Race, Biopolitics and Violence in Francophone Postcolonial Studies

A One-Day International Colloquium
University of Birmingham (UK)
Weds 26th June 2013
Ashley Building, Edgbaston Campus, Room 422
10am-5pm

This interdisciplinary colloquium aims to explore the interlocking and myriad intersections between race, biopolitics and violence in Francophone postcolonial culture, politics and thought, considering Caribbean, African and American contexts. The day will include a number of papers intended to spark in-depth discussion. The colloquium will conclude with a round-table and summing-up.

This project is organised in the framework of the European Commission/FP7 Marie Curie Research Project ‘Caribbean Biopolitics of Literature’ by Principal Investigator Dr Louise Hardwick and Marie Curie Research Fellow Dr Alessandro Corio.

PROGRAMME

10 am - Registration and coffee (Ashley Building, Ground Floor Foyer)

10.20 am - Welcome Remarks

10.30 am

Alessandro Corio, Marie Curie Research Fellow in French, University of Birmingham: The Living and the Poetic Intention: Édouard Glissant’s Biopolitics of Literature

Louise Hardwick, Lecturer in French, University of Birmingham: ‘Creolizing the “Coolie”: Indian Indentured Labourers, the Francophone Caribbean Ethnoclass Hierarchy and Biopolitics’

12 NOON Lunch (non-speakers are welcome to join us for lunch at their own costs in the University dining room)

2 pm - Nicki Hitchcott, Associate Professor and Reader in African Francophone Studies, University of Nottingham: Ethnopolitics in Rwanda Genocide Fiction
2.45 pm - Break

3 pm

**Judith Misrahi-Barak**, Associate Professor, Department of English / EMMA, Université Paul-Valéry Montpellier 3: *The Violence of Words, ‘Race’ and the Power of Text: Edwidge Danticat’s Many Tongues*

**Michael Wiedorn**, Assistant Professor of French, Georgia Institute of Technology: *Lafcadio Hearn and the Construction of the ‘Creole’*

4.15 pm - Round Table

6 pm – Aperitif and dinner at “Côte”, The Mailbox (self-funding basis).

**ABSTRACTS**

**Alessandro Corio**: *The Living and the Poetic Intention: Édouard Glissant’s Biopolitics of Literature*

*Rien n’est Vrai, tout est vivant* is the title Édouard Glissant chose to give one of his last public speeches – held within the context of seminars organized by the Institut du Tout-monde in 2010. This philosophical-poetic intervention introduced a new concept within the spiraling nature of both his œuvre and his thought: *le vivant*. Glissant’s poetry maintained a constant and fertile relationship with the most significant moments of contemporary thought, particularly that of French philosophy in the second half of the twentieth century. In a highly original manner, this decisive convergence toward an idea of living, in contrast with the notion of a transcendent and incorporeal Truth, connects to the contemporary debate on biopolitics.

Drawing on the later reflections of Foucault, philosophers such as Deleuze, Nancy, Esposito, Agamben, Butler have argued for the complex relationship between *life and form*, *body and power*, the incommensurable potency of living and the structures of language and knowledge. These subjects show an evident connection to and a specific development within a post-colonial and post-slavery context, and they are particularly evident in Glissant’s poetic and narrative production. Glissant’s thought and poetry, precisely due to his deep connection to the historic parabola of the African diaspora, slavery and colonial domination, have managed to shed new light on the relationship between the political horizon and that of ‘bare life’, in a deep connection between language and body. This paper argues that this relationship is particularly evident in his novels *Malemort* (1975) and *Mahagony* (1987), where the governed and alienated colonial body is finally able to tip over into a new kind of performativity, marked by relation, impersonality and a new common language, which is deeply linked with the non-appropriability of the body. This paper advances the belief that Glissant’s vision is also able to overcome negative impasses of contemporary thought,
deterritorializing it, while giving life to a language and a writing able of face up to the unpredictability, opacity and non-appropriability of the living body.

**Louise Hardwick:** ‘Creolizing the “Coolie”: Indian Indentured Labourers, the Francophone Caribbean Ethnoclass Hierarchy and Biopolitics’

In Francophone Caribbean literature, the ‘Coolie’ occupies an ambiguous, fraught position. The movement of créolité has made some critical headway in reconceptualising the ‘Coolie’, as demonstrated by Confiant’s *La Panse du Chacal* (2004), a novel which grants the Coolie’s subaltern story greater visibility within Francophone Caribbean culture. This is largely achieved through Confiant’s strategic alignment of the Coolies’ history with the aesthetics of cultural métissage promoted by créolité. However, by reassessing the earlier work of a little-known author, Maurice Virassamy, it becomes evident that decades prior to créolité, Virassamy set out to examine the paradoxical status of a mixed-race child in his childhood memoir *Le Petit coolie noir* (1972), and in doing so drew attention to a set of negative experiences which challenge the créoliste re-writing of Coolie experience.

Despite their differences, both texts do display commonalities – their emphasis on the Coolie as a transnational, in-between figure whose autonomy and power of movement is doubly restricted: firstly by the European powers who transported Indian indentured labourers to the Caribbean, and secondly by the repressive ethnoclass hierarchy of the French Caribbean. To illustrate the interplay between race and violence in representations of subaltern Coolie characters in Francophone Caribbean literature, I draw on the concept of biopolitics, particularly as developed by the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, arguing that his paradigm of ‘bare life’, the form of existence reduced to its biological functions provides an insightful methodology with which to analyse the ethnoclass hierarchy, and the Coolie’s situation within it, in the Francophone Caribbean.

**Nicki Hitchcott:** *Ethnopolitics in Rwanda Genocide Fiction*

‘Hutu’ and ‘Tutsi’ are two terms that have become synonymous with the 1994 genocide in Rwanda in which between 800,000 and 1 million people were brutally massacred in just one hundred days. During and since the events of 1994, ‘Hutu’ and ‘Tutsi’ have been very much at the centre of the Western media’s focus on the genocide which was, for a long time, dismissed as yet another ‘ethnic conflict’ in a largely unknown nation in Africa. However, specialists on the Great Lakes region generally agree that ‘Hutu’ and ‘Tutsi’ are, in fact, imagined identities that have been manipulated for political – and indeed, genocidal – ends by different groups of people at different points in time. This paper will examine the traces of this politicisation of ‘ethnicity’ in a fictional work about the genocide. It will focus on the brilliant, but controversial novel, *Le Passé devant soi*, by Gilbert Gatore who fled Rwanda in 1994. Gatore has been chosen as a particularly striking example of an author who attempts to challenge Rwandan ethnopolitics in his fictional writing, but who has become the subject of ethnopolitical debate in the academic reception of his text.

**Judith Misrahi-Barak:** *The Violence of Words, ‘Race’ and the Power of Text: Edwidge*
Danticat’s Many Tongues

Edwidge Danticat’s novel The Farming of Bones (1998) takes its epigraph from the Bible, Judges 12: 4-6. The famous passage about the Shibboleth is indeed the best possible introduction to the novel since ‘le droit de passage, le laissez-passer’ (Derrida, Du Droit à la philosophie, 1990, 13) is reserved to people who can be identified as belonging to a certain social and ethnic group because they speak in a certain way. The way a word is pronounced determines whether you live or die.

From the ancient times when the Gileadites inflicted the Shibboleth test upon the Ephraimites so as to distinguish insiders from outsiders to 1937 when Dominicans put Haitians to the Parsley test, having them say perejil in the ‘proper’ Dominican way and die if they could not, it is an ongoing violence. Through her fiction writing Danticat builds a discourse about the violence of language and the violence of race, but she also writes about the power of text that goes against such violence.

Alongside The Farming of Bones this presentation will bring together two other novels and a poem about the massacre of Haitians that was ordered by General Trujillo in 1937: Jacques Stephen Alexis’s Compère Général Soleil (1955), René Philoctète’s Le Peuple des Terres Mêlées (1989) and Rita Dove’s "Parsley" (1983). So as to understand how Danticat has read her predecessors and how her reading and writing contribute to transforming a history of violence into one of liberation and possibilities, I will focus on the following points: the (in)accessibility of trauma for generations who have not lived through the trauma directly but have inherited it from the previous generations; the working through that can only take place through repeating and listening; the often neglected translating of the texts that is a vital and dynamic element in the process. All these elements weave a new web against the dictatorship of ‘race’. This presentation will go across translation, postcolonial and trauma studies, francophone and anglophone. A handout will be provided for the quotations in French, with the translation.

Michael Wiedorn: Lafcadio Hearn and the Construction of the ‘Creole’

Lafcadio Hearn was a journalist, novelist, and purveyor of the exotic who spent his childhood in Europe, launched his career in the US and died a Japanese citizen, after a spending a few years soaking up the creole cultural zones of New Orleans and Martinique. He has been credited with “Inventing New Orleans” (the title of a monograph on Hearn), and with using the term “creolization” in print for the first time in the English language. This latter term has become, along with Hearn himself, the darling of a set of prominent writers from the Francophone Caribbean. What is more, the meaning of “creolization” has expanded vastly in recent years, becoming abstract enough to be viable in disciplines as diverse as the history of science or literary theory, and in spatiotemporal settings ranging from the Roman provinces to the contemporary Maghreb. In my presentation I propose to historicize the term “creolization” through a return to Hearn’s work.

I would like to argue that for Hearn the creole, in contrast with the optimism and often utopianism that characterize today’s usages of the term creole and its derivatives, is a victim of violence, and moribund. In Hearn’s two early novels, for example, the figure of the
creole was haunted by suffering and death, and developed through narratives of violence inflicted upon feminine bodies. In *Chita*, which casts the creole as representing a world marked by multiplicity (be it ethnic, linguistic, racial etc.), a cataclysmic storm wipes away a fragile Gulf Coast community. In *Youma: The story of a West Indian Slave*, a young woman torn between the “White Creole” and “Black Creole” worlds chooses to be burned to death.

In my conclusion I briefly connect Hearn to the late twentieth-century writers known as the Créolistes (who claimed him as a source of inspiration) and to that prophet of Creolization, Edouard Glissant (who largely rejects Hearn). I argue that while their conceptions of the Creole are more optimistic, concerned more with the future and less so with death, the term Creole remains fraught and undecided in their work as well as in Hearn’s. In doing so, I critique the créolistes and Glissant, suggesting that «creoleness» and «créolisation» risk becoming unmoored from the history of the creole, and that Hearn's agony-ridden legacy lingers on today.