

LANGUAGE AS A VEHICLE FOR NATIONAL THEMES¹

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Jamaicans have been contributing to the poetry and prose of the world for more than a century. The literature of Jamaica reflects the pride Jamaicans have in their people, culture, and country, but it also reflects a conflict of language identity. Although English is the official language of Jamaica, the great majority of the population speaks a language that falls anywhere on a continuum with the standard prestige variety, the acrolect,² on one end and a basilectal³ Creole on the other. Linguistic tension between the previously colonial elite and the independent peasantry has resulted in conflicted attitudes towards speech in the middle and rising classes. “Good” speaking is the British-styled Standard Jamaican English and “bad” speaking is anything else. This commonly accepted dichotomy is, however, often in conflict with the varieties of English actually spoken by individuals in all classes.

Before the rising nationalism in the 1930s, Jamaican Creole - ‘dialect’ - was used only as an experimental literary device. By the 1940s, writers were carefully venturing toward compositions written in the non-standard speech of the majority. These forays were often bitterly criticized in academic circles, in newspapers and in living rooms as substandard and degenerate. However, as the earliest experimenters in and later promoters of the Jamaican language happened to be highly educated, often academically decorated individuals, the inevitable occurred: the language ‘of the people’ began to find a solid foothold in Jamaican literature.

This paper will examine the poetic language used by three highly respected Jamaican poets: Sir Philip Sherlock, The Honorable Louise Bennett-Coverly (“Miss Lou”), and Evan Jones (short biographies of the authors appear in the in the Appendix). All were all born between 1900 and 1930 when Jamaica was still a British colony. The three types of poems presented here will show that the writers have produced poems specifically about Jamaica and Jamaicans, but which express the themes in very different ways.

Examination of the poems presented here will show that where Sir Phillip uses established British English standards, both linguistic and literary, Evan Jones uses established English literary form, but steps away from the linguistic standard in his protagonist’s monologue. “Miss Lou” writes exclusively in a non- standard linguistic form, but utilizes a wide variety of standard, recognizable poetic and dramatic devices. The three poems fall on different points on the continuum that is Jamaican language.

¹ This paper was originally written for TESL 560 The World in English (Fall 2002, Professor Naomi Baron) at American University, Washington, DC.

² Acrolect: The variety of speech that is closest to a standard prestige language, especially in an area in which a creole is spoken. For example, Standard Jamaican English is the acrolect where Jamaican Creole is spoken. The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language: Fourth Edition. 2000

³ Basilect: The variety of speech that is most remote from the prestige variety, especially in an area where a creole is spoken. For example, in Jamaica, Jamaican Creole is the basilect whereas Standard Jamaican English is the acrolect or prestige language. The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language: Fourth Edition. 2000

Sir Phillip Sherlock's poem *Jamaican Fisherman* benchmarks one end of the continuum. It is easily recognizable as a Standard English poetic form:

Jamaican Fisherman
by Sir Phillip Sherlock

Across the sand I saw a black man stride
To fetch his fishing gear and broken things,
And silently that splendid body cried
Its proud descent from ancient chiefs and kings.
Across the sand I saw him naked stride;
Sang his black body in the sun's white light
The velvet coolness of dark forests wide,
The blackness of the jungle's starless night.
He stood beside the old canoe which lay
Upon the beach; swept up within his arms
The broken nets and careless lounges away
Towards his wretched hut...
Nor knew how fiercely spoke his body then
Of ancient wealth and savage regal men.

The theme, recognition of the beauty and dignity of the Black Jamaican, stops short of conveying a maudlin, "noble savage" sentiment, yet the work acknowledges the fisherman's unselfconscious splendidness. Here, it is not the language, but the theme that is daring, given the social and political attitudes of Colonial Jamaica.

While the language in Evan Jones' *Banana Man* still hugs the boundaries of Standard English, Jones introduces some changes that were commended in literary circles for capturing the essence of Jamaican Creole speech.

Song of the Banana Man
by Evan Jones

Touris', white man, wipin' his face,
met me in Golden Grove market place.
He looked at me ol' clothes brown wid stain,
an' soaked right through wid de Portlan' rain,
he cas' his eye, turn' up his nose,
he says, 'You're a beggar man, I suppose?'
He says, 'Boy, get some occupation,
be of some value to your nation.'

I said, "By God and dis big right han'
you mus' recognise a banana man."

"Up in de hills, where de streams are cool,
 an' mullet an janga swim in the pool,
 I have ten acres of mountain side,
 an a dainty-foot donkey dat I ride;
 four Gros Michel, an four Lacatan⁴,
 some coconut trees, an' some hills of yam,
 An I pasture on dat very same lan'
 Five she-goats an a big black ram,

"Dat, by God an dis big right han'
 is de property of a banana man.

"I leave me yard early-mornin' time
 An' set me foot to de mountain climb;
 I ben' me back to de hot-sun toil,
 An me cutlass rings on de stony soil,
 ploughin' an weedin', diggin' an plantin'
 till Massa Sun drop back o' John Crow mountain,
 den home again in cool evenin' time,
 perhaps whistlin' dis likkle rhyme,

(*Sung*) "Praise God an me big right han'
 I will live an die a banana man.

"Banana day is me special day,
 I cut me stems an I'm on me way,
 load up de donkey, leave de lan'
 head down de hill to banana stan',
 when de truck comes roun', I take a ride
 all de way down to de harbour side—
 dat is de night, when you, touris' man,
 would change you' place wid a banana man.

"Yes, by God, an me big right han'
 I will live an die a banana man.

"De bay is calm, an' de moon is bright
 de hills look black for de sky is light.
 Down at de docks is an English ship,
 restin' after her ocean trip,
 while on de pier is a monstrous hustle,
 Tallymen, Carriers, all in a bustle,
 wid stems on deir heads in a long black snake
 some singin' de songs dat banana men make:

⁴ These are varieties of banana.

“like, (*Sung*) Praise God an me big right han’
I will live an die a banana man.

”Den de payment comes, an’ we have some fun,
me, Zekiel, Breda an’ Duppy Son.
Down at de bar near United Wharf
we knock back a white rum, bus’ a laugh,
fill de empty bag for further toil
wid saltfish, breadfruit, coconut oil,
den head back home to me yard to sleep,
a proper sleep dat is long an’ deep.

“Yes, by God, an’ me big right han’
I will live an’ die a banana man.

”So when you see dese ol’ clothes brown wid stain,
an’ soaked right through wid de Portlan’ rain,
don’t cas’ you’ eye nor turn up you’ nose,
don’t judge a man by his patchy clothes;
I’m a strong man, a proud man, an’ I’m free,
free as dese mountains, free as dis sea,
I know myself, an I know me ways,
an will sing wid pride to de end o’ my days

(*Sung*) “Praise God an’ me big right han’
I will live an’ die a banana man.”

Jones manipulates the standard with orthographic changes that reflect the sounds of the speech he would have heard while growing up. Though part of a privileged class, as the child of a banana planter, he would have had commerce with men like his *Banana Man* and would be familiar with their vernacular. Words such as *tourist*, *must* and *cast* lose their final [t]s; *this* and *that* become [dis] and [daet], and *little* becomes [lɪɪkl]. Final [ŋ] s become [n] s: e.g. *ploughin’*, *diggin’*, *restin’*. In addition, Jones employs turns of phrase particular to Jamaica such as to *knock back a white rum* and *bus’ a laugh* when the *Banana Man* is with his friends in the bar. Other ‘local’ phrases in the poem easily recognized by Jamaicans of all classes and language groups include *early-mornin’ time*, *evening-time*; *cas’ his eye* and *Massa Sun*⁵. But Jones introduces only one specifically Creole lexical item in the poem – *janga* – the word for river crayfish.

The names of the *Banana Man*’s friends, Zekiel (Ezekiel), Breda and the entertaining ‘Duppy Son’⁶, capture a decidedly Jamaican cultural element. Nicknames that often defy explanation are common on the island.

⁵ Mister Sun.

⁶ A Duppy is a ghost, spirit or other supernatural being. West African word.

While poetry cannot be categorized as ordinary spoken language, the *Banana Man* uses the Jamaican vernacular to fully express pride in his occupation, its contribution to the national economy, and to underscore his personal independence⁷. In this poem, Jamaican Creole speech is used by the author *and* his protagonist as a political statement. Such use points to the outsider as being unable to recognize Jamaicans and their contributions within their own context: the landowner and small farmer is mistaken for a beggar by an outsider.

Where Jones experiments, The Hon. Louise Bennett uses, and has used, the full force of Jamaican Creole. The entire body of her work has been written and performed in Creole. Miss Lou's writings demand respect for a language that has been marginalized by the upper classes and abandoned by an embarrassed middle class – a language that is neither broken nor deficient, but one that is able to express the whole range of human thought and emotion. She challenges the position that the national language is inferior to English because both, she contends, “are derivatives of other languages” (Bailey, 1992).

All Miss Lou's poems, though available in written form, are meant to be recited aloud: they are squarely in the oral tradition. Years of public performances of her work have made Miss Lou a celebrity in Jamaica and among the Jamaican expatriate communities worldwide, unlike the solely academic acclaim of Sherlock and Jones.

She uses a spelling system close enough to Standard so those unfamiliar with the sounds of the authentic Jamaican Creole are able to read her works. The spelling adjustments “assume that anyone familiar with Jamaican Creole will hear the sounds of Creole even when the spelling looks like Standard” (Morris quoted in Bennett, 1983). The result is written work that showcases not just the odd phrase, but the lexicon, structure and colloquialisms of Jamaican Creole.

The poem *Back to Africa* clearly illustrates Miss Lou's writing style:

Back to Africa
by Louise Bennett

Back to Africa, Miss Mattie?
You no know wha you dah seh?
You haf fe come from somewhe fus
Before you go back deh!

Me know say dat you great great great
Gramma was African,
But Mattie, doan you great great great
Granpa was Englishman?

Den you great granmader fader

⁷ Jamaica gained independence from Great Britain in 1962.

By you fader side was Jew?
 An you granpa by you mader side
 Was Frenchie parlez-vous?

But de balance a you family,
 You whole generation,
 Oonoo all barn dung a Bun Grung –
 Oonoo all is Jamaican!

Den is whe you gwine, Miss Mattie?
 Oh, you view de countenance,
 An between you an de Africans
 Is great resemblance!

Ascorden to dat, all dem blue-yeye
 White American
 Who-fa great granpa was Englishman
 Mus go back a Englan!

What a debil of a bump-an-bore,
 Rig-jig an palam-pam
 Ef de whole worl start fe go back
 Whe dem great granpa come from!

Ef a hard time you da run from
 Tek chance! But Mattie, do
 Sure a whe you come from so you got
 Somewhere fe come back to!

Go a foreign, seek you fortune,
 But no tell nobody say
 You da go fe seek you homelan,
 For a right de so you deh!

Some recognizably English words in *Back to Africa* have quite different lexical and grammatical meaning in the Creole context. Some lexical items are barely recognizable as the original English and others may not be in the Standard English lexicon at all, but hail from the West African languages and dialects that are part of the Creole language mix.

For example, *foreign* here literally means any foreign country, though it is now often used to refer specifically to England, the United States and Canada. The word *gwine* (verse five) operates both as the gerund of the verb *go* and as the phrasal modal *be going to*. In this case it operates as the gerund, the literal translation of ‘*Den is weh you gwine, Miss Mattie?*’ being: “Then is where you going to, Miss Mattie?” Of course, the

illocutionary force renders it a rhetorical question and not a request for geographical destination.

The Creole word *oonoo*⁸ (verse 4) is both second person singular and plural, like the Standard English *you*. Here, *Oono all is Jamaican* takes the plural meaning “All of you are Jamaican”.

Many grammatical features of Creole are quite different from those in Standard English constructions. Consider the use of the word *dah* in the following lines:

- ‘*You no know wha you dah seh?*’
 - ‘Do you not know what you are saying’?
 - Literally: You not know what you (are) say
- ‘*Ef a hard time you dah run from...*’
 - If it is hard times you are running from
 - Literally: If (it is-another auxiliary) hard time you (are) run from
- ‘*You dah go fe seek you homelan*’
 - You are going to seek your homeland
 - Literally: You (are) go to seek you homeland

These examples show the use of *dah* as an auxiliary verb (is/are). Note that tense and aspect are not marked by inflected verb forms, but by context.

Miss Lou uses the familiar Jamaican Creole as a tool for social commentary, pointedly criticizing those who look everywhere but their homeland for their identity. She focuses on national pride, not aspirations to be from some other place. In Colonial Jamaica, the educated class looked to England; Miss Lou looked to Jamaica. She took the language of the common people and used it to celebrate the place that was already theirs. Hers was a strong cultural and political statement. Though not the first Caribbean writer to write in Creole, she is one of the most prolific, and has become a hugely influential figure in Caribbean Creole literature. Jamaican literary circles refused to acknowledge her poetic contributions until well into the 1970s, reflecting the contemptuous upper-class social attitudes toward Jamaican Creole or ‘dialect’, and its speakers. Miss Lou did, however, receive great popular support, and important early support from the influential Sir Phillip Sherlock (Morris in Bennett, 1996.).

Each poet covered here uses a particular variety of Jamaican language to support a nationalistic point of view. However, while it could be argued that Sherlock and Jones were constrained (perhaps unwillingly) from deviating from Standard English in their writing by their own social positions, the Hon. Louise Bennett felt no such constraints. She used her academic and creative talents to put the language of the majority of

⁸ Pronoun from the West African Ibo: you (pl). Variations: unnu, onoo, unnu. (Lalla, B. and D’Costa, J. 1949, pg232).

Jamaicans in full view of a narrow social system dismissive of its own core in favour of an imposed standard.

None of the three Jamaican writers presented here, Sir Phillip Sherlock, Evan Jones and 'Miss Lou', is more or less eloquent than the other in showcasing his or her national pride. What they do show is the wide range of expression possible on the continuum of Jamaican language, a fair treatment for all language groups, and movement away from colonial standards that disrespect an entire cultural reality.

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- Walmsley, A., [compiler] (1968). *The Sun's Eye*. Kingston: Longman Caribbean

Biographies

Philip Manderson Sherlock was born in 1902 in Jamaica. He was educated there and obtained first class honours in the University of London external BA degree in 1927. One of the fathers of West Indian letters, with a tireless and scholarly interest in all things West Indian, and the folk traditions in particular. He has spent a lifetime as an educator, first in Jamaican schools, and then, from its inception in 1948, at the University of the West Indies, which he headed as President (Vice-chancellor) from 1963 to 1969. Since then he has been Secretary to the Association of Caribbean Universities and Research Institutes Foundation, based in Miami. After a distinguished record of public service, he was knighted in 1967. He has published sixteen book, mainly educational works on folklore and Caribbean history. His poetic output has been small but impressive, making a significant contribution to the literary renaissance which accompanied the nationalist movements of the (nineteen) forties and fifties.

Biography from:

Burnett, P. (1986). The Penguin Book of Caribbean Verse in English. Great Britain: Penguin

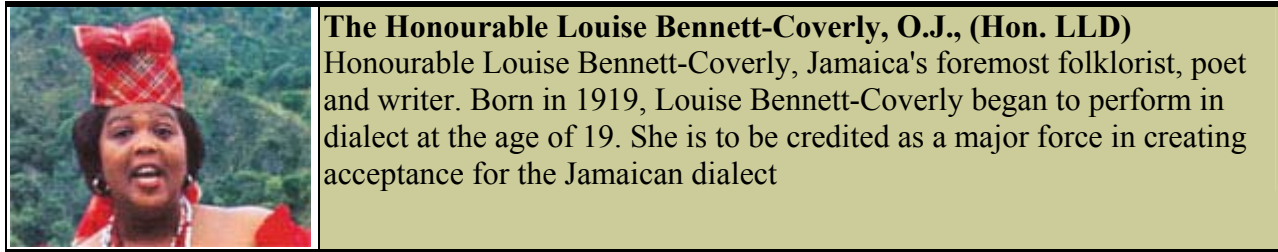
Evan Jones was born at Hector's River, Portland, Jamaica in 1927, the son of a banana planter. He was educated at Munro College and later at Haverford College in Pennsylvania and Wadham College, Oxford, where he was awarded a BA Hons. in 1952. He taught English literature at the George School, and at Wesleyan University in Connecticut. He moved to England in 1956, and has since made writing his profession. His poetry includes '*The Song of the Banana Man*' and the '*Lament of the Banana Man*' which have been anthologized widely. Of the poem, Jones says

Song of the Banana man was written as a memory of my childhood
and a tribute to my county. For I was born in one of the chief
banana-growing parts of Jamaica – Hector's River, Eastern Portland.
My father was a prominent banana planter there. (Walmsley, p. 144)

Song of the Banana man, written in 1952, was a “conscious experiment to find a distinctly Caribbean voice” (Burnett, p. 412). His television work includes the documentary drama series 'The Fight Against Slavery' (BBC, 1975). His films include *King and Country* (1964), *Funeral in Berlin* (1966), *Escape to Victory* (1981) and *Champions* (1984). Other writing includes a biography of Las Casas, *Protector of the Indians* (Nelson, N.Y., 1958), *Junior Language Arts of the Caribbean* (Longman, 1977-1983), *Tales of the Caribbean* (Ginn & Co., 1984), and *Skylarking*, a novel for children (Longman, 1993), also published in France as *Adventures sur la planète Knos* (Musée Dapper, 1997). *Stone Haven* was originally published in 1993.

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Walmsley, Anne (Ed.) (1968). *The Sun's Eye*. United Kingdom: Longman Group and from: <http://www.heinemann.com/shared/Authors/767.asp>, retrieved December 9, 2002.



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Louise Bennett has been recognized as the foremost West Indian female to employ the Creole idiom for promoting the acceptance of a diasporic wisdom embedded in the Jamaican poetic tradition. Unlike poets Una Marson (1905-1965) and Claude McKay (1898-1948) who experimented with the Jamaican Creole, all of Bennett's works (1943 to present) are written and performed in the Jamaican vernacular (Bailey, 1992). 'Miss Lou', her performance persona, has performed her work professionally since 1938. She has written weekly columns for the Jamaica Daily Gleaner, and worked in radio, television and on stage. In 1945, she won a scholarship to the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in London. In Britain she worked for the BBC and was also in repertory companies. She has toured and lectured in the Americas, Europe and Africa (Burnett, 1986).

Biography from:

Bailey, L. L. (1992). *We are all contributing to life: A chat with Louise Bennett*. The Caribbean Writer, 12.

Burnett, P.(Ed.) (1986). *The Penguin Book of Caribbean Verse*. Great Britain: Penguin

Bennett, L. (1993). *Aunty Roachy Seh*. Jamaica, W.I.: Sangster's Book Stores.

Morris, M. (1993). Introduction. In Bennett, p. vii-xii.