CHAPTER 7

English in the Caribbean

Edward Kamau Brathwaite

Caribbean poet Edward Kamau Brathwaite in this 1981 essay takes a very different approach from Ngugi wa Thiong'o. He argues that standard colonial English has been altered by the literary practices of Caribbean writers, who have appropriated it for the creation of a new “creolized” or mixed language.

You may excel
in knowledge of their tongue
and universal ties may bind you close to them;
but what they say, and how they feel —
the subtler details of their meaning,
thinking, feeling, reaching —
these are closed to you and me . . .
as are, indeed, the interleaves of speech
— our speech — which fall to them . . .

dead leaves . . .
G. Adali-Morty, “Belonging” from Messages

The Negro in the West Indies becomes proportionately whiter — that is, he becomes closer to being a real human being — in direct ratio to his mastery of the language.
Frantz Fanon, Peau noire, masque blanc

Yurokon held the twine in his hands as if with a snap, a single fierce pull, he would break it now at last. Break the land. Break the sea. Break the savannah. Break the forest. Break the twig. Break the bough.
Wilson Harris, Sleepers of Roraima

What I am going to talk about is language from the Caribbean, the process of using English in a different way from the “norm.” English in a sense as I prefer to call it. English in an ancient sense. English in a very traditional sense. And sometimes not English at all, but language.

I start my thoughts, taking up from the discussion developed after Dennis Brutus’s excellent presentation. Without logic, and through instinct, the people who spoke with Dennis from the floor yesterday brought up the question of language. Actually, Dennis’s presentation had nothing to do with language. He was speaking about the structural condition of South Africa. But instinctively people recognized
that the structural condition described by Dennis had very much to do with lan-
guage. He didn’t concentrate on the language aspect of it because there wasn’t
enough time and because it was not his main concern. But it was interesting that
your instincts, not your logic, moved you toward the question of the relationship
between language and culture, language and structure. In his case, it was English,
and English as spoken by Africans, and the native languages as spoken by Africans.

We in the Caribbean have a similar kind of plurality. We have English, which is
the imposed language on much of the archipelago; it is an imperial language, as are
French, Dutch, and Spanish. We also have what we call Creole English, which is a
mixture of English and an adaptation that English took in the new environment of
the Caribbean when it became mixed with the other imported languages. We have
also what is called nation language, which is the kind of English spoken by the people
who were brought to the Caribbean, not the official English now, but the language of
slaves and laborers – the servants who were brought in by the conquistadors. Finally,
we have the remnants of ancestral languages still persisting in the Caribbean. There
is Amerindian, which is active in certain parts of Central America but not in the
Caribbean because the Amerindiands are a destroyed people, and their languages were
practically destroyed. We have Hindi, spoken by some of the more traditional East
Indians who live in the Caribbean, and there are also varieties of Chinese.¹ And,
miraculously, there are survivals of African languages still persisting in the Carib-
bean. So we have that spectrum – that prism – of languages similar to the kind of
structure that Dennis described for South Africa. Now, I have to give you some kind
of background to the development of these languages, the historical development of
this plurality, because I can’t take it for granted that you know and understand the
history of the Caribbean.

The Caribbean is a set of islands stretching out from Florida in a mighty curve.
You must know of the Caribbean at least from television, at least now with hurricane
David* coming right into it. The islands stretch out in an arc of some two thousand
miles from Florida through the Atlantic to the South American coast, and they were
originally inhabited by Amerindian people, Taino, Siboney, Carib, Arawak.

In 1492, Columbus “discovered” (as it is said) the Caribbean, and with that discov-
ery came the intrusion of European culture and peoples and a fragmentation of the
original Amerindian culture. We had Europe “nationalizing” itself, and there were
Spanish, French, English, and Dutch conquerors so that people had to start speaking
(and thinking in) four metropolitan languages rather than possibly a single native
language. Then with the destruction of the Amerindians, which took place within
thirty years of Columbus’s discovery (one million dead a year), it was necessary for the
Europeans to import new labor bodies into the Caribbean. And the most convenient
form of labor was the labor on the very edge of the trade winds – the labor on the edge
of the slave trade winds, the labor on the edge of the hurricane, the labor on the edge
of West Africa. And so the peoples of Ashanti, Congo, Nigeria, from all that mighty
coast of western Africa were imported into the Caribbean. And we had the arrival in
that area of a new language structure. It consisted of many languages, but basically
they had a common semantic and stylistic form.² What these languages had to do,
however, was to submerge themselves, because officially the conquering peoples – the

¹ This talk was presented at Harvard late in August 1979. Hurricanes ravish the Caribbean and the
southern coasts of the United States in the summer of every year.
Spaniards, the English, the French, and the Dutch—insisted that the language of public discourse and conversation, of obedience, command, and reception, should be English, French, Spanish, or Dutch. They did not wish to hear people speaking Ashanti or any of the Congolese languages. So there was a submergence of this imported language. Its status became one of inferiority. Similarly, its speakers were slaves. They were conceived of as inferiors—nonhuman, in fact. But this very submergence served an interesting intercultural purpose, because although people continued to speak English as it was spoken in Elizabethan times and on through the Romantic and Victorian ages, that English was, nonetheless, still being influenced by the underground language, the submerged language that the slaves had brought. And that underground language was itself constantly transforming itself into new forms. It was moving from a purely African form to a form that was African, but which was adapted to the new environment and adapted to the cultural imperative of the European languages. And it was influencing the way in which the French, Dutch, and Spanish spoke their own languages. So there was a very complex process taking place, which is now beginning to surface in our literature.

In the Caribbean, as in South Africa (and in any area of cultural imperialism for that matter), the educational system did not recognize the presence of these various languages. What our educational system did was to recognize and maintain the language of the conquistador—the language of the planter, the language of the official, the language of the Anglican preacher. It insisted that not only would English be spoken in the Anglophone Caribbean, but that the educational system would carry the contours of an English heritage. Hence, as Dennis said, Shakespeare, George Eliot, Jane Austen—British literature and literary forms, the models that were intimate to Europe, that were intimate to Great Britain, that had very little to do, really, with the environment and the reality of the Caribbean—were dominant in the Caribbean educational system. It was a very surprising situation. People were forced to learn things that had no relevance to themselves. Paradoxically, in the Caribbean (as in many other “cultural disaster” areas), the people educated in this system came to know more, even today, about English kings and queens than they do about their own national heroes, our own slave rebels—the people who helped to build and to destroy our society. We are more excited by English literary models, by the concept of, say, Sherwood Forest and Robin Hood, than we are by Nanny of the Maroons, a name some of us didn’t even know until a few years ago. And in terms of what we write, our perceptual models, we are more conscious (in terms of sensibility) of the falling of snow for instance—the models are all there for the falling of the snow—than of the force of the hurricanes that take place every year. In other words, we haven’t got the syllables, the syllabic intelligence, to describe the hurricane, which is our own experience, whereas we can describe the imported alien experience of the snowfall. It is that kind of situation that we are in.

Now the Creole adaptation to that is the little child who, instead of writing in an essay “The snow was falling on the fields of Shropshire” (which is what our children literally were writing until a few years ago, below drawings they made of white snow fields and the corn-haired people who inhabited such a landscape), wrote “The snow was falling on the cane fields.” The child had not yet reached the obvious statement that it wasn’t snow at all, but rain that was probably falling on the cane fields. She was trying to have both cultures at the same time. But that is creolization.
What is even more important, as we develop this business of emergent language in the Caribbean, is the actual rhythm and the syllables, the very body work, in a way, of the language. What English has given us as a model for poetry, and to a lesser extent, prose (but poetry is the basic tool here), is the pentameter: "The curfew tolls the knell of parting day." There have, of course, been attempts to break it. And there were other dominant forms like, for example, Beowulf (c. 750), The Seafarer, and what Langland (1322?–1400?) had produced:

For trewthe telleth that love. is triacle of hevene;
May no synne be on him sene. that useth that spise,
And alle his werkes he wroughe. with love as he list.

Or, from Piers the Plowman (which does not make it into Palgrave’s Golden Treasury, but which we all had to “do” at school) the haunting prologue:

In a somer seson. when soft was the sonne
I shope me into shroudes. as I a shepe were

which has recently inspired our own Derek Walcott with his first major nation language effort:

In idle August, while the sea soft,
and leaves of brown islands stick to the rim
of this Caribbean, I blow out the light
by the dreamless face of Maria Concepcion
to ship as a seaman on the schooner Flight. 6

But by the time we reach Chaucer (1345–1400), the pentamer prevails. Over in the New World, the Americans – Walt Whitman – tried to bridge or to break the pentameter through a cosmic movement, a large movement of sound. Cummings tried to fragment it. And Marianne Moore attacked it with syllabics. But basically the pentameter remained, and it carries with it a certain kind of experience, which is not the experience of a hurricane. The hurricane does not roar in pentameter. And that’s the problem: how do you get a rhythm that approximates the natural experience, the environmental experience? We have been trying to break out of the entire pentametric model in the Caribbean and to move into a system that more closely and intimately approaches our own experience. So that is what we are talking about now.

It is nation language in the Caribbean that, in fact, largely ignores the pentameter. Nation language is the language that is influenced very strongly by the African model, the African aspect of our New World/Caribbean heritage. English it may be in terms of its lexicon, but it is not English in terms of its syntax. And English it certainly is not in terms of its rhythm and timbre, its own sound explosion. In its contours, it is not English, even though the words, as you hear them, would be English to a greater or lesser degree. And this brings us back to the question that some of you raised yesterday: can English be a revolutionary language? And the lovely answer that came back was: it is not English that is the agent. It is not language, but people, who make revolutions.

I think, however, that language does really have a role to play here, certainly in the Caribbean. But it is an English that is not the standard, imported, educated English,
but that of the submerged, surrealist experience and sensibility, which has always been there and which is now increasingly coming to the surface and influencing the language. I use the term in contrast to dialect. The word dialect has been bandied about for a long time, and it carries very pejorative overtones. Dialect is thought of as bad English. Dialect is “inferior English.” Dialect is the language when you want to make fun of someone. Caricature speaks in dialect. Dialect has a long history coming from the plantation where people’s dignity is distorted through their language and the descriptions that the dialect gave to them. Nation language, on the other hand, is the submerged area of that dialect that is much more closely allied to the African aspect of experience in the Caribbean. It may be in English, but often it is in an English which is like a howl, or a shout, or a machine-gun, or the wind, or a wave. It is also like the blues. And sometimes it is English and African at the same time. I am going to give you some examples. But I should tell you that the reason I have to talk so much is that there has been very little written about our nation language. I bring you to the notion of nation language but I can refer you to very little literature, to very few resources. I cannot refer you to what you call an establishment. I cannot really refer you to authorities because there aren’t any. One of our urgent tasks now is to try to create our own authorities. But I will give you a few ideas of what people have tried to do.

The forerunner of all this was, of course, Dante Alighieri who, at the beginning of the fourteenth century, argued, in De vulgari eloquentia (1304), for the recognition of the (his own) Tuscan vernacular as the nation language to replace Latin as the most natural, complete, and accessible means of verbal expression. And the movement was, in fact, successful throughout Europe with the establishment of national languages and literatures. But these very successful national languages then proceeded to ignore local European colonial languages such as Basque and Gaelic, and to suppress overseas colonial languages wherever they were heard. And it was not until the appearance of Burns in the eighteenth century and Rothenberg, Trask, Vansina, Tedlock, Waley, Walton, Whallon, Jahn, Jones, Whitely, Beckwith, Herskovitz, and Ruth Finnegan, among many others in this century, that we have returned, at least to the notion of oral literature, although I don’t need to remind you that oral literature is our oldest form of “auriture” and that it continues richly throughout the world today.

In the Caribbean, our novelists have always been conscious of these native resources, but the critics and academics have, as is often the case, lagged far behind. Indeed, until 1970, there was a positive intellectual, almost social, hostility to the concept of dialect as language. But there were some significant studies in linguistics, such as Beryl Lofton Bailey’s *Jamaican Creole Syntax: A Transformational Approach*; also: F. G. Cassidy, *Jamaica Talk*; Cassidy and R. B. LePage, *Dictionary of Jamaican English*; and, still to come, Richard Allsopp’s mind-blowing *Dictionary of Caribbean English*. There are three glossaries from Frank Collymore in Barbados and A. J. Seymour and John R. Rickford of Guyana; and studies on the African presence in Caribbean language by Mervyn Alleyne, Beverley Hall, and Maureen Warner Lewis. In addition, there has been work by Douglas Taylor and Cicely John, among others, on aspects of some of the Amerindian languages; and Dennis Craig, Laurence Carrington, Velma Pollard, and several others at the University of the West Indies’ School of Education have done some work...
on the structure of nation language and its psychosomosis in and for the classroom.

Few of the writers mentioned, however, have gone into nation language as it affects literature. They have set out its grammar, syntax, transformation, structure, and all of those things. But they haven't really been able to make any contact between the nation language and its expression in our literature. Recently, a French poet and novelist from Martinique, Edouard Glissant, had a remarkable article in Alcheringa, a nation language journal published at Boston University. The article was called "Free and Forced Poetics," and in it, for the first time, I feel an effort to describe what nation language really means. For the author of the article it is the language of enslaved persons. For him, nation language is a strategy: the slave is forced to use a certain kind of language in order to disguise himself, to disguise his personality, and to retain his culture. And he defines that language as "forced poetics" because it is a kind of prison language, if you want to call it that.

And then we have another nation language poet, Bruce St. John, from Barbados, who has written some informal introductions to his own work which describe the nature of the experiments that he is conducting and the kind of rules that he begins to perceive in the way that he uses his language.

I myself have an article called "Jazz and the West Indian novel," which appeared in a journal called Bim in the early 1960s, and there I attempt to show that the connection between native musical structures and the native language is very necessary to the understanding of nation language. That music is, in fact, the surest threshold to the language that comes out of it.

So that is all we have to offer as authority, which isn't very much, really. But that is how it is. And in fact, one characteristic of nation language is its orality. It is from "the oral tradition." And therefore you wouldn't really expect that large, encyclopedic body of learned comment on it that you would expect for a written language and literature.

Now I'd like to describe for you some of the characteristics of our nation language. First of all it is from, as I've said, an oral tradition. The poetry, the culture itself, exists not in a dictionary but in the tradition of the spoken word. It is based as much on sound as it is on song. That is to say, the noise that it makes is part of the meaning, and if you ignore the noise (or what you would think of as noise, shall I say), then you lose part of the meaning. When it is written, you lose the sound or the noise, and therefore you lose part of the meaning. Which is, again, why I have to have a tape recorder for this presentation. I want you to get the sound of it, rather than the sight of it.

Now in order to break down the pentamer, we discovered an ancient form which was always there, the calypso. This is a form that I think everyone knows about. It does not employ the iambic pentamer. It employs dactyls. It therefore mandates the use of the tongue in a certain way, the use of sound in a certain way. It is a model that we are moving naturally toward now.

(Iambic Pentamer)  To be or not to be, that is the question
(Kaiso)  The stone had skidded arc'd and bloomed into islands
            Cuba San Domingo
            Jamaica Puerto Rico
But not only is there a difference in syllabic or stress pattern, there is an important difference in shape of intonation. In the Shakespeare (above), the voice travels in a single forward plane toward the horizon of its end. In the kaiso, after the skimming to describe an intervalllic pattern. And then there are more ritual forms like kumina, which I won’t have time to go into here, but which begin to disclose the complexity that is possible with nation language. What I am attempting to do this morning is to give you a kind of vocabulary introduction to nation language, rather than an analysis of its more complex forms. But I want to make the point that the forms are capable of remarkable complexity, and if there were time I could take you through some of the more complex musical/literary forms as well.

The other thing about nation language is that it is part of what may be called total expression, a notion that is not unfamiliar to you because you are coming back to that kind of thing now. Reading is an isolated, individualistic expression. The oral tradition, on the other hand, makes demands not only on the poet but also on the audience to complete the community: the noise and sounds that the poet makes are responded to by the audience and are returned to him. Hence we have the creation of a continuum where the meaning truly resides. And this total expression comes about because people live in the open air, because people live in conditions of poverty, because people come from a historical experience where they had to rely on their own breath patterns rather than on paraphernalia like books and museums. They had to depend on immanence, the power within themselves, rather than the technology outside themselves.

Let me begin by playing for you, first of all, some West Indian poets who are writing in standard English, or if you like, in West Indian standard English. The first poet is Claude McKay, who some people think of as American. He appears in American anthologies, especially anthologies of black writing. (Until recently, American anthologies hardly ever contained black writers, except perhaps Phillis Wheatley.) But McKay (1889–1940) was born in Jamaica and was a policeman in the constabulary there for some years before emigrating to the States where he quickly became a leading figure in what has come to be known as the Harlem Renaissance. But although he is very much identified with the black movement, he was, except perhaps during the most productive years of his life, rather ambivalent about his negritude. And in this recording made toward the end of his life in the forties, when he had moved from communism to catholicism, for instance, he is saying, in this lead-in to his most famous and militant poem, “If we must die,” a banner poem if ever there was one (it is a counter-lynching poem), that he is a poet, not a black poet, and not, as he said in those days, a “coloured” poet. And he goes on to recount the story of how a copy of “If we must die” was found on the body of a dead (white) soldier during the First World War. The newspapers recorded the occasion and everyone started quoting the poem. But no one, McKay says, said – perhaps they did not even know – that he was black. Which was okay by him, he says, because it helped ensure his “universality.” (Winston Churchill also quoted this poem – without attributing it to the author who, when he had gone to Bernard Shaw for encouragement in earlier days, had been advised by the Grand Old Man [after Shaw had taken a shrewd look at him] that he’d better try it as a boxer!)
Well, that's the first stage and story of our literature. We want to be universal, to be universally accepted. But it's the terrible terms meted out for universality that interest me. In order to be "universal," McKay forsook his nation language, forsook his early mode of poetry and went to the sonnet. And his sonnet, "St Isaac's Church, Petrograd," is a poem that could have been written by a European, perhaps most intimately by a Russian in Petrograd. It certainly could have been written by any poet of the post-Victorian era. The only thing that retains its uniqueness here (in terms of my notion of nation language) is the tone of the poet's voice. But the form and the content are very closely connected to European models. This does not mean that it is a bad poem or that I am putting it down. I am merely saying that, aesthetically, there are no unique elements in this poem apart from the voice of the poet reciting his own poem. And I will have a musical model that will appear after you have listened to the poem, and you can tell me whether you think I am fair or not. [On tape: McKay reading his sonnet followed by the "Agnus Dei" from Fauré's Requiem.]

Bow down my soul in worship very low
And in the holy silences be lost
Bow down before the marble Man of Woe,
Bow down before the singing angel host...

The only trouble is that McKay had "trouble" with his syllables, his Clarendon syllables are very "evident," and he didn't always say "the," but sometimes said "de," which is a form in nation language. And these elisions, the sound of them, subtly erode, somewhat, the classical pentametric of the sonnet....

Our second poet is George Campbell, also of Jamaica. In 1945, Jamaica was, after a long history of struggle, granted by Britain the right to move toward self-government and independence with a new political constitution and the formation of the People's National Party. George Campbell was very moved by, and involved in, these events, and he wrote what I consider his finest poem:

On this momentous night O God help us.
With faith we now challenge our destiny.
Tonight masses of men will shape, will hope,
Will dream with us; so many years hang on
Acceptance. Why is that knocking against
The door?....... is it you
Looking for a destiny, or is it
Noise of the storm?

Now you see here a man who is becoming conscious of his nationality. But when he comes to write his greatest poem, he is still writing a Miltonic ode; or perhaps it is because he's writing his greatest poem, that it must be given that kind of nobility. And it is read by our Milton of the Caribbean, George Lamming, our great organ voice, a voice that Lamming himself, in his book The Pleasures of Exile (1960) recognizes as one of the finest in English orature. But the point is that from my perspective, George Campbell's ode, fittingly read by George Lamming, isn't giving us any unique element in terms of the Caribbean environment. But it is still a beautiful poem wonderfully read. [On tape: Lamming reading Campbell's poem....]
Must the horse rule the rider or the man
The horse.
Wind where cometh the fine technique
Of rule passing through me? My hands wet with
The soil and I knowing my world

[The reading was followed by the opening of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony] 21

The models are important here, you see. The McKay can be matched with Fauré, Campbell/Lamming with Beethoven. What follows next on the tape, however, is equally important because our local Beethoven employs a completely different model. I'm not saying his model is equal to the Fifth Symphony, but it makes a similar statement, and it gets us into what I now consider the nation or native language. Big Yout's sound poem, “Salaman Agundy,” begins with a scream (On tape: Big Yout’s “Screamin’ Target”/“Salaman Agundy” from the LP Screamin’ Target [Kingston, c.1972]), followed by the bass-based reggae cantor of downbeat on the first “syllable” of the first and second bars, followed by a syncopation on the third bar, followed by full offbeat/downbeats in the fourth:

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The other model that we have, and that we have always had in the Caribbean, is the calypso, and we are going to hear now the Mighty Sparrow singing a kaiso which came out in the early sixties. It marked, in fact, the first major change in consciousness that we all shared. And Sparrow made a criticism of all that I and Dennis have been saying about the educational system. In “Dan is the Man in the Van” he says that the education we get from England has really made us idiots because all of those things that we had to read about: Robin Hood, King Alfred and the Cakes, King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table, all of these things really haven’t given us anything but empty words. And he did it in the calypso form. And you should hear the rhyme scheme of this poem. He is rhyming on “n’s” and “l’s,” and he is creating a cluster of syllables and a counterpoint between voice and orchestra, between individual and community, within the formal notion of “call and response,” which becomes typical of our nation in the revolution.

(Solo) Acordin to de education you get when you small
You(ll) grow up wi(th) true ambition an respec for one an all
But in MY days in school they teach me like a fool
THE THINGS THEY TEACH ME A SHOULDA BEEN A BLOCK-HEADED MULE

(Chorus) Pussy has finish his work long ago
An now he restin an ting
Solomon Agundy was born on a MunDEE
DE ASS IN DE LION SKIN. . . 22

I could bring you a book, The Royal Reader, or the one referred to by Sparrow, Nelson's West Indian Reader by J. O. Cutteridge, that we had to learn at school by heart. It contained phrases like: “the cow jumped over the moon,” “ding dong bell, pussy in the well,” and so on. I mean, that was our beginning of an understanding of literature. Literature started (startled, really) literally at that level, with that kind of model. The problem of transcending this is what I am talking about now.
A more complex form by Sparrow is this next poem, "Ten to One Is Murder." Now it's interesting how this goes, because Sparrow has been accused of shooting someone on the eve of Carnival, just before Lent. (Kaiso and Carnival are two of our great folk expressions.) Now Sparrow apparently shot someone, but because of the popular nature of the calypsonian, he was able to defend himself long before he got into court by creating the scenario for the reason why he shot the man. He shot the man, he says, because for no reason at all, ten irates suddenly appear one night, surround him, and started throwing stones. The one in front was a very good pelter, and Sparrow didn't know what to do. He couldn't even find shelter. So he ran and ran and ran until finally he remembered that he had a gun (a wedger) in his pocket. He was forced to take it out and shoot pow pow pow and the crowd start to scatter. As a result he had the community on his side before the trial even started. But even if he hadn't written the song, he would have had the community on his side because here you have a folk poet; and folk poets are the spokesmen whose whole concern is to express the experiences of the people rather than the experiences of the elite. But here is "Ten to One Is Murder." Each slash phrase is an impressionistic brush stroke:

About ten in de night on de fifth of October
Ten to One is Murder!
Way down Henry Street, up by H. G. M. Walker
Ten to One is Murder!
Well, de leader of de gang was a lot like a pepperrr
Ten to One is Murder!
An every man in de gang had a white-handle razorrr
Ten to One is Murder!
They say ah push a gal from Grenada
Ten to One is Murder!...

Now that is dramatic monologue which, because of its call-and-response structure (in addition, of course, to its own intrinsic drama), is capable of extension on stage. There is in fact a tent form known as calypso drama, which calls upon Trinidadian nation forms like grand charge, picong, robber talk, and so on, which Sparrow is in fact consciously using in this calypso, and which some of the younger Trinidadian nation poets like Malik, Questel, and Christopher Laird, for example, are bringing into play in their poetry.

Man a start to sweat. Man a soakin wet
Mama so much threat: that's a night a can never forget
Ten to One is Murder!...

Next we have the poet who has been writing nation all her life and who, because of that, has been ignored until recently: the poet Louise Bennett (Miss Lou) of Jamaica. Now this is very interesting because she is middle class, and "middle class" means brown, urban, respectable, and standard English, and "the snow was falling in the canefields." It certainly doesn't mean an entrenched economic/political position, as in Europe. For instance, Miss Lou's mother's and Miss Lou's own upbringing was "rural St Mary," hence the honorable Louise's natural and rightful knowledge of the folk. (It was not until the post-independence seventies that she
was officially—as distinct from popularly—recognized and given the highest honors, including the right to the title of Honorable.) But one is supposed, as V. S. Naipaul once said at a memorable Writers Conference in Jamaica, to graduate out of these things;26 therefore there is no reason why Louise should have persisted with Anancy and Auntie Roachie and boonoonoonooos an parangles an ting, when she could have opted for “And how are you today,” the teeth and lips tight and closed around the mailed fist of a smile. But her instincts were that she should use the language of her people. The consequence was that for years (since 1936?) she performed her work in crowded village halls across the island, and until 1945 could get nothing accepted by the Gleaner, the island’s largest, oldest (estab. 1854), and often only newspaper. (Claude McKay had been published in Kingston, including in the Gleaner, in 1912, but he had had an influential white sponsor, the Englishman Walter Jeffery, compiler of Jamaican Song and Story [1907].)27 And although by 1962 she had already published nine books,28 Miss Lou does not appear among the poets in the Independent Anthology of Jamaican Poetry, but is at the back of the book, like an afterthought if not an embarrassment, under “Miscellaneous.” She could not be accepted, even at the moment of political independence, as a poet. Though all this, as I say, is dramatically altered now with the Revolution of the late sixties, her consciousness of this unfortunate situation remains where it hurts most: “I have been set apart by other creative writers a long time ago because of the language I speak and work in... From the beginning nobody recognized me as a writer.”29 I couldn’t satisfactorily reproduce in print Miss Lou’s “Street Cries” played for the lecture from her long-playing album Miss Lou’s Views.30 Here instead are two examples of her more “formal” verse from the book collection Jamaica Labrish, recordings from which, Miss Lou informs me, should be available alongside the revised edition of Labrish quite soon.31 First, “Pedestrian Crosses”:

If a cross yuh dah-cross,
Beg yuh cross mek me pass.
Dem yah crossin’ is crosses yuh know!
Koo de line! Yuh noh se
cyar an truck backa me?
Hear dah hoganeer one deh dah—blow!

Missis, walk fas’ an cross!
Pickney, cross mek me pass!
Lady, galang an mine yuh business!
Ole man mek up yuh mine
Walk between dem white line!
Wat a crosses dem crossin yah is!

... De crossin a-stop we from pass mek dem cross,
But nutten dah—stop dem from cross mek we pass,
Dem yah crossin is crosses fe true.

And “Dutty Tough” begins:

Sun a-shine but tings noh bright,
Doah pot a-bwhile, bickle noh nuff,
River flood but water scarce yaw,
Rain a-fall but dutty tuff!

And ends on this note of social commentary:

De price o' bread gan up so high
Dat we haffe agree,
Fe cut we y'eye pon bread an all
Tun dumpin refugee!

An all dem mawga smaddy weh
Dah-gwan like fat is sin,
All dem deh weh dah-fas' wid me,
Ah lef dem to dumpin!

Sun a-shine an pot a-bwhile, but
Ting noh bright, bickle noh nuff!
Rain a-fall, river dah-flood, but
Wata scarce an dutty tuff!33

Notes

1 No one, as far as I know, has yet made a study of the impact of Asiatic language structures on the contemporary languages of the Caribbean, and even the study of the African impact is still in its infancy. For development of Anglophone Caribbean culture, see Edward Kamau Brathwaite, *Contradictory Omens: Cultural Diversity and Integration in the Caribbean* (Mona, Jamaica: Savacou Publications, 1974).


3 The Maroons were Africans and escaped slaves who, after running away or participating in successful rebellions, set up autonomous societies throughout plantation America in marginal and certainly inaccessible areas outside European influence. See Richard Price, ed., *Maroon Societies: Rebel Slave Communities in the Americas* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1973). Nanny of the Maroons, an ex-Ashanti (?) Queen Mother, is regarded as one of the greatest of the Jamaica freedom fighters. See Edward Kamau Brathwaite, *Wars of Respect: Nanny, Sam Sharpe, and the Struggle for People's Liberation* (Kingston, Jamaica: Agency for Public Information, 1977).


6 Derek Walcott, “The Schooner Flight,” in *The Star-Apple Kingdom* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1979), p. 3. William Langland’s prelude to *Piers the Plowman* is often softened into “In somer season, when soft was the sonne/I shope me in shroudes as I shepe were,” which places it closer to Walcott — and to the pentameter.

7 But see the paragraphs and notes that follow.