From Beowulf to Bounty Killa: 
Or How I Ended Up Studying Slackness  

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Babylon system is the vampire  
Sucking the blood of the sufferers  
Building church and university  
Deceiving the people continually.  
(Bob Marley, “Babylon System”)

In the Jamaican popular imagination, as illustrated in that epigraph from Bob Marley’s song, “Babylon System,” generic “church and university,” conjoined in an unholy ideological alliance, are represented as duplicitous agents of a vampirish, neo-colonialist state system. Indeed, there is a long established Rastafari subversion of the original name of The University of the West Indies--University College of the West Indies. In “dread talk,” University College, abbreviated as UC/“you see,” becomes “you blind.”¹ The vision that is so grandiloquently pronounced in the University’s motto, “Lux oriens ex occidente”—“Light rising from the West”—is eclipsed in cynical, populist discourse.

But light does arise from other points of the compass. The colonial Department of English at UWI, Mona has undergone revolutionary ideological transformation into the post-colonial Department of
Literatures in English. And various creoles, let me quickly add. In fact, Caribbean Creole Linguistics has its genesis in the Department of English. The linguist Robert Le Page was, for many years, Head of the Department of English at Mona and it was he who established a solid academic base for later developments in the study of Caribbean creoles. The evolution of the Department illustrates the gradual accommodation of an essentially imperial institution to the culture-specific needs of our students and the wider society.

When I was accepted into the Department of English at Mona as a student almost four decades ago, I was a runaway from the Department of Modern Languages. I hadn’t realised when I’d applied to Modern Languages that at university level I would be studying literature rather than language, my primary love. Once I discovered my error, I immediately decided that I would rather read literature in my mother tongue than in a foreign language, all the nuances of which I could not fully apprehend. Those days I had not yet sighted the fact that my mother tongue is Jamaican. Given the options, English was the next best thing. In retrospect, I wonder if I shouldn’t have studied linguistics. But I probably wouldn’t have had as much fun over the years. So I became a maroon in the Department of English.

Fortunately, the gradual transformation of the Department from the singular English to the plural Literatures in English had already begun. There were some early attempts to contest the authority of the English literary canon and to diversify the Department’s curriculum. Maureen Warner-Lewis, one of the Department’s most distinguished graduates, originally from Trinidad and now long-resident in Jamaica, recalls that in the 1964-65 academic year, as a student at Mona, she was introduced to a few African poems in a course on Modern Poetry taught by Louis James, an expatriate lecturer who had lived in Africa. A full course on African literature was introduced at Mona in the late 1960s by Arthur Drayton, another Trinidadian.

Approximately two decades after the establishment of the Department, yet another Trinidadian, Kenneth Ramchand, introduced the first
course on West Indian literature in the 1969/70 academic year. A truly revolutionary development. Literature produced by West Indian writers about our own experience was being made available for West Indian students for the first time. Not surprisingly, there was much resistance from some of Ramchand’s backward colleagues to this development. I gather that he was asked the question, “Is there a West Indian literature?” Or words to that effect.

I was fortunate to have been a student in that inaugural class which set me on the rugged path of unconventional research that has led me to the study of Jamaican popular culture and the embrace of slackness. Since the introduction of West Indian literature, the most radical development in the curriculum in our Department was Maureen Warner-Lewis’ designing of courses on oral literature: a seeming contradiction. Our notions of literature are bound up with letters—i.e., literacy. But there is a vibrant body of verbal creativity that is produced orally which must be taken into full account. Warner-Lewis’ course “The Oral Tradition and Literature” was first taught over two decades ago in the 1985-86 academic year. With semesterisation, this single course was restructured into two: “Introduction to Orature” and “Folk Tale and Proverb.” Warner-Lewis also designed a related course “Myth and Epic” which has not yet been taught. These courses moved the curriculum from the purely scribal domain into the oral, a quantum leap.

Somewhat ironically, an epic poem like Beowulf would have been originally performed in an oral context entirely different from its scribal transmission as “high culture” literary text in a Department of English. When I studied Beowulf at Mona it was a labour of absolutely no love. Having run away from Modern Languages, I was unwilling to study poetry in a completely dead foreign language, masquerading as English. One night, after struggling for three hours with four lines of Beowulf, I conceded that I had lost the epic battle with that text. I dropped the course the very next day and picked up philosophy.
The issue of language continues to preoccupy me. I remember several years ago raising with Eddie Baugh the matter of why we weren’t experimenting with Creole as a language of literary analysis and theorising. We celebrate the emergence of the Creole voice, first as the spontaneous language of Caribbean self-expression and, much later, as the studied language of omniscient narration. But not the voice of scholarship. So in 1988 I decided to put my academic currency where my mouth is and the result was the bilingual essay, “Writing Oral History: Sistren Theatre Collective’s Lionheart Gal,” which has been much republished, most recently in the 2005 *Postcolonialisms: An Anthology of Cultural Theory and Criticism*, edited by Gaurav Desai and Supriya Nair.

I included the essay in my first book, *Noises In the Blood: Orality, Gender and the ‘Vulgar’ Body of Jamaican Popular Culture*. I asked Edward Baugh to speak at the launch of the book, and he resplendently bedecked himself in the borrowed habits of a dancehall DJ professor. Metaphorically speaking, of course. In his yet unpublished review, Eddie threw out a challenge in precise response to the bilingual essay on Lionheart Gal:

> Just about in the middle of the book, just when, at the height of the author’s dazzling wielding of English in the cause of creole, we might be tempted to ask, ‘So why didn’t she write the book in creole?’ – she switches into creole as the medium of critical analysis. (Baugh Launch of Carolyn Cooper’s *Noises in the Blood* 6)

Baugh then complicates his reading of the essay by highlighting the very paragraph that self-consciously announces the transition from English to Jamaican. This is how I had put it:

> Recognizing the dialogic nature of oral/ scribal and Jamaican/English discourse in the story/text Lionheart Gal; and seeking to narrow the social distance between the language of the stories and the language of textual analysis, I wish to
engage in an experimental Jamaican subversion of the authority of English as our exclusive voice of scholarship. My analysis of the testimonies of the women of Sistren – their verbal acts of introspective self-disclosure – will now proceed in Jamaican. (Cooper, Noises in the Blood 91)

Given the cultural politics I was elaborating in the book, Baugh quite understandably and mischievously observed the following: “So then I thought, ‘How would that go in Jamaican?’ And if it went, would it still be that, or would it have become dat? One could make quite a play of ironies here” (Baugh Launch 7). I took up the challenge to turn “that” into “dat” in an unpublished 1995 paper, entitled “Performance Criticism: The Video Version of Noises in the Blood,” given in a lecture series hosted by the Institute of Caribbean Studies at Mona, of which Joseph Pereira was then Director. Incidentally, the title of that series, “Quarrels with History,” comes from Baugh’s own foundational 1977 essay, “The West Indian Writer and His Quarrel with History.”

I am indebted to Barbara Lalla for that brilliant construct “performance criticism.” She deploys the term in an early review of Noises in the Blood that was both cautious and cautionary:

As a critique, the study (like its subject) is inclined to tek bad ting make juok, and to the present reviewer it seems that in the process certain serious issues (like the unspeakable brutality of some lyrics) are trivialised and certain trivia are unduly dignified by academic notice. But the writer also foregrounds crucial issues of discourse such as the verbal marronage of performers who challenge canonicity. The writer’s colourful integration of both coherent trends and contradictory features in the oral culture suits her style to her topic. (Dare we term this “performance criticism?”) (Lalla 137)

Somewhat ironically, one woman’s “trivia” is another’s scholarship. The very first entry on the word “trivial” in the Oxford English
Dictionary defines its meaning as “belonging to the trivium of mediaeval university studies” i.e., grammar, rhetoric and logic.

*Noises in the Blood* was my attempt to write the history of Jamaican popular culture from below. Not necessarily below the waist. My experiment with the Jamaican language as the voice of literary analysis was an affirmation of the authority of the vernacular. Of the *Lionheart Gal* essay Lalla observes, “[p]icking up her analysis in Jamaican Creole part way through the chapter, she grips attention and entertains but adds little new content to her actual argument. The Creole commentary does, of course, testify that critical discussion can take place in the vernacular, but the most basic linguistic information makes this obvious in any case”(Lalla 134). Lalla’s confidently dismissive “of course” is not, of course, supported by our actual critical practice.

With apologies to my colleagues from Mona who are quite familiar with my various experiments with Jamaican as a language of literary analysis, I now perform an excerpt from my inaugural professorial lecture, “Professing Slackness: Language, Authority and Power Within the Academy and Without,” in which I focus on the politics of translation. Apologies, too, to those of you who are not competent in Jamaican and so may have a bit of trouble understanding. I’m happy to translate afterwards. In addition, the variable orthography I deploy for Jamaican is likely to be confusing. In the original *Lionheart Gal* essay and the later “Performance Criticism” typescript, I use the phonetic Cassidy orthography. Conversely, in the typescript of the inaugural professorial lecture, I use a decidedly idiosyncratic orthography. Though I am quite competent in the specialist Cassidy orthography for Jamaican--having used it in a bilingual newspaper column for approximately five years--I did not wish to run the risk of stumbling over the text. The politics of the occasion demanded absolute fluency in Jamaican. I therefore crafted a personalised orthography that I could quite easily read aloud.

So hear how mi tun “that” into “dat.” An it never hard to dat. It did ongl look hard. A true, mi did use couple big word inna dat deh paragraph weh Eddie draw fi test mi: “dialogic,” “discourse,”
“introspective,” “subversion,” “self-disclosure,” “textual analysis.” An Eddie know seh mi ha fi go bus mi brain fi figure out how fi tun dem deh highfalutin word inna plain an not so simple Jamaican. Seet ya:

When mi read *Lionheart Gal* an see seh di high up uman dem a write fi dem story – dem no inna no taping business; an dem a write inna pure English. An mi see seh dem other one dem a talk fi dem story, inna Jamaican, mi seh, ‘Hmnn. Jackass seh di worl no level.’ An den mi see seh if mi no mind sharp, mi a go end up a pop style inna English pon di uman dem who a tell fi dem story inna Jamaican. So mi seh ‘naa.’ Mi a go try a ting. Mi a go show unu seh wi cyan use Jamaican fi talk bout all kind a big subject. A no so-so English wi ha fi use. Di Sistren dem look inna dem life an dem tell wi di whole a fi dem personal an private business. An mi a go tell unu wa me tink bout dat. An mi a go tell unu inna Jamaican. Seet ya. (Cooper, “Performance Criticism” 8)

Seet deh now: Wi accustom fi tink seh is alright fi use Jamaican fi gi joke an recite poem an act out play an tell story. But some a wi just cyaan get it inna wi head seh we can use Jamaican fi reason. Pon top a dat, some a wi doan understand seh plenty-plenty reasoning wrap up inna fi wi storytelling. So some a wi feel seh reasoning higher dan storytelling, an reasoning too high fi fi wi language. Notn no go so. A we a use language; a no language a use we. So fi wi language can do whatsoever wi want it fi do. So mek wi reason out how mi answer Eddie B question.

It come een like English a di A side a di record, an Jamaican a di dub version. An when mi seh dat, a no dis mi a dis dub, an a no dis mi a dis fi mi language. Mi ha fi mek dat clear-clear. Cau plenty people feel seh Jamaican a so-so drum an bass. It naa no lyrics; it naa no melody; it naa seh notn. A no dat me a seh. Cau yu done know seh drum an bass have nuff power an authority. Is a nex language. Yu all have artist specialise inna pure drum an bass. Dem no business wid no A side. Daddy U Roy big up im sound system an seh “dis station rule di nation
wid version.” An mi a add on pon dat an seh “fi wi language rule di nation wid dub version.”

So a so me see di switching over from English to Jamaican. A side/B side. But a no so English dweet. Dem use a next word picture: Tek something from me gi you. Or carry smaddy or sinting from ya so to deh so. Dat a di root a di meaning a di two English word “transfer” an “nation wid dub version.” Den yu see dem deh word “translate” an “transfer;” a no no real-real English word, yu know. A borrows. From Latin. Translatus. Same ting Miss Lou seh: “...dem shoulda call English Language corruption of Norman French an Latin an all dem tarra language what dem seh dat English is derived from” (Bennett 1).

So di English word translate a corruption a di Latin word translatus. An di latus a di part a di verb transfer weh show seh di action done-done. Some a di Latin word dem change up-change up dem shape fi show di meaning a di different-different part a speech. Transferre: fi transfer; translatus: transfer done. Anyhow, to cut a long story short, the Latin word transferre, weh di English word transfer come from, it mek up outa two word: trans mean across and ferre mean fi carry. Like di ferryboat weh lickle most stop carry passenger from Kingston to Port Royal.

But hear dis: English so walk an borrow-borrow other people word, dem all borrow when dem no got no need fi borrow. For all di “ferry” inna “ferry boat,” a good-good long-time English word weh mean di said same ting like di ferre inna Latin. Transferre. But just like how some a wi feel seh English higher dan Jamaican, a di said same way plenty a di tapanaaris dem inna England did feel seh Latin an French did higher dan fi dem owna language. Member 1066? Di Norman people dem beat down di English people dem, mek dem feel seh fi dem owna language no good fi notn. An a it mek di English people dem borrow-borrow so much farin word a gi people problem fi learn dem corrupt language.

So hear how mi build up fi mi drum an bass version outa mi owna A side argument bout Sistren Lionheart Gal. Or if you rather, hear how mi
carry over di meaning from English pon di Jamaican ferry. Di first part a di sentence alone woulda did sink di boat: “Recognizing the dialogic nature of oral/scribal and Jamaican/English discourse in the story/text Lionheart Gal. . . .” So mi stop braps and start from scratch. “Dialogic” Latin again. An di root a disya Latin word, “dialogic,” a Greek. Corruption pon top a corruption. Anyhow, all “dialogic” mean, a couple people a talk. So wa mi do, fi start off mi answer to Eddie B question, a fi show unu di different-different class a people a gi dem story inna Lion Heart Gal; an mi point finger pon who a talk, who a write, who a write English and who a talk Jamaican, an a so mi carry over di meaning a di word “dialogic.”

Den di part bout “seeking to narrow the social distance between the language of the stories and the language of textual analysis.” Mi use one proverb fi catch “social distance”—“Jakaas se di worl no levl.” Story done. An den mi start talk to miself. “Dialogic” again; but no “mad, sick, head no good,” as di yout dem Predator an Elephant Man seh. Naa. A consider mi a consider. Ole time people seh “when man drunk im walk an stagger; when uman drunk she sidown an consider.” Mi naa seh di big word dem drunk mi; but mi had was to sidown an consider. Mi seh: “Hmnn.” And dat deh “hmnn” a when mi stop an ask miself a wa mi a do when mi a write bout people an naa use fi dem (an fi mi) language fi reason bout dem an mi. An a so mi come up wid di next part a di argument bout “the language of the stories and the language of textual analysis.” A so mi put it: “An den mi si se, if mi no main shaap, mi a go en op a pap stail ina Ingglish pon di uman dem uu a tel fi dem stuori ina Jamiekan.”

Now, when mi seh “pap stail” mi mean “show off.” But mi also a talk bout how yu dress up wa yu a seh. Di style a yu language. Mi stepmother she know weh mi mean an mi like how she put it. She seh “English come een like dress up clothes and patwa a yard clothes.” So weh mi do, mi tek fi mi yard clothes turn fashion an dress up mi language inna prettyPRETTY bashment stylee fi go out a street an up a university. An a dat mi mean when mi seh “naa.” Nuff politics inna dat deh “naa.” A dat Marcus Garvey mean when im seh wi fi
emancipate wiself from mental slavery. Nobody naa dweet fi wi. A wi ha fi dweet. An wi no fi fraud fi test wiself an show off di power a wi language an wi culture.


Fi di lecture tideh, mi gi unu brawta. A next version: plain English. Seet ya:

It’s obvious that there’s a tension in Lionheart Gal between written and oral narrative, between English and Jamaican. I want to narrow the gap between the language of the stories and the bookish language of analysis. So I’m going to do a subversive experiment and show that we don’t have to use only English to do academic work. I’m now going to analyse the testimonies of the women of Sistren – what they reveal about themselves – and I’m going to do it in Jamaican.

A di said same meaning a di “academic” version; but you no ha fi a study literature a University fi understand i.
Den when me a talk bout language, authority an power pon campus an outa road, one a di thing me a deal wid a how we a go link up wid people mek dem understand fi true di work weh wi a do ya so. Nobody much naa read di academic paper dem weh wi a write an a publish inna fi wi lickle journal dem. So wi ha fi use radio an tv an newspaper fi spread di word. An wi ha fi use language weh people understand. It no mek no sense we a write inna newspaper an a use big word an long sentence, weh di subject a malice di verb, an yu ha fi a read di sentence over an over fi ketch di meaning. Dat a pure foolishness.


All like di language problem inna di school dem. Wa a go happen to dem pikni a go primary school dis ya year whofa teacher a go try teach dem inna English, one language weh di pikni dem no understand? An some a di teacher dem no know to dat. Me know seh some a unu a go seh mi a defend slackness. An a no man an uman story mi a talk bout. Hmnn. Me know seh we naa go “unlock the potential of the Caribbean region” so til we learn fi respect di pikni dem heart language, dem yard language, fi dem owna language an teach dem inna Jamaican fi di fós, mek dem learn fi read an write an tek een all a di odder subject dem.
An den wi teach di pikni dem English. One next language, one next subject weh dem ha fi learn. Look how long di language specialist dem a show wi seh Jamaican a no bad English. A one next, good-good language.


An mi know some a unu a go vex wid me now. But some time mi ha fi wonder if wi waan everybody inna Jamaica fi learn English fi true. Becau if all a di pikni dem can flex--English when it suit dem, or Jamaican--the one an few a wi now, weh know English good, naa go able fi go have nothing over dem. We kyaan show off pon dem inna wi nice-nice English. Dem wi able fi brandish English to. An me know seh a through some a wi feel seh a English a gi wi power over certain people, a it mek wi no waan put no value pon di Jamaican language. Becau everybody done know it already, an wi naa go have no big stick fi lick people inna dem head seh dem a eedyat becau dem naa no language.

So that was the performance criticism. At Mona, we have been broadening the curriculum from purely literary studies, narrowly
defined, into cultural studies. A further development in the field of orature is the course on “Reggae Poetry” which I designed and which the Department offered for the first time in the 2005-2006 academic year. This course builds on the pioneering scholarship of Mervyn Morris who included the work of Louise Bennett and the dub poets in his West Indian poetry course. It is also indebted to Gordon Rohlehr’s long-sustained academic work on calypso.

I conceive the transformation of our curriculum at Mona and my own ideological trajectory as a movement from Beowulf, which I invoke here as a metonym for the canonical “EngIish” literary curriculum, to Bounty Killa, one of the not at all trivial dancehall poets whose work engages me. When Bounty chants “Mama she a sufferah/ Papa im a sufferah/ Can’t mek mi children grow up turn sufferah,” he is challenging the authority of “church and university” in exactly the same way that the now canonised Bob Marley did. But my use of the prepositions “from” and “to” is deliberately ambiguous, denoting not so much a limiting politics of exclusion---an absolute rejection of Beowulf for Bounty Killa---but a permissive praxis that contests the very notion of “the canon” and inclusively redefines the appropriate subjects of literary scholarship. Story done. Fi now.

ENDNOTES


WORKS CITED


