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**“YOU HAVE TO MELT IT TO HEAR THE TALK”:
TRANSNATIONALISM, CREOLE STYLIZATION AND
AURALITY IN SAM SELVON’S THE LONELY
LONDONERS**

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Abstract: Whereas in the traditional ‘English novel’ the space of the nation is indexed by regionally unmarked, neutral, ‘standard’ English (cf. *Bleak House*), in Sam Selvon’s *The Lonely Londoners* (1956) the creation of a transnational London relies on an accented, regionally and socially marked creole vernacular. This paper focuses on the deployment of creole stylization and lyricism as the sites of the transnational negotiation of space and meaning: What happens to urban space when it becomes a meaning amenable to being styled in and through creole stylization, when the vernacular functions as a mode of subjectivity which mediates the characters’ and the readers’ experience of space? How do the characters and the narrator use creole to construe identities from which they distance themselves? Bourdieu’s concept of habitus shows how in stylization speakers can ‘own’ London by amplifying and disrupting the relationship between social meanings and regionally- or socially-indexed linguistic forms and varieties. In *The Lonely Londoners* it can be argued that the hyperaurality of the creole vernacular constructs a new and rival transnational geography challenging the racialist spatial order; more specifically, the sonic irruption overwrites the visual description of the city with a phonographic one, which goes beyond the forms and meanings of verbality. The paper concludes with a reading of the end of the novel as the musical counterpoint to the creole stylization, which is a displacement of black suffering. Selvon’s ‘phonographic novel’ opens us up to a new way of reading and listening to creole speech: the aural rewriting of the sociolinguistic ‘standard’ restores the act of listening to its proper place in the act of reading.

The Lonely Londoners (1956) is the first book of the Moses trilogy, a picaresque romance which charts the lives of postwar (Afro-)Caribbean immigrants in London in a non-linear series of loosely connected episodes. The novel’s narrative style is closer to creole oral literature than to the European tradition of the realist novel. In this Caribbean ‘dialect novel’, Caribbean English-lexicon creole (CEC) is not confined to dialogue, but is the medium of narration. Quite unlike earlier English or Caribbean writing, the novel doesn’t use creole referentially, “as ways of marking a narrative’s particular setting, a character’s social, ethnic, or regional background” (qtd. in Buzelin, and Winer 645). Instead, Selvon’s ‘modified’ Trinidadian Creole English operates in the mode of stylization, in the strong theatrical or quasi-theatrical sense of that term. In addition to heavily stylized creole, which is the main concern of this paper, there are linguistic

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performances, interactions and identities in the narrative that are less, or not at all stylized.

Bakhtin suggests that stylization is “an artistic image of another’s language” (Bakhtin 362). In *The Lonely Londoners* stylizations cannot be taken at face value; they are always more than simple or straightforward markers of identity, linguistic or cultural practices. This can be seen in the stylizations of Galahad who arrives from Trinidad in the winter, wearing nothing but a tropical suit and a pair of watchekong: “This is the way the weather does be in the winter? Is not so bad, man. In fact I feeling a little warm” (Selvon 33). Creole stylization dramatizes the disparity, drawn by Michel Foucault and Raymond Williams, between the ‘primary realities’ and secondary or ‘meta-level’ representations (See Rampton 221-4). In each instance, the fundamentally metaphorical, multi-voiced, disparate and obscure level of ‘secondary representation’ is the condition of possibility for the production and performance of several transnational identities.

To better understand ‘stylization’, we may turn to the so-called ‘dialect stylistics’ model, which holds that “our understanding of ‘accent’, ‘dialect’ or ‘linguistic variety’ should encompass much more than just a set of co-occurring phonological and grammatical forms” (Rampton 361). In fact, “there is a wide range of semantic and pragmatic phenomena on the fringe which sociolinguistics has not systematically addressed, having to do with rhetorical style, stance and implicature” (Garrett, Coupland, and Williams 323; see also Coupland; Bakhtin; Rampton). Coupland’s call for ‘dialect stylistics’ grew out of this new way of thinking about dialect.

Dialect varieties are “particularly well configured for stylized performance.. . [since] they do generally constitute known repertoires with known socio-cultural and personal associations” (Coupland, “Dialect Stylisation” 350). Furthermore, generally speaking it is the case “that the establishment has constructed ‘standard’ varieties to be more ontologically real, historic, coherent, consensual and valuable – in short, as more authentic” (Coupland, *Style* 182). Nonstandard varieties in Selvon’s novel, on the other hand, perform a revised conception of authenticity that disrupts the ocular schema of national and racial identity, foregrounding the phenomenology and production of transnational space. Some of the social meanings regularly associated with nonstandard varieties (such as creole) are: low socioeconomic status, as well as rural, unsophisticated, untrustworthy, and dull speakers (see Garrett, Coupland, and Williams). In addition, the following social meanings are specifically associated with creole: body, eroticism, emotion, periphery, vernacularity, performativity, aurality, (hyper)masculinity, violence, resistance, orality, metissage/syncretism, Caribbean “sound-system(s)” (Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse, Poetics*; Rampton 342; Moten 71-2; Hewitt; Hall). In the context of this paper, it is especially important to emphasize that creole is deeply embedded in the Caribbean oral (calypsonian) tradition and sound-system culture. In *Caribbean Discourse*, Glissant proclaims that “for Caribbean man, the word is first and foremost sound. Noise is essential to speech” (123). In addition, recent work in African American studies focuses on the aurality of black speech (see Moten).

Glissant, Hall, Gilroy, and others view creole as a syncretic ‘linguistic variety’ which integrates “the multiplicity of African languages on the one hand and European ones on the other” (Glissant, *Poetics* 69). Selvon’s stylized creole amplifies the syncretic

quality of creole, for it is not “tied down too closely to any one Caribbean community” and can therefore function as the transnational language of the Caribbean’s unique cultural and literary identity (Mair 150). With creole displaced and relocated from the sociocultural world of the Caribbean to that of England, it turns into the diaspora’s means to communicate in postwar Britain; as a result it becomes embedded in the common experiences of migrant laborers and working-class black settlers: economic exploitation, political racism, displacement, and exile (Gilroy 82).

Thus, Sir Galahad, a character in *The Lonely Londoners* who is new to London, styles a socially embedded creole identity with the help of dialect stylization:

And once he had a date with a frauline, and he make a big point of saying he was meeting she by Charing Cross, because just to say ‘Charing Cross’ have a lot of romance in it, he remember it had a song called ‘Roseann of Charing Cross’. So this is how he getting on to Moses:

‘I meeting that piece of skin tonight, you know.’ And then, as if it not very important, ‘She waiting for me by Charing Cross Station.’ Jesus Christ, when he say ‘Charing Cross,’ when he realize that is he, Sir Galahad, who going there, near that place that everybody in the world know about (it even have the name in the dictionary) he feel like a new man . . .

The same way with the big clock they have in Piccadilly Tube Station, what does tell the time of places all over the world. The time when he had a date with Daisy he tell her to meet him there.

‘How you don’t know where it is?’ he say when she tell him she don’t know where it is. ‘Is a place that everybody know, everybody does have dates there, is a meeting place.’ (Selvon 84)

The phonetic and morphosyntactic performances of creole English enable the black migrant to fashion for himself a Caribbean Londoner identity. On the one hand, Galahad’s stylization incorporates traditional “rich points” of masculine Caribbeanness, for “[a]n amplified and exaggerated masculinity has become the boastful centerpiece of a culture of compensation that self-consciously salves the misery of the disempowered and subordinated” in migration (Gilroy 85). The performative utterances stylize the courtship of an English (white) woman, the theme of love-intrigue and ingroup male competition. On the other hand, the stylization incorporates new sociocultural resources and repertoires formerly not associated with Caribbeanness.

To appropriate the English landmarks such as Charing Cross, Piccadilly and the statue of Charles I is to immediately invoke the most visual and visible signs of national identity. It is no accident that Galahad contests the racial structuration of the nation by appropriating the English city. These national sites are, as argued by Bhabha, sites of colonial privilege, reviving “memories of the imaginative geographies that spanned centuries and empires” (243). By defining and positioning himself in relation to the sites, symbols and spaces of the imperial city, he appropriates the semiotics of the ‘center’, thus reversing the logic of colonial expansion and conquest which drives the Victorian genre of imperial romance. The appropriation of the English city involves a rejection of the colonial city’s racialized geography; catalyzed by creole stylization the traditional and ‘fixed’ meanings inscribed in its national imaginary are reworked and re-accentuated. Ashcroft’s concept of linguistic ‘appropriation’ can be extended to include this process of

semiotic appropriation by which the migrant captures the urban center as well as the English woman, making it ‘bear the burden of [his/her] own cultural experience.’

Galahad feigns surprise when he learns that Daisy doesn’t know where Piccadilly is located. Galahad is in the process of styling for himself the identity of a ‘local’ Londoner, whose cool, effortless extemporaneity, sense of housedness and rootedness he mimics. This act of stylization includes the major elements required for black art according to Toni Morrison: “...it must look effortless. It must look cool and easy. ... You shouldn’t be able to see the seams and stitches” (qtd. in Gilroy 78). However, the narrator disrupts the appearance of effortless and ease, showing that the improvisation has in fact required a great deal of planning and preparation: “Many nights he went there [Piccadilly] before he get to know how to move around the city” (Selvon 84). The storyteller’s ‘exposé’ of Galahad’s performance is kind and gentle as if stagedness were an inevitable consequence of lived blackness:

So this is Galahad dressing up for the date: he clean his shoes until they shine, then he put on a little more Cherry Blossom and give then an extra shine, until he could see his face in the leather. Next he put on a new pair of socks –nylon splice in the heel and the toe. He have to put on woolen underwear, though is summer. Then the shirt –a white Van Heusen . . . (Selvon 85-6)

In asserting stagedness as the quotidian characteristic of black life, Selvon confronts us with the oppositions animating this act of self-stylization: construction and improvisation; reality and fictitiousness; performance and routine; authenticity and inauthenticity; freedom and subjection; subjectivity and alienation; identification and dis-identification; spectacle and spectator; violence and pleasure. In fact, it can be further posited that these oppositions have to do with the basic ambivalence of black performance, referred to by Moten as objectification and humanization, the scene of subjection and radical performativity (2, 14).

Coupland’s analysis of stylization provides a theoretical frame with which to interpret creole stylization in the novel. It is fairly obvious that Galahad is not speaking in his own ‘real’ voice or persona; he does not project in any simple sense “his real self”, but a preferred, invented voice/persona. He speaks as if the Londoner in whose voice/persona he is speaking were him, yet it is not altogether clear whether he is speaking in the ‘real’ vernacular or persona of a Londoner (Coupland, *Style* 150, 163). Galahad is engaged in what Coupland terms “‘being [himself] and in ‘not being [himself]’, in using stylistic resources in order to index identities and at the same time to mark the fact that these were not identities that [he] authentically owned or inhabited” (Coupland, *Style* 183). Coupland proposes that stylization speakers are engaged in ‘using’ as well as reflexively ‘mentioning’ speech styles, and it is useful to view Galahad as being engaged in simultaneously deauthenticating and reauthenticating himself as a creole speaker, deauthenticating and reauthenticating the practices he is alluding to and stylizing (Coupland, *Style* 183). Just what levels of ownership, authorship, and endorsement are being implied in the stylized utterance is left unclear, for “engineered obscurity” is a general attribute of stylization (Coupland 366).

Rather than abandoning ‘Caribbeanness’ in favor of ‘Englishness’, Galahad crosses into his own identity through the use of a vernacular that indexes his regional provenance. By complicating the links between sociolinguistic practice and social meaning, stylization effects a distanced validation of Caribbean identity and creates the discursive conditions of what Bhabha calls the Third Space. Creole—a social style formerly associated with a particular place and ethnicity—becomes an important means of transforming diverse Caribbean cultural inheritances into a pan-Caribbean or a single black British culture (see Gilroy 82).

Also important to consider is Coupland’s sociolinguistic appropriation of Bourdieu’s concept of habitus for the purposes of elucidating the work dialect stylization does in the novel (Coupland, *Style* 89-93). According to Coupland, the concept of habitus summarizes Bourdieu’s view that

ways of speaking (styles) are intractably linked to historical and political meanings, but are also ingrained in physical acts of speaking . . . habitus implies that we cannot easily (if at all) shake off the ideological associations of our own ingrained ways of speaking, because they result from a slow process of being socialised into normative and acceptable ways of speaking for our social groups. (90)

The notion of habitus offers us ways of thinking about the creole vernacular style as an ideologically and practically (practice-based), as well as a linguistically and phonetically sedimented practice (Coupland, *Style* 89-93; Rampton 2006). The use of creole styling in the following excerpt exemplifies two central elements of habitus: firstly, the deep socio-semantic significance of language variation as a dimension of social practice; secondly, the embeddedness of linguistic, particularly phonetic characteristics in social experiences (Coupland, *Style* 90):

‘Aye Galahad,’ he say, ‘you used to know a fellar name Brackley in Charlotte street?’
‘Brackley? Charlotte street? But how you mean? You think I would be living in Port of Spain and don’t know Brackley! Ain’t he the fellar who ain’t have no nose, and he always riding about town on a ladies bicycle, peddling with his heels, and his fingers sticking out on the handle bars? And if you tell him anything he curse like hell?’
‘Yes! Just as I was sitting down here I remember Brackley. Boy, he was one test could make you laugh! If you call out to him he stop the bike and start to curse you.’
‘What the – you want? What the – you calling me for? Brackley is your father?’. (Selvon 127)

Selvon’s literary representation of creole is meant to invoke something like ‘the ordinary speech of ordinary people’ in Trinidad (or in the Caribbean). The creole vernacular invokes consensual meanings and values, projects personas, identities and genres from well-known repertoires, bringing into play the speech genres and “sound systems” associated with the Caribbean speech community. As mentioned earlier, dialects or vernaculars are well configured for stylized performance because they constitute known sociocultural repertoires and profiles, and are thought to be anchors for solidarity and local affiliation (Coupland, “Dialect Stylisation” 350, Coupland, *Style* 181). One way to approach creole stylization is through the formal dimensions of dialect stylization: the

exaggerated or hyperbolic impersonation of targeted genres or styles, which brings about form and meaning focusing (Coupland, *Style* 147-8). Another interpretation, however, is as a “subterfuge” which disrupts the socio-semantics encoded in its projected meanings and values (Coupland, “Dialect Stylisation” 349). Coupland stresses that stylization is a “reflexive, mannered and knowing . . . metacommunicative mode that attends to its own modality and radically mediates our own understanding of the meanings of its own utterances” (“Dialect Stylisation” 350). It follows that the ‘engineered obscurity’ of stylization has the capacity to disrupt its hyperbolic, hypervisible socio-semantics. This socio-semantic disruption, in turn, generates a slippage, a sound, a rhythm in excess of linguistic meaning, generating the conditions of possibility to a sonic experience not reducible to language.

Stylization thus locates dialect at the locus overlapping the fields of music, sound, performance, spectacle, ritual, orature and language. Herein lies the crux of the argument: whereas creole stylization doesn’t relate in any simple way to lived experience or reality at the level of reference or meaning, at the experiential-sonic level it is always a direct embodiment and thus a projection of a locally lived experience, of locality as a phenomenological property of social life. Rather than simply embedding the Caribbean situational frame within the current British situational frame, dialect stylization constructs locality as a mode of subjectivity and a particular phenomenological property of social life. It goes above and beyond an act of “semiotic reconstruction” (Kandiah 100), for it gives rise to a sonic irruption which overwrites the visual description of the city with a phonographic one. The indelibly material presence of sound in dialect stylization creates a diasporic, transnational soundscape that challenges the racialist structuration of the city.

Throughout the novel, the experience of the enclosed spaces on the slave ship and the plantation is expressed through sonic overcrowdedness, discordant and loud noise. Toward the end of the novel, the overwhelming, overbearing cacophony reaches a fortissimo. In the last pages, Moses is haunted by, but alienated from the boys’ “old talk” (47) – termed “big talk” (43) or a “jam-session” (78, 114) at various points in the narrative – when “he come home and he can’t sleep, is as if he hearing the voices in the room, all the moaning and groaning and sighing and crying” (Selvon 138-9). These are significant moments because they speak to the reader’s own auditory experience of the novel: “Sometimes, after they have gone, he [Moses] hear the voices ringing in his ear, and sometimes tears come to his eyes and he don’t know why really, if is home-sickness or if is just that life in general beginning to get too hard” (Selvon 139). These sounds carry within them the material trace of black suffering: “hate and disgust and malice and sympathy and sorrow and pity” is expressed through “all the moaning and groaning and sighing and crying” (Selvon 45, 139). At the point where the verbiage of “oldtalk” disappears, the forbidden, camouflaged suffering, the “high falsetto” of old fellars is heard: “no song or rhythm, just a sort of musical noise so nobody could say that [they] begging” (Selvon 47, 75).

Finally, a reading of the end of the novel illustrates that a new kind of black consciousness and lyricism emerge, providing a counterpoint to the creole stylization that otherwise predominates the novel. A number of stylized utterances, piled up on top of one

another, interrupt the development of the narrative; each one is lifted out of its context, there is no causal or contextual relationship between these stylizations:

Hello boy, what happening.
So what happening, man, what happening.
How long you in Brit'n boy?
You think this winter bad? You should of been here in '52.
What happening, what happening man.
What the arse happening, lord? What all of us doing, coasting lime . . . ? (italics added, Selvon 140)

The meaning of these fragments is held not only in the syntax and grammar, but in the phonological and rhythmic qualities of creole. Devoid of any context—who is speaking to whom about what—the reader is forced to tune in, and to really listen to the aurality, vocality and musicality of creole speech.

In this final section, there is a lot of call and response, shifting back and forth between loud styling and the so-called “shrieks” of black suffering. The boys’ stylized speech fragments are replaying in Moses’s head over and over again, “what happening, what happening man”, but suddenly there is a stylistic shift, an irruption of the expression of black suffering: “What the arse happening, lord?” (Selvon 140). Arguably, this expansion of sound into a lyrical register becomes the foundation of a new creole identity and connective culture.

Shortly after voicing his own suffering, Moses identifies stylization as the site of the suppression of black suffering, thus opening up the vexed question of the relationship between “the kiff-kiff laughter” and the despair lingering beneath the surface:

Under the kiff-kiff laughter, behind the ballad and the episode, the what-happening, the summer-is-hearts, he could see a great aimlessness, a great restless, swaying movement that leaving you standing in the same spot. As if a forlorn shadow of great doom fell on all the spades in the country. As if he could see the black faces bobbing up and down in the millions of white, strained faces, everybody hustling along the Strand, the spades jostling in the crowd, bewildered, hopeless. As if, on the surface, things don't look so bad, but when you go down a little, you bounce up a kind of misery and pathos and a frightening –what?” (Selvon 141, emphasis mine)

By incorporating the traumas of slavery, racism, economic hardship, displacement, and exile into the diasporic musical score, the grammatical-ontological basis for distinguishing between self and other is eclipsed, as well as the novelistic differentiation between reader, narrator, character and author. Moses reaffirms that “words don't go there” (Charles Lloyd qtd. in Moten 41), for he “don't know the right word, but he have the right feeling in his heart. As if the boys laughing, but they only laughing because they afraid to cry, they only laughing because to think so much would be a big calamity” (Selvon 75, 142).

Standing on the bank of the Thames, the act of feeling and listening and thinking opens Moses up to a new experience of the city, one in which he is no longer alienated or

“locked up in that small room, with London and life on the outside” (Selvon 140). In the same moment that a tone of mournful lyricism emerges through the aurality of creole performance, the *Black Atlantic* is constituted. There is an expansion, a groundedness of self described in spatial terms that extends beyond the problematic of race and nation, styling and shrieks, pleasure and pain, one and many: “Still, it had a greatness and a vastness in the way he was feeling tonight, like it was something solid after feeling everything else give way, and though he ain’t getting no happiness out of the cogitations he still pondering, for is the first time that he ever find himself thinking like that” (Selvon 142).

The hyperaurality of creole results in an essentially sonic conception of space (similar to that of urban variationist sociolinguistics). The singing voice, traumatic sound as well as creole stylization disrupt the ocular and logocentric conception of racial spatiality, restoring sound to its proper place in the representation and construction of space (Moten). Moreover, creole imposes its particular sound and flow of meaning on the spatial-ocular body of the English nation (as well as that of the English novel): “He [Moses] watch a tugboat on the Thames, wondering if he could ever write a book like that, what everybody would buy” (Selvon 142). As the diasporic ensemble is dissolved into the figure of the black novelist, a relationship of identity is established between quotidian speech and literature, stylization and lyricism. The privileging of the sonic and the art of ‘storytelling’ in the novel raises certain questions about ‘western’ oppositions of speech and writing, music and literature, reading and listening, as well as the fields of performance and ritual and quotidian.

The newly emerged transnational author/storyteller creolizes the ‘English weather’ in the concluding sentence of the novel: “It was a summer night: laughter fell softly: it was the sort of night that if you wasn’t making love to a woman you feel you was the only person in the world like that” (Selvon 142). A distinctive flavor and form of (cross-)cultural energy, a process of dismantling and rebirth, a reconciliation of one and many is initiated via the lyrical mournfulness of creole performativity. The metaphor is sounded into visibility as it flowers into bloom through rhythm and tone, shifting and re-shifting; first and foremost, it is a feeling or an affective positioning activated in and through the transformative presence of sound. The distance between creole sound and the writing of that sound evokes the unavoidable diversity of the Black British diaspora—an identity which lives in and through difference.

This paper has examined what happens when the experience of urban space is interpreted and perceived through a stylized vernacular, focusing on the deployment of creole stylization and lyricism as the sites of the transnational negotiation of space and meaning. It has argued that the phonic materiality of creole reconstructs and reevaluates racialized meanings with a phonographic inscription which exceeds the meanings of verblivity; more specifically, the aural rewriting of the sociolinguistic ‘standard’ returns the act of listening to its proper place in the act of reading, thus forging a transnational community of listeners in and through Selvon’s ‘literary phonography’.

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