey argues "for a dynamic and politically progressive way of conceptualizing the spatial" (67). Yet, writing from a literary studies perspective and declaring a concern like Massey's with the political, is also to signal a tension that cannot be ignored, perhaps particularly in our current knowledge market preoccupied with the task of measuring and grading knowledge by standards currently referred to in the UK as the Research Excellence Framework (REF), "a new system for assessing the quality of research in UK higher education institutions" in the interest of rigorous scholarship.³ How, at this juncture, a call—such as that, above, from within the disciplinary borders of Geography, apparently more porous in its acceptance of the political as a scholarly preoccupation—might translate in terms of literary methodology implicates a larger issue: a politics of Literature teaching that is rarely acknowledged. Few scholars recognize or debate the politics of Literature itself, or undertake research into the political consequences of unquestioned approaches to literary studies or literary mobility with rare exceptions to which I will refer, further, below.⁴ Paul Giles points to literary traditions within which certain "disparagements" together with the prioritizing of, for example, ethics over aesthetics and much else above the political, remain normative. Such a situation ultimately reflects a failure on the part of the Literature teacher or scholar to recognize his or her own "ideological positioning" (105). In addition, I read Giles's writing about the "Politics of Disorientation," in tandem with my own interest in the politics of Literature and the mobility that the discipline allows.

My position lies identifiably within the borderlands of Literary Studies and Pedagogy. Aligned with a tradition which recognises Literature as a "constitutionally impure category" (Giles 103), I urge, invoking Said, another "relocation of literature" (qtd. in Gikandi 12)—that is, one sensitized to the many levels of translation that a text embodies and to its potential breadth of meanings for a wider constituency including Others. The uncomfortable term, Other—despite its continuing power to disturb—was adopted by our research network⁵ for its persistent historical connection with the

Enlightenment and “the institution of slavery,” as Toni Morrison underscores, “the rights of man and his enslavement” (42). Furthermore, in this “genderized, sexualized, wholly racialized world” (Morrison 4), its influence continues to have an impact upon the production of literary knowledge. Our concern with the radical Other in this context remains a pressing one since, with regard to Europe, it can be argued that still too few Others are engaged in humanities university classrooms and the privileged task, as Simon Gikandi articulates it, “in search of [their] missing past” (18). Otherness is problematised in this context, specifically in relation to the ability of Literature teaching to recover the histories of those trapped and marginalized *within* the mainstream, which is simultaneously the diaspora representative of a history of hostilities and attendant patterns of oppression. To examine further this situation, I draw also on Giles’s consideration of the “transliteration of politics into aesthetic forms” (109) which, I suggest, encompasses some of the complexity of translation involving the creolising aesthetics also of key concern to the present discussion.⁶

Within the literary scholarly space that our classroom represents, teachers remain less concerned with *how* learners experience and conceptualize the world. Or, as Rima Drell Reck writes:

The critic’s ivory tower is no refuge and it cannot long stand inviolate. Literature is drawn from life, whether directly or indirectly, and we cannot teach it as if it existed in a timeless realm where issues are universal and unchanging, where values are unquestioned, where what a man writes is addressed to posterity alone. We as teachers of literature are involved, whether we want to be or not, and we must be aware of this involvement and conscious of its implications. (429)

Yet, barring the rare crisis such as that to which Reck is responding, silence prevails concerning the issue, in favour of considerations of the art and rhetoric of representing that experience as Literature. As a result, the challenge to maintain sight of what might be considered “the political” is considerable even at the level of engaging “the intersection between my life and the novel,” as Gikandi writes of his own experience of Literature (19). Though he does not name it as such, I read Gikandi’s account as a *signifying translated encounter* of the type possible, still, for only a very few black students, descendents of colonized Others, whose marked absence from the Literary humanities university classroom—acknowledged here as limited literary mobility—challenges the *human* in Humanities teaching.⁷ As Cresswell notes, “mobile people are never simply people” (4). Adding to his categories, I wish to suggest that they might also be black Humanities professors, particularly within the disciplines

of Literature and History, Literary Studies PhD candidates, black postgraduates of the Humanities, and so on, though this is all too often still not the case in universities in Britain and in Europe.

I propose to undertake the challenge of underscoring the political by privileging within the present discussion the literary space as the site of struggle between *how* “we experience and conceptualize the world,” sometimes as the *signifying translated encounter*, and *how* we represent that world through words as authors and critics. I refer to such contested space as the central *translational* space that concerns this discussion. Primarily, the term names the writer’s translational space where s/he grapples with the task of translating experience into literary art through a range of strategies and techniques. Of the writers referred to in this paper, for example, Beryl Gilroy writes concerning “[her] choice of existentialism to underpin [her] creativity” (*Leaves* 62). She states also, “when I write, I live and breathe the characters. I take them everywhere with me. Possessed by them, I can hear them talking, arguing with me, often demanding to say more” (61). Importantly, and allowing a valuable glimpse into literary production as “constitutionally impure,” perhaps especially for Black women writers in the diasporic context—radical Other writers with whose work few students have the opportunity to engage in study—Gilroy’s historicizing provides a key:

The fifties saw the first meetings between publishers and Black women in an unequal, yet semi-equal footing. The publishers, editors and other occupants of the inner publishing sanctum had been raised on the stereotype, preserved them and could not see beyond them. Talking with some about my writing brought the discussion to a dark and barren place. Their class-education had not prepared them for encounters with colonial minds. (*Leaves* 211)

Gilroy’s signaling of time, “the fifties” is important and raises the question about whether such “unequal” timing might now be relegated to the past. Similarly key to an understanding of “the political” is the selection process of university classroom courses, teachers and texts allowing or inhibiting readers’ encounter with selected writing, such as that examined here. Typically, though not exclusively, the text may be considered one author’s translation from lived experience to literary representation. Classroom access to such texts affords a larger *translational space* representing a further and differently complex site of struggle involving many bodies: those of academics and students, and multiple translations, as Maria Helena Lima’s inclusive teaching exemplifies in her

collaborative paper with Viv Golding. A consequence is that the classroom becomes a translational space *of scale* and a critical site of struggle concerning interpretation, as Golding and Lima so astutely illustrate. For Caribbean texts examined in this discussion, attendant issues include switching from minority (in diasporic terms) to majority language (even at the level of critical discourse), transposition into the “language of global dominance” (Tolliver 33), with corresponding “ideological weighting,” as well as processes of “domestication” as Lawrence Venuti terms it, or, as our AHRC Translating Cultures research network might foreground it, an inverse domestication to Other cultures. Translation is also interpretation rooted in ideology, as scholars including Joyce Tolliver have emphasized. Thus, in sharing Massey’s concern with spatiality and considering the politics of Literature, I argue that that to which we might refer specifically as the politics of translation, alongside the broader politics of the university classroom (much of which remains largely unexamined) merits attention *particularly* in its impact on mobility within the classroom and subsequent hierarchies of knowledge. Concurring with Barnor Hesse, “to illuminate the political, its institution or modalities,” it is valuable to turn to “experiences and events from Other narratives, from elsewhere or another time” (162).

Underscoring a crucial difference between the English novel on which Caribbean writers were nurtured, and novels by Caribbean authors, novelist George Lamming wrote in 1960: “[T]he West Indian writer does not write for them [the West Indian middle class]; nor does *he* write for himself. *He* writes always for the foreign reader...The word *foreign* means other than West Indian whatever that other might be” (43). Over half a century later, re-evaluating the translation scenario that Lamming identified and specifically in relation to the fiction pinpointed in this discussion, I take particular account of diasporic women writers who from the perspective of a later wave of writing can no longer be ignored in debate concerning Caribbean writing. Reading Lamming—who referred to male writers—the implication that the West Indian writer is preoccupied with translation for the Other merits investigation in order to examine the translational impetus of the new wave of writers not imagined by Lamming, namely, women authors of the region. Interlinking the complexity of Massey’s “web” (inclusive of meanings of domination, subordination, solidarity and cooperation) with an intention to translate, examination of the process of translation involved seems apt. My interest in the question of translating should also be understood as relating to the larger research theme, that of “translating cultures,” and the project from which this paper draws.⁸

I take as fairly uncontroversial the idea of the Caribbean text as simultaneously regional and

diasporic for reasons particularly of colonialism, publishing practice, and diasporic residence.⁹ Perhaps more controversial is my reading in this context of Andrea Levy's *Small Island* as Caribbean. Appropriately inserted within "a long line of English novelists," it may well seem contentious to overlay another category, that of Caribbean diasporic.¹⁰ Nonetheless, the explanation offered here is that each of the selected texts—including Levy's—reconstructs Caribbean lives within the landscape of a re-signifying diaspora. A key question concerns their gendering of diaspora and race: how do the authors translate the spatial interface that their characters negotiate and what does the fictional representation of Caribbean lives "on the move" in Cresswell's terms (3), mean in view of an increasingly transnational representation? Addressing this question, I would like to underscore the suggestion that the writing that concerns this discussion illuminates a radical diasporic (re)turn in terms of its turn to the diaspora. Key features of this may be identified as: firstly, a silence-breaking that given the historical literary absence (Anim-Addo, *Touching* 56) may be considered radical; secondly, a claiming of authority that engages a profound writing against; thirdly, a writing of inter- and trans-culturality; and finally, an elaboration of gender and race relations that is distinctive.

In the light of the above, and exploring the fictional representation of Caribbean mobilities, a search for meanings that take account of an increasingly transnational representation seems appropriate. I heighten this concern with regard to Édouard Glissant's equating of Caribbean creolization with "Relation," that is, "a new, and original dimension allowing each person to be there and elsewhere, rooted and open" (34). I consider how in the authors' gendering of creolisation (Anim-Addo, 2013), diaspora and race, the writers translate the spatial interface that their characters negotiate, especially since, by Glissant's analysis, such characters are already conditioned by their history of Atlantic slavery to a kind of transnationalism through which they are "there and elsewhere, rooted and open" (34). I argue that in memories of London, for example, in Levy's and Gilroy's fiction, the texts represent space not only as culture crossings but also as translational space within the "new triangle" that contests and dislodges notions of identity. Yet, the focus on space in this discussion should not mask the significance of time, for example, at the level of the perception of black women as writers in Britain. Thus the time difference matters between Gilroy, writing from the 1950s—which rendered her an 'anomaly' within a male-dominated field¹¹—and one whose manuscripts would wait for decades to be published in the 1970s, compared with Levy born in the fifties and first published in the nineties. This is important not only in relation to the possibilities or limitations that the narratives offer. Time, a key factor in the canonization of texts, for example, also impacts upon the text's ability to

intervene in classroom spaces. Indeed, time affects not only the space that teaching allows but also the products of cultural and social institutions such as publishing houses. Thus, time/space constructions also determine what is read and how, or, indeed, whether a figure such as the dislocated Creole cosmopolitan materializes at all via texts that might first reach the classroom to render translations possible.

It seems interesting, then, that by tracing the dislocated Creole cosmopolitan—a figure like Levy’s Hortense or Gilroy’s Melda, who, moving across borders, effectively translates the self in terms of identity—the part played by translation in the university classroom might be illuminated. In this light, the classroom as translational space assists the process of translation which might yet be further extended through the judicious selection of classroom texts.

Creole Diasporic Imaginary, Aesthetics and Translational Space

Consideration of a Caribbean or Creole diasporic imaginary directs attention to “Relation,” and also the specific ways in which the selected writers translate the spatial interface that their characters negotiate within the diaspora. Barnor Hesse, writing in the context of the USA suggests:

The diasporic imaginary attempts to synthesize the radical dispersal, displacement and contiguity of populations invested with an African genealogy in the post-1492 world, descending down a line of resistances and affirmations in encounters with contemporary white racism, nineteenth century colonialism and sixteenth- to nineteenth-century enslavement. Recognizing the African diaspora as a social imaginary takes us beyond the empiricist “binary formation—us and the others, a residual construction surviving from the master/slave heritage (Clark 42).” (169)

In consideration of Hesse’s useful focus on the historical, the resistant, and the imaginary as horizons, I should underscore a particular interest in a Creole, diasporic, literary imaginary. I draw also on Ernesto Laclau’s writing of the imaginary as “a horizon: it is not one among other objects but an absolute limit which structures a field of intelligibility” (qtd. in Hesse 169). Assuming such a shared imaginary, I suggest some distinguishing features of this to reside within the representation of women, or, a gendering that is qualitatively different from that of first-wave Caribbean writers celebrated by Lamming.¹² I am referring to an imaginary which places black women characters at or near the centre of the novel where such novels are concerned with a dialogic representation of the Other; heightens

issues of Creole or Caribbean identity; and figures, through its aesthetics, the diaspora as contested space whether public or intimate. My larger questions, then, concern the Creole diasporic imaginary and the rendering of meanings that might be inferred in terms of aesthetics and translational space. This is especially cogent given Glissant's "poetics of Relation," encapsulated in the idea that "each and every" Creole identity is already extended by virtue of the history of Atlantic slavery, "through a relationship with the Other" (11). Glissant's poetics contributes to this discussion not only through the heightened understanding it affords of the Other as already known, but also through his elaboration of "rhizomatic" thinking which is far-reaching and predisposed to cultural exchange, as opposed to the kind of thought which overvalues an idea of "roots" as one directional and best nurtured with notions of purity. Glissant sagely points to the problem for "Relation" in a globalised world when ideas of purity of roots persist.

London, as the new home of Levy's Creole characters in *Small Island*, corresponds to the exile that Glissant highlights as featuring a "circular nomadism," one that entails a crucial experiencing of difference leading to "new forms of identity" (Glissant 18). For those characters who have chosen, in Glissant's terminology, an "errant" lifestyle and moved to London – a form of exile – the reader observes how they find their sense of identity gradually eroded. This is evident, for example, with Levy's Hortense, for whom "England was my destiny" (187) and who initially cannot understand why since she was a teacher and Queenie "only a woman whose living was obtained from the letting of rooms" (191), the latter seemed not to account for such status in the way in which she interacted with her.

Of particular interest to the discussion is Levy's deployment of a coupling of characters as literary device. The strategy affords, more dramatically than the other selected texts, an exploration of the staging of translation for characters and ultimately, readers. It allows a controlled fragmentation of the larger story world broken into mirrored sections depicting white male/ black male/ white female/ black female and so on, enabling crucial dialogue and comparison.¹³ An effect is that *Small Island* presents the characters, Queenie (Victoria) and Bernard Bligh, Hortense and Gilbert Joseph, Queenie and Michael Roberts, as well as twins, Winston and Kenneth, in shifting permutations of Otherness. Set against a backdrop of 1948 Britain with forces from the Second World War, including black GIs and West Indians, Levy's novel performs a shifting Othering through the conflicts that her characters experience. One might ask who are Queenie's Others? Equally, one might speculate on Hortense's Others especially since questioning is so important in the novel in its performing of translation. "What

is a pork pie?” Gilbert asks Queenie, and she shares her cultural understanding through this enabling strategy. Similarly, Queenie asks Hortense, “Do you have pictures... films...where you come from?” (190), and by this means, another translational opportunity comes into view.

The spatializing of *Small Island* has been recognised as important to interpretation of the novel. Sarah Brophy highlights two types of spaces in the text: diasporic space and bodily space. I concur with Brophy that Levy’s London, as diasporic space, represents a series of encounters of contiguity perhaps as much within the house as rented space in which Queenie is landlady, as outside in the streets. Perhaps more interesting for this discussion is Queenie’s bodily space, which becomes significant in relation to a concern with creolisation. That is to say that in contradistinction to neo-slavery texts (such as Austin Clarke’s *The Polished Hoe*, for example,¹⁴ or *Imoinda*, variously and insightfully analysed by Giovanna Covi, Viv Golding and Maria Helena Lima, Lisa Marchi and Mina Karavanta in this collection), indicating the black woman’s bodily space¹⁵ as creolising space, in the diaspora that Levy writes, it is the white woman’s body that is signified as creolising space. My interest derives from Kamau Brathwaite’s elaboration of the process of creolisation which highlights “sex and amorous influences” as integral to the social processes involved (19). Brathwaite writes of the process interlinking firstly, “acculturation,” in which one culture is absorbed by an Other, and secondly, “interculturalisation,” involving an intermixing that is to some extent reciprocated (11).

Ideas of “acculturation” and “interculturalisation” expand upon and substantiate Brathwaite’s earlier proposition that “the most significant (and lasting) inter-cultural creolisation took place” within the “intimate” space of “sexual relations” (303). While the writing of intimacy is perhaps markedly absent from Caribbean women’s texts, I argue that intimacy is pivotal to the process and nature of translation across cultures that Levy’s text represents.¹⁶ The novel turns on Queenie’s intimacy with the Jamaican airman, Michael. I have already suggested also that Queenie demands through her questioning a translation of the Other and that translative encounters are prismatic in the novel. In order to consider the creole aesthetics that emerge, it is of particular interest to examine the Creole narrative of desire that Michael shares with Queenie leading up to their intimacy. Levy writes:

“We have bird in Jamaica,” he said, softly as a bedtime story. “A humming-bird—our national bird.” His breath was on my cheek. “It is very small but beautiful—blue, green, purple red—every colour you can see in its tiny feathered body. And when it flies, its wings flicker so fast your eye cannot see them. It hovers—its

wings beating to hold it still—while, steady as a man with a gun, it sticks its long yellow beak into the flower to feed.” (247)

Michael’s desire articulated through the metaphor of the humming bird is not only realised in the words of seduction that he weaves. His erotic play is also physical, bringing fingers and hands into delicate contact with Queenie’s face and hair. The section concludes: “And as his hand fluttered downward, his fingers delicately caressed my hair” (247).

Of the many ways in which the novel sets up translation across ethnicities and in the diasporic space, what does this particular instance of verbal and physical mastery illustrate in terms of Creole aesthetics? Importantly, a particular choreography of movement, metaphorical storytelling and intimate questioning precedes Michael’s seductive storytelling. The sequence involves card playing, holding Queenie’s gaze, asking her to “stay awhile with me,” inviting her to ask all the questions she had been holding back, moving physically closer, questioning her about whether she was not curious about him, and touching her with his foot. If, as Mary Louise Pratt argues, contact zones are “social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each Other, *often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination*,” (4, my emphasis) who is dominant and who is subordinate in this play of interracial intimacy?

Finally, in answer to Queenie’s question “Where are you from?” (246) Michael’s response, beginning with “We have bird in Jamaica” (247), builds to a stroking of her hair and becomes a prelude to their intimacy out of which a child will be born. Challenging though it is to approach the notion of a creole aesthetic in the context of intimacy, itself distorted by plantation realities, that is no reason to avoid it. The totality of Michael’s nation language narrative mesmerises, with its rhythms and repetitions. For example, he refers to “wings” that either “flicker” or “flutter.” Read in the light of the Creole (Jamaican) lilt in the opening sentence, there is a rhythmic insistence in his visualizing of the humming bird’s journey from Jamaica to the “rubble and bricks” of bombed-out England, spotted, for example, in London’s Trafalgar Square, and all the while, the exotic bird (in the diasporic context) is tracked in its fabulous quest, as Michael puts it, to “sample the nectar of English flowers.” The double entendre appears hard to miss though arguably the intensity of Queenie’s desire and her anticipation of a “perverse erotic encounter,” to borrow from Kathryn Perry (173), perhaps converge as she hears this overt statement of Michael’s erotic desire.¹⁷ At the same time, Levy leaves hanging the questions: whose erotic fantasies are played out in the scene and where might their origins be located?

Re-presenting Caribbean Transnational Lives “On the Move”

It is significant that accruing to such portrayal of Caribbean lives, much is revealed concerning identity “on the move,” or translation of the self in terms of identity, as I have referred to such mobility. Glissant’s theory of “Relation” assists our understanding of the process not only by identifying the origins of false knowledge of the Other. More importantly, it underscores the contemporary encounter and the stage beyond the moment of erosion of rooted identity, in the light of the nature of globalised lifestyles particularly in metropolitan centres. Thus, while Levy’s “errant” characters find their “compact entities” being destroyed in such encounters, they also experience the beginnings of “new forms of identity” albeit characteristically “difficult” and of “uncertain births” (18). In other words, this may represent moments of crisis for each character. At the same time, it also resonates with an increasingly urgent phenomenon in European and other cities contemplating a crisis of globalization including an accommodation to black bodies, perhaps especially the male body. In addition, that the selected texts allow insight into ways in which identity from the perspective of “Relation” refuses the stasis of stereotyping is important. Gilroy’s *In Praise of Love and Children*, for example, perhaps less intricate in the structure it provides for translation across cultures, nonetheless represents Melda Hayley, the protagonist, as arriving in London to discover, one day later, “a tall, blonde woman with eyes as blue and hard as fossils of aquamarine” (18), who walks into her brother’s bedroom betraying an intimacy that seems to her to be inexplicable.

Although Trudi introduces herself as Melda’s brother’s “friend,” Melda can only respond to Trudi as “Mistress Lady,” attributing to her an elevated and distanced status. Furthermore, Melda grows even more bewildered when she begins to appreciate that her brother Arnie is, as she states, “in bed with the enemy who made his father leave home and turned Ma crazy” (26). In this direct translation of Melda’s perception, Gilroy explains her protagonist’s inability to embrace Trudi, both in terms of racist colonial behaviour directly experienced within her family and also—for Trudi is German—in terms of anti-German colonial propaganda. Gilroy has stated explicitly her concern with what she calls “fact-fiction” and Melda is evidently a product of such imagination for Gilroy’s autobiography *Black Teacher* had been published two decades earlier in 1976 to present her own story of being a black teacher in post-war London. It seems important that while both Gilroy’s Melda, and Levy’s Hortense are teachers trained within the colonial system, both re-present a particular myopia leading to incomprehension of the global despite their regional experience of an already globalised world in which, as Glissant has taught through his elaboration of “A Poetics of Relation,” “each and every identity is extended through

a relationship with the other” (11). Unaware of such meanings, Melda finds herself unable to comprehend the possibility of Trudi as a sister-in law, and in the face of that likelihood, positions herself for “war” between them since she has no intention to be open to the Other she recognises in Trudi.

While both authors represent a complex Othering and intentionality, for Gilroy, as for Levy, diasporic space is also claustrophobic and contested space where the new migrant must negotiate a home of sorts within and outside of which whiteness constitutes an imminent threat. In Melda’s case, whiteness also implicates the threat of familial poverty, at once personal and life-changing, even leading to the loss of life of those for whom she cares deeply. What Melda remembers most acutely is that to which Hesse refers as a process in which the black subject descends “down a line of resistances” (169). Experience has taught Melda that her role is to resist many things, including the dominant meanings of whiteness, leading invariably—in her experience—to exploitation. For this reason she is unable to reach towards Trudi or to reciprocate Trudi’s stated desire for openness even though, as Gilroy writes, “it was usual in the yards [in the Caribbean] for women to rush to the rescue of other women” (32). Despite her experience of such affective bonds, Melda’s realisation brings with it shock on discovering that Trudi is about to have her brother’s child, so that hers is the interrogative demand, “a child who will hate its black half?” While this question can be differentiated from that posed by Levy’s narrative in relation to the child born to Queenie, the reader finds replicated in both texts the white woman’s bodily space—in the diaspora—as creolising space in terms of its giving birth, itself a birthing of alterity. At the same time, it is notable that while the white woman’s body offers an affirmation, however temporary, of the black male, there is no similar intimate encounter for the black woman.¹⁸

The quest for protagonists Melda and Hortense is one that is strongly differentiated from other characters in the respective novels. Arguably, Hortense, like Melda, “knew nothing about making a relationship with a man which would grow in strength, flourish and endure” (Gilroy 51-2). Rather, any affirmation these upwardly mobile black women protagonists sought through the change that immigration represented was related to their status as teachers. Through their seeking to improve their mind and status, the authors also present a considered or elaborated gender-relational aesthetics. Melda, for example, states: “Suddenly I realised that my life had taught me to love women, but left me ignorant of men” (52). Any expectations regarding relationships and attendant intimacy had become “sublimated,” to use Gilroy’s term. The black women characters would seek not affirmation through

sexual encounters but “better life chances” including that of the mind. In this respect, the protagonists, Levy’s Hortense and Gilroy’s Melda are different again as not only women subjects with agency but also women who believe their intellectual development to be an important priority above any need for intimacy. It is interesting, also, for this discussion that Melda’s journey or “circular nomadism” as Glissant would refer to it, does not end in London. Rather, the novel closes on her desire for mobility to another diasporic space, the USA.

Set in a different diasporic space, Velma Pollard’s eponymous *Karl* opens with the epigraph, below, indicating a focus on a cosmopolitan Creole subject who is male:

Im is a self-made man

Im mek imself

Das why im no mek good (26)

Pollard’s protagonist Karl is a character who, while no more “self-made” than Melda or Hortense, must first confront himself in the diasporic space only to find a divided self and urgent questions of class to be addressed rather than issues of race. Karl’s diasporic space is that of Toronto where as a student he faces “three years in a different country” and where “Bright Canada not like grey England we had read about” (46). That there are no complications for Karl about ideas and expectations of “motherland” and empire does not eliminate the *dis*-ease to which diasporic life gives rise. Rather, as Karl states it, the problem is, “I had to leave my Land, Masters, to see my land” (48). More specifically, through the globalizing experience of travel and diasporic sojourn, Karl discovers himself as Other in terms of class identity. For Karl, his girlfriend, Pearl, a fellow Jamaican and the only other Jamaican on campus, appears to be the problem who triggers an acute crisis of identity when he overhears her, as follows:

“Karl want us to get engaged”, she was saying. “He’s really a nice guy you know, and I am sort of gone on him too but ... You know his grandfather went to work on the Panama canal...you know sort of like farm work to America. I can’t see Mama dealing with that. Worse yet how she will understand why his mother is Miss Grant, and that she is a higgler in Gordon Town market.”

I didn’t know what to imagine on the face of her little audience.

I didn’t wait to hear their comments. (50-1)

That Pearl's statement proves to be at least as devastating for Karl as any racist encounter is important for concerns with the dialogic in Pollard's writing. In this instance, Karl's desire to "get engaged" signals what might be understood as love and with it some reciprocity, indicated in Pearl's confession that she is "sort of gone on him too." Yet, his desire for an ethical relationship with the one he loves, itself seldom represented within the literature, is radically undermined when his accidental eavesdropping reveals his own Otherness of which he had been unaware. While the text does not directly address racism, Pearl's "little audience" is white and the nature of her disclosure in the face of whiteness has a devastating effect on Karl, for it is to this audience that she reveals Karl's socio-economic details concerning his migrant worker grandfather and his market woman mother, whom he now understands to be not only of low social status but also a bearer of children out of wedlock, the latter a stigma he appears not to have fully appreciated. Thus Pearl's admission complicates issues of difference between the two even as it raises ethical questions. Is economic globalization to be valued above affective bonds, or national solidarity, for example? In effect, such challenges in diasporic space destabilise Karl and ultimately fracture his identity. What Pollard raises in this fragmented narrative goes beyond class issues and a critique of love, for in diasporic space and separated from his home in Jamaica, Karl must discard his Jamaican connection and his dream of marriage to re-assess himself. Pollard allows us to see how Karl cannot be reconciled but is fundamentally harmed in the contradiction of the moment when he understands himself as not only stigmatised but also considered so inferior that his beloved objectifies him to a gathering that he might himself consider (racially) Other, thus rendering him the displaced Other.

If the reader can readily identify Hortense's Other or Melda's, who is Karl's Other? Is it Pearl who seems a natural partner ready-made for him until he overhears her speaking so apparently disparagingly of him? Is it Daphne who accommodates to becoming a banker's wife by marrying him but refuses to bear his children on the grounds that she "couldn't bear to imagine any little finger marks all about the wall and any how much wee wee on the carpet?" (102). Is Karl the Other in this text, unknown and misunderstood because, as Gilroy suggests in another context, plantation experience made it impossible for black and white people to know each other but also for black women to know black men? Certainly Karl comes to know sexual pleasure with the woman he subsequently marries but the body he comes to know intimately also represents bodily space that is restricted in that Daphne's bodily space refuses to bear the Creole child that he expects to have.

A Re-signifying Diaspora: Disturbing Identity

Comparing these texts allows some key understanding of the ways in which the writers, radical Others, suggest in their reconstructing of Caribbean lives that diasporic space re-signifies identity. Thus, while Levy's Hortense must discover herself in London as not quite the figure of erudition she had imagined herself to be in Jamaica, Pollard's Karl becomes fundamentally disturbed by his re-signifying encounter in diasporic Toronto. Pearl's revelation not only renders him unable to face her—the woman he had hoped to marry—it triggers a signal transmutation of identity which leaves him unable to face himself. For the purposes of this discussion, such fundamental re-signification allows sight of the range of translation of self that diasporic encounters engender. At the same time, while each writer genders diaspora and race in her own distinctive way, how she translates the spatial interface that the characters negotiate is important. In this respect, perhaps Pollard's writing points most strongly to the role of writer as translator. Unconcerned with race, she translates in any case for a society to which Karl, Pearl and Daphne all belong, despite their sojourn in diasporic space and their circular nomadism for varying periods in terms of years. I have written elsewhere of Caribbean women's writings as "auto-theorising" texts. By "auto-theorising" I refer to "a particular self-referentiality in writing related either to the individual or collective self" (266). This feature is especially "evident in Caribbean texts which infuse cultural knowledge of story-telling as partially didactic and thus refuse literature as wholly or largely entertainment" (278). Pollard's *Karl*, for example, navigates an unmistakable Creole aesthetic to put its message across. Thus, Karl summarizes as follows what he learns from overhearing Pearl:

And yet it was she who was to upset my apple cart which should probably have been upset years before, and send me on the first of those double-thinks, hunting behind people's honesties...for honesty. She made my cap start not to fit, my zoot zoot feel too tight. These days they would say she "raised my consciousness". I had to leave my Land, Masters, to see my land. (48)

In the process of re-signifying diaspora as a space in which knowledge of the self (and of Others) is extended, Pollard's text theorises itself, telling the reader that the narrative is about learning from one's experience. It underscores, also, that such knowledge is best gained "on the move" or in the discomfort zone typified by living in the diaspora.

Critical reading of these diasporic texts in our university classrooms and the opportunities they allow for translation and legitimation matter. Among the reasons for this is that, thinking to the future and setting aside the fears of literary conservatives, the Literature we study needs to be more inclusive and to be seen as such. In the UK, for example, an inclusive debate has barely begun, as indicated by the discussions, “Saving Black British literature” and “Why is my Curriculum White,” that foreground the voices of black British authors and readers.¹⁹ I referred, above, to Literature as an “impure” category and in this sense decision makers can no longer avoid the many tensions indicative of debate that considers who studies the Literature we offer and who remains excluded. A path to a wider classroom audience and more enriching pedagogy is precisely through the kind of translating of cultures that has been largely unrecognised, repressed or silenced. This is not the least because in the texts, translation is offered by those traditionally considered to be Other by mainstream cultures, but who actually re-present “copresences” within the culture (Pratt 7). Such texts afford an urgent peep *behind* the looking glass, where this research has been located, for the purpose of aiding all our reflection. Moreover, such reflection points to new knowledge about our shared pasts and possible futures.

Conclusion: The Diasporic (Re)turn

By highlighting in the title of this paper a “diasporic (re)turn,” I have also called into question an impetus within the writing that affords translation in terms of negotiating meanings related to experience in the diaspora as contact zone. Since diasporic space demands a renegotiation of identity, it might also be considered space that allows insight into the translations that particular subjects have to negotiate. Key to the translation of culture offered by the selected texts is the transposition of characters from home to diasporic space in which the dynamics of the unfamiliar as sometimes challenging, often hostile, come into play. At the same time, selected for the university classroom, access to depictions of defamiliarised diasporic spaces is gained imaginatively, by virtue of being peopled by characters considered by the mainstream as Other. That is to say, it is shown through the safe translational space that Literature can provide to reveal the histories of those marginalised behind the looking-glass and to attend to the needs of globalized communities, to reflect equally upon themselves as well as upon Others. Paradoxically, as I hope to have illustrated, this is achieved through writings that centre the Other as protagonists and central characters and whose main concern, since they represent “co-presences” within the diaspora, lies with the self, albeit perceived as Other by the majority reader. The selected texts, in translating Creole culture, offer a nuanced representation of the

Other in complex situations simultaneously as Other and *not* Other. In effect, the fiction achieves this multiple mirroring, including that which is “behind the looking-glass” by virtue of its writing of the diasporic space. In addition, since memory plays a key role in the reconstructing of such diasporic lives, the language emerging from the text’s writing of the radical diasporic (re)turn is also one that draws on Creole aesthetics, including an elaborated gender-focused aesthetic, dependent on the author’s individual style and sense of audience.

In concluding, I would underscore the turn to renegotiate the self, or as Gilroy puts it in relation to the selected texts, the “every Black woman” subject. In this turn or radical diasporic (re)turn to the black self as representation, I suggest, lies an openness or perhaps an invitation to dialogue that these texts appear to mark. In many respects, this is an extension of the dialogue that began within the region’s literature with its particular colonial genealogy in which the black woman was largely absent and then marginalised. The texts from which I have selected demand a different dialogic negotiation and offer a qualitatively different knowledge of self: gendered, raced, and mindful. Central to the translation process is a radical re-visioning which re-positions the black woman as subject. As the texts illustrate, she is being written anew as professional, as individual, as transnational, as complex, though not necessarily divorced from her community. In effect, time and space together shed a different light on Lamming’s observation, above, so that there now seems to be little doubt that the West Indian writer in reconstructing Caribbean lives is writing for herself and with an acute sense of a widening community of “Relation”.

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Notes

¹ I write, for example, of Mary Prince, whose publication qualifies her “doubly as the ‘radical other’ [and] whose silence-breaking began a tradition of African-Caribbean women’s writing” (2008: 260).

² Here, I wish to play on the ideas of, on the one hand, a turn – on the part of the author – to the diaspora for the material content of the text and on the other hand, a simultaneous, almost inevitable engagement with or return to the past in negotiating that material.

³ See, <http://www.ref.ac.uk/>. 9 November 2013. See also, debate about the effects of this, particularly Marina Warner, ‘Why I Quit’, <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v36/n17/marina-warner/diary> 12 November, 2014.

⁴ Giles refers to such teaching as the “routine’ basis of instruction in English Literature” (101).

⁵ This collection of essays draws on the research of our international Network focusing on ‘Behind the Looking-glass: ‘Other’ cultures within Translating Cultures,’ funded by the AHRC, 2011-2013. See, <http://www.gold.ac.uk/caribbean/behind-the-looking-glass/>. 9 November 2013.

⁶ Although Giles’s emphases are different and he is concerned with Cotezee’s oeuvre, I draw from his writing an important concern with the political in connection with the literary.

⁷ I write this as possibly the UK’s only black or African-heritage English Literature professor privileged to have observed the pattern of black students in English Literature university classrooms over two decades. See also Anim-Addo & Back, 2008. <http://www.english.heacademy.ac.uk/explore/publications/newsletters/newsissue15/joanback.htm>. 24 November 2014.

⁸ An earlier version of this paper was first presented at the 10th Biennial Australian Association for Caribbean Studies Conference, La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia, February 2013.

⁹ Interestingly, Lamming’s concern with first-wave writers such as Selvon and Mittelholzer would be different again.

¹⁰ Mike Phillips, *The Guardian*, Saturday 14 February, 2004. See, “Roots manoeuvre: Mike Phillips salutes Andrea Levy’s honest narrative, *Small Island*” <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2004/feb/14/featuresreviews.guardianreview10>. 10 November 2013.

¹¹ Gilroy’s anomalous position was partly that of a woman writing when the field was especially male, as Selvon’s view in this essay highlights. See also Courtman 69.

¹² In Selvon’s *The Lonely Londoners*, for example, women characters are notably underdeveloped.

¹³ See also in this collection Laura Fish’s article elaborating on how the mirror functions in relation to black characters and writers.

¹⁴ See my discussion of *The Polished Hoe* in “Gendering Creolisation: Creolising Affect.”

¹⁵ M. NourbeSe Philip refers, for example, to the “space in between” connecting body, plantation and landscape. See, her *A Genealogy of Resistance*.

¹⁶ Gilroy suggests that intimacy was almost a secretive part of Caribbean life. I would add to this that the secrecy of it may be understood in terms of plantation realities for black lives. See my “Gendering Creolisation: Creolising Affect.”

¹⁷ I cite here Kathryn Perry who writes of the ‘perverse’ erotic encounter as a ‘thrilling excursion into the landscape of inter-racial desire when it represents ‘forbidden love’ (173).

¹⁸ Riley’s *Romance* which explores inter-racial relationships suggests that intimacy does not of itself carry the affirmation that the black woman might expect.

¹⁹ See, <http://wordsofcolour.co.uk/saving-black-british-literature/>. 24 November 2014. See also, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dscx4h2l-Pk>. 24 November 2014.