

West Indian Writers Who Do Not "Translate As Well": The Case of Trinidadian Writer Earl Lovelace

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Abstract: This article discusses some of the major factors that can potentially work as agents of censorship in the promotion of postcolonial literary texts. In the discussion, centred on West Indian writing, the writer's location, choice of topics and languages are foregrounded as the three major factors that account for the lack of promotion of a particular variant of West Indian writing. In particular, this paper is centred on the dearth of translations of texts by Trinidadian writer Earl Lovelace. The article argues that the figure of the literary translator has the capacity to act as a catalyst for change in the collective endeavour of reversing the aforementioned imbalance in the West Indian literary field.

Keywords: West Indian literature, literary translation, location, Earl Lovelace

Résumé : Cet article examine certains des principaux facteurs qui peuvent intervenir comme agents de censure dans la promotion de textes littéraires postcoloniaux. Dans cette analyse de textes antillais, nous dégageons trois facteurs qui expliquent la faible promotion d'une variante particulière de la littérature issue de cette région : l'emplacement de l'écrivain, le thème et la langue de l'oeuvre. Nous nous intéressons tout particulièrement à l'absence de traductions des oeuvres de l'écrivain trinitarien, Earl Lovelace. Nous affirmons que le traducteur littéraire peut intervenir dans un projet collectif visant à corriger ce déséquilibre dans le monde littéraire antillais.

Mots clé : littérature antillaise, traduction littéraire, emplacement, Earl Lovelace.

Resumo: Este artigo discute alguns dos principais fatores que atuam como agentes potenciais de censura na promoção de textos literários pós-coloniais. Centrando-se na escrita antilhana, a localização do escritor, os tópicos e as línguas são tomados como os três principais fatores responsáveis pela falta de promoção de uma variante específica da escrita antilhana. De forma específica, este trabalho focaliza a falta de traduções dos textos do escritor trinitino Earl Lovelace. Argumentamos que o tradutor literário pode agir como uma figura de mudança no empenho coletivo de se reverter o desequilíbrio descrito no campo da literatura antilhana.

Palavras-chave: literatura antilhana, tradução literária, localização, Earl Lovelace.

Resumen: En este artículo se abordan algunos de los factores principales que pueden, de manera potencial, actuar como agentes de censura en la promoción de textos literarios poscoloniales. En la discusión, que se centra en la escritura proveniente de las islas del Caribe, se ponen de relieve la ubicación del escritor, los temas y los idiomas como los tres factores principales para la falta de promoción de una variante particular de la escritura de las islas del Caribe. En particular, este ensayo se enfoca en el reducido número de traducciones de textos del escritor de Trinidad Earl Lovelace. El artículo plantea que el traductor literario tiene la capacidad de actuar como figura de cambio, parte de un esfuerzo colectivo para revertir la desigualdad con respecto al campo literario de las islas del Caribe.

Palabras clave: literatura de las islas del Caribe, traducción literaria, ubicación, Earl Lovelace

Representing the Caribbean: topics, language and location

The promotion of postcolonial texts requires that these be tailored to the Western reading public; thus, only those products that aim at decoding difference are considered worthy of investment. More specifically, in the case of the West Indies, literature is deemed eligible for promotion only when it is written from the diaspora, tackles topics that the Western reader is quite familiarized with or can easily identify as "Caribbean", and, finally, is not written in any of the different Creole languages – or at the very least when the use thereof is limited.

In terms of the topics valued for publication, first of all, texts that do not assume any prior knowledge of the socio-political history of the region are preferred. Mainstream writings are those that focus on a limited range of topics in order to conform to the hegemonic stereotypes of the region and portray the Caribbean as an exotic, festive, disorganized society. In this respect, Trinidadian writer and journalist Raymond Ramcharitar, in an article published on August 20, 2014 in *The Trinidad and Tobago Guardian*, "White Girls Rock Caribbean Literature", laments the continuous repetition of tropes found in a lot of Caribbean contemporary art and expected by the Western cultural world. He argues that "a frightening amount of contemporary Caribbean art" contains the tropes expected by the metropole, such as "primitivism, 'festive' consciousness, [or] disorder", which "suffuse regional/Trini cultural orthodoxy, and are reproduced endlessly" (Ramcharitar). For his part, Guyanese-British writer David Dabydeen has recognized the pressure from mainstream metropolitan publishing houses to stop "folking up" the literature "or else you perish in the backwater of small presses, you don't get published by the 'quality' presses, and you don't receive the corresponding patronage of media-hype" (12-13). In fact, it could be argued that this pressure towards mimicry, to which Dabydeen suggests Caribbean writers are asked to conform in order to enter the mainstream Western literary world, is a requirement for any non-Western writer wishing to publish with a mainstream publishing house. Thus, non-Western or so-called ethnic writers who do not produce simplified texts in which the Western reader can see him- or herself reflected, are likely to see their chances at pursuing a successful writing career severely diminished.

In terms of language, any representation of otherness is marketed and promoted provided that a Western readership is accommodated. Paul Gilroy explains that the Western culture industry is prepared to make investments only in certain types of otherness. These investments have a very limited scope since, as Gilroy describes, their eligibility is conditioned upon these cultural products offering a "user-friendly, house-trained, and marketable 'reading' or translation of the stubborn vernacular" (242). The promotion of or investment in postcolonial literatures is partly limited to writings from the West by migrant or diasporic writers that are, moreover, written exclusively in a European language. Thus, if texts hold any traces of non-European languages that might force the reader to become aware of linguistic diversity – a trait that characterises the majority of postcolonial linguistic contexts – these ought to be decoded so as to offer a user-friendly version for the Western reader and thus be eligible for promotion.

In the case of the West Indies, due to its complex linguistic situation, language can be said to play a crucial role in literature. Joanne Akai explains that West Indian writers, being primarily Creole speakers, have not had the same relationship with English as monolingual English speakers. According to Akai, this is reflected in many West Indian texts, which "constitute an intricately woven textile of the Creole and

English languages, and of Creole and English narration traditions" (175). As Akai recognizes, language enriches West Indian literature and distinguishes it from other literatures in English. However, despite the fact that Creole is the medium that most faithfully records people's worldview, the tradition of writing novels or short stories in the West Indies is shaped by the culture of the official language, English (Hodge, "Earl Lovelace" 47). Thus, what has been most common in West Indian writings that have made it in the West is a kind of literature that uses a language shaped for a non-West Indian audience. Creole is limited to phrases or sentences that give the exotic flavour expected by the Western reader, but its presence is almost unnoticed and certainly unobtrusive to the English-speaking reader. In general, therefore, it can be argued that the preferred texts have been those which use highly decreolized versions of the different Creole languages, thereby creating the impression that these are simply dialects of English, or worse, deformations of the Standard language.

In terms of location, the reality is that the great majority of West Indian writers are not island-based writers and this cannot be disassociated from the fact that location plays a critical role in the privileging and promotion of West Indian writing. As Allison Donnell argues, the preference for certain West Indian authors over others is explained by whether these authors have or have not retained an island base; that is, whether they are diasporic or non-diasporic writers. Donnell argues that the focus is on the cosmopolitan rather than the rooted, the traveller rather than the dweller (78). This imbalance is of great concern since the different perspectives these two sets of authors provide are simply not interchangeable.

Donnell traces the origins of this disproportionate focus on diasporic writers to what she refers to as "the Black Atlantic moment", referring to the decade of the 1990s, which saw a rise in popularity of diaspora studies and transnationalism. She argues that the emergence of the Black Atlantic model, best articulated by Paul Gilroy's 1993 study *The Black Atlantic*, signalled the beginning of a phase of neglect of writers writing from the Caribbean. In particular, Donnell claims that due to the preference for diaspora studies and the transnational approaches brought forward by the Black Atlantic model,

writers such as Brodber, Hodge, Senior and Lovelace, who retained an island base in terms of the focus of their work, were (and remain) far less discussed and critically attended to than Kincaid, Danticat and Phillips among others whose work spoke to the critical demands of diaspora criticism more loudly and clearly. (86)

For Donnell, as a consequence of a disproportionate focus on Caribbean migrant literature, those writers who have stayed in the region have been disregarded. Overall, this uneven cultural exchange in the West Indian literary field can be said to be a reflection of a general imbalance between metropolitan and peripheral countries.

Earl Lovelace

Earl Lovelace is one of the few West Indian writers who have chosen to stay in the region. The result of being a full-time resident of Trinidad is that Lovelace is less known in literary circles outside the region than his migrant counterparts. Bill Schwartz argues that Lovelace's reputation in the West is underwritten by a marked ambiguity.

He is a recognized author outside the Caribbean but at the same time he is received as a "regional" or "local" author. On the one hand, Lovelace

wins international prizes; he is published by prestige houses; he has access to smart venues for his readings in cities across the Anglophone world. On the other, outside the Caribbean many an intellectual well versed in contemporary literature won't have read him, or maybe won't have come across him. His works are seldom available in bookstores [...] his reputation is subsumed by his being received as a regional – a Caribbean – author. (xiii)

This ambiguity might be due to the fact that Lovelace's writings are embedded in the political and cultural frameworks of the region, and aim at offering a vision of the Caribbean as a place which is just as much a part of the world as any other. His work, which is not concerned with translating the Caribbean reality for a foreign audience, looks inwards and places the Caribbean at centre stage. As a non-diasporic writer, Lovelace offers a national perspective in a national medium and has no intention of adapting his fiction to a foreign, or more specifically Western, readership.

Lovelace's attitude seems to parallel that of his character Philo, the calypsonian in his novel *The Dragon Can't Dance*. When Philo performs in the calypso tent during Carnival season – a time when the number of tourists increases dramatically in Trinidad – unlike other calypsonians who would offer subdued versions of their calypsos to please and translate Trinidadian culture to the foreign audience, Philo does not adapt his calypsos because "he didn't sing for the tourists then, if they came in the tent to listen, let them walk with a Trinidad dictionary" (*The Dragon* 229). Instead of adapting his calypsos for the tourists to understand, Philo's calypsos fulfil the traditional role of the calypso. Philo acknowledges the burning need to write and sing about the Caribbean experience without concessions, and in so doing effectively succeeds in fulfilling the traditional role of the calypsonian, the ordinary people's spokesperson. Lovelace, too, performs a similar role through his writing. As West Indian artists, both Philo and Lovelace, calypsonian and writer, choose not to adapt their performances and fictions to please a foreign audience.

Lovelace argues that rejecting the option of exile and choosing to stay and write from Trinidad and Tobago grants him a privileged perspective:

My advantage over writers who have migrated is that I am more acutely aware of what is taking place here now. This enables me to address myself to themes in this society with much more confidence and depth; to present a Caribbean perspective on the world; advance our language and sensibility, undermining and destroying those negative images of self imposed upon us by a view of history, which has hitherto presented us as objects. (*Growing* vi)

Lovelace's texts offer a distinct perspective from those of his migrant counterparts. A perspective such as Lovelace's is important not because having stayed he is more entitled to represent the Caribbean, but because different perspectives are simply not interchangeable, though they are certainly equally important for the West Indian literary field.

Lovelace's writings are foregrounded as an extremely important intervention in the Caribbean because they prove that the Caribbean nation is also a place where people can build a life. In his writings Lovelace contests the frequent constructions that establish the perceived impossibility of residing in the Caribbean and the pervading idea of the region as a non-place populated by non-people who have created nothing – a construction that ultimately contributes to keeping the region dependent on Western approval and tutelage.

Translating Earl Lovelace

Earl Lovelace would fall into the category of postcolonial writers who, because they have retained a national focus and do not straddle worlds, do not "translate as well" from a hegemonic perspective (Boehmer 239). In fact, only his novel *The Dragon Can't Dance* has been so far translated into French, German, Dutch, Italian and Japanese.

In a personal interview I conducted with the author in 2013, Lovelace offered two major recommendations for a prospective translator of his novels. First, he suggested that the translator ought to be able to grasp "a sense of the characters", and secondly, he expressed his concern over retaining the integrity of the Creole used in his writings. As regards his characters, it is important to note that the protagonists in Lovelace's novels are either Port of Spain slum-dwellers or peasants in rural communities. Lovelace argues that these sections of the West Indian population are, in fact, the royalty of the country. In the case of *The Dragon Can't Dance*, he suggests that the translator should understand that poverty is not the central force in their lives:

[Poverty] is a factor but for me what it [*The Dragon Can't Dance*] is talking about is that they are seeking to assert themselves as human beings. For me this is important to understand and not to see them just as poor people here but to see them in that other dimension. (Personal Interview)

According to the author, the characters living in Calvary Hill¹ might all share a kind of poverty but it is nonetheless a poverty defined as "regal poverty" (Personal Interview). The emphasis in Lovelace's oeuvre is not on the characters' poverty but on their humanity and the struggles and achievements that make them royal and allow them to be defined as "everlasting monument[s] to human endurance and human dignity" (*Growing* 37). In his latest novel, *Is Just a Movie*, the author provides a list of some of the members of the Trinidadian royalty:

Then what about the ordinary people who resisted the colonial pressure, whose resistance gave us a sense of self, whose artistry for our humanity and whose struggle turned plantations into battlefields for humanness? The stickfighters and the masquerade players, the dragon and jab molassie, the Midnight Robbers, King Sailors and moko jumbie, all those maskers who come out of nowhere to speak for who we are,

¹ Calvary Hill is the setting of Lovelace's *The Dragon Can't Dance*. It is a hill overlooking the capital of the country, Port of Spain, mainly populated by African-descended people at the bottom of the economic ladder.

the casonian and the creators of steelpan, the dancers of Orisha and the Shouters? (*Is Just* 324)

Among the elements that make up this list of traditions created in Trinidad and Tobago by the ordinary people, we find some of the cultural art forms that Lovelace has systematically vindicated in his oeuvre. This list of Creole cultural manifestations includes folk traditions related to carnivalesque traditional masquerade characters, stickfighting, calypso and steelpan and African-derived religions. These are all integrated into Lovelace's work – to varying degrees and according to the thematic focus – with particular emphasis on Carnival and African-derived religions. It is important for the translator to be aware that these Creole art forms define the characters and that their presence is of central importance in the source text. Thus, in order to maintain the "sense of the characters", on the one hand, the translator needs to understand the concept of "regal poverty", and on the other, the target text should avoid a generic or simplified portrayal of this section of the population and their art forms.

In terms of language, it is significant that Lovelace's texts make use of Trinidadian English Creole (hereafter TrinEC) alongside the formal and official language of Caribbean Trinidadian English (hereafter TrinE). A brief description of the Trinidadian linguistic environment is now in order. The linguistic context of Trinidad and Tobago, as that of the majority of the West Indies, is characterized by an official and formal language, in this case TrinE, a variety of Standard English. However, the language of everyday interaction is a Creole language, in this case TrinEC, a variety of Caribbean English-lexicon Creole. Since Creole, the first language for the majority of Trinidadians, is not recognized as a national language, its inclusion does not only serve to make the work more realistic, but more importantly, it represents a means of challenging the higher status of Standard English. By using TrinEC, a full-fledged language that represents a form of resistance, the author gives validity to what had been considered for a long time, and unfortunately is still considered by some today, as a form of broken English. Therefore, its inclusion can be read as part of the enterprise of asserting the validity of Caribbean culture and "extricating Caribbean culture from the realm of the unofficial and unavowed" (Hodge, "Earl Lovelace" 5).

Moreover, the two varieties found in Trinidad, TrinE and TrinEC, although distinct in nature, are lexically related to English. As linguist Jo-Anne S. Ferreira explains, TrinEC is considered to be separate from TrinE and other Englishes in its morpho-syntax, but similar at the level of lexicon (Ferreira, 1997). Consequently, they are for the most part mutually intelligible languages. This is increasingly the case given the fact that modern TrinEC is a heavily decreolized variety with just a few vestiges of the old basilect that is further away from the Standard. This fact might mislead a translator not capable of distinguishing TrinEC in its written form into believing that Creole is not present much or at all in Lovelace's writings. Moreover, since Lovelace does not use the more easily recognizable phonetic representations of TrinEC, the translator needs to be equipped with a knowledge of Creole linguistics so as to be able to discover what is hidden in the Caribbean writer's use of language. In this regard, Merle Hodge's defence of the importance of Creole linguistics in the West Indian literary field is also significant for translators:

It is time that the years of work carried out in the field of Creole linguistics be put to greater use in the literary field. There are three

groups that need to have more concrete, more scientific knowledge of the language: writers using Creole as medium; literary critics analysing West Indian literature; and publishers who edit West Indian literature. (Hodge, "Earl Lovelace" 152)

Translators are arguably another group that needs more concrete and scientific knowledge of Creole. Even though, as can be deduced from Hodge's quote, they are not alone in their lack of knowledge of Creole, their role in promoting West Indian literature beyond Creole-speaking audiences is too important for this issue to remain unaddressed. In order to produce a translation that does justice to the writer's use of Creole in the source text, translators must be able to decode areas that would be opaque to non-Creole speakers.

Moreover, when Lovelace suggests that a prospective translator should retain the integrity of the Creole (Personal Interview), this means that two major aspects must be taken into account: his non-hierarchical and unapologetic use of Creole, and his refusal to adapt English spelling to represent Creole. The distance between earlier writers and their characters is not present in Lovelace's narratives. Lovelace's unorthodox journey has allowed him to give an insider's view of his characters and their reality since he feels he is part of the world he portrays. In terms of language it is therefore crucial not to create a distance between the narrator and the characters of the narrative because, as Lovelace makes clear, "once we begin to use the narrator – who is the kind of voice of authority – to speak in a different way than the person who he is speaking about, you already started to put the whole thing in an *upsided* fashion" (Personal Interview). Since the author recognizes himself in his characters, retaining this lack of the hierarchical is key for the translator.

It is also important to note that Lovelace does not use "eye dialect" to represent TrinEC; that is, he does not use the more easily recognizable phonetic representations of Creole English. It can be argued that since Lovelace, for the most part, has opted not to adapt the spelling of Standard English to accommodate Creole phonology, the translator should not opt for this kind of deformation to reflect Creole in the target language either. To do so would not recreate Lovelace's language; instead, it would reflect different and conflicting strategies between the source and target text.

Translating as activism

It has been argued that in this age of high globalization, texts by writers like Earl Lovelace are not promoted or translated because of their anti-hegemonic nature. Therefore, in translating "translation-resistant" (Cronin 135) writings such as Earl Lovelace's, the translator's task is necessarily an activist endeavour. This idea is connected to one of the assumptions traditionally accepted in translation studies; that which establishes that the translator is a neutral participant above history and ideology. This assumption is made clear in the following view by Edward Said:

Critics are not merely the alchemical translators of texts into circumstantial reality or worldliness; for they too are subject to and producers of circumstances, which are felt regardless of whatever objectivity the critic's methods possess (Said 35)

Edward Said uses the figure of the translator as an objective participant to claim that the critic's objectivity is not possible. However, it can be argued that being an alchemical translator, namely an objective translator, is as impossible as being an objective critic.

Cronin believes that in the present circumstances the conventional responsibility thought of only in textual terms is not enough, and argues that "textual scrupulousness is only certain good. There must be an activist dimension to translation which involves an engagement with the cultural politics of society at national and international levels" (135). Unless the activist dimension or engagement is recognized, translators could be made accountable for "the unexamined ascendancy of the values of the dominant powers within a culture and throughout the globalizing world" (Tymoczko 7); and could even run the risk of just adding to the "neo-colonialist construction of the non-West" (Spivak 181). As a result, not translating certain texts or offering simplifying translations that erase difference can be seen as part of an overall strategy to protect the readership, as members of hegemonic cultures, from true difference:

[members of hegemonic cultures] are never exposed to true difference, for they are strategically protected from the disturbing experience of the foreign; protected not only through assimilative translations but also through five-star hotels in third-world countries, and the like. (Robinson 109)

Instead, translation has the potential of functioning as a "cultural political practice, constructing or critiquing ideology-stamped identities for foreign cultures, contributing to the formation or subversion of literary canons, affirming or transgressing institutional limits" (Venuti 9). In order to contribute to this task, Tymoczko also argues that the strategies to accomplish engaged and committed translations are to be "selected, invented, and improvised for their tactical values in specific situations, contexts, places and times" (Tymoczko 230). Thus, no single strategy can be implemented in all contexts. Strategies would range from at times amplifying the translated text by adding commentaries or paratextual materials to, at other times, simplifying the text. Whatever the strategy, though, the aim would remain the same; namely, to create an engaged translation that resists dominant Western cultural values. In this sense, the translator would seek to

reproduce whatever features of the foreign text abuse or resist dominant cultural values in the source language, yet this reproductive effort requires the invention of analogous means of signification that resist dominant culture values in the target language. (Venuti 12)

The agency of the translator as a committed and engaged figure is precisely what accounts for translations that offer counter-discourses that aim at destabilizing dominant values.

In the case of the West Indies, reversing the existing imbalance that focuses mainly on diasporic or migrant authors more easily accessible from the West should be seen as a collaborative action involving many actors, among them the translator. Along with creative writers, translators are key actors in the collective endeavour to offer a more complete representation of the Caribbean which acknowledges native

cultural manifestations and allows West Indians to see themselves reflected in fiction. Translators can contribute to redressing the aforementioned imbalance by working on and for the more local literatures. With their translations, translators can also contribute to subvert the hegemonic, simplistic views of the Caribbean and ultimately, together with creative writers, put their respective works "at the service of humanizing (r)evolution" (Rahim 39).

Conclusion

Literatures in English from postcolonial countries are usually complex and diverse texts because they reflect realities characterized by neither a monolithic cultural situation nor a monolingual linguistic situation. Thus, as Elleke Boehmer acknowledges, these texts demand work on the part of the reader, because they oblige the reader to make the effort to go beyond his or her own world (138). As for the translator, these texts necessitate an in-depth understanding of the world they reflect. Translators are not only required to be familiar with the richness and diversity reflected in texts in general, but need to be equipped with the specific tools each culture-specific text elicits, so as to break away from translations in which Western readers merely see themselves reflected in a cultural other.

It has been argued that Lovelace's texts are non-translatable from a hegemonic perspective. The three main features that hinder Earl Lovelace's texts from being eligible for promotion from the perspective of the Western culture industry are: his non-hierarchical use of TrinEC; his conscious choice to remain and write from Trinidad and Tobago; and his refusal to adapt his fiction for a Western readership.

Lovelace's version of the Caribbean from within is both unmediated and empowering, and confronts the pressing issue of reconstructing Trinidadian and West Indian history and validating its culture. Thus, translating a postcolonial author like Earl Lovelace, who has chosen, with his writings, to contribute to the continuing political struggle for self-representation, should be seen as part of a collaborative enterprise towards building counter-discourses and redistributing the privilege of seeing and representing.

The literary translator has also been foregrounded as an active and engaged figure; as a key participant co-responsible for challenging cultural frameworks, introducing difference into the world and ultimately changing societies. In undertaking such translations, the translator, with his or her choices and strategies, can contribute to the destabilization of the hegemonic control in the translation of literary texts between power-differentiated contexts.

Finally, ethically and politically motivated translations of Earl Lovelace's works would target the non-English speaking community in general as well as the Caribbean region itself; such translations would surely enhance the vision of the region and also work towards reinforcing a dialogue within the region. As a result, a translation of Lovelace's texts would also contribute to breaking "the greatest cultural barrier" that the Caribbean faces as a region: "our inability to 'speak' to each other" (Roberts and Walcott-Hackshaw vii).

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