Multimodality in Black Feminist Canadian Literature: Orality, Writing, and the Body in the Work of Harris, Philip, Allen, and Brand

by Maria Caridad Casas
The linguistic rape and subsequent forced marriage between African and English tongues has resulted in a language capable of great rhythms and musicality; one that is and is not English, and one which is among the most vital in the English-speaking world today[...] To keep the deep structure, the movement, the kinetic energy, the tone and pitch, the slides and glissandos of the demotic within a tradition that is primarily page-bound -- that is the challenge.

Marlene Nourbese Philip, “The Absence of Writing or How I Almost Became a Spy” in *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks*, 23
When Caribbean English Creole-speaking writers try to convey the character, the “sheer festivity,”¹ of their language on the page they run into a series of problems in representation, both from a technical and from a cultural perspective. Technically, the spelling system and vocabulary of English are not flexible enough to encompass the very different sounds and lexis of a deep Caribbean English Creole. If the attempt is made, as it often is, to stretch English orthography with non-standard spellings, the innate conservatism of English print culture pulls these writers into a series of cultural meanings that are difficult to control.

To spell a word that looks like an English word with a non-standard spelling suggests a deficit of ‘literacy’. I put the term ‘literacy’ in scare quotes advisedly, for its referent is relative and shifting. A student who has produced a piece of writing full of spelling errors and idiosyncratic grammatical constructions is, one says in frustration, ‘illiterate’. Is literacy, then, the ability to follow the rules of a reference grammar? Is literacy the ability to read Shakespeare (not pop lyrics and advertisements)? In writing, issues that are technical and issues of prestige and standards cannot be separated.

If the spelling system of English has been standardized to such a degree that it does not rise to the task of representing creole, it is because, in the five centuries or so since print became an important carrier of its cultural meanings, English became a colonial, then imperial, then global language divorced from its dialectal roots. Its grammar and spellings not only represent meanings and sounds; they enact a regime of control.

Canadian writers Nourbese Philip, Claire Harris, Lillian Allen, and Dionne Brand deploy Caribbean English Creoles as an important, meaningful element in their work. They insist on the black, female body as an inerasable presence in their meanings, and in their meaning-making. They insist on using oral language, whether it is recorded, performed, or transcribed. They insist

¹ Lillian Allen’s term. Introduction, Women Do This Every Day, 11..
that these material realities not be folded into everyday, dominant categories such as ‘woman’, or ‘language’; and in doing so, they ask me to consider what these everyday categories hide.

The elusiveness of their writing to an analysis from a mainstream linguistic point of view is an opportunity both to rethink mainstream linguistics and to find a language of description adequate to their achievements. This is therefore a book with two aims: to work out a suitable approach for describing their texts; and to use this approach to make revealing readings. It asks, what kind of linguistics, broadly conceived, is adequate to the task of describing and explaining this multimodal writing? Since the linguistic analysis of literary texts is the domain of stylistics, in this book I also expand stylistics by moving from a mainstream linguistic analysis to a social semiotic one. I build on and expand social semiotics in search of a metalanguage capable of describing the special features of these oral / written texts.2

The issues

In “no language is neutral,” Dionne Brand moves back and forth between standard written English and Trinidad English Creole (hereafter TEC).3 In sociolinguistics these movements on the part of speakers are known as ‘slides’4 or ‘code-switches’.5 However, Brand is a literary writer, constructing a poetic persona whose code-switches are written, while linguistics is a discipline that focuses exclusively on speech.

In literary studies, the closest thing to Brand’s representation of TEC in writing would be called dialect writing. Dialect writing is treated unproblematically as the written equivalent of the dialect it is supposed to represent, while the standard written English that usually contextualises it represents the imaginative status of the hero or narrator. This applies throughout English literary history: the speaker of dialect is lower class, or an outsider; at best, the dialect speaker’s

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2 In this book I use the word ‘text’ for any object of interpretation, whether it is space-based (written) or time-based (spoken). This allows me to treat spoken and written texts in the same framework. See Gunther Kress, Literacy in the New Media Age, London: Routledge, 2003, p.45 for discussion of space- and time-based texts.


identity as a member of a group is more important than his or her individuality. The standard written foil to this represents a ‘classless’ speaker or narrator. Often literacy and standard written English are in a strong connotative association, so that another dialect represents not just orality in a written imaginative world, but illiteracy. A dialect speaker in English literature is often the buffoon.

However, in Brand’s long poem the dialect speaker is the same as the persona represented by standard written English. The entire text is written in first person: it is a lyrical, highly personal narrative of the poet’s immigration from the Caribbean to Canada, with all of the international class issues this entails (issues embedded in colonial history, in neo-colonialism, and in class, race, and gender oppression). Here is no standard written narrator sending up, or subtly objectivising, a speaker of dialect; in this highly literary and writerly text, dialect is central to the theme of the poem that “no language is neutral.” Here, standard written English is also a dialect, loaded with socio-political associations.

A code-switching model brings this point into relief in a way that a literary treatment does not. Sociolinguistic studies of code-switching describe people who speak first in one language or dialect and then in another, switching either during the same conversation or switching according to the situation in which they find themselves. As in all linguistic studies, there is no question of valorising one dialect at the expense of another, even though one dialect (such as a standard) may have more social prestige than another.

Using a framework from a discipline that focuses on spoken language to analyse a written text, however, raises other issues. For the historical reasons already discussed, written English tends to erase spoken dialect differences. Whether one normally speaks American English, Nigerian English, or Australian English, the written versions of these will look the same, erasing the distinctive and important differences in sound that normally help to signal dialects. How, then, can a framework developed for spoken language be applied to a written text?

In a way, the question must be turned on its head. How does a written text convey a spoken language? And, given that written texts do convey spoken language, how could an approach

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6 I am using the term standard here in the non-normative way it is used in linguistics, as a dialect with certain social functions and a high degree of prestige. See William Downes, Language and Society, New York: Cambridge UP, 1998 on standardization and Standard English. But I am also using the term “standard written English” as a synonym of Ong’s grapholect (see Chapter Three), that is, a form of the language developed for, and characteristically found in, written texts.

7 I use the term “poet” to mean the poetic persona, the equivalent of “narrator” in fiction.
developed for written language (ie, English literary studies) adequately describe such a transformation? A text that transcribes Caribbean English Creoles is an exemplary case, for Caribbean English Creoles are oral languages. An oral language is one that has no official written counterpart – that is, it can be written, but its spellings or script are not generally agreed upon. Thus, the transformation that brings Creole speech into writing is a double transformation: it is a translation / transcription, translating one of the Caribbean English Creoles as a language partially into the language of standard written English in order to write it down.

For example, in the following passage from “no language is neutral” each and every word is written in ‘English’, that is, according to the spelling rules of standard written English:

When Liney reach here is up to the time I hear about. Why I always have to go back to that old woman who wasn’t even from here but from another barracooun, I never understand but deeply as if is something that have no end.8

What is not standard written English is the syntax (and one special term, “barracooun”, raising the question of where one language stops and another one begins). This is not bad grammar, or ungrammatical (in the technical linguistic sense), but another grammar. How do we know this is not ungrammatical English, but a different grammar? The answer cannot be found within formal linguistics. Differences between dialects and national languages, and the very definition of ‘a dialect’ or ‘a language’ must be placed in a social and political world. At the same time, the question makes no sense without reference to specific words and their placement in relation to each other – their patterns of distribution, or syntax.

There are puzzling contradictions and tensions around Brand’s written treatment of TEC in this text. Why does she transcribe an oral language into a highly literary, writerly work? Why does she use exclusively English spellings, staying within the orthographic code of standard written English? What does her use of TEC say; what does her spelling of TEC words say; what is the message carried by her treatment of TEC in writing? In the terms of social semiotics: if Brand’s treatment of TEC were a text in itself, what would it say?

Harris’ standard spellings in Drawing Down a Daughter raise similar questions. However, in She, Harris uses some non-standard spellings to represent TEC, and non-standard spellings have specific effects, as we will see.

8 Dionne Brand, No Language, 24.
In her 1993 collection of print poems, *Women Do This Every Day*, Lillian Allen transcribes Jamaican English Creole (hereafter JEC) using non-standard spellings. Non-standard spellings are meant to indicate the sound values of particular words. For example:

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An’ him chucks on some riddim
an’ yu hear him say
riddim an’ hardtimes
riddim an’ hardtimes
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Spellings such as ‘riddim’, ‘yu’, or ‘an’ are clearly meant to steer the reader to specific sounds. Allen also uses small markers of a Caribbean English Creole morphology, as Brand does: in this case, she uses the Jamaican form of the third person subject pronoun (“him chucks on some riddim”). Yet, because Allen and Harris also adapt English spellings to recreate the speech sounds of Caribbean English Creoles, their work offers a more concrete entry into the relationship between spoken creoles and standard written English. As in Brand’s texts, the dialect ‘speaker’ is not (usually) a buffoon or a stock ethnic character. In addition, their poetry is so overtly political that there is no chance to miss the message that these spellings are part of a political message – and a political practice.

As a dub (performance) poet, Allen depends on the spoken Jamaican word for many of her effects; so that, when she writes her poetry, she must incorporate those effects somehow on the written page. The problem is that the ‘phonetic’ Latin alphabet in which English is written is anything but phonetic. Instead, the function of standardised English spellings is to signal group membership and solidarity within the dominant group of the ‘literate’, and it is only secondarily to do with the representation of sounds.

Allen’s position in this dominant group is conditioned by her membership in another group: the creole-speaking cultural-political activists called dub poets. It is from the latter position that she is able to criticise the literary establishment. Her position and practice raises a number of important questions, such as: what is the relationship of literature to writing? How does this relationship shape the things that can be said in literature by people marginalised from the

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10 I am aware that with this term I am eliding the differences between the many Caribbean English Creoles in the Caribbean, as well as their diaspora counterparts. (See Mark Sebba, *London Jamaican: Language Systems in Interaction*, London: Longman, 1993 for a description of one such Caribbean English Creole, popularly known as ‘Creole’ among its users.) However, since my remarks are about the relationship between any one of these historically and lexically related languages and standard written English, I will use ‘creole’ hereafter. Depending on the context of use, it means one of the Caribbean English Creoles used either in the Caribbean or in Toronto.

11 See Chapter One for a description of the dub poetry movement.
cultural centre? What are the meanings that are missing from the high literary, from what is called poetry in official contexts (education, trade publication, juried literary prizes)? Her work is partly the expression of the things that can’t be said in written, official, literary ways, because those ways do not allow certain things to be said.

But her spellings are also meant to evoke Jamaican English Creole as an oral language. As such, any of the Caribbean English Creoles is a powerful resource for subverting several different codes. One, as we have seen, is the syntax of written English (which is also that of the formal speech patterns of imperial Britain and neo-imperial English North America). Other imperial codes structure relationships between people according to social categories such as class, race, gender, sexuality, nation, and so on. In Chapter Five, I look at the conditions that allow one to say that the grammar of ‘a language’ works in the same way as the grammar of a social category system such as ‘gender’ or ‘race’.¹² For here, too, there is a connection between the oral / written nature of the work of these writers and the expression of a black feminist sensibility.

Codes, spellings, and grammars
‘Code’ is a very slippery, though necessary, term. To begin, using the word ‘code’ to mean language or dialect is a convenient way of avoiding the distinction between a language and a dialect. That is because there is, in formal linguistic terms, no very good way of making that distinction. Is Yiddish a dialect of German or a language? Is Haitian a dialect of French, or a language? Is JEC a dialect of English or a language? It has famously been said that a language is a dialect with an army and a navy – that is, the difference between a language and a dialect is not linguistic but social, supported by a real difference in power. National languages are supported by bureaucratic regimes, armed forces, and all the other apparatus of a nation state.

In “no language is neutral” Brand’s two written codes represent ethnic identities (Trinidadian Canadian; Anglo-Canadian) as well as languages (TEC; standard Canadian English). But they also represent race. In addition, because of her political analysis, Brand’s perception is that gender is deeply affected by – co-constructed with -- race; and sexuality is also socially constructed, from within a network of identity relations. From the point of view of

¹² I use the word ‘syntax’ in this book to mean the patterned way words are put in sequence; I use this term to avoid a confusion with ‘grammar’, which I reserve for any description of the syntax of a particular language.
‘switching’, then, all of these social categories (ethnicity, race, gender, sexuality) are represented by the two codes, although in different ways. Finally, the media of speech and writing are also caught up in the two codes: writing is represented by the dialect that I have been calling standard written English, while speech is represented by written TEC.

Of course I am using the term ‘speech’ to mean speech-in-writing. But it is worth looking closely at the relationship between speech-in-sound and speech-in-writing, for there is in fact no material connection between the two. Letters on the page, as you see here, are simply shapes in black ink; what connects them to speech sounds is the conventions of the alphabet that we use, which is, in principle, phonetic. And, although phonetic writing has a very close connection to speech, the connection is not as simple as it seems. The same letters in related dialects, such as English and French, represent very different sounds: the letters bois represent the sound [boys] in English speech but [bwa] in French.13 Even within one language, and notoriously in English, the visual signs of the alphabet are not consistent in their representation of speech sounds. George Bernard Shaw’s witticism is apt here: if the English spelling system were consistent, the spoken word [fish] would be spelled ‘ghoti’, because the final ‘gh’ of ‘cough’ is an [f], the middle ‘o’ of ‘women’ is an [I], and the initial ‘ti’ of the common suffix ‘-tion’ is a [sh] sound in speech.

The relationship between a letter and a sound is tenuous, then, but this fact disappears in most treatments of speech and writing. One exception is Derrida’s Of Grammatology, in which he describes that very tenuous relationship between letter and sound in order to unearth and describe what he calls a “metaphysics of presence”: the pervasive, unshakeable idea that the relationship between any signifier (such as a letter) and signified (such as a sound) is solid and fixed. In Chapter Three I look very closely at certain passages in Of Grammatology with Allen’s non-standard spellings in mind, seeking a way to understand the meaning of her spellings. In the end, I find Derrida’s version of phonetic writing too restricted to explain the relationship between letters and sounds in these transcribed creole texts. To understand the spelling choices of creole-speaking writers, and what those choices mean, one has to take the social into account.

13 In this book I will be using the International Phonetic Alphabet as presented in Henry Rogers, Theoretical and Practical Phonetics. Square brackets indicate sounds rendered in the letters of the IPA; wherever it seems necessary, I will exemplify the sounds with English words.

Caribbean English Creoles are not only oral languages but also highly politicised and socially-marked languages.\textsuperscript{15} When it comes to representing them in writing, how do Canadian women negotiate the relationship between the social and historical meanings of Caribbean English Creoles and the meanings of the high literary in Canadian letters? I believe their spelling choices trace this complex negotiation. If spellings are not simply transparent signifiers of sounds, a spelling represents a choice -- and therefore a meaning -- made by a creole-speaking writer. Yet, as I have indicated, a choice is not always without restrictions: to spell an English word differently from the standard can convey a strong negative social message about the writer. Spellings make their meanings \textit{first} in social dimensions.

Why should this be so? This is where the term ‘code’ comes into its own. Although it is hard to define a code, its presence is ubiquitous. People behave as if a code -- dialect, language, spelling system -- is ‘real’ in the sense that they follow its rules, even though these rules are enforced only by social stigma; and even though there is far more variability and change within the code than they are aware of. To explain why they believe in codes in a manner very much akin to Derrida’s metaphysics of presence, in Chapter Four I look closely at the interplay between social status and linguistic mistakes.

What this involves is looking closely at the boundaries of codes (ie, languages or dialects). By boundaries, I mean those moments when not only ‘mistakes’ are made but also creative new expressions. The same word can be taken as just plain wrong, or as a wonderful new word, and this depends on the specific context. So, for example, we can say to friends, “I’m whomped today,” meaning very tired, and that new word is taken as a creative expression by family or friends; however, produced in a formal context, it will be judged as confusing, an error (consider the statement made of the Secretary-General of the UN: “She was whomped when she said that…”). In short, a linguistic error depends on whether a given spelling or word or syntactic pattern is received as ‘wrong’ -- or as ‘interesting and new’. This judgement, in turn, is based on the social status of speaker and hearer relative to each other, and most importantly, on perceptions of in-group or out-group status.

The difference between a linguistic error and a linguistic innovation, then, depends on reception, not production; and it depends on social contexts, not syntactic ones. I stress this point

\footnote{According to Winer, “recognition of TEC as a legitimate language has been slow, because of the negative values arising from its associations with slavery and degradation. These languages have been seen as “broken”, “bad”, “corrupt” and “degenerate” forms of their European lexifier languages.” Winer, \textit{Trinidad and Tobago}, 58}
because linguistic correctness is considered an absolute, first and foremost in the popular imagination, but also in mainstream linguistics. ‘Grammaticality’ (correct grammar) is a fundamental in formal linguistics, where judgements of ‘grammaticality’ are considered solid evidence for arguments about the structure of a language. Yet, considering the powerful way in which social context and situation affect judgements of correctness, it is difficult to justify the abstractions of a linguistics based on the idea of the fixed boundaries of a language (ie, judgements of correctness as an absolute). Instead, verbal patterns are produced by social relations and therefore they are a social and semiotic reality and not a cognitive one: they are a set of agreed-upon representations, or agreed-upon correlations between one thing and another, such as an order of words and a meaning, or a spelling and a sound.

An analysis of languages as semiotic entities is a focus on ‘a’ language as a popular notion, and the perception of the distinctness of ‘a’ language as a result of a group-member’s need to symbolise a standard (in the non-linguistic sense of the word) and to position themselves in relation to it. From this point of view, a grammar has no concrete reality. That is, one cannot touch a grammar (though one can touch a book containing a set of rules written by a grammarian). A grammar, instead, is a social and semiotic reality. It is a set of agreed-upon representations, or agreed-upon correlations between one thing and another, such as a word and a meaning, or a spelling and a sound.

This means a grammar is as much a social code as a formal code. In Chapter Four I explore the numerous and important ramifications of this, and at the end of Chapter Four I adapt the term ‘grammar’ as we normally use it to mean a ‘rapidly-changing set of verbal patterns organized according to social principles of identity and difference’. A grammar is, first and foremost, a description of a set of speakers (as trace) rather than of a set of words.

Given that social relations are always changing, agreed-upon representations, or signs, must also always be changing. Chapter Five works out the properties of signs within systems when signs are constantly in flux. Every sign is really a sign-function during which two closed, symbolic systems are generated at the same moment and only for the purposes of the immediate interaction. What creates a sign-function when they are simultaneously generated is the strength of the boundary between the signifier and the signified. This is the very same boundary that speakers in social interaction negotiate in establishing their standing through verbal error / correctness; they make reference to the perceived boundaries of a national language (whether
some verbal pattern is ‘inside’ the language or excluded by the language ie, incorrect), or to some sociolect as a sub-set of the language.

I have written that the boundary between Portuguese and Spanish, between Yiddish and German, and between JEC and English is as much social as it is linguistic. Distinctions between creole speech / English writing also depend on this type of boundary. Allen, Philip, Harris, and Brand both maintain these socio-linguistic codes (and other, related, codes) and manipulate perceptions of them by working at their boundaries, coining new spellings and expressions while maintaining the integrity that allows them to function symbolically.

In Chapter Six I look at the way Brand varies the practice of code-switching on different levels. When Brand’s code-switches are considered from the point of view of their media or modes, it begins to make better sense to see some transcribed creole not as written, but as written-to-be-read-as-if-heard. That is, the same meaning-making principles that come into play at the boundary between two languages also come into play at the boundary between two modes.

Media, modes, and multimodality
In one of the questions of this Introduction -- what exactly is the relationship between creole speech and English writing -- there is a useful ambiguity in the term ‘English writing’. The most obvious meaning of ‘writing’ is the technology of the Latin alphabet, which correlates a segment of sound (a phoneme) with a visual sign (a letter). It is this sense of ‘writing’ I begin with in Chapter Three, concentrating on the sound-letter relationship between creole speech and English writing. But there are also the social meanings of ‘writing’ quickly unearthed when considering the highly standardised spellings of English. Writing in many cultures is a highly privileged communicative technology, and it is the social dynamics of this privilege that I focus on for much of the rest of this book.

In Europe and its former colonies, the implication of writing in literature is very strong, to a degree present in few other functions of writing. That is, few other uses of writing (outside of the religious and legal) are as respected, institutionally supported, and policed. Written literature is so entrenched, so embedded in networks of economic and cultural capital, that most people perceive literature as necessarily written, excluding from the term ‘literature’ other European traditions of verbal art such as storytelling and song lyrics. In addition, there is a strong historical link between literacy, standardisation, and the British nationalist-imperialist projects associated
with training in English language, literacy, literary canonisation, and literary education.¹⁶ That is why I use the terms ‘literature’ and ‘literary’ in the traditional sense, with connotations of high literary culture, so that they retain their etymological link with ‘literacy’ and the medium of writing. As Hodge, Kress, and others have pointed out, the root of the English word ‘literature’ is related to the French lettres (the term for what in English is called literature), and one meaning of lettres is still ‘letters’. That is a fair representation of the European conception of literature.

The oral / written texts of Allen, Philip, Harris, and Brand are in a dialectical relationship with the literary. As oral (not-written), they question the cultural centrality of writing in Europe and its ex-colonies and writing’s role in maintaining the social boundaries of literature. As verbal art, these oral / written texts exploit writing’s conventions, and the rupture of those conventions, to create new (written) meanings.

Other facets of the term ‘writing’ come to light when we consider the sub-disciplinary opposition speech / writing (as in ‘research in speech and writing’).¹⁷ Speech in the usual uses of this opposition is a socially-situated, sound-based communicative medium; writing is also considered in its contexts of situation, but as a visual communicative medium sharing a verbal code with (not necessarily secondary to) speech. Their juxtaposition raises a very large question - what is the difference between speech and writing? -- querying in the process the nature of language. The global but quite specific meanings of ‘writing’ in this opposition can be approached if we look at a related opposition, orality / literacy. The orality-literacy ‘debates’ of the last thirty years have been about the social, political, and historicised meanings of writing as a social entity, as well as its fetishized Other, orality.¹⁸ There has been little attempt until recently to separate these social entities from the materiality of speech and of writing.¹⁹

Discourses of orality, literacy, speech, writing, and the literary are extended in this book in perhaps unexpected ways. Here, speech is a medium and orality is a mode. I am using a distinction presented by Gregory and Carroll in which the medium is the actual material of the

¹⁷ For example, Michael Halliday, Spoken and Written Language, Geelong, Australia: Deakin UP 1985. [see also entry in Handbook of Sociolinguistics by LePage? called Speech and Writing
message (sound-based, produced with the human vocal cords) and the mode is the “distinctive set of linguistic features associated with a particular, recurring relationship [between the medium and its verbal patterns].”\(^{20}\) Gregory and Carroll use the example of a play script, which can be in a written medium but in a spoken mode if it employs many of the linguistic features (the syntax, the word choices) usually associated with speech.\(^{21}\) Thus, the language of the play script is, in my terms, written in medium, but oral in mode.

Another mode crucial to this book is the semiotic body. The term ‘semiotic body’ is used by Lemke in “Towards a Social Semiotics of the Material Subject” to mean that aspect of the body that is perceived and manipulated -- constructed -- in socially meaningful ways. A semiotic body is a medium of communication in live performance, but a mode of communication when represented in film, still images, writing, or other media. It is this semiotic body as mode that I will be discussing as it appears in Harris’, Philip’s and Brand’s poetry; but when asking how Allen manipulates social perceptions of the body in performance, it is the semiotic body as medium that is at issue.

All texts are multimodal: they make their meanings in different media and modes. When we listen to somebody speaking, we watch the gestures, body language, and facial expressions that accompany the sounds of speech. A spoken text, then, is kinetic and visual as well as sound-based and verbal. A printed text, on the other hand, is visual in the different modes of page layout, type design and words. A complete description of how a specific text makes its meanings includes a description of all the modes of the text.

Mode is a term central to Kress and van Leeuwen’s Multimodal Discourse, where modes are defined as “semiotic resources which allow the simultaneous realisation of discourses and types of (inter)action.” Crucially for my argument,

Modes can be realised in more than one production medium. […] media become modes once their principles of semiosis begin to be conceived of in more abstract ways (as ‘grammars’ of some kind). This in turn will make it possible to realise them in a range of media. They lose their tie to a specific form of material realisation.\(^{22}\)

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\(^{21}\) Michael Gregory & Susanne Carroll, *Language and Situation*.

Considering the written texts of Allen, Philip, Harris and Brand as multimodal opens up an enormous range of material connections in their texts. Although still written, their poetry is also oral; if oral, then also embodied. The body as a medium of communication is an obvious connection in dub and performance poetry. But the body as a mode – as a code for making meanings in writing – is also very important to their work. Philip, Allen, Harris and Brand manipulate social semiotic codes of the body in much the same way they work at the boundaries of other codes. Their aim is not to destroy systems of race and gender, which would not only be an impossibility but also a loss to their sense of self; their aim is to bring these discourses, which circulate in embodied signs, into both literary culture and the written mode.

Why social semiotics and what is social semiotics?

Recall that the question at the beginning of this introduction was, what kind of linguistics, broadly conceived, is adequate to the task of describing and explaining these multimodal texts? My argument so far has been a social semiotic one rather than a narrowly linguistic one. Although most linguists would not consider semiotics an ‘expansion’ of their discipline, semiotics is a natural direction for linguists who find the focus of traditional linguistics too restricted for certain purposes. The application of linguistics – as the study of the structure of language – to poetry seems an eminently reasonable project, but it has not fulfilled its potential within the criteria of literature as a discipline because literature is interested in interpretation – in meaning-making – whereas ‘meaning’ in linguistics is a much more limited affair. (On the other hand, in its focus on interpretation, literature in the early twenty-first century lacks a formal method, in the way in which method permeates linguistics.) One of the key differences between linguistics and semiotics, then, is that traditional linguistics does not really concern itself with meaning, whereas semiotics both does and does not. In Chapter Five, I explore the formal paradoxes arising from this initial contradiction in the semiotics of Saussure.

One limitation of classical semiotics is that Saussure left undeveloped the social side of his vision of semiotics; he introduced semiotics as semiology, “the science of signs as part of social life.”23 This limitation has persisted in mainstream semiotics and its off-shoot, structuralist linguistics, so that Derrida’s post-structuralist sign, based on a structuralist reading of Saussure, excludes the social. In Chapter Three, I look at the Derridean sign and what it might reveal about

23 (15, emphasis mine).
the relationship between written English and JEC in Allen’s texts. As I have indicated, it is the social and political aspects of this relationship that cannot be grasped using the Derridean model of the sign.

Yet, it is not enough to make a linguistics ‘social’ to make it useful for discussing politically-committed texts. Classical dialectology,24 or variationist sociolinguistics25 are ‘social’ in the sense that they rely on social categories such as class, race, age, and education for their descriptions of language in social life. But these categories are unexamined and untheorised, incorporating into these types of sociolinguistics relatively conservative visions of social organisation. These are implicit political analyses: in their hiddeness and their support of the status quo, they preserve social inequalities.26 Social semiotics, on the other hand, developed with the 1980s critical linguistics and critical discourse analysis movements in the UK.27 One of their main objectives was to bring an explicit analysis of social, economic and power relations to the analysis of the language of texts; and to be explicit about their reformist agenda in doing so.

A third limitation of traditional linguistics is its treatment of materiality. Systems of signs are everywhere in social life, and can be studied apart from language. Saussure’s original vision of semiotics inspired studies of a range of objects-as-texts by Barthes, Levi-Strauss, and others. The fact that these texts are made up of non-verbal signs—images, food, music, narratives—shows that a linguistic method might successfully be applied to non-verbal texts. Unlike linguistics, semiotics extends its focus beyond the verbal, allowing an analysis of both verbal and non-verbal meaning-making at the same time, in the same text.

Paradoxically, the fact that structural linguistics underlies their method has stopped many semioticians from considering the materiality of signs. This is because linguistics assumes that the form and content of a sign are divisible -- and linguistics studies only form. On the other hand, literary studies assumes that form is motivated by content. That is, the form of a text is shaped by its content, or the content intended by its maker. In this, some social semioticians have adopted the assumption of literary studies: that there is a motivated relationship between form

25 Labov
and content, or, roughly, signifier and signified. But social semioticians have gone further, and included the materiality of the text as a motivated signifier. Kress and van Leeuwen call this “the means and processes of inscription,” rightly pointing out that ‘the same’ text written with pen and ink or written with a word processor are not the same text. It is this last step that makes social semiotics particularly suited to talking about the difference between written and oral versions of the ‘same’ text, in the poetry of Allen, for example – and about the social meanings created by these different means of inscription.

Social semiotics sees any instance of meaning-making as first and foremost a social event embedded in relations of power. It takes interaction between people as a starting point for text analysis, rather than structures of language or text. Texts are understood as collections of signs; signs are understood as social practices. These social practices are carried out by social subjects. In contrast to the common-sense notion of individuals as free agents (or conversely, as buffeted by fate), social subjects are always constrained by their social position and the limitations of the communicative situation at hand -- although they do make choices within these constraints. For Hodge and Kress, “… texts and contexts, agents and objects of meaning, social structures and forces and their complex interrelationships together constitute the minimal and irreducible object of semiotic analysis.”

For Kress, the motivated sign is central, as I have said. In addition, signs can be transparent or opaque – that is, they can be clearly understandable or hard to decipher, depending on the social positions of the producer and the interpreter of the sign. This makes signs texts in themselves, in the sense that the interpretation of a sign is a fundamental aspect of its meaning, (just as the interpretation of a text is a fundamental aspect of its meaning). It means that signs, and texts, do not exist as a function of their intelligibility: one may look at a scribble on a wall and conclude that, as text, it is ‘non-sense’, that it is not an intelligible sign/ text; but this does

30 Gunther Kress & Theo van Leeuwen, Reading Images, 231.
32 Gunther Kress, “Against arbitrariness”.
not mean it is not a sign/text. It is a text that means ‘non-sense’ or ‘scribble’ (to one particular reader).

Other names associated with social semiotics are Halliday, Halloran, Hodge, Iedema, Lemke, Thibault, and Threadgold. They certainly share the critical, social-theoretical orientation crucial to the ‘social’ in social semiotics; Lemke, however, takes a slightly more social-functional approach, Thibault slightly more text-based in Social Semiotics as Praxis, Threadgold explicitly feminist, and so forth. At the same time, their interest has been in pushing forward the project of creating a critical theory and practice of text analysis that sees ‘text’ (or sign) as meaning-in-the-making in socio-political context.

Multimodal discourse analysis is a growing field; it revives the Saussurian project of using linguistic theory to analyse texts in all media and has so far been applied to new communication technologies, computer-mediated communication, including the image/print combinations of the electronic screen and the Internet, and all types of ‘paralinguistic’ communications. Applying social semiotics and its offshoot, multimodal discourse analysis, to a literary text, however, requires a perception that the literary is not necessarily written; and that even writing, in certain marked usages, has a socio-political relationship with speech that is imperceptible unless we reject the traditional notion of writing as a transparent conduit for sound.

Why these four?
Philip, Harris, Allen and Brand all arrived in Canada from the Caribbean within four years of each other, from 1966 to 1970, and began to publish in a period between the mid-1970s and the early 1980s. They were active participants in Canadian literary and cultural life from this time, Harris as part of a loose group of prairie poets, Allen, Philip and Brand in Toronto, where their poetry and other writings were an inseparable part of their social and political activism. All drew attention to the insularity and racism of Canada at a time when Canada was just waking up to the day-to-day realities of large-scale immigration from non-European countries and to a concommittent need to readjust its self-image from monocultural, if bilingual, to multicultural. In addition, racism became a focus of both protest and public discussion, for the first time perhaps

in Canadian history, and partly through the efforts of these four writers and their allies in a broad women-of-colour coalition. Philip and Brand were especially active in re-drawing the self-image of Canada in the 1980s through journalism and social activism, while Allen’s performances as a dub poet had the same large-scale impact on a whole generation of young, hip Canadians.

These four writers were thus some of the most visible writers of colour whose themes and settings were as much, or more, Canadian than anything else. As Allen has written, “The dub poetry movement in Canada boasts more major practitioners than either Jamaica, Britain or the U.S. and this, ironically, makes dub as essentially Canadian as it is a worldwide black phenomenon.”34 They established the groundwork in terms of the discourses and possibilities for a new type of Canadian literature, non-white, non-Anglo-American, and fiercely talented. This groundwork allowed both later, younger Canadian writers, such as di’b young, Nalo Hopkinson and Shani Mootoo, and older, established Caribbean writers who arrived in Canada in the 1990s, such as Lorna Goodison and Pamela Mordecai, to write and publish out of their Caribbean or afrocentric sensibilities to a Canadian readership previously (in)formed by Harris, Philip, Allen and Brand.

Whether Caribbean-Canadian writers are Caribbean or Canadian seems a trivial point, but it looms large in the context of English as an academic discipline in Canada. Black Canadian writers are still considered not central to Canadian literature, which is still imagined as a white, European-descent literature. This is in spite of the fact that Brand has re-imagined Toronto in minute detail (as a multicultural city many residents of Toronto are proud of), that Harris’ later poetry integrates the landscapes of Calgary, the Bow River, and the prairie into the psyche of her female protagonists, and that Allen’s urban poetry is full of local scenes and references. On the other hand, because so many Caribbean literary writers are resident outside of the Caribbean, it almost seems like ‘poaching’ to identify these writers as Canadian. Yet I will continue to do so, not to treat them out of context (a context that I am careful to establish as Caribbean in Chapter One), but to continue to make a point about the boundaries of Canadian literature and about the importance of these four writers to the trajectory of Canadian literary history.

By the early 1990s, the work of Philip, Harris, Allen and Brand was appearing on university course reading lists, which is where I encountered it. It became clear that they had enormous thematic, linguistic, and political commonalities. Only some of these are shared with Caribbean

women poets who reside in the West Indies, with contemporary Black male Canadian writers such as George Elliott Clarke and Austin Clarke, or with Black Canadian women writers who began to publish later. Thus, in broad terms, these four writers constitute part of a movement, even a school, whose context, themes and concerns I discuss in Chapters One and Two.

Contexts of the texts
In this chapter, I have sketched a set of contrasts between linguistics and the study of literature. My aim is to inhabit the space between the two disciplines, using each to look at the other. Although both disciplines are centrally concerned with language, they have very different approaches to its study. Linguistics has always patterned itself on the natural sciences, and more recently on social sciences. On the other hand, literary studies’ interest in language is solely in language as it is used in literary texts; it is most centrally concerned with advanced literacy and with explorations in the reading and interpretation of literary texts.

Stylistics is traditionally the application of linguistics to literary texts; yet applying linguistics unreflectively to literary texts will almost certainly distort the linguistics, as well as creating a reading that falls below the standards of a bona fide literary reading. By this I mean that in literary studies one reaches for the most plausible readings of texts, with (often) no prescribed method; this creates the condition for very rich readings, readings that cannot hope to be equalled by applying an approach developed within another discipline (such as linguistics) for another object of study (such as the syntactic structure of a language). Furthermore, because traditional linguistics considers itself a science, it is not interested in the relativity of history or of cultures; synchronic linguistics simply ignores them. The result is that these aspects of texts (such as cultural differences or differences in mode) are ‘invisible’ when seen through the lens of much linguistics.

In order to do satisfactory interdisciplinary work, then, in Chapters One and Two I explore the cultural and literary historical context of Canadian women writing creole in order to avoid a decontextualized account of the language of their work; in Chapters Three, Four, and Five, I extend linguistics and social semiotics to explain things in the texts that are otherwise resistant to explication; and in Chapters Six and Seven, I use these and other frameworks to read the poetry of Philip, Harris, Allen and Brand.
This fully interdisciplinary approach is suggested by the texts under analysis. The poetics of these writers have at times been driven by their perception of a gap between the nature of their own expressive strategies and (especially in the case of Allen and Philip) those considered literary or acceptable. Many times this gap has been seen as a lack of participatory legitimacy; in many cases they have felt their language (both communal and personal) constrained by dominant socio-political forces permeating their world. These are the forces arising out of European colonisation and neo-colonial cultural and economic exploitation. Brand and Philip are especially aware of a dominant language whose function is to silence alternatives. Part of this dominant language is the discourses it uses to talk about language itself, discourses rooted in the same social and historical conditions. This is why it is necessary to rework linguistics to explain how they make their meanings.