



Sculpture by Laura Facey Cooper in Emancipation Park, Kingston, Jamaica. Photo by Ricardo Makyn.

Professing Slackness: Language, Authority, and Power Within the Academy and Without

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Listen no! My long-time teacher, Eddie Baugh, set a hard-hard exam question fa mi when im launch mi first book, *Noises in the Blood*, inna 1994. Hear wa im seh:

Just about in the middle of the book, just when at the height of the author's dazzling wielding of English in the cause of creole, we might be tempted to ask, "So why didn't she write the book in creole?"—she switches into Creole as the medium of critical analysis. It is in the chapter on Sistren's *Lionheart Gal*. And the performance is impressive. Then I went back and read again the paragraph which introduces the shift. It goes like this: [it on di back a di programme]

Recognising the dialogic nature of oral/scribal and Jamaican/English discourse in the story/text *Lionheart Gal*; and seeking to narrow the social distance between the language of the stories and the language of textual analysis, I wish to engage in an experimental Jamaican

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subversion of the authority of English as our exclusive voice of scholarship. My analysis of the testimonies of the women of Sistren—their verbal acts of introspective self-disclosure—will now proceed in Jamaican.

So hear Eddie im now wid im big exam question: “So then I thought, ‘How would that go in Jamaican? And if it went, would it still be *that*, or would it have become *dat*?’ One could make quite a play of ironies here.” And through im know im student good fi true, hear how Eddie polish it off:

But Carolyn, I have no doubt, knows what we are talking about and is all along smiling in the corners of her eyes. After all, it is she who says:

That the lyrics of the DJs should be identified as an appropriate subject for analysis is itself evidence that Culture is in hot pursuit of fleet-footed Slackness: subjection to analysis is yet another form of containment.

Yu see how my teacher wicked! An all mi can seh is guilty wid explanation. Mi *did* use couple big word inna dat deh paragraph we him draw fi test mi: “dialogic,” “discourse,” “introspective,” “subversion,” “self-disclosure,” “textual analysis.” An Eddie know seh mi ha fi go burst mi brain fi figure out how fi turn dem deh highfalutin word inna plain an not so simple Jamaican. Di best ting any teacher can do fi a student a fi set hard question. It force yu fi wheel an come again. So mi mek up mi mind fi tek up Eddie challenge di next year when mi gi a talk inna December 1995 inna one series, “Quarrels With History,” weh Joe Pereira did put on fi di Institute of Caribbean Studies. Joe im tek di name a di series from one essay weh di same Eddie di write long-long time inna one Trinidad newspaper, *Tapia*. Dat a 1977! Im show how wi Caribbean writer dem ha fi a quarrel wid history—like History a smaddy—becau a no fi wi story di mouldy History a tell.

An, by di way, a it mek mi ha fi a quarrel wid di people dem who put up di two bafan statue inna Emancipation Park. Dem dis big an so-so. Mi did go down a National Gallery an look pon di lickle moggle weh di artist did build fi di competition. It sweet yu see! It no ha notn fi do wid emancipation but di lickle figurine dem look good. But when dem blow up inna dat deh hell of a monument! No sah. One a mi friend seh dem look like two cow inna di miggles a road a nighttime, no know weh fi turn when car headlight lick dem.

Dem deh two half-idiot get dem free paper, stand up stiff like dem frighten, no know weh fi do! No mind sharp dem end up back pon plantation a do di said same slavery work. A no fi mi story dat. Fi mi granny muma a Compong maroon. An mi know seh some a di maroon dem did sell out some a di other African dem, weh did lef back pon di plantation. But nobody never did tell dem fi tan deh. Dem shoulda stand up an quarrel wid history before history did get chance fi tie dem up. Den yu see da word “bafan.” It come from Ghana. Twi. It mean one pikni weh no learn fi walk from two to all seven year old. An dem deh bafan inna Emancipation Park kyaan walk at

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all at all. Dem no ha no leg; dem no ha no foot. A pure camouflage. Anyhow, mek mi lef dem fi now. Reggae Studies a go put on one talk session bout di Monument inna Heritage Week. An mi a go get Lovindeer fi come sing bout 'ha-penis' inna di Park. Unu fi listen out fi dat.

So hear how mi answer Eddie exam question. An it never hard to dat. It did ongle look hard. Back a di programme; an tek yu pick. Bright people, unu can read Mr. Cassidy version;¹ who not so bright, follow back a we an seckle fi di chaka-chaka.² A it dis. Cassidy style:

Wen mi riid *Lionheart Gal* an si se di hai op uman dem a rait fi dem stuori – dem ni ina no tiepin bizniz; an dem a rait ina pyuur Ingglish. An mi si se dem ada wan dem a taak fi dem stuori, ina Jamiekan, mi seh, “Hmnn. Jakaas se di worl no levl.” An den mi si se if *mi* no main shaap, mi a go en op a pap stail ina Ingglish pan di uman dem uu a tel fi dem stuori ina Jamiekan. So mi se ‘naa!’ Mi a go chrai a ting. Mi go shuo unu se wi kyahn yuuz Jamiekan fi taak bout aal kain a big subjek. A no suosoo Ingglish wi ha fi yuuz. Did Sistrin dem luk ina dem laif an dem tel wi di ha huol a fi dem porsnal an praivit bizniz. An mi a tel unu wa mii tingk bout dat. An mi a go tel unu ina Jamiekan. Siit ya.

Seet deh now: Wi accustom fi tink seh it alright fi use Jamaican fi gi joke an recite poem an act out play an tell story. All like dat deh story mi just done tell unu. An a true story. But some a wi just kyaan get it inna wi head seh we can use Jamaican fi reason. Look how long Rastafari (bald head an all) show wi seh fi wi language full a reasoning. But some a wi naa listen. A it mek Rasta ha fi call wi university “yu blind”—not UC.³ Pon top a dat, some a wi doan understand seh plenty-plenty reasoning wrap up inna fi wi storytelling. So some a wi feel seh reasoning higher than storytelling, an reasoning too high fi fi wi language. Notn no go so.

A wi a use language; a no language a use wi. So fi wi language can do whatsoever wi want it fi do. So mek wi reason out how mi answer Eddie B exam question.

It come een like English a di A side a di record, an Jamaican a di dub version. An when mi seh dat, a no diss mi a diss dub, an a no diss mi a diss mi language. Mi ha fi mek dat clear-clear. Cau plenty people feel seh Jamaican a so-so drum an bass. It no ha no lyrics; it no ha no melody; it naa seh notn. An dat a no weh mi a seh. Cau yu done know seh drum an bass have nuff power an authority. A one next language. Yu all have artist specialize inna pure drum an bass. Dem no business wid no A side. Daddy U Roy big up im sound system an seh, “Dis station rule di nation wid version.” An mi a add on pon dat an mi seh “fi wi language rule di nation wid version.” If mi did have money yu see, mi woulda set up one so-so patwa radio station. PATWA FM. Unu know seh mi rather call di language Jamaican; but outa road a patwa everybody seh. Yu see dat deh PATWA FM. It woulda rootsy, hot, cool, irie, full an love an power – everything wrap up inna one. An mi would gi Radio Mona di bligh fi broadcast wi patwa programme dem from 6:00 to 6:00, instead a di so-so A side, A class music dem a play whole night. One day, one day.⁴

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So a so mi see di switching over from English to Jamaican. A side/B side. But a no so English dweet. Dem use a next word picture: Tek something from mi gi yu. Or carry smaddy or sinting from ya so to deh so. Dat a di root a di meaning a di two English word “transfer” an “translate.” Den yu see dem deh word “translate” an “transfer”; a no real-real English word, yu know. A borrows. From Latin. *Translatus*. Same ting Miss Lou seh⁵: “. . . dem shoulda call English Language corruption of Norman French an Latin an all dem tarra language what dem seh dat English is derived from.”⁶ An thank yu Marse Mervyn fi read it fi wi.⁷ Nof rispek fi all di work yu do fi show wi seh wi ha fi *study* Miss Lou. Serious ting. An, Mervyn, believe it or not, a yu response fi plenty a di slackness mi a defend, yu know. A yu start it. Yu a good-good teacher. Unu clap im.

So di English word “translate” a corruption a di Latin word *translatus*. An di *latus* a di part a di verb *transferre* weh show seh di action done-done. Some a di Latin word dem change up-change-up dem shape fi show di meaning a di different-different part a speech. *Transferre*: fi transfer; *translatus*: transfer done. Anyhow, mek mi cut a long-story short. Di Latin word *transferre*, weh di English word transfer come from, it mek up outa two word: *trans* mean across and *ferre* mean fi carry. Like fi ferryboat weh lickle most stop carry passenger from Kingston to Port Royal.

But hear dis. English so walk an borrow-borrow other people word, dem all borrow when dem no got no need fi borrow. For all di ferry inna ferryboat a good-good, long-time English word weh mean di said same ting like fi *ferre* inna Latin. *Transferre*. But just like how some a wi feel seh English higher dan Jamaican, a di said same way plenty a di tapanaaris dem inna England did feel seh Latin an French did higher dan fi dem owna language. Member 1066? Di Norman people dem beat down fi English people dem, mek dem feel seh fi dem owna language no good fi notn. An a it mek di English people dem borrow-borrow so much foreign word a gi people problem fi learn dem corrupt language.

So hear how mi build up fi mi drum an bass version outa fi mi owna A-side argument bout Sistren *Lionheart Gal*. Or, if yu rather, hear how mi carry over di meaning from English pon di Jamaican ferry. Di first part a di sentence alone woulda did sink di boat: “Recognising the dialogic nature of oral/scribal and Jamaican/English discourse in the story/text *Lionheart Gal* . . .” So mi stop braps a start from scratch. ‘Dialogic’. Latin again. An di root a disya Latin word, dialogic, a Greek. Corruption pon top a corruption. Anyhow, all ‘dialogic’ mean a couple people a talk. So wa mi do fi start off mi answer to Eddie B exam question a fi show unu di different-different class a people a gi fi dem dem story inna *Lionheart Gal*. An mi point finger pon who a talk, who a write, who a write English an who a talk Jamaican. An a so mi carry over di meaning a ‘dialogic’.

Den di part bout “seeking to narrow the social distance between the language of the stories and the language of textual analysis.” Mi dis use one proverb fi ketch ‘social distance’. “Jackass seh di worl no level.” Story done. An den mi start talk to miself. ‘Dialogic’ again; but no “mad,

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sick, head no good,” as di yout dem, Predator an Elephant Man seh. Naa. A consider mi a consider. Ole time people seh, “When man drunk im walk an stagger; when woman drunk she sidown an consider.” Mi naa seh di big word dem drunk mi; but mi had was to sidown an consider. Mi seh, “Hmnn.” An dat deh “hmnn” a when mi stop an ask miself a wa mi a do when mi a write bout people an naa use fi dem (an fi mi) language fi reason bout dem an mi. An a so mi come up wid di next part a di argument bout “the language of the stories and the language of textual analysis.” An a so mi put it: “An den mi si se if mi no main shaap, mi a go en op a pap stail ina Ingglish pan di uman dem uu a tel fi dem stuori ina Jamiekan.”

Now, when mi seh “pap stail,” mi mean “show off.” But mi also a talk bout how yu *dress up* wah yu a seh. Di style a yu language. Mi step-mother, Pansy, she know weh mi mean an mi like how she put it. She seh, “English come een like dress up clothes an patwa a yard clothes.” So weh mi do, mi tek mi yard clothes turn fashion an dress up mi language inna pretty-pretty bashment style fi go out a street an up a university. An a dat mi mean when mi seh “naa.” Nuff politics inna dat deh “naa.” A dat Marcus Garvey mean when im seh wi fi emancipate wiself from mental slavery. Nobody naa dweet fi wi. A wi ha fi dweet. An wi no fi fraid fi test wiself an show di power a wi language an wi culture.

So wi reach di next part a di carry over: “I wish to engage in an experimental Jamaican subversion of the authority of English as our exclusive voice of scholarship.” Fi “experimental” mi seh, “Mi a go chrai a ting.” An fi “subversion of the authority of English as our exclusive voice of scholarship?” A it dis: “Mi a go shuo unu se wi kyan yuuz Jamiekan fi taak bout aal kain a big subjek. A no suoso Ingglish wi ha fi yuuz.” An a so di reasoning build up lickle-lickle. Den dis a di last part a di crossing over now: “My analysis of the testimonies of the women of Sistren—their verbal acts of introspective self-disclosure—will now proceed in Jamaican.” Fi “analysis” mi seh “wa mii tink bout dat.” Den “verbal acts” mi change up dat to “dem tel wi.” An “introspective”—“dem luk ina dem laif,” an “self-disclosure”—“dem tel wi di huol a fi dem porsnal an pravit bizniz.” An last-last “will now proceed in Jamaican” turn inna “an mi a go tel unu ina Jamiekan. Siit ya.” So a it dat Eddie B. That a dat fi true. An mi know mi pass di exam.

Fi di lecture today, mi gi unu brawta. A next version: plain English. Pon di back a di programme. Seet ya. A di said same meaning a di academic version; but yu no ha fi a study literature a University fi understand it:

It’s obvious that there’s a tension in *Lionheart Gal* between written and oral narrative, between English and Jamaican. I want to narrow the gap between the language of the stories and the bookish language of analysis. So I’m going to do a subversive experiment and show that we don’t have to use only English to do academic work. I’m now going to analyse the testimonies of the women of Sistren—what they reveal about themselves—and I’m going to do it in Jamaican.

An when me a talk bout language, authority an power pon campus an outa road, one a di thing

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me a deal wid a how wi a go link up wid people mek dem understand fi true di work weh wi a do ya so. Nobody much naa read di academic paper dem weh wi a write an a publish inna fi wi lickle journal dem. So wi ha fi use radio an tv an newspaper fi spread di word. An wi ha fi use language weh people understand. It no mek no sense wi a write inna newspaper an a use big word an long sentence, weh di subject a malice di verb, an yu ha fi a read di sentence two time, three time, four time fi ketch di meaning. Dat a pure foolishness.

A it mek all like my friend Wilmot Perkins a tek step wid wi a call wi University “intellectual ghetto.”⁸ Di “ghetto” part no bother mi to dat. All it mean a “district.” *Oxford English Dictionary* no sure weh di word come from. Dem tink it coulda come from Italian, *borghetto*; di first part a dat deh word come from *borgo* meaning “borough”—like dem nuff borough a New York. An di *etto* mean “little.” Di original ghetto a one lickle district inna di city dem inna Italy weh dem force di Jew dem fi live. Inna Jamaica no Jew naa live inna ghetto. Well uptown maybe. Not downtown. A poor black people weh no ha no money fi step up inna life a live inna fi wi ghetto dem. An a so Mutty a jook wi now, a seh wi pauperise up a University; wi naa use wi brains fi do nothing fi deal wid di whole heap a problem dem inna di country. A dat vex me. Cau nuff a wi a do serious work. Respect juu. An di problem dem wi have inna Jamaica no start today. A long-time story.

All like di language problem inna di school dem. Wa a go happen to dem pikni weh a go a primary school dis ya year who fa teacher a go try teach dem inna English, one language weh di pikni dem no understand? An some a di teacher dem no know to dat! Mi know seh some a unu a go seh mi a defend slackness. An a no man an woman story mi a talk bout. Hmnn. Mi know seh wi naa go “unlock the potential of the Caribbean region”⁹ so til we learn fi respect di pikni dem heart language, dem yard language, fi dem owna language an teach dem inna Jamaican fi di first, mek dem learn fi read an write an tek een all a di odder subject dem. An den wi teach di pikni dem English. One next language, one next subject weh dem ha fi learn. Look how long di language specialist dem a show wi seh Jamaican a no bad English. A one next, good-good language.

A it mek wi have so much problem right ya so a University. Whole heap a di student dem ha fi a tek one course, “Fundamentals of English,” becau nobody never teach dem English di rightful way. Mi know seh when yu a teach English inna Jamaica, yu ha fi member seh English a no di pikni dem yard language. A dem school language. English a no dem first language. A dem second language. Yu kyaan gwaan like dem done know English an a ongle lickle fix-up fix-up wanting. Yu ha fi teach di pikni dem English like how di school dem inna Canada teach di English pikni dem French an di French pikni dem English. Serious ring. No joke business. An it cost money.

If wi no ha di money fi teach di whole a di primary school pikni dem English di way mi a talk bout, a use Jamaican, mi sure wi coulda find couple people well woulda willing fi mek Govament practise pon dem pikni inna one special patwa primary school. Di way Jamaica people love buy

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lottery ticket now, mi feel seh dem wi tek a chance wid dem pikni education. It can't worse dan wa a gwaan right now.

An mi know some a unu a go vex wid mi now. But sometime mi ha fi wonder if wi waan everybody inna Jamaica fi learn English fi true. Becau if all a di pikni dem can flex—English when it suit dem, or Jamaican—the one an few a wi now, weh know English good, naa go able fi go have nothing over dem. Wi can't show off pon dem inna wi nice-nice English. Dem wi able fi brandish English to. An mi know seh a through some a wi feel seh a English a gi wi power over certain people, a it mek wi no waan put no value pon di Jamaican language. Becau everybody done know it already an wi naa go have no big stick fi lick people inna dem head seh dem a eedyat becau dem no ha no language.

Mek mi read one front page *Gleaner* report from 11 December 1992 weh Margaret Morris write. She set down di story a one lady name Miss Babes. An when yu listen it, if yu no hear power an authority inna Miss Babes voice, yu deaf fi true:

“The burial nah sweet me”

Nora Jackson, Miss Babes, is 68 years old and ailing. She lives at the top of a steep and thickly wooded hill in a remote district of Westmoreland. On Monday November 9th she heard that her son had been arrested on a charge of stealing a cow and was in the Ramble police lock-up. On Tuesday 10th she journeyed to Ramble to arrange bail. Sitting on a neighbour's verandah she described her experience to the *Gleaner*.

At first she was incoherent and could only mutter over and over again “He was a lamb to the slaughter, a lamb to the slaughter.” Barely audible she told us, “You know he dream to my daughter week before last Friday night . . . she see him coming up the little hill to come up to my kitchen and he say to her, ‘Is long time me a come Carlene but is now me just ketch. You must tek care of everything and tell Mamma not fe fret ‘pon me because me alright.’

“And me know he is alright you know because he was a lamb to the slaughter.”

Outrage seemed to make her more articulate and she continued. “Dat child, he work all around the clock, dat a me backbone, dat a me husband. Before he get de death he send come tell me, ‘Mamma me coming up in the holiday and spend the holiday with you.’ He work work work, he don't stop at all, me never hear me son say, ‘Mamma me tired.’ He never complain about nothing at all he work from six to six.”

She described her interview with the policemen at Ramble. “The police did try, fe (trick) me fe tell him, me son ben sick. . . he say ‘You is Headley madda?’ And me say, ‘Yes.’ And he say to me say, ‘Headley ever have fits or any sickness?’ And me say, ‘No officer, from that young man bawn nothing nah do him: he work right round and round de clock.’”

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Never act strange

“And me up dere (Ramble Station) up till long after[,] the other policeman call me, say me fe come in, and he say to me say, ‘Me is a detective you know.’ And me say, ‘Yes sir.’ And he say to me say, ‘Mother you son ever act strange?’ And me say, ‘No officer.’ And he say, ‘Madda he never act strange?’ And me say, ‘No officer.’ And he say, ‘Madda he never act strange?’ And me say, ‘No officer nutten at all never do him, he work from 6 to 6 and he never tired.’ And he say, ‘Den Madda he never act strange?’ And me say, ‘No officer nothing never do him[.]’ and he say to me, ‘Den he never have fits?’ And he say it over and over and he say to me, ‘Madda he never go a doctor?’ and I say, ‘From dat bawn—dat's how I bawl out in dey—from dat bawn he never sick.’

“And de policeman sit down and sit down an look pon me and I say, ‘A dat a me backbone, a dat a me all an all. Holiday a come now an me look for me big cake and John will go a Montego Bay and buy it and send it up fe me,’ and de police say, ‘Oh Yes?’ and me say, ‘Yes, a me backbone dat . . . nobody never come and mek no complaint from him was a boy growing up . . . all what name he get is good name.’

“And de police look pon me and say, ‘I gwine tell you something but you not fe frighten,’ and I say, ‘Yes officer,’ and he say, ‘Madda you son dead you know,’ and me say, ‘Lawd have his mercy . . . lawd have his mercy dem kill me son now,’ and me say, ‘Officer who and me son was in the gaol when he die was it Davison?’ and he say, ‘No,’ and me say, ‘Who and him?’ and he say, ‘A next young man,’ and me say, ‘Officer den a dat young man kill me son in a gaol officer?’ Yes is dat what I ask him and he say to me, ‘No Madda ah not him kill him[.]’ and me say, ‘Den what do him?’ and he say dat when dey did go in dem find him with a little froth at him mouth look like when somebody have fits and me say, ‘Officer a strong man like that dem couldn't just tek from his work and him jus have fits right away so and cause him fe dead.’ He say, ‘Madda don't worry youself, the government—’ and me say, ‘Officer don't tell me ‘bout no government is me pickney me dey talk bout, is me pickney.’

Burial nah sweet

He say, ‘Don't worry yourself just relax,’ me say, ‘me cya[a]n relax, this no cause fe relaxing, let me tell you, me cya[a]n bury dead, if me house even bus' me cya[a]n find a little piece of board that size fi mend it, not even so big mi cya[a]n find,’ and he say, ‘Don't worry yourself government will help you bury him,’ and me say, ‘Officer let me tell you: The burial nah sweet me and the money nah sweet me, if they give me one million trillion dollar it nah sweet me like me pickney,’ and he say, ‘Madda just relax[.]’ and me say, ‘Officer me cya[a]n relax’ and he say, ‘Madda alright me finish with you.’”

Miss Babes went back to Argyle Mountain, but friends of her quiet, hardworking son, residents of the area who claim to have heard him bawling for mercy as the police beat him, people who

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claim to have seen policemen stepping outside the station to drink a jelly before going back to resume the beating next day blocked the main road to draw attention to what they claim was police brutality.

The police high command, already embarrassed by the cell deaths of three prisoners at Constant Spring, ordered an investigation into Headley's death. On Wednesday, December 9, Assistant Commissioner Bertram Millwood released the result of the pathologist's report on Headley's corpse: death due to cardio-respiratory failure associated with blunt force injuries.

But a million trillion dollars cannot bring John Headley back and up on Argyle Mountain Miss Babes faces Christmas without her favourite son and haunted by the knowledge that he was tortured to death.

Same way police batter-batter Miss Babes pikni, a so dem a batter-batter her wid question. A try must an bound her fi seh Headley did suffer from fits. An a di said same way teacher a batter-batter plenty pikni inna school a ask dem one question two time, three time weh di pikni dem can't answer becau dem no understand di language. Mi go a one Primary School fi gi one talk inna Heritage Week and mi decide fi talk Jamaican. Yu must see how di pikni dem face light up. Mi know a di first time any big smaddy ever come a dem school come talk to dem like dat. Yu waan hear dem a ask when mi a come back.

An di headmistress she ask me a good question. She seh she can't understand how it alright fi use all Miss Lou poem dem inna class but yu not suppose fi use di language inna school otherwise. Hmnn. A di said same question Amina Blackwood Meeks she ask inna fi her *Gleaner* column weh come out August 24. She call it "Of subversion and creativity":

Yuh nuh see sey Miss Lou pop dem again? Yes chile dem try to ship her off before school open so de school children would straighten out dem tongue and get back to losing dem confidence into Queen grammar in time for September roll call.

What a palampam when roll call over and teacher open up discussion bout 'today's topic is a memorable moment in my summer holidays.' You know how Miss Jane likkle one love chat and she was the chief flag waver outa de airport in Miss Lou's coming and the only one in her goings.

[. . .]

You can imagine when teacher open up dat topic and she put han a kimbo an leggo two Miss Lou poem. . . .

I want to be a fly on dat wall. For you know is whose class she move up into. The very teacher

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who every year train de debate team with the one topic, “It is infradig to speak in the Jamaican vernacular,” and she only training the children to propose the moot. What a prekeh. How now is she going to tell the children not to speak like she whom they were but recently saluting with bans of flag-waving.¹⁰

Anyhow, di headmistress tell mi seh one day she see a lickle boy a run inna di school yard an she stop im an ask im, “Whose class are you in?” Di pikni look pon are an seh “Eeeh Miss?” She ask im again. Im seh di same ting. An she tell mi seh, she all a tell im seh, im no fi seh “eeeh.” Dat a no English. And den she catch up herself an she ask di pikni “Who a yu teacher?” An im tell her same time. Mi know seh a disya language problem a stop plenty a di bwoy pikni dem from learn. Di girl dem have di problem to. But girl pikni bring up different from bwoy pikni. Di girl dem wi sidong wid dem book an try; di bwoy dem outside a play. A so dem turn play-play man.

A long time now Professor Errol Miller write one book weh im call *The Marginalization of the Black Male*. Yu see “marginalization?” It come een like seh yu a write one composition inna yu exercise book bout di different-different work wa man an woman do inna Jamaica. Ascorden to wa Professor Miller seh, wa uman do woulda full up di whole page a yu exercise book. Wa man do woulda dis hitch up inna di lickle space side a di line dem, weh lef fi teacher mek correction. A so-so correction fi di man dem. An no me seh so. A Professor Miller.

Den a Mistress Caroline Dyche tell me bout Miss Babes an Headley. A she in charge a di Language side a di Department of Language, Linguistics and Philosophy. An she a write her PhD thesis bout di language situation pon di campus.¹¹ An yu know weh she seh bout Miss Babes story: “The power of oral testimony and its role in the written media are reflected clearly here, I think.”¹² An a no ongle “the written media.” A radio an TV to.

Inna dem ya time, Jamaica people find out di power an authority a fi wi language and nobody no fraid fi tell fi dem owna story, inna fi dem owna language. A it mek dem call CVM “come video me.”¹³ An people wi spend all one hour pon cell phone a wait fi talk pon talk show. Up to di host dem bruck out an a chat dem language broad-broad. Tony Laing tek over from Babatunde; an Miss Haughton she ketch her length. Mi woulda love hear di two a dem, a run one show. Pure excitement.

An a wi same one inna di so-call “intellectual ghetto” a do di work fi explain wa a gwaan inna di society. Dr Kathryn Brodber, she a di Head a di Department of Language, Linguistics and Philosophy, she a write one book bout how talk radio change up over di last twenty year. A no like first time: yu go pon radio an TV an ha fi a round up yu mout an try talk stush. An Professor Hubert Devonish get University fi set up one Unit fi di Jamaican language inna dat deh department fi mek wi language step up inna life.

Lickle from now, Govament a go ha fi mek sure seh all a fi dem important document gi out

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inna two language: English an Jamaican. No so-so English. An nuff other language specialist inna disya University lay down di foundation. Dr. Pauline Christie book pon language inna Jamaica just come out. Dr. Velma Pollard write one book pon Rasta language weh she call *Dread Talk*. An Dr. Beverley Bryan inna di Department of Educational Studies a do work pon di language situation inna di primary school dem.

An inna fi mi Department, Literatures in English, wi teach nuff literature inna Jamaican. Mervyn Morris start teach Miss Lou an di dub poet dem: Mikey Smith, Oku Onuora, Linton Kwesi Johnson, Mutabaruka. An plenty a di “A” side writer dem use Jamaican same way. Lorna Goodison, Jean Breeze, Olive Senior, Erna Brodber, Mervyn Morris, Eddie Baugh, Vic Reid, Claude McKay, Herbert DeLisser. An mi bring een di DJ dem. So mi a go draw Elephant Man an Spragga Benz big tune, “Warrior Cause,” fi salute all a di teacher dem a UWI fi di work wi a do fi honour wi language, an wi culture an wi history:

Well mi come fi big up every warrior
From di present to di past
Hail all who know dem fight for a cause¹⁴

Yu see all Anthony B tune, “Nah Vote Again,” inna di miggie a it im gi out “Talk like Miss Lou, mi no talk like foreigner.”¹⁵ Di Dj dem know weh dem a defend. An mi ha fi thank L'Antoinette Stines an L'ACADCO fi dance Anthony B lyrics. An mi ha fi thank Sean Mock Yen fi cut an paste Anthony B tune and drop een di one line, “Talk like Miss Lou, mi no talk like foreigner,” three more time, fi mek sure unu hear it. Sean seh im fraid Anthony B bun fire pon im fi tek liberty wid di I tune. But im safe.

So dat a di language, authority and power within the academy and without. An by di way “without” is like inna dat Easter hymn, “There is a green hill far away without a city wall.” It no mean seh di green hill no ha no city wall. It mean seh di green hill outside a di city wall. Dat a first meaning a without di academy. But is a next ting mi a seh. If wi no mind sharp, di people dem outside a di academy a go gwaan without wi. So wi ha fi go step quick an ketch up wid dem.

So mi come to di last part a di talk now. Soon done. Professing slackness. Mi go down a di Senior Common Room bar pon campus Tuesday night and some a di man dem a tell me seh dem hope mi a profess tightness to. Yu see how dem slack! So wa mek mi call di lecture “professing slackness?” Well, is a little joke; but is a serious joke. Hear how it go. Yu see when yu promote to Professor, yu cyaan turn so-so Professor. Yu ha fi a profess something. So mi did waan call miself Professor of Cultural Studies becau a dat mi a do. But mi come fi find out seh it couldn't work so.

Di VC im response fi appoint professor.¹⁶ Im seh since mi still inna di English Department a sopen inna dat mi shoulda profess. But mi never like di title dem im a gi mi: Professor of Literary

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Theory. A no mi dat. Mi cyaan even remember some a dem. A three time im call mi inna im office fi talk bout di title. So di last time mi seh to im “why unno don't just call me Professor of Slackness an done.” Im laugh, im laugh, im laugh. An den im seh, “You're not very original. Your enemies already call you that.” Poor mi, poor gyal, mi never even know mi have enemy.

Mi ha fi thank mi fren Nadi Edwards fi come up wid di title a di professorship: literary an cultural studies. So mi get two fi di price a one. But is a serious joke. Me a profess slackness fi true. But wha kind a slackness? Me did write one article bout slackness fi di *Observer* long time now after mi did go pon one Tuesday Forum an, as per usual, people no listen good weh mi seh, an waan gi mi bad name. Mi call di article “Slackness Misconceived?” Seet ya. An mi mix iin a paragraph from mi dancehall book, *Sound Clash*.

Slackness Misconceived?

The basic problem with talking about “slackness” is that there are certain things that are better done than said: “Is not everything good fi eat good fi talk.” Why we don't listen to the wisdom of our proverbs, I don't know. Perhaps, it's because there's a part of us that positively enjoys I talking about the forbidden. Half the fun of doing certain things comes from the pleasure of talking about it. We learn quite early to associate the secrets of sex with cunning language. As children, we knew that once you heard adults start up with this spelling business they were talking about something interesting that they maliciously didn't want us to know about. It motivated a lot of us to learn to spell.

Another problem with talking about “slackness” is that this very suggestive term is often used rather loosely. Everybody assumes that we all know exactly what we mean when we say “slackness.” So we don't have to bother to be precise. As a teacher, I have an instinct for precision. To get things into the open you sometimes have to ask outrageous questions that stir people up. After the smoke clears, you hope there's a little more light than heat.

I gather that I've upset a number of upstanding citizens who are annoyed with me for doubting their pedigree and that of their parents. They assure me that they were not conceived in slackness. Who am I to question anyone's memory of conception? We've all seen *Look Who's Talking*. It's just that it seems a little absurd to claim that at the very instant of conception this new organism had the capacity to know the exact nature of the relationship between the two adults engaged in the act of procreation.

In any case the statement I made was, “If we equate slackness with sexuality, then it wasn't for slackness none of us would be here.” That context makes all the difference.... Surely, none of the souls who remember being conceived in love would claim that they were not conceived in sex. They could claim that their conception was clean, but certainly not that it was immaculate.

So what is “slackness”? Definitely difficult to pin down. It's the old erotica/pornography

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debate. Whatever turns us on is “erotica,” but those dirty people next door get off on “pornography.” Slackness, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. In Jamaican usage, the English word slackness has almost exclusively sexual overtones and is synonymous with licentiousness—“libertine, lascivious, lewd” behavior—to cite the alliterative *OED* definition of the latter word. But the license in the English licentiousness is often repressed in its Jamaican equivalent and only the censure remains.

The *Dictionary of Jamaican English* does not have an entry on “slackness.” But it does define a “slack” as “1. a slovenly person. 2. a woman of loose morals.” The gender bias is evident in this unsettling shift of meaning from the domain of the literal and superficial—dress/appearance—to that of the metaphorical and substantive—moral conduct. The gender neutral “slovenly person” becomes the gender specific “woman of loose morals.” Modes of un/dress have long been read as signs of the moral condition of both men and women, as far back as the Garden of Eden. But in the Jamaican context, slackness becomes essentialized as the generic condition of immoral woman, not man. Women are supposed to be the perennial guardians of private and public morality; men are allowed to extemporize.

The other side of the “slackness” double standard has to do with class. Loose women tend to be working-class; respectable women are, generally, middle-class; upper-class women—like men—are free to behave like the working-class. But middle-class women do get a chance to carry-on badly like everybody else every now and then. Like at carnival time. The foreign/local double standard. Imported slackness is certainly more acceptable than the local variety. Like saltfish. And rap. And R&B.

Middle-class women can also display themselves legitimately in beauty contests and on various calendars. Quite frankly, I'm not as upset about the calendars as some right-wing feminists are. What I think we need is gender equity. Advertisers are missing a huge market of women [and, dare I say, men?] who would love to see calendars with pictures of well-built men with bulges in all the right places. We women will settle for the occasional mature model: a little “distinguished” graying at the temples; the “expressive” lined face; the merest hint of flab. But like men, we'd like to see mostly fit young things in provocative poses. Models on horse/bike-back; around trees; rising steamily from the sea. I think you get my drift.

And slackness isn't only about sexual morality....People who talk in languages that wear shoes think that people who talk in barefoot languages are slack. They make corrupt animal noises. It's a short step from no shoes to no clothes. Naked savages thinking dirty thoughts and daring to speak them. Which brings us right back to where we started: Slackness is “what oft is thought but ne'er so well repressed.” It's O.K. to think it, but not to speak it. Sexual innuendo is not slackness; explicit reference to sex is.

For many people the problem with the DJs is that they haven't mastered the art of double speak. Unlike the calypsonian, the DJ doesn't often speak with a forked tongue. So a

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calypsonian will sing about a mechanic who refuses to “work on any man bus(t)” and that's not slackness because it is “subtle.” But even our local DJs who know how to talk about sex in code (back to the childhood spelling games) can't get away with that kind of subtlety. You know that song about the man on the bus who remembers his own shortcomings every time the conductor shouts out “Shortwood.”¹⁷ That's slackness. It won't be played on the radio, but the calypso counterpart will.

Let me end on a clean calypso note. I yield to all those uptight people who say they were not conceived in slackness. I concede that, though conception does sometimes take place in rather loose circumstances, for the sheer fun of it there's nothing like doing it in the right context. Innuendo, like slackness, is in the mind of the receiver.

Den mek mi gi unu one last lickle piece, from the same talk weh mi answer Eddie Baugh exam question. Mi call it “Performance Criticism,” an yu wi hear weh mi get di title from. So mi seh: *Noises in the Blood* [an mi ha fi put een *Sound Clash* now] is my attempt to write the history of Jamaican popular culture from below. Not necessarily below the waist. My political choice has it consequences. Listen to the cautionary tone of this quote from Dr. Barbara Lalla's generally enthusiastic review of the book, published in the *Journal of Caribbean Historians*, vol 28/1:

As a critique, the study (like its subject) is inclined to tek bad ting make juok, and to the present reviewer it seems that in the process certain serious issues (like the unspeakable brutality of some lyrics) are trivialised and certain trivia are unduly dignified by academic notice.¹⁸

Mea culpa, mea maxima culpa. But truth is stranger than fiction. I looked up ‘trivial’ in the *Oxford English Dictionary* and was amazed to find that the very first entry defined the meaning of the word as “belonging to the trivium of mediaeval university studies” i.e. grammar, rhetoric and logic. Seet deh! One woman's trivia is another woman's scholarship.

But I must make it clear that immediately after raising the issue of trivia, Dr. Lalla counterbalances her argument with a positive “but”:

But the writer also foregrounds crucial issues of discourse such as the verbal marronage of performers who challenge canonicity. The writer's colourful integration of both coherent trends and contradictory features in the oral culture suits her style to her topic. (Dare we term this ‘performance criticism’?)¹⁹

I must thank Dr. Lalla for that brilliant construct ‘performance criticism’.

A true. Dat a weh mi a do. So “Professing Slackness: Language Authority and Power Within the Academy and Without.” Bait an switch. See di dub version ya. An mi stretch it out: Mi a defend

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Slackness, when it come on to language, inna university an out a road. A wi have di power an di authority fi free wi mind. Story done. Reasoning done. Tank unu fi listen mi.

Carolyn Cooper is a professor of literary and cultural studies at the University of the West Indies, Mona, Jamaica. She is the author of two influential books – *Sound Clash: Jamaican Dancehall Culture at Large* (2004) and *Noises in the Blood: Orality, Gender and the ‘Vulgar’ Body of Jamaican Popular Culture* (1993). She is the editor of the award-winning *Global Reggae* (2012). A well-known media personality in Jamaica, Professor Cooper writes a weekly column for the *Sunday Gleaner*. She is a public intellectual committed to widening debates on cultural politics beyond the walls of the university.

Notes

¹ Frederick Cassidy, one Jamaican man weh study language, im show wi how fi write Jamaican inna di *Dictionary of Jamaican English*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967, xxxix-xl. Cassidy an Robert LePage, one next man weh know bout language, work pon di *Dictionary*.

² Mi use “chaka-chaka” fi di mix up way fi write Jamaican laka English.

³ Di University of the West Indies did start off as a college inna di University of London (UCWI). An Rasta turn di C inna ‘see’; an turn it over again an seh “blind.”

⁴ Inna 2003, when mi gi dis lecture, di UWI radio station did name Radio Mona an it never broadcast no programme after 6:00 p.m. Dem play “classical” music whole night. Di station name change to NewsTalk, an di programme dem run day an night.

⁵ Miss Lou a di pet name a Louise Bennett Coverley. She write nuff poem an story inna Jamaican.

⁶ Louise Bennett, *Aunty Roachy Seh*, ed. Mervyn Morris (Kingston, Jamaica: Sangster’s Book Stores Ltd., 2005), 1.

⁷ Marse Mervyn dat a Prof Mervyn Morris weh do nuff work di big up Miss Lou.

⁸ Wilmot Perkins did-a do one talk show pon radio. Im dead inna 2012.

⁹ Dat a UWI motto.

¹⁰ Amina Blackwood-Meeks, “Of Subversion and Creativity,” *The Sunday Gleaner*, August 24, 2003, F3.

¹¹ Inna 2012, Dr. Dyche finish her PhD pon “Demystifying Empiricism: Understanding English Language Education Policy-making in a Commonwealth Caribbean University.”

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¹² Mistress Dyche write dat pon di piece a newspaper weh she gi mi.

¹³ CVM a one TV station inna Jamaica.

¹⁴ Elephant Man/Spragga Benz, “Warrior Cause,” Track 6, *Log On*, Greensleeves Records, 2001.

¹⁵ Anthony B, “Nah Vote Again,” Track 7, *Universal Struggle*, VP Records, 1998.

¹⁶ VC, dat a Vice-Chancellor, di head a di University. Dat deh time a Prof. Rex Nettleford a di VC.

¹⁷ “Wood” a one Jamaican word fi penis.

¹⁸ Barbara Lalla, Review of *Noises in the Blood* in *Journal of Caribbean Historians* 28(1) (1994): 136.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 136-137.