Journeying Across Languages, Cultures, and Literatures: the Poetry of Mervyn Morris

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ABSTRACT

The West Indian poet Mervyn Morris (1937-) is renowned for espousing the importance of a national language in creating national literature as well as for integrating European poetic heritage with Caribbean literary traditions. Through an exploration of Morris's selected poems, the paper discusses the role language plays in shaping the themes of diasporic writing and of postcolonial identity, and argues that his works show a deep awareness of the fundamental aspects of West Indian and British culture. Since Morris "refuses to be trapped in the excesses of post-modern Romanticism or political propaganda parading as nationalism" (Thompson), the paper also looks at the presentation of eternal values like love and humanity celebrated in his poems. By foregrounding the frequent use of epiphanies in his poetry, Morris conveys human affection in the frame of colonial and postcolonial history. (PF)

KEYWORDS: Mervyn Morris, Caribbean poetry, Caribbean literature, Creole, standard English, postcolonial literature

Poets of postcolonial Anglophone countries are modern multilingual writers. One of the leading figures is Mervyn Morris (1937-), a distinguished Jamaican poet—also an academic—who has always stressed the importance of a national language in developing national literature. Although his native language is English, all his life he has lived surrounded by the various languages spoken in the Caribbean (French, Dutch, Spanish, and Portuguese) as well as with the different varieties of English. While the education system in Jamaica has used standard

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British English since the colonial era, Creole English has been preferred in everyday speech as well as in Jamaican literature, and particularly in poetry.

As a poet Morris works with all the varieties of English. He studied at the University of the West Indies; as a Rhodes Scholar he experienced at first hand the academic atmosphere and British English at St Edmund Hall in Oxford. However, in his poetry, he prefers to utilize and explore the denotational, connotational, and phonetic possibilities of Creole English. Morris is convinced that Caribbean poetry is most expressive when it draws on orality inherent in the Caribbean. In his essay "Louise Bennett: The Poet," Morris argues that the formal qualities characterizing the poetry of the Jamaican poet and folklorist, Louise Bennett-Coverly (1919-2006), evidently demonstrate the performative potential in Creole. He claims that she most often employs "the dramatic monologue," pointing out that the "[p]rinted texts which are unconventionally punctuated and difficult to read encourage the notion that Louise Bennett is essentially for performance and is inadequate on the page" (21). Based on her poetic models, subsequent generations of Caribbean poets, for example Jean Binta Breeze (1957-) or Olive Senior (1941-), have continued the tradition of writing about the Caribbean in Creole and performing their poetry. Thus, Creole is not limited "in its ability to deal with complex ideas," therefore it "could perfectly well do what you chose to make it do," as Morris suggests (qtd. in Doumerc 114).

Formative function of language on identity

In his book of essays *Is English We Speaking and Other Essays* (1999) Morris's main argument is that in spite of the fact that Creole differs from standard English—also indicated in the first part of the title that deviates from standard grammar—it still has the potential to be functional and understandable, which makes it an appropriate tool for literature. He maintains that "[p]eople using West Indian English and people using English are mutually intelligible,

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most of the time. But because, in a sense, we share a language, it is easy to overestimate the levels of understanding" ("Is English We Speaking" 2). Although Caribbean Creole might be difficult to decipher if one is not a native speaker, Morris believes in its power and poetic credibility. He disagrees with his fellow Caribbean-American poet Claude McKay (1890-1948), who claimed that "dialect is a 'Morri tongue' with which it is impossible to build an edifice of verse possessing the perfect symmetry of finished art" (qtd. in McFarlane 84). Contrary to McKay, Morris thinks that "[c]onceptions of what Jamaican poetry is, and what it can be, have evolved, and are evolving still. Language is a central, though not the only, element in the evolution" ("Poet Laureate" 4). The incorporation of varieties of English in his poetry exemplifies his own contribution to the vitality of Jamaican poetry: "I write poems in international English, poems in Jamaican Creole and some that are a mixture" (4).

Morris suggests that the performative nature of Caribbean poetry considerably distinguishes it from mainstream Anglophone literature. Most contemporary Caribbean writers first perform a largely improvised version of their poems and only subsequently do they write them down. As Morris points out, West Indian writing has contributed to the Anglophone literature in the following way: "[s]ome of our writers have, by conventional mainstream criteria, done distinguished work. Others have, by their particular skills and achievement as so-called performance poets—often working at the Creole end of the continuum—helped us extend our recognition of excellence" ("Is English We Speaking" 2).

Morris shares the Wordsworthian definition that poetry "is the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings: it takes its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility" (Wordsworth 307). For the transference of feelings from the poetic speaker to the reader, appropriate linguistic tools should be applied. As Morris argues, Creole proves to be a most suitable means for that: "[f]or most West Indians the language of feeling, their most intimate language, is Creole. It has been observed that West Indians who seem entirely comfortable in Standard English often break

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into Creole in moments of excitement or agitation" ("Is English We Speaking" 9). As a consequence, the poet must balance the choice of language and its emotional baggage in order to remain intelligible.

Morris exemplifies a postcolonial poet who is not rigorous about using only one variety of English and rejecting all the others. He disagrees with distinguished historians of Anglophone postcolonial literature such as Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, who believe that

> one of the main features of imperial oppression is control over language. The imperial education system installs a "standard" version of the metropolitan language as the norm, and marginalizes all "variants" as impurities. . . . Language becomes the medium through which a hierarchical structure of power is perpetuated, and the medium through which conceptions of "truth," "order," and "reality" become established. Such power is rejected in the emergence of an effective post-colonial voice. (Ashcroft, et al. 7)

Morris is closely connected to the Caribbean culture but he also has strong ties to the UK in terms of education, academic career, as well as literary influence on his poetry. In the former colonies, the UK is still referred to as the "mother country," where he lived for longer stretches of time before 1962, when Jamaica gained its independence. He was legally an official citizen of the British overseas territories. He taught at the University of Kent in Canterbury (1972-1973) and became Visiting Writer-in-Residence at the South Bank Centre in London following his nomination by the UK Arts Council in 1992. Modeled on the example of British Poet Laureates, in 2014 he was appointed the first official Jamaican Poet Laureate, who is "expected to stimulate a greater appreciation for Jamaican poetry, write poems for national occasions, and

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preserve and disseminate the island's cultural heritage through prose" (McNeill). Morris's ties to England go beyond academic fields: he excels in tennis—he could have represented the UK in a sports competition between the Oxford/Cambridge teams and the Harvard/Yale teams, if an implicit racial segregation and oppression had not existed during his stay in England.

The poetry of Morris is to a great extent inspired by the poetic works of a wide spectrum of canonical British writers, such as the metaphysical poets John Donne, George Herbert, and Andrew Marvell, as well as by William Shakespeare, Alexander Pope, John Keats, Thomas Hardy, W. B. Yeats, T. S. Eliot, R. S. Thomas, and Philip Larkin. Morris utilizes the conceits of the metaphysical poets, the complexity and metaphors of Shakespeare, the language brilliance of Pope, the inspiration of nature by the Romantics—in particular, the lyricality of Keats—the modernist diction of T. S. Eliot, and the emotional impact of R. S. Thomas's poetry. With their deceptively simple language, their modern topics presented with traditional rhyming techniques, the Movement poets (Philip Larkin, Kingsley Amis, Donald Davie, Elizabeth Jennings, or Thom Gunn) have exerted a considerable impact on Morris. He is fascinated by the manifold complex allusions to classical literature, Anglophone culture, and contemporary British politics in the deep structure of their poems as well as their rejection of grandiose romantic gestures and diction in favor of simplicity and clarity.

Morris is also greatly influenced by the poetics of other British poets. He uses traditional forms coupled with other poetic traits, hence his poems oscillate between haiku, epigram, sonnet, and ode. Although he prefers free verse, he frequently includes rhymed couplets that easily highlight the poems' endings, while he regularly utilizes sarcasm and irony as well. Kwame Dawes, a fellow Caribbean poet, maintains that "ultimately, this ironic eye is what distinguishes Morris from most of his contemporaries" (47). In addition to the shaping influence of British literary traditions, Morris's poetry also relies on the European cultural heritage in general, and on allusions to Greek and Roman mythology in particular.

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The performative elements ingrained in Caribbean poetry are manifest in Morris's oeuvre and, perhaps even more explicitly, in the works of Louise Bennett (1919-2006), Derek Walcott (1930-2017), Kamau Brathwaite (1930-2020), and Lorna Goodison (1947-), his poetic forerunners. However, while they often employ Romantic sensitivity in their poetry, Morris rejects being labeled as a postmodern Romantic poet because he is well aware of the pitfalls of foregrounding emotions, a common practice in Caribbean poetry. As Ralph Thompson explains: "Morris is careful to ensure that sentiment never slips into sentimentality, that genuine religious experience is never confused with religiosity. The emotion essential to all good poetry is kept within the discipline of the craft."

Morris provides his own version of the transfer of emotions to the reader in his poem "Advisory" as "positive or negative / or in-between. / Don't let anybody / lock you in" (*I Been There, Sort Of* 26). He believes in artistic freedom and advocates that although a poem is the expression of the poet's feelings and emotions, it should not remain a pure confession. Dawes describes Morris's particular technique claiming that his "poetry is a study in the business of counter-confession, a kind of poetry of sophisticated masking and distancing that is devoted to the singular thesis of the poem as the artifact" (47).

As a scholar and a poet, Morris is well aware of the functions and mechanics of literature, the aim of which is not merely to copy and narrate experience and feelings. In his essay "Behind the Poems," Morris explains that "every poem is an unmasking; someone may understand. And every poem, however 'confessional', is a mask, a face the poet has fixed" (65). He directly addresses masking in his "Question Time" from *Examination Centre*:

Sometimes a poem

is a mask

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to ritualize
connection

& preserve
a little something

shared a little
something treasures

in pretence
that privacy

lives on within
community (11)

There is always a tension between the poetic speaker and the reader's response. But the purpose of writing poetry is not just to describe the occasion that initiated the creation of a poem or to explain it in full. It is the tension between the disclosed and undisclosed that makes the poem vibrate. It is the process of reading the text of the poem that creates pleasure, and Morris skillfully works with this creative technique. Although he partially masks his private incentives for writing a particular poem, he plays with the commonly shared values and dreams of the community that bring together the poet and the reader. In other words, Morris constantly reminds the reader that "facts lie / behind the poems / which are true fictions" ("Data," *Examination Centre* 44) and that "[l]ife is raw material. Metaphor is mask" ("Behind the Poems" 73).

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The Wordsworthian claim of poetry—the expression of feelings that are recollected—is evident in his poem "The Day My Father Died" (*The Pond* 23) as it exemplifies that such a traumatic experience may be best transcended artistically with a distance in time. Morris was eleven when his father died but the poem was written approximately seventeen years later. His approach to remembering his dying father differs from how, for instance, Dylan Thomas "talks" to his own father in "Do not Go Gentle into That Good Night" (1951). Only in retrospective does Morris as a poet recognize that the relationship between the speaker—a mask of the poet—and the dying father is only of secondary importance:

> His face on the pillow
> In the dim light
> Wrote mourning to me,
> Black and white.
>
> We saw him struggle,
> Stiffen, relax;
> The face fell empty,
> Dead as wax.

These lines, however matter-of-fact and unemotional they appear to be in their description of someone dying, do carry a hint at the troubled relationship between father and son, especially in light of the next two stanzas:

> I'd read of death
> But never seen.

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My father's face, I swear,

Was not serene;

Topple that lie,

However appealing:

That face was absence

Of all feeling.

Although the death of his father was a tragic experience in the boy's life, in his recollections he focuses on his widowed mother, who carries the burden of his father's death:

The day my father died

I could not cry;

My mother cried,

Not I.

The pain of the loss hits the boy through his mother's tears, which suggest a sorrowful future:

My mother's tears were my tears,

Each sob shook me;

The pain of death is living,

The dead are free.

For me my father's death

Was mother's sorrow

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That day was her day,

Loss was tomorrow. (“The Day My Father Died,” *The Pond* 23)

The language choice in this poem—standard English with simple and plain vocabulary—is in line with Morris’s admiration for the Movement poets who, in his words, “valued a cunning plainness, in reaction against grand rhetorical gestures they often deemed bogus” (qtd. in Doumerc). However, this unadorned style serves its goal—restraint foregrounds the emotional impact of the father’s death. As Andrew Salkey observes, “Morris distills and entices the mind toward the mediation of the complexity of the plain and the everyday . . . [he is] an engraver in short, sharp slashes that go deep . . . Wholly admirable is his ability to eschew sentimentality, tighten periphrases and encapsulate otherwise prolix statement-making” (193). Without entangling the reader in difficult nets of allusions, Morris not only pays a direct tribute to his deceased father, but also celebrates his mother.

Black and white collective and individual (post-)colonial identity

Caribbean writers and poets in the twentieth century made a significant contribution to the discussion of (post-)colonial identity. Within this context, as T. J. Boynton reminds us, the role of language was crucial: “the new uses to which English has been put . . . by poets of Caribbean, South Asian, African, and Irish origin have stretched the language’s traditional resources both by responding to the novel experiences of colonization and postcoloniality, and by hybridyzing . . . its diction, its rhythms, its figural repertoire, and its grammar” (762). By using the word “hybridity” Boynton indirectly refers to Jahan Ramazani’s postulates in his *The Hybrid Muse* (2001) that although poetry “has been largely ignored in postcolonial studies,” it is not only a “transcultural” and “transformative” medium, but it “would have been unimaginable within the confines of one or another culture” (5), thus, poetry should be

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evaluated within the larger context of Anglophone literature. Postcolonial literature undergoes a transformation and Bill Ashcroft believes that "the post-colonial writer faces in two directions" and, at the same time, he determines the role and function of a postcolonial author as regards the language choice: "[t]he decision he or she makes is not just how to write 'he dete languages,' but how to make language perform this 'bearing across'" (*Caliban's Voice* 163).

In order to offer solutions to these dilemmas, Morris likes to look back and appreciate the colonial Caribbean past since it is of vital importance to learn from history. In "Sentences for Heritage Week," he urges the reader to "[m]ine history / for the energy it frees" (*I Been There, Sort Of* 30). This becomes essential within the context of Caribbean history and the rise of Black Power in the 1960s and 1970s both in the US and Great Britain. The central concern of this movement is the construction of Black identity, which constitutes another fundamental aspect of Morris's poetry. Although Morris draws on history, he does not let himself be limited by it in order to be able to envisage the future. In an interview, Morris explains that "black identity is the sense of performance, something not in the past, to be found, but in the future, to be constructed" (qtd. in Dawes 48). Therefore, whereas the study of history may to a certain extent be a passive activity, the vision of the future requires active participation. This idea is reflected in "The Pond," which might at first sight evoke the image of a pastoral landscape with its poetics close to William Blake's *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience* (1789). However, Morris shifts the natural motif onto a political level. Small boys are forbidden to approach the pond because, according to local oral traditions and superstitions, it swallows both people and animals into its depths, where they experience various ordeals. The metaphorical comparison of these ordeals in the underworld of the pond refers to the terror which the British colonizers imposed on the slaves. A small black boy does not resist the temptation and does indeed approach the pond, which is very dark and gloomy, similarly to the British historical

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presence in the region. Surprisingly, Morris ends the poem with an epiphany concerning the future:

> Sudden, escaping cloud, the sun
> came bright; and shimmering in guilt,
> he saw his own face peering from the pool. (*The Pond* 42)

A bright future emerges from the dark past when Jamaica gains independence and can build the country's own future. To do so requires courage, which the country must pluck up, as is evident in his ode "Valley Prince." While in the first stanza, the speaker is an anonymous participant in a music festival and wants to mingle with the crowd, in the second stanza he is among the musicians, still a little reluctant to perform a solo, although he is asked to do so: ". . . plenty people / want me blow it straight" (*The Pond* 7). The celebration of the victory, that is, Jamaican independence, must be modest. Besides the collective experience, the poem contains a personal dimension as it is dedicated to Don Drummond (1932-1969), a remarkable jazz trombonist. Similar to the way in which Jamaicans tried to strike a balance between their own integrity and dependence on Britain, Drummond hovered between artistic genius and mental breakdown. J. Edward Chamberlin draws parallels between the art of the poet and the musician:

> Morris's poem uses Drummond's language to illuminate his eccentric genius. But Drummond, like Bob Marley, caught the spirit of what it was to be West Indian, and the language of Morris' poem represents both an individual and a collective experience. It illustrates how West Indian life is inextricably bound up with its language and how both life and language are (to use Walcott's phrase) "like nothing one has ever seen before." (101)

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Morris wishes to capture Drummond's extraordinary talent in a mixture of standard English and Jamaican Creole, which gives rise to a specific West Indian identity and consciousness:

> But straight is not the way; my world
> don' go so; that is lie.
> Oonoo gimme back me trombone, man:
> is time to blow me mind. (*The Pond* 7)

Chamberlin points out that

> Morris conveys a sense that only this language, shaped in this way, could tell this story, a story that on the surface is not about black power or social unrest or economic distress or political change, but about a figure who belongs to his place and time . . . a figure whose identity is both unique and universal, neither straight nor standard but simply and enduringly West Indian. (101)

The language gains more importance than ever before. Whereas in the colonial era Creole English was the language of the slaves and was their only means of verbal communication, created as a substitute and as an amalgam of various African languages and English, in the postcolonial era Creole, in the hands of Morris, appears in a privileged position as a full-fledged language fulfilling all the functions it should fulfill in a way that is comparable to those of standard English. Creole thus becomes the language that completely expresses Jamaican

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independence and mirrors national history, whereby it proves to be an adequate medium for national literature.

A comparably significant exploration of the importance of identity as expressed through language is to be found in the poem "Walk Good." The title itself alludes to a common Jamaican expression of parting, therefore it can be read as a heartfelt farewell to someone who is leaving their native ground:

> Teck time
> Walk good
>
> Yu buck yu foot
> An memory ketch yu
>
> like a springe. (*I Been There, Sort Of* 92)

The speaker bids good-bye to the traveler but reminds him that although he may physically be absent from his country, memories will inescapably accompany him. Edward Baugh suggests that the reader may "note how very culture-rooted and culture-vibrant [the poem] is. First, there is the Jamaican speech, alive with its own creativity. We could translate the poem accurately enough into Standard English, but, in an essential sense, it wouldn't be the same poem. It would not convey the way of life, the way of seeing and being that 'Walk Good' conveys" (118). Language plays a crucial role here—it not only situates the poem within the Caribbean culture instantaneously, but it also creates a unique atmosphere loaded with Caribbean references. If the poem was written in standard English, it would lose its charm and vibrancy. Another poem that refers to journeying and life in diaspora is "Mariners" (*I Been There, Sort Of* 70). Morris

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skillfully makes puns on the ambiguity of references to the day (whiteness) and night (darkness) and to the Caribbean reality that the Caribbean islands are surrounded by the ocean and, therefore, the locals are deemed to be seafarers who are “sick in the deep,” that is, by extension, troubled by the colonial past and postcolonial present.

In addition to the numerous poems dedicated to voyages, Morris constantly returns to the themes of home and home-based rituals. He provides an excellent example in “Peelin Orange,” which, on the surface, showcases a learning process of peeling an orange:

when mi father try
fi teach me
slide de knife
up to de safeguard thumb

I move de weapon like
a saw inna mi han
an de dyamn rind
break (*I Been There* 28)

However, what may seem to be an occasional light-verse poem about peeling an orange is in fact a deep contemplation with a conceit in the tradition of the English metaphysical poets such as Andrew Marvell or John Donne. In Morris’s poem, metaphorically speaking, beneath the skin of the orange there is the essence of culture, family ties, and individual family roots. Through the conceit of acquiring new clothes if you manage to complete the task in a perfect manner—“yu peel a orange / perfec / an yu get new clothes” (*I Been There* 28)—the speaker alludes to the Caribbean diaspora. The image of new clothes denotes the newly acquired culture,

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whereas the old clothes refer to the Caribbean home. By the end of the poem, the speaker gives preference to the "ole clothes," that is, to returning home, which is more dear to him than living in the diaspora abroad (28).

Exile, however, might sometimes be the proper choice. In the poem "To an Expatriate Friend" (*The Pond* 14), Morris compares the pre-Black Power period and post-Black Power atmosphere in the Caribbean. During the former, "colour meant nothing /. . . / categories of skin / were foreign; you were colour-blind," and what mattered was human nature and kindness. Then the turning point, the "revolution" came, when Black Power became the dominant societal force, but, in the speaker's opinion, "new powers re-enslaved us all: / each person manacled in skin, in race"; therefore, one oppression (that is, the colonial burden) ended only to be replaced by another one, which is equally unhealthy. After the revolution, during which "black / and loud the horns of anger blew / against the long oppression," no bright future awaited the Caribbean; just the contrary: "the future darkening, you thought in time / to say goodbye. / . . . / It hurt to see you go; but, more, / it hurt to see you slowly going white" (14). By repeating the phrase "it hurt to see you go" Morris emphasizes the speaker's deep sadness felt when the friend was leaving home, yet, the departure might be necessary. The ambiguous image of "going white" closing the poem may refer to turning physically pale, or may signify an inclination towards white Anglo-Saxon values, or perhaps even anger at seeing a friend adopt them—the conceit leaves the interpretation of the poem open.

Another poem, "Case-History, Jamaica" (*The Pond* 19), revolves around the themes of racism and Black identity. It focuses on a Black child who is not identified but is referred to as X (a similar technique of using an anonymous X instead of a proper name for a Black person was applied by Scottish poet Jackie Kay (1961-) in her poem "Teeth" in order to signify the status of Black people in British society). Addressing an individual in this way undoubtedly

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evokes the colonial times when the names of the Black slaves were of no importance at all since legally they had the status of property with no human rights:

> In 19-something X was born
> in Jubilee Hospital, howling, black.
>
> In 19- (any date plus four)
> X went out to school
> They showed him pretty pictures
> of his Queen. ("Case-History, Jamaica," *The Pond* 19)

The indefiniteness of X's identity stands here for the masses of Black slaves who had but financial/economic value for slave owners. Although the British colonial government introduced an education system in its former colonies, history was taught from the colonizer's point of view. As a consequence, children in the Caribbean learnt about distinguished white British personalities, whereas local, colonial, and slave history was neglected and mostly denied to them at school. In the poem, at the age of seven, the speaker plucks up the courage to ask at school what "naygas" denotes ("Case-History, Jamaica," *The Pond* 19). No answer is given to him, which means the total denial of enslavement in Caribbean history. Such treatment continues as the speaker grows older, although in secondary school he already knows what *naygas* means. This time he asks "where slaves came from" (19) and receives a perfunctory answer: "'me, Africa,' the master said, / 'Get on with your work'"(19). Arguably, the teacher is unwilling to explicate the nearly three-hundred-year-old colonial governance of the British establishment in the Caribbean region. At the university level, the speaker feels he does not belong: "at the university he didn't find himself" (19). His inability to finish his tertiary

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education demonstrates the incongruity of the British system of education for Caribbean students who would wish to study their history from an unbiased point of view and who would refuse to adapt to the inherited British teaching methods. The denial of British colonial and postcolonial periods in history teaching leads to endless struggles concerning the identity of the people living in or coming from the Caribbean. Before the independence of Jamaica in 1962, Jamaican people were officially the citizens of the United Kingdom's overseas territories. Thus, the Caribbean people had the right to go and settle in Britain as British subjects, but they were still perceived as second-class citizens by the white British in the UK.

Non-privileged status and identity doubts become the focal point in "Post-colonial Identity." In a terse quatrain Morris addresses the controlling power of language:

> The language they're conducted in
> Dictates the play in these debates.
> Good english, as they say, discriminates.
> White people language white as sin. (*I Been There* 27)

Language is imposed on people by those in power. The speaker concludes that "white people language white as sin," so being robbed of the possibility to speak one's language naturally, indirectly expresses the ongoing postcolonial burden.

A political agenda of Jamaican elections and political leaders representing individual political parties is a recurrent theme in Morris's poetry. As Thomas Rothe postulates, "Morris' poetry deals with social concerns in post-Independence Jamaica without explicitly raising political banners, cultivating a poetics that critically examines the status quo through different literary devices, such as vernacular language and irony" (215). Morris does not succumb to cheap political agitation; instead, he builds his agenda on many allusions to history and to

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traditional British poetry in order to show that Black and white identities are like two sides of one coin that cannot be separated. In the poem "Anglo-Saxon," the speaker shows the changing atmosphere and a shift to political radicalization:

> Though blackness isn't new
> To me: ten, fifteen years ago
> I didn't need
> a uniform, my skin would do (*I Been There* 74)

These days, the Black and white opposition persistent since the colonial times has acquired a new dimension. White influence is still perceivable, for instance, in the political system, which is largely based on British models. Full emancipation has not been reached yet, and the speaker understands that it is the Black person who has to make compromises:

> But I am learning, brother;
> I'll succeed . . .

However, success is not guaranteed because of the deeply rooted prejudices and stereotypes:

> He never made it. Thought-
> inspectors, quivering at the sight
> of an Afro-Saxon on the road
> towards the border, caught
> him sneaking in-
> to Blackness, radioed:

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> don't let that nigger fool you, he is White! (*I Been There* 74)

It is through irony that Morris overcomes his disappointment with racial prejudice. Playing with the label of Anglo-Saxon identity, he changes it into Afro-Saxon identity, which captures the dilemma of one's identity in the Caribbean. As Derrilyn Morrison puts it, "the man yields to the pressure to conform to society's code of behavior only to be rejected as being white!" (20). Morris's poem shows that the taking of sides creates "an intellectual dilemma both within the society and the individual" (Morrison 23). Although most of the Caribbean people are of African ancestry, the Anglo-Saxon colonizers, that is, the British presence and the imposition of British rules have exerted considerable impact upon them and led to the construction of a mixed identity manifest in language and closely related to "class and race" (Rothe 217). Morris explains this situation within the Jamaican context:

> Race is still a factor here. Or colorism, as they say sometimes. Class matters, but class and race run parallel. Money can make a difference, education can make a difference. But somehow the people who are poorest are black. Race became a more noticeable factor in the 70s, of course, because of Black Power. (qtd. in Rothe 222)

Political radicalization connected with Black Power in the 1970s is inherently present in "To the Unknown Non-Combatant," in which Morris warns against a political engagement that is senseless:

> "Come join us!" (voices from the left)
> "Come help us in the fight!"
> "Be honest with yourself; you're ours,"

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Said voices from the right.

. . .

He thought he'd better choose.

He crawled to join a side.

A bullet clapped him in the neck—

Of course he died.

They left him face-down in the dust,

. . .

He was forgotten. (*The Pond* 16)

The senseless loss of life of a person who was not even convinced that he wanted to be politically engaged suggests that such victimization does not have any justification. As Derylin Morrison points out, "the poem shows that contrary to what society says, the middle position is not an easy one, and that the man in the middle is not necessarily a coward. His mistake, however, is to let society pressure him into taking sides" (19). Morris counters the blind observation of the desires of the masses in "House Slave." Contrary to the attitude of the speaker in "To the Unknown Non-Combatant," the speaker here does not succumb to his "tribe of blood / [which is] singing brothers home" ("House-Slave," *The Pond* 17). He remains himself and although he knows he will stay alone, he prefers his way to the communal hysteria that leads nowhere. As the examples above indicate, Morris refuses to write overtly political poems as he does not believe that political radicalism would help solve the identity dilemmas of either individuals or society as a whole.

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Conclusion

Morris represents a postcolonial Anglophone poet who is cognizant of the British literary traditions from which he draws his inspiration, while he is also deeply anchored in Caribbean poetics. The local culture provides him with a background against which he depicts purely Jamaican themes, such as domesticity and nature, in a language that is a unique blend of standard English and Jamaican Creole. Morris masters conventional poetic forms (ode, sonnet, epigram, and haiku), and voices concerns about topics such as Jamaican independence and the necessity for a national language, but he also writes highly intellectual love poetry rich in metaphors. At the same time, he manages to be entertaining as Edward Baugh testifies: "Mervyn writes poetry the way he plays tennis. After his serve you may think he has turned languid, but while you are preparing a return he is suddenly at the net. Smash. Score, 40 love. Game, Set and Match" (qtd. in Thompson).

Palacký University, Olomouc

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