

Yusef Bushara

Professor Lisa Cheung

CAES9201

Sunday, December 4th, 2022

### The Caribbean Tongue

The global influence of Caribbean culture is difficult to contest. This holds especially true when looking at the export of its various Englishes abroad. Many of the speakers in the anglophone world are raised with Anglo-Caribbean colloquial language, using it mostly to ease the formality of “standard” English practice in daily life. For example, youth across the English-speaking world, regardless of cultural background, can be heard greeting each other with choruses of “wagwans” instead of “hellos” (Thompson). This Jamaican Patois expression signals the melding of Caribbean English into the larger fold of its mother language. In British urban centers, this phenomenon is most observable. British English (BE) has been endowed with Caribbean and African language conventions by members of the Caribbean and African diasporas in the UK, but also has been transformed by a fundamentally Caribbean and African spirit and rhythm. In turn, Black people have forged, over the course of generations, a new strain of the Queen’s language: Black British English.

The formation of this English variant has, however, been met with serious internal and external conflict (Makinde and Duran). Black British English, or BBE, was created by generations of Black people in the UK out of the remains of the languages their ancestors spoke and were forced to abandon upon migration to the UK from the Caribbean and Africa. The complex melange of the English language in the UK derives from an eternal struggle for the Caribbean person to inhabit language authentically, in written form and speech. It is an issue of postcolonial nature. The ‘Windrush Generation’ arrived from various Caribbean destinations to British ports beginning in 1948 and with them brought an insuppressible linguistic and cultural presence (Schwarz 291). Now, decades on, BE *sounds* different, *feels* different, and forcibly represents more than the white hegemony, because it has been reshaped by the Caribbean diaspora. Black speakers bend the way the

language is spoken so that it feels just slightly more like belonging, while non-Black speakers embrace or belittle the diversity of an evolving language.

While members of the Caribbean diaspora are constantly reforming how language is 'done' in the UK, many Caribbean writers are conflicted by a 'dilemma of the tongue,' as Carolyn Cooper describes in her essay "Islands of Envy." A dilemma which, by nature, burdens the most crucial of their faculties, because they are forced to produce language that runs counter to their truest form of expression. This expression manifests in their potential ability to infuse literature with the 'rhythms of the street' (Cooper 7). In her essay she outlines the imperatives for the Caribbean writer in this line of work. She borrows from Derek Walcott's telling of 'ironic tension,' suggesting that the very preconditions for the Caribbean writer's oscillating authenticity comes from having no claim on the language they speak (Cooper 1). This deprivation, however, is not without origins. As the title of the essay suggests, the Caribbean tongue is a lost tongue; one which has been chopped up and twisted not least thanks to the ravages and structures of colonial imposition. Mutaburka puts the matter sharply, saying that "The language we talk we can't write, and the language we write we cannot talk" (Cooper 3). By invoking the region's most renowned literary giants, Cooper engenders an impassioned conclusion. The eventual objective of Anglo-Caribbean literature is to reclaim the possibility of reading with a native voice, which cannot happen without a commitment from the Caribbean author to 'speak with the absolute authority of a person who has discovered their true-true self' (Cooper 16). For this, empire altogether must be dissolved. As Kamau Brathwaite, Barbadian poet and intellectual, eloquently reminds the reader, the setting of the sun on empire, while it might tarry along, will eventually drop below the horizon (Cooper 10).

Cooper's paper calls to attention a serious conundrum in the world of Anglo-Caribbean literature which exists in the colonized world. Inhabiting the language of one's oppressor, in speech or text, to describe the 'rhythms of the street' is a paradoxical mission. As much is mentioned by Cooper, but what remains troubling is the hope she musters up regarding the resolution of this issue. The perceptual models for understanding native cultures and traditions in Anglo-Caribbean literature have been hijacked by colonialism, and the extent to which they can be repaired through the nativization of the English language, has admittedly dubious prospects. Brathwaite is aware of this

reality when he describes English's current capacity for the Caribbean writer: "We are more conscious (in terms of our sensibility) of describing the falling of snow than the force of hurricanes which take place every year," he says of Anglo-Caribbean literature. The challenge posed by such cultural perceptual deficits is whether English still can emancipate its Caribbean speakers. Whether this emancipation can happen in the UK hinges on Anglo-Caribbean writers' ability to summon the 'rhythms of the street' in their production of BE and BBE.

The expansion of British English to include Anglo-Caribbean Englishes may presuppose a weakening white British hegemony, but authors Oyin Makinde and Eve Doran argue in their article that "The Myth of 'Proper English'" is robust as ever. For them, English already exists as a creole with white origins, borrowing from French, Latin, Celtic, and Germanic languages (Makinde and Duran). "Purity" claims about BE are predicated on this racial and cultural exclusion. Makinde and Duran cite Kenyan author Ngugi wa Thiong'o to explain the pervasiveness of this harm. He states that English enforces an understanding of the self that disregards the heritage of struggle experienced by Caribbean Islanders and Africans in the UK (Makinde and Duran). Scholar, April Baker-Bell, reminds readers that BE is not a prerequisite for intelligent communication. Such an idea maligns speakers of BBE and tears a hole in the fabric of linguistic justice, a term coined by Baker-Bell. The only way to mend this hole is by recognizing BBE as a legitimate system of communication; one with a rich and complex history. One which can also attest to the boundless intelligence of (Black) individuals. Makinde and Duran conclude with a prescriptive approach to BBE in the context of education. They maintain that BE must be stripped of its supremacy over BBE in "academic and professional spaces." The authors argue that this is the only way to chip away at the legacy of colonial linguistic imposition (Makinde and Duran).

The sovereignty of "standard" English in the UK creates an atmosphere that disparages Black intelligence. Black youth receive the brunt of the mistreatment caused by prioritizing BE. The prioritization of BE in scholastic settings especially, robs Black youth of the empowerment that should accompany speaking one's own language in a culturally diverse setting. The same phenomenon explained in "Islands of Envy" whereby Caribbean writers lack a perceptual model to understand traditions and their native selves, occurs to the Black child in the UK. In a classroom, the

same “wagwans” that white students use, when used by Black students, are signifiers of their deviance and unruliness (Idowu). They revert to ‘code-switching’ habits to assimilate, scrubbing any evidence of BBE from their speech. This erasure is dangerous for it reinforces the struggle that Caribbean diasporic members have for centuries tried to escape from—the struggle against whiteness.

In conclusion, both of these primary sources paint the picture of linguistic reclamation. The Caribbean person in the UK refurbishes the English language in an act of protest, so that it becomes endowed with a fuller, more representative history. A history that understands, acknowledges and thus distances itself from the supremacy of BE. The Caribbean person in the UK uses language intelligently but faces scrutiny for doing so on their own terms, that is the lesson from Makinde and Duran. Despite this, BBE emerges resilient as a voice for the street and in the classroom.

## Works Cited

- Cooper, Carolyn. "Islands beyond Envy: Finding Our Tongue in the Creole-Anglophone Caribbean." *Caribbean Quarterly*, vol. 59, no. 1, 2013, pp. 1–19, [www.jstor.org/stable/43487754](http://www.jstor.org/stable/43487754). Accessed 4 Sept. 2022.
- Idowu, Christina. "The Mental Health Impact of the Policing of Black British English." *BLAM UK CIC*, 20 May 2022, [blamuk.org/2022/05/20/the-mental-health-impact-of-banning-black-british-english/](http://blamuk.org/2022/05/20/the-mental-health-impact-of-banning-black-british-english/). Accessed 13 Nov. 2022.
- Makinde, Oyin, and Eve Doran. "The Myth of "Proper" English – How the Ban on Black British English Continues a Colonial Tradition of Linguistic Injustice." *BLAM UK CIC*, 7 Dec. 2021, [blamuk.org/2021/12/07/the-myth-of-proper-english-how-the-ban-on-black-british-english-continues-a-colonial-tradition-of-linguistic-injustice/](http://blamuk.org/2021/12/07/the-myth-of-proper-english-how-the-ban-on-black-british-english-continues-a-colonial-tradition-of-linguistic-injustice/).
- Schwarz, Bill. "Windrush: Unresolved Legacies." *NWIG: New West Indian Guide / Nieuwe West-Indische Gids*, vol. 95, no. 3/4, 2021, pp. 289–295, [www.jstor.org/stable/27130416?searchText=windrush&searchUri=%2Faction%2FdoBasicSearch%3FQuery%3Dwindrush&ab\\_segments=0%2Fbasic\\_search\\_gsv2%2Fcontrol&refreqid=fastly-default%3Afa9fae359132e24af8b69e49f940e80f&seq=3#metadata\\_info\\_tab\\_contents](http://www.jstor.org/stable/27130416?searchText=windrush&searchUri=%2Faction%2FdoBasicSearch%3FQuery%3Dwindrush&ab_segments=0%2Fbasic_search_gsv2%2Fcontrol&refreqid=fastly-default%3Afa9fae359132e24af8b69e49f940e80f&seq=3#metadata_info_tab_contents). Accessed 13 Nov. 2022.
- Thompson, Ife. "Unpacking the Interconnectness of Black Atlantic Languages Whilst Disrupting Linguistic Supremacy...." *Medium*, 11 Feb. 2022, [medium.com/@ifejoyce/unpacking-the-interconnectness-of-black-atlantic-languages-whilest-disrupting-linguistic-supremacy-928cbf1c7696](https://medium.com/@ifejoyce/unpacking-the-interconnectness-of-black-atlantic-languages-whilest-disrupting-linguistic-supremacy-928cbf1c7696). Accessed 13 Nov. 2022.