

*Language and Self
in Opal Palmer Adisa's
"Bake-Face and Other Guava Stories"*

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"Long time now, me nuh me own ooman."

OPAL PALMER ADISA, "Bake-Face"

IN HER INTRODUCTION to Opal Palmer Adisa's *Bake-Face and Other Guava Stories* (1986), Rosa Guy, herself a Trinidadian writer, comments on the legacy of a colour-coded class hierarchy in the Caribbean and its effects on the changing perception of Creole as an aberrant dialect of English: "We mocked their speech, imitating their speech patterns for the amusement of family and friends, but with such consistency that through the generations their language became our humour and now has become our poetry" (ix). Gradually, Creole has assumed the status of a literary if not a nation language. According to James Berry, Caribbean nation speech is not "dialect interference in English," but "simply a different language, which struggles to find appropriate adjustments in order to settle down as the mother tongue into which it has grown" (70). It is for this reason that works by Caribbean writers provide much scope for an examination of the relationship between language and identity, as the Caribbean islands suffered the worst excesses of the imperial enterprise—including displacement and suppression of the precolonial mother tongue. The transplanted Africans, as Ashcroft et al. put it, "found that psychic survival depended on their facility for a kind of *double entendre*" (146). This resulted in a "radical subversion of the meanings of the master's tongue," as they developed the skill "to say one thing in front of 'massa' and have it interpreted differently by their fellow slaves" (146).

This "radical subversion of the meanings of the master's tongue" has a particular significance for writing by women from the Caribbean. Traditionally marginalized by both patriarchal and imperial structures, these women have, in effect, been victimized into a kind of voicelessness. Recent writing by Caribbean women such as Opal Palmer Adisa can be seen as an attempt to give utterance to those who have been silenced for so long: part of the epigraph to Adisa's collection of short stories reads: "May the sisters without voices be given microphones." Claiming that Adisa's book is "of great historical significance," Rosa Guy says:

When Bake-Face thinks: "me [did] fraid God gwane tek me one lil pickne to punish me fah me silence," a new world is revealed through her language which ushers in a vastly different realm of letters. (viii)

The language referred to by Guy is not the original mother tongue of the pre-colonial time, nor the imposed Standard English of the master language; instead, it is a synthesis of elements revealing the polydialectal character of Caribbean culture. This development of a "new" language has implications for the way selfhood is constituted. A concern with language and identity in writing by women from the Caribbean is also noted in the recently published anthology *Her True-True Name* (1989), edited by Pamela Mordecai and Betty Wilson (themselves Jamaican like Opal Palmer Adisa), who comment on "a continuing awareness of the need to liberate the Word, to make it into a vehicle adequate for our own Caribbean being and perceiving" (Introduction xvi).

The focus here will be on the development of selfhood as revealed by a shift from silence to speech in Adisa's title story, "Bake-Face." It is useful to compare this with the other stories in the anthology to show how the protagonists, Lilly in "Duppy Get Her," Denise in "Me Man Angel," and June-Plum in "Widow's Walk" survive and even transform traumatic events into moments of personal liberation. In order to speculate about the alternative discourses of selfhood offered by these narratives, it will be useful to compare the effects of the protagonists' relationships with other women, and the extent to which the material conditions of

their existence become appropriated as part of a determinist philosophy of exploitation.

The narrative voice in the stories is that of an authorial narrator speaking from within the community, though the narrative is frequently focalized through the protagonist's consciousness. Despite this intimate, subjective mode of narration often associated with the individualism of liberal humanist discourse, these narratives provide a radical view of difference. Alison Light argues that it is important to take cognizance of the initial impact of the difficulty of the non-standard English of the texts written in the (black) vernacular, because of what "our first naive readings tell us about our own relation to difference" (110).¹

Bake-Face, a semi-educated Jamaican woman, reflects on her life and the crucial decision she must take, whether to return to her husband and young daughter, or to remain with her lover, with whom she lives for five months of the year during the sugarcane harvest. The fact that Bake-Face's recollections are presented untranslated in their spoken form ensures that the reader is compelled to engage with the difference of her experience and recognize the way women like Bake-Face have been traditionally positioned as other or object within dominant discourse. On their first meeting, her lover Mr. Johnson first touches her, before speaking to her, "fondling her face as if it were a piece of wood he had carved" (6). The otherness of language and idiom here should be approached not as an indication of lack or deprivation (unlettered or primitive), but, as Light points out, rather as creating and communicating the difference of experience. The implication for the non-West Indian or white readers is that

[a]ny real engagement with racial difference in the text (and in our politics) has to be far more dialectical than any simple model of "otherness" and its recuperation or appropriation (embourgeoisment) within the dominant culture, might suppose. (110)

Light urges that it is important for the reader to give up partly "the power of naming and of assuming knowledge of someone else's struggle" (110). It is this attempt at a dialectical reading that informs my response to the way language is used in "Bake-Face" as an index of the development of selfhood.

While we recognize what Patricia Waugh describes as “the provisionality and positionality of identity, the historical and social construction of gender, and the discursive production of knowledge and power” (13), there is nevertheless an emphasis in much recent women’s writing on values commonly regarded as “humanist” or “personal,” such as

co-operativeness, nurturance, an awareness of self-in-relationship and of the relativity of fields of knowledge and totalizing systems which attempt to systematize individual and concrete human actions. (Waugh 13-14).

When looking at the different ways selfhood is achieved in each of the stories, we can use Waugh’s comments on “self-in-relationship” and the “relativity of fields of knowledge” as points of departure for discussion. Taking the latter first, we can argue that the alternative knowledge evident in Lilly, Denise, and June-Plum’s awareness of another dimension of time and reality undercuts the colonialist imposition of a linear, historical time and (Christian) belief system. In all three cases, the spiritual experience is associated with a traumatic physical and emotional rupture. One evening, shortly before she is due to give birth, Lilly, a young domestic working on a sugar plantation, sees her deceased grandparents calling to her from the canefield:

Steal away, chile, steal away.
Duppy nuh wan yuh ere, chile,
duppy nuh wan yuh ere. (51)

When the father of her child, Richard, and her cousin Beatrice attempt to restrain Lilly, she loudly curses her employer, Mrs. Edwards, a respected Christian woman: “Miss Edwards bumbuhole—Miss Edwards rasscloth. Oonuh leabe me alone mek me guh tuh me granny and grandpa” (54). An interpretation of the appearance of the *duppy* (a spirit from the other world) is given by the community myalist or healer, Miss Maud, who sing-tells Lilly to “Tie yuh belly, guh home,” because “[y]uh muma seh she neba raise / Nuh picknie fi guh lego” (52). This appears to be borne out by the fact that when Lilly returns to her mother she immediately recovers from her apparent insanity and gives birth to a healthy baby the next day. The only other time she “goes off”

is when she is about to be married some years later to the hapless Richard; the marriage never takes place, and Lilly later marries another man, bears numerous children, and lives prosperously with a domestic of her own to help her. Lilly's ability to see and hear Duppies earns her great respect in the community, though one could argue that Lilly's visions are projections of her own unarticulated desires. In view of the influence the cane crops have on the life of the community Lilly comes from, it seems significant that the canefield is where the Duppies appear. The syncretism of African and Christian beliefs is evident in the obvious unease Mrs. Edwards feels each time she is near Lilly after this encounter with the *duppy*, though "Mrs Edwards, of course, did not admit to a belief in local superstitions" (55).

In the story "Me Man Angel," Denise translates the violent death of the angelic and frail child Perry, on whom she had lavished an obsessive motherlove (although she is not his biological mother) into evidence that Perry exists in another dimension, where he will continue to send tokens of his existence and proof of his love for her, thus redeeming all the emotional energy invested in caring for him while he was hers. In "Widow's Walk," June-Plum sees the sea as a competing mistress, manifesting herself as the Goddess Yemoja, who is intent on ensnaring her fisherman husband: it appears that June-Plum is pregnant with another child, one that she and her husband can ill afford, and Yemoja is also a giver of children—both a giver and taker of life.

One of the reasons Bake-Face does not share these experiences of an alternative dimension of time and reality is that Bake-Face lacks the close generational ties that exist between mothers and children evident in the other stories—June-Plum is named after the fruit her mother loved to eat in the last part of her pregnancy. Bake-Face is orphaned at ten after her parents are drowned when their fishing boat capsizes during a hurricane. The issue of "self-in-relationship" for Bake-Face is marked by abuse—sexual abuse from the male members of her family (she is raped at twelve by her uncle), and physical abuse by her aunts, "who because they could not protect her or defend themselves, out of jealousy and frustration accused her of spreading her legs

for her uncles" (7). Her silent and shamed acquiescence only encourages her abusers, and Bake-Face begins to wonder whether God is punishing her for her silence or for her failure to speak about her sexual, physical, and emotional violation by the very people who should protect her. Clearly, this isolation has a powerful effect on her sense of selfhood: "She had been crazy with loneliness which ate at her body, making her look like a frail vine" (7).

The blurb on the dust-cover of Adisa's collection emphasizes personal relationships as the focus of these stories: "Her language is universal—Love," says Rosa Guy, and the *New York Times Book Review* describes the stories as a vivid portrayal of the conflict between obligation and personal desire: "four keenly felt fictions of Jamaican women struggling to be understood by the men they love." However, I will argue that the narratives offer an interpretation of self-in-relationship that subverts this emphasis on love particularly in terms of traditional Western ideologies of romantic love. Whether the intensely experienced love is focused on a man, such as June-Plum's husband Neville and Bake-Face's lover Mr. Johnson, or Denise's child-man, Perry, for each of the women involved, (including Bake-Face), the strongest moment of achieving an alternative selfhood—one not given by the dominant structures—occurs when the woman feels herself ruptured from the beloved either by death as in the case of Denise and June-Plum, or an act of will as in the case of Bake-Face; in other words, a sense of self-in-relationship becomes replaced by a momentary and triumphant sense of self-as-self, problematic as this is.

Bake-Face's gradual awareness of self occurs through her relationship with a nurturing community of women during the time she spends with her lover at Norman Estate, living in the communal home appropriately named "Bruk-up House." Here she develops friendships for the first time, these women acting almost like a substitute family. Bake-Face is caught between a suddenly discovered desire, a self that enjoys, and a fatalism that thwarts this desire, epitomized in the dream she has of a burning canefield, herself trapped on a narrow road leading nowhere

through the cane. This desire is initiated when she meets Mr. Johnson (who is silent like herself), and recognizes that, "very plainly reflected in his hazel eyes was her sorrow" (5). The importance of this recognition is that it can be seen as an expression of the desire to construct selfhood. The application of some of Lacan's theories of subjectivity are useful here: "The first Desire of any human is the absolute one for recognition (the Desire to be desired), itself linked to the Desire to *be* a unity."² Johnson himself feels drawn to Bake-Face, "compelled by a desire he hadn't felt in too many years" (5). When, in silence, she responds to his touch, he decides "he would have her, not as an exploit, but because she was a frail chicken left to fend for corn with the haggard fowls" (6).

Bake-Face is repeatedly shown as having an ambivalent relationship to speech. On the one hand, her becoming more talkative enables her to become part of the community of women at Bruk-up House, yet her fear of exposing herself in her relationship with Mr. Johnson causes her to swallow her words, "which sometimes choked her":

He never seemed to notice her silence, so she decided that that was another thing she would learn to live with. Now she doesn't want to live with it any more; it is stifling her and there is no alternative. (18)

The desire not to be stifled by the unuttered words that are choking her is thwarted by the fatalistic sense that "there is no alternative." I suggested earlier that in each story there is a moment of revelation when the women recognize what Andrea Stuart has described as an important step towards resisting dominant ideologies: "When women stop defining themselves in terms of their relationships with men they are more likely to discover their own source of happiness" (70). However, initially for Bake-Face the desire for self is strongly bound up with her desire to be with Mr. Johnson. Motherhood (she tells her friend Joyce that her life began when she became a mother) is not compensation enough, partly because she feels that her daughter Pauline does not really need her. What becomes evident here is that Bake-Face sees herself not through the gaze of others, but in terms of others' needs which become reciprocated

as her needs entrap her into an emotionally dependent relationship with Mr. Johnson—entangled in yet another silencing mechanism.

The dialectical relationship of the reader to the difference of the text is established not only through Bake-Face's spoken thoughts, which, as Velma Pollard has observed about the use of Creole, becomes an insider's language (241), but also through code-switching as the narrative moves among different registers of English: even the standard English of the narrator is rooted in the local Jamaican landscape. There are some interesting implications here for the conflation of mother, land, and tongue. Caroline Rooney suggests that in contrast to fatherland, which suggests ownership, motherland suggests origin, and "functions as a substitute for 'native'" (99). Similarly, mother tongue can be contrasted to the imposed "Massa's tongue" referred to earlier; as Velma Pollard points out, in relation to standard English or even Jamaican English, Jamaican Creole (the language or mother tongue of Bake-Face) "can be thought of as language rather than *a* language" (252; emphasis added), and far from simply suggesting the exotic otherness of the West Indian landscape for readers outside the West Indies, this aesthetic has political implications. Creole, claims Ansel Wong, becomes not only a language of celebration but also, in certain circumstances, "an aggressive and proud assertion of racial and class identities" (119).³

Throughout Adisa's stories the exotic landscape functions not only as physical presence, but also as vehicle for analogy or objective correlative to thoughts and experiences. For example, we are told at the beginning of the story that as a pensive Bake-Face leans against what she considers to be her tree: "the blood-red petals of the flamboyant tree cover the ground like a dropt flag over a coffin" (3), suggesting not only exhausted passion but also its thwarting, or death, preparing us for the decision she must make about her future with Mr. Johnson. At the end of the story, she sees her return home to husband and child in images of her nightmare of the burning canefield from which there is no escape:

The sun burst in, sets the kitchen afire. Bake-Face stands. Already she is at that narrow road; cane is all around her, allowing her no escape, and there is no Mr Johnson to call out to. (40)

Cane, of course, is what the slaves were imported to work for—the source of their livelihood and their enslavement. Throughout, the horizons of the story are limited to Bake-Face's own experiences, and this is emphasised by the use of the present tense here. The narrative voice offers no analysis of the way the class/colour hierarchy of Jamaican society affects women like Bake-Face, though one is constantly aware of it. For instance, when she travels twenty-five miles to the nearest hospital because her infant of four months has a fever, the hospital is “always a pot with too much food in it” (5), a reference to the overcrowded conditions where women like Bake-Face, “with pains from too much work, too much living, too much giving birth, too much not being able to find enough” (5), wait on hard wooden benches to see one of the two doctors treating this multitude. Significantly, it is here that she meets Mr. Johnson. As they ride home home together (in characteristic silence), “her eyes [are] hard and blank like cardboard, waiting for some destiny to be stamped upon her” (6), and again a mixture of desire and fatalism is suggested in her sense of the possibilities the relationship holds for her.

Bake-Face's sense of affinity with the landscape is closely associated with this fatalism. This is why she tends to naturalize experiences which the reader clearly recognizes as located in the racial and gender oppression common to the Jamaican social context. Another contributing factor is her sense of isolation—her abuse resulting in a sense of her life as “a grave dug too early” (11). Nevertheless, this naturalization of experience results in an innovative use of analogy to describe experience and emotion: Bake-Face experiences her husband Ezra's lovemaking as analogous to his rigorous farming methods: “He was often forceful in much the same way as he dealt with his farm” (11). This parallel with the soil also suggests her objectification of herself. After the incident when her uncharacteristic attempt at light conversation results in a sharp verbal attack from her friend, Jennifer, Bake-Face feels devastated, almost as if she has been physically as-

saulted; her anguish is clear: "The earth should have opened up and enfolded Bake-Face. Instead, she protruded like the stump of a dead tree" (24). This is contrasted to the physical presence of duppies singing to Lilly from the canefields, or the rival woman, Yemoja, seducing June-Plum by engulfing her with her warm sea water. Interestingly, while the sources of livelihood and exploitation through sugarcane and fishing become transmuted into duppies and the Goddess Yemoja, Bake-Face, despite her lack of analysis of the causes of her social and physical oppression, does possess a sense of injustice precisely because of her inability to conceive of an alternative spiritual dimension, which after all functions also as a form of determinism when events which are grounded in a material reality dominated by the sugarcane plantations (often owned by absentee landlords) are spiritualized by Lilly and June-Plum. Therefore, Bake-Face's sense of disillusionment, while rendering her hopeless and unable to conceive of alternatives, nevertheless suggests a space for a possible analysis of her situation. In a passage focalized through Bake-Face's consciousness, she speculates in typically graphic, physical terms about not only her own life, but also the lives of other women, who here become representative of all those colonized subjects, the mute recipients of thoughtless exploitation and greed:

Why do men act so mighty, never noticing their own weakness, dismissing their rape, wearing women's love like shirts, ejecting children like shit, showing their backs as if they do not bleed too. She knows that they do, but men don't know, because they don't have to shop once a month for pads to catch a part of themselves from spilling onto the earth (17).

Although Bake-Face's tendency to naturalize oppression renders her mute and passive ("waiting for some destiny to be stamped upon her"), the seasonal nature of her relationship with lover, husband, and child could perhaps imply also a tenuous connection with a (lost) African communal culture of cyclic time which Bonnie Barthold has described as characteristic of the precolonial experience. Cyclic time has an affinity with natural processes such as seasonal regeneration and is distinct from linear or historical time, which is the postcolonial, Western concept of time. As Barthold points out, in terms of this cyclic (or

precolonial) concept of time, crop failure is seen as a result of human failure (11), and this to some extent helps to explain Bake-Face's determinist outlook. Years of abuse have had their impact too. Significantly, she feels alive only during the five months spent with her lover at Norman Estate: "This is the space she needs before returning to Ezra and a home where the trees don't bloom or bear fruits (all male trees)" (9). Norman Estate is described as a "ghost town" for the other seven months "while the canes grow and ripen." Then "it rises like bread bursting in the middle for the remainder of the year when the seasonal workers return" (3). The reference to rising bread introduces the chain of associations with food which are used to describe the relationship between Bake-Face and her lover. It seems fitting that memories of their time together are seen in terms of the products of the very cane that traps her in her dream:

Yet these sights are what she lives for; they hold memories—some burnt molasses, bitter and scalding to the tongue, others thick cane juice, frothy and sweet—of her and Mr Johnson. (4)

Appropriately, her leave-taking is marked by her parting gift of "blue drawers" cookies, his favourite. These domestic, concrete analogies are indicative of both the physicality of her experience and the confines of her world: a hurtful comment is "like piss thrown in [the] face" (39); the recollection of an unpleasant incident is "painful gas to be belched" (21). Somewhat perversely, Bake-Face's own face on the eve of her final departure from Bruk-up House, is described as "smooth and wrinkle-free as a newly made bed" (3). This suggestion of innocence is also picked up in references to her as a "frail chicken," despite the fact that she is thirty-five—but also indicates the possibility of a fresh start, embodied in the puppy she intends taking home to her daughter.

Perhaps more interesting than the kind of perception described here and its relevance to an awareness of self, is the way the narrative attempts to diffuse boundaries between the spoken and the written word. According to King-Kok Cheung, this type of writing, which translates the spoken vernacular into written form "dissolves the boundary separating the spoken from the written word and percolates with a vigor often absent in formal

writing" (170).⁴ In a fascinating discussion of the relationship between dialect and national identity, Lauren Berlant suggests that in less literate communities, oral transmission plays a crucial role in the reproduction of the nation itself, from generation to generation (836). Similarly, the Caribbean novelist and critic Wilson Harris argues for the creation of a new Caribbean language which will subvert the imperial domination of standard English ("massa's tongue"), a new language and new way of seeing the world in which "division and categorization are no longer the bases for perception" (qtd. in Ashcroft et al. 35). As I have argued, this new (nation) language is evident in these stories, and this is an increasing trend in recent writing from the Caribbean.

The different endings to the four stories suggest that while Lilly, Denise, and June-Plum are survivors who refuse to be overcome by the calamities that befall them, "Bake-Face," which ends with the nightmare vision of the burning canefield from which there is no escape, is to some extent representative of "the sisters without voices" mentioned in the epigraph to Adisa's anthology. And although Bake-Face does finally make a choice, she nevertheless feels that she has no alternative—the narrow road through the cane, leading her back to her husband and child, is all that awaits her. As the perceptive and plucky Jennifer tells her: "Is like yuh nuh feel yuh deserve nutten" (30). Bake-Face feels acutely the difference between herself and Jennifer, who not only has the will to claim her happiness but is willing to beat—literally—both her common-law husband and his mistress to get what she wants (her man, in this case). Bake-Face's recognition of the implications of this are evident when she tells Jennifer: "yuh is yuh own ooman. Long time now, me nuh me own ooman. Time well late" (31). However, although the decision she makes does not bring her happiness (or, rather, Mr. Johnson), the fact that she decides to leave him permanently is significant because it is the first time she has made a deliberate choice: "she has never had choices up until now" (32). More important, the imagery linking the blood-red colour of her desire for Mr. Johnson with both the cane-fire and burning paper that leaves "only the black ash which stains everything" (9)

suggests a subconscious recognition of the insubstantial basis provided by a relationship founded on mutual need. There is after all a strong suggestion of the strangely symbiotic nature of the relationship between herself and Mr. Johnson: “they supplied a deficiency in each other” (8). Yet just before she leaves, Bake-Face takes her first truly assertive action, the result of which is an orgasm, initiated and claimed by her. This is almost an echo of Jennifer’s action (who, unlike Bake-Face, is her “own ooman”). During their love-making, Bake-Face decides that “she will take what she wants, she will walk outside of herself and taste the dawn” (37). In Lacanian terms, this represents the recognition of self through the split awareness of non-self (“walking outside herself”). Mr. Johnson becomes the catalyst rather than the focus for her awareness that she “deserves something,” and they part after this encounter. The suggestion is that she accepts that self is found not only through a relationship with a man.

Adisa makes this point effectively through two incidents which are linked to Mr. Johnson’s perception of Bake-Face as a “frail chicken.” As Bake-Face sits musing under her flamboyant tree on her last evening at Bruk-up house, her thoughts are interrupted: “A chicken lays an egg. Then cackles. The red peel-neck rooster pursues it” (9). Bake-Face playfully throws a stone at the rooster. After her final parting from Mr. Johnson, she looks out of the window and again “notices the red peel-neck rooster pursuing the chicken; *that is its life*” (40; emphasis added). This observation suggests a transference from the victimized chicken (Bake-Face) to the rooster, Mr. Johnson. Unlike the rooster, Bake-Face has some choice, and she chooses to leave Mr. Johnson; at the same time, the sense of canefields closing in on her serves to undermine the liberation experienced in the act of choice itself. A comment by Light is useful here: speaking about the criticisms of happy endings where there is an appeal to an “apparently unified self,” Light argues that a radical statement can be made by the fictional representation of the illusion of this unified self:

For without such momentary fixings of the flux of subjectivity, the illusion of being a powerful and coherent agent in the world, how would we get out there and do things—how indeed can we have a political theory of action and responsibility. (113-14)

I would suggest that when Bake-Face for one brief moment "[takes] what she wants," this is an example of one such "momentary fixing"—before she becomes immersed again in the "flux of subjectivity" here represented by the canefield that swallows her at the end of the story.

NOTES

- 1 Alison Light is discussing the movement from silence to speech in Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. There are numerous parallels between the two protagonists, Celie and Bake-Face, both semi-educated, both sexually abused and forced into silence by this experience. Some of the criticism of Walker's novel can usefully be applied to a discussion of "Bake-Face."
- 2 Daniel Ross uses Lacan's theories of subjectivity in discussing "the desire for selfhood" in *The Color Purple*. Here Ross is quoting Lacanian scholar Ragglund-Sullivan ("Celie in the Looking Glass: The Desire for Selfhood in *The Color Purple*" 74).
- 3 Referring to the Jamaican Patois spoken by black adolescents in London which is assuming aspects of Cockney, Wong says: "Patois is a powerful social and political mantle. . . . It can also be seen as a process by which extreme cultural dependence is transmuted into greater autonomy and independence primarily through [the] use of Patois to create linguistic barriers" (119).
- 4 King-Kok Cheung is referring to the development of Celie's language in *The Color Purple*.

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