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Spelling out Resistance: Dub Poetry and Typographic Creativity

Introduction

The so called 'third wave' of variationist studies scholarship presents a perspective on speaker's use of variables as 'agentic': in this light, speakers are considered "not as passive and stable carriers of dialect, but as stylistic agents, tailoring linguistic styles in ongoing and lifelong projects of self-construction and differentiation".[1] In this light, social variables do not simply reflect social structure, but they also function as a speaker's resource to impact on his or her social world. As Penelope Eckert argues:

> Variation constitutes a social semiotic system capable of expressing the full range of a community's social concerns. And as these concerns continually change, variables cannot be consensual markers of fixed meanings; on the contrary, their central property must be indexical mutability. This mutability is achieved in stylistic practice, as speakers make social-semiotic moves, reinterpreting variables and combining and recombining them in a continual process of bricolage.[2]

Linguistic variants are thus considered as markers of styles, being part of "active-stylistic production of social differentiation".[3] As such, they can be taken into consideration to focus on the value of social meaning, suggesting that variation is not a neutral operation but rather a socially determined choice. As it unearths the connection between linguistic variation and its embedded social meaning, this theoretical approach proves particularly helpful in the investigation of orthographic variation related to the textualization of written Creole both in the Caribbean and in Britain.

Being the point of intersection between "issues of language as a formal object and of language as a social and cultural phenomenon", orthography is inextricably linked to issues of social and national identity as well as of cultural representation.[4] The emergence of an increasing corpus of texts written in Creole, especially in CMC, has revived the problem of representation of English-lexicon Caribbean Creoles for which there is no standard orthography. In Jamaica, the work of linguists and scholars has focused on the use and popularization of a standard orthography devised in the 1960s in order to promote the cause of bilingualism together with a "vernacularization of education".[5] However, in Jamaica as well as in the diaspora, writers tend to use a modified Standard English spelling, for practical as well as for ideological reasons. In Britain, for example, English-lexicon Caribbean creole is gaining prestige among the youth and is being increasingly used in written communication, as the work of Mark Sebba focusing on written code-switching of British-born Caribbeans between a local British English variety and a local

[1] Penelope Eckert, "Three Waves of Variation Study: the Emergence of Meaning in the Study of Sociolinguistic Variation", *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 41.87 (2012), 97-98.

[2] Ibid., 94.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Mark Sebba, *Spelling and Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 6.

[5] See on this Robert B. Le Page, "Problems to Be Faced in the Use of English as the Medium of Education in Four West Indian Territories", in Charles Ferguson, Joshua Fishman and Jyotirindra Dasgupta, eds., *Language Problems of Developing Nations* (New York: Wiley, 1968).

British variety of Jamaican Creole shows. Written British Creole appears primarily in oral-related forms like dub poetry or dialogues in short novels and plays, and is represented by 'respelling' or modifying conventional Standard English spelling. Although it presents several problems of ideological nature such as inconsistency, closeness to the colonial lexifier, and the continuation of an image of a 'corrupt' version of the norm, this etymological orthography is nonetheless a flexible system providing a more suitable model to convey and textually represent the high degree of variability which characterizes the Jamaican creole continuum and diasporic speech communities. By using a sociolinguistic approach to issues of language standardization, the work of Sebba has illustrated the ideological implications of the orthography of Jamaican Creole by British Caribbean writers, and will prove particularly illuminating in analyzing the work of dub poets of Jamaican origin Linton Kwesi Johnson and Jean 'Binta' Breeze.

Writing Jamaican Creole: Between Standardization and Variation

The Jamaican context is characterized by a complex sociolinguistic history that has produced a 'continuum of expression' both oral and written, a linguistic variation characterized by gradient transitions from English as the 'acrolect' through an intermediate range ('mesolect'), to the broadest Creole or 'basilect'. Mesolectal and basilectal forms are used consciously for rhetorical purposes to construct a public persona/identity, or to make a political statement – by people who would clearly have been able to produce the Standard English alternative.[6] The notion of continuum also problematizes the definition of the Jamaican context in terms of diglossia, where Standard English and Jamaican Creole are polarized in different functions; while Standard English is the expected language in schools, law courts, mass media and "in all the other contexts where written language is required",[7] Jamaican Creole is supposed to be the language of oral, informal communication. However, some scholars have argued that "the diglossia of the past is being eroded" by the increasing presence of Jamaican Creole in formal and written contexts, thus steadily appropriating the function of the High Language.[8]

Although it would be inaccurate to consider Jamaican Creole as an exclusively oral language, as research carried out by Lalla and D'Costa demonstrates, it has been increasingly used in written communication – folklore, poetry, informal news and the Internet – since the beginning of the twentieth century.[9] Poetry, in particular, has been the privileged site of the use of written Jamaican Creole. A case in point is the work of Claude McKay (1889-1948), who published the first dialect collections of poems in the Anglophone Caribbean in 1912: *Songs of Jamaica,* published in Kingston, and *Constab Ballads*, published in London.[10] This tentative phase ended with McKay's migration to the States, where he became a major leading voice of the Harlem Renaissance and devoted himself to the sonnet and to prose. The production of Una Marson (1905-1965), feminist activist and writer, is more controversial, contradictorily swinging between a mimicking of

[6] Christian Mair, "Creolisms in an Emerging Standard", *English World-Wide*, 23.1 (2002), 33.

[7] Pauline Christie, *Language in Jamaica* (Kingston: Arawak Press, 2003), 2.

[8] Kathryn Shields-Brodber, "Requiem for English in an 'English-speaking' Community: The Case of Jamaica", in Edgar W. Schneider, ed., *Englishes around the World (2): Caribbean, Africa, Asia, Australasia* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1997), 57-69.

[9] Barbara Lalla and Jean D'Costa, *Language in Exile: Three Hundred Years of Jamaican Creole* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1990).

[10] Claude McKay, *Constab Ballads* (London: Watts, 1912); *Songs of Jamaica* (Kingston: Gardner, 1912).

the Romantics and the Georgians and experimental while unconvincing Creole poems.[11] Louise Bennett (1919-2006) has produced ground-breaking work for the extensive use of Creole in poetry and has had a continuing impact on generations of poets. As a middle-class woman who started performing and printing in Jamaican Creole in the early 1940s, Miss Lou – as she was affectionately called – is now acknowledged for her innovative use of Creole and considered as a symbol of Jamaican culture. Moreover, her research on and popularization of folk culture undoubtedly favoured the literary appropriation of Creole, casting her as an inspiring figure for generations encouraged by her use of 'Jamaica Talk'.

The mass migration to England in the 1950s signalled the beginning of the Caribbean literary tradition, and the publication of works by writers such as Derek Walcott, George Lamming and V.S. Naipaul marked the explosion of a Caribbean literature that established Standard English as the language of narration. Despite Sam Selvon's linguistic daring with the publication in 1956 of *The Lonely Londoners,* written in a Creole which sought to recover on the page the rhythm of oral speech, the taboo persisted. Creole in literature was still mainly used for comic purpose or in dialogue, rather than in narrative, and it was clearly marked in the text by a set of paratextual devices which implicitly reproduced the dichotomy and hierarchy between orality and literacy.

The steady improvement of Internet access in Jamaica in the past few years has revitalized the use of written JamC, considerably extending it to the Jamaican diaspora. In fact the Internet has opened up new perspectives for the use of Creoles in writing,[12] bringing about new written text types "marked by higher frequencies of informal language features".[13] Examples of these informal features are code mixing and frequent deviations from standard spelling conventions, thus producing what has been termed a written counterpart to "conversational codeswitching"[14] displaying the use of a vernacular along a standard language in computer mediated communication. An interesting case in point is also the appearance of Creole in quality newspapers articles (and in their online versions) and blogs, further testifying to the full functionality of JamC in written domains.[15]

As a consequence, the increase in number and in geographical distribution of both consumers and producers of written texts in Jamaican Creole has focused the attention of linguists on persistent problems of spelling and standardization. Since the 1960s, the emergent textualization of Creole through oral-related forms such as music, folklore and 'dialect verse', and the concurrent process of cultural nation-building stemming from independence in 1962, has called for a debate on the 'Jamaican vernacular' and its standardisation, focusing in particular on the political implications of orthography. In 1961, the Jamaican linguist Frederick Cassidy devised a phonemic system whose virtue is undoubtedly its internal consistency, with "one symbol or pair of symbols always representing the same sound".[16] However, it is its very regularity and consistency that might prove problematic. Albeit intended to give literary dignity and independence to Jamaican Creole, this system is very likely to be perceived as a further imposition, a norm

[11] See for instance Denise de Caires, *Making Style: Contemporary Caribbean Women's Poetry* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 8-29.

[12] Christian Mair, "Language, Code and Symbol: the Changing Roles of Jamaican Creole in Diaspora Communities", *Arbeiten aus Anglistik und Amerikanistik*, 28.2 (2003), 231-248.

[13] Lars Hinrichs, "How to Spell the Vernacular: a Multivariate Study of Jamaican E-mails and Blogs", in Alexandra Jaffe, Jannis Androutsopoulos, Mark Sebba, Sally Johnson, eds., *Orthography as Social Action: Scripts, Spelling, Identity and Power* (Berlin-New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2012), 325.

[14] See in particular Lars Hinrichs, *Codeswitching on the Web: English and Jamaican Creole in E-Mail Communication* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2006).

[15] See for example Carolyn Cooper's column in the *Jamaican Gleaner*.

[16] Carolyn Cooper, *Noises in the Blood: Orality, Gender, and the "Vulgar" Body of Jamaican Popular Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 12. An important tool for the codification of Jamaican English is also the first *Dictionary of Jamaican English* compiled by Frederick Cassidy and Robert Le Page and published in 1967.

devised and popularized by academics and which requires some efforts in learning on the part of people who are literate in English. As a consequence, although its adoption has been greatly favoured by linguists on the grounds that "[a] genuinely creole orthography will strengthen the structural and psychological identity of the creole",[17] Cassidy's phonemic system has remained largely ignored by writers, both in Jamaica and in the Caribbean diaspora. Despite the ongoing commitment of Jamaican scholars such as Carolyn Cooper and Hubert Devonish to popularize the Cassidy system, writers consistently privilege a modified StE orthography. The alternative to phonemic transcription, etymological orthography, is in fact a system that "uses the conventional spelling of the lexifier for words which identifiably originate from the lexifier. Other words are spelt using the conventions of the lexifier, with modifications if necessary".[18] Although the etymological orthography is perceived and often described by Jamaican scholars as "colonialism inscribed",[19] there are some practical reasons for the popularity of this choice; since for most writers, as well as for their readers, Standard English is their first literacy, they are more familiar with its written conventions; modifying that spelling system is thus easier than adopting a completely different one.

Moreover, while the phonemic system signals a greater ideological distance from the etymological orthographic system of the standard lexifier language, the choice of using a modified StE spelling conveniently marks the proximity between the two codes in writing and in speaking, often coexisting in code-switching.[20] While the phonemic spelling limits the flexibility of a system which relies on the variability of speech through code-switching and ambiguity, the choice of modified StE orthography may also provide further possibilities for representing difference by conveying a 'hidden' code-switching or by fully exploring the potential of an 'open', unfixed spelling system. Since identification of a text as creole must not rest on morphological, syntactic and lexical clues alone,[21] sound is an important creole identifier as a few phonetic spelling variations are necessary to suggest dialect in writing. In this light, some scholars have focused on possible semantic loans in cases in which a word exists both in English and in creole in the same form, but in a completely or partially different meaning.[22] Variation can thus also occur at a more hidden level, exploiting the proximity between the lexicons of SJE and JamC in order to convey a different meaning (covert Creole) through the use of sounds. As a consequence, not only would "standardization … undermine its covert prestige",[23] but it would also heavily limit the potential to 'distance' JamC from the orthography of the standard language.

Textualizing British Creole: The Case of Dub Poetry

Questions concerning the printing poetry produced by the interplay of speech and writing have often been debated, especially in relation to literary canonization and language standardization. The *Savacou* debate is one of such examples. In early 1971, Laurence Breiner published an innovative anthology titled *New Writing*

[17] Marlies Hellinger, "On Writing English-related Creoles in the Caribbean", in Manfred Görlach and John Holm, eds., *Focus on the Caribbean* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1986), 67.

[18] Mark Sebba, *Contact Language: Pidgins and Creoles* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1997), 244.

[19] Cooper, *Noises in the Blood*, 12.

[20] Sebba, "How Do you Spell Patwa?", *Critical Quarterly*, 38.4 (1996), 60-61.

[21] See Hellinger, "On Writing English-related Creoles in the Caribbean".

[22] Mair, "Creolisms in an Emerging Standard", 31-58.

[23] Lars Hinrichs and Jessica White-Sustaíta, "Global Englishes and the Sociolinguistics of Spelling: A Study of Jamaican Blog and Email Writing", *English World-Wide*, 32.1 (2011), 68.

1970 as a double issue of the journal *Savacou*, which featured "overtly political and experimental work with roots in oral and performance poetry".[24] While some stressed the crucial contribution of music in the new poetry, welcoming the fruitful intersections between poetry and musical forms such as reggae and calypso, other critics sharply dismissed the 'new poetry' as 'bad poetry' as opposed to the craft of "the great English poets".[25] As Breiner emphasizes, the question of anthologizing non-standard poetry was in fact specifically informed by issues of values and standards related to "how a poem would look on paper":

> Above all, the *Savacou* debate was about what amounts to the decorum of poetry – a matter of values, standards, the rule of the game.… The critical furor over the *Savacou* anthology was most particularly about what should be printed, and about how a poem should look on paper. No one was fighting about techniques of improvisation, or about what should happen in a poetry reading or on the radio. The discussion was about written texts, and so about the canon created by print: about what should be in an anthology.[26]

Textual representation is thus cast as the real problem, posing the transcription of oral texts performed in Creole as an issue of West Indian identity. As he points out that "[m]uch of the experimentation involved rhetorical and orthographic devices by which features of non-scribal poetry could be appropriated into poetry actually intended for print",[27] Breiner implicitly refers to the problematic use of Creole in published poetry. The crucial question of how the oral performance should be reproduced on the page also involves the typographic representation of a language that does not have an official orthography, thus weaving together issues of literary canons, language and spelling standards and national identities.

Critic and poet Mervyn Morris has addressed similar concerns while editing the work of contemporary Jamaican poets Louise Bennett and Mickey Smith. In his account of the editorial work on Bennett's *Selected Poems* (1982), he emphasizes his efforts for a reader-friendly edition: "We have tried to ensure that the poems are easy to read. The spelling assumes that the reader is accustomed to English and that anyone familiar with Jamaican creole will 'hear' the creole sounds even when the spelling looks like Standard".[28] In this case, the intended reader is someone educated in English whose ear is tuned to the sounds of Creole, in order that he or she can retrieve its rhythm despite its visual proximity to the Standard. Conscious of the possible criticism of "having seduced Miss Bennett towards the regrettable respectability of Standard", Morris contends that despite the inconsistencies of the spelling, his main preoccupation is with accessibility.[29] Readability continues to be his primary concern also in the textualization of dub poet Mickey Smith's work, whose spelling he defined as "erratic" and "puzzling".[30] While helping Smith to "print his performance", Morris seems to have systematically attempted at homogenizing and standardizing the spelling of JamC, striving to represent orality on the page by providing an easily accessible transcript.

However, consistency in transcription is not an easy task, especially when non-

[24] Laurence Breiner, "How to Behave on Paper: the *Savacou* Debate", *Journal of West Indian Literature*, 6.1 (1993), 1. See *Savacou* 3-4 (March 1971).

[25] See, respectively, Gordon Rohlehr, "West Indian Poetry: Some Problems of Assessment I", *Bim*, 54 (1972), 80-88, and Erich Roach, "A Type not Found in All Generations", *Trinidadian Guardian*, 14 July (1971), 6.

[26] Breiner, "How to Behave on Paper", 1-10.

[27] Ibid., 3.

[28] Mervyn Morris, "Louise Bennett in Print", *Caribbean Quarterly*, 28.1-2 (1982), 48. Original emphasis.

[29] Ibid., 49.

[30] Mervyn Morris, "Printing the Performance: Them and Us?", in Gordon Collier, ed., *Us/Them: Translation, Transcription and Identity in Post-Colonial Literary Cultures* (Amsterdam-Atlanta: Rodopi, 1992), 245.

standard spelling also bears the burden of conveying the 'sound' to the reader, as is the case of oral-related forms like dub poetry. Dub poetry is in fact the fusion of reggae rhythms with the practice of the spoken word, focusing on the primacy of the voice. The combination of speech and music underlies a subordination of the former to the latter, thus producing a body of poetry "which is *written* to be *performed* to the same kind of musical accompaniment as that used by deejays".[31] Based on "Word, Sound & Power", as it combines music with spoken word performance, dub poetry sums up the tension between writing and orality, between the word as text and the word as sound.[32] Since its performances are based on the interaction with the text, the way it is presented, and the response of the audience, dub poetry offers interesting insights on standardization and textualization of Creole, especially as concerns the work of dub poets of Jamaican origin Linton Kwesi Johnson and Jean 'Binta' Breeze.

Linton Kwesi Johnson is one of the most outstanding dub poets. Born in Jamaica, he moved to England in 1963, at the age of eleven. He joined the British equivalent of the Black Panther Party while he was still a teenager and then studied Sociology at Goldsmiths, coupling writing poetry with political commitment through his involvement with the British Black Panthers and the CAM (Caribbean Artists Movement). A pioneer in the use of Jamaican Creole in a British context, since the 1970s Johnson has toured extensively with his band and has created his own music label. A poet, storyteller, actress and performer, Jean 'Binta' Breeze went to London in the mid-1980s at the invitation of Linton Kwesi Johnson. She has been recognized as the first female dub poet who, fusing reggae rhythms and spoken words, has been able to carve a completely new space for women in a predominantly male field where women were usually confined to the role of back up singers. Unlike DJs, dub poets have print as one of their intended media: both Johnson and Breeze in fact express a concern with 'printing the performance'; Breeze has published several collections of poems, written in a language ranging from the most basilectal forms of Jamaican Creole to Jamaican Standard English, while Johnson, whose first collection dates back to 1974, has been the first living and the only black poet to be published in the Penguin Modern Classics series.[33]

One of the main issues concerning the textualization of dub poetry is the representation of sound and 'riddim' on the page. While Michael Bucknor identifies some print strategies such as "graphic layout, aural structure and spatial arrangement",[34] Susan Gingell complements them with other approaches used by dub poets to incorporate the aural into the scribal form:

> Providing introductions and other explanatory apparatuses; using contextualizing illustrations and other graphics; exploiting the semantic possibilities of unusual placement of words and letters on the page; privileging sound over verbal semantics; using varying fonts and letter sizes, and employing capitals to script differing voices and sound dynamics; deploying non-alphabetic symbols as semantic resources; making allusions to substantive and stylistic aspects of music and other parts of oral tradition

[31] Carolyn Cooper and Hubert Devonish, "A Tale of Two States: Language, Lit/orature and the Two Jamaicas", in Lloyd Brown, ed., *The Pressures of the Text: Orality, Texts and the Telling of Tales* (Birmingham: University of Birmingham, 1995), 70.

[32] Christian Habekost, *Verbal Riddim: the Politics and Aesthetics of African-Caribbean Dub Poetry* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1993), 1.

[33] Linton Kwesi Johnson, *Mi Revalueshanary Fren: Selected Poems* (London: Penguin, 2002). Henghameh Saroukhani has provided an insightful analysis of Johnson's "penguinization" in "Penguinizing Dub: Paratextual Frames for Transnational Protest in Linton Kwesi Johnson's *Mi Revalueshanary Fren*", *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, published online 11 November 2014.

[34] Michael A. Bucknor, "Body-Vibes: (S)pacing the Performance in Lillian Allen's Dub Poetry", *Thamyris: Mythmaking from Past to Present*, 5.2 (1998), 303.

> to link the written text to the oral and to guide how the text should be vocalized; and paying careful attention to prosody and using non-standard spelling and code-switching in order to convey the riddims and other phonological dimensions of Caribbean English Creoles and dub itself.[35]

The first experiments straddling oral performance and the written medium have been explored by Kamau Brathwaite in his pioneering trilogy *The Arrivants* (1973).[36] By bringing into his poetry and performances the rhythms of African and West Indian drumming and of jazz, Brathwaite has used his performative innovations to develop his concern for "getting poetry off the page".[37] In this light, crossing the borders between oral/aural and visual/graphic, he has given voice to the printed Creole word by employing the devices of computer-generated typography.

However, the interaction between oral performance and the written medium poses problems not just in terms of graphic representations consistent with the reading – line breaks, italics or different typographic characters – but, most of all, of word spelling. Putting Creole in print is to use a sort of "eye dialect", an idiosyncratic or altered spelling which focuses on pronunciation. As Peter Roberts puts it:

> Whereas the standard orthography identifies words or lexical units, eye dialect attempts to give the precise sound of these units by giving the symbols greater phonetic significance than they normally have and by altering the standard spelling, in spite of the fact that the standard spelling is not totally or exclusively phonetic.[38]

Yet, as has been noted, spelling alterations are often the product of deliberate choices creatively deployed by writers in order to reinforce the message conveyed by the use of Creole through an ideological use of orthography.[39] Dub poetry can thus be seen as a very relevant and interesting field of investigation for the role of spelling choices as social action and 'typographic resistance'.

Variation *as* Creativity

The transition from stage to page, combined with the lack of an official orthography of JamC, offers a further possibility for creative experiments with the printed medium. Thriving on the instability of the borders between the page and stage, dub poetry is characterized by the impossibility to provide an identical performance of the same text. Every dub poem in fact boasts a variety of *versions*, thus keeping in line with the *OED* definition of *dub*: "to provide an alternative sound track ... to mix (various sound tracks) into a single track; to impose (additional sounds) on to an existing recording; to transfer (recorded sound) on to a new record".[40] The poems' printed version coexist with that recorded on audio supports, and with the many versions from live performances. Moreover, every text always changes, not only in the variability of oral performances, but also in the various spelling of

[35] Susan Gingell, "'Always a Poem, Once a Book': Motivations and Strategies for Print Textualizing of Caribbean-Canadian Dub and Poetry", *Journal of West Indian Literature*, 14.1-2 (November 2005), 221.

[36] Kamau Brathwaite, *The Arrivants: A New World Trilogy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

[37] Laurence Breiner, *An Introduction to West Indian Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 185. Brathwaite's concern is also testified by the fact that *The Arrivants* was first published and then issued as a set of LPs, leading the way for the audio recordings issued by dub poets.

[38] Peter A. Roberts, *West Indians and Their Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 137.

[39] Mark Sebba, "Phonology Meets Ideology: the Meaning Orthographic Practices in British Creole", *Language Problems and Language Planning*, 22.1 (1998), 19-47.

[40] Oxford English Dictionary, www.oed.com. Last updated September 2014.

the written text, as if to constantly dislocate the word. As Mervyn Morris suggests, "just as there are poets who, in reading aloud, eschew variations in the voice so as to approach (they hope) the comparative impersonality of print, so too are there poets who in their transfer from performance into print resist the basic context of that medium".[41] As a consequence, Morris' strife for standardization and consistency of written Creole seems to contradict the embedded inconsistency of oral-related poetry. The possibility of resistance encompassed by dub poetry can be exemplified by Jean Breeze's statement about her commitment to this genre: "I like this space, there are no rules here".[42] Rules can be taken to mean grammar, Standard English, as well as poetic diction, all dispersed in the liberating power of the spoken word which allows for freedom to express and to experiment with language. Variation in fact seems to be an intrinsic feature of Jamaican orthography, which presents a great degree of inconsistency in itself.[43]

Since, as mentioned above, writers in Jamaica as well as in the diaspora are not generally familiar with the rigid system created by Cassidy in 1961, written Creole is usually represented through a 'respelt' or modified Standard English orthography. Phonetic difference in JamC is generally signalled by using, for instance, the plosives /d/, /t/ instead of British English fricatives, as in: *dem, wid, ting, mout*; half-open monophthongal vowels are used in words like *make* (mek), *say* (seh), *go* (goh), *no* (noh), where BrE has diphthongs. The presence of a glide /j/ after velars and /w/ after bilabials, when a low vowel follows: *cyaan/kean*, *bwoy*; loss of final consonant in clusters: *bes'*, *an'*; velar plosives /k, g/ in medial positions where BrE has alveolar /t, d/: *miggle*, *lickle*; the non-pronunciation of postvocalic /r/ (*start*, *turn* and *mother*) is signalled as: *staat*, *tun, maddah* for *start, turn, mother*.[44] However, in the absence of any official orthography for writing Jamaican Creole, standard norms or recognized model, writers are free to experiment. Variations and alterations are thus the result of individual choices producing a high degree of variability and inconsistency, both among writers and even in the same text, where non-Standard English variant spellings deliberately alternate with the Standard English spelling of the same word. The notion of 'orthography' clearly assumes its inherent correctness and normativity; as it implies a set of accepted norms and conventions, orthography refers to a writing system specifically intended for a particular language and proposed for such use.[45] On the contrary, LKJ and Jean Breeze dismiss any claim of 'authenticity' or 'correctness' and resist the notion of a standardized orthography to which they should conform their writing. Focusing on the importance of 'purpose' of writing, Sebba argues that "Creole writers, without intervention from linguists, have developed ways of representing Creole in writing which suit their current purposes".[46]

Recalling Kloss' notions of *Ausbau* and *Abstand*, Sebba argues that in order for a non-standard language variety to improve its status and define itself as a separate entity, "it will be necessary both for it to develop in such a way that it can support high functions (Ausbau) and to establish itself as different from its competitors (Abstand)".[47] Taking the notion of orthography as a set of "cultural practices",

[41] Morris, "Printing the Performance", 242.

[42] Jean Breeze, "Can a Dub Poet Be a Woman?" in Alison Donnell and Sarah Lawson Welsh, eds., *The Routledge Reader in Caribbean Literature* (London: Routledge, 1996), 500.

[43] This variability is also testified by the fact that the *Dictionary of Jamaican English* provides different spelling variants of the same word in its entries.

[44] Michael Aceto, "Caribbean Englishes", in Braj B. Kachru, Yamuna Kachru, Cecil L. Nelson, eds., *The Handbook of World Englishes* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 216-219.

[45] See Sebba, *Spelling and Society*.

[46] Mark Sebba, "Writing Switching in British Creole", in Kathryn Jones and Marilyn Martin-Jones, eds., *Multilingual Literacies: Reading and Writing in Different Worlds* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2000), 185.

[47] Sebba, "Phonology Meets Ideology", 4.

Sebba argues that "the signs carry not only linguistic meaning, but also social meaning at the same time.[48] As a social practice, orthography is thus affected by ideological implications and, in the case of dub poets, is aimed at achieving "maximal differentiation"[49] from the Standard. Moving away from the limitations of standardization, writers thus choose alternative orthographic representations of Creole phonology in order to signal difference from Standard English.

In the case of Linton Kwesi Johnson, although his first published poem, *Five Nights of Bleeding* (1973),[50] displays Standard English syntax and spelling, it is already possible to trace the tension between JamC/JamE and StE. In contrast with the orthographic regimes of highly standardized texts such as published poetry, Johnson makes a consistent use of JamC in his work heavily relying on the flexibility of the modified StE spelling, often adopting a distinctive spelling which strongly marks difference. This is especially the case with words with Standard English source but different from British English in phonemic structure; common examples of words displaying both phonemic and phonetic difference are: "cyan", "dung", "daak", "numbah", or "oppreshan". Moreover, as the table shows, his spelling is not consistent throughout his work:[51]

can't	cyan	kean	
fire	fire	fyar	fyah
going to	gaan	gwan	
nothing	notn	nottin	nofink
victory	victory	victri	vic'try

The wide range of variants testifies to the purpose of asserting "the independence of creole as a separate language from English",[52] and the last word of the table provides an interesting example in this regard. In the 1979 album *Forces of Victory*, the title track was spelled as "Forces of viktry". When the text was included in the poem collection *Inglan is a Bitch* (1980), its title boasted a standard spelling of the word ("Forces of Victory"), while Johnson spells *vict'ri* in other occurrences in the text. On the other hand, the same poem included in the 2002 collection *Mi Revalueshanary Fren* becomes "Forces of Victri", where the poet adopts the same non-standard spelling of the word throughout the poem.

The work of Jean Breeze similarly displays a high degree of spelling variation, combined with more frequent instances of written code switching. She ranges from StE to JamC, including all the mesolectal forms in between; her code switching is present throughout her work as well as in the same poem. This variability arguably derives from the fact that her linguistic choices always reflect the identity of the poetic persona; basilectal forms and African-derived lexicon are in fact more frequently found in poems such as "Riddym Ravings", performed with the voice of a rural Jamaican woman, or "Soun de Abeng fi Nanny", celebrating the legendary Maroon leader Nanny. In the latter poem Breeze describes Nanny following and decoding the sounds of nature in order to hide from her enemies and take them by surprise:

[48] Sebba, *Spelling and Society*, 7.

[49] Ibid., 110.

[50] Republished in Linton Kwesi Johnson, "Five Nights of Bleeding", *Voices of the Living and the Dead* (London: Race Today, 1974).

[51] The corpus for the study of LKJ's work are his *Inglan is a Bitch* (London; Race Today Publications, 1982), and the aforementioned *Mi Revalueshanary Fren*.

[52] Sebba, "How Do you Spell Patwah?", 59.

an er yeye roam crass
ebery mountain pass
an er yeas well tune to de win'
an de cricket an de treefrog
crackle telegram
an she wet er battam lip fi decode.[53]

[53] Jean 'Binta' Breeze, *Riddym Ravings and Other Poems* (London: Race Today, 1988), 45.

The use of sounds as a strategy for resistance and revolt is evident in the very structure of the poem, where every line celebrates the warlike qualities of the cunning warrior, finally urging the audience with the final incitation: "so mek wi soun de abeng/ fi Nanny". The *abeng* evoked in the poem is an ambiguous musical instrument re-signified by the maroons: an African word meaning conch shell, the abeng was the shell or animal horn used by slaveholders to call the slaves to the plantation, but its blowing also called to revolt, since the instrument had been strategically appropriated by runaway slaves to communicate and organize rebellions. For this reason, the language presents several occurrences of a basilectal form of Jamaican Creole with an African-derived lexicon (like "yeye" for eye) used to signify extreme difference and approximate the language spoken by Nanny, the furthest linguistic variety from the acrolect.

As much as she freely exploits the richness of the language continuum according to the meaning she needs to convey, Breeze similarly adopts unstable spelling choices which, however, tend to privilege phonetics in order to facilitate 'correct' pronunciation.[54] Asked how she made her spelling choices, Breeze answers: "I grew up reading Louise Bennett from the page and that would certainly have been my exposure to Jamaican on the page".[55] It is worth noting that Breeze's first collection of poems, *Riddym Ravings* (1988), was edited by Mervyn Morris. In later collections, however, her work seems to display a higher degree of inconsistency, as if testifying to her need to freely experiment with the ways sounds should be written on the page. In her 1992 collection *Spring Cleaning*, for instance, the internal variability of her spelling choices appears more evident:[56]

[54] De Caires, *Making Style*, 116.

[55] Breeze quoted in Susanne Mühleisen, "Encoding the Voice: Caribbean Women's Writing and Creole", in Joan Anim-Addo, ed., *Framing the Word: Gender and Genre in Caribbean Women's Writing* (London: Whiting & Brick, 1996), 176.

[56] Jean 'Binta' Breeze, *Spring Cleaning* (London: Virago, 1992). Indicated as *SC* in the text.

can't	kyan (3)	kean (9)	
other	adda (41)	odder (88)	
boy	bway (4)	bwoy (21)	boy (26)

Variability, however, also occurs throughout her work; the spelling of "can't" further varies as "cyan",[57] while the spelling of "first" is "firs" (*SC*, 89) and later "fus" (*AB*, 15). Quite predictably, a wider range of different spellings can be found in the case of words with no Standard English source or with an English source with a distinct grammatical function in Creole. Since their use in Standard English is dissimilar from their use in Creole, there is no standard orthography, as is the case of the preposition /ina/: while Johnson consistently uses "inna", Breeze privileges "eena" and "een".

[57] Jean 'Binta' Breeze, *The Arrival of Brighteye and Other Poems* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 2000), 16 and 28. Indicated as *AB* in the text.

Diasporic poets such as Linton Kwesi Johnson and Jean 'Binta' Breeze are educated, bilingual individuals with a literacy in StE. Deeply conscious of the syntactic, lexical and phonetic differences between StE and JamC, their use of JamC, as well as its interference in StE lines, is always intentional. As Sebba insists, such orthographic variation should not be considered "as simply idiosyncratic", but rather as "wholly or partly conscious attempts [by some writers] to subvert and challenge Standard English spelling".[58] Such conscious deviations from the norm thus represent a precise strategy: on the one hand, "anxious not to be rejected unread", dub poets choose the "compromise" of writing "the vernacular for the eye accustomed to standard English, but with various alterations signalling creole";[59] on the other, as they use "a phonetic rendition of Creole … to indicate the pronunciation", they consciously enact a "defamiliarizing strategy to unsettle the reader's expectations of the printed word in 'English'".[60] It is worth noting, for example, that Johnson significantly respells words such as "labour", "recreation" and "accident" as "laybah", "reckreashan" or "hacksident" – to the detriment of the text's readability – in order to create further ideological distance from the lexifier. In this light, while there are material conditions which bring the poets to adopt a system more easily acceptable for an audience whose first literacy is English (thus favouring publication and legibility), they also perform powerful 'creative interventions' on the conventional orthographic system. Sometimes typographic choices are devised so as to include other meaningful words, as for instance in Johnson's spelling of "*re*value*.shanary*", which reveals its proximity with the language of Rastafari.[61] While the modified StE orthography facilitates understanding for literates in English, Johnson uses a declaredly provocative non-conventional spelling that unsettles the reader's expectations; in this case, the reader's attention is immediately focused on typographic difference and on the poet's creative variation gesturing to a precise cultural identity and resistance. In this light, it is particularly significant that in the early 1980s a British journalist argued that Johnson's language "has wreaked havoc in schools and helped to create a generation of *rioters* and *illiterates*".[62]

Taking Trudgill's model of dialect accommodation according to which one of the most salient features involves phonemic contrast, Sebba postulates that writers should be drawing attention to "surface phonemic contrast"[63] in the respelling of StE words to highlight the difference between the two phonological structures. Yet, while Johnson and Breeze often represent the fricatives θ or ð respectively through the /t/ or /d/ sound (as in *think*/*tink*; *this*/*dis*, etc.), as is usual in JamC, Sebba underlines that even when the pronunciation of StE and Creole words is identical or only features minor differences, the respelling marks such less salient features with orthographic devices.[64] Common examples of non-standard spellings used even for words where the sound in question is not different in Creole are the respelling of "you" as "yuh", "yu" or "y'u". This is also the case of the word "tuff", used by both Johnson and Breeze, which is spelt differently from "tough" although they are homophones. Moreover, both poets also use /k/ rather than

[58] Mark Sebba, "Phonology Meets Ideology", 12.

[59] Morris, "Printing the Performance", 22.

[60] De Caires, *Making Style*, 108.

[61] For the word-making process of Rastafari, see Velma Pollard, *Dread Talk: The Language of Rastafari* (Kingston: Canoe Press and McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000). See also Mickey Smith's clever spelling of "politics" as "politricks" in his famous "Me Cyan Believe it", *It a Come* (London: Race Today, 1986).

[62] Roy Kerridge, "A Poet for Our Time", *The Spectator*, 23 April 1982, 12. Emphasis added.

[63] Sebba, "Writing Switching in British Creole", 176.

[64] Ibid., 175-177.

/c/ even when the change is not functional to signalling a different sound in Creole. As a consequence, writing "catch" as "ketch" is a powerfully symbolic rejection of standard norms rather than just an attempt to visually represent a Creole sound. On this subject, Sebba notes that "[a]t this point, the use of unconventional spellings to write Creole begins to look ideological: symbolising *difference* from Standard English may be more important than signalling *sound*".[65] By respelling even the words which show very small phonetic differences from British English, not only they intend to convey the *sound* of Creole, but they also make an ideological use of unconventional spellings. As a symbol of a subculture seeking to distance itself from mainstream British culture, British Creole thus tends to use non-standard spelling as a mark of difference, calling attention to the grapholect which, through an orthographic variation, marks cultural and ethnic difference, eventually resisting any kind of standardization.

As early as 1986, Marlis Hellinger hypothesised that the introduction and the official support to a Creole orthography based on English conventions was likely to strengthen the notion of Creole as inferior; obscure and eradicate much of Creole's linguistic and phonemic authenticity and, most of all, would prevent creativity, arguing that "in no way would linguistic creativity … receive momentum; a dependent language, whose inferior status is also manifest in 'deviant' spellings, will borrow massively from English rather than exploit its own potentially productive morphological rules".[66] However, the alternative orthographic choices of dub poets seem to contradict her. As they experiment with spelling variations in order to convey difference and create new meanings, Johnson and Breeze testify to and powerfully assess the covert prestige of Jamaican Creole and its creativity in a diasporic context. By strengthening a sense of identity which resists any pressure for standardization, they promote creativity while freely using and deliberately modifying the colonial orthographic standard. Equally aware of the danger of proclaiming a supposed 'standard Creole', they also shun the risks of turning textualization into a tool for fixing the written conventions of Creole. As if to resist any claim of authenticity or 'correctness', dub poets thus constantly displace their text and their voice, moving away from the dangers of standardization like clever tricksters.

[65] Sebba, "How to Spell Patwah?", 57.

[66] Hellinger, "On Writing English-related Creoles in the Caribbean", 53-70.