

From Jamaica to Scotland: some initial notes on writing in dialect  
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What it means to be a Caribbean person living and teaching creative writing in Glasgow is that I am constantly negotiating the politics of dialect; it means I must weigh in with my own opinions and experience on those projects that try to capture sound on the page – especially the kind of sound that was once frowned upon or dismissed as being unrefined, unfit for intelligent or literary discourse. The kind of discriminated speech I am describing is of course often rooted in the history of wars, inequality, and the institutionalized denigration of people who would have had it drilled into them that they were less than some unachievable standard. Debates about dialect then have the potential to excite great passion, especially by those subjects who use it, writers and speakers, who have only latterly learnt to love and appreciate the sophistication and poetry of the language. To enter the debate is a tricky business – one is not merely negotiating a way between the subtle nuance of one position or another; sometimes it seems you are being asked to take a position in a spectrum that stretches between ‘wrong’ and ‘right’, if not between ‘good’ and ‘evil’.

The outsider to Scotland would rather avoid all of this by pleading ignorance, by saying, I’m sorry, I’m not from here – the same answer we give when we are asked Celtic or Rangers? The problem is that I am from the Caribbean – a place with its own history of wars, inequalities, and the institutionalized denigration of people who have only latterly began to write their sounds onto the page – it must be said, with varying degrees of success. And also, I am teaching creative writing, so avoidance is a luxury I have not been afforded. People demand to know where I stand.

This then is a first attempt to articulate some of my own positions. This paper is necessarily personal, tentative, and truth be told, a bit nervous.

It is the same nervousness I feel when a student approaches me with an attitude that says – here is a dialect poem, or here is a piece of prose written in Jamaican or in Scotts. It is written in dialect and therefore to critique it is to critique something essential to my own core. In such situations, what I, as a teacher, am often searching for is my own pedagogic dialect to say sympathetically – I know dialect is a language with its own verve and power and music, but you haven’t used it well here. That dialect is good does not make everything written in it good. So invoke Chaucer, and Kellman and Leonard and Linton Kwesi Johnson all you want – you aren’t them. And we have learn to stop hiding behind this uncritiquable dialect.

But I want to first engage with this question of how do we hear sounds on the page? The page, after all, is silent. You never lift it to your ear to discern what is happening on its surface. How is it then that we as critics (I am changing hats briefly) describe some writers as being musical, or as being lyrical, or as having a special knack for voices? I put it to you that the reader can only hear what is in his own mind already. The page almost never introduces readers to something that they’ve never heard. What the writer does, through one trick or another, is to invoke a sound that triggers a memory in the reader. They then ask the reader the reader to apply the sound to the rest of the prose; they encourage the reader to hear it in a certain way. It is for this reason, incidentally, that I have met two people, on completely separate occasions, who upon hearing that I was Jamaican and teaching in Scotland confessed to me (in a

very shame-faced way) that they thought the Glaswegian poet, Tom Leonard, was from the Caribbean. 'Do you know I used to think Tom Leonard was Jamaican?' they whisper to me. 'I had only read his work, and for some reason I always read it with a Jamaican accent in my head.'

Many writers from the Caribbean and Scotland have tried to suggest specific sounds by writing them out phonetically. The disadvantage of course is that this can make poems or stories at times very difficult to read, not only for those who are unfamiliar with the language, but also those who are in fact very intimate with it but who are not used to receiving it textually. Today, writers will often declare with a bit of arrogance (which every writer needs a little of) – well the reader must put in some work as well! There is a whole other essay to write here – about the kind of work a reader ought to put in, but it is too much to get into right now, so let us just say fine. Fair enough. The reader must put in some kind of work. And also it must be said that this business of writing phonetically sometimes serves the purpose of making the language seem strange visually – to estrange it from English as it were. I confess that I have a slight frustration with this, especially when the writer insists that he is writing in Jamaican not English, or in Scots not English, and then is upset at the small-mindedness of English publishers who will not publish them. I of course prefer the view that I write in my own variety of English which sounds very different from how the queen might use it. But to continue this matter of the strange spelling of words - dub poets and dialect poets in Jamaica used to do it to the point that they would spell some words phonetically that in fact didn't come out sounding any different from their English origins – the word 'love' spelt as 'luv' for instance, 'black' spelt as 'blakk', 'again' spelt as 'agen'. When the Jamaican poet Mervyn Morris began to work with several of the dub poets and also with Louise Bennett, the Caribbean's pre-eminent dialect poet (our version of Robbie Burns, but more contemporary of course, the Caribbean's literary history of course is a much more recent thing), he introduced the concept that maybe the writer should only reach for a sort of contorted spelling if he or she wanted to suggest a sound that really is not apparent in its English transcription. This is part of my own policy too and what I often suggest when teaching, though I confess to you Mervyn Morris was my first teacher and so my conservatism has its roots.

But I also wonder about the limits of phonetic spellings and again it comes to this matter of how do we hear sounds on the page? Consider a very small, but I hope illustrative example: there are a great number of dialect writers from disparate places who have tried to suggest their specific sounds on the page by losing the G from the end of gerunds. But when the readers sees, not the word 'losing' but instead, losin' or maybe even losin' or then again, losin' how is he tell which one is African-American, which one is Jamaican or which one is Scottish. Phonetics by itself does not capture all the peculiar nuances of sound. In fact, going back to this matter of the work a reader is required to put in, I want to suggest that by being a very strict 'phoneticist' it is in fact the writer who is sometimes strangling the fiction or poem and not giving space the for the reader to do the kind of work he'd more happily do.

I know the question that is raising its head here is one of authenticity. I think writers, by and large would benefit greatly by not concerning themselves with the matter. There is after all a kind of anthropological way we can approach sound which perhaps is too exacting a way, and there is an aesthetic way. The two almost never meet at exactly the same place. Derek Walcott once said that the writer must never write in

dialect because no one would understand him. The writer, he said, must appear to write in dialect; he must write an approximation of it, perhaps enough to fool the dialect speaker that you are giving him back his language, but not so much that you divorce people who do not speak the language.

What I often want to suggest to my students is that there is a way that national writers of specific Englishes, whether it be Jamaican or Scottish, can successfully invite a broader international community of English speakers into their world and their work. There is a way in which we can even write the word 'losing' – exactly like that, without losing the G from its end – and still encourage the reader to hear it as 'losin'. Of course I am talking about the kind of reader who already has an idea of what Scottish or Jamaican sounds like – because if the reader doesn't have an idea of this, they will almost never hear it, no matter what we do. To write in dialect is to write with a certain texture, and also to write with an absolute control of syntax, to be able turn a sentence ever so slightly that the reader begins to hear something else than what they are accustomed to, and then it is also the introduction of a few culturally specific words, and then yes – a few specific sounds, all together a great orchestration away from the English they might be most familiar with and into something that will describe afterwards, as lyrical, and rhythmic and they will say – here is a writer that has a knack for voices. But it was the reader did the work, sometimes without knowing it. The thing is, I agree with Walcott. We never really write in dialect – you simply make the reader hear it as dialect.