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RACISM IN JOHN AGARD'S SELECTED POEMS

Gilang Ardinata Prayoga, Eko Suwargono, Yanuaresti Kusuma Wardhani
English Department, Faculty of Humanities, Universitas Jember, Indonesia
Gilangprayogya@gmail.com

Abstract: Racism has historically shaped social hierarchies that privilege whiteness and marginalize Black identities, embedding inequality into language, education, and cultural institutions. This study explores how is systemic racism presented in John Agard's Selected Poems and what is the significance of systemic racism is in selected poems by John Agard. This study applies qualitative research using Michael Riffaterre's semiotic of poetry to analyze systemic racism in three of John Agard's selected poems, "Listen Mr Oxford Don," "Half-Caste," and "Checking Out Me History." Through heuristic and hermeneutic readings, the research identifies ungrammaticalities and reconstructs hypograms to uncover deeper layers of meaning. The findings reveal that Agard's poetry criticize systemic racism by exposing the marginalization of Black identity, the manipulation of language, and the enduring legacy of colonialism. These semiotic structures convey themes of resistance, cultural pride, and historical reclamation. Ultimately, the study highlights how poetry functions as a powerful medium for resisting systemic oppression and reclaiming identity.

Keyword: *Systemic Racism, John Agard, Poems, semiotic of poetry*

Introduction

"Half-Caste," "Listen Mr Oxford Don," and "Checking Out Me History" are poems written by John Agard to convey his feelings and experiences as an Afro-Guyanese individual. According to Riffaterre (1978: 1), poetry conveys something indirectly. The indirectness of expression contained in poetry is the attraction of poetry compared to other literary works. This semiotic complexity makes poetry a powerful tool for exploring nuanced societal issues like racism. This study is based on Riffaterre's Semiotics of Poetry framework, which appears in the unique language and symbolism.

These selected poems were chosen because all of these poems discuss the mixed race of Afro-Guyanese who were being mistreated by white people. The selected poems above should be comprehended to find their meaning and significance. Sometimes, readers have difficulty understanding the meaning because the meaning is not conveyed directly (Riffaterre, 1978: 1). I use Semiotics of Poetry by Riffaterre as a primary theory in finding the meaning and purpose of John Agard's selected poems.

Related to how systemic racism is applied in Agard's selected poems, I assume the selected poems above depicted systemic racism. Feagin (2006: 2) stated that racism in institutions encompasses much more than just personal prejudice and racial bias. Despite advances in human rights, systemic racism continues to shape institutional behaviors and cultural narratives, often in implicit ways that marginalize non-white identities (Goldberg, 2015). By analyzing these poems, this study shows how systemic racism works between language, culture, and social relations, thereby revealing the broader societal implications of Agard's work.

Methods

This study employs a qualitative research method to explore the presentation

and significance of systemic racism in John Agard's poetry. As defined by Denzin & Lincoln (2005), qualitative research investigates events within natural contexts using interpretive methodologies. This approach is well-suited for analyzing language, cultural meaning, and symbolic structures within literary texts. The data of this qualitative research is obtained based on the results of reading and observing every data from John Agard's selected poems, "Half Caste," "Listen Mr Oxford Don," and "Checking Out Me History" sourced from the Poetry Archive (https://poetryarchive.org). Specific sentences, words, and phrases related to systemic racism were extracted for in-depth analysis, and Secondary data include scholarly books, journal articles, theses, and online sources focusing on systemic racism, semiotic theory, and Agard's literary contributions.

Results and Discussion

In this analysis, the researcher explores systemic racism in the selected poems of John Agard by examining how the poet represents the struggles of Black identity in a postcolonial British context. As a poet of Caribbean descent, Agard has long been engaged in critiquing linguistic and cultural oppression rooted in colonialism and white supremacy. His poetry often challenges dominant narratives by using Caribbean Creole, satire, and irony to reveal how language and history are manipulated to marginalize non-white identities. Through poems such as "Half-Caste," "Listen Mr Oxford Don," and "Checking Out Me History," Agard's work is a vital literary contribution to the discourse on systemic racism and postcolonial identity because it emphasizes issues of racial injustice, identity, and resistance.

This research focuses on the significance and presentation of systemic racism in John Agard's selected poems. The findings examine how Agard addresses the marginalization of Black identity through themes of linguistic resistance, historical distortion, and cultural reclamation. His work challenges the dominance of Eurocentric narratives and questions the authority of standardized English as a colonial tool. Through his poetry, Agard emphasizes the importance of reclaiming cultural identity and empowers marginalized voices to confront the structures of systemic racism embedded in British society.

Heuristic & Hermeneutic In Listen Mr Oxford Don

The poem was first published in 1985 in the poetry collection Mangoes and bullets: Selected and new poems. There are several versions of this poem. This thesis will analyze the version published on Alternative Anthem: Selected Poems by John Agard (2009). This poem was written as a satirical protest. Upon his arrival in Britain as an immigrant from Guyana, John Agard experienced his language accent being treated as inferior or uneducated by the environment. This poem consists of 38 lines and nine stanzas of various lengths. John Agard uses irregular structure to match the tone and rhythm of creole speech.

Listen Mr Oxford don

In the poem, the word /*Listen*/functions as an imperative verb, signaling a demand for attention. It is composed of short declarative sentences. The word /*don*/ here, based on Oxford Dictionary, is some kind of professor, particularly at Oxford or Cambridge.

Me not no oxford don
Me a simple immigrant
From Clapham Common
I didn't graduate
I immigrate

The word /*Clapham Common*/ refers to a park in South London, which is famously known for its working-class and multicultural

character. The poet asserts his identity not through academic achievement but through migration by showing the refusal of academic standards of grammar and education.

But listen Mr Oxford don
I'm a man on de run
And a man on de run
Is a dangerous one

The line /*I'm a man on de run*/ is a declarative sentence using the present continuous tense. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, the word /*on de run*/ is trying to avoid or escape from something. This line metaphorically positions the speaker as a fugitive, not from law, but from linguistic norms and societal expectations. The word /*dangerous*/, based on Merriam-webster, can be assumed to cause harm that reinforces the speaker's threat; the danger he poses is linguistic and cultural, not physical. The poet wants to build tension while ironically mimicking the language of a criminal, turning language into symbolic resistance.

I ent have no gun
I ent have no knife
But mugging de Queen's English
Is the story my life

The word /*ent*/ in the Dictionary of Caribbean English is "ain't." The repeated structure uses a double negative, a common feature in Creole English and informal speech. The poet wants to convey using the words /*gun*/ and /*knife*/ as harmful weapons that threaten society. With the additional word of /*mugging*/, based on Oxford Dictionary, means robbing someone in public. However, the poet uses it figuratively to describe how the speaker steals from proper English language, Queen's English. According to Merriam-webster, it refers to standard, prestigious British English, linked with power, tradition, and authority. Line 4, stanza 3 suggests that the poet survives in English by using a mix of language and creole.

I don't need no axe
To split/ up yu syntax
I don't need no hammer
To mash/ up yu grammar

The first and third lines are a repetition of the previous stanza. However, another line that supports this line is the second. Based on the Cambridge Dictionary, the words /*split*/ and /*mash*/ are acts of force; the poet applies these words not on objects but to syntax and grammar. The speaker metaphorically invades the rigid structure of proper English without using violence. This stanza portrays language as not a neutral tool but a battleground where voices can resist through creativity and irregularity.

I warning you Mr. Oxford don
I'm a wanted man
And a wanted man
Is a dangerous one

According to Oxford Dictionary, the word /*wanted*/can be used as a noun or a verb to tell someone about the possibility of dangers. This stanza wants to tell of the speaker's mocking himself to portray himself as someone perceived as dangerous by the system, not because of physical violence, but his rebellion in language.

Dem accuse me of assault
On de Oxford dictionary/
Imagine a consice peaceful man like me/
Dem want me to serve time
For inciting rhyme to riot
But I tekking it quiet
Down here in Clapham Common

This stanza combines humor with serious criticism. The word /*Assault*/ according to Merriam-webster, means a violent physical or verbal attack. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, the word /*incite*/refers to encouraging someone to act violently or illegally. The poet describes being accused of /*assault on the Oxford Dictionary*/, by bending formal English rules.

This stanza uses simple declarative sentences with imagery of a criminal. Line 3 highlights the poet's self-image. Using the word /*concise*/ in the Cambridge Dictionary means giving clear information with a few words. Figuratively, this stanza criticizes the way institutions criminalize cultural and linguistic differences.

I'm not violent man Mr.Oxford don
I only armed wit mih human breath
But human breath
Is a dangerous weapon

This stanza has the exact repetition as previous stanzas, as a declarative sentence, the phrase /*I'm not violent man*/, the poet straightforward denial of being a threat, with the "breath" based on Oxford Dictionary is the air taken into or expelled from the lungs, breath also sometime produce voice. According to the Dictionary of Caribbean English, the word /wit/ refers to "with" and the word /*mih*/ refers to "my." The poet conveys the use of /*armed wit mih human breath*/ transforming something natural and essential into a metaphorical weapon that can threaten the system of linguistic establishments.

So mek dem send one big word after me
I ent serving no jail sentence
I slashing suffix in self-defence
I bashing future with present tense
And if necessary

For the last time, this stanza uses a declarative sentence on these lines with action verbs and rebellious imagery. The poet imagines language as a battlefield. He rebels against his way of speaking. The word /*suffix*/ in Merriam-webster means the additional end of a word to change its meaning. The line 3-4 use can be symbolized as disrupting English grammar's formal, rigid structures.

I making de Queen's English accessory/ to my offence

Metaphorically, this line suggests that the language he accused of misusing has become part of his rebellion. This shows a profound reversal of power, where the colonial language no longer controls him, but he is reclaiming it instead. In heuristic reading, this final stanza expresses linguistic resistance and cultural empowerment. The poet portrays language not as a tool of authority but a means of survival. His act of rebellion symbolizes broader acts of postcolonial defiance against cultural dominance.

In heuristic reading, the poem presents linguistic disruptions (such as the use of Caribbean dialect and broken grammar) that force the reader to question authority tied to the Oxford don and Standard English. Through metaphors of violence and breath, the speaker challenges the idea that language is neutral. Instead, the reader uncovers that even "human breath" becomes a tool of resistance, subverting academic elitism and linguistic power.

After analyzing these poems, the model can be determined at the poetic word, phrase, or sentence level. The model of this poem is the poet's identity as a rebellious immigrant. In this poem, the variant can be explained through statements that are Mugging the Queen English, warning Mr. Oxford don, Human breath as a weapon, making the Queen's English accessory.

In Listen Mr Oxford Don, the poet delivers a criticism against the figure of the Oxford academy (don) as the symbol for the British establishment. The poem expresses the immigrant speaker's defiance against linguistic colonialism by humorously framing himself as a criminal who "mugging de Queen's English." This metaphor suggests that altering standard English is seen as an inappropriate act by those in power, revealing how language becomes a site of oppression. The speaker uses "assault" and "inciting rhyme to riot" in the Oxford dictionary to criminalize non-standard speech, especially that of immigrant groups, resulting in

speaking one's own voice becoming an act of rebellion and self-assertion. Agard reclaims language as a tool of empowerment by using Caribbean Creole and phonetic spelling. The repetition “a man on de run is a dangerous one” underlines how those excluded or marginalized by systemic racism become powerful when they refuse to assimilate passively. Thus, Listen Mr Oxford Don explores how language functions as both a weapon of colonization and a means of resistance.

Heuristic & Hermeneutic in Half Caste

The first publication of this poem was in 1996 in John Agard's poetry collection Half-Caste and Other Poems. This poem is free verse, which does not follow a regular stanzaic structure. This poem consists of 52 lines with short but punchy words in each line.

Half-Caste

The title of this poem /*Half-Caste*/ according to Oxford Dictionary, refers to his family having different racial blood that their heritage considered Mixed blood. The choice of this poem was inspired by a direct response to the casual racism he encountered in Britain.

Excuse me
Standing on one leg
I’m half-caste

These lines are a short sequence of three lines forming a complete sentence. This structure captures attention immediately and mirrors physical imbalance through its literal image of /*standing on one leg*. / According to Oxford Dictionaries, /*excuse me*/ is a polite phrase used to get someone’s attention. The phrase introduces the speaker’s polite but firm tone while setting up a challenge to the listener’s assumptions. The word /*standing on one leg*/ is a physical metaphor for the unstable or incomplete position. It can also imply that others only understand one side or judge people unfairly. Agard uses this term to highlight the absurdity of the level by pairing it with the equally absurd image of one standing on one leg. When read heuristically, this metaphor invites the reader to question the logic and fairness of judging people by their racial or ethnic mixture.

Explain yuself
What yu mean
When yu say half-caste

Line 4 is an imperative sentence. The verb /*explain*/ is used here as a command to make something clear or understandable. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, it means to make something clear or easy to understand by describing or giving information about it. Based on the Dictionary of Caribbean English, the word /*yuself*/ is a phonetic spelling of “yourself”. This use of dialect emphasizes the speaker’s identity and challenges linguistic norms, a key theme in Agard’s poetry. Line 5 is a simple interrogative sentence. According to the Dictionary of Caribbean English, the phrase /*wha yu mean*/ is a Creole rendering of “what do you mean?”. This question challenges the implied meaning behind the slur /*half-caste*,/ forcing the listener to confront its underlying assumptions. The speaker here initiates a deep interrogation of the term’s implications, asking the listener to reflect on what they truly imply when using it. This line transitions into metaphor, setting up the artistic and natural analogies that follow, destabilizing the logic of racial purity.

Yu mean when Picasso
Mix red an green
Is a half-caste canvas?

In line 7, the poem uses Picasso, referring to Pablo Picasso, an iconic figure in modernist art known for blending contrasting styles, colors, and perspectives. Agard subverts the racialized logic that underpins the term. The juxtaposition of /*red an green*/ two distinct yet complementary colors, functions as a metaphor for racial and cultural hybridity.

Yu mean when light an shadow
Mix in de sky
Is a half-caste weather?

Agard continues his strategy of satirical inversion, drawing from natural phenomena to deconstruct the notion of /*half-caste*/. By juxtaposing /*light an shadow*/ he reveals the absurdity of treating mixture as deficiency. This metaphor serves to normalize hybridity, suggesting that just as the sky accommodates both light and darkness in harmony, so too can identities embody multiple racial or cultural influences without being diminished.

Well in dat case
England weather
Nearly always half-caste

These lines continue the poet's satirical interrogation of the term "half-caste" by linking it to the natural world. The opening phrase /*well in dat case*/ is a conversational clause acting as a rhetorical bridge from the previous metaphor in lines 13-14. The word /*well*/ according to the Cambridge Dictionary, is often used to introduce a remark that responds to or builds upon a previous statement. The phrase /*in dat case*/ Based on Dictionary of Caribbean English "in that case" sets up a logical consequence suggesting that if mixed elements in nature qualify as /*half-caste*/ then so must England's weather, which is according to BBC News England is famously known for having unpredictable and frequently mixed weather. By selecting this national symbol, Agard humorously criticizes the absurdity of associating mixture with inferiority. The poetic strategy invites readers to reassess their assumptions and recognize the naturalness and ubiquity of mixture, whether in skies or societies.

In fact some o dem cloud
Half-caste till dem overcast
So spiteful dem don't want de sun pass
Ah rass

These lines are part of a poetic sequence that uses weather imagery to explore the meaning of the word /*half-caste*/. Based on Merriam-webster, /*cloud*/ refers to visible masses of condensed water vapor floating in the atmosphere, often associated with weather changes. The word /*some o dem cloud*/ suggests a group of clouds, with /*dem*/ that, according to the Dictionary of Caribbean English, is a creole variant of "Them," referring to those clouds. The poet humorously applies this term to clouds, suggesting that clouds appear /*half-caste*/ when they are partially lit (part light, part dark), symbolizing mixture or transition. The word /*overcast*/ based on Oxford Dictionary, means completely covered with clouds, indicating a lack of sunlight. Thus, /*till dem overcast*/ describes when the clouds move from a mixed state to total darkness. The word /*spiteful*/ is defined in Oxford Dictionary as showing or caused by malice, and here it characterizes the clouds as deliberately blocking sunlight. The phrase /*don't want de sun pass*/ means the clouds are so dense or intentional in coverage that they prevent sunlight from breaking through. The interjection /*ah rass*/, based on the Dictionary of Caribbean English, is a Caribbean slang expression often used to express frustration, surprise, or emphasis.

The poet uses this personification and hyperbole to enhance the metaphor: the clouds are not just weather, but characters with mood and agency. This metaphor contrasts the state of blending and full obstruction, emphasizing how something natural (like clouds or mixed identity) is unjustly labeled or misunderstood. The shift from /*half-caste*/ to /*overcast*/ symbolically moves from partial visibility to total concealment, enriching the poem's message about misunderstanding and prejudice.

Yu mean Tchaikovsky sit down at dah piano
An mix a black key

Wid a white key
Is a half-caste symphony?

This passage forms another metaphor, continuing the poem's strategy of juxtaposing the absurdity of applying the term /*half-caste*/ to esteemed artistic creations. The subject here is /*Tchaikovsky*, / referring to Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, a renowned Russian composer known for classical symphonies and ballets. The line /*yu mean Tchaikovsky sit down at dah piano*/ imagines the composer performing on a piano, the instrument by design contains white and black keys. The word /*dah*/, according to the Dictionary of Caribbean English, means "that," anchoring the voice in a culturally specific dialect that reinforces authenticity and defiance.

The line /*an mix a black key* / *wid a white key*/ presents a literal act of blending different elements to create harmony. According to the Oxford Dictionary, the word /*mix*/ means to combine two or more things to make something new. These lines metaphorically suggest that just as musical harmony depends on the interplay between contrastive elements, identity and beauty can also emerge from racial or cultural mixture. The line /*is a half-caste symphony?* /poses a rhetorical question that applies the derogatory term /*half-caste*/ to a symphonic composition. According to Merriam-Webster, a /*symphony*/ is a long piece of music typically involving complex orchestration and harmony. This metaphor challenges the reader to reconsider their view of racial mixture if they can accept the existence of musical mixture.

Ah listening to yu wid de keen
Half of mih ear
Ah looking at yu wid de keen
Half of mih eye

The word /*ah*/, based on the Dictionary of Caribbean English Creole for "I", refers to the poet, who adopts the same accent throughout the poem, reinforcing cultural identity. The phrase /*listening to yu*/ and /*looking at yu*/ express direct sensory engagement with attentiveness. The repetition /*keen*/ According to Oxford Dictionary, it is an adjective that means wanting to do something or wanting something to happen. The poet want to convey his perspective, with the Lines /*half of mih ear*/ and /*half of my eye*/ with creole /*mih*/ based on Dictionary of Caribbean English is "my", and with word "ear" and "eye" According to Merriam-Webster, the noun /*ear*/ is organ of hearing and /*eye*/ is organ of sight, these lines serve as a metaphor for restricted perception, mocking the idea that being mixed blood implies only use these organ partially, and pretending not seeing the other half.

An when I'm introduced to yu
I'm sure you'll understand
Why I offer yu half-a-hand

Line 36 is a conditional clause, where when it indicates a possible future, it means his directness toward the listener who has used the term /*half-caste*. / The clause /*I'm sure you'll understand*/ expresses confidence that the listener will grasp the meaning of the poet's behavior. Line 38 offers a humorous but biting line. Merriam-Webster defines a /*hand*/ as the body part for greeting or touching. By saying /*half-a-hand*,/ the poet mocks the logic that "half-caste" means one should be functionally impaired. These lines mean that if society sees him as mixed blood, he will respond by behaving correspondingly, symbolizing a rejection of those who fail to see his complete human form.

An when I sleep at night
I close half-a-eye
Consequently when I dream
I dream half-a-dream

On line 39, the conjunction /*an*/, according to the Dictionary of Caribbean English, is a Creole variant of "and," meaning that it is a continuation of the

previous line. Line 40 is the literal interpretation of the idea of being half. A human typically closes both eyes to sleep, but by stating he closes only half, the poet emphasizes how the label half-caste absurdly reduces a person's full potential. Followed by the connector of line 41, the word/*consequently*/ is defined by Oxford Dictionary as cause and effect, and combined with the word "dream" based on Merriam-Webster as a series of thoughts and imagination during sleep, or it can also be interpreted as the goal of someone. This means that the poet conveys his feeling that there is a limitation to reaching a goal as a half-caste.

An when moon begin to glow
I half-caste human being
Cast half-a-shadow

Line 43 has a literal meaning. The word /*glow*/ in the Oxford Dictionary is to produce a steady light. It means when the night shines brightly because of the moonlight. The phrase /*human being*/ is crucial; it centers the poet's humanity, directly challenging any classification that might render him less than whole. The juxtaposition of "half-caste" and "human being" invites reflection on how racist language denies the speaker's full personhood. To say he casts only /*half-a-shadow*, / he emphasizes the illogical racial labeling. This is how the poet's identity is mispresented by societal views by imaging the moon and the fractured shadow.

But yu must come back tomorrow
Wid de whole of yu eye
An whole of yu ear
An de whole of yu mind
An I will tell yu
De other half
Of my story

The repetition of /*the whole of yu…*/ emphasizes completeness. These three lines of repetition represent the poet's demand for full engagement in listening, understanding, and open-mindedness, as the poet suggests in the following lines, with the last three lines mirroring how society sees him as a "half" person. The term "other half" reinforces the central metaphor only when the listener is fully open so the poet can be fully known.

The poem uses repeated disruption (such as the phrase "half-caste,' broken syntax, and ironic comparisons) to force the reader to question the logic behind racial labeling. The reader is drawn into decoding how language, customarily used to stereotype mixed-race identities, becomes a site of resistance. Through repetition and fragmented grammar, the poem destabilizes the assumed inferiority of "half-caste" and invites the reader to reconstruct its meaning as a symbol of wholeness and dignity.

The model of this poet is "half-caste," which represents how mixed-race identity is seen as incomplete or inferior. Variants of this model appear through statements such as: mixed colors in a painting (Picasso), mixed light and shadow (shadow), half-eye, half-ear, half-hand.

The title of this poem indicates that it will talk about the poet's identity as a caste, which is an offensive term for someone of mixed racial heritage. At first, the poet mocks the idea of his identity. However, the poem engages with deep systemic criticisms of language classification and identity. The repetition of "*explain yuself*" mirrors the oppressive expectation that mixed race must justify their existence to colonial and racist societies that not fit their binary category of pure race. The poet uses absurd examples (half caste weather, symphonies, and painting) to highlight how natural and beautiful combinations are, revealing the irrationality of racial purity ideologies. The term "half-caste" is not only inaccurate but also insulting and damaging to the identity of mixed-blood individuals. He uses Caribbean Creole, non-standard spelling, and phonetic rhythm as a linguistic rebellion to reclaim the

right to define his identity. In hermeneutic reading, half caste is not just a protest against a word, but a rejection of all forms of cultural and racial invalidation. It signifies wholeness, complexity, and resistance against systemic oppression.

Heuristic & Hermeneutic In Checking Out Me History

The first publication of this poem was in 2007 in John Agard's poetry collection Half-Caste and Other Poems. This poem consists of 40 lines and 10 stanzas with a variety of lengths. John Agard uses irregular structure to match the tone and rhythm of creole speech.

Bandage up me eye with me own history
Blind me to my own identity

This stanza consists of two lines, each a simple declarative sentence in Creole English. The word /*bandage up*/ according to Merriam-Webster Dictionary, refers to wrapping cloth with a fiber to cover a wound. The poet here intends to reverse the meaning typically used to heal the wound by wrapping the bandage, but here it is used to conceal the speaker's vision. /*eye*/ in the Cambridge Dictionary means the organs used for seeing. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, it symbolizes perception and understanding, while /*history*/refers to collective memory and cultural heritage. Thus, the poet intends to show that colonial forces have deliberately covered or hidden the speaker's true history. Continue with the following line. Use the word /*blind*/as defined by Oxford Dictionary to make someone unable to see. The word "identity" here encompasses the speaker's racial, cultural, and historical self-awareness. This stanza powerfully illustrates how educational institutions are tools for erasing minority histories, maintaining a white-dominated narrative that excludes black contributions.

Dem tell me bout 1066 and all that
Dem tell me bout dick Whittington and he cat
But Toussaint L'Ouverture
No dem never tell me bout dat

Toussaint
A slave
With vision
Lick back
Napoleon
Battalion
And first black
Republic born
Toussaint de thorn
To de French
Toussaint de beacon
Of de Haitian Revolution

Dem tell me bout de man who discover de balloon
And de cow who jump over de moon
Dem tell me bout de dish run away with de spoon
Bu dem never tell me bout nanny de maroon

Nanny see-far woman
Of mountain dream
Fire-woman struggle
Hopeful stream
To freedom river

Dem tell me bout lord Nelson and Waterloo
But dem never tell me bout Shaka de great Zulu
Dem tell me bout Columbus and 1492
But what happen to de Caribs and de Arawaks too

Dem tell me bout Florence Nightingale and she lamp
And how Robin used to camp
Dem tell me bout ole king Cole was a merry ole soul

But dem never tell me bout Mary Seacole

From Jamaica
She travel far
To the Crimean war
She volunteer to go
And even when de British said no
She still brave the Russian snow
A healing star
Among the wounded
A yellow sunrise
To the dying

each has a different subject but the same criticisms. Each stanza follows a pattern, he contrasts the trivial or celebrated figures of British history (such as Dick Whittington, Columbus, and Lord Nelson) with important but suppressed black and indigenous figures (such as Toussaint L'Ouverture, Nanny of the Maroons, Shaka Zulu, and Mary Seacole). This repetition illustrates how the colonial system deliberately erases non-European contributions from historical narratives. By focusing only on white British heroes and nursery rhymes, the educational system blinds colonized peoples to their heritage as role models. These stanzas together illustrate the idea that systemic racism exists through knowledge.

Dem tell me
Dem tell me wha dem want to tell me
But now I checking out me own history
I carving out me identity

the poem's message in declaring self-recovery and empowerment. By confronting institutionalized racism in education systems that marginalize black history, John Agard shows that reclaiming history is an act of resistance against systemic oppression. The word "craving out" is based on Oxford Dictionary, which means someone has a strong desire for something, in this case, the desire for his identity against centuries of colonial history that sought to define the black people as lesser or invisible.

The poem presents textual disruption that forces the reader to question the authority of colonial education. The repetition of "*Dem tell me"signals a cliché* (the passive consumption of Eurocentric history) which the poem then destabilizes through contrast with suppressed figures like Toussaint L'Ouverture and Nanny de Maroon. This contrast creates a decoding process, where the reader must recognize the absence of black historical voices as a deliberate cultural erasure. By juxtaposing nursery rhyme-like names with revolutionary heroes, Agard compels the reader to reconstruct the meaning of history as a political tool. The poem's structure, alternating between imposed knowledge and recovered identity, activates the reader to explore the pride, resistance, and the politics of self-definition.

The model of this poem is British history and education, which is considered marginalized by British society and curriculum (Osler: 2005). Variants in this poem are the individual historical figures and folk histories, such as Toussaint L'Ouverture, Nightingale, and Columbus. These figures may disrupt the model and offer different versions of history, such as resistance, strength, and empowerment.

This poem narrates the speaker's frustration with being taught only selective portions of history while denying black heroes. Agard uncovers how education is not neutral. It serves as a tool of systemic racism that hides the histories of minority people to maintain cultural hegemony. By repeating "dem tell me," Agard points to colonial education's authoritarian and selective nature, where history is fed rather than explored. By using the words "bandaged" and "blinded," the society wants to silence the history of black people. Yet in stanza 9, the speaker's act of "carving out" his identity symbolizes empowerment and desire. Thus,

hermeneutic reading of this poem is not just about history, it is a poem about resistance and freedom against systemic racism.

Systemic Racism as Significance

The three selected poems of John Agard in this thesis contain systemic racism, such as discrimination against those who use the minority accent, identity of mixed blood, and how society silences black history. This research analyzes a matrix that is actualized into some variants in the poems. John Agard uses Creole English, satire, metaphor, and historical figures to challenge the structures of racism that operate through institutions, traditions, and inherited narratives.

The poem "Listen Mr Oxford Don" was first published in 1985 in the poetry collection Mangoes and Bullets: Selected and New Poems. The significance found in this poem is systemic injustice, focusing specifically on linguistic imperialism that lies in exposing how language becomes a tool of exclusion and domination. The poet presents a speaker who is "mugging de Queen's English, " symbolically reclaiming English from its institutional gatekeepers of language. Systemic racism here is not about skin colour but about controlling whose speech is considered legitimate. Through this resistance, the poet expresses how standard English, supported by educational and cultural elites, perpetuates colonial attitudes and marginalizes immigrant identities. The hypogram in the poem Listen Mr Oxford is the dominance of Standard British English and its institutional enforcers, particularly the British academic establishment. The word like the "Oxford Don" and the "Queen's English" are not just literal references but symbols of the linguistic imperialism imposed by colonial rule. These symbols represent an ideological hypogram: the belief in the cultural superiority of white, elite, educated Britain, particularly in language use. Agard satirically resists this hypogram by adopting Caribbean Creole and phonetic spelling, mocking the sanctity of "proper" English by framing himself as someone "mugging de Queen's English." As scholars such as Ashcroft et al. (1989) argue, language itself in postcolonial literature becomes "a site of struggle," especially when formerly colonized writers reassert their voices through non-standard dialects. Therefore, the hypogram in Listen Mr Oxford Don is the cultural ideology of linguistic purity and institutional authority, which Agard challenges through poetic irony and linguistic rebellion.

"Half-caste" was first published in 1996 in John Agard's poetry collection Half-Caste and Other Poems. The significance found in this poem is the criticism of linguistic racism and identity degradation. Agard shows marginalized individuals by confronting the derogatory term "half-caste," showing how systemic racism uses language to create divisions and imply inferiority. Through humorous but hurtful metaphors, the poet exposes the absurdity of racist thinking embedded in social discourse. His use of Caribbean Creole voices the dignity of multiracial identity against the legacy of colonial racial hierarchies. In John Agard's Half-Caste, the underlying hypogram is the colonial discourse of racial purity and classification, particularly the derogatory construct of "half-caste" used to label people of mixed racial heritage. In this poem, the term "half-caste" itself is not just a word; the phrase functions as a carrier of colonial ideology that views mixed-race individuals as incomplete or inferior. Agard subverts this hypogram by ironically comparing it to "half a canvas" or "half a symphony," revealing the illogic of racial purism. Using Caribbean Creole and fragmented syntax, Agard resists the linguistic and cultural dominance imposed by British colonial standards. As Savory (1994) explains, Caribbean writers often confront "imperial language systems

that encoded racial hierarchy," using poetry as a tool of "textual resistance" to reclaim identity and agency. Thus, the poem transforms the hypogram of colonial racial ideology into a declaration of wholeness and pride in hybridity.

The poem "Checking Out Me History" was published in 2007 in John Agard's poetry collection Half-Caste and Other Poems. Addresses the institutional erasure of black histories. The significance of this poem lies in how the poet wants to reclaim historical identities stolen or hidden by Eurocentric education systems. He shows how colonial society glorifies European achievements while silencing heroes of African and Caribbean descent. By interweaving nursery rhymes about English figures with resistance leaders, Agard criticizes how systemic racism is maintained through selective storytelling. The poem wants to recall the suppressed histories as a vital part of resisting racial oppression.

In "Checking Out Me History", Agard uses the hypogram to challenge the colonial and Eurocentric historical narratives that have systematically erased or marginalized Black and Indigenous histories. In "Checking Out Me History," John Agard introduces a series of historical figures, each representing a different ideological hypogram, or underlying cultural narrative, that the poem seeks to challenge. The historical figures in the poem are not merely individuals but symbols of larger, often contradictory, historical frameworks—one imposed by colonial powers and the other reclaimed through postcolonial resistance.

"Dick Whittington": This figure is part of British folklore, representing the idealized narrative of the British Empire. As a hypogram, Dick Whittington symbolizes the colonial perspective that frames British figures as heroes of progress and prosperity, masking the exploitation and subjugation of colonized peoples. His presence in the poem signals the "official" history taught in schools, which often disregards the contributions of non-white individuals.

"Mary Seacole": Agard juxtaposes Mary Seacole against the traditionally celebrated figure of Florence Nightingale. Seacole, a Black Jamaican woman, is largely omitted from the mainstream historical narrative despite her heroic role during the Crimean War (McDonald, 2005). As a hypogram, Seacole represents the erased and marginalized history of Black women who were excluded from the official record, challenging the colonial notion of who is worthy of recognition and historical commemoration.

"Toussaint L'Ouverture": Toussaint L'Ouverture, the leader of the Haitian Revolution, represents the struggle for freedom and the fight against colonial oppression (Dubois, 2004). As a hypogram, L'Ouverture challenges the colonial history that denied Black people agency and leadership. His inclusion in Agard's poem reclaims the Black revolutionary spirit and offers a counter-narrative to the colonial myth that Black people were passive victims rather than active agents of history.

"Nanny of the Maroons": Nanny, the leader of the Jamaican Maroons, symbolizes resistance to colonial violence and oppression. As a hypogram, Nanny represents the African resistance to slavery and colonial rule. Her omission from British-centered history exposes the erasure of Black resistance figures in favour of glorifying colonial power. In Agard's work, Nanny's legacy is reasserted as a symbol of empowerment and the active fight for freedom.

"Lord Nelson and Waterloo": Lord Nelson is a hero in British history, particularly known for his victory at the Battle of Waterloo. In colonial discourse, British military figures like Nelson are glorified for their role in expanding and

maintaining the empire. As a hypogram, Nelson represents the dominant British narrative institutionalized in history textbooks, promoting British imperialism and the victory of colonial powers.

"Shaka de great Zulu": Shaka Zulu, a revered military leader and king of the Zulu kingdom, is an important figure in African history, but one that is often omitted or marginalized in Western historical narratives. In contrast to Lord Nelson, Shaka's history is often ignored or misrepresented in favour of colonial triumphs (Laband, 1995). As a hypogram, Shaka Zulu represents the colonized people's history that is systematically erased or disregarded in the Eurocentric historical narrative. This omission reflects Agard's challenge to reclaim African history that colonial perspectives have silenced or overshadowed.

"Columbus and 1492": Christopher Columbus is a central figure in the Western historical narrative, often celebrated as the "discoverer" of the Americas in 1492. However, this narrative is deeply problematic, as it overlooks the Indigenous peoples who lived on the land long before Columbus's arrival. The term "1492" is emblematic of the beginning of European colonization in the Americas (Zinn, 1980). The hypogram of Columbus functions to critique the Eurocentric interpretation of discovery and exploration, ignoring the devastating impact of colonization on Indigenous peoples.

Conclusion

This research analyzed the existence of systemic racism in John Agard's three selected poems to reveal how racial prejudice is embedded within language, history, and cultural perception. Using the semiotic poetry by Riffaterre, which consists of two stages of reading, the presented meaning and significance of selected poems by John Agard are found. In the first step of reading, heuristic reading, the meaning that is acquired at the mimetic level contains an ungrammatical meaning. Moreover, the second stage of reading, hermeneutic reading, is applied to give a deep understanding of the significance of the three selected poems.

The significance of "Listen Mr Oxford Don" is the challenge to linguistic supremacy. Agard empowers individuals by criticizing the standard English equates to intelligence, encouraging cultural and linguistic pride. The significance of "Half-Caste" is the racial categorization and prejudice against mixed-race individuals. This poem empowers the speaker by questioning the binary racial framework and dismantling the derogatory term" half-caste" through humor and irony. The significance of "Checking Out Me History" is a reclamation of historical narratives. Agard empowers marginalized communities by reclaiming history from a colonial, Eurocentric perspective and highlighting suppressed figures from the African and Caribbean diasporas. From those three significances, it can be concluded that John Agard's selected poems illustrate a powerful criticism of systemic racism and advocate for racial and cultural empowerment. Through racial identity, linguistic resistance, and historical reclamation, Agard challenges colonial ideologies and exposes the rooted prejudices embedded in language, education, and society.

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