

## ◆ Daniel Boukman : A Poetics of 'Detour'

The project of this thesis is to demonstrate how Boukman's blends Marxist literary theory with a Caribbean aesthetics. The work also seeks to show that the artist's devices and practices advance a Caribbean worldview and a Caribbean programme of combating colonialism. Finally, it seeks to demonstrate that Boukman "writes back" to Europe through parody, inversion and reversal.

The thesis analyses three dramatic works by Daniel Boukman - *Les négriers* (1978); *Ventres pleins, ventres creux* (1971) and *Chants pour hâter le temps de la mort des Orphée*, 1968 - against the background of both Marxist and Caribbean literary theory. It does not avoid the political issues at work in Boukman's work, but seeks to offer a sound analysis of the plays and their impact through the theoretical framework established for the research.

This is the first dissertation in English on the work of the Martinican writer Daniel Boukman. It seeks to help bridge the gap between the French- and the English-Speaking Caribbean by introducing English-speaking scholars to the work of an important playwright who is currently playing a key role in the cultural landscape of Martinique and Guadeloupe. In addition, the thesis establishes a connection between theoretical works that have seldom been used together for literary interpretation (Brecht, Bakhtin, Boal and Brathwaite, Benitez-Rojo, Fanon and Glissant). Through Brechtian theory, Boukman's plays are discussed against the background of African theatre practices, an approach which helps to assess the playwright's contribution to post-colonial dramaturgy.

The introduction surveys the existing body of scholarship on Boukman's work. It displays a willingness to both challenge (in the case of Jones) and develop (Ruprecht) the work of established critics. Some of the thesis' contributions include the writer's examination of dialogue and the ways in which it encodes the conflict between ideologies; his exploration of the plurivocality of dialogue as a tool of political subversion; and his extensive examination of the use of irony and how this is deployed by the playwright. In so doing, the writer has put a greater level of emphasis than previous scholarship on the philosophical motivations that underpin Boukman's use of language. Additionally, the dissertation has articulated in greater depth Boukman's Marxist orientation, with an emphasis on the ways in which Boukman co-opts and repackages Marxist 'borrowings' to both articulate new, and confirm already existing, Caribbean visions of the theatre.

Another of this dissertation's important aspects, theoretically speaking, is to underline the extent to which Boukman's dramatic craft reflects the wider Caribbean theatrical tradition, captured in the notion of *détour*. Here, we are indebted to Edouard Glissant who speaks of the Story (le Conte) as articulating " des symboles aisés pour cheminer ensuite dans des approximations, par détour et retour " (Glissant 1981:152). Linking this (single) term to the concept of literary marronage in the section in which this statement appears, we have re-appropriated the term as a notion providing a unique perspective of Caribbean poetics

perspective of Caribbean poetics.

The term is used to speak of theatrical representation achieved through roundabout ways or courses, through deviation from "direct" - i.e. conventional - or favoured modes of representation, for the purposes of resistance, obscuring or artifice. This term encodes the practices of literary marronage - of the *carnivalisation* of literature - and of verbal play. In sum, it reflects a way of writing and of performance that subverts through its deceptive, enigmatic nature. This deviant and deviating Caribbean mode of representation often expresses itself in sportive humour, of the kind that Huggan speaks of in his 1994 essay entitled "A Tale of two parrots: Walcott, Rhys, and uses of colonial mimicry," and which he cleverly refers to as 'parrottry' (see Chapter Four); and in speech heavily laden with conflicting voices and ironic overtones. It forms the backbone of Boukman's practice of writing, constituting for the Caribbean writer a theory of writing. In the playwright's own words, " passer par des détours pour dire des choses " is a key literary stratagem; it is undoubtedly a way of ambushing the "established" discourses of the coloniser. What is more, when he asserts that " l'humour établit une certaine complicité: l'humour n'est pas universel. Il opère [...] en fonction d'une culture, d'un pays ", his words corroborate the culture-specific nature of the practice as his attitude is one that at once valorises the community and the nation and de-emphasises and subverts the culture of the colonizer. The literary detour textualises the spirit of marronage. In other words, it translates the maroons' strategies of resistance into the literary imaginary as acts of cultural opposition to an imposed order or an imposed discourse (see Glissant 1981: 104). These strategies include "all the canny detours, diversions and ruses required to deflect the repeated attempts to recuperate [...the] cultural subversion [of the slave society]".<sup>[1]</sup>

Further, *détour*, in the thesis, encapsulates the literary practices of co-optation, appropriation and repackaging. Cuban theorist Antonio Benítez-Rojo states that "Antilleans [...] tend to roam the entire world in search of the centers [sic] of their Caribbeanness" (Benítez-Rojo 1996: 25), a statement which we re-deploy as a framework for understanding the manner in which Boukman integrates certain ideas and philosophies emanating from outside the Caribbean. The integration of many of these ideas is paradoxical in that the playwright valorises Caribbean conceptions of theatre and advances an aesthetic that is firmly Caribbean even while using theories coming from the heart of Europe. As such, *détour* also represents the notion of taking foreign off-roads, of exploring and travelling indirect routes that lead the playwright back to the centre of his Caribbeanness. These, then, are the routes of co-optation, interanimation and repackaging.

In sum, a "poetics of detour" is a theory by which writing becomes an expression of Caribbean cultural opacity (in the Glissantian sense). In other words, writing becomes a space in which the perennial practices of errancy and nomadism - on the one hand - and of ruse and artifice - on the other - are accorded a primordial value, i.e. where literary unorthodoxy is consecrated in the re-interpretation of genres through "new encounters" between Caribbean worlds and other cultural universes; and where the "right to opacity" (Glissant) - or what one might call the "right to unintelligibility" - translates into language that constantly seeks to disguise itself through various acts of subterfuge, as by disguising itself, it becomes more treacherous and therefore more effective as a weapon of subversion. This notion finds confirmation in all four chapters of the dissertation.

Chapter One constitutes the theoretical framework for this dissertation. An attempt is made here to define an aesthetic of the Caribbean theatre around the notion of the detour. The chapter also examines the ways in which this concept forms a connecting bridge between the aesthetic concerns of Boukman's stagecraft and an aesthetic, generally defined, of a wider Caribbean theatrical tradition. The section seeks to outline the culturally specific ways in which the Caribbean consciousness conceives of theatre; it shows that while the Caribbean literary consciousness seeks to invite and co-opt approaches from elsewhere, there are irrepressible indigenous forces that make a distinctive imprint on what West Indians see as "theatre". That is to say, the integration of ritual and oral performance is an integral part of the expression of West Indian theatre, whether this is used for enlightenment, propaganda or simply for entertainment purposes.

Further, this chapter provides a brief outline of the philosophy of the Marxist theatre, and its aesthetic parameters. (The latter are often expressions of the worldview of this theatre). Brecht's imprint on the Marxist theatre is spoken about chiefly. This should allow the reader to see not only the European Marxist theatre's influence on so-called "Third World" theatres, but also their mutual concerns. Establishing certain characteristic traits of both traditions should also make it easier to see the ways in which the West Indian theatre engages with, co-opts, and re-articulates many of the principles of the Marxist theatre. While Boukman makes explicit attributions to European Marxist playwrights and to Marxist theory, the chapter aims to underscore his constant concern with a Caribbean aesthetic in his theatre. Additionally, it seeks to show that the devices and practices that the dramatist uses advance a Caribbean worldview and a Caribbean programme of combating colonialism in all its manifestations, indeed, of "writing back" to Europe, the self-proclaimed "Centre", through parody, inversion and reversal.

Chapter Two is concerned with the idea of *détour* as the sum of techniques that increase the pleasure of the spectator (through his having to decode artful strategies and double-voiced discourse) while fostering critical distance, allowing the author to more visibly demonstrate the critical issues of the theatre. This section seeks to show ways in which Boukman appropriates Brecht's concept of "alienation," often actualising it with Afro-Caribbean devices such as oral performance and ritual. A central concern, therefore, is the ways in which Boukman employs "strangeness" - injecting "unusual" or culturally self-exhibiting theatrical devices into his drama (a practice which fits into Glissant's idea of "l'opaque" as we shall further see) - causing it to produce transparency or social enlightenment. Such devices include the songs of the RECITANT, the narrator of *Ventres pleins* and *Les négriers*, who resembles the figure of the griot. We witness this example of literary detour on pages 43-45 of *Ventres Pleins* through the utterances of the narrator:

Des drapeaux flottent dans le vent  
mon peuple est libre indépendant.  
Les Anémones de la mer  
toutes les grottes et les coraux  
de cette Pieuvre étaient l'affaire.

He will constantly repeat the refrain " des drapeaux flottent dans le vent... " - which alone is sung - but will add to it a gradually intensifying commentary which he tells in the form of a story, using metaphor and "symbology" (Small 2001: 35), the signature of the storyteller. For example, the colonizer or colonizing country is referred to as the

the storyteller. For example, the colonizer or colonizing country is referred to as the "Pieuvre". The story gradually builds by means of symbology and parable as the narrator sets up a binary opposition between the "Pieuvre" and the "Sardines Crevettes et Coquillages[, ] Crabes et Langoustes" who are, for the Octopus, merely "occasion de pillage" (44). These same creatures of the sea will, at the end of the story, unify to counter the Octopus's aggression.

Through this tale, the Afro-Caribbean mode of *performance* theatre is illustrated in different ways. The first is the practice of storytelling - that ensemble of didactic instruction and traditional wisdom that, in this West Indian playwright's cosmogony, is necessary for his people, not only to survive, but to advance. Indeed, the rhetorical figure of the storyteller, the "escort" of the people, [2] will be woven throughout *Ventres pleins*. The extensive use of symbolic and parabolic language as well as the conversation between spoken word and musical instrument - important in the last scenes of *Les négriers*, for example - is another testimony to the plays' link to an Afro-Caribbean theatre aesthetic. Jean Small (2001), through the linkage she creates between the Caribbean theatre mode and traditional African heritage, rightly suggests the centrality of *la griotique* [3](Small 2001) to this aesthetic. Presenting "a dramatic expression in which word and chant, music and dance, mime and gesture harmonise" (Small 2001: 36), *la griotique* naturally is akin to the alienation technique insofar as its dramatic expression is one of instruction and guidance. Further, it implies performing a role rather than incarnating it; enlightening the spectators by paradoxically estranging them from the proscenium. As such, Boukman weds the (Brechtian inspired) estrangement effect with the concept of *détour*, the former often being, for him, a corroboration of the latter. What is undeniable, moreover, is that in using the folk figure of the storyteller as an 'estrangement' or 'alienation' effect, Boukman seeks not only to employ but also to re-actualise the Brechtian technique for the benefit of a Caribbean worldview and aesthetic.

Chapter Three confirms the idea of roaming and co-opting to arrive at an ontology that is decidedly homespun, or at least to confirm that ontology, by showing ways in which Boukman advances the Marxist conception of the artist as educator and social luminary while valorising Caribbean identity by sharpening the critical spirit and by enlightening his people, " et ce, avec un souci d'esthétique puisant sa forme et ses beautés dans l'imaginaire et le patrimoine [...] nôtres " (emphasis mine).[4] Indeed, the chapter seeks to demonstrate that not only is the programme that Boukman puts forward in his work politically engagé, but the literary techniques that vehicle them also reflect a political choice to valorise the Caribbean theatrical spirit, even while being inspired by Marxist aesthetics (e.g. the theories of Brecht and Piscator).

The plays examined in this section are works that aim to encourage French West Indians to resist self-abasement. They underscore the role of the theatre in generating nationalist feeling, as the plays instill in the natives the consciousness that their national culture exists and, like any European national culture, is worthy of being celebrated. Further, our analysis in this section shows that the playwright constantly intertwines his dramatic discourse with a Caribbean theatre aesthetic, a practice which presents another outworking of the concept of *détour*: Boukman, through this practice, reveals the Caribbeanness of his vision, i.e. not only his *antillanité*, but also his desire to advance Caribbean anti-colonial discourse and inscribe his drama in a Caribbean-centred worldview of the theatre, even while employing certain European philosophies as his theoretical base. This confirms Benítez-Rojo's articulation of *détour* - as roaming "in search of the centers [sic]" of one's Caribbeanness. Nevertheless, revolutionary

search of the centers [sic]" of one's Caribbeanness. Nevertheless, revolutionary discourse and action, though seeking to be subversive, are often not as effective as desired in making an impact on the centres of authority, going against the current of an oftentimes blindly "assimilated" French Caribbean society. Where revolutionary action fails, or is insufficient, the playwright must resort to the power of words, a power which, if not stronger, seems at least as strong as revolutionary action in subverting the establishment.

As such, Chapter Four is the first of two chapters that deal with the ingenious use Boukman makes of the power of the Word: it seeks to explore the concept of *détour* as literary techniques of verbal play (parody as well as tricky incursions of 'destabilising' voices in dialogue) and ruse as techniques of resistance. In this section, we employ the concept of *détour* to articulate verbal manoeuvres that destabilise the coloniser - that lead him astray and thus sabotage him - while playing upon his desire to "hear the strains of [...his] own voice" (Huggan 1994: 645). As such, the concept also encapsulates the *carnivalisation* of discourse - including 'outside' voices playing with and undermining dialogue, and the reversal of certain high and low cultural values through language - which acts as a technique of political resistance from the literary page.

Laughter in its different forms - reversal and carnivalization being the most resounding - often proves to be as powerful a philosophical weapon as the lofty and the poetic, if not a more powerful one. The laughter of parody and reversal causes the spectator to take a certain questioning distance vis-à-vis the stage. *Play*, it must be said, does not occur solely as action generating a comedic effect but also as the sum of devices designed to 'parrot' (Huggan, 1994) the discourses - the language - of those whom Boukman constantly interrogate. Indeed, in his programme of persuasion, no speech, no utterance is sacred enough for him not to deftly insert in it an ironic or double-voiced intonation - to play on the speech of his characters, and chiefly the colonial figures of the plays - causing a negation or sabotaging of hegemonic discourses. Parrotry and double-voicedness involve recourse - and ascriptions - to European sources but testify fundamentally to ingrained Caribbean slyness in using the colonial's language in unheard-of ways to sabotage him. As such, Boukman's uniting of scenic tricks with language reversal is hard to deny. Together, both devices evoke the artist's *détours* - winding, indirect routes that lead the spectator into a Caribbean worldview of the theatrical space.

Finally, our thesis in Chapter Five is that the self-referentiality of language can be seen as a re-interpretation of the Brechtian aesthetic through the social performativity of theatre language. Language becomes self-exhibiting, owing in large part to the distance created between the actor and the character (or in the acting mode as delivered in the script itself). Boukman's use of language becomes metalinguistic in the sense that it both speaks about its own operation (in the West Indian context) and performs the roles it has set for itself, e.g. it acts as both invective (Caliban's cursing) and couter-narrative. We also examine the author's extended use of *didascalie* (while dealing with the plays as texts), and their operation, that give him added possibilities of *acting* - of communicating his ideological message. The self-referentiality of language in the plays that are analysed in this study is, moreover, another way of reminding the spectator of the physical space of the theatre - of *diverting* him or her from the stage illusion as a means of encouraging critical reflection.

Throughout its five sections, this study characterises Boukman's drama as having an anti-hegemonic programme and thus establishes its connections with a wider notion of

anti-hegemonic programme and thus establishes its connections with a wider notion of Caribbean post-colonial 'literature' [5] (bearing fully in mind, nonetheless, the fact that the drama, and especially one such as Boukman's, is more than literature). Boukman's dramatic works present a host of elements which expose the project of colonialism and cultural imperialism, especially in regard to language, identity, cultural alienation and assimilation. Boukman undoubtedly saw himself as being given a chance to talk back in response to the lies spoken about his people, the lies of which they have forgotten that they are lies; and the lies concerning his civilisation and his culture. The serious, the poetic, the comic and even the farcical all unite in this oeuvre to sabotage the "fictions" [6] of Europe. In addition, these unite in unusual packages that transmute the spirit of cultural resistance onto the literary page; they come together in literary blends which corroborate the West Indian spirit of *marronage*, signalling the author's intention to befuddle hegemonic Europe.

Such literary *marronage* demonstrates the overarching concept of this dissertation - the idea of *détour*, reflective of Boukman's literary form. The 'détour' is conceptually dual in the works studied. It is confirmed first of all as a theoretical roundabout course, or a deviation from the direct course of action or form of writing that occurs as a result of the writer's roaming of foreign bases in search of a confirmation of himself, in search of strategies allowing him to know and affirm himself. It is our conclusion that a theoretical discussion of Boukman's dramatic craft ought to include the notion of paradox, as the playwright, though passing through Brecht (chiefly) and other corresponding theories, ends up in a mode of theatre that inscribes itself firmly in a Caribbean theatre aesthetic. The recurrence of this aesthetic is demonstrated in all the chapters of this dissertation, as are the ways in which Boukman has explored European and other theatrical strategies, co-opted them, and sometimes redrafted them to fit the Martinican and Caribbean programmes of contestation and cultural revalorisation, while never being subservient to such strategies. On the contrary, such strategies have led him to "[...une] esthétique puisant sa forme et ses beautés dans l'imaginaire et le patrimoine (au sens large du terme) nôtres ". [7]

Secondly, this idea of " *le détour* " manifests itself in the form of the playtexts. One must also note that the playwright reinvests certain typical West Indian devices that recall the strategy of *marronage*. This can be seen in the circuitous off-roads of parody, of parable and of verbal scheming - formulae which, in the hands of Boukman, paradoxically create "*gestus*" and favour in the spectator an important critical realism.

All things considered, this dissertation aims to challenge the reader to explore an oeuvre which, on the whole, is extremely significant from a Caribbean standpoint. Secondly, it aims to demonstrate the specificity of Boukman's work and at the same time its commonalities with Caribbean theatre in general - its specificity so as to valorise and further expose Boukman as a playwright of importance and worth, and its commonalities so as to show the playwright's importance to the study of Caribbean theatre. As such, it seeks to elucidate the connectivity between Martinican theatre and theatre ideas and those of the English-speaking, and even wider Caribbean. Boukman's work, we believe, deserves to be taken more and more out of the shadows - several others have played a part before me - so Caribbean scholars, in particular, can not only see the continuity of preoccupations between his drama and a wider Caribbean one, but also through the former, derive a greater sensitivity and interest towards the issues and debates of French West Indian society.

This is a shortened version of a thesis by Jason D. Allen's entitled ". The thesis was presented for the M. Phil. degree in French which he earned from the University of the West Indies at Mona, Jamaica in 2006. Allen now works as high school French teacher in the Bahamas and intends to start Ph.D. studies in Comparative Caribbean Theatre Studies in 2008.

**Notes:**

[1]

This quote is taken from Betsy Wing's glossary in her translation (1997) of Glissant's *Poétique de la relation*.

[2]

Spoken by the Abazonian elder in Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* (Oxford: Heinemann 1987) 123.

[3]

A term used by Jean Small to refer to the values incarnated in the Afro-Caribbean figure of the *griot*, which include those of community forging and didacticism.

[4]

Daniel Boukman, email to the author, 12 December 2004.

[5]

Being fully cognisant of the controversies surrounding this term, but not wanting to enter them at this stage of the work, I shall merely clarify my use of the word 'post-colonial' as indicating issues and preoccupations that linger on after the end of 'official' colonization. For a critical analysis of the controversial uses of the term 'post-colonial' see, for example, Anne McClintock, "The Angel of Progress, Pitfalls of the Term 'Post-Colonialism'" *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, eds. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York: Columbia University P., 1994) 291-304.

[6]

This term directly recalls the title of Brydon's and Tiffin's work *Decolonising Fictions*. Beyond this, I intend to evoke 'fiction' in a postmodern understanding of the term i.e. paradoxically as 'truth' - a direct working of power's desire to dominate and as the incorporation of a field of language which becomes dominant through constant use.

[7]

Daniel Boukman, email to the author, 10 December 2004.

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