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# RaY

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‘Many people still do not accept the fact that for us there are many things which are best said in the language of the ‘common man’’ (Louise Bennett (1968) in Markham, 1989: 49)

‘Any speech is as interesting as the people who speak it... it has a character all its own of which none but the least imaginative can remain unaware. (Frederic Cassidy, 1961)

‘The language, if mastered, is capable of expressing the full experience of its users which is a very deep one’ (David Dabydeen, 1984: 15)

‘We have to keep claiming and reclaiming our voice and language. Our voices with their own wisdom have their own place. It is our duty to bring the vibrancy, wisdom and pleasure of our culture sounds into the mainstream.’ (James Berry in Dawes, 2001: 5)

When, in his 1984 ‘electronic lecture’ *History of the Voice*, Kamau Brathwaite famously declared: ‘It is *nation language* in the Caribbean that, in fact, largely ignores the pentameter...English it may be in terms of some of its lexical features. But in its contours, its rhythm and timbre, its sound explosions, it is not English’ (1984: 13) he outlined what will be the three main concerns of this chapter: the key role played by language experimentation and the use of ‘vernacular voices’ in Caribbean/Black British and British Asian writing, the relationship of such writing to a western canonical model of poetry (a model dominated, formally, by the iambic pentameter and, ideologically, by monologic concepts of Englishness) and the centrality of orality and/or a performance aesthetic to many of these poets. The moment in which Brathwaite’s manifesto was published was a significant one, reflecting a recent upsurge in vernacular, ‘Nation language’ writing within the Caribbean and Britain in the 1970s and early 1980s. However, as his lecture (originally given in 1979) makes clear, he was intent on excavating a much longer history in which Nation language (also known as creoles) emerged from the historical contact between African slaves and European ‘conquering peoples’ (7) in the plantation contact zones of the Caribbean. Brathwaite explains how Africans of different tribal affiliations and language communities were deliberately split up by slave owners in order to minimise the potential for slave insurrection on the plantations. As such, they were effectively pushed underground as forbidden, ‘submerged’ languages (1984: 7). In contact with European languages, they developed naturally over time to become stable, fully functioning languages with their own native speakers, expanded linguistic forms and grammars and unrestricted contexts of use.

Historically, both popular and scholarly accounts of vernacular forms in the Caribbean have tended to be negative or derogatory. Many of the first accounts of vernacular voices come from early European

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travellers’ accounts of visits to the Caribbean. As Peter Muhlhausler has observed: ‘many of [these] early accounts of pidgins and creoles come from the pen of gentlemen travellers and administrators whose attention they had attracted because they appealed to them as caricatures of the civilized European tongues.’ Vernacular voices were viewed ‘at the lowest levels’ as entertaining curiosities, ‘...an after dinner joke or...’tropicism’ (Muhlhausler, 1986: 25). In the (mainly white-authored) sources which have survived a fragile archive, we see the radical unfamiliarity of new world vernacular forms to many western ears and a fundamental lack of understanding of their linguistic origins. In both America and the Caribbean at this time, black vernacular forms were repeatedly accorded a child-like, simplified, comic status. Rather than being regarded as language systems in

their own right, a status accorded to Caribbean creoles by modern linguists<sup>ii</sup> they were viewed as debased or degenerate versions of Standard English: ‘Broken English’<sup>iii</sup>.

There are also many examples of white manipulations of black vernacular voices in published and written accounts in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (including translation, collection and anthologisation of folk texts such as Walter Jekyll’s (1907)). From the very start, these texts had a transatlantic currency and circulation: rather than being discretely contained within national borders, ideas about new world vernaculars, as well as their speakers and texts, circulated in a transnational flow (as they did in relation to the Abolitionist cause in Britain and the US). Some of these manipulations of black vernacular voices were well-meaning but misguided attempts to bring such voices to a wider audience, apparently guided by the editorial necessities/ exigencies of tempering some of the extremes of these language forms for white audiences. Others were quite deliberate appropriations of black vernaculars, exaggerated for both parodic effects and for wider political uses, whether sympathetic to the actual speakers or not. The net result was the same: to underscore the belief that black vernacular forms were *inherently* inferior to Standard English and reflected the moral, cultural, intellectual and technological inferiority of their speakers. In nineteenth century India too, as Javed Maheed has shown, British Indologists and administrators’ choice of English as a ‘unifying framework’ and their promotion of Roman script (itself closely allied to a print rather than oral or manuscript culture) in the transliteration of ‘vernacular’ Indian languages, ensured that Roman script became a ‘culturally charged symbol’ of modernity, justified in terms of economic efficiency and privileged within a wider colonial epistemology (2013:100, 95). It is against such powerful and pervasive attitudes that the ‘vernacular voices’ of speakers and writers have had to fight. Indeed, the first Caribbean writers to make use of vernacular forms in their poetry<sup>iv</sup> all did so against a barrage of negative popular attitudes to the use - and especially *literary* use – of the vernacular.

The history of Caribbean vernacular voices is one of repeated denigration and disavowal: firstly by external observers, secondly by the colonial masters and thirdly through the agency of a powerful colonial educational apparatus. Everywhere the British went they implemented colonial systems of government, law and education, all of which publicly upheld the primacy of a standardized form of English. Colonial subjects and speakers were themselves encouraged to regard vernacular forms as contemptible and inferior (rather than merely different) to Standard English. As Jamaican poet Louise Bennett recalls, they were considered ‘not respectable’, suitable for the yard or the street perhaps, but not for the classroom, the court or the government building. In turn, there was ‘a social stigma attached to the kind of person who used dialect habitually.’ (Bennett, 1968: 1-2) Indeed, Bennett famously recalls an audience member shouting out at one of her early Jamaican performances: ‘Is dat yuh modder sen yuh a school fa?’ (Bennett, 1982: xii-xiii) As late as 1990, Merle Hodge commented: ‘We speak creole, we need creole, we cannot function without creole, for our deepest thought processes are bound up in the structure of creole, but we hold creole in contempt’ (Hodge, 1990: 204). In 1999 Mervyn Morris summed it up thus: ‘Linguistics tries to teach us equal respect for Creole and Standard English... [but] the historical legacy lingers. Facility in Standard English – the language of the masters, originally – confers a measure of social status’ (Morris, 1999: 7). This history of high status for Standard English and low status for vernacular voices has had tumultuous consequences for the emerging *literary* use of creoles. As Brathwaite’s coinage of the affirmative term ‘Nation language’ suggests, such vernacular forms, from their very earliest uses, gained the status of a subversive, frequently politically charged ‘guerrilla’ language, a vital source of anti-colonial cultural resistance and, also for many, a source of Caribbean authenticity.

This history notwithstanding – indeed, perhaps in part because of it - the use of non-standard language forms by Caribbean, Black British and Asian British writers in this and the last century has

been one of the most important revolutions in contemporary British poetry. Black British poetry is the province of experimenting with voice and recording rhythms beyond the iambic pentameter. Not only in performance poetry and through the spoken word, but also on the page, Black British poetry constitutes and preserves a sound archive of distinct linguistic varieties. In *Slave Song* (1984) and *Coolie Odyssey* (1988), David Dabydeen employs a form of Guyanese Creole in order to linguistically render and thus commemorate the experience of slaves and indentured labourers, respectively, with the earlier collection providing annotated translations into Standard English. James Berry, Louise Bennett, and Valerie Bloom adapt Jamaican creole to celebrate Jamaican folk culture and at times to represent and record experiences and linguistic interactions in the postcolonial metropolis. Grace Nichols and John Agard use modified forms of Guyanese Creole, with Nichols frequently constructing gendered voices whilst Agard often celebrates linguistic playfulness. Indeed, the collective use of creole by many contemporary Black British poets has proven it to be a versatile medium, rich in creative potential. Their work has also enabled a number of stereotypes surrounding the use of Nation language to be broken down: firstly that it is employed primarily for comic effect; secondly that it is used merely to effect ‘authenticity’ or verisimilitude<sup>v</sup> and thirdly, that it is limited to a ‘syntax of rebellion’ (Saroukhani in this volume), the medium of politicized ‘protest’ poetry alone – often, it is argued - of the most mediocre, lacklustre kind. The latter stereotype has particularly beleaguered the critical reception of dub poetry since its beginnings in 1970s Jamaica. On the contrary, as this chapter demonstrates, creole has proven a medium versatile enough to encompass a range of poetic effects: robust, erotic, dramatic, satirical, comic, lyrical and elegiac. That vernacular voices have been central to the articulation of a ‘demotic poetics accessible to the community from which [such poetry] speaks’ (Saroukhanai in this volume) is arguably something to celebrate but this factor has also sometimes been harnessed in critiques which suggest that the use of the vernacular limits audience.

Part of the problem is that despite the emergence of well-respected dictionaries of Caribbean English from the 1960s onwards (Le Page 1960, Cassidy 1961, Bailey 1966, Cassidy. & Le Page 1967) there is still not a uniform orthography for transcribing creoles into written form. Mervyn Morris has reflected on the editorial misunderstandings which a lack of standard orthography can give rise to when transcribing primarily oral performance poems into print (Smith, 1986: 10). Other writers have found their own ways of ‘modifying the dialect’ and transferring their own vernacular voices into print. (See Morris 1999: 45-52) Consequently, all literary use of creole is necessarily the use of an adapted form or idiom which can vary greatly from writer to writer. This is not necessarily a disadvantage to the writer wanting to use creole in his or her work. Indeed, David Dabydeen has argued that:

In the brokenness of language resides...the capacity to be experimental with a language; it is almost like Shakespearean English. You can make up words, play with words and you can rhyme in much more adventurous ways than you can in Standard English. The brokenness has a capacity to convey a greater sense of tragedy and pain, of energy, but you can also reconstruct it in your own way, you can play with the language with a greater degree of freedom. (1989: 76)

In *Nations of Nothing But Poetry* (2010) Matthew Hart proposes a potentially useful category of ‘synthetic vernacular’ based partly on Scottish poet, Hugh MacDiarmid’s use in the 1920s of what he called ‘synthetic Scots’- a kind of ‘invented literary dialect’ that combined actual Scots and ‘regional expressions’ as well as ‘contemporary idioms’ in a constructed amalgam. (xi) Hart is fascinated by the modernist use of ‘synthetic vernaculars’ by poets including early Brathwaite and shows how the ‘double-voiced’ trope of the ‘synthetic vernacular’ ‘troubles the border between...difference and universality...vernacular self-ownership and the wilful appropriation of language that will forever be

foreign.” (7) For Hart, as for the present argument, “conversations about vernacular language are inseparable from questions of political sovereignty and social inequality.” (xiii)

An alternative theoretical model, derived from creole linguistics, and used to explain variation in individual speakers’ (or writers’) uses of creole within a given speech community is also useful here. The (post) creole continuum plots different forms within a single creole language (e.g. Jamaican creole) from the broadest (*basilectal*) varieties at one end of the spectrum, through *mesolectal* varieties in the middle, to those which most closely resemble Standard English at the other end (*acrolectal* varieties). The type and extent of creole spoken by an individual speaker within a given language community, depends on a number of factors including the speaker’s geographical location, educational background and social status. Most speakers exhibit a linguistic competence, or ability to speak a range of creole along a section of this ‘creole continuum’. Crucially, this model is not fixed but dynamic, allowing for linguistic change and development at both ends of the continuum. So, for example Standard English can be affected by creole forms and vice versa. Indeed, in a British diasporan context, the vernacular resource of Nation language is continuing to change and develop, as speakers and writers continue to experiment with the resources of Caribbean creoles and Standard English. The borders between linguistic varieties are porous rather than absolute or static, as the emergence and marked growth of what sociolinguist, Mark Sebba has termed ‘London Jamaican’ (1997, 2013) indicates and ‘London Jamaican’ is an important example of this fluidity and change at the edge of the post-creole continuum. In this chapter I suggest that the (post) creole continuum can also be used as a model for a wider, equally mobile and fluid continuum of use as black British writers draw from those vernacular resources available to them in the linguistic, formal and aesthetic choices they make in their poetry.

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Saroukhani argues in this volume that dub and black British protest poetry’s ‘powerful multimodality’, has always allowed creative cross-fertilization of forms (such as bhangra, rap and dancehall) and ‘cross-cultural solidarities’ (Saroukhani CROSSREF). Asian British writers, such as Daljit Nagra, creatively take liberties with English in different ways than the dub poets but Nagra’s poetry is ‘promiscuously porous’ (De Caires Narain CROSS REF) enough to embrace dub rhythms in certain poems. Rather than drawing on established Creole languages, and blending them with Standard English as many black British poets do, Nagra’s heteroglot poems frequently emulate ‘Punglish’, the English of migrants whose first language is Punjabi. Whilst it is the language prestige of London Jamaican that has been significantly enhanced since the 1990s, a fact not only confirmed by linguistic research (Sebba 1993, 2013) but also by its *transethnic* uses both in the streets and on the page, Nagra’s substantial success and the mainstream attention he receives also indicate the clout of vernacular voices in poetry. Vernacular voices have the potential to connect with oral traditions and cultural memories, to record linguistic varieties, and to endow ‘street cred’ to authors and texts. In this chapter, these double-voiced poetic languages are also read as signs of resistance against residual monologic ideologies of Englishness.

Sebba has recently argued: ‘From the early days of ‘London Jamaican’ through to recent remarks by the historian David Starkey that rioters in English cities were communicating in ‘wholly false... Jamaican patois’, authenticity and ownership have been problematic for both linguists and users of Creole in Britain.’ He continues:

Second-generation speakers of Creole in London in the 1980s were conscious that they could not pass for natives when in the Caribbean, but could nevertheless claim to be authentic ‘Black British’ by virtue of commanding both the local British vernacular and a local version of Jamaican Creole (Sebba 1993). By the end of the century, claims of authenticity linked to ethnic identity had been undermined by the emergence of a non-ethnically specific youth variety incorporating Creole grammatical and phonological features, as parodied by the

fictitious character Ali G (Sebba 2003, 2007), sometimes called ‘Jafaican’ by the media. In a study of ethnically diverse young people in Manchester, Dray and Sebba (2011) were able to conclude that ‘authenticity’ was indexed by involvement in particular practices involving specific speech styles, some of which were Caribbean or partly Caribbean in origin; at the same time, there was little or no use of the local Creole which had been prevalent in the 1990s and earlier, as multi-ethnic vernaculars have come to predominate among the youth (Cheshire et al. 2011)’. (Abstract to Sebba, 2013)

His conclusions were that ‘Creole’ manifests itself less and less as a linguistic system and more and more as an additional linguistic resource in a complex semiotic system’, that is, ‘‘authenticity’ is achieved through practices rather than inherited ethnicity or native-like use of a specific variety.’ (Abstract to Sebba, 2013)

From its very beginnings, Nation language has been closely associated with orality and the spoken voice. In literature, its use has often been coupled with a holistic, communal, kinetic context of performance in which the speaker’s location, voice, body and interactions with his/her audience are all of central importance. As Walter Ong (1987) and Ruth Finnegan (1970, 1992) have shown, understanding oral expressive forms demands a critical awareness of an oral mindset or ‘psychodynamics of orality’. Orality is not merely the absence of literacy or an abstract aesthetic choice on the part of the writer (poetry for the ‘stage’ rather than the ‘page’). In the case of Black British and Asian British poetry it is useful to take account of an oraliterary continuum of literary practices in which both orality and writing, audio and print text feature. Importantly this is not a simple binary: not all performance poems use vernacular voices or vice versa. Contemporary Black British poets such as Agard and Nichols draw inspiration from African and Caribbean oral traditions in their work (Nichols in Dawes, 2001:140). This privileging of orality and the sounded voice is also important in contemporary Britain, where spoken word performance is currently enjoying something of a renaissance. It thus makes sense to speak not only of a textual archive but of a *sound archive*

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also.

The first Black British poets to experiment with creole in Britain were undoubtedly inspired by the pioneering ‘vernacular voice’ of Louise Bennett. A prolific writer and performer, Bennett started performing her Nation language poems, short stories and monologues in 1936, broadcasting on radio and publishing books and regular newspaper columns from the 1940s onwards. Fellow Jamaican poet, James Berry recalls:

The ‘people’s language’ was first opened up by Louise Bennett. She dared to speak Creole – as the majority of people spoke - on the radio in the 1940s, and absolutely shook the whole island. She shook us into a new awareness of our Caribbean consciousness.  
(Hoyles & Hoyles, 2002: 204)

Although Bennett uses the English quatrain form, the rhythms and cadence of her poems are rarely contained by iambic pentameter and, at best, she makes the form absolutely her own. For many years she faced opposition and critical censure for what was dismissively called ‘doing dialect’. (See Morris, 1967) She originally wrote in Standard English but, after a revelatory moment in a tramcar, she decided to switch to the vernacular voices heard all around her on a daily basis.

In ‘Bans a Killing’ her persona addresses ‘Mas Charlie’, a man who wants to ‘kill’ all dialects in favour of Standard English. Bennett draws parallels between the Jamaican ‘dialect’ which she uses in her poetry, the origins of the English language as a vernacular of Latin and the long existence of regional dialects in English:

So yuh a de man me hear bout!  
Ah yuh dem seh dah teck  
Whole heap oa English oat she dat  
Yuh gwine kill dialect!

Meck me get it straight, mas Charlie,  
For me no quote understand-  
Yuh gwine kill all English dialect  
Or jus Jamaica one?

Ef you dah equal up wid English  
Language, den wha meck  
Yuh gwine go feel inferior when  
It come to dialec?

...Dah language weh yuh proud a,  
Weh yuh honour an respect –  
Po Mas Charlie, yuh no know she  
Dat it spring from dialect!

Dat dem start fi try tun language  
From de fourteenth century –  
Five hundred years gawn an dem got  
More dialect dan we!

(Bennett, 1982: 4-5)

Bennett's inspiration is very clear in the poetry of James Berry, who came to Britain in 1948. Like Bennett (and McKay and Marson before her), Berry makes extensive use of the 'letter home' creole voice portrait, creating in the process some of his finest poems, notably the 1982 collection *Lucy's Letters and Loving*. Berry edited two key early anthologies of Black British poetry: *Bluefoot Traveller* (1978) and *News for Babylon* (1984) in which a new generation of vernacular voices are recorded. However it is his own poetry with its crafted use of Nation language and Standard English, its experimentation with different poetic forms (the haiku, the Jamaican proverb, the love lyric, the letter home and creole monologue) which has done most to challenge stereotypical notions that Black British poetry is overwhelmingly public rather than personal, a voice only of protest and rage rather than of reflective lyricism. As Berry's poetry shows, Nation language is particularly suited to lyrical uses as part of a directly personal and intense style. Unlike Standard English it is an informal and emotive language strongly associated with intimacy and group solidarity amongst speakers rather than distance or divisiveness. It facilitates a refreshing directness in place of the abstraction or sophistication of Standard English; sometimes, as David Dabydeen puts it 'the English fails where the creole succeeds' (1984: 14). In poems such as 'Ol Style Freedom' (Berry, 1995: 49) and 'Words of a Jamaican Laas Moment Them' (Berry 1995: 72) Berry makes lyrical use of creole as the quiet, almost reverential medium of intimacy between speakers:

Mek all the Island wash –  
wash away the mess of my shortcomings –  
all the brok-up things I did start.  
Mi doings did fall short too much.  
Mi ways did hurt mi wife too oftn. (1995: 72)

Jamaican-born, Valerie Bloom was one of the young poets anthologised in Berry's *News for Babylon*. Her first collection *Touch Mi! Tell Mi!* (1983) was heralded by Linton Kwesi Johnson as an 'important and welcome' collection of 'oral poetry' (Bloom, 1983: 9). In it, like Berry and Bennett, before her, Bloom uses an adapted Jamaican creole to celebrate Jamaican folk culture and at times to represent and record experiences and linguistic interactions in the postcolonial metropolis. In 'Language Barrier' Bloom addresses the issue of Nation language directly, as her persona takes on the querulous observations of her 'foreign frien', Hugh, and reveals her delight in the 'sweet' potentialities of 'Jamaica language':

Jamaica language sweet yuh know bwoy,  
An yuh know mi nebba notice I',  
Till tarra day one foreign frien  
Come spen some time wid mi.

An den im call mi attention to  
Some tings im she soun queer,  
Like de way wi always sey 'koo yah'  
When wi rally mean, 'look here.'...

Mi tell Hugh nuffe teck awn soh'  
Nuffe badda eun wi dung,  
Is not dat wi don' like English'  
But wi lub wi modda tongue. (1983:41-3)

Now, this open expression of Nation language as 'wi modder tongue' is a new and important one, the logical corollary of Brathwaite's contemporaneous message in *History of the Voice*. Though Bloom uses the English quatrain form and writes about similar topics to Bennett, she belongs to a later generation of poets who were able to use vernacular voices more explicitly and more confidently than ever before.

However, not all Black British poets use vernacular voices in the same way. In his first collection, *Slave Song* (1984) David Dabydeen, takes as his starting point the historical perception of the 'vulgarity' (1984: 13) of creole languages as 'broken English', 'degenerate' linguistic forms which were thought to reflect the alleged depravity, uncivilized or childlike status of their speakers. *Slave Song* consists of a series of Guyanese creole voice portraits each accompanied by a Standard English translation and the poet's own critical commentary. Dabydeen's observation in his introduction that 'it is surprising...that very little Creole poetry exists' (Dabydeen 1984: 15) given 'the potentiality for literature is very great indeed...' (15) has more than a touch of the Brathwaitian manifesto about it. Indeed, Dabydeen later reflected: 'People like Brathwaite have been arguing for years that Creole is a different language, sufficiently different from English to be considered its own language. So therefore the logic would be to provide a translation, which is what I did' (1989: 75). Although it was not the first collection to use vernacular voice portraits, *Slave Song* was important in ushering in a new self-consciousness about the literary uses of creole, in opening up debates about its relation to Standard English and an English canon, and demonstrating how vernacular voices could be used for varied poetic effect.

Indeed, the poems in *Slave Song*, like those of Bennett or Berry, are more than Browningsque voice-portraits transferred to a Caribbean context. They are, as the title suggests, first and foremost songs: songs of resistance. Dabydeen writes in his introduction of the 'brokenness' of creole as a 'naturally tragic language...no doubt reflecting the brokenness and suffering of its original users -- African slaves and East Indian indentured labourers' (1984: 13). However, this concept of a doubled brokenness is resisted in practice by the dominant and defiant voices of the poems themselves: voices



which refuse to be broken (e.g. 'Slave Song'), which are not beaten or reduced to despair and which are markedly fluent rather than faltering. Read collectively, the intensely imagined experiences of the individual speakers form a powerful examination of what Wilson Harris terms the 'pornography of Empire', an exploration of the brutalities enacted on the slave and the various means of resistance (linguistic, cultural and sexual) open to him or her. The collection mediates between these experiences and speaks with a thoroughly creolized as well as creole voice.

Dabydeen's adaptation of Guyanese creole is not a naturalistic or even necessarily a representative one. His literary reconstruction of particular 'vernacular voices', drawn in part from childhood memories and personal experience, is deliberately artificial, an artful and self-conscious process. In his introduction Dabydeen writes of a 'criss-cross of illusions' (1984: 9) between England and Guyana, mythically figured as 'El Dorado' and this notion of illusion as public mythology is neatly mirrored by Dabydeen's admission that the poems are, in part 'an imaginative rendition...a private fantasy' (1984: 10). *Slave Song's* 'vernacular voices' *do* seem to confer a certain 'authenticity', even as we acknowledge their artifice. Dabydeen effectively returns to his creole-speakers a subject position which was historically denied to their historical counterparts and these are powerful voices.

However, in a collection so full of illusion and fantasy, perhaps the greatest irony is that such speakers and their vernacular voices are also illusory, fantastical. Arguably, they are ultimately contained, challenged, and even silenced, by the translations and notes in Standard English. Indeed, we might read such Standard English translations as the ironic legacy of a whole colonial history of vernacular voices being re-presented and mediated through the colonizer and, in the process, attenuated or obfuscated. Dabydeen has spoken of a painful 'unsheathing of the tongue' in preparation for a 'language uncomfortably raw' (1984: 14), yet paradoxically the energy and radicalism of the poems themselves, which are powerfully disruptive of linguistic hegemonies and canonical modes, is 'smothered' by the Standard English translations and the Eurocentric critical apparatus which encases them. It is as if 'the reader's need to consult the scholarly appendages to the poems was essentially in order to distance and detoxify the emotional effects of their message' (McWatt, 1989: 87). The notes and translations, are in their own way, as insistent as the creole voices of *Slave Song* and, as competing voices, they act as a kind of metacommentary on the asymmetries of power involved in postcolonial textuality. McWatt makes a similar point when he observes how *Slave Song's* incorporation of its own critical apparatus effectively anticipates the hermeneutic requirements of a metropolitan audience (as the images of the conspicuous consumption of 'peasant' literature by Oxbridge diners at the end of the poem '*Coolie Odyssey*' will make even more explicit): '*Slave Song* [draws] attention to interesting problems of poetic form and voice, of the ways in which the projected audience of the poem modified the craft itself, so that the poet of ex-colonial societies bears the multiple burden of messenger, translator, apologist, explicator' (McWatt, 1989: 87). Alternatively it could be argued that the notes and translations are a deliberate and integral part of the text rather than a subtext incorporated under any such 'burden' or obligation. Ultimately, Dabydeen assumes different roles and discursive modes: historian, polemicist, poet and critic among them, quite deliberately, in order to subvert conventional generic boundaries and to foreground the porous relationship between historical documentation and imaginative reconstruction, primary voices and scholarly apparatus, orality and literacy, vernacular voices and standard language translation.

The title poem to Dabydeen's second collection, *Coolie Odyssey* (1988) is even more explicit in its articulation of the politics of vernacular language. With a nod to the preoccupation with 'dialect' and 'the folk' in both a Caribbean and a British context, black British Nation language poets and more canonical contemporary voices who use regional dialects in their work (Seamus Heaney, Tony Harrison, Tom Leonard, Basil Bunting), the poem opens:

Now that peasantry is in vogue,  
Poetry bubbles from peat bogs,

People strain for the old folk's fatal gobs  
Coughed up in grates North or North east  
'Tween bouts o' living dialect,  
It should be time to hymn your own wreck.  
Your house the source of ancient song (1988: 9)

The 'you/r' of this poem is 'Ma', Dabydeen's grandmother and the poem is in part an elegy to her. The poetic persona muses on the deep contrast between the life of an uneducated Indo-Caribbean peasant and his own privileged life in Britain and considers how best to memorialize his Guyanese grandmother. Having missed her funeral, he ends:

We mark your memory in songs  
Fleshed in the emptiness of folk,  
Poems that scrape bowl and bone  
In English basements far from home,  
Or confess the lust of beasts  
In rare conceits  
To congregations of the educated  
Sipping wine, attentive between courses- (1988: 13)

These final knowing - but also terribly poignant lines – reveal the personal and communal cost of consuming 'the folk' and their 'vernacular voices' in this way, as the poet reflects on the tension between his subject and his art, the Guyanese peasant life of his grandmother and the performance of his poems to an educated, mannered, sophisticated elite in Britain. Despite, the persona's skill in constructing the 'rare conceits' of his poetry, he is also aware that not far beneath the surface reside some enduring colonial stereotypes (also explored in *Slave Song*): the 'bowl and bone' and 'lusts of beasts'. As Jamaica Kincaid might say 'there is a world of something in this' and Dabydeen captures it perfectly.

Not all poems using 'vernacular voices' absolutely necessitate a performative mode even if they do continue to privilege the speaking voice. A good example is John Agard, known for his lively, kinetic performances but whose poems work well also in print form. 'Palm Tree King' from Agard's 1983 collection, *Mangoes and Bullets* playfully utilises a vernacular idiom for serio-comic effect. By means of a bold dialogue with an imagined interlocutor (a technique much used by Bennett and also by Bloom), the speaker of this poem mobilises a series of apparently harmless stereotypes of the West Indian, the focus of which is the persona of the 'Palm Tree King'. The poem effectively constructs a reductive 'tourist-eye view' of the Caribbean reminiscent of the satirical opening to Jamaica Kincaid's *A Small Place* (1988). Both texts use a complex surface and structural irony but whilst Kincaid uses Standard English to make her coruscating critique of the globalised, neo-colonial construction of the Caribbean as holiday destination, Agard playfully uses a vernacular voice to mock the process of stereotyping from within. Indeed, the poem is structured around the tension between the simplicity and crudeness of the received stereotypes (the Palm Tree King, and by extension the Caribbean, is all about sun, sea, sex, beaches, bananas, limbo dancing and cricket) and the verbal dexterity of the speaker, in what becomes an increasingly complex, double-voiced mythologization of self and place. At first the Palm Tree King is allowed to encode his own mythology of existence - according to the stereotypes imposed on him by 'certain people in England'. In private, however, he reflects that his 'expert' knowledge as a West Indian 'native' and his improvisatory skill arises from the doubled motivations of 'not wanting to sever dis link/with me native roots/...or to disappoint dese culture vulture' (36). As in Dabydeen's 'Coolie Odyssey' he is aware that he is effectively performing a kind of Caribbean identity in which his vernacular voice is central but he is also aware that it this is ultimately a one dimensional and inauthentic performance of a more complex identity politics. With characteristic wit, verve and sexual innuendo the speaker demands:

Anyway why you so interested  
in length and circumference?  
That kind of folk so ordinary  
That don't touch the essence  
of palm tree mystery  
That is no challenge  
to a palm tree historian like me  
If you insist on statistics  
Why you don't pose a question  
with some mathematical profundity? (1983: 37)

As the speaker gains credence through the interlocutor's credulity, he occupies a controlling position in the schema of the poem. This makes his use of Nation language syntax –traditionally regarded as the province of the subordinated rather than the dominating group - doubly apt. Moreover, his verbal eloquence in true 'man of words' style lays the lie to the stereotype of creole as the province of the inarticulate, commensurate only to the brutish vulgarity of 'the folk' or 'peasant speech'. On the contrary, the speaker's considerable verbal dexterity allows him to disarm the stereotype of creole inarticulacy by pushing his argument to parodic extremes. By cunningly appropriating the interlocutor's preference for the discourse of the tourist guidebook, an obsession with facts and figures, the Palm Tree King mounts an effective counter-narrative which reveals the possibility of alter/native ways of seeing and being. Anancy-wise, the Palm Tree is able to manipulate, mislead and outwit, by drawing on the interlocutor's own familiar (linguistic and mathematical) resources. Indeed the whole poem can be read as an exercise in destabilizing hierarchies, as dominant stereotypes are subjected to a spectacular guerrilla attack. The poem ends appropriately enough with the Palm Tree's King's counter stereotypical demand that his English interlocutor 'answer in metric' (37). In true griot spirit, traditional disciplinary boundaries between botany, history, mathematics and finally literature are collapsed in the poem. Agard's poem does not merely parody the tourist- eye view of 'certain people in England' but ultimately makes a more complex point about the epistemic violence enabled and enacted by colonial and neo-colonial structures and discursive practices.

'Listen Mr Oxford Don' addresses similar kinds of popularly received impressions and beliefs as 'Palm Tree King' but in this poem, Agard's subject is vernacular language itself. 'Listen Mr Oxford Don' makes use of the popular fear of Nation language as an anarchic, alien language with a battery of broken and bastardized forms potentially waiting to erupt on the quiet tranquillity of Standard English, as symbolized by that great repository, the OED. The poem also plays upon a series of anxieties about the figure of the immigrant in Britain which are as timely in 2017 as they were when the poem first appeared in 1983:

Me not no Oxford don  
Me a simple immigrant  
From Clapham Common  
I didn't graduate  
I immigrate (1983: 44)

This is Agard's starting point: the imagined threat posed to the 'Oxford Don', establishment figure and upholder of the 'Old Order' of Standard English, by a 'simple immigrant' and his famously dread warning. The poem is explicit in articulating the Oxford Don's (and other Britons') unspoken fear: that vernacular voices such as this threaten to subvert the quiet echelons of 'Oxbridge English', to ripple the surface of the undying myth of English pastoral, to erupt in like the Barbarians at the gate. And the speaker does this, not by the threat of physical violence (another popular fear), but by insidious, invisible means. As the central persona proclaims in a kind of dread prophesay:

I ent have no gun  
I ent have no knife  
but mugging de Queens English is the story of my life.  
I don't need no axe to split  
up yu syntax I don't need no hammer to mash  
up yu grammar. (1983: 44)

Much of the poem's power derives from Agard's playful exploitation of the imagined rather than actual threat to the English Language. The speaker is incredulous that a 'concise, peaceful man like me 'should be accused of 'assault/ on de Oxford dictionary' (44). However, he like many other black British poets do exactly this: harnessing the peaceful but also powerful medium of words in order to subvert the hegemony of Standard English from within. The irony, of course, is that the 'immigrant' is also British and the English language has always been subject to change – indeed it continues to evolve as does the OED and notions of 'de Queen's English'. However, the poem offers a powerful insight into the ways in which language variety and language choice signal – or are perceived to signal – a threat to hegemonic identities.

Fellow Guyanese, Grace Nichols, also uses both Standard English and Nation language in her poems. Her 1984 *The Fat Black Woman's Poems* builds, in part, upon the resilient female personae and Nation language experimentation of Louise Bennett. Nichols' treatment of gendered experience in this and in *Lazy Thoughts of a Lazy Woman* (1989) is tinged with the same 'good-natured humour...shading into satire' (Cooper 1988: 138) which is found in many of Bennett's poems. Certainly, the Fat Black Woman demonstrates the same robust individualism, grounded self-knowledge and bodily confidence which is evidenced in some of Bennett's female personae but in Nichols' case the poems are also freighted with deliciously playful and erotic overtones. As Nichols says of her use of the erotic: 'poetry, thankfully is a radical synthesising force. The erotic isn't separated from the political or spiritual' (1988: 103). However, it is arguably in Nichols' long poem cycles: *I is a long memoried woman* (1983), the title poem of *Sunris* (1996) and, *Startling the Flying Fish* (2006) with their many-voiced, self-fashioning female personae that her most effective use of an adapted creole is evident. In the epilogue to her first collection *i is a Long Memoried Woman* (1983), Nichols famously reflects on the origins of Nation Language:

I have crossed an ocean.  
I have lost a tongue,  
from the root of the old one  
A new one has sprung. (1983: 87)

Nichols says that her choice of language is not a conscious decision: 'the language, like the form and rhythm, dictates itself.' (1989: 297) Her claim that 'when I'm writing creole it's a kind of creole that I naturally speak' (Nichols, 1997: np) importantly signals the proximity of creole to a wider oral matrix 'songs...proverbs, rhythms and so on' (1997: np), what James Berry has called 'our voices with their own wisdom' (Dawes, 2000: 5). Creole is thus in part a language of intimacy, familiarity and sincerity. Nichols has also acknowledged that the 'social stigma' attached to Nation language:

is one of the main reasons why so many Caribbean poets, including myself, are now reclaiming our language heritage and exploring it. It's an act of spiritual survival on our part, the need (whether conscious or unconscious) to preserve something, that's important to us. It's a language that our foremothers and forefathers struggled to create and we're saying that it's a valid, vibrant language. We're no longer going to treat it with contempt or allow it to be misplaced. (Ngcobo 1988: 97-8)

However, she stresses that this is not the only reason for her use of creole:

I find using it genuinely exciting. Some creole expressions are so vivid and concise, and have no equivalent in English...I like working in both Standard English and creole. I tend to want to fuse the two tongues because I come from a background where the two worlds, creole and Standard English, were constantly interacting... (Ngcobo: 97-8)

Linton Kwesi Johnson's wryly ironic 1996 poem 'If I Woz a Tap Natch Poet' is a central text in any consideration of the relation of black British vernacular voices to a western literary canon. However, other black and Asian British poets have explored the relationship between their writing and a western canonical model in different ways. Daljit Nagra's, *Look! We Have Coming to Dover* (2007), is an extraordinary first collection in which Punjabi family histories, migrant dreams and the language and political ideologies surrounding U.K. immigration are mapped onto a British poetic landscape which is both familiar and startlingly defamiliarized. From what he terms in this collection 'our babbling...lingoes' (2007: 32), Nagra creates a kind of adapted 'Punlish' – a combination of Punjabi and Ungregi (English) which he provides a brief glossary to at the end. However, he is also attuned to other vernacular resources (such as Yorkshire dialect in 'Parade's End').

One of the striking features of this collection is its complex dialogue with canonical English writers such as Matthew Arnold ('Look We Have Coming...'), Dr Johnson and Shakespeare ('The furtherance of Mr Bulram's Education'). In the title poem of the collection, Nagra returns to Arnold's most famous poem 'Dover Beach', registering both the town's iconic place in British cultural nationalism ('The White Cliffs of Dover') and its centrality as a site of border-crossing for more recent migrant histories:

Swarms of us, grafting in...  
banking on the miracle of sun-  
...passport us to life. Only then  
can it be human to hoick ourselves, bare-faced for the clear.  
Imagine my love and I,  
our sundry others, Blair'd in the cash  
of our beeswax'd cars, our crash clothes, free,  
we raise our charged glasses over unparasol'd tables  
East, babbling our lingoes, flecked by the chalk of Britannia!' (2007:32)

Nagra's 'Kabba Questions the Ontology of Representation, the Catch 22 for 'Black' Writers' (2007: 42-3) is a kind of 'meta-poem' which examines the politics of representation and reception for Black British and Asian British poets, the role of colonial education and the continuing power of the English canon and canonical processes with particular reference to the category 'Poets From Other Cultures' in the UK National Curriculum for English. A Punjabi father asks, in exasperated and crowded demotic, on behalf of his school-aged son:

Vy giv my boy  
dis freebie of silky blue  
GCSE antology with its three poets  
from three parts of Briten – yor HBC  
of Eaney, Blak  
Clarke, showing us how  
to tink and feel? For Part 2, us  
as a bunch of Gunga Dins ju group, 'Poems  
from *Udder Cultures*  
and Traditions.' 'Udder' is all

vee are to yoo, to dis cuntry-  
'Udder'? To my son's kabbadi posseee, all  
Yor poets are 'Udder'!' (2007: 42)

In 'The Vernacular Cosmopolitan' (2000), Homi Bhabha writes of 'the double life of British minorities' as 'mak[ing] them 'vernacular cosmopolitans', translating between cultures, negotiating traditions from a position where 'locality' insists on its own terms, while entering into larger national and societal conversations' (Bhabha, 2000: 139). This is a useful frame for reading Nagra's poems in this and his later collection (2011). As Bhabha stresses: 'this is not a cosmopolitanism of the elite variety' trading in 'universalist patterns of humanistic thought that run gloriously across cultures, establishing an enlightened unity' but rather vernacular cosmopolitans are compelled to make a tryst with cultural translation as an act of survival. Their specific and local histories, often threatened and repressed, are inserted 'between the lines' of dominant cultural practices.' (2000: 139)

Patience Agbabi's *Telling Tales* (2014) engages with extract this kind of 'cultural translation as... survival' (Bhabha, 2000: 139) and dialogues with a canonical tradition of English poets, central of which is Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*. In *Telling Tales*, Chaucer's world is turned upside down and voiced by a gleeful cast of modern day Black British poets and would-be poets, fully imagined speakers who satirically capture the zeitgeist of the contemporary British poetry scene. Indeed, the inclusion of short fictionalised biographies at the end of the text can make them seem even more convincing than Chaucer's originals and in this way, Agbabi encourages us to read both texts in dialogue in new and provocative ways. Thus Harry Bailey, the host of Chaucer's original poem becomes Harry 'Bells' Bailey who 'worked as a bouncer when studying at London Guildhall Uni. Ended up managing pub. Now owns five gastropubs, including the legendary Tabard Inn in Southwark. There hosts monthly storytelling night, *Plain Speaking*, which mixes live performance with Skype (115). Amongst the speakers is the vernacular voice of Mrs Alice Ebi Bafa, a modern day Nigerian in Britain who brings her own unique story to an updated Wife of Bath's Tale. Hers is a transnational voice, as Agbabi creatively mines the rich verbal resources, the cadences and timbre of a vernacular 'which is English and African at the same time' (Brathwaite, 1984: 13). Moreover, Alice's Nigerian English also carries the tell-tale traces of a transethnic London black vernacular ('isn't it?):

My name is Mrs Alice Ebi Bafa,  
I come from Nigeria.  
I'm very fine, isn't it?  
My nex' birthday I'll be twenty-nine  
I'm a business woman.  
Would you like to buy some cloth?  
I've all the latest styles from Lagos,  
Italian shoe an handbag to match,  
lace, linen an 'Dutch wax.  
I only but the bes'  
and I travel first class (2014: 31)

Contemporary Black British and Asian British poets evidence a rich awareness of the power of the sounded word and the potentialities for non-standard language use along a fluid continuum of aesthetic practices. In their creative plumbings of a whole spectrum of oral, musical, literary, linguistic and other cultural influences, they engage with a western canon and monologic notions of Englishness in exciting and transformative ways and bring new vernacular 'clout' to contemporary British poetry.

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i

See for example, Long 1774, Mrs Carmichael 1833, Lady Maria Nugent 1839 Trollope 1859, Kingsley 1872, Froude 1888.

ii

See for example, Hymes 1971, R B LePage & A Tabouret-Keller 1985, Rickford 1987, Romaine 1994, Sebba 1997, Muhlhausler 1997.

iii

Standard English itself, it should be remembered, is a historico-cultural construct. What is variously known as the 'Queen's English' or formerly as 'BBC English' originated in the English variety spoken in the London and South eastern region of England which by the 14<sup>th</sup> century was beginning to emerge as the hegemonic variety of English spoken at Court. The term is used in this chapter to denote a hegemonic variety against which 'non-standard' 'vernacular varieties' are explicitly or implicitly compared and contrasted. The term 'vernacular' is often used of the Latinate or Romance languages which emerged from Latin (the official language of the Roman Empire and the Christian Church) in the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries and which more accurately represented the speech of ordinary people. The role of English as a colonial language imposed by the British in a range of global contexts added another dimension to this complex history. Importantly, vernacular languages are usually spoken as a mother tongue as opposed to imposed or learned (and often written) languages such as Latin or Sanskrit.

iv

See for example, Claude McKay 1912a, 1912b, Una Marson 1937, Louise Bennett 1943.

v

See also Figueroa, 1970: 14-16.

vi

See Sajaee Elder's recent online post 'Where Did Drake's "Jamaican" Accent Come From?' for further discussion of the politics of cultural appropriation and authenticity in another diasporan context: that of Toronto, Canada.

[https://www.buzzfeed.com/sajaee/some-ting-borrowed?utm\\_term=.mrBA2q5W76#.x1l4n5JbdL](https://www.buzzfeed.com/sajaee/some-ting-borrowed?utm_term=.mrBA2q5W76#.x1l4n5JbdL) (accessed 1.8.16)

vii

See Novak 2011. This sound dimension was explicitly recognised in *Voiceprint* a 1989 anthology of oral and related poetry from the West Indies and Britain which included poems, songs, elegies, laments, calypsos, and other forms expressing the wide range and different styles of the oral tradition in West Indian poetry. Some poets such as LKJ have always published in both recorded audiotexts and printed form as well as performing live and The British library National Sound Archive has sought to preserve a sound archive of recordings such as the 1990 Bluefoot Cassettes and 2011 CD featuring poets such as Linton Kwesi Johnson, E A Markham, Jean 'Binta' Breeze, Dabydeen, Amryl Johnson, James Berry, John Agard, Grace Nichols, Zephaniah and Michael Smith.

viii

See Bennett 1942, 1943, 1944, 1949, 1957, 1961, 1966, 1979, 1982, 1993.