

Dr William 'Lez' Henry Article for The Wire Magazine Sept 2018

Fear the Talking Dread!

For a black writer to be born into the English language, is to realise that the assumptions on which the language operates are his enemy.
James Baldwin

I am often left to ponder what it means to belong to England, as one who was born and raised in Lewisham, Southeast London, when considering James Baldwin's notion of my relationship with an 'enemy language'. For English is my language, my 'mother tongue', yet I still don't feel I belong to it, and whenever I am asked to self-identify I automatically say, 'I'm African, Jamaican and Southeast London', because I feel comfortable with these aspects of myself. African obviously speaks to my racial heritage and the other two reflect the acculturation process I went through because, apparently, I couldn't speak 'proper English' until I went to primary school. For me this is hardly surprising because I, along with my British-born siblings, was socialised, acculturated and influenced by my Windrush Generation, Jamaican-born parents and siblings who spoke mostly 'patwa', Jamaican language at home. I vividly remember as a child not being allowed to go to the Ice Cream Van to ask for 'anything' because, according to my elder siblings, 'mi taak too bad'. This vignette exemplifies why I and many others would choose patwa, or our UK version of it, to express our innermost concerns about living in the womb of a scornful mother, because our 'Jafaican', as it has been dubbed, is a natural mix of our linguistic influences and speaks to our particular take on life in Britain. The point I am making is that complex negotiations are arguably far more frequent in everyday conversations than we are perhaps consciously aware of when we consider that language, as a system of communication, entails far more than meets the eye. Moreover, there are ongoing processes of mediation happening every time we communicate, which we perhaps only consider during moments like these, when we are writing or thinking reflexively on how alternative public arenas are created through everyday language usage.

When consideration is given to how and why black youth who were born in Britain rebelled against their 'mother tongue', thereby expressing their innermost concerns in patwa on Reggae Sound Systems, acknowledgment must be given to the utilisation of different speech idioms. Here, I am thinking specifically of the mixture between London English and Jamaican Patwa, as mediated through the lens of

Rastafari teachings which are conveyed through a particular style of reasoning known as 'dread talk'. I don't have the space to really go into this here, but a good example is where Rastafari teaches us that as Africans we are not 'educated' by Europeans because what we receive from them is 'head-decay-shun'. The reasoning behind this is that Africans seldom learn anything of note regarding a positive historical presence that predates chattel enslavement, meaning these contributions are deliberately white-washed or 'hidden'. Therefore, what we Africans are exposed to in their 'lie-burys' (libraries) are white lies that will decay the head. So it is wise to shun their 'education' and look to your own pro-black resources, hence why I advocate the need for Africentric knowledge exchanges. The suggestion is that these forms of 'dread talk', and the knowledges contained therein, were/are a 'natural' part of the 'verbal exchanges' many of us experience in our daily social interactions at school, work, home and in the black spaces within which we mix and mingle. In fact, it was/is commonplace in the Reggae-dancehalls to hear various regional and Caribbean accents mixed together to create this form of patwa, the dominant language of the deejay performance. For instance, you will hear Macka B, Pato Banton and Benjamin Zephaniah, speaking with a 'Brummie' (Birmingham/Wolverhampton) accent during their performances (they were born and raised in the West Midlands) and Levi Tafari speaking with his Liverpudlian twang during his performances. Yet, this in no way diminishes their status as Reggae revolutionaries through their profound usage of 'dread talk', for as Levi Tafari explains:

As a Black youth born and raised in Britain of Jamaican parentage, I became aware of the issue of race and racism from an early age and use my poems to open people's eyes to this reality through my Rastafari principles. I have experienced racism in all aspects of my human activity such as in education, sports, religion and entertainment etc. and using standard English to counter white domination caan work for I & I as one rich in melanin.

It was not unusual for the pioneering British-born deejays to feature these forms of local or regional expression in all aspects of their performances, so the inclusion of cockney speech idioms, including 'rhyming slang', in the performances of London-based deejays were commonplace, constantly updated, and transcended any notion of a simple 'code-switching' device. For instance, in the British film *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels* (1998), the infamous, colourful and now departed Lennie Maclean, in his role as an underground enforcer, uttered the following words when

reasoning with another villain; 'get that look orf your Chevvie Chase'. Any of us who are familiar with 'cockney rhyming slang' know that he was talking about the villains' 'boat race' (face), yet this change is accepted because the linguistic form evolves to accommodate current trends, fashions and events. The 'boat race' is hardly the captivating spectacle it was a few years ago, hence the 'slanguage' accepts these variations and updates to maintain its contemporary relevance to make sense in the now. As such 'cockney rhyming slang', which originated as a tool for outsmarting the authorities, became a tool for encouraging an alternative way to think about yourself and the world around you, encouraging a different 'world view' that bestows a sense of an autonomous socio-cultural self. If this is the case, we must consider some of these processes of encoding and decoding language that occur on this inter-subjective level, and to do so let's consider the following from the hit song 'Cockney Translation' by the now-departed Smiley Culture:

It's I, Smiley Culture with the mic inna me hand,
Me come to teach you right and not the wrong,
Inna the Cockney Translation.

Cockney's not a language it is only a slang,
and was originated yah so inna Englan,
the first place it was used was over East London,
it was respect for the different style pronunciation,
but it wasn't really used by any and any man,
me say strictly con-man also the villain,
But through me full up of lyrics and education,
right here now you a go get a little translation,
cockney have name like Terry, Arthur and Del-boy,
we have name like Winston, Lloyd and Leroy,
we bawl out YOW! While cockneys say OI!

Smiley Culture's lyric perfectly captures how natural it was for black youth, in this case in London, to bridge both linguistic worlds in a way that was instinctive and relevant because it bestowed a sense of self-worth and pride that was denied to them in standard English. Moreover, as I have argued on many occasions, it was usual for performers to speak in a way that came naturally to them and his record just made that aspect of Sound System culture more broadly known. Crucially, he states 'through me full up of lyrics and education, right here now you a go get a little translation', which speaks to how black youth considered their profound insights into the black British experience were necessarily linked to their social awareness and intellect. This is an

important point to grasp as many social commentators in the mainstream media, or the hallowed halls of academia, attributed this usage of 'dread talk' to ignorance, illiteracy or parroting their parents 'jungle talk' or 'mumbo jumbo'. However, these were aspects of everyday communication that were then transposed into the deejay performance and, according to Paul Gilroy, formed an important part of 'the basic strategy of linguistic exclusion with which the community had protected itself from the encroachment of unwanted white listeners'. The notion of the 'unwanted white listener' is central to this discussion as certain whites were welcomed into these alternative public arenas because they understood certain aspects of the black struggles against white domination. For instance, Kenny Monroe stated:

Sound System and Sound System culture were everything for us in the early Eighties. Football or Sound System. The deejaying aspect of the Sound System enhanced our lives and it wasn't just black kids like me, white kids and some Asians gravitated toward it as well.

Moreover, many white youths were affiliated with Sound System culture and understood the language of the deejay performance through commonalities in their wider socialisation, a necessary consequence of living in the same neighbourhoods or attending the same schools, youth clubs etc; however, they perhaps knew they belonged to English in a way a black youth never could. The iconic scene in the film *Babylon* (1980) where a white woman tells 'Beefy' to, 'fuck off back to your own country, Jungle Bunny...' and he retorts, 'this is my fucking country, lady, and it's never been lovely, it's always been a fucking tip for as long as I can remember...' perfectly captures this reality, because:

Now listen to the lyrics me a fling pon the groove,
from an African who was twice removed,
from the Motherland to the carry-beyond,
them entice me parents fi come ah London,
but before me join in ah any celebration,
let me tell you 'bout the Windrush Generation,
cos just like the slaves on the plantation,
them use we fi build up the whole ah England,
which they had destroyed in them contention,
that ah the tribal wars of the European. Lezlee Lyrix (1993)

To this very day I still struggle to positively identify myself within the confines of the English language as something other than a 'wog/nigger/spade/coon', or even a

'savage', which is what my secondary school librarian used to regularly call black students.

The suggestion is that the British-born deejays like Papa Levi argue that, when fully embraced, English will 'tun African innah robot', as it erases all traces of an autonomous black self that seeks edification from an African centre. These sentiments are captured in the above lyric I used to chat as Lezlee Lyrix, 'way back in the day', which challenge the way we are treated as the black 'Other'. This feeling of 'otherness' has been compounded by the so-called 'Windrush Scandal' that has led to the types of persecution and even tragic loss of black lives one would not immediately associate with 21st century Britain. We have had politicians blatantly lying, hand wringing and apportioning blame in every direction, yet the truth is that if not for the petition initiated by a member of the black community, the general public would have remained oblivious to this issue. Why I specifically state the 'general public' is because black people have expressed concerns about our hostile treatment at the hands of the State, irrespective of who is in power, for decades. In fact, the conscious Reggae singer, Sister Audrey, released a track entitled 'English Girl' on Mad Professor's Ariwa Record label in 1987 and spoke to the reality that hit many from the Caribbean upon arrival in Britain, suggesting that, 'my mother and my father too, if only they knew, all the promises of work and pay, were only part way true'. The main point is that there has been a constant critique from the street that has informed, educated and, in many instances, mobilised the black/African communities by feeding them alternatives to the white dominated, often racist portrayal of their lived black experiences in Britain. It is therefore crucial that we place this commemorative year, marking 70 years since the arrival of the HMT Empire Windrush at Tilbury Docks, 21st June 1948 (the passengers were allowed to disembark on the 22nd June) into some type of context, so 'before me join in ah any celebration, let me tell you 'bout the Windrush Generation'.

I have considered here that language as a cultural artefact invariably carries with it a notion of an incorporation of divergent traditions because, like any other 'culture', it is not static: it recreates (according to countless determining environmental factors at any given period) and not just replicates. It is this notion of replication that has been used as a weapon against black people from the former colonies who, because of their accents, dialects or whatever, were dismissed as not being able to 'speak proper'! In other words, because many who sought to understand black

expression in Britain failed to recognise it was a conscious choice to use dread talk or patwa to challenge the Queen's English, a crucial aspect of contemporaneous British history and culture remains 'hidden' in the wider public arena.

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