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Abstract

Though English colonization of the Caribbean brought with it a new and strictly British education system and set of ideals, its backlash also caused "a debil of a bump-anbore, /Rig-jig an palam-pam," a chaotic whirlwind of sociopolitical and cultural leanings (Bennett 1966:215:25) which battled with each other and formed polarized camps. As the colonial rule brought with it a new language as well, the variety of reactions to its residual effects on the area were expressed in distinct and deliberate ways. Anglophone poets of this changing time and place used language and dialect to depict their sociopolitical and cultural climates as a result of colonization in a powerful and telling way. Poets of the postcolonial context deal with issues of identity, homeland and heritage in ways that narrative cannot, though a student would be hard-pressed to find any poetry represented in a postcolonial literature class. By placing particular attention to poetic form, diction and dialect, Caribbean Anglophone poets express their struggles with identity as a result of colonial rule.

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Me Mout' Haf Fe Sympat'ise Wid Somewhe: Dialect-Poetry of Ambivalence in the Postcolonial Caribbean Context

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Me Mout' Haf Fe Sympat'ise Wid Someweh:  
Dialect-Poetry of *Ambivalence* in the Postcolonial Caribbean Context

Though English colonization of the Caribbean brought with it a new and strictly British education system and set of ideals, its backlash also caused “a debil of a bump-an- bore,/Rig-jig an palam-pam,” a chaotic whirlwind of sociopolitical and cultural leanings (Bennett 1966:215:25) which battled with each other and formed polarized camps. As the colonial rule brought with it a new language as well, the variety of reactions to its residual effects on the area were expressed in distinct and deliberate ways. Anglophone poets of this changing time and place used language and dialect to depict their sociopolitical and cultural climates as a result of colonization in a powerful and telling way. Poets of the postcolonial context deal with issues of identity, homeland and heritage in ways that narrative cannot, though a student would be hard-pressed to find any poetry represented in a postcolonial literature class. By placing particular attention to poetic form, diction and dialect, Caribbean Anglophone poets express their struggles with identity as a result of colonial rule.

The first half of the title of my paper, “Me Mout' Haf Fe Sympat'ise Wid Someweh,” translated, means “My mouth has for sympathize with somewhere.” Standardized by a prescriptive view of ‘Standard’ English, the title comes to “My mouth has to sympathize with somewhere.” Many Anglophone poets of the Caribbean wrote with the dialect and grammar structures that developed in their communities during and
after colonial British rule. This tactic makes their poetry distinct and identifiable as a manifestation and relic of their specific culture. Dialect poetry has become a source of pride with which Caribbean peoples have used to identify themselves. Yet, while it has the potential to open a reader’s eyes to another dialect and residual subculture of the British Empire, it can also limit accessibility.

Yet, editions of these poems often come with glossaries and are heavily annotated and introduced within their context by an editor and the author themselves, in attempts to ameliorate issues of inaccessibility. In fact, most of these poets’ accessibility has been limited by the fact that they have not, until recently, been anthologized. Even relatively recently, from 1996-1998, three poetry anthologies were published, with all poetry listed according to the amount of poets represented from each country (Ramazani 1). Africa, India and the Caribbean combined comprised one quarter of the text. Jahan Ramazani comments that “most anthologies reassert...boundaries” by listing poetry from these countries as ‘postcolonial,’ effectively lumping their themes into one category (1). Thus, the borders of accessibility between non-speakers of these specific dialects and the communities represented in these poems are murky. This essay will explore the poetic journey through this murky conglomeration of cultures especially as it is expressed in the works of Louise Bennett, an iconic Jamaican colonial and postcolonial Anglophone dialect poet.

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It follows that the borders that encapsulate the identities of the poets themselves are murky as well. As a consequence of the coerced Western cultural assimilation of the colonial period, the postcolonial climate is characterized by a cultural duality; opposing cultures are presented as now, citizens of independent countries are free to practice a culture that has lain relatively dormant for generations. Caribbean Anglophone dialect poets often utilize metaphor, creoles and dialects and rhythms of their country’s native tradition in addition to those of the colonial power which have brought in new ways of speaking, new dialects, languages, and specific poetic forms that have shaped the education of the colonized Caribbean peoples. Through this cultural duality, dialect poets reshape the literary language and forms of the colonizer in order to reflect the complexity of their identities as a result of colonization.

Yet, even the idea of a cultural duality does not adequately describe the situation which produces the complexities seen in Anglophone dialect poetry. The two heritages do not exist separately. Rather, they interweave and interbreed to create a mélange that is both its product and its own culture in itself. This culture did not grow out of its own seed, but is “response-oriented.” This is a culture of “fragmented Otherness in the hybrid” (Feddema 92). In the postcolonial era, hybridity is a term that has gained popularity in describing the culture of indigenous peoples of a once-colonized nation. This “otherness” represents not only separateness from colonial culture but from indigenous culture as well. The fusion of indigenous and colonial culture is unthinkable to fervent nationalists and prescriptive “Standard” English grammarians do not recognize this culture and its language as their own. In theorizing hybridity, Jan Nederveen Pieterse comments that hybridization is a “cross-category_process” (Kesselman 441). Thus,
hybridity is not a state that is set in stone. Rather the hybrid identity continually oscillates, reconsiders and redefines itself.

In his book, The Hybrid Muse, Jahan Ramazani describes the culture which inspired this poetry – its “muse” – as “hybrid.” I expand on this idea by saying that as a result, there is no discernable simple viewpoint expressed in the poems of Caribbean dialect poets. Caribbean dialect poets express the duality of a mixed education, culture and identity in their hybrid poetry. There is skepticism at those who staunchly adhere to one perspective. There is ambivalence. There is vacillation and self-interrogation and interrogation of the polarized opinions around them, those which promote assimilation to English ideals and those who isolate themselves from it. The poems are often written in reaction to one opinion or the other, or both, but never center on a pole.

Jahan Ramazani writes that “postcolonial poets indigenize the Western and anglicize the native to create exciting new possibilities for English-language poetry” (2). This statement implies that both are done intentionally. When the poet sees one category or view expressed, he will try to create its opposition, and vise versa. A person who needs to do this is eternally compelled by two conflicting forces. When a heritage is so bifurcated, one can only take what he is given and move forward. Louise Bennett and Claude McKay manifest this ambivalence, whether intentional or by default. They display an oscillation between the cultural poles of colonizer and colonized that eventually surfaces itself as hybridity. However, by associating their “otherness” with this new hybridity, they establish it as their own chosen category, a new, deliberate identity. Stephen McCafferty coins the term, ambivalence: that is, an ambivalence of one’s own volition. This ambivalence, ironically, is chosen.
Louise Bennett was born in 1919 and died just last year, in 2006. However, the story of her life relates back to the unique colonial history of Jamaica. The modern, postcolonial era has cultivated her to the level of a cultural icon in Jamaica for her performance dialect poetry. This poetry relates to the 17th Century, during which the British turned Jamaica into slaving colonies and divided up into large sugar plantations owned by absentee landlords. The poetry recalls the Caribbean people’s roots in West Africa, from which they were imported as forced labor, slaves to the British in the Caribbean. Louise Bennett was born in 1919, before Jamaica’s independence in 1962. Thus, her poetry touches on many issues from between 1834, when Jamaica’s slaves were abolished, until its independence, and through its postcolonial beginnings.

Having lived many years in both colonial and independent Jamaica, Bennett has come to represent her country and its unique colonial and postcolonial struggles. She has become iconic in her birth country, though she is virtually unknown anywhere else in the world. Bennett was educated both in colonial Jamaica and in England, at the Royal Academy for Dramatic Art. Bennett became famous as a spoken word poet and performer and for her radio show Ms. Lou’s Views, and for her Children’s stories and songs. She was well known in Jamaica for her dialect poetry, written to be spoken out-loud. It is a unique poetry which forces its reader to take on the dialect, intonation and flavor of her native way of speaking. Yet, it is written in the ballad form; the various ways the dialect,
form and tone of her poetry express a degree of ambivalence produced by the hybridity of her uniquely Jamaican background.

Louise Bennett writes her poetry in the ballad form, which, like her identity, is a form which is vexed itself. A long-standing traditional form, the ballad form has its roots in English folk music and became very popular in English literature for centuries, especially as the country was spreading its colonial roots. It alternates lines of four feet (hinged on four stressed syllables or beats) with lines of three feet, usually iambic, creating a ‘tension-release’ dynamic and a singsong quality (Simpson). In his essay “What Ever Became of the Ballad?” David Barber asserts that “there is no question but that they were meant to be heard, not read” (Barber). The ballad form came to be traditionally associated with emotion, dialogue or narrative, and simple language across centuries of British poetry. Its vexation came with the fact that it added orality to the literary medium as a necessity and enhancement.

Bennett’s relationship with the ballad’s associated qualities is clear. Bennett’s ballads infuse these attributes sometimes in ways which fit into the traditional ballad mode, and sometimes in ironic ways and untraditional ways. First, and maybe most traditionally, many of Bennett’s poems are dialogues or monologues spoken to a silent character in reaction to their point of view about the issue at hand. Bennett, as “a poet of utterance,” creates personae and speaks to them as she performs (Bennett 1966:16).

Yet, she plays on the fact that – despite its reputation as vexed – the ballad is a form which is well-known to be English. Bennett personalizes the ballad to reflect Jamaican dialect and culture. The foot and stanza structure is a ballad in its most classical form, but the words are in a non-standard English dialect with the vocabulary,
syntax and tone are nonstandard as well. The combination of these elements gives the poem an ebullience that is unique to the sounds and rhythms of Bennett’s Jamaican dialect. The poetry is indeed ebullient and its sounds are joyful. The dialect and the sing-song tonality of the ballad complement each other and work together to add to the life and humor of the poem simply. Use of this specific dialect indicates a proud display of the indigenous reality. By putting it together with the ballad form, Bennett means to convey the beauty of the sounds of her dialect.

In Bennett’s poem, “Independence Dignity,” Bennett writes in her usual dichotomy of ballad form with Jamaican dialect. The poem, a monologue, describes Jamaican national pride and Bennett’s personal pride over the new Jamaican national anthem adopted upon the country’s independence. The poem strikes the reader as sincere and hopeful. The dialect shows the beauty of the dialect and idioms of the language, as she boasts that “not a stone was fling, not a samfie sting.../As Independence was celebrated” (Bennett: 1966: 171: 9-12). The capitalization of the word “Independence” solidifies Jamaica’s strength as a unit:

“Dere was functions by de tousan’
An we crowd up every one;
From Packy Piece to Macka Town
De behavior was gran’

Bennett here portrays Jamaica’s unique strengths by mentioning specific places with boisterous and almost humorous names, and associating them with ‘grand’ behavior and large-massed crowds. The use of the word “grand,” especially within the context of the ballad form, shows that she attempts to place them on par with their once-rulers, the English colonists.
Yet, on adjacent pages in her anthology of poems, lies Bennett’s alternate independence song, “Indepence.” Note, the spelling of the word “independence” is incorrect, with an “a” in place of the “e” to project the word “dance” into the forefront of the reader’s mind. Nevertheless, it is still a misspelling, and, unlike the poem regarding Jamaica’s anthem, this poem’s title does not contain the word “Dignity.” Louise Bennett reflects Jamaica by portraying her vexed relationship with all of the Jamaican cultures which contribute to her identity. Therefore, she oscillates between pride for each of them, or skepticism at any one of them when those around her are proud.

Bennett’s poem, “Indepance,” responds to the “boogooyagga,” the excessive celebration by Jamaica’s people that came with the country’s independence (170:27). Throughout the poem, she makes belittling remarks about Jamaica, first comparing it to a pubescent boy who “start grow beard, ah hope/ We chin can stan’ de strain!” (169:3-4). She compares the newly independent nation to a small dog who does not “wag him tail fe suit him size” (170:29). Finally she states that “Jamaica start smoke pipe, ah hope/ We got nuff Jackass Rope” (tobacco) (170:39-40). For these descriptions, “Miss Lou” was criticized by many Jamaicans who had come to adore her and use her to represent their country. Yet, Bennett’s disapproval only reaches as far as those extreme nationalists who beat their chests without caution. She is skeptical only because she wants a tenacious and sturdy freedom and expresses her happiness at Jamaica’s new independence, saying “Indepence is we nature” (169:13). Thus, Bennett’s pride in the country is present and “hope[s]” for its best, though also hopes that extreme Jamaican pride does not overshadow the “self-sacrifice, and plenty of training and education” that independence should bring (169).
In her anthology, Jamaica Labrish, in which these poems are published, “Independence Dignity” is presented directly after “Indepandance.” We are led to understand that one is meant to balance the other, to reinforce the pride she still feels for her country: she expresses her grievances so that she might help her country progress. This is an example of her ambivalence. Bennett is proud in her reservations about expressing staunch nationalist pride. Rather, she listens to the pandemonium around her and makes her decision to hybridize it in order to move forward into independence. By comparing Jamaica to a young boy, she can instruct it to listen, as she does, in order to grow into an identity.

Like her personal relationship with Jamaica, Bennett’s dialect does not reflect consistent and overwhelming Jamaican pride. In fact, her language has a very present relationship with England and “Standard” English. Bennett plays off of the “Standard” and uses it as a springboard to express her ideas through inconsistencies and specific sociopolitical jargon. The dialect is often inconsistent. For example, Bennett spells the word “devil” two different ways on two separate occasions. In her poem, “Colonisation in Reverse” Bennett comments on the period during the last years of British colonial rule over Jamaica wherein – as a consequence of a British immigration campaign for the post-war need for workers – over 300,000 West Indians, a majority Jamaicans, migrated to Britain and created an ironic role reversal for the colonial and colonized poeoples (Louise Bennett). While this poem satirically comments on this situation and on its ironic historical reversals, it is reliant upon English diction to make its ironic points. She describes that some are living on the dole while sitting on the couch and hardly searching for work and cries out “what a devilmnt a England!” and wonders how they will stand
the colonisation in reverse (Bennett:1966:179:41). She spells “devilment” with a “v,” choosing the “Standard” English spelling. By doing so, she implies that she is also identifying with her British leanings.

Conversely, in her poem “Back to Africa,” Louise Bennett responds to those around her who choose to travel to Africa to rediscover their roots. She comments that contemporary Jamaicans have roots in so many ethnicities that to look just to Africa is single-minded. She comments that if everyone devoted their identities to their national roots, everybody would have to go back to their ancestral country of origin, no matter with whom they identified in the present. On the surface, this poem looks like a sharp criticism of the most racially and nationally proud in Jamaica. Yet, she describes this situation as

What a debil of a bump-an-bore,
Rig-jig an palam-pam!
Ef de whole worl’ start fe go back
Whe dem great granpa come from! (215:25-28)

Her spelling of the word “debil” with a “b” shows her identification, ironically, with those she criticizes. Indeed, this identification is heightened by the fact that she uses Jamaican expressions, “bump-an-bore,/ Rig-jig an palam-pam” to describe the ironic migratory chaos she describes. By using this phrase to describe actions that are going on all over the world, Bennett extends her specific dialect farther than its borders, empowering it, and the people she seems to criticize.

These inconsistencies are also present in her poem, “Noh Lickle Twang!” or “Not Even a Little Accent.” This poem directly confronts issues of dialect. This poem, like a traditional ballad, is written in ballad form and is a monologue. It is spoken by a
boisterous and obnoxious woman who has sent her son to study in America for six months but, to her chagrin, he has come back speaking with exactly the same dialect. She suggests that her son address his father as “Poo” instead of “Pa” so as to impress him with a new vocabulary (210:39-40). Bennett expresses the character’s conflicting and vexed relationship with her dialect through a three-tiered ironic description into which her inconsistent dialect is incorporated.

On the first level, if taken seriously: yes, the woman’s son is shameful, and we should pity this woman for sending her son thousands of miles away to be improved and his coming back empty handed and empty mouthed is pitiable. On a second level, Bennett is ironically criticizing this woman because the woman doesn’t understand what she is praising: She instructs her son to address his father differently. “Yuh always call him "Pa" dis evening.' Wen him come sey "Poo"” (210:39-40). She wants an impressive change of language but she does not understand that this particular change would insult her husband. She means to show the superiority of ‘Standard English’ but by misusing words such as “lamented,” she shows she praises the language because of its connotations though it practically impairs her understanding (210:27).

On another level come the dialect and form chosen by Bennett. While she criticizes her speaker, she also attempts to reach out to her with the message that she should not be ashamed of the dialect she speaks – she and her dialect are not pitiful but impressive enough to make beautiful poetry themselves. Then again, is Bennett herself acting in the same way as her character by using the ballad form? If nonstandard dialect is praiseworthy enough, why choose a “Standard” English form? Louise Bennett forces the readers and listeners of her poetry to ask these questions and simultaneously consider
all of the levels of understanding of her poem. She complicates her relationship with language by infusing inconsistent dialect with irony, in order to convey her complicated identity.

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Thus, Bennett is *Ambivalent*. She presents herself as an oscillating presence that identifies with both the colonial and indigenous peoples. The plays on language bare an entire complex sociopolitical climate, and many of its elements, with which language is associated. In “Noh Lickle Twang” the character not only bemoans the fact that her son came back with “no little twang,” (12) but also, “not a piece betta,” (7) “ugly same way” (20) and so her “proudness drop a grung” (4). The character expresses her shame at the fact that he has not improved himself or bought new clothes. She worries that these disappointments will cause her public shame. The language is heavily associated with appearance; the apparel and image of African Americans in American hip-hop pop culture. The woman’s son does not have a little twang, nor does he have a gold chain around his neck or the right kind of trousers. In this way, she again praises the language with its general social associations, though she does not understand the connotations of the associations as the reader does. Language is also associated with self improvement. The fact that he speaks the same dialect reflects that he is not any “betta” (7). Bennett infuses these associations into her poetry to reflect the postcolonial climate of Jamaica.
Bennett uses language to conjure images of the West and the colonial empire on a more political level as well. In “Colonisation in Reverse,” Bennett proclaims that Jamaican immigrants

...week by week dem shippin off
Dem countryman like fire,
Fe immigrate an populate
De seat o’ de Empire (179:21-24).

Thus, she uses words that were jargon that the British used to describe the colonization process like “immigrate and populate.” When the English colonized in the sixteenth century, these words were used to convey their intentions to populate a land which they thought of as uninhabited (Ramazani 126). Bennett also ironizes the word “colonize” by saying that the Jamaican population is colonizing the “motherland” with their “countrymen.” She praises them by exclaiming:

What a islan! What a people!
Man an woman, old an young
Jus pack dem bag an baggage
An tun history upside dung! (Bennett: 1966:179:13-16)

As seen in this passage, Bennett highlights the political irony by using the same political jargon used in the colonial era in the reverse situation.

However, the situation she describes, this triumphant role reversal, is hampered by her further description of how Jamaicans live when in England during this period:

...Some will settle down to work
An some will settle fe de dole.

Jane say de dole is not too bad
Because dey payin’ she
Two pounds a week fe seek a job
Dat suit her dignity.
Me say Jane will never find work  
At de rate how she dah-look,  
For all day she stay pon Aunt Fan couch  
An read love-story book.

Wat a devilment a Englan!  
Dem face war an brave de worse,  
But me wonderin’ how dem gwine stan’  
Colonizin’ in reverse. (179: 30-44)

The situation she chooses to elaborate upon in her poem does not convey a complete reversal of power; it is convoluted like the sociopolitical climate and identities the colonial era created. Bennett does not proclaim that Jamaicans have taken on leadership positions or positions of great utility and power. Rather, they are living off of the dole, the welfare system, and reading “love-story book[s]” (40). At this point she takes the side of England, proclaiming “me wonderin’ how dem gwine stan’/ Colonizin’ in reverse” (43-4). Spelling “devilment” with a “Standard” spelling “d,” and victimizing England at the end of her poem, she conveys a situation that portrays Jamaicans as lazy, though she initially claimed the reverse-colonization made her “heart gwine burs’” (heart going to burst). However, on another level, this last proclamation is a very real cry to power for Jamaicans. Even though they lack leadership, their position in English society is exploitative, as was the reverse situation for the British in Jamaica. Thus, she ironizes the situation on several levels with her ambivalent portrayal of the migrating Jamaicans.

Issues of place, movement and homeland are indeed, paramount in Louise Bennett’s expression of the postcolonial moment. This is the foremost concern of Bennett’s poem, “Back to Africa.” As “Back to Africa” criticizes Jamaicans who seek their homeland by going to Africa, Bennett means to make the point that every single person on earth has ancestry which has migrated, many from very different places. Thus,
with all of this chaotic confusion, Bennett asserts that one should consider their homeland to be exactly where they are.

...But Matty, do
Sure o’ weh yuh come from so yuh got
Someweh fe come back to!

Go a foreign, seek yuh fortune,
But noh tell nobody sey
You dah go fe seek you homemlan,
For a right deh so yuh deh! (215: 30-36)

Bennett warns that those who “seek you homemlan” should be “sure o’ weh yuh come from” (2-3). In the context of the search of those around her, this warning seems redundant, as if she agrees with their actions. Yet, this is a call to stay put, because their homeland is “right deh so yuh deh” (36). This statement is an indication of Bennett’s ambivalence. Though the postcolonial climate of Jamaica bombard the identity with conflicting heritages, this ambivalent heritage is the heritage she accepts.

Derek Walcott, poet and Caribbean commentator on postcolonial studies, comments on this phenomenon as well. In his essay, “The Caribbean: Culture or Mimicry?” he notes that the colonial era has erased cultures to an extent that there is a “loss of history.” As a result, “what has become necessary is imagination.” Though indigenous peoples have grown up with a conglomeration of various cultures, they choose to revert back to a culture they imagine their ancestors practiced many generations ago to create a mimicked, imagined culture. Just as Bennett asserts that the “great resemblance” is the only force which ties modern Jamaicans and Africans, Walcott comments that Jamaicans self-perpetuate “the exercise of racial memory which is tradition. Somehow the cord is cut by that meridian. Yet a return is also impossible, for
we cannot return to what we have never been” (Walcott 260). Walcott accepts the current, confusing and ambivalent postcolonial moment as his culture.

This question concerns Louise Bennett’s poetic predecessor, Claude McKay (1890-1948). Living at the end of the colonial era in Jamaica in Jamaica and subsequently many places throughout the world, McKay felt that his soul “cannot reconcile itself to the fact of limitation to any one country, or allegiance to any one nation.” His soul is “vagabond” (McKay xi). McKay thus utilizes many of the same ambivalent elements that Bennett utilizes as well. His poetry is written in iambs, but in his specific dialect, which is different from Bennett’s, but is also infused with “Standard” English. His poem, Notes on “Old England” is an example of this form. It is written in dialect but very early on uses the word “‘tis” (McKay: 45: 2). This could be dialect choice or use of old English, as is the reverence for Wordsworth and Gray expressed later in the poem. However, the word “‘tis” was also used in very informal settings in the romantic period, and, when used to refer to people of great social status, could be a sign of disrespect. By using this word, he is showing his feeling of separateness from both of the cultures which influenced him in his upbringing.

Yet, he refers to England as his “homeland” (5). That which qualifies it as such in this poem is the “much talk” (6) that he hears about the famous things that the country boasts. He even goes so far as to refer to England as his “own native shore” (29).

So I’ll rest glad an’ contented in me min’ for evermore,  
When I sail across de ocean back to my own native shore.

Native is both a word with “strong colonialist connotations” (BSA), and also implies a place of birth and natural connection. The Oxford English Dictionary defines native as,
the “inherent, innate; belonging to or connected with something by nature or natural constitution” (OED). McKay openly notes that he has never been to England and that he will only “sail across de ocean back” to it in the future (McKay: 46:29). However, he refers to it as his “homeland England” and implies that it is his natural birthplace (5). By baring this contradiction, McKay comments on the colonial education which encouraged him to view England as his paradoxical “homeland.”

McKay surfaces this theme in a very pronounced way in his poem, “My Native Land, My Home. The poem is addressed to Jamaica – his “native land” and “home” (57: 4). This poem presents several problems of place and identity. While he refers to England as his “native shore” (46: 29) in “Old England,” Jamaica is also his “native land” (57: 4) in “My Native Land, My Home.” Jamaica can be his “home” but not his “homeland.” He also calls Jamaica “de nigger’s place” (5). He goes on to assert that he knows this is where his people find home, despite the fact that his people are called the “no-land race” (7). He proceeds to list the ways that he would die for his country—by blood or poverty but at the end says if he can’t get food from it he will turn against it.

Still all dem little chupidness
Caan’ tek away me lub;
De time when I’ll tu’n ‘gains’ you is
When you can’t give me grub (37-40).

This poem bares a series of contradictions when set next to “Old England.” McKay is almost loyal, just as his home/native land Jamaica is almost a homeland but not quite. In “Old England,” conversely, he praises England as a land he claims to be his birth place to which he will go “back,” though he has never been there, and only praises it for what he has been taught by the colonial English to see in this country (46: 29).
The Jamaican relationships with Africa and England are heavily intertwined in Jamaican verse. Indeed Louise Bennett plays on this relationship in her Anancy Children’s verse as well as in her poetry. In the introduction to her storybook, “Anancy and Miss Lou” Mervyn Morris describes that Anancy, a morphable spider-man trickster in children’s stories, comes from West Africa but has been “Jamacanized.” He quotes Leonard Barret who says that Anancy has become so ingrained in Jamaican culture that “cunning has become part of the Jamaican personality stereotype” (Bennett:1979: ix).

Yet he also describes that Anancy is seen as having “Godlike power,” and is revered as such by Jamaicans. “Godlike power” implies a straight-forward nature, as God is associated with ultimate rule, omniscience and fiat. If, on the surface, Anancy can be best characterized as a trickster, Louise is commenting on the fact that Jamaicans tend to play into the stereotype of Jamaicans as lowly tricksters, and embrace it, perhaps simply because it is Jamaican. Morris continues that the stereotype of Jamaican personality obviously does not always match with the actual and Louise Bennett addresses this. She brings out Anancy’s “human” qualities...lazy, envious, greedy, yet also accurate about the pretensions of others.

Louise Bennett’s author’s note addresses the Jamaican view of Anancy and surfaces her personal connection with the cunning spider-man. As she does with her culture, she immediately articulates the conflicting dichotomies in Anancy’s character. He is both “comic and sinister,” a “hero and villain,” and “a rascal but lovable.” Bennett also describes that Anancy “points up human weaknesses” and that “he can change
himself into whatever he wishes.” There are many commonalities between Bennett—as she manifests herself in her poetry—and the Anancy figure she describes. Her poetry conveys the same theme of the duality of the character of the Jamaican because of mixed background, education, expectations, valued cultural ideals (Bennett: 1979: Author Note).

Indeed, the title of the book is Anancy and Miss Lou. “Miss Lou” is also the name she goes by in her radio show which propelled her to her iconic status in Jamaica (Jamaican Performing & Recording Artists). Both she and Anancy are both characters with ambivalent, dual natures which have both come to represent Jamaica—though it is not clear that Jamaicans are cognizant of this ambivalence because of the nuanced mix of irony and many forms of humor in both Bennett’s poetry and the Anancy stories. Nonetheless, Bennett uses the title of her book to display her relationship to him and to pointing out their similarities and how they reflect one another.

Bennett utilizes Anancy as a vessel to depict her cultural surroundings as well. Once again touching on the question of home, she utilizes one of her Anancy songs, “Anancy An Fire” to underscore the ambiguousness of this concept for Jamaicans.

Oh yuh buil’ yuh house ‘pon san’
De breeze come blow, dung ‘nancy
Oh yuh buil’ yuh house wid board
Fiyah come bu’n i’ dung ‘nancy
A comin wid de fiyah bu’n ‘nancy
Yuh see yuh galley comin’ dung..‘nancy
A comin’ wid de fiyah bu’n..’nancy (Bennett: 1979: 103)

For Anancy, as for Bennett and all Jamaicans, the concept of home and homeland is a precarious one. Because Anancy has built his house on sand, is has blown down.
Because Anancy has built his house with wood, it is burning down. Bennett repeats and underscores the image of the burning, the withering away of Anancy's home. While Bennett bemoans Anancy's surroundings, she makes sure to point out that Anancy is at least partially at fault for his loss. This dual portrayal of Anancy's situation is reminiscent of her portrayal of Jamaicans in general. Though she notes that the Jamaican's have been exploited and stripped of their indigenous culture, she also derides the fact that they seek to imagine a new culture for themselves to which they have never been exposed in their lifetimes.

An ominous point to note is the ambiguity of the title of this song. The word "an," when read with the accent, can sound like "and" or "on." These two choices can imply very different things, "and" mainly portrays the fire as an element which enters into Anancy's world. If Anancy, a mutating trickster, is already "on" fire from the beginning of the poem, the fire comes to be viewed as a characteristic which is either intrinsic to him, or that he has taken upon himself willingly. As the dialect in Bennett's poetry is often inconsistent, and her themes and characters are often contradictory or dualistic in nature, it is unclear which of these words to pick, or if the reader should choose both.

Her incorporation of the importance of dialect into her stories helps the reader further understand this theme in her verse. In one of her Anancy stories, she quotes Anancy speaking and points out that he has a speech impediment, as an aside.

"'Not a man een de whole worl can long like dish bamboo'... Anancy tongue tie, yuh know, so him cal 'dis' 'dish''' (39).
This description is both telling and problematic. Anancy is considered to be “tongue tie” or “tongue tied.” The Oxford English Dictionary describes “Tongue tied” either as that the tongue is too short so that one is unable to speak, or that one is restrained or debarred from speaking or free expression from any cause; speechless, mute dumb, silent, also reticent. The phrase can imply a physical ailment or a forcible restraint. Anancy could have a physical ailment, in which he cannot speak, as in the first definition, but this seems unlikely, considering he can morph into anything he wants. Yet, as Mervyn Morris points out that Anancy is “Jamaicanized” (ix), one could draw the parallel that, similarly, Jamaican dialect would impair social mobility during colonization.

However, it seems that Bennett may be commenting on the self-perpetuation of the Jamaican stereotype through Anancy as she does in “Independance” and “Back to Africa.” She has often expressed wariness about blind Jamaican nationalism and the embrace of Jamaican faults as points of pride (Ramazani 138). Conversely, she has also expressed wariness at those who try to eradicate their Jamaican “twang[s]” in total reverence of the “Standard” English dialect, as seen in “Noh Lickle Twang!” (Bennett: 1966: 209: 12) It also may be important to note that she is distinguishing correct speech from Anancy’s incorrect using her own dialect. The tongue tied says “dish” while the ‘correct’ speaker says “dis.” There is no mention of the correctness or incorrectness of the word as it is pronounced “this,” in “Standard” English pronunciation. Thus, this is a moment wherein Bennett points out the complexities in dealing with language, communication, and what it means to speak correctly. Anancy, like the Jamaicans, does not speak like others around him, maybe due to “restraint” or being “debarred” from speaking, as the OED definition implies. Yet, he is more powerful than others around
him, and further, in Bennett’s story, the ‘standard’ way of speaking is the Jamaican dialect.

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Louise Bennett’s poetry is reflective of her postcolonial climate, of both colonial and independent Jamaica and the conflicting cultural forces which govern its people. Bennett not only conveys the weight of these heritages, she also expresses the pressure she feels from those around her who are loyal to only one of these cultures. Bennett is ambivalent, oscillating her bias between these polarized ideals. She ultimately settles on hybridity as the best expression of her identity within the postcolonial climate of Jamaica’s battling poles. She is staunch and proud in her ambivalence. She is ambivalent: she urges the indigenous peoples of the Caribbean postcolonial moment to join her in cautiously, yet joyously embracing the best of both cultures and move forward from there.
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