

#4

## Identity and Struggle in Jamaican Talk

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*And so Ashanti, Congo, Yoruba, all that mighty coast of western Africa was imported into the Caribbean. And we had the arrival in our area of a new language structure. . . . [O]fficially the conquering peoples—the Spaniards, the English, the French, and the Dutch—insisted that the language of public discourse and conversation, of obedience, command and conception should be English, French, Spanish or Dutch. They did not wish to hear people speaking Ashanti or any of the Congolese languages.*

—BRATHWAITE (1984, p. 7)

Talk is central to Caribbean life. In the preceding epigram, Brathwaite (1984) captured not only the centrality of talk to Caribbean life but the historical locus of its contentiousness as well. Brathwaite contended that Caribbean people value orality because we live in the open air, often in conditions of poverty, and because we come from a historical experience that has forced us to rely on our very *breath* rather than on paraphernalia like books and museums and machines (p. 19). Jamaicans can be readily distinguishable by their talk. Like people of many other nationalities, they share common cadences, intonations, and accentuations unique to their country. In both what they say and how they say it, Jamaicans demonstrate their consciousness of orality and of its important role in their sense of being in the world.

A cursory look at Jamaicans and their talk can provide insights into the people of this largest English-speaking Caribbean nation, who number just over 2.5 million and who live on 4,411 square miles of what Columbus discovered in 1494 to be “the fairest

island eyes have beheld.”<sup>1</sup> Over 1 million other Jamaicans live outside Jamaica, primarily in the United States. Regardless of where they reside, Jamaicans’ identity and experiences are revealed through their talk, as we shall explore.

### Background

In *Beyond a Boundary*, C.L.R. James (1976) aptly described Caribbean people as living at the intersection of Europe and Africa in the new world. We are a people born in the cultural cross-current created when the marauding presence of the white supremacist spirit of Europe met the enslaved yet stubborn, unyielding spirit of Africa.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, we have always negotiated a multiplicity of cultures, including the dominating cultures of our European enslavers and colonizers as well as the dominated cultures of our African ancestors.

Such a scenario makes for a Caribbean history that includes “degradation, mimicry, violence, and blocked possibilities.” Even so, Caribbean people are

“rebellious, syncretic, and creative” (Clifford, 1988, p. 15).<sup>3</sup> We are constantly manipulating “vitality, elan, and creativity into a viable sense of identity” (Lowenthal, 1972, p. xiii).

As a people we have had to establish for ourselves survival mechanisms, including thriving with less than adequate resources, or in Jamaican terms, you *tun yu han an mek* fashion. This is in the face of a colonial culture, in Jamaica, that declared inferior what was local while coupling blackness with subordination and whiteness with supremacy. For colonial Jamaica, and in many instances also for postcolonial Jamaica, what Nettleford (1989, p. 293) called “the imperial metropole” has been the center of culture, “high culture.” Mimicry of things English, and later things American, and degradation of indigenous products and practices have been commonplace.

Still, it is important to note that as early as 1938, Jamaica sought to guide the development of its people’s creative energies. And, as Nettleford (1989) did point out, Jamaica has been outstanding for its support of cultural development. Yet, as Rodney (1975) contended, advancement in Jamaica was “determined by how non-black the blackest” of us could be (p. 8). As a result, many Jamaicans rebelled against the degradation of everything black and local and adopted a creative mode of struggle for survival for their own sense of selfhood and dignity.

This creativity is evident in Jamaica’s eclectic cultural practices, including religion, entertainment, and other practices of socialization such as storytelling (Cooper, 1993). In entertainment, for example, Jamaica’s creativity was demonstrated in early, local cultural productions like mento and ska, the precursors of rock steady and reggae music. Mento and ska gained government support and international acceptance only after disinherited black Jamaicans embraced them and showed that there was an audience, in Britain as well, for this music (Rodney, 19675). In this regard, Michael de Certeau’s (1984) celebration of the inventiveness of North Africans living in France, in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, is equally applicable to Caribbean people in general and Jamaicans in particular, that is, in the practice of their daily survival “art of making do” (p. 30). Our focus is Jamaican talk.

Jamaicans are known for telling elaborate tales among themselves about themselves. The well-documented Anancy stories are the preeminent forms employed by Jamaican raconteurs to weave their particular vision of the epic struggles of Jamaican life. These anecdotes often reflect the ancient practice valorized and identified by the Sophists as *metis*, practical and cunning intelligence deployed as part of the effort to survive in the borderlands—the terrain between the legitimized and the delegitimized (Conquergood, 1992). This domain includes issues of race, identity, and local culture, all highly contested in both colonial and postcolonial Jamaica. Here Jamaicans employed day-to-day tactics to contest the strategies employed by the dominant powers from the white supremacist slave powers to the present. I use the terms *tactics* and *strategies* here, following de Certeau (1984), to point to the daily survival feats of Jamaicans as based on their acting at the opportune time in each given situation in contrast to the colonial regime’s strategy: the assumption of “a place that can be circumscribed as *proper*” (p. xix). Surviving in this realm of instability and uncertainty, under the panoptic gaze of a dominant colonial regime and among its locally appointed vassals, required special skills. Jamaicans developed such skills and survived slavery and colonialism by their wits and their rhetorical skills as evidenced in their talk. Surviving and thriving in this environment is no easy task, for as Cooper (1993) inveighs, “social mobility in Jamaica requires the shedding of the old skin of early socialization: mother tongue, mother culture, mother wit—the feminised discourse of voice, identity and native knowledge” (pp. 2–3).

### Struggle and Identity in Jamaican Talk

Talk is an area in which Jamaicans demonstrate their particular brand of struggle and survival through creative energy and a sense of independence mixed with syncretic tendencies. Jamaica’s official language is English. However, this description is like the eye of a Caribbean hurricane revealing nothing of the swirling winds of linguistic fury that remains Jamaica’s battle over language. Jamaicans’ use of English reflects both a clash of cultures and linguistic traditions and an awareness that English is an imposed

language. As a result, there are various types of English spoken in Jamaica and throughout the Caribbean. Brathwaite (1984) identified standard English, Creole English (a Caribbean adaptation involving a mixing of English and other imported languages), and "nation language" or Jamaican (before that referred to as *Patois* "the language of slaves and labourers"; pp. 5-6). We discuss each of these with a focus on Jamaican.

Although English is Jamaica's official language, an overwhelming majority of Jamaicans talk Jamaican. This is variously referred to as the language of the streets, the language of the people, Jamaican folk language, or just Jamaican. This speech has been documented by Frederic Gomes Cassidy (1961) in *Jamaica Talk*; its vocabulary has been catalogued, if not legitimized, for the literary community by Cassidy and Le Page (1980) in the *Dictionary of Jamaican English*; and it has been popularized by Jamaican poets and musicians. Cassidy and Le Page described this folk speech as Jamaican English, a Creole language, "an amalgam of some features of English with others drawn from a variety of African languages" (p. xiii). Despite Cassidy and Le Page's substantial orthography, it was through Bob Marley's reggae music that the language gained popular international exposure. At home in Jamaica, the chief proponent of Jamaican speech and the person perhaps most responsible for popularizing this language is leading Jamaican poet Louise Bennett. In her use of the Jamaican language, Bennett is nonpareil.<sup>7</sup>

Bennett (1947) has written (*Jamaican Dialect Poems*) of "the free expression of the people," a mode of utterance that is "unhampered by the rules of (Standard English) grammar" (Bennett, 1966/1975, p. 9). She consciously eschews and even undermines such rules. Jamaican poet Dennis Scott contends that Bennett is the "only poet who has hit the truth about the society in its own language" (p. 9). Nettleford described her as a poet of utterance who uses "the normally spoken language, not the normally written tongue" (p. 11). He noted further that she lives "in an oral tradition where people talked and listened, cross-talked and reported and posses [*sic*], almost to a fault, a high propensity for words—'bad' words, new words, archaic words, 'big,' long, and sonorous words" (p. 11).

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The way a Jamaican uses or "misuses" standard English is a common indicator of class.<sup>4</sup> Educated Jamaicans, often from the middle and upper class, take great pride in their mastery of standard English and often contend to be the best speakers of the language. George Lamming (1960), of Barbados, for example, spoke for many Caribbean people when he claimed, "I can read verse much better than most English poets alive. That is a fact. And I read it [in London] exactly as I would have done in the West Indies" (p. 62).<sup>5</sup> Such a position provides a useful corrective to notions of superiority in anglocentric thought. Unfortunately, however, it also represents in many instances a flight from the local, the "low class," and a reaching for one of the markers of English pedigree—the mastery of English. People living in the Caribbean who embrace this practice are often like the early James (1976): "intellectually [they] live[d] abroad, chiefly in England" (p. 65). This effort to demonstrate a mastery of the "Queen's English" is also fraught with perils, as failed attempts result in embarrassment and sometimes in a loss of social standing.

Creole English results in part from the mixing of English with other imported languages. However, a failed attempt at standard English also typically results in Creole English or what is referred to as broken English with its odd mixtures.<sup>6</sup> To a Jamaican ear the result is often hilarious, with such linguistic slip-page as *the* changed to *de*, *this* changed to *dis*, and several word endings lost in the shuffle. The tourist guides who meet visitors at the Donald Sangster International Airport in Montego Bay or at Norman Manley in Kingston are using a funny mix of English and Jamaican when they say "Welcome to Jamaica, falla backa wi."

Many Jamaicans have an aspirate problem that often emerges in our effort to speak English. The

Jamaican language, then, reflects Jamaicans' love for talk and their desire and willingness to throw off and often mock the official language. The development and usage of Jamaican language is being increasingly recognized for what it is, a protracted resistance and survival effort dating back to the arrival of the Ashanti. Cooper (1993), for example, describes the writings of Bennett and other popular Jamaican poets Jean Breeze and Mikey Smith as "cultural resistance to the hegemony of anglocentricism" (p. 9).

Jamaica has a black majority that has long been marginalized. In this regard the country is more like South Africa than the United States. As Nettleford (1989) notes, "the class structure underlined in colour, continue(d)[s] to appear immutable" (p. 3). That is, the Jamaican language is usually associated with the lowest economic class. Further, the Jamaican body politic is marked by a "high/low-euro/afrocentric cultural divide" (Cooper, 1993, p. 8). Indeed, if one is able to use only Jamaican with no efficacy in standard English, this is usually a clear marker of a lack of formal education. (However, following the radical effects of Rastafarian influences on Jamaican talk, individual Jamaicans are declaring in their talk a conscious rejection of standard English.) On the other hand, any Jamaican who uses standard English exclusively and is unable or unwilling to use Jamaican is seen as disrespecting Jamaica. Such a person would be identified in Jamaica as culturally deficient and lacking a practical language skill necessary for survival. The ability to perform with competence in both standard English and Jamaican is a highly valued educational achievement in Jamaican life.

A competent Jamaican speaker is not only bilingual, but must also be able to move dexterously between the planes of standard English and Jamaican. The emphasis here is on vocal performance, with orthography being perhaps the most difficult aspect of the development of the Jamaican language. Nettleford contends that "the rhythms and sounds [of the spoken language] are obscured by problems of orthography" (Bennett, 1966/1975, p. 12). And Brathwaite (1984) argues that "when it is written, you lose the sound or the noise, and therefore you lose part of the meaning" (p. 17). Thus Jamaican, a spoken language, is seldom read or written by Jamaicans. (This does not reveal

with certainty whether they are not able or rather have chosen not to.)

Speech and phonality, then, are critical to the Jamaican identity.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, the use of Jamaican is not just a function of the lack of a formal education. It is a political act, an act of resistance against a cultural imperialism that constructed a Caribbean educational system reflecting the language and heritage of the English and rejecting the various African and Amerindian languages that were part of the region's culture (Brathwaite, 1984). For example, focusing on Rastafari talk, Malika Lee Whitney (Hussey & Whitney, 1984) notes, and Cooper (1993) endorses that the "Rastafari way of speaking or 'reasoning' is not illiteracy as some would have you believe, but the tailoring of the European language for most identifiable self-expression" (pp. 115, 121).

Rastafarian poet Bongo Jerry (1970-1971), like other Jamaican artists, intentionally misuses what he would call Babylonian English to contend,

Save the YOUNG  
from the language that MEN teach,  
the doctrine Pope preach  
skin bleach ...  
MAN must use MEN language  
to carry dis message:  
SILENCE BABEL TONGUES:  
recall and  
recollect BLACK SPEECH.

—Bongo Jerry (1970-1971, pp. 13-15)

And Louise Bennett (1966/1975) is polemical in her "Bans O' Killing":

So yuh a de man, me hear bout!  
Ah yuh dem sey dah-teck  
Whole heap o? English oat sey dat  
Yuh gwine kill dialect  
Meck me get it straight Mass Charlie  
For me noh quite understan,  
Yuh gwine kill all English dialect  
Or just Jamaica one?  
Ef yuh dah-equal up wid English  
Language, den wha meck  
Yuh gwine go feel inferior, wen  
It come to dialect?

—(pp. 218-219)

Perhaps most pointed is the contention of a Jamaican mail carrier who sought to affirm Cooper in her work on the Jamaican language by noting that this language "ful de speis of our rial Afrikan langgwij": "It fills the space of our real African language" (Cooper, 1993, p. 13). Cooper's *Noises in the Blood*, which builds on the works of Bennett, Mervyn Morris, Mervyn C. Alleyne, Brathwaite, Nettleford, and others, should go a long way in putting to rest notions of Jamaican folk talk as being the result of ignorance.<sup>9</sup> If, for example, you find any of the preceding language impenetrable, interpret this as an invitation to learn this new language and join Jamaicans in a mutually liberating act of struggle for liberation and self-identity (Cooper, 1993).

### Jamaica Talk and Jamaican-American Relationships

Because the United States is the leading place of abode for Jamaicans outside Jamaica, it is important to consider how Jamaican talk affects Jamaican-American interpersonal relationships in the United States. In Jamaica, Jamaican speech is interpreted as a marker of class and education, distinguishing Jamaicans from other Jamaicans and from the English. In the United States, however, this speech further demarcates Jamaicans from all others, becoming even more significant in issues of race, class, and ethnic identity. Outside of Jamaica, sheer necessity forces Jamaicans to use the more internationally known English language, as compared to Jamaican, which is recognized but not known internationally. Nonetheless, the English spoken by Jamaicans is English with a Jamaican sound. In the context of the United States, then, the Jamaican sound and accent produce salient markers, and they are easily distinguishable from other U.S. speech sounds and accents. Consequently, for Jamaicans in the United States, their accent is like a Spanish machete—it cuts both ways.

McKay (1937; Watkins-Owens, 1996) revealed that a Jamaican identity can have advantages for black Jamaicans wishing to advance in the race-conscious United States. The "native accent" is one sure way to establish a special identity (pp. 8–9). James Weldon Johnson's experience confirmed that

to be foreign-born, or even to be mistaken as being foreign-born, could result in blacks being spared the harsh discriminatory practices reserved for U.S.-born blacks (Johnson, 1969, p. 65). This is also chronicled in Booker T. Washington's (1900/1965) classic *Up From Slavery*.

However, for the most part, race and foreign-born status, with its attendant issue of accent, remain the double jeopardy faced by black Jamaicans who emigrate to the United States (Watkins-Owens, 1996). This situation can be illustrated through the experience of my two daughters. Between 1990 and 1992 they were in public schools in the Midwest. One attended elementary school and the other went to middle school. My older daughter experienced the double jeopardy of racial and ethnic discrimination. She faced racial discrimination from white schoolmates, and both blacks and whites teased her because of her Jamaican accent. Both daughters faced discrimination because of their accent when, on the premise of "deficiency in their [English] language skills," school authorities tried to place them in English as a second language (ESL) programs. We objected, and, as we were to find out later, these ESL proposals were made on the basis of the children's accent. The proposals became moot after both children easily passed their English comprehension tests.

The case of our younger daughter was particularly interesting for, as it turns out, her educational challenge was not her own accent but the accent of her European-American teacher. When she heard the teacher say *binana*, my 7-year-old daughter spelled *banana* accordingly and insisted, against all our efforts to the contrary, that the word was *binana* because that was what the teacher had said. The case of *binana* versus *banana* has become a family joke. In preparing this essay, I asked my daughter (now age 15) to verify my account of the ESL issue. She recalled that the word *water* caused similar confusion. To her ears, the teacher kept referring to *wader*. It was left to us at home to clarify that this was just how the teacher talked, but that the word should be spelled *w-a-t-e-r*.

It is important to note that Jamaicans are forced to reckon with the dominant U.S. accent at every turn.<sup>10</sup> First, there were U.S. Armed Forces radio broadcasts, and, until the end of the 1980s, radio was

the major source of news in the English-speaking Caribbean. The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), nevertheless, was the primary source of international news information. With an increasing number of households getting television sets and with the proliferation of the satellite dish, however, American television and CNN became the primary news sources.

The double jeopardy of discrimination has long been a scourge for Caribbean immigrants to the United States, often resulting in tentative and awkward relationships with Americans, both black and white. As Watkins-Owens (1996) tells us, Viola Scott Thomas, who arrived as a child in 1920 from Barbados, remembered being mocked by African Americans because of her accent. *Monkey chaser* was the derisive term used by blacks in Harlem to taunt Garvey and his followers and generally to describe black immigrants from the Caribbean (Bontemps and Conroy, 1966). The derisive Harlem ditty rhymed, "When a monkey chaser dies, he don't need no undertaker. Just throw him in the Harlem river. He'll float back to Jamaica" (Cronon, 1955, p. 168).

As we know from Paule Marshall's (1959/1981) *Brown Girl, Brownstones*, white American women who employ Caribbean women as household workers are known to speak of their efficiency, reliability, and honesty. In my own encounter with white men and women who employed Caribbean women, they often speak in glowing terms about the competence and reliability of these women. Such competence and reliability, of course, are in contrast to unidentified others. As Marshall has noted, such expressions by these whites are often part of an "insidious divide and rule encouragement" (Bryce-Laporte, 1981, p. 7; Watkins-Owens, 1996, p. 51). And Houston (1994) picked up on this tactic, demonstrating that it is also used by white women to divide African American women into categories of "acceptable" and "unacceptable" (p. 137). *Brown Girl, Brownstones* deals with Caribbean immigrants in the first half of the 20th century; however, the practice, by white Americans, of declaring to Caribbean immigrants that they are "different" continues as a common contemporary phenomenon. I heard declarations of my "difference" before I knew that this difference was as compared to those considered as the problem in American

society—African Americans. These comments were often accompanied by references to my ability to "speak so well."

Here, my ability to speak standard English becomes that which marks me as better than whites expected of a "black Jamaican" and different from (read superior to) U.S.-born blacks. Troublingly, these expressions are tendered as sincere compliments, often with a lack of consciousness of their racist undertones. The perspectives of difference and superiority embraced by many Caribbean people evidence the success of such divide and rule strategies—albeit often unconscious ones. As Marshall informs us, Caribbean women often see themselves as "different," "superior," "more ambitious," and "more hard working" than African Americans (Bryce-Laporte, 1981, p. 7; Watkins-Owens, 1996, pp. 51–52).

African Americans, too, have imbibed the notion that black people from the Caribbean are "different." Some African Americans join those white Americans who focus on the foreign-born status of Caribbean immigrants, labeling them as intrusive outsiders. The way that Caribbean people talk is often featured and derided when this "difference" is highlighted. Marcus Garvey is the most notable example from the early 20th century; however, C.L.R. James and later Kwame Toure (Stokely Carmichael) are other examples of leading Caribbean immigrants whose foreign-born status became the focus of their American detractors (*New York Age*, 1920; Watkins-Owens, 1996, p. 81). Developments such as these, with their focus on difference, used ethnicity to destabilize the racial solidarity shared by blacks from the Caribbean as well as those from the United States. The problem is both long-standing and divisive.

In 1923, W. A. Domingo, a Jamaican migrant who became well known as a Harlem radical, editor, and businessman, as contributing editor to the *Messenger*, chided the newspaper for its nativism and ethnic bias expressed against Marcus Garvey and other black people from the Caribbean living in the United States (Hill, 1983). Domingo (1923; Watkins-Owens, 1996) contended that the *Messenger's* hostility would eventually "make the life of West Indians among American Negroes as unsafe or unpleasant as the life of American Negroes among their white countrymen" (pp. 640, 122).

Yet, whether it is Robert Campbell, Grace P. Campbell, Claude McKay, Amy Jacques-Garvey, Marcus Garvey, J. A. Rogers, Bob Marley, Shabba Ranks, Orlando Patterson, or Colin Powell, Jamaican migrants continue to have a significant impact on U.S. culture with their unique brand of activism and social consciousness, articulating black struggle with international class struggle and specifically connecting American black interests to Caribbean interests (Delany & Campbell, 1969; Watkins-Owens, 1996). Such articulation often incorporates all the flair of the Jamaican language with its distinctive accent, adding to the rich mix of speech patterns already practiced in the United States.

### Conclusion

Jamaican language provides its speakers a sense of identity, comfort, and shared solidarity. It bestows a feeling of uniqueness, especially in the face of the alienating function of the dominant, mainstream Euro-American culture. Jamaicans living in the United States conduct their private conversations, with family or with Jamaican friends, in their local language and sometimes in a mixture of Jamaican and standard English.

In their language Jamaicans find contact with a shared world and ready access to important aspects of that world. The word *irie*, for example, is understood by Jamaicans as a greeting of goodwill, a commentary on the state of one's being, and a cultural celebration of the inventiveness of the marginalized. *Irie* emerged out of the Jamaican Rastafarian subculture. To describe everything as *kosher* comes closest to the idea of everything *irie*.

The use of this nation language is a collective tactic. The tactic is employed to survive external domination while creating a world of integrity and relevance through language. This is a language that functions for the Jamaican today similar to the way it functioned for the Ashanti brought to the Caribbean in slave ships. It disguises the personalities of the users as it conserves aspects of their (Jamaican) culture. In the face of crises or difficult situations, Jamaicans in the United States abandon standard English and communicate in their nation language or their mother tongue, if you will. Also at gatherings where

we feel the need for a sense of solidarity, we speak to each other exclusively in Jamaican. This usage excludes those who do not share our cultural marker. We do this because we know that the language is inscrutable to outsiders. And, of course, we know that "one culture's 'knowledge' is another's 'noise'" (Cooper, 1993, p. 4).

My amateur soccer team is made up of players from several different countries, including players from several African countries. Sometimes when tempers flare, the Africans communicate with each other in French or a select African language. That is usually a signal for my Jamaican teammate and me to begin talking to each other in Jamaican, abandoning English, the language shared in common by the entire group. At such times, I take on a new personality and my children often gasp, "Dad, is that you?" This is a sure sign that I continue to live in the Caribbean cross-current. I am a product of English (and now American), African, neither, yet both—a new being.

### ENDNOTES

1. A. Bernaldez, a Spanish historian, tells us that in 1494 Columbus saw Jamaica and declared, "It is the fairest island eyes have beheld" (cited in "Geography and History of Jamaica," 1999).
2. *Beyond a Boundary* is James's treatise on the cultural influences of cricket on Britain and its colonies in the West Indies. This text explores the various elements of race, class, and education as just some of the socio-cultural problematics involved in the acculturation of Caribbean people to this most British of games, cricket. In more direct terms, Lopex-Springfield (1990) cites her interview with James where he makes the explicit argument that Caribbean people function on the cusp of this intersectionality between Europe and Africa (p. 85).
3. It should be noted that a Jamaican identity focused on its more than 95% black population has not been without contention. Despite gaining independence from Britain in 1962, until the mid-1970s, Jamaica was still a place where there was "official hostility to the consciousness of being black" (Rodney, 1975, p. 8). Such hostility, although no longer official, still lingers. And the claims of some black Jamaicans today that "a black man [*sic*] time now" points to an awareness that the vestiges of slavery, colonialism, and racism are yet to be overcome.