FROM TOMB TO TOOL? RETHINKING PLANTATIONS
FOR A CARIBBEAN PHILOSOPHY OF LANGUAGE

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Introduction
A somewhat recent assertion made by the anthropological linguist Christine Jourdan (2008) situates the theorization of creole language beginnings in a commonsensical yet novel framework. She connects the origins of these languages to “. . . stories of the power relationships that are at the core of the social worlds that have fostered most of the pidgin and creole languages we know” (p. 360). This statement acknowledges the processes of selection and narration that always play substantial roles in the elaboration of scientific explanations of the past while alluding to micro-level dynamics of language use and linguistic interaction. Crucially, as read here, it also suggests that linguists with research interests in Caribbean societies should strive to enrich and nuance scholarly traditions and theories that address how, where, and why creole languages were created.
The discussion below considers the significance of Jourdan’s work for Anguilla, the most northerly of the Caribbean’s Leeward Islands. It has two main objectives. First, it aims to highlight commonalities and tensions between Jourdan’s (2008) general description of the societies in which creole languages emerged and unpublished socio-historical information found in archives describing the early period of Anguilla’s colonization. Second, it discusses links between the plantation and contemporary attitudes toward the use of Anguilla’s English-lexifier Creole in writing. This essay shows that in both of these cases ideas about the plantation interfere with the promotion of critical language awareness, a concept that Fairclough (2006, [1999]) measures in terms of two components: (i) knowledge of the structures and functions of language and (ii) consciousness of links between language and social power.

Concern about the plantation’s longstanding hold on knowledge about the Caribbean past has a long but marginalized history in Caribbean Studies. In a 1976 essay, Brathwaite problematizes the status of the plantation model as an effective and useful trope for the analysis of the region’s history and social life, warning that it “is in itself a product of the plantation and runs the hazard of becoming as much tool as tomb of
the system it seeks to understand and transform” (p. 201). He suggests that scholars should approach the infamous institution critically in order to contemplate a more fruitful set of analytical resources, one that directly assists them in achieving their goals. Brathwaite envisions a framework that would include the conceptualization of a philosophy of history for the Caribbean that “would alert us to the duality that is characteristic of calendars of fate associated with dead time as the spectral irony and archaeology of the muse” (p. 202).

In the more than three decades that have elapsed since Brathwaite’s warning, an impressive amount of scholarship has led to numerous insights about plantations and their ongoing significance, but the cumulative effects of the plantation as tomb continue to loom large, at times effectively undermining researchers’ efforts to productively contribute to the communities that they study. Circumventing the problem that Brathwaite identifies remains challenging, but the issue should be rekindled, I argue, given the pragmatic repositioning of knowledge nurtured by the project that he envisions.

**Anguilla’s cultural and linguistic heritage**

Situated between the Caribbean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean in a southwest-northeast direction, Anguilla is relatively small, with an area of approximately 35 square miles. Concerning demographics, the 2006 census estimates the population to be 13,500. Approximately 91% of the inhabitants identified as Black, with about four and five percent recognizing themselves as White and mixed, respectively (Anguilla 2006 Census).

The island has long existed as a colonial setting where the Caribbean’s iconic plantation economy proved to be peripheral and generally less profitable than in the colonies of Barbados, Antigua, and St. Christopher that the English established in the 1600s. This has much to do with the fact that Anguilla’s soil and dry climate were generally unsuitable for the production of sugar, in contrast with the aforementioned colonies, which were wetter, larger, and organized around the production of commodities for export (Higman, 1995: 43-45).

Contemporary Anguillian, the English-lexifer Creole spoken by most of the island’s native-born inhabitants, is frequently referred to locally as “Anguilla Talk”, “dialek” (“dialect”), or even English. While the Creole has received increased attention from linguists in the last decade, it remains one of the Eastern Caribbean’s many underdocumented varieties. Most locals speak it as a native language and also learn a standard variety of British-influenced English in their youth because it is the main language of formal education on the island. Some speakers describe Anguillian as an “accent” rather than a language, given the blurry boundaries between it and official varieties of English and a long trajectory of ambivalence toward creole languages throughout the region. However, grammatical differences distinguish the languages.
Anguillian’s distinctive features include pre-verbal tense, mood, and aspect markers; various types of serial verbs; and a pronominal system distinct from that of British varieties of English.

An increasing number of scholars specializing in the study of Creoles define this group of languages in terms of the socio-historical contexts in which they arose. Information about two transformative events stands out as paramount to documenting their emergence: European colonization and the Atlantic Slave Trade. According to influential interpretations of the founder principle (e.g., Chaudenson, 2001; Mufwene, 2001), patterns of social interaction within the period these colonies were established are key to understanding the origins of creole languages. In the case of Anguilla, the founder period lasts about 150 years, dating from around 1650, the year of its official recognition as an English colony, to the end of the eighteenth century. The early colonial-era “founders” are frequently described as a few English families from St. Christopher (today called St. Kitts), but recent research shows that the relatively small population of a few hundred people included enslaved West Africans as early as the seventeenth century (see Walicek, 2009). Thus, Anguilla’s non-indigenous founders include Africans as well as Europeans.

One of the current challenges in creolistics involves documenting how the dynamics of colonization and African enslavement unfolded differentially across the settings in which these varieties emerged. Jourdan (2008: 365-366) offers a list of general characteristics that is useful for connecting creole language origins and local socio-historical dynamics. Her description, which can be seen as building on Thomason and Kaufman’s (1988: 35) view that the sociolinguistic history of speakers rather than the structure of language is the primary determinant of the linguistic outcome of contact, “operates from the premise that the societies in which creole languages emerged differ from one another in terms of work conditions, cultural diversity of the workers, and general social relations.” It describes these societies as: (i) centered around work or work-related activities; (ii) constrained by the lack of cultural depth in situ, the structure of the plantation system, and the lack of access to European cultural depth; and (iii) restricted by and developed in relative isolation, in self-contained social and economic worlds.

Jourdan suggests that these characteristics should be assessed and adjusted in accordance with the dynamics of interaction and social experience in specific settings and local circumstances. She underscores (p. 365) the importance of thinking about cultural heterogeneity as a set of “new cultural worlds, in the plural, rather than as a totalizing cultural world.” In what follows I offer some preliminary comments on how Jourdan’s characteristics relate to socio-historical data from the period 1650-1800 in Anguilla.

The first characteristic indicates that the cultures of this early period were “centered around work or work-related activities.” Keeping in mind that Anguilla’s societal
development is distinct from that of more frequently studied Caribbean colonies, I argue that a culture of work associated with the market economy was actually marginal during the period in question. Challenges to survival associated with a harsh and rather desolate environment were pervasive and constant. The island was repeatedly subject to attacks, raids, evacuation, hurricanes, and shortages of currency and food (see Walicek, 2009). The European colonists and enslaved Africans living on the island lacked basic infrastructure. Housing is described as inadequate and reports indicate that colonists chose to burn their dwellings during raids by the Caribs and French. At the center of the still emerging society was a basic struggle: transforming the fledgling settlement into a viable place to live.

It should be noted that many on the island engaged in subsistence agriculture and that some men migrated to work in this early period, prominent trends that continued through the twentieth century. Nevertheless, enterprise linked to capital investment and the large-scale production of agricultural commodities for export, as well as the ideologies that mark the region’s transition from feudal and subsistence traditions were not central components of Anguillian society during the early years of its settlement. Furthermore, the labor that contributed directly to the early colony is distinct from the type of work that most historians and linguists associate with plantations.

Second, Jourdan mentions “lack of cultural depth” in situ as a central characteristic of the societies in which creole languages arose. Jourdan’s work is useful because while what happened locally is described as key to understanding linguistic outcomes, that which is external and prior is not forgotten. She proposes that incipient contact varieties became progressively central to social life “while vernaculars remained all the while rooted in the cultural depth associated with places of origin”, “central to the cultural memory” and facilitating psychological and emotional transitions (p. 367). This balanced perspective should be explored in scholarship that contextualizes the founder principle in relation to first-generation homestead societies.

Archival data cross in-situ external boundaries, providing information that assists in documenting social life. A useful anecdote from the 1667 identifies Africans in Barbados, one of the islands from which colonists and slaves migrated to Anguilla in the seventeenth century, as “English” speakers:

“The proprietors and tradesmen wormed out between 1643 and 1654: the planters design to have all their tradesmen, sugar boilers, &c. of their blacks, and put blacks with all their tradesmen; has inspected many plantations and seen 30 or 40 English, Scotch, and Irish at work in the parching sun, without shirt, shoe, or stocking, and negroes at their trades in good condition; by which the whole may be endangered, for now there are many thousands of slaves that speak English [emphasis added],
and if there are many leading men slaves in a Plantation, they may be easily wrought upon to betray it, especially on the promise of freedom. How each party abets its faction in the greatest dangers, would amaze any Englishman.” (CSP, 1880: 520-534)

As Devonish (2008: 621) points out, during this period “English” frequently refers to language either associated with or identified as Creole. The label is likely to indicate speech with salient evidence of substrate forms. Though it does not detail events that took place in Anguilla, the excerpt above assists in theorizing the “cultural depth” that existed among first-generation migrants in situ. It points to diverse levels of fluency among Africans, a diachronic trend toward greater exposure to English within the early phase of British colonization, and one official’s concerns about Africans’ greater proficiency. Given that Barbados is one of two locations that Baker (1999: 355) identifies as a “launching pad” for contact varieties of Caribbean English, such information may be relevant for tracking language contact on a variety of islands, not only Anguilla.

Archives also provide some information about life during the first five decades of settlement. For example, records from Anguilla’s local council mention a conflict between Africans and Europeans that involved language. Reference is made to a 1690 case of physical confrontation in which, Jupiter and Leo, two enslaved Africans, assaulted and mocked two Irish brothers who were indentured servants, calling them “white negroes” with “corrupt language”. This brief anecdote, rich with significance, shows an example in which contact did not lead speakers to immediately share norms or unified cultural forms. Here members of two subgroups of “founders”, all presumably proficient in ‘English’, directly engage in conflict, one in which Africans use metalinguistic commentary to insult Irishmen (St. Kitts National Archive, Anguilla ledger 1). Apparently the transition from “crowd of individual workers” to “community of workers”, which Jourdan associates with new cultural subjectivities and local practices that fostered bonds between inhabitants, did not take root until the century that followed (pp. 365-366).

The third characteristic, the notion that linguistic and cultural contact was directly shaped by isolation associated specifically with the plantation, is rather inappropriate for the early period. Simply put, plantations as they are known today did not yet exist. While some colonists did use the term and sometimes called themselves planters, for most of them plantation signified either a garden or, as designated in their wills, “a small parcel of land” (St. Kitts National Archive, Anguilla ledger 1). As the period progressed, a few wealthier men from other islands did claim large tracts as investments, but early on most appear to have been absentee owners who did not immediately pursue intensive exploitation of their holdings.
Also significant is that even the enslaved Africans attached to estates, presumably the most immobile of early inhabitants, were connected to other islands through networks of physical movement and intra-island communication (St. Kitts National Archive, Anguilla ledger 2). Familiar with navigating the ocean and the construction of boats from trees, they fished at sea and hunted on uninhabited islands, at times sharing information with others from Tortola and Saint Croix who did the same. In the seventeenth century, some Africans in Anguilla knew that they could gain their manumission if they reached Spanish territory as runaways. As discussed in a forthcoming article, information about the possibilities of freedom in Puerto Rico is likely to have been spread by a small number of Africans who were owned by mariners and worked in areas as far away as the Virgin Islands (e.g., St. Croix, Crabb Island, uninhabited cayes). Some fled Anguilla and these outliers while others experimented with *petit marronage*. Both situations worried their masters throughout the 1680s. This can also be seen in three instances of circular migration to Crabb Island (contemporary Vieques, part of the US commonwealth of Puerto Rico). These took place in 1683, 1688, and 1717 (see Walicek, forthcoming).

“Tongue Clapper Say”

For many Anguillians today, linguistic pride runs deep and its use in daily life acts as a powerful symbol of heritage and place. In fact, the language plays a central role in local discourses about culture and history, usually reinforcing a sense of belonging and shared experience. When negative attitudes toward Anguillian are voiced, they are frequently linked to arguments about the relationship between history and sociolinguistic phenomena. One example of this dates to a 2006 letter to the editor in the local newspaper *The Light*. The letter draws attention to the column “Tongue Clapper Say”, a feature of *Library Lingo*, the community newsletter that Anguilla Library Services publishes for its patrons. The letter to the editor charges that the newsletter’s “three major insertions stink with slang and broken English” (p.15). Signed with the pseudonym Educator Too, the letter to the editor cites the following passage in which a narrator refers to her friend Lickmout Lou, a fictitious character: “Gyul, I did promise aya las time dat I was gonna tell aya all about Digicel and Cable and Wireless, but when mi frien’ Lickmout Lou read di piece bout ole time weddings last time, she send dis one for fuh me from di press from di Barbados Nation.” Humorous in tone, here the narrator recalls a previous installment of Tongue Clapper Say in which she shared information about Anguilla’s traditional culture.

Educator Too continues, “*Library Lingo* seems to convey that it’s OK to be lazy and not stress one’s self by having to write and speak proper English, just open one’s mouth and utter whatever comes out; also write whatever pops up in one’s noggin [. . .].” The writer adds, “I understand and know the role of creole language in one’s cultural heritage; but I don’t think that Anguilla has a creole language as such” (p.15).
Contemporary Social Life

What exactly is the writer of this letter suggesting? In essence, Educator Too takes two jabs at Lickmout Lou and her creators. The first links writing in Anguillian to laziness and a lack of thought. Defining the language in narrow and negative terms, the idea is that any deviation from the standard tradition reflects laziness and stupidity and should be avoided. Within this mindset, often the only acceptable language for writing is that of the numerical minority that has been socio-economically dominant, the very group that historically has limited the majority’s access to literacy. For many, Anguillian is the preferred language for participating in and talking about celebrated traditions such as boat racing, storytelling, and jollification. It’s the language associated with play, humor, and intimacy. Its use in writing is a hallmark of intelligence and creativity, as shown by the poetry of Patricia Adams, an English teacher who, like local librarians, values and advocates for the use and mastery of both the local Creole and “British English”. Neither her work nor the characters who use an approximation of local dialect in the Blanchards’ New York Times bestseller Trip to the Beach (2000) reflect laziness or a lack of knowledge. Local writers consistently incorporate non-standard spoken norms and orthographies into their work. This pattern is evident even in the texts produced by the Caribbean’s two Nobel Laureates in Literature, V.S. Naipaul and Derek Walcott.

The second jab at Library Lingo’s attempt to promote positive language attitudes comes in the assertion that Anguillian is not a Creole. Teacher Too suggests that the language has an exceptional status among non-standard Caribbean varieties, an umbrella category in which I include Anguillian. At the same time, the writer claims to understand language within the context of cultural heritage. The idea is that because the language is not a Creole it has no place in the island’s cultural heritage and presumably no legitimacy as a written system.

In 2010 I conducted semi-structured sociolinguistic interviews in which ten adults discussed Teacher Too’s views. Participants in these “chat sessions” generally fell into two groups. The first group consisted of people who, like Teacher Too, rejected the categorization of Anguillian as a Creole, usually on the grounds that the island had neither a typical plantation past nor a climate like that of nearby sugar colonies (e.g., St. Kitts, Antigua). In the words of one participant, “We don’t have good soil, had no plantations, and have no real creole.” These individuals suggested that “real creoles” exist in places where strong economies emerged around the production of commodities. They associated such settings with grammars that diverge more dramatically from their European lexifiers, the varieties linguists identify as “radical” creole languages (e.g., Jamaican and Papiamentu). Members of this first group were divided about the extent to which the experiences of African enslavement and European colonization in these plantation settings are altogether distinct from Anguilla’s somewhat atypical past. However, all agreed that these differences should
be documented and their discussion integrated into the history curriculum of the island's schools.

The interviewees who made up the second group took a more anthropological approach to questions about how to classify Anguillian. They saw Anguillian as a Creole and favored a notion of culture that includes language, whether standard varieties or "dialects". Many of them recounted that their pride in the language had little to do with the label creole itself and more to do with its effectiveness in communicating culture, in particular the "flavor" and "texture" of local meanings and symbols. These individuals emphasized "what we gain" when Anguilla Talk – for many the language of daily life – is recognized as a central element of the island's cultural heritage rather than defined in opposition to it. They mentioned the importance of reversing negative attitudes and promoting self-confidence among young people. In addition, several pointed to "something special" about Anguillian that distinguished it from English. According to one speaker, "a story in English is like seen a movie in black and white, but doing it my Creole like seeing in technicolor". In follow-up questions about how negative attitudes might be transformed, members of this group consistently mentioned the importance of using Anguillian to document the island's culture, history, and heritage. Various publications and readings by poet Patricia Adams and Ijahnya Christian's dictionary project (i.e., Adams, 1998; 2003 and Christian, 2003) were mentioned as models that should be utilized in carrying out such work.

This limited assessment of language attitudes indicates that acceptance of the local Creole tends to accompany exposure to its use on the printed page and the recognition of similarities across diverse historical experiences within the region. Distinct from the members of the first group, when asked about regional trends in language and history, those in the second described the experiences of African enslavement and European colonization in St. Kitts and Antigua as similar to that of Anguilla. Like their counterparts, those in group two indicated that connections between history and heritage deserve greater attention in formal education.

**Final remarks**

This essay has suggested that the consideration of socio-historical information can contribute to knowledge about language creation as well as to the reformulation of ambivalent attitudes towards Anguillian. It takes a critical approach to dominant assumptions about "the plantation" and its significance as the site of language contact for all societies within the Caribbean region. With linguistic awareness as its main tool, this approach buttresses postcolonial narratives that revel in the fact that the smaller, the marginal, and the silenced ultimately matter a great deal.
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Tongue Clapper


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