

The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly: The Construction of *Othering* in Edward Bliss Emerson's Caribbean Journal of 1831-1832¹

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This paper examines the vocabulary, grammar structures and rhetorical devices that appear in Edward Emerson's journal based on his trip to the Caribbean. The end-in-view is to identify the devices that Emerson utilized, mostly unconsciously, in his depiction and construction of others; in the case of this journal, of the peoples he encountered in the Caribbean. The methodological approach of critical discourse analysis guides this examination. Keywords: Edward Bliss Emerson, West Indies, St. Croix, Puerto Rico, New England, Othering

Introduction

When asked for a definition of language, many will readily say that it is a tool for communication. What they do not explain is how language varies depending on its function or use in a particular context of communication. This essay examines the words used by Edward Bliss Emerson in his 1831-1832 journal of his visit to the Caribbean islands of Saint Croix, St. Thomas, and Puerto Rico. It is an in-depth look at the language that is typically associated with the description of places visited by individuals whose basic aims are to either keep a written memoir of their experiences in the form of a journal or letters, or share the results of their experiences with potential readers such as family, friends or the book-reading public.

Ethnographies or descriptions of cultures are primarily the responsibility of cultural anthropologists. However, throughout history, as is the case of Greek writers Tacitus and Pausanias, the retelling of these stories in the form of unedited personal letters and journals or published accounts has become part of the genre known as historical travel literature (Riggins, 1997).

Emerson's journal is an excellent example of this literary genre from the 19th century. It is also the personal repository of his experience abroad "in search of health" (Frawley, 2004, p. 113), and as such sheds light on the scholarship on *invalidism*. This term refers not only to a condition of disability among individuals, but also to the literature on this phenomenon and the study of cultural and social responses to notions of incapacity. Within this area of knowledge, there are many personal accounts of travel reports of the so-called invalids; to name a few, we have Bullar's 1861 *Letters from Abroad, from a Physician in Search of Health*, Blake's 1886 article, *Try the Bahamas*, and the anonymous publications *Summer Tour of an Invalid in 1860* and *A Voyage to Australia for Health* in 1884 (cited in Frawley, 2004).

In her book on *Invalidism and Identity in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, Frawley states that

¹ Edward B. Emerson's Caribbean journal and letters can be accessed online at <http://bibliotecadigital.uprrp.edu/cdm/ref/collection/librosraros/id/1701>. Unless otherwise specified, his letters from that period can be found in that text. Permissions to quote from Edward Emerson's journal and letters have been granted by the Ralph Waldo Emerson Memorial Association and Houghton Library, Harvard University, and the Massachusetts Historical Society, and are gratefully acknowledged.

...a market for travel literature by invalids in fact thrived throughout the nineteenth century. The steady flow of such travel accounts throughout the period suggests that their appeal extended beyond fellow sufferers and that these texts satisfied cultural needs different from those of narrative adopting the private confessional stance. Many travel accounts either written by invalids or directed to them simultaneously served a population of armchair travelers in Victorian England. (p. 116)

There is no indication that Emerson wrote his journal with the goal of publication. However, as a personal document, it constitutes relevant documentation for the scholarly study of invalidism and the travel literature associated with it.

Emerson's journal may thus be viewed from a myriad of perspectives. However, the aim of this study in particular is to present the results of a close reading of Emerson's words in order to extract from the language used in his writing a clearer view of the descriptions of the experiences he lived. It is thus also an attempt to unveil or uncover the ideas that he utilized unconsciously to make these descriptions, and, through them, his own construction and representation of the people, places and events he observed.

According to recognized scholars in the study of culture such as Bhabha (1994), this aspect of the representation of *others*, of those that belong to cultures different from ours, is the result of an unconscious dimension of thinking. Most of us use it to classify, make interpretations and evaluate other people and the activities in which they engage (Lustig & Koester, 2010). As to the term *others*, it is part of the common terminology used in anthropology, sociology, cultural studies and discourse analysis. It is used to refer to "all people the Self perceives as mildly or radically different" (Riggins, 1997, p. 3). The terms *othering*, *otherness* and *alterity* are also prevalent in the literature and are used to describe the result of this cognitive process.

Anthropology, as a discipline historically constituted to understand others, coined the term "ethnocentrism" to explain our participation in the understanding of those different from us. Anthropologists tell us that we "think, feel, perceive, and perform from a certain perspective that we have acquired in the process of becoming human..." (Grimson, Merenson, & Noel, 2011, p. 9, translated from Spanish by this author). As a result of this, we cannot understand immediately those views that are different from ours unless we engage in a process of deep reflection. Emerson's descriptions of Caribbean island places, people, and events therefore must be viewed under the rubric of the ethnocentrism that permeates our way of thinking. Ethnocentrism elevates the values of the society to which we belong to the category of universality; thus this social construct becomes the only frame of reference in our observation of others (Todorov, 1991, as cited in Grimson et al.). This is precisely, then, how Emerson's descriptions are to be seen and understood: within the scope of his New England upbringing and his European-oriented education.

Methodology

The theoretical and methodological approach of critical discourse analysis (CDA) (van Dijk, 2009) provides the most appropriate perspective to analyze Emerson's journal (Riggins, 1997). The qualitative aspect of this method ensures that findings are not merely numbers and statistics, but that the subtleties of the phenomenon undergoing study are clearly seen. This approach employs the qualitative method of analyzing written texts through close readings of them and is based on the belief of anthropologist and linguist Dell Hymes (1962) that language is first and foremost a socially situated cultural form. This posture recognizes and understands that much of the linguistic form cannot be separated from how and why it is

used. In relation to this understanding, Saville-Troike (2003) believes that this view and each of its subsequent developments "...stress the need to look at the larger sociopolitical contexts [...], claiming that those contexts may determine features of [...] use in ways that are not evident from a focus on language alone..." (p. 253).

Critical Discourse Analysis (van Dijk, 2009; Wodak & Meyer, 2009), as a methodological approach, is grounded on the belief that the relation between words and truth is problematic. Any text, written or oral, is viewed as a selection and an interpretation of events. Therefore, the representations that are made of events are characterized by a possibility of different and ambiguous meanings that entail some fact and some fiction (Riggins, 1997). No matter how committed some writers are to the accuracy and truthfulness of the ideas they put into writing, all of us are "unwittingly trapped in a world of biased perceptions and 'stories,' all of which both exceed and shortchange 'reality'" (p. 2).

In 1995, Fairclough, one of the original scholars working with CDA in the 1990s, together with van Dijk and Wodak, referred to discourse as "the language used in representing a given social practice from a particular point of view" (1995, p. 56). This language then does not reflect 'true' reality because it is based on a different reality, constructed and shaped according to the personal interests of the writers (Riggings, 1997) and to the socio-cultural values the writers learned in their own process of socialization and enculturation. CDA is also involved in the relationship between language, power, and privilege. This study, however, will focus on Emerson's construction of reality through his use of language, without necessarily eliminating the dimensions stated above.

Some linguistic structures and discursive strategies, together with other stylistic devices of language use, provide the framework for identifying the language items used in constructing the writer's own realities. The language components included here are lexical items or words—their selection, use, meanings and emotional charge, pronouns (*we* vs. *they*), possessive modifiers (*our* vs. *their*) and language structures associated with the passive voice, verb modals (use of modal auxiliaries such as *may*, *must*) and the use of adverbials such as *certainly*, *unfortunately*, *obviously*.

Discursive strategies refer to ways in which language is used or put together in order to create an idea that is not necessarily the one intended by its dictionary or denotative meaning. Examples of these include the use of absolute negatives or positives such as *nil* and *superb*, stereotypes, figures of speech such as metaphors and similes, repetitions for emphasis, expressions characterized by vagueness and ambiguity, and the reliance on both presupposed and absent information. The former is information that is merely implied. The latter is information that is neither provided nor implied. It is these two types of information that prove to be the most elusive and thus difficult to extract (Fairclough, 1995). As to stylistic devices, they are those aspects of language use that are characteristic of the particular style of the writer. They may also entail using language whose register is associated either with formal or informal language, that is, with the use of simple or more complex words, expressions and sentences.

Presentation of Findings and Analysis

The main objective of this project is to identify the linguistic, discursive and stylistic aspects of Emerson's words, which reflect the writer's construction of his own reality based on this *other* context, the new situation in which he found himself in the Caribbean. These aspects are presented and discussed following the three categories proposed in the title to this study: the good, the bad and the ugly, as he described them in each of the three islands visited. The findings presented here are a sample of an ongoing research regarding this fascinating work. Taking Frawley's (2004) discussion of invalidism in the nineteenth century

and another travel account, by an anonymous invalid (*A Winter in the West Indies and Florida*, 1839), it is clear that some themes within this category of travel literature are a constant feature: climate, landscape, food, Blacks and Puerto Ricans, together with the dialect, music and personal qualities of the two aforementioned ethnic groups. The recurrence of these themes is reflected in the presentation of the most salient findings.

It is relevant to add at this point that the presentation of findings is based on the notion of binary opposites as the title of this essay reads. Thus the good and the bad are radical opposites which are bonded into a dialectic experience (Gikandi, 2011) that is then extended to the notion of ugliness. This dimension is merely an increase in degree of what is already bad. This study has already identified these stances of apparent polarity in some of the comments that Emerson provides about similar, if not equal, experiences as revealed in the recurrent themes mentioned above: for example, motion vs. inertia, overeating vs. undernourishment, fine vs. miserable weather, blistering sun vs. shining star, rude vs. happy music, feelings of loneliness away from his spiritual surroundings vs. feelings of independence in terms of his religious beliefs, happiness vs. ignorance, to name a few.

“The Good”

In order to understand the positive aspects of his new environs, it is important to bear in mind the reasons for which Emerson came to the West Indies. As mentioned earlier, Frawley (2004) comments on the importance of more temperate and warmer climate, such as in the Caribbean, and in the “search of health,” that characterized the published and unpublished journals of those afflicted with incapacity. According to her, highly embellished descriptions of the scenery, of the beauty of nature, and of the balmy climate and its remedial effects run throughout these works. Emerson’s text is no exception. The examples of positive comments that appear below are relevant to each of the islands he visited.

St. Croix

In the examples below, note the use of the adverb *kindly* to personify the climate and the totality of remedial power with which Nature is bestowed to provide remedy; the choice of a heaven-like adjective such as *glorious* to describe the ocean, and the participial verbs in adjectival form *untossed* and *unterrified* to create a posture of ease and security. Finally the climate is crowned with a Biblical reference, that of Paradise itself.

...the climate grows kindly and perhaps [Emerson’s underlining] he gets well by some of the many remedies which nature here holds to every sense. (4 January 1831)

I walked to the shore and looked at again on the broad ocean which is truly a glorious sight to one who views it in security from an isle like this, untossed and unterrified. (6 January 1831)

Well has Edwards called this the climate of Paradise. (23 January 1831)

In the example that follows, the description involves the local food, especially the tropical fruit of which he spoke highly. This is obviously connected to its nutritious and remedial value. Emerson goes to great lengths when writing about the delicious and plentiful variety of fruit, a topic that fascinated him (see Rigau-Pérez, 2014).

[The soursop] is very agreeable if taken in small quantity early in the morning and is said to be recommended to invalids, especially the febrile. (6 January 1831)

Despite some inconveniences concerning his perception of the local population--to be discussed below--Emerson found St. Croix to “abound in politeness” and the Black population to be “tranquil” and “civil.”

St. Thomas

Although Emerson was in St. Thomas twice, first in 1831 and then again in 1832, his first visit was very brief, only one day, on board the ship that would bring him to Puerto Rico. Emerson described the scenery as follows:

A fine morning shows this beautiful place to great advantage. Its peculiar situation & threefold division on English, French man & Government hills is [sic] picturesque. (5 April 1831)

His description of this port in 1832 confirms his initial aesthetic pleasure with the views.

St. Johns (San Juan, Puerto Rico)

When describing the historical aspects of the city of San Juan, which he referred to as St. Johns, Emerson's style is one of formality, careful choice of words that project beauty and elegance, of metaphoric language; this represents his best written discourse.

Imagine yourself then a well-fortified city, -with lofty walls encircling its entire extent. Supporting ramparts from which, at due intervals, jut forth round sentry boxes, and huge cannons peep through the embrasure, -so strong by art, that the first glance assures the visitor of security against hostile attempts... (Journal, Appendix 2)

...conceive this city to be bounded on the north, on the east, & on the west by the sea & on the south by an arm of the same which after forming a commodious & graceful port passes on eastward and joins the sea again... (Journal, Appendix 2)

So rich & peaceful is the scenery from the southern side that one is almost tempted to suppose as his eye glances first on the walls and then on the opposite country, that some stout pilgrims tired with the tumult of European traffic & contention, wisely fixed on this spot their home & altar, resolved to defend themselves as in a newfound Paradise & seek nothing but how best to enjoy the garden so happily discovered. (Journal, Appendix 2)

The scenery and climate of Nature's gift to the island was also praised through the use of embellishment in the choice of nouns, adjectives and verbs, the use of absolute positives (*no better climate*), metaphors and an elegant prose.

I walked on the ramparts & thought the Elysian fields could enjoy no better climate & scarcely a finer prospect than that which lay to the South and

Southwest across the bay. Those evergreen hills now darkened now irradiated as the clouds rise and fall between them & the Spectator, or between them and the King of the day, are a beautiful resting place for the eye, their clothing of bushes and trees is ornamental and attitudes or arrangement quite picturesque. (23 May 1831)

“The Bad”

Two themes that evoked in Emerson the tendency to construct negative images of the Caribbean were those that were foreign to him in the environment in which he was socialized and enculturated: large numbers of Blacks vs. a small population of Whites, as was the case in both St. Croix and St. Thomas and, in the case of Puerto Rico, a society mainly made up of descendants of Spaniards, Blacks and a mixture of both, whose culture was characterized by major differences from that of Emerson’s New England. This notion of difference is harmonious with the concept of ethnocentrism as put forth by anthropologists who place it at the heart of the construction of alterity or otherness. Ethnocentrism is a common human tendency in which the patterns of one’s own culture are held as superior to those of others (Lustig & Koester, 2010), thus creating ideas of rejection of that which is ‘not like us’ or ‘beneath us.’ The comments that fall under this rubric, many of them harsh, reflect these visions.

St. Croix

Emerson commented on slavery, but these were reports on what he heard from the White members of the Crucian community. He did, however, frequently comment on the ways of speaking and language of the Black community. Notice in the examples given below the use of the word “dialect” to demean their linguistic system. This word used to refer to a “broken form or non-standard form of a language.” It is now used in the discipline of linguistics with a neutral meaning to refer to the various systems in which languages manifest themselves; thus American English is a dialect or variety of English and so is Received Pronunciation in England, Singapore English, and South African English, to name a few. Colombian Spanish, Castilian Spanish, Puerto Rican Spanish and Mexican Spanish are also varieties of the language called Spanish. There is no evaluative tone in this classification as there was in the former use of “dialect.” The same is true for the term “patois.” Emerson knew he was not a philologist, but he still ventured forth making negative comments about the ways of speaking of the Blacks. In a famous study on language attitudes, Lambert, Hodgson, Gardner and Fillenbaum (1960) discovered that early in adolescence we construct negative attitudes towards others’ ways of speaking; these are reflections of negative attitudes towards others as people, for it is easier and socially more acceptable to discriminate openly against a people’s language than against the people themselves.

Notice in the second quote the use of the progressive form of the verb “chattering” used as a noun modified by the adjective “voluble” to describe the spoken language of Blacks as a constant exchange of unimportant ideas, thus implying the emptiness of meaning in the communicative act among them. The third example is one of lack of intelligibility, but as it is voluntary, he implicitly suggests it is an indication of obstinacy or defiance. From a linguistic perspective, this example in particular is a comment about a speaker’s use of the local Creole language spoken widely on the island at the time and whose intelligibility to non-Creole speakers of English fluctuated from a speech that could either be close to English or very far away from it.

Dialect of negro servants a complete English patois with a droll voluble singsong manner. (5 January 1831)

Note voluble chattering of negroes precisely like that of lower orders in Marseilles or Italy. (22 January 1831)

Mrs. D. bought some ban-bush at house of a free old negro woman whose talk was as far from English as any other, except when she strove to be intelligible, & this is not uncommonly the case here. (2 March 1831)

St. Thomas

Again, the brevity of the first stay provided little data. Still the island was compared to Italian cities in the constant talk about unimportant things coming from the mouths of Blacks.

It reminded me of the Italian cities by constant chatter of negroes, which is as unintelligible as a strange tongue. (5 April 1831)

St. Johns (San Juan, Puerto Rico)

Either because of the length of Emerson's extended stay in Puerto Rico, which provided him with the opportunity to get to know the island better or because of the pronounced differences between San Juan, a Spanish city, and the island of St. Croix, Emerson presents bad and ugly comments of San Juan, the place, the people, and the activities. The quotes below speak directly to his very negative view of San Juan. Notice the choice of words to describe what he saw: the use of absolute negatives (*no books, image void of beauty*), the comments full of sarcasm (third example), the portrayal of society as being ignorant and having no literature, the poking of fun at the military, the description of the music as rude, and the sweeping statements about the lack of interest among the men to strive for perfection in comparison with the men in New England. The citations below epitomize how ethnocentrism, kept at an unconscious level, creates the perfect model for the creation of alterity.

ill odors rushing from the doors & courtyards. (7 April 1832)

no bookstores, but several variety shops, & chocolate & grocery stores. (17 April 1832)

13 servants about the house do the work which a third of the number might as well or better perform. (7 April 1832)

no literature. (8 April 1832)

Troops in white: not exhibiting the discipline of West Point. (8 April 1832)

Song & music rude enough but *muy alegre* strikes the ear... (13 April 1832)
After breakfast walked, read, visited one of the churches large & vaulted but without the splendor & art of Italy & France. Image void of beauty must derive all value from the association & company. (17 April 1832)

Others of the negroes had rattles made of calabash & called in English 'shake shake' a name excellently descriptive of the music...a boisterous singing & violent jumping joined to the clatter... (5 June 1832)

The following is a long commentary whose words reflect Emerson's strong feelings about the city: that it is an ugly reality in San Juan. This marked emotion is felt through the use of repetitive absolute negatives (no lectures, no sermons, etc.), absent information and grandiose style:

It is very possible that much more intellectual and moral entertainment might be furnished to the thousands of ignorant people to be found here, in both upper & lower classes of society; & some attention to this subject is extremely desirable. It is a pity that no other amusements, than games of hazard or even of skill & bodily dexterity & no other comforts than those of repose & common conversation should be offered to thinking men. No lectures, no sermons, no reading rooms, no public libraries, even the theatre not yet completed...this is an excess of apathy or ignorance, as to the value of the intellectual faculties & the need of cultivation... (26 June 1832)

Again the demeaning of the music produced by the "bands of negroes" and the indirect reference to their lack of intelligence is clearly stated:

Walked tonight, saw a band of negroes dancing to drum & shake shake & congo upon the ramparts, singing a simple tune with I should think not more than three different notes, & perhaps no meaning- & moving backwards & forward from within a circle with a step as uniform as the song, & such as it needs no Monsieur to teach... (26 June 1832)

This is followed by the direct comparison with New England:

Men do not strive here as in N.E. after the *perfect man*. It is present *pastime* or *gainful* industry or chance which they follow as their stars. (3 July 1832)

The lines that follow are a devastating condemnation to any society.

I say not that there is no internal piety or virtuous effort or sacrifice here, but if such fruits do abound, the leaves & the blossoms are so scanty & the produce so disposed of as to make the vineyard very unlike the pictures of a 2d Eden that see form under the instructions of northern divines....Still I fear there must be much crime & impurity—mingled with the ignorance of the people about me. I am told of priests who have been beastly drunkards, & great cockfighters. I see much gambling. I hear of bribery as the great advocate in lawsuits; of duelling [sic] ...I hear hardly a book named; I see the people go to mass but they seem to have little respect for their clergy & this...must I think render their religion nearly stationary if not retrograde in respect to its influence in stimulating the mind towards imitation of divine perfections... (7 August 1832)

These are strong negative comments coming from a man who is highly religious and well educated, but who cannot escape the humanity that engages all of us into the creation of a condemning view of a cultural other.

Although Edward Emerson's Caribbean journal for 1831-1832 constitutes an important document for study under the rubric of travel literature and the literature on invalidism, this essay focused on a close reading of the writer's words in his descriptions of people, places and events in St. Thomas, St. Croix and Puerto Rico. The objective was to present linguistic evidence from the work itself about how Emerson's words provided a blueprint to his own construction of others. This representation followed the cognitive processes of his inner unconscious and ethnocentric mind, the product of a particular enculturation and socialization process. This type of mind is also one that easily falls prey to this type of perception and characterization in our encounters with others and is unfortunately present in the majority of us (Lustig & Koester, 2010).

In addition to the objective of this study as presented above, the analysis of the work of E. B. Emerson will provide the reader with a wider perspective of the Caribbean as seen through the eyes of a brilliant individual who had traveled here as a very ill man. It will also open other venues into the analysis of travel literature in an area in the world that in the 19th century in particular was considered an ideal place to find health. However, throughout colonial times, the Caribbean had been viewed as the seat of corruption and evil in terms of language, morality, and health, as historical documentation reveals. These contrasting views serve to underscore the importance of the study of the perspective of binary oppositions in the portrayal of the Caribbean.

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