

Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose

An Afro Caribbean Scholar on the Higher Education Plantation

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ABSTRACT

In this autoethnographic piece, I explore my writing events and activities that bring me to an even greater realisation that, *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose* (*The more things change the more they remain the same*). It pushes me to tell *mystory* as an Afro Caribbean scholar who chooses to reside and work in the USA. I reflect on and reinterpret my writings using a dialogic/performance analysis. One major outcome is a consciousness, an awakening, and recognition that social plantation systems continue to exist in the geographic spaces—Trinidad and Tobago and the United States—that I embody. It is a painful experience, but I can transcend the isolation and use the networks available on the plantation as resources. I can find venues in which I can resist, write, speak about, and write back using cultural tools, conceptual frames, and literary devices that resonate with me as an Afro Caribbean scholar.

Keywords: Social plantation systems, autoethnography, Afro Caribbean, dialogic/performance analysis.

EPIPHANY

It is a time when lovers are making New Year's resolutions, clinking champagne glasses, and dancing to the strains of Auld Lang Syne. I share a drink of red wine with my youngest son and resolve to make this the last year of what had become for me an unhappy, unfulfilled relationship to which I had given 27 years. My diary is the witness and the pen the tool that completes the task as I write in my journal: 'By the end of this year, I must complete my master's degree and enter a doctoral program. I can no longer stay in this situation.' (01/01/99)

The acceptance of my application to an American university seemed the answer to my prayers. Here was the opportunity to find a path along which to continue life's journey. I was not about to 'retire' just because I had ended 25 years of teaching or because of a failed marriage. Instead it was going to be 'refirement.' (Fournillier, 2004, pp. 160–161)

I wrote the opening passage during my days as a doctoral student who was trying to interpret my lived experiences on what I characterise now as yet another 'plantation'. Later on in the paper, I explore what this concept means to me and how I am using it. The personal biographic pieces of information I shared in the epigraph and throughout the paper represent one level of discourse in *mystory*, which is 'specific to its composer' (Ulmer, 1989, p. 209). The other levels are the stories of women in the community whom I interview, live with, and write about in a book chapter, *Woman/Native/Other: My Experiences as an Anglophone Caribbean student in the United States* (Fournillier, 2004), and expert-knowledge I gain from the academic disciplines that I make my intellectual home at varying times. In this autoethnographic piece, I explore how writing is a form of inquiry and how my decision to

do a dialogic/performance analysis of the previous texts that I wrote about my experiences form and inform my awareness. I intersperse excerpts from the various texts that tell the story of my experiences and those of persons I interviewed and worked with on the plantations.

THE END IS THE BEGINNING

I am now an assistant professor and at another point and place in my journey and residence on a plantation. However, it is with the awareness that I have gained over the past 10 years since coming to the United States that I take you with me on the journey through what seemed at times to be a dark abyss. I say the end is the beginning because although I have reflected on and written about this issue many times, it only came together when I wrote a paper for a panel discussion, *Thirty + Years on the Plantation*, at the Third International Qualitative Inquiry Congress (2007). I created a piece that I called *Plus ca change, plus c'est ca meme chose*, which became the title of this paper.

The writing process, the literary devices, and the conceptual frame that I employed in my writing of that conference paper and my present use of a dialogic/performance analysis facilitate this autoethnographic piece that you are now reading. I found Riessman's (2008) interpretation of a dialogic/performance analysis and her extended view of stories most appropriate for this paper, which I intend to open the spaces for dialogue and response to my lived experiences on the plantation. She views stories as 'composed and received in contexts—interactional, historical, institutional, and discursive—to name a few' (p. 105). The stories I tell and use in this autoethnographic text are designed to evoke the emotions of the audiences. Leggo (2008) compares this kind of writing to 'echolocation', the means by which 'bats can navigate their nocturnal flights. They send out sound waves which then bounce off distant objects and reflect back to the sender' (p. 91).

Here I am, an Afro Caribbean immigrant scholar who is trying to find my way on the 'plantation' and uncertain about the terrain. I approach the various narratives that I draw from my writings, as the 'other'. I use them as resources for a dialogic/performance analysis. Among the many questions that I ask myself in the hope that answers will bounce back are: (1) Who am I [or who are we?]; (2) How did I [or we] get where we are; (3) Why am I [or are we] here; (4) What am I [or are we] experiencing; (5) How am I [or are we] dealing with navigating the process; (6) What pictures of my self [our selves] do I [we] feel the need to present or deny?

MYSTORY BEGINS...

Narrator's voice at the conference:

s/he is scared too scared to say how s/he feels and so s/he hides behind the mask of a form that might never get in spaces that re-represent the discourses that determine what is scholarship who is scholarly and who is smart

spaces authority figures master narratives contribute to decision making processes in the long and short run and so anansi spins the web while s/he draws close to Linda Smith who reminds indigenous peoples that...

it means struggling to make sense of our own world while also attempting to transform what counts as important in the world of the powerful

but how you does do that

and so s/he writes as a method and art of inquiry Richardson and Neilsen, Cole, and Knowles
and she reflects to keep her sanity and . . .

yes s/he looking backward and forward at the Collins' outsider within status s/he chooses to
occupy and struggles to inhabit and make a habit. (Fournillier, 2007)

My analysis of the various stories made me very conscious of how experiences on the plantation were affecting me. I was and still am sometimes afraid of the repercussions of speaking out and being vulnerable. And my question is always, 'Can I be any more political?' Just risking to write this paper is for me a giant step and my fingertips jump off the computer keys faster than my brain works. I type the words on the paper knowing and wondering how the masters will respond when they read what I write. Although I shared my deep feelings of anguish and disappointment with my close friends, I did not think I could dare write about them. However, my use of the literary device—stream of consciousness/interior monologue—and a Trinidadian dialect seemed to provide me some level of freedom and to allow me to clear my throat. My voice came through for me. This literary device met my need for a mode of writing that: (1) provides some distance [without being distant] from the narrative; (2) allows for reflexivity; and (3) facilitates an appreciation for theoretical and practical applications of the art of writing inquiry process.

But I needed much more than those devices. I needed a conceptual frame that resonated with my deep feelings and the images that I conjured up as I tossed and turned the ideas in my mind. I was excited and thrilled when I received the invitation to participate in the panel and saw that the theme was built around the plantation. I jumped at it. And so I framed the piece.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMING OF MYSTORY/THEIR STORY/OUR STORY

Narrator's voice:

yes s/he was born and lived for fifty years in a hinterland co-constructed as a plantation system that characterized and informed the many institutions in a society dat in spite of economic growth propelled from the metropole and constitutional independence remained largely underdeveloped and dependant and

persistent poverty prevails in spite of the amount of oil money there exists the need for education for all quality education the right to education expansion and equality of access that led to a continuing socially stratified community and an intellectual class with the ascriptive characteristics and culture traits dat are fundamentally those of the North Atlantic white colonizers. (Fournillier, 2007)

I was born in Trinidad and Tobago, where I worked, studied, and resided for the first 50 years of my life. I never considered myself a minority, but I knew that my ancestors were born in and out of the slave experience. My grandmother, who was born in the early 1900s, was the daughter of a man who came from China as part of the indentured labour system and a woman who came from Venezuela and worked on the cocoa plantation estate. I lived, grew up, and attended primary and secondary school in Belmont, one of the areas in which most of the slave population lived. I never classified myself as minority, but I knew my slave heritage.

My first lesson was that I needed to be politically correct to survive on the plantation. I shied away from identifying as Black in the book chapter that I subtitled *Experiences of an Anglophone Caribbean Student in the United States* (Fournillier, 2004). It was my way of distancing myself from the other Black natives and letting the White community know that English was my first language. I knew who had the power and which master I had to serve. Intuitively, I felt it might have also made me more acceptable in this new space—USA—where I was now a minority, a worker, an alien, and an immigrant. But I eventually realised that it does not work that easily, and the conflict and turmoil is best reflected in the following excerpt.

Narrator's voice:

s/he was unprepared for the alien resident voluntary minority afro-Caribbean immigrant woman of the Black Diaspora of whom Waters writing while Pierre pushing s/he out the comfort zone when she calling for rejection of ethnicity theory and holding on to theories of Black distinctiveness within analyses of power relations and ongoing practices of racial subjugation

dat one go down a little better and s/he now realize what united we stand divided we fall really mean on the plantation and how this ethnic distinctiveness only fueling the racist myth of Black American cultural inferiority so i still learning lessons the hard and painful way from Pierre but s/he still is a transnational who always have to go home for nurturing and feel the pain of separation when s/he go home and have to leave saying s/he going back home because s/he homeland rejecting s/he and calling s/he American girl although s/he holding on to the same rhythmic speech patterns and have accent like everyone else who think is only s/he have one and s/he getting bold and telling them s/he like dem own too. (Fournillier, 2007)

The divide and rule system of the slave plantation was still at work in higher education. Instead of working together with my Black 'sistahs' to strengthen and support each other, I was distancing myself. It therefore seemed most appropriate to use the historical social plantation system [a subset of the plantation estate] as a conceptual analogy. It allowed me to explore its similarities with the higher education institution that I characterise as a 'plantation'.

When I think of plantation, I recall the lyrics of Mighty Sparrow's calypso 'Slave'. Slinger Francisco, whose sobriquet is Mighty Sparrow, is one of our well-known bards of the Caribbean musical art form—calypso.

Narrator's voice:

*I was caught and I was brought here from Africa
well it was licks like fire from de white slave master
everyday ah down on mi knees
weeks and weeks to cross the seas
to reach the West Indies
then they made you work, oh yes ah work
good Lord no pay
and then ah toil and toil and toil and toil
so hard each day
I'm dying I'm crying...oh lord I wanna be free... (Excerpt from 'Slave' by Mighty Sparrow)*

The lyrics of this calypso represent the images I have of a plantation estate and the meanings I make of it. I remember the deep feelings of anger that the lyrics evoke as I vicariously experience the pain and suffering of my ancestors who worked on the plantation estates

for little or no money. I experience the same pain and anguish as an alien immigrant worker on this new plantation. I remember the tears running down my cheeks and turning to what felt like icicles as I walk across the drill field on my way to and from work on campus. I cannot afford the luxury of a car or housing on the grounds of the plantation. I live in what one White professor called 'the ghetto'. The academic tasks I am given to perform are in exchange for tuition waivers and a small stipend that pays my rent and bought food. I am a privileged 'house slave'. I can hear my friends argue that most graduate students are in search of tuition waivers and receive similar stipends. But the difference is that as an alien resident, immigrant, and international student, I can only legally work 'on campus' and depend solely on the good will of the masters. I knew that to do otherwise would be to run afoul of the immigration laws and risk being shipped back to the Caribbean. I understood now what it meant to work on a plantation. Higher education institutes became my plantation estates. Moreover, it was, and possibly still is, 'a distinctive economic, social, technological, and cultural institution profoundly influencing the destinies of many lands' (Ragatz, 1961, p. 410). Plantation becomes an appropriate framework for exploring my lived experiences and presenting *mystory/their story/our story* (Ellis & Bergen, 2000).

MOVING ALONG...

I was one of the baby boomers who had decided to become a public intellectual. I did not want to be an intellectual funnel. I wanted to stop taking things for granted and to start making associations, complicating things, generating new ideas, and networking with persons who were thinking differently. I had used these thoughts as my rationale for finally leaving the security of my Caribbean home for the United States. (Fournillier, 2004, pp. 160–161)

These were my thoughts as I reflected on and tried to find a rationale for leaving the land of my birth. Looking at the lines now, I think, what an idealist I was. Trinidad and Tobago, now a twin-island republic, was a former slave plantation and a Spanish, French, and then British colony. Like so many postcolonial countries, it demonstrates characteristics of the historical social plantation system that is integral to its colonial history. In spite of claims to emancipation and freedom from the chains of colonial slavery, political independence, and its republican status, Trinidad and Tobago remains haunted by its colonial past. Thus, it seems ironic that the textbooks refer to the country as postcolonial. I knew from my experience as a primary and secondary school and university student, an instructor, and an examiner that the country's educational system was decidedly British in its origin. It changed over the years, but there were still limitations in terms of educational opportunities. Some scholars like myself, interested in further education, felt compelled to move to another region of the cultural sphere—Plantation America—in search of higher education degrees and labour. I am still drawn to what one of my North American peers called 'the isolated geography of red rock country' (personal communication, Kaufmann, September 8, 2010). In addition to the personal reasons I refer to in the epigraph, many scholars like myself make the challenges universities in the Caribbean face a justification for our departure. Caribbean scholars Lewis and Simmons (2010) suggest that some of the challenges the universities in the Caribbean face in terms of developing a research culture stem from the inability to break away from their 'metropolitan inheritances that include: political, administrative and education systems, ways of knowing, taste and dependent economic systems' (p. 338). The more I interacted with my peers and heard their stories, the more I realised that I was not alone and *mystory* was their story and our story that needed to be told.

THEIR STORY/MY STORY/OUR STORY

My reading of the literature on immigrant women in education and their experiences in the academy and my interview research work and interaction with women of African descent from the Caribbean and the United States brought me even closer to my interpretations of the workings of the 'plantation'. And so I write,

The Caribbean women whom I began interviewing recognized their immigrant status and were determined to complete their education at any cost. Scholarship and intellectual dialogue no longer mattered. The women at Pleasant Ville and Pander Ville [pseudonyms I gave to the universities for the purpose of institutional review board requirements] reiterated in the interviews and in casual conversations that they just wanted to finish and would give their professors whatever they asked for even if it went against what they believed. I pondered on how I would navigate my journey. What kind of ethical issues were involved in the research process if we as students did what professors asked of us? (Fournillier, 2004, p. 171)

My analysis of the women's stories made me realise that the graduate students were not the only ones who had a need. There was a need on the plantation for cheap labour. It was especially pervasive among international students for whom this was often the major source of income. It meant obedience to the will of the master, loss of voice, and the absence of the will to engage in scholarly and intellectual dialogue. It became most obvious to me when one of the participants in my interview study requested that I remove some material for fear of the implications if her advisor read it. Her status as labourer meant for her a loss of rights and an obedience to authority. She was also afraid that she would not only lose her pittance pay but might not get a recommendation for work on other 'plantations' later on. 'What was the price of the ticket?' I asked myself. An immigrant scholar's economic dependence on the 'plantation' seemed to influence what she dared to say in an interview. It was yet another form of slavery and a plantation operating under the guise of a different name.

I would soon discover as I searched and reviewed the literature that there were many of us on various plantations. And indeed there was a range of economic, political, and social factors that accounted for our presence. The literature that I reviewed for my encyclopaedia paper on Black students from the Caribbean and Sub-Saharan African shows that this is not a new phenomenon and there were indeed many other factors that accounted for this pull.

I write in my encyclopaedia entry:

With the increasing attention to primary education, an increasing number of students from African and the Caribbean have the qualifications for colleges and universities. As U.S. educational institutions seek to satisfy diversity requirements, they often see these countries as ideal sites for marketing the educational opportunities they offer. The most recent data from the Institute of International Education show that of the 564,766 international students enrolled in 2005 to 2006 in U.S. colleges and universities, 49,998 came from African and Caribbean countries.

Liberal legislation initiatives such as the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 have accounted in part for the initial increase and heightened visibility of international students from the Caribbean and African regions. At the same time, students there are motivated through increasing globalization, internationalization of education, and access to knowledge about U.S. institutions and the wider range of academic opportunities they offer.

The flight of human capital from these areas has been referred to as the 'brain drain.' Caribbean economists and historians bemoan the fact that instead of being of benefit to the local economies, the investment in the education of their citizens has benefited the North

Atlantic countries. Although a U.S. education may benefit the individual, it is more often than not detrimental to the economic and social development of the sending countries. Open Doors reported that 61.8% of all international students relied on personal and family funds for their U.S. studies, taking their resources out of their homelands; only 25% of their funding came from U.S. colleges or universities. Overall, international students have contributed over \$13 billion to the U.S. economy. (Fournillier, 2010, pp. 361-362)

My childhood days on the plantation were over by this time, and I could now network with others on the plantation. The other member workers on the plantations provided me with advice and suggestions on how to navigate the system. I learned the hard way that I had to speak up, speak out, and write back. I remember only too well a faculty member telling me that I did not get what I wanted to teach because I did not speak up. I fumed inwardly and perhaps outwardly also but I learned my lesson. I was no longer a house slave; I was elevated to another position on the plantation, and so I had to take action.

NETWORKING ON THE 'PLANTATION'

As a junior faculty member on the plantation, I began to recognise that higher education as an institution did not provide an escape from institutionalised racism, clearly defined classism, and many of the social injustices that accompany a plantation system. However, it afforded the possibility for networking, overcoming the isolation, and a space like the one in the encyclopaedia, in which I could begin to re-present my voice as an Afro Caribbean scholar. Indeed, the Third International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry, whose theme was *Ethics, Evidence, and Social Justice*, allowed me to finally make public via a conference presentation and not under the cover of a chapter or an article that as an Afro Caribbean immigrant scholar I had exchanged one plantation for another.

EXCHANGING ONE PLANTATION FOR ANOTHER

Narrator's voice:

so Anansi reminds her dat there ain't no way s/he can contribute to de decolonizing processes and so s/he runs and James stops s/he in de track and like Caliban s/he realize dat after all dese centuries s/he have to pioneer into regions Caesar never know

is a case of establishing identity . . . but dat aint easy either

s/he scared too bad for fear that some might think s/he biting de hand that feeding and might say so why yuh staying why you doh go back where you come from but dat might mean that there will not be too many left because plenty plenty come here from somewhere else so to make a long story short s/he start to think again about what it is like where s/he come from and how s/he contribute to de brain drain and leave one plantation system and run smack into another

s/he aint believe is a case of love it or leave it instead it is a case of improve it or lose it and so s/he make the choice to stay and participate like Williams suggest in a meaningful and great souled manner aware and now more conscious and critical of the continuing colonization of the mind mental slavery Bob Marley and de decolonization of methodology Linda Smith...

s/he experience de education system dat Sparrow say wanted to keep us in ignorance and experiencing another that challenging her to explore revisit re-conceptualize what is education who is a educator and where education taking place

but is only when she move away she start to reconsider what s/he took as gospel and like ti jean the youngest character of Nobel laureate Caribbean playwright Derrick Walcott Ti Jean and his brothers s/he combining wit and common sense that Ian Robertson reminds make before book to survive de plantation systems dat exist in de first second third and fourth worlds

yes and in spite of the contractions s/he staying on de academic plantation dat allowing for taking risks and contributing to de dialogue

Crick Crack monkey break he back for a two-cent pommerac yes. (Fournillier, 2007)

APPROACHING WRITING/PERFORMANCE/REPRESENTATION

The preceding text I used in my performance at the conference, excerpts from my paper on immigrant women in academia, and my encyclopaedia entry allowed me to share ‘their story/my story/our story’ (Ellis & Bergen, 2000). These texts are all reinterpretations of my lived experiences on the plantation. I must admit that I made the decision to intersperse pieces from conference text in this autoethnographic piece knowing that,

When the text takes the place of speech, there is no longer a speaker, at least in the sense of an immediate and direct self-designation of the one who speaks in an instant discourse. This proximity of the speaking to his own speech is replaced by a complex relation of the author to the text, a reaction that enables us to say that the author is instituted by the text, that he stands in the space of meaning traced and inscribed by writing. (Ricoeur, 1991, p. 109)

However, I found the literary mode an alternative form of representation and a most appropriate format for the conference presentation text. I intentionally opted for stream-of-consciousness, defined as ‘a continuous flow of sense-perceptions, thoughts, feelings, and memories in the human mind; or a literary method of representing such a blend of mental processes in fictional characters usually in an unpunctuated or disjointed form of ‘interior monologue’ (Baldick, 1990, p. 318).

It was a literary mode that resonated with me as a scholar, a ‘native-born’ Trinidadian and a former language arts teacher. This mode of writing allowed me to play with an alternative way of representing my lived experiences. I knew that ethnography was not exempt from the use of literary techniques. In the introduction to the *Ethnographic Narratives of Village Trinidad* John Stewart (1989) reiterates, ‘But there can be no question that literary techniques are ideal for plumbing the subjective, and that by calling forward sensations through which much of the world is experienced literary techniques also effectively energize intersubjective communication’ (p. 8). Using them released me from the bonds of the plantation system I embodied as a student. It was a freeing and exhilarating moment when the audience responded lustily and shook their heads and shed a tear after hearing the presentation.

I was intent on performance, ‘the term used to describe a certain type of particularly involved and dramatized oral narrative’ (Langellier, 1999, p. 127). I could do so with the spoken work that I interspersed with James Joyce’s (1961) literary style of the repetitive ‘yes’. I gave the audience the word I wanted them to repeat. I was being positive and assertive and they responded with their bodies and their voices.

It is my way of asserting that I am not a victim but one who has arrived at an awareness and consciousness of what living and working on the plantation means to me and how it affected the way I was representing my self [selves]. I found freedom in the belief that of great significance to my experience of learning the culture is what Yun Kim (2008) identifies as 'the acquisition of new cultural aesthetic and emotional sensibilities, from a new way of appreciating beauty, fun, joy, as well as despair, anger, and the like' (p. 363). It was not just a matter of receiving but of providing a stage in which the audience 'could to some extent participate in the interior world of an ethnographic situation' (Stewart, 1989, p. 8). Indeed, according to Stewart, this was one of the assumptions underlying the use of the literary ethnographic approach.

Another literary device that not only added to the conference text but amplified my construction of self was my use of a Trinidadian dialect, and calypso. This is a genre of music for which the Caribbean is well known and an art form historically used as a mode of resistance. My use of the calypso allowed me to add another character to the script, incorporate a genre of music that comes out of an oral tradition, and explore the historical contexts.

I chose Slinger Francisco—Mighty Sparrow—because he is one of the better-known singers/calypsonians outside of the Caribbean. In addition, this calypso 'Slave' is one that calypso aficionados call a 'masterpiece'. The song describes the horrors of the slave experience and the 'never-ending quest for liberation through rebellion, and the eventual emancipation' (BBC Caribbean.com, 2007). The interview from which this quotation was taken was interestingly titled, *Slave: History in a Song*. I found that it was most suited to the theme of the piece, contributed to its aesthetic poetic narrative form, and voiced my deep feelings of anguish about a social plantation system that seems to still exist in Plantation America but under the guise of a different name.

THE END IS THE BEGINNING

I am an Afro Caribbean scholar, a Trinidadian woman, a researcher/writer and a labourer on the plantation. But I can transcend the isolation and use the networks available on the plantation as resources. I can find venues in which I can resist, write, speak about, and write back. I have a responsibility to share the experiences and to give voice to my deep fears of being punished by the owners of the plantation for daring to speak out and or back. And, yes, the more things change, the more they remain the same. But I have the power and the agency to write so that others can read, interpret, possibly understand, and (if they are so inclined) make a difference in the lived experiences of members who exchange one plantation for another and need to find their way(s) back home.

NOTES

- 1 I include 'we' because although I am the author and I focus on my responses to the experience, the story is also about the group and about society and culture.
- 2 Mas' is a shortened form of the word masquerade. A mas' camp is a physical and more recently virtual location where costumes are designed, made, sold, and distributed to persons who choose to be a part of the band on Carnival Monday and Tuesday—the two days prior to the Christian festival of Ash Wednesday.

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