

“What Seems to Be Standard English Often Isn’t”: A Conversation on Language and West Indian Literature with Jamaican Poet Mervyn Morris

Thomas Rothe

Doctor (c) in Literature, CONICYT fellow/Universidad de Chile, Chile
tcrothe@gmail.com

Born in Kingston in 1937, Mervyn Morris is one of Jamaica’s most renowned poets and critics. Growing up in Jamaica, he witnessed the boom of West Indian literature in the 1950s and also the social changes brought on by Independence in 1962. He studied abroad at Oxford for three years on a prestigious Rhodes Scholarship and returned to Jamaica in 1961, devoting the rest of his career to teaching. From 1970 to 2002, Morris was professor of West Indian Literature at the University of the West Indies (UWI), Mona, where he also taught Creative Writing. In 1976, he received the Silver Musgrave Medal and in 2009 the Order of Merit, one of the Jamaican government’s highest awards. In 2014, he was named the first Poet Laureate of Jamaica since Independence, a title he held until 2017.

Morris’ poetry deals with social concerns in post-Independence Jamaica without explicitly raising political banners, cultivating a poetics that critically examines the status quo through different literary devices, such as vernacular language and irony. In addition to his contributions in little magazines throughout the Caribbean, he has published many full volumes of poetry, which include *The Pond* (1973), *On Holy Week* (1976), *Shadowboxing*

(1979), *Examination Centre* (1992), *I Been There, Sort of: New and Selected Poems* (2006), and *Peelin Orange* (2017). His critical work has focused on written and oral literature, including so-called dub poetry, and the impact of Louise Bennett, famed poet and performer who promoted Jamaican folk traditions and culture to a wider audience. This work is gathered in the following volumes of essays: *“Is English We Speaking” and Other Essays* (1999), *Making West Indian Literature* (2005), and *Miss Lou: Louise Bennett and Jamaican Culture* (2014). Morris has also edited many anthologies of poetry, stories, and criticism, including *Seven Jamaican Poets* (1971), *The Faber Book of Contemporary Caribbean Short Stories* (1990), *Voiceprint: An Anthology of Oral and Related Poetry from the Caribbean* (1990, with Stewart Brown and Gordon Rohlehr), *Lunch Time Medley: Writings on West Indian Cricket* (2008), *Writing Life: Reflections by West Indian Writers* (2008), and *In This Breadfruit Kingdom: An Anthology of Jamaican Poetry* (2017). Despite having traveled to several Latin American countries, including Cuba and Venezuela, his work is scarcely available in Spanish. However, some of his poems were translated for the anthology *Poetas del Caribe anglófono* (2011), published by Casa de las Américas in Cuba.

My conversation with Morris took place in Kingston, Jamaica, on December 13, 2017, at UWI Mona’s Department of Literatures in English. This interview forms part of a long-standing debate that crosses linguistic, political, and cultural spheres, and extends to the rest of the Anglophone Caribbean, although with particularities in each national context. Caribbean Creoles emerged from the contact between African slaves and European slave owners on the plantations as of the 16th century, and in some cases with significant Asian influences due to the migration of indentured workers from China and India in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Historically, Jamaican Creole (often referred to as Patois or Patwa) has been disregarded as a vulgar or “broken” version of standard English, stigmatized as low-class or uneducated speech, although most Jamaicans understand and can speak Creole. While linguists have contributed to comprehending Creole as one of the national languages with its own linguistic system (an impetus which began in the mid-20th century and was thrust forward after the independence process of the 60s), literature, both written and oral, has helped to legitimize the use of Creole, reclaiming it as a source to indigenize and decolonize intellectual discourse. In what follows, Morris speaks of the tensions between Creole and standard language, written and performance poetry, and how he attempts to represent these issues in his own poetry. I

thank Morris enormously for agreeing to this interview and later helping to revise the transcript.

Thomas Rothe (TR): I would like to begin by talking about language. Language is the raw material of poetry and a sensitive issue in Jamaican society, related to class and race. Do you believe Jamaican society has come to terms with its Creole language or do tensions persist? How have writers and intellectuals contributed to the debate?

Mervyn Morris (MM): I think most Jamaicans now accept that some of our writing will be in Jamaican Creole. One of the pioneers was Claude McKay who published two collections of dialect poetry in 1912. But the person that most of us regard as crucially important was Louise Bennett, often referred to as Miss Lou, who started publishing Creole in the early 1940s and had been performing before that. As Ted Chamberlin noted in *Come Back to Me My Language*, "More than any other single writer, Louise Bennett brought local language into the foreground of West Indian cultural life" (95-96). Though some of the dialogue in various novels is represented in Creole, the earliest West Indian novels in which the language of narration is not Standard English were Vic Reid's *New Day* (1949) and Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* (1956). Of course, English is one of our languages, a point George Lamming made with some force in *The Pleasures of Exile* (1960). Linguists often talk of a continuum between a version of standard English and the deepest Creole, Creole that is not very accessible to the standard speaker. But part of the joy in West Indian literature, I think, is recognizing there's a lot of play somewhere in the middle, so you get people who write things that look as though they're standard English but to a West Indian ear you can clearly recognize the Creole inflections. That's something I care a lot about.

TR: In your book of essays, *Is English We Speaking*, you began with a quote from Sam Selvon which illustrates the issue of creol intonations missed in print.

MM: That's right, is English we speaking...

TR: Can you expand upon this issue, how those intonations don't necessarily reach a standard English-speaking reader?

MM: They probably wouldn't understand it if they didn't have some experience with Caribbean speech. In fact, when I first presented that text as a talk in London, even the person introducing me didn't have any sense of

that difference until I spoke it. They tend to think of it as being a query: Is English we speaking? (laughs). I used that quotation to make the point that there are many Englishes and the character Galahad is speaking one of them.

TR: You mentioned earlier the notion of dialect poetry. There are many debates over names of genres that use vernacular language, such as dialect or Kamau Brathwaite's *nation language*, a term which I know you don't completely adhere to.

MM: Yes, I'm in a small minority. The term *nation language* can be a little slippery. Near the beginning of *History of the Voice* Brathwaite expresses his unhappiness with the word *dialect* and wants to find something else. So it appears as though *nation language* is a substitute for dialect, but by the time he's finished it's much wider—by the time he gets to Tony McNeill, it's standard English in a Jamaican accent. The term is so wide I'm not sure it has the kind of precision that might be useful. Linguists have taught us about Creole, which may have started as a pidgin with the contact language but becomes a Creole that is the first language or the mother tongue of children who grow up speaking it. The term *nation language* can absorb Standard English entirely.

TR: I think what Brathwaite is going for is to question the pejorative implications of dialect, as you mentioned, and associate the speech with an idea of national identity. But would you say then that he did not fully pursue this idea and has left it in somewhat of a conceptual ambiguity?

MM: Perhaps. The original oral presentation (in 1976 at CARIFESTA in Jamaica) was riveting. He offered recordings of speech and music to illustrate or reinforce what he was saying. The performance is less persuasive in print.

TR: It seems almost necessary for academics and intellectuals to use different technological platforms, such as audio or video recordings, in their research and also in their teaching.

MM: They certainly use it in teaching, especially when they're dealing with writers who often perform. All sorts of things become much clearer when you hear them. People have also written academic papers in Creole: one notable attempt in English has been a Carolyn Cooper paper on Sistren,¹ written largely in Creole. This was sort of new in our Department, but in the 70s on this campus, especially in the social sciences, there were people

¹ "Writing Oral History: SISTREN Theatre Collective's *Lionheart Gal*". *Kunapipi* 11.1, 1989, pp. 49-57.

giving lectures in Creole sometimes. George Beckford, the economist, often gave public lectures in Creole, as part of a political thrust. People often use bits of Creole in their teaching, though I don't think many people give whole lectures in Creole anymore.

TR: I think many Latin American readers and scholars would be interested to know more about Louise Bennett and her pivotal role in legitimizing Jamaican Creole. Can you briefly describe her importance in Jamaican society and culture?

MM: She mainly took us over by her performances, by what was on radio and on stage, and through Pantomime.² But she was always publishing as well. Her first book was published in 1942, though she wasn't taken seriously for a very long time. The people who wrote about literature tended to enjoy Louise Bennett but not to consider her part of literature. In 1963, when I was a schoolmaster and using some Louise Bennett poems in my teaching, I wrote an essay called "On Reading Louise Bennett, Seriously," and that seems to have struck people as something to pay attention to. When Rex Nettleford edited *Jamaica Labrish* (1966), he made reference to that, though he had reservations about some of my assumptions on language, and he was right to have them. Most of us now take it for granted that some of our literature will make substantial use of Creole. There was a stage when the Ministry of Education was very much against including Creole in the school curriculum, but that changed, as I mention in *Making West Indian Literature*. Of course, because she was also a very popular performer on radio, Louise Bennett came to be known by everybody in Jamaica. And then there was her television work: she was persuaded to do a weekly children's program, *Ring Ding*, for six months and ended up doing it for 12 years. I would say that many people who talk about Louise Bennett have never really paid much attention to what's included in *Jamaica Labrish* and the *Selected Poems* (1982). They are really remembering the impact of Louise on *Ring Ding*, presenting and encouraging culture of all kinds. Primarily *Ring Ding* promoted Jamaican culture, but it also welcomed little bits of performance that might be from anywhere. So, you'd have somebody who would come in and play the flute, somebody who would recite a very English poem, but it was all part of the mix. And this connects with a Jamaican countryside tradition called the Tea Meeting, where people would get together and recite

² A theater production founded in 1941 by the Little Theatre Movement (LTM) which is staged yearly on Boxing Day.

bits of Shakespeare, bits of whatever, bits of Jamaican folksong, and so on. I think Louise Bennett's reputation was earned not only for her humorous poems in Creole but also for what she did in Pantomime, and *Miss Lou's Views*³ (which was a radio program), and *Ring Ding*.

TR: Yes, Louise Bennett made prolific use of Creole in her writing and performance career, always appealing to a local Jamaican audience, yet by the time of her death she had reached international recognition. How do you believe she managed to negotiate between the local and universal so as to speak to both?

MM: A lot of that has to do with the skill of her performing persona. She was able to perform in Creole to people who didn't really know Creole. She would do a very swift introduction to the poem in standard English, and in no time people were responding to the rhythms of her performance. After the most minimal of introductory notes, her personality made the connection. She was outstanding in that way. I think by the way that there are some other very good writer-performers.

TR: In your book *Making West Indian Literature*, you say the term "dub-poetry" is not completely satisfying. Can you briefly explain your reservations and also how literary criticism has paid attention to or ignored performance poetry?

MM: Dub poetry can be examined as literature, but literary criticism does not always give much weight to the impact of performance. And some of the writers we call dub poets don't like the term because they see it as limiting them. They really would rather be understood as poets. Someone who embraces and promotes the term is Orlando Wong, who changed his name to Oku Onuora. Linton Kwesi Johnson prefers the term "reggae poetry." Carolyn Cooper has taught a course here on "Reggae Poetry." Some well-known "dub poets," such as Mutabaruka, Jean Binta Breeze and Oku Onuora himself, also write poems which do not make significant use of reggae or dub music rhythms. There is an overlap between people who are writing reggae lyrics and people who are writing what in effect are poems, which reward sustained attention to language. It is not unusual now to recognize Bob Marley as a poet.

³ Aired in Jamaica from 1966 to 1982. Many of the monologues broadcast on this program are collected in *Aunty Roachy Sey*, edited by Morris and published in 1993 by Sangster's Book Stores.

TR: What about Rastafarianism, which has been internationalized through reggae? How do you perceive its influence on Jamaican literature?

MM: Rastafarian influence is widely diffused in Jamaican society. In the 60s and 70s, increasingly Rastafarian ways of thinking and speech became widely received and used. Michael Manley used for the 1972 election campaign a phrase which was often associated with Rastafarians: "The word is love." Rasta became more and more accepted and also certain elements which are thought to be Rastafarian got adopted by people who did not wish to be Rastafarian. There's a lovely saying: "Not every dread a Rasta" (laughs). The locks came partly in connection with the Black Power influence in the United States, but wearing hair natural is a choice that was made by many people who would not consider themselves Rastafarian. And there are all sorts of subtleties which aren't always talked about. It is widely understood that the Rastafarian is committed to marijuana, ganja, the holy herb. But some prominent Rasta do not smoke. Cedric Brooks, for example, didn't smoke, and Mutabaruka doesn't smoke. But yes, Rastafarian influence is widely diffused in Jamaican society. There are Rastafarian characters in our literature, and many instances of Rasta-inflected language.

TR: Like many Caribbean writers and intellectuals, you traveled to England to study in the university. Can you share some of that experience and how it has influenced your consciousness and writing?

MM: In my case, I received a scholarship and went away for three years. But as my studies came to a close, I wanted to return to Jamaica because the woman I was going to marry was back here.

TR: That's a good reason...

MM: It is a good reason. But if she had come to the U.K. I might have stayed much longer.

TR: Did you face any discrimination while in London, experiences such as those documented by Linton Kwesi Johnson, for example?

MM: I didn't have the kind of experience that Linton had. I was largely sheltered. But that doesn't mean I didn't experience some things that were clearly race related. For example, I was at a party with other members of a field hockey team, and I asked a woman to dance. She turned, ready to dance, but pulled back when she saw me. I remember that very clearly. Then also: I was competing for a place on a combined Oxford and Cambridge lawn tennis team, scheduled to travel to the States to play against a combined Harvard and

Yale team, as happened every few years, and was told that only English players could be selected. I wondered about that, because I had been encouraged to compete by a West Indian who had previously won a slot, Ian McDonald. But he's a white West Indian (laughs). Discreetly challenged, the decision was revised. I didn't make the team, but an Indian did. I also recall an incident on a tube train in London when there was a small group of boisterous young men, and one of them seemed to think I was staring in a hostile manner. He started to move towards me, but another in the group restrained him, saying: "Ah no, he's the same color as Louis Armstrong, man!" These are trivial incidents in comparison to the experience of people like Linton.

TR: They may seem trivial, but those experiences no doubt influenced your awareness and perception of race.

MM: Oh, yes. But also, I arrived in England at a time soon after the Notting Hill Riots. So there was a kind of alertness to race. I was at a college where people were really quite friendly. I had all sorts of hesitations at first, but they soon wore off. When I returned to Jamaica I entered a competition sponsored by the Institute of Race Relations, which invited African, Asian, and West Indian students to write on their attitudes to the color problem. My essay, included in a collection called *Disappointed Guests*, tried to suggest the complexity of my personal experience, much of it positive.

TR: Many people in Jamaica say that race is no longer an issue, that Jamaica is a classist society, which seems to be a response in many countries around the world with histories of racial oppression. I'm wondering if you can talk a little about race relations here in Jamaica in order to better comprehend the subtleties, considering the history of colonialism and slavery, and also how it has manifested in literature.

MM: Race is still a factor here. Or colorism, as they say sometimes. Class matters, but class and race run parallel. Money can make a difference, education can make a difference. But somehow the people who are poorest are black. Race became a more noticeable factor in the 70s, of course, because of Black Power and so on. I've tracked some of it in my poems in a way, because there was a period when you were quite likely to encounter a "blacker than thou" attitude. The assumption was if you were not saying what had become the general fashion you were probably not committed enough.

TR: I would like you to speak briefly about your own poetry. In the volume of your collected poems, *Peelin Orange*, there are constant metaphors

of sight, allusions, lies, imprisonment and fruit, as in the title poem. Can you speak about these images and if they are conscious decisions?

MM: I think they must be images that just appear, so please tell me more (laughs). No, lies are pretty central; lies and light, those are things that I am conscious of. That doesn't mean I set out to do them, but I'm conscious that they are there all the time. Unmasking certain appearances... but then again, every writer does that, trying to reveal what is and what seems to be.

TR: You also go in and out of standard English and Jamaican Creole. Can you explain your intentions in using each language?

MM: Well, I write some poems which are clearly meant to be in Creole and some which are not only in standard English but in very British standard English (laughs). This is the range of what I know. Occasionally, I begin writing poems in standard English and then switch to the Creole. "Peelin Orange," for example, I began in standard English but it didn't feel right. You hear various voices and you shift them around. Sam Selvon talked about this in relation to *The Lonely Londoners*, that he started writing it in standard English and it didn't feel right and that he found himself writing it more in the Creole. It's the voice that you hear for the character in whatever small way... The voice leads you. But I like to point out that there are many moments when what seems to be standard English isn't. For example, one of my poems is "To an Expatriate Friend." In one of the stanzas the word "sufferers" is spelt in the standard English way, but the meter is signaling three syllables. Something feels wrong if you sound it as *subfrers*.⁴ In the Jamaican context, the sound is *subfaras*,⁵ which signifies poor black people. The word "sufferers" is standard English, and here it is also Creole. Let me just read you the stanza:

And then the revolution. Black
and loud the horns of anger blew
against the long oppression; sufferers
cast off the precious values of the few.⁶

⁴ Phonetic spelling of the British pronunciation, which only articulates two syllables.

⁵ Phonetic spelling of the West Indian pronunciation, which articulates three syllables and drops the final "r."

⁶ *Peelin Orange*. Manchester, England, Carcanet, 2017, p. 203.

On the other hand, in a poem called “Diptych” there is a stanza that reads:

when the wild guitarist
making too much noise
was thrown out by
his wutliss friend
he hanged himself.⁷

The word “wutliss” is emphatic, as in *wutliss bwoy*, or *di bwoy wutliss, mon*. The Jamaican resonance goes beyond “worthless.”

TR: Out of curiosity, is the expatriate poem based on a real experience?

MM: Yes, he was a white friend who taught physics at Munro College and later at UWI Mona. As things got more and more uncertain for whites, he and his wife decided that maybe they should leave and they did.

TR: In the last line of the poem, it says he was “going white.” Was there a time when he was “going black”?

MM: Good question. As white people teaching at Munro College up in the St. Elizabeth hills, he and his wife were much more integrated into the local scene than my wife and me. People would bring him things to fix and he was a friend to many. Color didn’t seem to matter to him and his wife. It’s all very complicated because this was somebody who actually had taught at Gordonstoun, which is where Prince Charles went to school—a very upper-class school in Scotland. So, he was not an English yokel (laughs) but he was very comfortable in the situation at Munro. And then he came to Kingston and things seemed to be less safe. The last line is not only about him going white, but also about his black friend seeing blacker. “New powers re-enslaved us all.” One of the things about the 70s is that everybody changed.

TR: I wanted to ask about your personal style of writing shorter poems and using rhymes. How did you come to cultivate this style, especially considering that today rhyming in poetry can sometimes be considered archaic?

MM: Only sometimes, as you say. Well, I don’t always rhyme, as you know. But I often feel that at least an occasional rhyme can help the poem seem like something made. I think it has to do with having enjoyed rhyme in

⁷ *Peelin Orange*. Manchester, England, Carcanet, 2017, p. 238.

the work of some poets I like. A poet whose craft I very much like is Philip Larkin—he doesn't always rhyme either—and one of the main things I've learned from him is to sometimes choose contemporary common language, given a certain freshness by its placement.

TR: Humor seems to be an important aspect of Caribbean literature and I have noticed that your poetry tends to use irony. Can you briefly comment on the function of irony and humor in your work?

MM: Humor is an important aspect of Caribbean life, sometimes as a survival mechanism. It is often provoked by incongruity, of course, the perception of a gap between what looks like pretenses and what we call reality. I grew up in a family that laughed a lot. My father was an inveterate humorist. I know that irony can sometimes be seen as a strategy of evasion, a reluctance to choose, but I believe that in my use of it I am often trying to represent complexity, the many-sidedness of particular moments. It may also be the residue of my earliest years at university, when I began to study poets such as Donne, Herbert and Andrew Marvell. My interest in Louise Bennett has reinforced my respect for irony and humor.