

BARBARA KORTE

Sista Rootz's „Dictionary black (trap)“ and the politics
of language

Sista Rootz's "Dictionary Black (Trap)" and the Politics of Language

Dictionary Black (Trap)

I was looking through mi dictionary
just the other day
An' in front of mi eyes
Tho' I was not surprised
5 Was a list
as long as mi back
Stating literal form and fact
Of all those words containing 'Black'

The first thing it say
10 is 'opposite to white'
I say to miself
Mmhm alright
It say 'persons with dark skin'
'Blackhearted - Dismal - Grim'
15 'Angry - Threatening - Black looks'
'Black Marks - Black lists'
and 'Black books'
'Deadly - Sinister - Wicked - Hateful'
20 All these words
to make us grateful

A kidnapped so-called Negro
on a slave ship
Is a 'Blackbird'
I thought they did have wing
25 Eat worm an' sing an' ting
'Blackbirding'
is the trade itself
That brought these people
enormous wealth
30 'Black-Cap'
One gets when
'Sentenced to death'
'Black maria - Blackmail - Black Death'

35 Hold on a sec
 Mek mi tek a breath.
 I haven't finished yet

 So just for the lark of it
 I check out the 'Dark' of it
 Well guess what it says
 40 It says 'Black more or less'

 A 'Darky',
 Is a 'negro'
 'Not fair - atrocious - evil'
 And the 'Prince of Darkness' is
 45 (you've guessed)
 'The Devil'

 Of course
 Africa is that 'continent dark'
 where all us 'Blackbirds' disembark
 50 along their shore
 we had arrived
 To 'darken their door'

 I knew next what to sight
 So I turned to 'White'
 55 All sweetness and light
 not a Black word in sight

 This 'White race member'
 Whose 'burden is leading'
 Characterised by his
 60 'civilised good breeding'
 Benefitting mankind
 with 'white-witch'-power
 'Superior' in their 'ivory tower'

 There is no Whitey
 65 Nothing distasteful
 'Coz only us Darkies
 are disgraceful

So due to their fear, greed and hatred
 They have on purpose created
 70 A language deceiving
 The whole world's believing
 This Oxford-Concise

with its ism and schism
 and outright RACISM
 While we pay the price
 we pay the price
 Like the Black Madonna
 And Jesus The Christ

Dictionary Black - Trap - CRAP¹

Over the last few decades, writers of non-European origin have made a considerable contribution to the literature of Britain.² Sista Rootz, of African Caribbean descent, is a most versatile member of Britain's Black artistic community. She has been writing and performing her poetry since the mid-seventies and works voluntarily with young people, using her poetry and visual art in an attempt to "dispel any stereotypical negativity and racism".³ "Dictionary Black (Trap)" deals with an experience that must affect her most deeply as an artist whose medium is language: the way in which the words at her disposal transmit a discriminating ideology. Specifically, the poem focusses on colour terms applied to human beings. Such terms do not mirror an empirical reality but signify, in the words of a prominent African American critic, "the difference between cultures and their possession of power, spelling out the distance between [...] bondsman and lord in terms of their 'race'."⁴

Most members of ethnic minorities in the UK (almost five per cent of the total population) originate from former and the last still extant British colonies. Today, almost half of the UK's non-white population are British-born, with Caribbean and Indian or Pakistani parentage prevailing. The post-war years, which saw the decline and fall of the British Empire, have been hailed as a period of de-colonization, the mother country itself now waving the fashionable flag of multi-culturalism. However, the spirit of Empire has not dried up, as Margaret Thatcher demonstrated in her notorious Falklands victory speech.⁵ In a polemical essay, Salman Rushdie emphasizes that non-white Britons have little reason to consider themselves de-colonized: "Four hundred years of conquest and looting, four centuries of being told that you are superior to the Fuzzy-Wuzzies and the wogs, leave their stain."⁶

"Dictionary Black (Trap)" examines how the English spoken in Britain today is stained by a racism which may, at least in parts, be considered a legacy of the British imperial enterprise.⁷ Racist language may not be immediately life-threatening, but it is nevertheless pernicious because a language determines its speakers' opinion of the world. "It is a key instrument in socialization, and the means whereby society forms and permeates the individual's consciousness."⁸ One of the central arguments of discourse theory is that language as uttered in social contexts invariably carries the power structures operative

under a given ideology: it reflects who is in possession of authority and who is subjected to this authority.⁹

English as spoken at the imperial centre became the 'received' standard throughout the British Empire. During the heyday of British imperialism, in the second half of the 19th century, the vocabulary of this 'master' idiom was inscribed in what has since become one of the major institutions of the English language: James Murray's *New English Dictionary* (*NED*), or, as it is known today, the *Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED*). Murray was aware of the fact that the vocabulary of a language is constantly developing.¹⁰ However, a dictionary is necessarily an inventory of words made at a certain 'stage' in this development and preserves this stage at least until its next revision. With vocabulary the prime component of a language to preserve the social and cultural knowledge of its speakers, dictionaries therefore contribute to the stabilization of world views and ideologies. Furthermore, they endow their word/world inventory with the authority of the written text and the reputation of the scholarly work. "Dictionary Black (Trap)" alludes to this authority in line 7, which states that a dictionary gives "literal form and fact" to a specific use of words. A dictionary which sanctions only or primarily one world view is, in Bakhtinian terms, monological. Sista Rootz exposes the monologism of a particular dictionary: the *Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English* (*COD*).

In Britain, the *OED* and its less comprehensive offshoots come closest to representing a quasi-official dictionary, not least due to their association with Oxford University, the most prestigious stronghold of British education and culture. Of the Oxford dictionaries, the *COD* is arguably the most influential one because of its wide distribution, for example in schools and universities: "The whole world's believing / This Oxford-Concise" (ll. 71f.). In a process easily re-enactable for readers with their own *COD* at hand, "Dictionary Black (Trap)" scrutinizes this dictionary's entries for *black*, *dark* and *white*.¹¹ This scrutiny involves a growing awareness of the ideology underlying these entries – a monological "ism" promoting *apartheid*, the "schism" of races (l. 73).

For the poem's persona, the process starts accidentally: she is "looking through" her dictionary (l. 1) when her attention is caught by the entry for "black". The long list of definitions for this word starts with a seemingly objective description, "opposite to white" (l. 10), with which the persona can hesitatingly agree: "Mhm alright" (l. 12). The description "persons with dark skin" (l. 13), too, at first appears fairly neutral. However, it cannot be neutral as the opposition of *black* and *white* refers not only to skin colour, but, more fundamentally, to values traditionally attached to the respective colours in Eurocentric culture(s). *Black* is associated with a list of negatives (starting in l. 14) so long that the persona is almost overwhelmed: "Hold on a sec / Mek

mi tek a breath" (ll. 34f.). If black is a colour charged with negative associations, how can a person denominated as *black* be at all seen in a 'bright' light?

Prepared by what the persona has found under *black*, the entry for *dark*, exhibiting the same ideology, does not surprise her: "Well guess what it says" (l. 39), "you've guessed" (l. 45), "of course" (l. 47). In a world perceived through a racist screen, the opposite, positive values for *white* are equally predictable: "I knew next what to sight / [...] /not a Black word in sight" (ll. 53/56). Significantly, the pejorative equivalent to *Darkey*, *Whitey*, is not listed in the dictionary (l. 64) – at least in the edition which the persona has at hand (it is included in the *COD* of 1982). The poem suggests that the word was omitted because it is incompatible with a world view in which the white race is in possession of power and only those who *lack* authority are conceivable in the diminutive.

The *COD*'s 1982 edition introduced new markings for "deprecated usage", one of them being "R" for "racially offensive". *Darkey* is marked with an "R", but another word, which must be equally insulting to people of African descent, is not: the word *blackbird* meaning "a kidnapped so-called Negro / on a slave ship" (ll. 21f.).¹² The nonchalantly contemptuous metaphor coined by white slavers catches the essence of slavery: people were deprived of their freedom as thoughtlessly as some people catch and cage birds – those creatures which, with their capacity to fly, are proverbially linked with freedom and in relation to whom captivity is perceived as particularly cruel. For people of African Caribbean origin, the voyage of slave ships from Africa to the Caribbean islands is still a communal trauma; *blackbird* with its special meaning must offend them. However, the *COD* notes only the most common and most obviously discriminatory expressions. For less common words, racist implications go unnoticed.

The *COD*'s entry for *blackbird* raises yet other questions. For most speakers of English today, the only meaning of *blackbird* is a particular kind of bird. Most readers of the poem will therefore share the persona's commonsensical reaction: "I thought they did have wing / Eat worm an' sing an' ting" (ll. 24f.). Considering that slavery in the British Empire was (nominally) abolished as early as 1833, the word *blackbird* referencing to slavery should primarily be of historical interest. The entry in the *COD*'s 1982 edition is, indeed, marked "Hist." for "historical; history" (it was not in earlier editions). However, should a word with a specialized, historical meaning be at all included in a dictionary explicitly devoted to the rendering of 'current' English? The editor of the 1982 edition specifies as part of his editorial policy:

The words, phrases, and meanings given are those current in the English of the present day – either in living use, or familiar through their occurrence *in frequently quoted literature of the past*.¹³ [my emphasis]

Does *blackbird* with its historical meaning really meet this criterion? One might argue that the dictionary entry keeps a word alive for speakers of English who would not, without the *COD*, come across it. Or does the word's inclusion in the *COD* imply that there still are people to whom it can be applied? The British no longer capture slaves, but an imperial attitude which views non-white people as inferior has undoubtedly survived.

Blackbird is not the only relic of the discourse of Empire in the *COD*. As "Dictionary Black (Trap)" goes on to expose, such relics are scattered all over the entries for *dark* and *white*. The notion of Africa as the dark continent (l. 48), for example, was popularized in the second half of the 19th century, when British interest in Africa resurged and released a stream of explorers and missionaries¹⁴ – most of whom displayed a condescending attitude towards the continent's autochthonous population.

Africa grew 'dark' as Victorian explorers, missionaries, and scientists flooded it with light, because the light was refracted through an imperialist ideology that urged the abolition of 'savage customs' in the name of civilization.¹⁵

For the alleged blessings of this civilization the enlightened were expected to be "grateful", as line 20 of "Dictionary Black (Trap)" emphasizes.

The poem introduces the word *light* in connection with a phrase that is one of the most famous catchwords in Victorian cultural studies: "sweetness and light" (l. 55). For Matthew Arnold, in *Culture and Anarchy* (1869), sweetness and light epitomize a culture's harmonious perfection – with Arnold's notion of culture firmly based on the alleged superiority of European culture. Arnold can hardly be considered a direct advocate of Empire, but his work contributed to the ideological underpinning of British cultural imperialism.¹⁶

Line 63 of Sista Rootz's poem, "'Superior' in their 'ivory tower'", refers to a conventional emblem of cultural elitism. The line thus links up with the earlier reference to the assumed preeminence of European culture – a culture whose importation was intended to supersede indigenous cultural expression in the colonies. As contextualized in the poem, however, the *ivory tower*, with its suggestion of elevation and its phallic implication, also connotes (white) authority in a more general sense. Through 'ivory', it evokes the exploitation and subjection on which this authority was built: ivory, in its literal sense, was a prime object of colonial greed; 'black' ivory, in the 19th century, was a common synonym for African slaves.

One of the most notorious watchwords of British imperialism is evoked in lines 57f.: "This 'White race member' / Whose 'burden is leading'". Rudyard Kipling's poem, "The White Man's Burden" (1899)¹⁷ disguises subjugation of the colonies as the white man's beneficial duty. "'White-witch'-power" in

Sista Rootz's poem (l. 62) refers to this lie of the munificent Empire, white witches, according to the *COD* (1982), "using power for beneficent purposes only". Sista Rootz's allusion to "the white man's burden", with *leading* in a position of emphasis at the end of a line, draws attention to the true desire behind the imperial enterprise: the desire to exert power, out of conviction of white superiority.

Sista Rootz's poem shows how the English language, not least through cultural institutions like dictionaries, preserves racial stereotypes that were part of a discourse of British imperialism. Without its imperial past, contemporary Britain would not be free of racism. However, the perpetuation of the ideology of Empire may have provided a fertile breeding ground for new forms of racism. Quite obviously, language as encoded in the *COD* maintains a segregation of people into white and black, dominating and subjugated. Up to and including the 1982 edition, the *COD* does not contain a single entry for *black* which would refer to race in unambiguously positive terms. Until the very recent past, a counter-discourse to the white man's ideology of colour was banned from the dictionary.

As "Dictionary Black (Trap)" progresses and the opposite values attached to colour terms become increasingly obvious, the persona gets more and more agitated. What starts out in a rather calm mood ends in a downright *j'accuse* of white language policy: "They have on purpose created / A language deceiving" (ll. 69f.). This language may be "crap", as goes the poem's final word, but it is powerful enough to capture Black people in a "trap" of prejudice. Ultimately, the schism implicit in white colour terms reflects on the persona's own language, specifically her use of personal pronouns. The poem's second half in particular features a clear division between 'us' and 'them' (ll. 49-52, 66-76) – those who have moulded language to support their desire to rule, and those who "pay the price" (l. 75) for this policy. What at the beginning is a dictionary with which the persona identifies ("mi dictionary" – l. 1), finally emerges as a dictionary in which others have institutionalized *their* language. In the end, white language forces the persona to develop a group identity defined against the whites, segregation thus being further aggravated. While initially the persona is presented as an individual ("I was looking [...]" – l. 1), the use of the first person plural at the end indicates her identification with the group of all people victimized and betrayed, "like [...] Jesus The Christ" (l. 78), by a monologically white dictionary.

Ending on a communal note suits the politically activist character of Sista Rootz's poem, a character shared by much of contemporary Black British poetry. This poetry is frequently performance poetry, most prominently in the work of *dub* poets like Linton Kwesi Johnson, who speak their poetry to the rhythm of reggae music. "Dictionary Black (Trap)", too, is a poem whose

impact is best achieved when read aloud: it becomes obvious then how rhythm (in fact polyrhythm), rhyme, repetition and the poem's non-stanzaic division support its argument.¹⁸ A note of performance is not least achieved through the poem's formal dialogism: the way in which it repeatedly establishes rapport with an audience (ll. 34-36, 39, 45). Its clear and direct style forces the listener to understand. Considering its features of orality, "Dictionary Black (Trap)" can be said to participate in a dominant line of contemporary Black British poetry, much of which is not composed in standard English.

In the version of "Dictionary Black" printed in this volume, features of Black English stand in explicit contrast to an English which is ideologically white. Throughout the poem, this white discourse is put in inverted commas, indicating that it is a language which the persona quotes but does not speak herself. Black discourse forms a counter-discourse to white people's stereotypes, most obviously in the following lines: "I thought they did have wing / Eat worm an' sing an' ting" (ll. 24-25). What is expressed here in Black English is an understanding of the word *blackbird* untainted by imperialist lingo. After all, the creole languages which African slaves and their descendants developed in the Caribbean allowed them to establish and maintain a new identity and culture of their own, against the colonizer's suppression of their original African languages and cultures.¹⁹ In Britain today, these varieties of English provide Black poets with an alternative to the British standard – an alternative employed in different degrees and to different purposes, from complete rejection of the standard variety²⁰ to a free shifting between languages.

Sista Rootz's poem could be studied in conjunction with poems entirely written in Black English. The anthology in which "Dictionary Black" was first published contains a range of examples. "No Dialects Please", by Grenada-born Merle Collins²¹, is a particularly suitable companion piece as it also directly addresses the issue of language: specifically, how an authoritative 'British' voice tries to silence poetry composed in non-standard English. Collins points out that the cultural superiority implied in this restriction is founded on an illusion: considered historically, standard English is as 'impure' as are Caribbean creoles: "de dialect of de Normans and de Saxons / dat combine an reformulate / to create a language-elect" (ll. 13-15). Another reason for the suppression of non-standard English is fear of its subversive power, its potential to question the validity of the master discourse: "so frighten o we power / dat dey have to hide behind a language" (ll. 63-64). Like "Dictionary Black (Trap)", Collins's poem thus postulates a them / us division; standard English is the white man's idiom. More emphatically than Sista Rootz, Collins conveys an impression of the power of Black English. Efforts to protect the hegemony of the old master idiom and the ideology it carries are doomed to fail; a Black counter-discourse can no longer be silenced.

- 1 The poem first appeared in R. Cobham, M. Collins (Eds.): *Watchers and Seekers. Creative Writing by Black Women in Britain*. London, 1987. Sista Rootz now considers this version of the poem "tired" (personal communication) and prefers the one printed here, which makes heavier use of Caribbean English grammar and spellings. It might be worth while comparing the two versions for teaching purposes. The main dialect spellings and meanings used are: *mi* (my), *ting* (things), *sec* (second), *mek* (let), *tek* (take), 'coz (because). For general characteristics of Caribbean-derived, Black varieties of English as spoken in Britain see D. Sutcliffe: *British Black English*. Oxford, 1982, p. 176.
- 2 See P. Gupta (Ed.): *Black British Literature. An Annotated Bibliography*. Sydney, 1986; D. Dabydeen (Ed.): *The Black Presence in English Literature*. Manchester, 1985; J. Berry: "The Literature of the Black Experience". – In D. Sutcliffe, A. Wong (Eds.): *The Language of the Black Experience. Cultural Expression Through Word and Sound in the Caribbean and Black Britain*. Oxford, 1986, pp. 69-106.
- 3 Personal communication.
- 4 H.L. Gates Jr.: "Writing 'Race' and the Difference It Makes". – In idem (Ed.): *'Race', Writing, and Difference*. Chicago, London, 1986, pp. 120, here: p. 6.
- 5 For an extract see D. Dabydeen (Ed.): *The Black Presence in English Literature*. "Preface", p. ix.
- 6 "The New Empire Within Britain" (1982). – In *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991*. London, 1991, pp. 129-138, here: p. 130. For background reading on Black people in Britain see, amongst many other publications: C. Husband (Ed.): *'Race' in Britain: Continuity and Change*. London, Melbourne, 1982; T. Kushner, K. Lunn (Eds.): *The Politics of Marginality. Race, the Radical Right and Minorities in Twentieth Century Britain*. London, 1990; J. Donald, A. Rattansi (Eds.): *'Race', Culture and Difference*. London, 1992. A government view is given in a publication by Her Majesty's Stationery Office: *Ethnic Minorities*. London, 1991. For a bibliography with earlier material see P. Stummer: "Die Rassenfrage im zeitgenössischen England. Realität und narrative Reflexion". *anglistik & englischunterricht* 16: *Race and Literature*, 1982, 9-30.
- 7 The link between racist language and imperialism is central in the Rastafarians' critique of standard English, in which skin colour denominations are also a prime target. See J. Bones: "Language and Rastafari". – In D. Sutcliffe, A. Wong (Eds.): *The Language of the Black Experience*, pp. 37-51.
- 8 G. Kress, R. Hodge: *Language as Ideology*. London, 1979, p. 1.
- 9 Central arguments of discourse theory are summarized in the introductory chapter of T. Crowley: *The Politics of Discourse. The Standard Language Question in British Cultural Debates*. Houndmills, 1989.
- 10 "General Explanations". *NED* 1, Oxford, 1888, p. xviii.
- 11 The version of the *COD* currently on the market is the eighth edition published in 1990. In contrast to its antecedents, this edition is distinguished by a comparatively high sensitivity to 'politically correct' language. Sista Rootz refers to an older edition. Most of the definitions and annotations in the entries under consideration remained unchanged up to and including the seventh edition (1982).
- 12 Note that "so-called" is added to the original dictionary entry because the term *Negro* is now considered offensive by many Black people.
- 13 J.B. Sykes (Ed.): *COD*. Oxford, 1982, p. viii.

- 14 Henry Morton Stanley's bestselling *Through the Dark Continent* was published in 1878.
- 15 P. Brantlinger: "Victorians and Africans. The Genealogy of the Myth of the Dark Continent". *Critical Inquiry* 12, 1985, 166-203, here: 166.
- 16 The following quotation from *Culture and Anarchy*, for example, could be easily used to legitimize the Empire's civilizing mission: "[culture] knows that the sweetness and light of the few must be imperfect until the raw and unkindled masses of humanity are touched with sweetness and light." *The Complete Prose Works of Matthew Arnold* V. Ed. R.H. Super. Ann Arbor, 1965, p. 112.
- 17 *Rudyard Kipling's Verse. Inclusive Edition 1885-1918*. London, n. y., pp. 371f.
- 18 A recording of Sista Rootz performing the poem is available; please contact me for further information.
- 19 See A. Wong: "Creole as a Language of Power and Solidarity". - In D. Sutcliffe, A. Wong (Eds.): *The Language of the Black Experience*, pp. 110-122.
- 20 One of the most prominent Caribbean critics of English language imperialism is Edward Kamau Brathwaite. See an interview in C. Searle (Ed.): *Words Unchained. Language and Revolution in Grenada*. London, 1984, pp. 232-239, and Brathwaite's lecture "English in the Caribbean. Notes on Nation Language and Poetry". - In L. Fiedler, H.A. Baker (Eds.): *English Literature. Opening Up the Canon*. Baltimore, London, 1981, pp. 15-53. For an extensive discussion of the language issue in post-colonial literatures also see B. Ashcroft, G. Griffiths, H. Tiffin: *The Empire Writes Back. Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*. London, 1989.
- 21 R. Cobham, M. Collins (Eds.): *Watchers and Seekers*, pp. 118f.