

Oh, You Like My Accent? Reflections on Bermudian English

I'd like to preface this blog foremost by thanking Dr. Rosemary Hall whose work comprises most of the existing canon on Bermudian sociolinguistics. Her doctoral thesis, "Staging language in Bermuda: phonology and parodic performance of Bermudian English," is the bedrock and primary literature for this blog's reflections. Its findings are of incredible magnitude, and will hopefully inspire continuous research on Bermudian sociolinguistics. Dr. Hall's research dares to broach conversation on the questionable local universality of the Bermudian dialect. Notwithstanding scrutiny, her findings highlight the problematic nature of dialectal 'colorblindness.' Thereby revealing how the trajectory of *Bermewjan*¹ was, historically, and now, affected by the 'othering' of Black Bermudians and their communities. Dr. Hall's research concerns itself with educating readers on the shortcomings of considering our dialect without the nuance its past warrants.

Of all the lesser-known English varieties (LKVE's) in the world, Bermudian English (BerE) has been comparatively understudied. Our speaker population of less than 65,000 (generously) renders cultural export exceedingly difficult. Scholars are quick to dismiss BerE's intrigue for reasons related to scale. Despite our size and influence, though, Bermudians boast a flourishing and rich dialect. Untrained listeners astutely label BerE as a disorienting melange of British, American, and Caribbean influence, with good reason. The dialect postures as an example of linguistic 'tabula rasa,' having originated on our formerly uninhabited island no earlier than the arrival of settlers in the 17th century.² Hall remarks more precisely that early BerE is closely related to Southern English port, Bahamian, and Turks and Caicos Islander varieties. The late 19th century ushered in more influence with the arrival of Azorean Portuguese and Caribbean Islanders.

Till present, certain words have stubbornly held on to their founding British twang and Caribbean drawl; yet through this a distinct Bermudian linguistic swagger has emerged in its own right. Bermudian folklore tells the story of the troll living underneath Flatt's bridge whose accent was the most jarring one around. Rammed with such norms that native speakers are accustomed to: exchanging W's for V's while disgruntledly asking morning drivers "Vhat's happening?" while they drove over his roof. Or replacing the "Th" in "The" by a bouncy D in order to ask fishermen going through the channel, "Vut de hell you looking at?" on their way out to North Shore.

These aren't forcibly exaggerations or examples of parody coming out of the troll's mouth, however, Hall's research flags how such instances, in specific contexts, can constitute degrading performances of the dialect. It's all-too-common to witness the appropriation of BerE, now synonymous with Black Bermudian English (BberE), by segments of the population whose history is alien to its origins.

¹ Hall, R. 2019. "Staging Language in Bermuda: Phonology and Parodic Performance of Bermudian English." PhD thesis, University of Oxford: 99.

² *Ibid.*, 11.

The advent of slavery, and subsequent systems of segregation, cultivated an environment that would bisect the dialect into one resiliently raised out of the condition of ‘otherness,’ enslavement, segregation, and socioeconomic inequality; and another, through linguistic and racial hegemony, dedicated to the upkeep of ‘two Bermudas.’ The recency with which Bermuda has departed from formal segregation, its ‘last vestiges being codified out of law in 1971,’³ has all but guaranteed the persistence, still, of social segregation today.

“Every time you hear an expansive white man drop into his version of Black English, you are in the presence of blackface’s conscious return.”⁴ — Lott

Many interactions described by Hall testify to the sentiments above. Showing how white Bermudians get lured into BberE, causally emboldened by their proximity to Black Bermudian experiences. Conflating this with a sort of unexpressed permission to mimic, quite whimsically, the dialect and those who speak it: through poetry, drama, music, and everyday speech. A particularly shocking example of such parody is seen in the 1924 *Royal Gazzette and Colonist Daily*’s literary column entitled “Elice in Vonderland,”⁵ which put a kink in a beloved fairytale by dramatically distorting it beyond anything BerE could earnestly claim.

Elice vas beginning to get wery veary of standin by her ladger in the bank, and of having nothin to do; vonce or twice she had run down a colum of figgers, but the colum vas not pretty and shaped nicely like the colums of the bank and the figgers vere wery dumpy like that of Mrs. Pudjums who knitted in the window across the way; “and what is the use of colums” thought Elice, “that hold up nothing or of figgers vich nobody vants to hold?”

³ Ibid., 21.

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Ibid., 102

None of these observations are invoked to suggest that there should be a monopoly on BerE. Rather, they're appealed to in order to nuance a narrative which wrongly purports the dialect as a linguistic product untouched by the history of "two Bermudas." I raise such points, highlighting something crucial about Dr. Hall's research. Every dialect, no matter the shortcuts it takes in deviation from its parent language, must be treated as an intelligent, breathing, and legitimate utility in local society. Parody and performance of BerE, regardless of its actor, commits a fatal mistake in collapsing space to think critically about why we speak, write, and communicate in the ways that we do.

I'm a Black Bermudian fascinated by our language and its fluidity. My interest in how we speak is deeply connected to storytelling. Bermudian stories might just be our biggest untapped natural resource. I'm trying to work on finding my own voice through the stories of others. In that vein I wrote the following poem. To listen to a Bermudian, is to feel entangled and embraced by their vocabulary, to hear generations woven into the puzzle of their speech, and to share in the grief that we find reflected in the crumbling of all things.

Limestone languish

Our lyric has a Sargasso timbre that tempts
tongues into making like quarry blocks in the sky.
Dropping letters quickly and haphazardly; elsewhere
and far from the vernacular of the man who greeted me
in the tone of *Wayasayin*, *bill* by his cliffs on
North Shore. With what attention his left eye could pay—the
other had been hit by recent inflation, always looking
up—he'd for thirty years watched the rocks fall into the
shape of porous souvenirs. He clutched the remnants
only for posterity to pry his fingers open again and
immortalize his memory through those who stopped
and, like me, had time. And enough gratitude to repay
him the attention his mic'ing eye couldn't. His flame
endured for his cliffs and the way they'd rubble,
wrinkling the water below with the immensity of all
they had lived to see. *If this limestone could talk*,
he sucked his teeth saying, muting his next thought: *I*
wouldn't have to be consoled by their falling apart. For
thirty years, he stood by his cliffs, poet enough to
summon story out of the calcium carbonate crumbs
that never worshiped him back, confessing:

I'm much the same
as these rocks, dun

I erode as they do:
hardly gently &
never all at once

I'm an aquifer as they are
with water percolating from
below my surface

Yet I'm cement strong
as Rocky Bay stone, bie.

It's *my* flame
underneath *my* kiln

I give you my last
story with the ferocity and languish
of a Casurania during The Tempest.

