



## *Language and Jamaican Literature*

by Velma Pollard

ABSTRACT: Disrespected literatures are written in disrespected languages. Languages are usually disrespected when the status of the people who speak them is low. In post-plantation societies the respected language is the European language brought by the people who colonised the country. The disrespected language is usually a creole born in the plantation environment where overseers speaking European languages and enslaved people speaking West African languages were forced to interact. In Jamaica the respected official language is English and the disrespected popular language is Jamaica Creole. The languages are lexically related and so give the impression of being closer than they are. In fact, Jamaican Creole is still regarded as “broken English” by people who have not paid attention to the linguistic analyses which indicate a strong structural relationship to certain West African languages. These two languages, the official and the popular have accommodated each other in the Jamaican environment with speaker and situation determining use. A fascinating feature of this accommodation is the ability of the individual to switch from one language to the other within the same speech event.

This paper hopes to illustrate how I and other Jamaican writers have infused the formal/official language in which most of us write, with the popular language and so have enriched the fabric that is the language in which Jamaican literature is written.



Disrespected Literatures are written in Disrespected Languages. I am from Jamaica where the official language is Jamaican English, a respected language, and the popular language is Jamaican Creole, commonly called Patwa, the disrespected language. Disrespected languages are hardly given the status of "language" except by linguists. They are called dialects or they are described as broken versions of respected languages to which they are usually related lexically. So some people describe the Jamaican popular language as "broken English". I have said elsewhere that if that is what it is, it is broken into many very small pieces. The truth is that languages gain status from their speakers. An eminent linguist (Max Weinreich) quoting an unnamed friend, remarked that a language is a dialect with an army and a navy. Jamaican Creole, Patwa, even if it used the salaries of all its speakers could hardly sustain an army and a navy.

#### BACKGROUND: ORIGINS

Jamaican Creole, like the other Caribbean Creole languages was born on the plantation where black enslaved workers and white plantation supervisors co-existed. Languages of Africa and languages of Europe were forced to interact in a super/sub-ordinate relationship. The supervisors spoke European languages and the enslaved, African languages. Always the master labels the landscape so in Jamaica the words of the language came mostly from English, the language of the master and the structure, the grammar and the rhythm from Africa, the continent from which the enslaved were brought/bought. Africans, learning the master's language fitted his words to their grammar. So in the French Caribbean you have Creoles with words related to French and in the English Caribbean, Creoles with words related to English. These New World languages emerging in plantation situations were and still are languages of the people.

Over time the two languages have come to accommodate each other, the one official, the other popular. The most fascinating feature of the accommodation is the ability of individual speakers to switch from one language to the other sometimes in the same speech event. This is "code switching" which you might have read about in other dual language situations. Let me illustrate this switching in a short poem "Cut language" dedicated to one of my grandsons, Stephen, who is a typical literate Jamaican boy.

"Cut Language"  
(for Stephen)

Wrapping your tongue  
round words  
Stephen man-  
oevering  
"spinsters and  
bachelors"



how many learn to spell  
but never practise  
words  
my grandson  
you will be  
wordsman  
claiming this English  
language  
other people's  
anguish  
claiming our  
patwa  
switching easy  
when reason calls  
"I saw the lightning  
leaping through the house  
I heard the thunder clap  
an Nanny bawl out 'Jiizas Krai'"  
Children across the wall  
offend  
and you defend  
with "gwe bwai  
no bada wi"  
didn't I tell them  
everytime  
bilingual is the lick?

Jamaicans had been writing for many years before the popular language started to appear in print. It came in slowly at the turn of the century: Claude McKay in poetry, Vic Reid in prose. Before them we wrote exclusively in Jamaican English. In the last century, Patwa started to appear more regularly: Olive Senior and Lorna Goodison among others included in their collections, stories written in Patwa. Spoken word poets speaking directly to their audiences invariably use Patwa with English being introduced from time to time to represent particular characters. Most writers from my community still narrate in English but represent characters in the language they would ordinarily speak, whether it is English or some version of Patwa. So in the poem printed above, Stephen uses Patwa when he is quoting Nanny, the household helper, and when he is addressing boys across the fence.

I need to pay special tribute to the late, great Louise Bennet (Miss Lou 1919-2006) who started out writing poetry in English but soon decided it could not represent the people whose experiences she wanted to write about. And she was faithful, using Patwa in poem, song and story over more than half a century. What is more, she was very conscious of the hypocrisy in the attitude of a certain section of the population to the languages of the society. All efforts to make Patwa one of the official languages of Jamaica have failed. English is the language of Jamaica. And if you ask any Jamaican what language Jamaicans speak, he or she will say English, though in fact we speak both English and Patwa. A Jamaican will use Patwa to tell you that he speaks English: "A English me a talk". Bennett speaks eloquently about that misleading position:



You go to school and you are taught to read and write in one language but the language is not the one you talk normally... Parents are always telling you to talk right you know but you never pay much attention for sometimes when they were talking it is the same language they are talking to you in ("Miss Louise Bennett"<sup>1</sup>)

What I hope to convey here in this paper is a sense of how myself and other Jamaican writers creating for a reading audience have exploited the environment in which respected and disrespected languages interact. I write in English for the most part but Patwa appears sometimes in a word, in a short phrase or in a sentence. Below are a few of my poems which make use of both languages. You will notice how just a few words from the disrespected language gives the poem a certain flavour.

The first is "Crown Point" which is the title poem of my first collection. Crown Point is really a Hotel in Tobago (the sister island to Trinidad in the Southern Caribbean) but in this poem it is that and more. This poem celebrates my Grandmother (Pollard, *Crown Point* 9-10).

"Crown Point"

The sea hums endlessly  
Stars through the darkness  
wake my homespun peace...

'...A see mi great granfather  
jumping hopscotch and playing marble...'  
I see MY grandmother praying  
'...Bless the Lord oh my soul  
and all that is within me  
bless his holy name...'

and the round green world of penny-royal  
smells the room  
through windows cool and sweet  
and khus-khus from the cupboard  
counter smells

On the shelf her pan  
a miniature suitcase black and red  
with stamps and old receipts and dust  
there too her bible large and black  
its file of leaves in red  
turned to us kneeling  
this bible full...  
God's words and other words  
birth dates and marriages  
and deaths

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C181G\\_s7h-s&t=325s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C181G_s7h-s&t=325s).



... and forget not all his benefits  
who forgiveth all thy iniquities  
who healeth all thy diseases  
who satisfieth thy mouth with good things...'

Thus speaks my Gran  
through this Tobago silence...  
and recreates the order of her room  
and recreates the aura of her God  
and speaks so clearly in me...

Perhaps the clutter of my life  
obscures her voice  
Perhaps the clutter of my mind  
frustrates her  
streaming to my consciousness  
Perhaps her mystic to me  
waits my silence  
waits my tomorrows' spaces.

The next is a different kind of poem. It is one of several I have written about animals. It begins with a Jamaican proverb. We are full of them: pithy statements of universal truths. The proverb at the beginning translates to English: Pig asks his mother why her mouth is so long and she replies, "You are growing, you will find out."

"Mule"  
(for Herbie Walker)

*Hag ask him muma wa mek im mout lang so im se yu a grow yu wi si*

Mules  
dragging heavy carts  
when I was young  
up unpaved country roads  
suddenly  
would seem to kneel  
*no bucky massa*

the cartman  
whip in hand  
angry would shower  
blow on blow  
and I would watch  
the mule face pain  
and shudder  
'stubborn (like mule)' he'd hiss  
'stubborn' he'd puff and blow  
his nostrils swell and shrink

and other sweaty, musceled men  
come crowding round



to help him lift her  
save his cargo  
urge him on  
'lick im' 'lick im'  
they'd say  
'stubborn like mule'

they'd lift the cargo  
not the mule  
and slowly slowly  
when the cart was light  
the lady mule would rise

Now my own knees  
swollen and tight  
would wish to buckle  
mule-like in their pain  
*no bucky massa*  
only my pride...

and only now  
I understand  
(Pollard, *The Best Philosophers* 12)

Now one of my anti-colonial poems. It is about Sir Francis Drake who I consider a pirate and who, for some reason, I have always hated. You will note, in this poem the Patwa line "dis wan fi ded bad" (which translates to English 'this one deserves a terrible death') said by an imaginary decision maker. It is accompanied by a common folk disparaging gesture which reinforces the words.

"Portobello"

I stood  
where Drake fell  
Francis  
forever on my mind

I dont remember  
how they say he fell  
or who (if anyone) felled him  
I only know  
forever I have felt  
this senior pirate  
honoured till my time  
remembered still  
in names of great hotels  
and water passages  
deserved to fall

somebody must have said  
cutting her eye



'dis wan fi ded bad'  
here he died  
how bad I cannot tell

green hills look towering down  
on that fair strand  
that looks in turn out to a tranquil sea  
from ancient look-outs standing  
still (remembering all the El moro  
signatures of Spain)

now little children  
clamber up the ramp  
looking at cannons  
touching their rusted mouths  
free from all fear  
(the smell of powder  
fired from these guns  
envelops all my air)

no tablet holds his name  
only ancestral murmurs  
mouthing words  
remind me  
here he died  
aquí se murió  
el falleció  
these words in syllables  
his spirit does not recognize

yet it is fitting that he should die here  
(unless he could die everywhere)  
here where a tract of land  
links the Atlantic and Pacific  
here where best re-  
presents all island histories  
new nomads wandering...

how could Drake know  
that galleons would bring here  
slaves yearning to fulfill  
dreams that were dreamt  
before their fathers' futures  
dreams to construct  
the awesome interlocking  
locks lakes  
Canal  
that would connect  
Carib and South sea  
(against divine design?)  
this jut of land  
making the two worlds one

so here I stand  
smelling the blood of Drake



smelling gun power  
seeing mingled sailors soldiers  
spirits pushing metal...  
feeling this deep and  
satisfying end  
conclusion to some things

Drake did die here  
and while I smile  
small children stare and wonder  
whispering underneath their hands  
"la loca"  
(Pollard, *Leaving Traces* 9-11)

And finally, my most anthologised poem. It begins with lines which imitate the sound of a train going up a hill. The sound translates to English "If I catch him I'll crush him" (repeat)

"Fly"

ef a ketch im  
a mash im  
ef a ketch im  
a mash im  
ef a ketch im...

Will you walk into my parlour  
Said the spider to the fly  
It's the prettiest snugliest parlour  
That ever you did spy... And I  
the fly  
inspecting your web  
this skein now then that  
put my microscope eye  
through its intricate weave  
saw valleys of cloud  
blue and serene  
saw acres of grass  
sheltered and green.  
Ephemeral and light  
I rested my life  
and dazzled  
I watched  
you wove me inside  
and dazzled  
I slept  
my cryalis sleep...

\* \* \*



I woke up inside  
no more dazzled and green.  
Awake and alert  
unfolding my wings  
I stretched  
But your skeins  
not delicate now  
resistant and strong  
they wove me inside  
I am trapped  
I can't move  
I can't butterfly  
fly

And you  
perched outside  
your eyes large and clear  
you see acres of green  
you see valleys of cloud  
you can move  
you can fly...  
Now I look through the web  
I look into the void  
I see numberless flies  
training microscope eyes  
through intricate weave  
ANANSI I cry  
ANANSI-SI-SI I hear  
the sky is too vast  
how it scatters my cry  
the sky is too clear  
it hides my despair  
they can't hear  
they can't see  
with their microscope eye...

ef a ketch im  
a mash im  
ef a ketch im  
a mash im

A ketch im... im... im  
(Pollard, *Crown Point* 27-29)

I hope I have illustrated how the respected and disrespected languages both find their place in my poetry but especially how few words of Patwa in a poem predominately in English give the poem a certain flavor, the flavor of a certain culture. In my Prose, the disrespected language is more frequently represented because it comes in the mouth of all the characters who speak it in their day to day interaction.

Mostly I write short fiction and I want to share with you a story on one of my favourite themes, perhaps I should say my pet peeve: Migration. You probably know that Jamaicans go to great lengths to get a visa, a permanent visa if possible, a visitor's



visa at least to get to the United States of America. Before I read my story I want you to hear one of our established poets, Edward Baugh, reacting to the migration phenomenon and impersonating a man trying to get a Visa to come to America. Patwa, the disrespected language, a version of it, which is what such a man would speak, is used throughout the poem which was inspired by the following sign in the waiting room in the US Embassy visa section in Kingston in 1982: "Please have your passport and all documents out and ready for your interview. Kindly keep them dry".

The poem is "Nigger Sweat" (the "N" word is not banned in Jamaica nor in any black country as far as I know) and begins this way:

No disrespect, mi boss  
Just honest nigger sweat;  
well almost, for is true  
some of we trying to fool you  
so we can lose weself  
on the Double R ranch  
to find a little life...

The poet goes on to give the "boss" a lesson about that sweat in History: how it put the aroma in his tobacco, his "choice Virginia", sweetened his cane and made the cotton shine. To top it all in his "nightmare dream" he sees the boss choking and drowning in a "sea of black man sweat" and wakes up shaking with "shame and remorse" because his mother taught him not to "study revenge." (Baugh 1988 in Baugh *Black Sand* 126-127).

And now my short Story:

"My Mother"  
(For Marjorie)

The Lexington Avenue train raced into Fourteenth Street station like a runaway horse and miraculously came to a stop; belching forth such an army of fast-moving bodies that I flattened myself against the stair-rails in sheer terror. But I survived, and after the first flight of stairs, stood near a tiny candyshop in the station, to let them all pass.

I stared, but only at the blacks—the strangers whom this heartless machine had rushed out of Harlem, out of the safety of the familiar 125th Street and into this alien city; to dingy stores and tiny disorganised offices or to other vague connections: Canarsie, Long Island, Jamaica, etc. They were all running, in some way or other—in careless abandon or in crisp, short, overbred paces; the women's girdles and eventually their coats, controlling the obviousness of the movement; the men's coat-tails flapping at the inevitable slit below the rump.

The men, whether they were briefcase types or lunch-pan types, all wore little hats with short brims. It was a cold morning. In New York twenty-three degrees is considered cold. The women didn't need hats. Cheap, curly wigs hugged their temples protecting their black youthfulness and hiding their kinky strands. Fifty acknowledging thirty needs a wig. For some reason the real hairline tells a story even when it is dyed black. And here the merciful cold allowed for the constant sweater or the little scarf that covers the telltale neck.



Everybody was running and everybody looked frightened. But you could see that all this had become natural. This speed was now normal and because they couldn't see their own frightened faces, they couldn't recognise their fright. When you answer long enough to a name that for one reason or another is wrong, and when you live long enough with a face that is always wrong, a frightened look grows on you and becomes an inseparable part of you. I looked at them and became numb with a kind of nameless grief. For I had seen my mother for the first time in all those tense women's faces, in all those heads hiding their age and gentleness beneath the black, curly wigs.

The little journey was a ritual. Very early, the first or second Saturday morning of the month, my grandmother and I would walk to Anne's Ridge and get in the line at the bank. I would sign my name on the money order made out to me and we would soon move from the Foreign Exchange line to the Savings line. I never knew how much money came, for the exchange from dollars to pounds was too much for me to handle, and I never knew how much was saved. But I always felt, one Saturday every month, that we were rich.

Sometimes we stopped in the big Anne's Ridge stores in town and bought a new plate or two, sometimes dress material and, v-e-r-y occasionally, shoes. Then we stopped in the market for the few things Gran didn't plant and Mass Nathan's shop didn't stock.

The journey home was less pleasant. I never ever noticed the hills on the way back, not because they were so much less green but because it took all my energy to think up little stories to help me block out Gran's monthly lecture. It always had to do with ingratitude. I'm not sure now how she knew the extent of my ingratitude long before I even understood the concept of gratitude. It had to do with the faithfulness of her daughter working hard in America to support me so I could "come to something" and my not trying to show thanks. I was no great writer, but Gran saw to it that I scratched something on an airletter form to my mother every month and that something always included thanks for the money.

Gran never made it clear in what nonverbal ways I should express thanks. I had to do well at school; but the teachers had a sort of foolproof mechanism for assuring that—those were the days of the rod and I meant to be a poor customer for that. So school was okay. But the guidelines at home were less clear. An action that one day was a sign of ingratitude was, next day, a normal action. It seems that the assessment of my behaviour was a very arbitrary and subjective exercise and depended partly on Gran's moods.

Now I understand what Gran's dilemma was like. She herself did not know what she had to produce from the raw material she was given if her daughter's sacrifice was not to be meaningless. She had been set a great task and she was going to acquit herself manfully at all costs, but she was swimming in very strange waters. Her daughter could only work and send money, and she couldn't offer guidelines either—only vague hints like the necessity for me to speak properly, however that should be.

Every year we expected my mother home on vacation and every year she wrote that she was sorry she couldn't make it. But she always sent, as if to represent her, a large round box that people insisted on calling a barrel. It was full of used clothes of all sorts, obviously chosen with little regard for my size or my grandmother's size. I never went to the collecting ceremony. This involved a trip to Kingston and endless red-tape. I merely waited at the gate till the bus turned the curve, gave its two honks and slid along the loose stones to a halt to let my grandmother out. Then the sideman would roll the barrel along the top of the bus and shove it to his comrade. Immediately the bus would honk again and move on.

Nothing smells exactly like my mother's boxes. It was a smell compounded from sweat and mustiness and black poverty inheriting white castoffs. I still remember one of those dresses from the box. With today's eyes I can see that it was a woman's frock, a short woman's voile frock for cocktail parties or an important lunch. And I was nine or ten then. But I wore it with pride, first to the Sunday School Christmas concert and then to numerous "social" events thereafter. And even now, that low-slung waist or anything resting lightly on the hips has particular charm for me, whether or not the beholder's eye shares my judgement... There were blouses and shoes and hats; something to fit almost everyone in my grandmother's endless chronicle of cousins. We accepted our ill-fitting fits and wore them with surprising confidence.



Every year we expected my mother home on vacation. But she never came. The year I was in third form they flew her body home. I hadn't heard that she was ill. I felt for months afterwards that my very last letter should have said something different, something more, should have shown more gratitude than the others. But I could not possibly have known that that would be the last.

When the coffin arrived, it was clear that nobody from Jamaica had touched that coffin. Sam Isaacs may have kept it a few days but that was all. The whole thing was foreign—large, heavy, silvery—straight from the USA. And when they opened the lid in the church, so she could lie in state and everybody could look and cry, it was clear that my mother too had been untouched by local hands. She had come straight from the USA.

When my mother left Jamaica, I couldn't have been more than five or six, so any memory I had of her was either very vague or very clear and original—carved out of my own imagination with patterns all mixed up, of other people's mothers and of those impersonal clothes in the annual barrel. The woman in the coffin was not my mother. The woman in the purple dress and black shoes (I didn't even know they buried people in shoes), the highly powdered face, framed by jet-black curls and covered lightly with a mantilla, was not like any of the several images I had traced.

The funeral couldn't be our funeral. It was a spectacle. I don't suppose more than half the people there had actually known my mother. But it was a Sunday, and the whole week that had elapsed between the news of her death and the actual funeral made it possible for people from far and near to make the trip to our village. Those who were from surrounding districts but had jobs in the city used one stone to kill two birds—visit the old folks at home, and come up to "Miss Angie daughter funeral".

It wasn't our funeral. It was a spectacle.

The afternoon was hot; inside the church was hotter. Outside, I stood as far as I could from the grave and watched several of them pointing at me, their eyes full of tears: "Dats de little wan she lef wid Miss Angie." Near to me was a woman in a fur hat, close fitting, with a ribbon at the side. She wore a dress of the same yellow gold as the hat, long earrings and costume jewellery of the same yellow gold.

I could hear the trembling voices from the grave—

"I know not oh I know not  
What joys await me there..."

—and fur hat, beside me, trying to outdo them so her friend could hear her:

"A didn know ar but a sih dih face; is fat kill ar noh?" (My mother was rather busty but that was as far as the fat went).

She didn't wait for an answer but continued: "A neva sih wan of dese deds that come back from England yet." (No one had taken the trouble to tell her it was America not England.)

"But de reason why a come to see ar is becaaz I was dere meself an a always seh ef a ded, dey mus sen mih back. Is now a sih ow a woulda look! But tengad a lucky a come back pon me own steam... An you sih dis big finneral shi have? She wouldn't have get it in Englan' you know. Since one o'clock she woulda gaan an' if they cremate ar, while we drinking a cuppa tea, she bunnin'."

"Wat?" asked her audience at last. "Deh gives tea? An peepie siddung?"

"Man, deh put dem in someting like ovin, an by dih time we jus' drink dih tea, you get dih ashes an' you gaan."

They had stopped singing about my mother's joys; the slow heavy dirge was now "Abide with me", sung with the Baptist rhythm sad and slow, though I hardly think it is possible for that particular song to be anything but sad and slow, Baptist or no Baptist. I looked towards the crowd. They were supporting my grandmother. I knew she wasn't screaming. She was never given to screaming. She was just shaking as great sobs shook her body and her hands seemed to hold up her stomach. It was pointless my trying to comfort her; they wouldn't let me. Two old women were holding her, Miss Emma, her good friend, and Cousin Jean, who was more like a sister than a cousin.



Next day I went alone to my mother's grave to push my own little bottle with maidenhair fern into the soft, red earth. When all their great wreaths with purple American ribbons had long faded, my maidenhair fern started to grow.

I had never known my mother. I had known her money and her barrels and my grandmother's respect for her. I had not wept at her funeral. But that morning, in the subway station at Fourteenth Street, in the middle of nowhere, in the midst of a certain timelessness, I wept for her, unashamedly, and for the peace at Anne's Ridge that she never came back to know, after the constant madness, after the constant terror of all the Fourteenth Street subway stations in that horrifying workhouse.

I saw my tears water the maidenhair fern on her grave to a lush green luxuriance. I was glad I was a guest in the great USA and a guest didn't need a wig. I would take no barrels home with me. I saw my mother's ancient grave covered again with its large and gaudy wreaths. Like the mad old man in Brooklyn, I lifted from a hundred imaginary heads a hundred black and curly wigs and laid them all on the ancient grave. And I laid with them all the last shapeless, ill-fitting clothes from the last barrel. The last of the women had hurried away. I wept for my mother. But I rejoiced that the maidenhair fern was lush and that we had no longer need for gaudy wreaths. (Pollard 1989 in Pollard, *Considering Woman* 38-43)

## CONCLUSION

I began this discussion with a poem "Cut Language" written in English with a few phrases of Patwa. I leave you with the words from perhaps our best-known spoken word artist in Jamaica, Mutabaruka. It is a poem in Patwa with a few phrases of English. It too treats migration towards which this poet expresses strong negative feelings. He has a certain attitude to the illegal immigrant who he thinks has shunned Jamaica. The poem is *MY GREAT SHUN* and the following verse illustrates nicely a situation in which the disrespected language is paramount and the respected language appears only as a translation of a line:

but yu lef tinkin yu woulda betta deh  
but tings nuh betta... betta weh?  
yu visa expire  
yu affi tun liar  
yu so bold  
sweatin in de cold  
*you are so bold sweatin in the cold*  
(Mutabaruka 4, my emphasis)

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