A Vindication of Vernacular: Goodison, Bennett, Hippolyte, and Walcott

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ABSTRACT: This essay examines the representation of working class characters, subversive protests against the imposition of European languages, and a creative reflection of the region’s transculturation, along with the tribute to oral tradition and folklore, as main inspirations for the use of vernacular in Anglophone Caribbean poetry. Selected texts by Lorna Goodison, Louise Bennett, Kendel Hippolyte, and Derek Walcott are analyzed to illustrate the argument.

Key Words: Caribbean Poetry; Creole; Lorna Goodison; Louise Bennett; Kendel Hippolyte; Derek Walcott

Vernaculars in the Caribbean have variously been referred to as ‘Creole/Kweyol’, ‘Patois’, ‘Patwa’, ‘language variations’ such as ‘Jamaican or Trinidadian English’, and also by specific names of individual creoles, such as the ‘Papiamento’ of Curacao or the ‘Sranantongo’ of Suriname. Amounting to a considerable number of spoken languages, these vernaculars are the result of the region’s history of colonization, indentured labor, as well as neocolonialism. Major cultural and linguistic influences include the indigenous Arawak, Carib, and Taino, African and European of the colonial period, East Asian and finally those derived from the many remaining parts of the world indicative of neocolonialist globalization. While the official languages of Caribbean countries are the languages imposed by the European colonial powers, English, French, Spanish and Dutch, the vernaculars enjoy considerable popularity as a means of creative expression. I have singled out four Anglophone Caribbean poets for the original ways in which they write in or at least borrow from Jamaican, St. Lucian, and also the French-based Kweyol. Jamaican Louise Bennett can be given the credit of a pioneer with regard to vernacular use in Caribbean literature and therefore certainly functions as an important role model not only for her compatriot Lorna Goodison. Likewise, St. Lucian Derek Walcott, characteristic for the most stylized use of Creole among the four, belongs to an older generation from which the younger compatriot Kendel Hippolyte succeeds in differentiating himself at the same time that he situates his work within the tradition of his Caribbean predecessors.

In “The Antilles, Fragments of Epic Memory: The 1992 Nobel Lecture,” Walcott employs the conceit of poetry seen as “perfection’s sweat but which must seem as fresh as the raindrops on a statue’s brow,” thus merging past and present (Walcott 1993, 262). At the end of the same paragraph he emphasizes that “[t]he dialects of [his] archipelago seem as fresh to [him] as those raindrops of the statue’s forehead, not the sweat made from the classic exertion of frowning marble but the condensations of a refreshing element, rain and salt.” The main thesis of Maria Cristina Fumagalli’s study The Flight of the Vernacular: Seamus Heaney, Derek Walcott and the Impress of Dante is that the relationship of the two contemporary poets to the development of their national literatures can be compared to Dante’s mostly due to their unique use of language and in particular the significance given to the vernacular as a form of resistance to the official or imperial language. Many Caribbean poets turn to the various spoken languages at their disposal for similar reasons in their writing. Prominent examples from the Anglophone part of the region are also found in the work of Merle Collins (Grenada) and David Dabydeen (Guyana). In my analysis of representative passages from Goodison’s, Bennett’s, Hippolyte’s and Walcott’s poems I will focus on their implied tribute to oral traditions and folklore, but also on a socio-economic significance of these linguistic choices.

In the above quotation Walcott uses the term ‘dialects’ for what linguists distinguish as ‘pidgins’ or ‘language variations’ on the one hand, and ‘creoles/kweyols’ on the other. Departing from this kind of distinction are George Lang’s definitions in Entwisted Tongues: Comparative Creole Literatures, where creoles are said to originate “when one or several overlapping generations create a mother tongue which never existed before,” and opposed by pidgins, “reduced language[s] resulting from sporadic contact between populations with no common language” (Lang 2). As clear cut as this may sound, Lang’s concession to overlap suggests that the practice of the
many variations found in the Caribbean is, in fact, much more complex, and Manuela Coppola's use of the term 'Creoles' in *Crossovers: Language and Orality in Anglophone Caribbean Poetry* is more inclusive than Lang's. Referring to any Caribbean vernacular as 'Creole', be it closer to a French or Portuguese base, or one of the "Caribbean Englishes" (Coppola 18), Coppola foregrounds the status these languages or language variations are given in the respective societies on the one hand and among literary critics on the other. This status as inferior to the official languages is common to all vernaculars disregarding their location and origin. Departing from the observation that adjectives such as "bad," "broken," or "rotten," and one may add "corrupted," or "impure," continue to enforce prejudices and to mark any variation as less valuable than the "Queen’s English" or its North American counterpart, Coppola provides an exploration of "the different ways in which Caribbean poets give voice and literary dignity to the way [they and their community members] talk" (Coppola 18). Following this basic trajectory, the questions raised in the course of the present essay revolve not only around the ways in which but also the purposes for which vernacular is used in selected texts and consequently by Anglophone Caribbean poets in general.

Prejudices which consider a language or any means of expression as inferior to another are obviously not unique to the Caribbean region, nor have they existed only since the period of colonialism. They would have rather occurred ever since communities with unique identities expressed in their articulations encountered other such communities. Lang, in his comparative study of Creoles, states that the "oldest specimen so far of a creolized language is in fact not Western" (Lang 1). Referring to the work of the Andalusian geographer Al Bakri working in Mauritania in the 11th century, Lang explains the origin of his study’s title: "the blacks have mutilated our beautiful language and spoiled its eloquence with their twisted tongues." Such judgment lays bare an ancient sense of xenophobia that no society can unfortunately pride itself to be completely devoid of. The fear of and hatred towards the unfamiliar in this case seems mostly related to race. Contemporary prejudice against vernaculars, as some of my analyses illustrate, are more concerned with class, though I am not denying the interrelation of the two categories.

In “Writing and Creole Language Politics: Voice and Story” Grenadian Merle Collins remembers how she learned as a child to distinguish between ‘bad’, deep Creole and ‘good’, a lighter Creole,” as well as between the “proper” English spoken by the teacher, the doctor, or the estate owner, and the “home English” (Collins 89). When Collins emphasizes that learning “proper” English was considered conducive to “social and economic advancement” (Collins 90) it becomes clear that, by implication, the deeper the Creole or the more pronounced the “home English,” the lower would be the class attribution of its speaker. One reason for a poet to represent Grenadian, Trinidadian, St. Lucian, Barbadian, or Jamaican English would then be to give voice to members of the lower or working class, and Lorna Goodison’s “The Road of the Dread” is an excellent example of such a choice.

**Lorna Goodison, “The Road of the Dread”**

The unpaved road without mileposts described in “The Road of the Dread,” inasmuch as it is related to the lack of existential items such as food and water, appears to symbolize the lives of the unprivileged, the dispossessed. Walking on this road means the risk of encountering "a snake ready fi squeeze yu/kill yu" (Goodison 133). Survival may lead to the loss of directions, caused by the absence of “color,” a symbol for landmarks, or also by a missing sense of beginning and end. Walking on such a road, then, becomes characterized as aimless, with the immediate struggle for survival as its only orientation. At the end of the first stanza the one to journey on this road is presented as trapped between “live barbwire.” While escaping does accordingly not appear an option, the painful nature of the path is seen to encourage speed as the only means to “walk far/away from the wicked.”

After all the road’s hardship is explained and illustrated throughout two thirds of the poem, the question why someone would continue to walk on it comes as no surprise. In response to this question the speaker describes certain moments of comfort. Sometimes comfort may be achieved through an appreciation of the effect a natural

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1 Poets discussed by Coppola and not mentioned in this essay include Jamaicans Una Marson, Linton Kwesi Johnson, and Jean Breeze, Barbadian Edward Kamau Brathwaite, Guyanese Fred D’Aguiar, and Trinidadian Marlene NourbeSe Philip.

2 Collins’ understanding of the term ‘Creole’ is also closer to Coppola’s rather than Lang’s definition. Collins writes, for example, that Sam Selvon wrote *The Lonely Londoners* in “Trinidadian Creole,” (Collins 90) when the language used in this novel would be considered a pidgin in linguistic terminology. Following the latter terminology Selvon’s stylized rendering of speech is best referred to as ‘Trinidadian English’ or simply ‘Trinidadian’ (Lang 3).
landscape can have. Such comfort is symbolized by the sight of a bird, a personification of the sun that smiles, or by a stream that provides drinking water. It is finally in the closing stanza where the ultimate comfort is found in company:

> and better still when yu meet another traveller
> who have flour and yu have water and man and man
> make bread together.
> And dem time dey the road run straight and sure
> like a young horse that cant tire
> And yu catch a glimpse of the end
> through the water in yu eye
> I won’t tell yu what I spy
> but is fi dat alone I tread this road. (Goodison 134)

Interaction and friendship, symbolized by mutual sharing which results in something existential, such as bread, allows for a different perception of the same road. The road is now “straight and/sure” as opposed to seemingly endless or aimless and uncertain. Interestingly, this experience is shared also between the “I,” the speaker and “you,” the reader/listener. It is the latter’s eye that is filled with water and that anticipates an “end,” but it is the speaker who withholds her or his vision when affirming the sense of company as her or his driving force in the final line. Such inclusion of the recipient lends the vision of this road a new, more universal dimension. Anybody’s life, no matter how materially privileged, is now given the potential of dread. Then again, the “you” may well be interpreted as the desired companion rather than the poem’s reader/listener, since it is he or she who is treated to “a glimpse of the end,” understands the journey’s aim. Finally, the companion and the poem’s recipient may be identical, a possibility I return to in the context of “Lawfa Poém-La” or “Poetry Faith.”

Hugh Hodges opens his “Start-Over: Possession Rites and Healing Rituals in the Poetry of Lorna Goodison” with a reference to an interview in which Frank Birbalsingh reminds the Jamaican poet that her poetry does not function as solution to the population’s suffering (Hodges 20). Through analyses of a large number of poems Hodges goes on to demonstrate how Goodison’s poems nevertheless “became or sought out rituals to restore hope,” and how this was done by drawing on Jamaican oral tradition as well as out of the conviction in the power of language. Although “The Road of the Dread” is mentioned only briefly in the context of a compelling reading of “To Rosa Parks,” Hodges also highlights the ending of the older text to signal “small victories against poverty and oppression” (Hodges 27). The vernacular would be a self-evident choice as the language of the poor and oppressed.

The belief in the power of language which may be assumed at the origin of any poetry, as a matter of fact is often exactly what prompts the preference of the vernacular. Maryse Condé summarizes not as much the healing but rather the ruling capacities in “Créolité without the Creole Language?”: “Language is a site of power: who names, controls” (Condé 102). Studies of the colonial imposition of European languages often revolve around readings of Shakespeare’s Tempest, in which Caliban exclaims: “You taught me language, and my profit on’t/Is, I know how to curse. The red plague rid you/for learning me your language!” One may take the use of the verb ‘learning’ here as either a sign of Caliban’s creolization or as a reminder of the fact that whatever is documented as a “standard” or “canonical language” today has likewise undergone change over the years. Lang discusses this fact with regard to French: “at the time of the Revolution the majority of the subjects of the French nation-state did not speak anything resembling the language of Racine as we know it today” (Lang 13). To return to Caliban, however, his fury marks the initial colonial encounter, to be followed by the slave trade and later a system of indentured labor, historical developments which are largely responsible for the cultural diversity that is now characteristic for Caribbean societies.

The vernaculars are expressions of this unique type of transculturation. To use them in literary creation may well be a sign of rebellion. As such it seems the perfect choice for a poem like Kendel Hippolyte’s “Revo Lyric,” however much the speaker wants to stay away from politics: “dem will say dat/dis eh revolution, stop it/dem go talk about/de People an’ de Struggle/an’ how in dis dry season/t’ings too dread, too serious/for love” (Hippolyte 2007, 86). Notions of “de People an’ de Struggle” are significantly capitalized here to treat them as proper nouns the speaker is familiar with. As in Goodison’s poem this speaker’s reality is related to “dread,” a situation which leads to protest in this case. Nobody is protesting or revolting in “The Road of the Dread.” The idea of protest and rebellion against a situation resulting from colonial conditions is, however, taken up in a poem by Louise Bennett.
In this poem the colonized or post-colonials are physically migrating, rather than ‘writing back’ as in the conceit prominently developed by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin. Both activities share the reversal of directions taken by an active colonial power towards the passive, colonized subject. In this sense both the writing and moving post-colonials are ‘colonizing in reverse’.

Louise Bennett, “Colonization in Reverse”

“Colonization in Reverse” is the title of a poem by Jamaican Louise Bennett which describes the waves of migration from the Caribbean to the European cities, mainly London, Paris and Amsterdam, during the second half of the 20th century. Presented chatting with an acquaintance the speaker in this poem observes that “By de hundred, by de t’ousan/From country and from town/By de ship-load, by de plane load/Jamaica is Englan boun” (Bennett 37). Turning history upside down, the movement’s direction, westbound during the colonial wars, is now eastbound to the “mother lan,” the “seat o’ de Empire.” Observations seem based on newscasts as well as on reports from other acquaintances. The opening lines, “What a joyful news, Miss Mattie,/I feel like me heart gwine burs’,” sets the stage for a satirical reflection on the historical effects of the British “Commonwealth’s” deconstruction. Jamaica was, along with Trinidad and Tobago, the first Anglophone Caribbean country to gain independence from the United Kingdom, in 1962. Many others, such as Dominica and St. Lucia, were to follow in the 1970s, very few, like Antigua & Barbuda or St. Kitts & Nevis, not until the 1980s. Following the 1948 British Nationality Act, these decades were preceded by waves of migration from the colonies to cities in the UK. The ‘Empire Windrush’ sailed for the first time as early as June 1948 with a group of nearly 500 immigrants from Jamaica. Looking for better living conditions these immigrants would often not anticipate the hardship that made their experience on the other side of the Atlantic anything but “joyful.” While Miss Mattie’s friend is most enthusiastic about “a big-time job” and the populating of “De seat o’ de Empire,” unemployment, discrimination and culture shock in general dominate the perspectives of the actual immigrants in the stories by Caribbean writers such as Sam Selvon and Caryl Phillips. Bennett’s rendering, however, is exposing the actual experience through satire.

At the end of the poem the speaker is wondering how the English will cope with this ‘colonization in reverse’, in light of the strain on their welfare system:

For wen dem catch a Englan,
An start play dem different role,
Some will settle down to work
An some will settle fe de dole.

Jane says de dole is not too bad
Because dey payin’ she
Two pounds a week fe seek a job
Dat suit her dignity.

Me say Jane will never fine work
At de rate how she dah-look.
For all day she stay pon Aunt Fan couch
An read love-story book. (Bennett 38)

The tone is clearly mocking, as opposed to Goodison’s lamenting descriptions of poverty and hardship in “The Road of the Dread.” The reader will find it difficult not to smile at Bennett’s description of Jane’s fate, however dreadful it may actually be. The latter’s reading romances at Aunt Fan’s place while collecting unemployment support, which allows her to wait for a ‘dignified’ occupation, is presented as a rather leisurely activity. This perspective, however, most likely corresponds to the view from afar. Although it is not stated explicitly, the speaker is probably not among the migrants herself\(^3\). It would therefore not be unusual for her to be ignorant of the negative side of the immigrant experience, involving the historical dimension of the respective waves of migration, the connection to the slave trade, frustration about joblessness, and all the different aspects of discrimination.

\(^3\) Although the gender is not identified either I consider it safe to assume a female speaker due to the nature of the conversation and its exclusive involvement of women in it. Besides Jane and Aunt Fan who are talked about, there is Miss Mattie, the listening acquaintance.
The mocking tone and subject matter in much of Bennett’s work is not the only reason, according to Mervyn Morris, that provokes laughter, or at least did so several decades ago. In “On Reading Louise Bennett, Seriously” (1967), Morris argues that especially the middle-class Jamaicans, which at the time provided the majority of both the reading public and theater audiences, laughed primarily “at dialect verse and drama for uncomfortable psychological reasons” (Morris 194). This observation suggests a certain sense of superiority, but also a lack of cultural self-confidence. Morris supports his argument by pointing out the absence of Bennett’s work from local anthologies and criticism at the time, interpreting this omission as lack of respect for and misjudgment of the significance of her poems. The fact that many of her texts have since been widely anthologized, for example in Alison Donnell and Sarah Lawson Welsh’s Routledge Reader in Caribbean Literature (1996), Stewart Brown’s Caribbean Poetry Now (1984/1992), and MJ Fenwick’s Sisters of Caliban: Contemporary Women Poets of the Caribbean (1996), the latter of which not even limited to ‘Anglophone’ Caribbean writers, testifies not only to the value of Bennett’s work but also to a changing sensibility towards the use of vernacular in Caribbean literature.

As Condé has eloquently put it, the colonized and postcolonial writers’ “recourse to vernacular languages born within the plantation system, seemed like a ‘miraculous weapon’ for their acts of subversion” (Condé 105). In their attempt to come to terms with the full extent of the colonial experience, colonized and postcolonial subjects have gone through great lengths in defining unique cultural identities, and the languages in which this has at times been done, or which have in the process become justified as effective means of expression, distinguish themselves from the languages of the colonizers through the use of vernacular. To this aim it is indeed irrelevant whether a text is entirely written in a Creole only accessible to the comparatively small number of speakers of this language (as will be seen below in Hippolyte’s “Lawfa Poëm-La”), or in what Lang would define as a pidgin (as Goodison and Bennett’s Jamaican English discussed above), or whether the text includes only an occasional vernacular term, phrase or line, often accompanied by a translation into the ‘standard’ language (as will be seen in excerpts from Walcott’s Omeros). Even the inclusion of such isolated terms or phrases serves the purpose of claiming and demanding the possibility for new cultural identities. According to Condé, the subversive process succeeded even through texts with only occasional Creole references, “as if by their very presence the [vernacular] words injected the marginalized and despised culture into the heart of the dominant one and in so doing, destroyed the latter’s hegemony” (Condé 103).

Condé’s optimism is met by Sarah Lawson Welsh’s more subdued assessment of the vernacular’s powers in “Experiments in Brokenness: The Creative Use of Creole in David Dabydeen’s ‘Slave Song.’” Writing in the 90s Lawson Welsh reports that the number of poets using creoles creatively had increased considerably during the preceding decade and a half (Lawson Welsh 416), but her comments on translations included in the analyzed collection by Dabydeen suggest that one need not forget the dynamics of neo-colonial mechanisms inasmuch as literature is part of a publishing industry with market regulations. The reading public in the Caribbean has a reputation of being small, and so are the publishing opportunities in the region. Caribbean writers have therefore continuously had to rely on publishing, working, and to a considerable extent also living abroad. The average foreign readers cannot be expected to learn Jamaican or Trinidadian English, let alone St. Lucian (French) Creole – Kweyol -, or can they? The inclusion of translations might, as a matter of fact, be just what could encourage them to do so. It should be noted that within the language continuum possibilities for comprehension vary considerably. While, I would argue, “The Road of the Dread” and “Colonization in Reverse” can easily be understood by any English-speaking reader, maybe even listener, without previous exposure to Jamaican, a text such as St. Lucian Hippolyte’s “Lawfa Poëm-La” does require mediation.

Kendel Hippolyte, “Lawfa Poëm-La/Poetry Faith”

“Lawfa Poëm-La,” which Hippolyte himself translates into “Poetry Faith” opens with the traditional storytelling formula “Cric? Crac!” Unlike the popular fairy tale beginning, “once upon a time,” or the calling on the muses in ancient epics, “Cric? Crac!” emphasizes the interaction between storyteller and audience. While the “cric” signals something like “are you there?” the “crac” replies in the sense of “yes, I am here,” not merely physically

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4 For more detailed studies of Bennett’s poems and especially the importance of vernacular writing, see Carolyn Cooper’s work, for example “‘Pedestrian Crosses’: Sites of Dislocation in ‘Post-Colonial’ Jamaica.” Coppola is correct in emphasizing the pioneering function of this Jamaican poet (Coppola 17).
present but rather ready and eager to listen, to participate in the sharing of a story, possibly even the evolving of
stories. In the tragic beginning of Hippolyte’s poem, however, the question remains without answer:

Mwen di: i call out
Kwik – Kweek
Pésonn pa di Kwak. nobody answer Kwak
Mwen hélé: i bawl out:
Tim-tim – tim-tim
M’a tann anyen. (Hippolyte 2012, 51) And i hear what?
Nothing. (52)

Even the second attempt remains without reply. In fact, there seems to be no sound at all, as the caller hears
“Nothing.” This storyteller’s situation worsens when his or her search for company turns from a more or less
anonymous group of listeners to intimate kin. His or her desertedness is complete when the absence of an audience
is accompanied by the absence of closest family members:

And a voice, flinging this song:
your mother – gone
your father – gone
your sister – gone
your brother – gone
Gone – everyone.
But then, I born – alone.

These circumstances suggest a host of associations, especially in the context of the preceding poems
discussed here. The most cheerful speaker so far has been the one in “Colonization in Reverse,” and she is in the
company of Miss Mattie, talking about friends or acquaintances that used to belong to their community. What keeps
the speaker in “The Road of Dread” going is the hope for the company of a fellow traveler, and the effects of such
company are described as well known. Hippolyte’s speaker, on the other hand, seems denied any kind of company,
which may lead to considerations about the future of the vernacular in which the poem was initially written. It may
more generally be read as a statement about the reading public discussed in the preceding paragraph. Then again,
the text refers to oral tradition, and performances still enjoy larger audiences, as can be seen for example in the
popularity of the carnival tradition. Bennett, who used to associate with this tradition, is famous for recitations
which at times connect to the genre of stand-up comedy. Moreover, there remains a considerable interest in theater
companies and stage performances.

Ultimately, the described sense of being isolated if not deserted may lead to the philosophical question
about the sound of a tree falling in the forest. Does the text even exist when nobody reads or hears it?
Hippolyte’s answer at the end of the poem is affirmative. Not only does the text exist, even if at the described moment mainly
for its author, but for him or her it actually turns into the desired company:

Yon sèl bagay mwen wè One single thing i see -
Sé ti poem sala. this poem here, so small.
Mwen di an tjè-mwen: In the deep part of me
my voice come make my mind
Si sé sa, sé sa say If a so, a so
Mwen pwan kouway, mwen hélé: Then I take heart, I call,
long, high:

KwiieeeEEE! I hear the poem, answering, cry
Poèm-la wéпонn: Kwak!
Ek sé kon sa A so
Mwen koumansé listwa. (51) I-story start. (53)

This ending suggests that the individual does not have to be one among many, but can him- or herself be one and the
many with his or her story as an expression of one’s own other or spirit. The idea of a plurality of the individual is
an important element of Rastafarian spirituality. Quoting Joseph Owens’ study of Jamaican Rastafarians Condé
explains how the “I” is opposed to “the servile ‘me’” (Condé 104-5) and how it is frequently turned into “I and I,”
“I-n-I,” or “I-n-I-self.” With this insight one may return to Goodison’s poem and consider the encounter with the
fellow traveler as the awareness of company within the self, and Hodges, among others, emphasizes the significance of the Rastafarian movement for the Jamaican poet’s work (Hodges 26). Such readings further emphasize a spiritual experience related to the writing or more generally communicative process. The recognition of the poem as company, however “small,” as well as in “the deep part,” not at all prominent at this stage, allows for the evolving or continuation of a story after all.

While my focus so far has been on how use of the vernacular in Anglophone Caribbean poetry can serve to give voice to members of the working class, reflect the cultural diversity of the region, and propose alternatives to traditional versions of the “great man” narrative, my consideration of the rise in use of the vernacular in Walcott’s work specifically is not to deny the intention to present the kind of homage Brodsky is referring to. Nevertheless, it is in this assessment also underestimating his linguistic skill somewhat. When in “Sainte Lucie,” for example, at the end of an enumeration of apple types as they can be associated with British linguistic imperialism” (Fumagalli xviii-xix). Interactions between Walcott and Heaney testify to this common concern, as Heaney’s review of Walcott’s The Star-Apple Kingdom, for example, shows. In the review question, the Irish poet explicitly praises Walcott’s use of “a language woven out of dialect and literature, neither folksy nor condescending, a singular idiom evolved out of one man’s inherited divisions and obsessions…” (Fumagalli 107). A fellow Nobel Laureate, the Russian Joseph Brodsky, discusses the amalgamation of registers in the St. Lucian’s language in his introduction to a special edition of Walcott’s poems, a collection which brings these poems together with paintings by Romare Bearden. “If at times Walcott writes in Creole patois,” Brodsky remarks there, “it’s not to flex his stylistic muscle or to enlarge his audience but as a homage to what he spoke as a child” (Walcott 1983, ix). Obviously little concerned with linguistic definitions of creoles as opposed to pidgins, Brodsky may in this assessment also be underestimating his friend’s stylistic skill somewhat. When in “Sainte Lucie,” for example, at the end of an enumeration of apple types as they can be associated with names of islands, the lyrical “I” admits to “have forgotten/what pomme for/the Irish potato” and then pleads “[a]come back to me/...my language” (Walcott 1990, 310), one would be hard pressed to ascribe this kind of wit to either intuitive revelry or the refined savvy of an experienced poet. It can only be the result of a combination between the gift and its conscious, continuous development. This is not to deny the intention to present the kind of homage Brodsky is referring to.

Walcott explicitly celebrates his country’s oral tradition when, in part three of the same poem, he presents a “St. Lucian conte, or narrative Creole song, heard on the back of an open truck travelling to Vieuxfort, some years ago” (Walcott 1990, 314). The song, like Hippolyte’s “Lawfa Poèm-La” is rendered entirely in French Creole or Kweyol and followed by an English translation in part four of the poem. It is in this song that a character called Ma Kilman is introduced as someone with “too much religion” and “charity” (Walcott 1990, 317). In Omeros, the long poem frequently referred to as contemporary epic and published a few decades later, Ma Kilman appears as a healer as well as owner of the No Pain Café, and her speech often begins in Kweyol:

“Mais qui ça qui rivait-’ous, Philoctete?”

“But what is wrong wif you, Philoctete?”

“Moin blessé.”

“I am blest

wif this wound, Ma Kilman, qui pas ka guérir pièce.

Which will never heal.”

“Well you must take it easy.

Go home and lie down, give the foot a lickle rest.”

Philoctete, his trouser-legs rolled, stared out to sea
The vernacular in this passage clearly serves two purposes, to represent the speech of local characters, even in its obviously stylized written version, but also to tease the flow of the terza rima. In the process, the crossover between English and French is being played with, as the French ‘blessé’ (wounded) turns into the English ‘blest’ (blessed). A similar pun occurs later in Omeros when Helen, the waitress/housekeeper/shopkeeper and symbol of the island, answers to Maud’s question, “So, how are you Helen?” with a combination of the English and phonetic rendering of the Kweyol greeting formula: “I dere, Madam” (‘I am there’ for “Mwen là”). Maud’s reply turns the phonetic ‘dere’ into the English ‘dare’: “At last. You dere. Of course you dare, come back looking for work…” (Walcott 1992, 124). I think it would be misleading not to recognize the ‘stylistic muscle’ at work in these passages, neither would I consider it a negative characteristic, though. Inasmuch as it is combined with a unique and genuine wit Walcott’s stylistic skill has rightfully been recognized as an invaluable celebration of his heritage in all its diversity. Such recognition almost ridicules the early need for a defense against accusations of mimicry.

Criticizing any kind of attempts to impose stylistic choices by literary scholars, reviewers or fellow writers, Walcott brings every author’s debt to her or his imagination as well as inspiration to the point in “What the Twilight Says”:

Listen, one kind of writer, generally the entertainer, says: ‘I will write in the language of the people however gross or incomprehensible’; another says: ‘Nobody else go understand this, you hear, so le’ me write English’; while the third is dedicated to purifying the language of the tribe, and it is he who is jumped on by both sides for pretentiousness or playing white. He is the mulatto of style. The traitor. The assimilator. Yes. But one did not say to his Muse, ‘What kind of language is this that you’ve given me?’ (Walcott 1970, 9).5

The discussion should, by all means, include the female poet and her Muse, and the term ‘purification’ has various unpleasant connotations, the activities of an institution like the ‘Académie française’ certain not the worst among them, but the main point, that the artist has to use whatever tools are to her or his disposal and continuously strive to refine them, is undoubtedly well taken. The fact that this responsibility to one’s cultural background requires flexibility especially in a region as diverse as the Caribbean, is best expressed by the most important proponent of the theory of ‘creolization’, the Martiniquan Édouard Glissant. Calling the Creole language the most obvious symbol of ‘creolization’ Glissant writes in Poetics of Relation that its “genius consists in always being open, that is, perhaps, never becoming fixed except according to systems of variables that we have to imagine as much as define” (Glissant 34). Such a demand for continued flexibility necessarily implies a big challenge combined, as these tend to be, with respective rewards for artists, linguists, and literary scholars alike. They have to remain alert to linguistic transitions in order to take due advantage of their medium’s wealth.

I like to think that my readings here have shown how rewarding inquiries into vernacular use in Caribbean literature can be. Even more insightful is it, of course, to go beyond the ‘Anglophone’ part of the region and include, as Lang’s study does, for example, Curaçao’s Papiamento or Suriname’s Saramaccan, though that is when the distinction between ‘language’ and ‘variation’ does become an issue. I have identified four main purposes for which writers choose to rely on their vernacular. The first is the aim to represent working class characters, like Helen the waitress/housekeeper/shopkeeper in Omeros, or the speakers in “The Road of the Dread” and “Colonization in Reverse.” These characters would not normally be speaking ‘school’- as opposed to ‘home English’ and the use of their vernacular thus gives them authenticity, even agency through the proximity to their actual speech.


6 It is somehow comforting to note that this venerable body now represents different ethnic backgrounds, as can be seen in the 2005 election of Algerian Assia Djebar, or the 2011 election of the Lebanese-born Amin Maalouf, though not yet, it seems, creolists.
The second reason for a choice against the colonizer’s language is the desire to reflect the linguistic diversity of the region, even if a text requires a translation, like “Lafwa Poèm-La,” to become accessible to readers unfamiliar with the Creole. Collins, for one, enumerates all the main languages in the Caribbean when she envisions the transition between her fellow writers’ imaginations and their expressions: “Creole, English, French, Spanish, Dutch are all a part of the Caribbean shaping, and individual writers use what in their estimation best suits their purpose and what most actively inhabits their imagination” (Collins 93). This statement shifts the reader’s focus from the text itself to the author and evokes once more Walcott’s remark about the means of expression available to the poet, the language offered by the Muse in his words. A poet’s exposure to and grounding in linguistic diversity naturally inserts this diversity’s reflection in her or his art.

The third reason for vernacular use is more related to political rather than aesthetic aspects. Although Condé attempts to maintain a very rigid separation between poetics and politics, her argument that a writer may choose the vernacular as alternative to the languages imposed by the colonizer, suggests that this separation is never strictly given. I certainly agree with her appeal “that all writers must choose whatever linguistic strategies, narrative techniques, they deem appropriate to express their identity” (Condé 108). Once the identity in question, however, is characterized primarily by subversive intentions, its creative expression necessarily involves public politics. Identities in the Caribbean, as has been seen in reference to Glissant’s notion of creolization, are never fixed, but rather in flux and naturally lending themselves to artistic creation in a variety of languages. What they have in common, however, leads to the fourth and final rationale for the popularity of vernacular use in Caribbean poetry: the rich oral tradition, folklore and respect for local music.

Some poets, such as Louise Bennett, are best known for their performances; and oral storytelling still has a very prominent place in Caribbean society. While the wealth of collective folkloric memory may serve as inspiration, as seen in the inclusion of the “Cric? Crac!” formula in “Lafwa Poèm-La,” or the inclusion of a folksong in “Sainte Lucie,” it is there to be appropriated in ever so many new ways. Condé’s closing question, “… aren’t there new and multiple versions of créolité?” is begging the answer “Crac!: they are and will continue to be there.” They will be informed by combinations of the motivations mentioned, by attempts to represent working class characters, by the urge to reflect the cultural diversity of the region, by the search for alternatives to the languages imposed by the colonizers and/or, finally, by the evocation of the rich oral tradition and folklore of the Caribbean. Just like the audience desired in “Lafwa Poèm-La,” these new versions of ‘créolité’ or ‘Caribbeanness’ and their languages are not merely there to rest passive and listen, but to interact and participate in the storytelling process.

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