

Colleen Gilgan
Final Connections Paper
20th Century British Literature

Many Caribbean writers choose to use the dialect of the islands in their writing to represent the voice of the people from this area and to make the characters more personal and human. There are many dialects of different languages all over the world, and using a dialect in the telling of a story simply better represents the culture and the people involved. Though different dialects and accents have been explored in writing, the use of the Caribbean dialect is much more of a challenge towards the traditional writing standard due to centuries of racism, both internally and overt. The existence of the dialect itself was created by slave trade and the imposition of language and culture from imperialistic nations. Poet and scholar Edward Kamau Brathwaite discusses this in his book, *History of the Voice: The Development of Nation Language in Anglophone Caribbean Poetry*:

We in the Caribbean have a [...] kind of plurality: we have English, which is the imposed language on much of the archipelago. It is an imperial language, as are French, Dutch, and Spanish. We also have what we call creole English, which is a mixture of English and an adaptation that English took in the new environment of the Caribbean when it became mixed with other imported languages. We have also what is called nation language, which is the kind of English spoken by the people who were brought to the Caribbean, not the official English now, but the language of slaves and labourers, the servants who were brought in (Brathwaite, 5-6).

Nation language, a term coined by Brathwaite, in the Caribbean was born out of a need to both disguise and maintain the original culture, trying to have both cultures at the same time (Brathwaite, 16). The language is unique in that it takes the English language and ignores the pentameter and any semblance of its traditional usage. It is completely oppositional to standard English, rooted in racial, cultural, and classist oppression, making it always political in some form. This political statement, however, comes from the use of the language. Brathwaite writes, “it is not English that is the agent. It is not language, but people, who make revolutions” (Brathwaite).

Because of its social and political history, writers who choose to use the nation language of the Caribbean and of their culture and ancestry in their writing are deliberately making a choice to do so and not conform to “traditional” literary styles. These writers are immediately questioned for this choice, where the inclusion of a dialect from a European nation, for example, would not be thought twice about. In the writings of Louise Bennett, Una Marson, and Linton Kwesi Johnson, the Caribbean nation language is used to aid the statement being made towards the culture of England or the “other-ing” that occurs between the English and Caribbean cultures. These three poets come from different generations, specifically Marson writing from a pre-Windrush perspective, Bennett writing after the Windrush scandal, and Johnson writing as a member of the first generation post-Windrush. They all, however, make similar statements about the racism and prejudice embedded in English culture that has carried through these generations to the present day.

Una Marson, born in 1905 in Jamaica, became a literary voice for black working-class Jamaicans, creating a space for future Caribbean writers. Her writings made statements on anti-colonialism, antiracism, feminism, and classism. Her first collections of poetry followed the

traditional European poetry style, but she eventually transitioned to include the language and culture of Jamaica, as well as more relevant subjects relating to the working-class Jamaicans living in England. As a black woman working to become a successful poet and writer during this time, her existence became a political statement, and she used her influence to raise awareness to cultural and political issues (Tomlinson).

A number of Marson's poems deal with the issue of racism, sexism, or classism, as well as the gray areas between, in a more direct message. Even her milder poems, however, do not let these issues take a backseat. In her poem, "Quashie Comes to London," the speaker speaks in dialect about living in London and missing their homeland. There are many things about England that they enjoy, such as the music, movies, and plays; however, they still know they do not belong in this new place. The people of England love "de coloured stars" and "de darkies' tunes," but still ostracize black people from daily life. There is a disconnect between the two cultures, which is apparent later in the poem when the speaker is at a restaurant and asks for "some ripe breadfruit, some fresh ackee and saltfish too an' dumplins hot will suit." The waitress does not have any of these foods and brings Quashie back something that "look like pigeon feed." The speaker misses the warm weather, the food, and the people from back home. No matter how much there is to enjoy in England, they will always be the "other" and be surrounded by "white face." Marson discusses the struggle that all immigrants face with the different identities of both their home and host nations, but this is even more apparent for black immigrants who also face racism and prejudice for this identity or lack thereof. This poem opened up a discussion between future writers on black identities and what it means regarding the African diaspora (Tomlinson).

The use of dialect in “Quashie Comes to London” furthers the distinction and divide between the culture and identity of the speaker and the people of England they interact with throughout the poem. The nation language gives Caribbean readers something to identify with, especially considering the subject of the poem. For white readers, however, the dialect makes a social and political statement against the system that both encourages and forces black Caribbean people to immigrate to England, appropriates their culture, and yet also oppresses them and shames them for their use of this same culture. “Quashie Comes to London” was written in 1937, only a few years before the start of the Windrush scandal that emphasized the divide between Caribbean immigrants and native white Englishers.

Louise Bennett, born in Jamaica in 1919, achieved similar success but was extremely influential in unapologetically creating a West Indian voice in poetry. Her work uses the nation language and deals with racial and cultural subject matter exclusively, making her the main literary activist to bring the Caribbean language and culture to the forefront. In an interview, Bennett discussed her deliberate choice of writing in dialect, saying, “I began to wonder why more of our poets and writers were not taking more of an interest in the kind of language usage and the kind of experiences of living which were all around us, and writing in the medium of dialect instead of writing in the same old English way about Autumn and things like that” (Narain, 53). The performances of her work, and the inflections and rhythms that come from speech performed aloud, have had even more of an impact on the representation of the Caribbean voice.

Bennett’s poetry is even more politically charged, which is emphasized by her choice to exclusively write in dialect as well as the time period in which she writes. In her poem, “Colonization in Reverse,” the speaker talks about how people are leaving Jamaica to get “a

big-time job” in England, but it is not all that it is made out to be. The people need to work and struggle or “settle fe de dole,” but there are some that take advantage of the system. There is a jovial, humorous tone throughout the poem, which is used to hide its political message. The tone of Bennett’s writing has created different interpretations in its analysis. Rex Nettleford wrote, “[it] is a classic of her brand of satire and the biting irony of the situation is brought out even more forcibly when Miss Bennett recites this with her peculiar relish and clean fun!” In contrast, Carolyn Cooper argued that the tone was genuine in celebrating the influence of Jamaican culture as it creates through its colonization (Naraine, 73). With any interpretation, the statement made by the poem is clear - though England is thought to be this powerful colonizing nation, this new culture is coming in and colonizing in reverse, making it their own through their culture and language.

The message of “Colonization in Reverse” is only deepened by the use of dialect, giving the speaker a distinct Creole identity and emphasizing the difference between England and its new inhabitants. The poem was written in the immediate aftermath of the Windrush scandal, where hundreds to thousands of West Indian immigrants came to England to help fill work shortages after the war. These people were met with extreme racism and prejudice from white Englanders. White opposition to the West Indian immigration grew during the 1960s, as well as black and Caribbean nationalist movements in response (Fulani, 88). Bennett’s poem discusses the very nature of what was developing between these two groups and what would be a huge historical movement that would affect thousands of people. The influence of the Caribbean on England during this time in both positive and negative ways cannot be denied and is well described by Bennett as “colonization in reverse.”

Linton Kwesi Johnson, born in 1952, moved to Britain from Jamaica in his adolescence during this racially and culturally charged period. He grew up surrounded by different political influences and decided to create his own “poetic language in order to overcome the traditions of linguistic and mental colonization imposed by the educational apparatus in the British colonies of the Caribbean” (Dawson). He began his career as a dub lyricist, creating poems to be performed over reggae dub tracks. This form of poetry was even more so distinguished by the significance of public performance. Johnson related the oral performance of his work to the honoring of the Jamaican oral tradition while still using subject matter relevant to black people living in Britain at the time.

LKJ’s poem, “Inglan is a Bitch,” takes a similar socio-political stance to those stated previously but to an even farther and more direct extreme. The recurring stanza, or chorus, states, “Inglan is a bitch, dere’s no escapin it. Inglan is a bitch, dere’s no runnin’ whey fram it.” England, or “Inglan” in this case, is considered a trap that Caribbean people are lured into and then stuck in a cycle of work, underappreciation, and racism that they cannot escape from. These people are forced to do “duh clean wok” and “duh dotty wok” but are still considered lazy. Johnson’s dub poetry makes a direct statement against the social, political, racial, cultural, and class systems of England. Setting these texts to reggae music has an effect, similar to Louise Bennett’s humorous tone, of hiding the message and making it more digestible for the listener. His words, however, are so direct and charged that the music does little to take away from its power but add to the cultural statement he is making.

Johnson’s use of dialect, reggae music, and oral performance honors and emphasizes the traditions and influence of his culture while using it to make a statement against the nation that he now lives in. He has created his own unique sound to bring awareness to the issues of black

people living in post-Windrush England. He is of the first generation to arrive after the initial impact of the Windrush scandal and grew up dealing with its aftereffects. His poems discuss the violence inflicted by police and a rise of neofascists, incarceration, and a denial of opportunities in education and employment (Fulani, 89). This time period faced a power struggle between the state and its people, as the Windrush generation and their children realized they would be making England their new home and began fighting for their rights. LKJ's poems discuss these fights for equality first hand, using the nation language of the Caribbean to honor where they came from.

Una Marson, Louise Bennett, and Linton Kwesi Johnson all make a statement in their actual poems and through their use of language. The nation language of the Caribbean is extremely powerful and influential, and these poets use this to their advantage. By reclaiming the language and culture that an imperialist nation has tried to diminish, they have made a powerful statement on the importance of the language, their culture, and their homeland. As Brathwaite clarifies, it is people who make revolutions, as these poets have revolutionized the literary world.

Works Cited

“Behind the Mask - Carnival Politics and British Identity in Linton Kwesi Johnson's Dub

Poetry.” *Mongrel Nation: Diasporic Culture and the Making of Postcolonial Britain*, by Ashley Dawson, University of Michigan Press, 2007.

Brathwaite, Kamau. *History of the Voice: the Development of Nation Language in Anglophone*

Caribbean Poetry. New Beacon Books, 2011.

Fulani, Ifeona. “New Ethnicities.” *Caribbean Quarterly*, 1 Dec. 2015, pp. 82–99.

“Linton Kwesi Johnson - Inqlan Is A Bitch.” *YouTube*, 24 Sept. 2007, youtu.be/Zq9OpJYck7Y.

Narain, Denise DeCaires. *Contemporary Caribbean Women's Poetry: Making Style*. Routledge,

2004.

Tomlinson, Lisa. “Una Marson: An Anti-Colonial, Feminist, Anti-Racist, Pan-Africanist

Champion of Good Causes.” *The Feminist Wire*, 19 Mar. 2014,

thefeministwire.com/2014/03/una-marson-anti-colonial-feminist-anti-racist-pan-africanist

[-champion-good-causes/](http://thefeministwire.com/2014/03/una-marson-anti-colonial-feminist-anti-racist-pan-africanist-champion-good-causes/).