Abstract

Caribbean English creoles as oral languages are a powerful poetic resource for the subversion of British colonialism. Colonialism includes grammars of “gender” and “race”; feminist African-Caribbean poets take advantage of the oral nature of creole to embody their poetry and declare an alternate version of social relations. This article traces the relationship between speech and writing with the help of Ong’s (1982) “grapholect”, posits a tenuous relationship between the English phonetic alphabet and the sounds of its dialects, and then turns to Derrida’s (1976) *Of Grammatology* to find a model of the semiotic relationship between the two. It finds Derrida’s version of phonetic writing too restricted for this application, and deconstruction only a partial explanation of Caribbean feminist poetics. The “reconstruction” of the sound-visual-meaning correspondences in their work depends, instead, on local, contingent knowledges, which are always already the signifieds even of formal sign systems such as standard language codes.

What challenges are posed when Caribbean creole, an oral language, must be re-produced in written form? When a performance poet such as Jamaican-Canadian Lillian Allen “commits” (1993:9) her poetry to the page, she is faced with the paradoxes of working in a “phonetic” English alphabet which is anything but phonetic. Instead, English spellings are so highly standardised that their most important function is to do with group membership and power, and only secondarily with the representation of sound. As do other creole-speaking poets, the technical linguistic, graphic, and graphological choices she makes are the traces of a complex relationship between postcolonial subjects and written English as a body of norms.

This paper examines the possibility of using Jacques Derrida’s work in *Of Grammatology* (1976) to track this complex and shifting relationship. One major obstacle, however, is the narrow view of meaning which informs the premise of Derrida’s argument. His “arche-writing” is based on the following-through to its conclusion of an overly-simplified version -- an ethnocentric version -- of phonetic writing. Although he argues against this ethnocentrism in several different guises (logocentrism, phonocentrism, the metaphysics of presence), and he identifies it as a key problem in the Western metaphysical tradition, he remains within it, as he himself admits (1978:280-81).

However, thinking about orality and literacy in relation to Derrida’s work helps to establish exactly how orality destabilises certain systems of colonial and postcolonial oppression. Dub poets such as Allen make a fallacy of arche-writing through an emphasis on “versions”, on local meanings, and on the materiality of their poetry. In her written texts, Allen is careful to retain the status of the ephemeral “version” for the printed object. Creole spellings invoke local -- contingent, historical -- knowledges through linguistic stereotypes. And finally, Allen and other poets explore the meaning of the social construct “black, female body” in their poetry, and by so doing re-construct that body as a material, local signified.

Orality and literacy
The relationship between orality in these texts and creole as a symbolic resource is intimate and multidimensional. Since it has been difficult for creole to develop its own written code, it is associated with spoken registers. Spoken creole is a powerful carrier of group identity, especially within the metropolis (Hewitt 1986; Rampton 1995; Sebba 1993). The representation of (creole) speech in writing therefore reinforces the symbolic force of creole by confronting two of the most powerful forces of English imperialism: its national language; and literacy in its script.

The symbolic use of creole language in the metropolis negotiates social relations through a complex network of intertexts. By evoking its speakers, the representation of creole in written poetry creates an intersection between these texts and images of creole speakers in the mass media and in different discourses. These images are complex: they include the romantic, with its roots in Montaigne's noble savage; the covert prestige of youth culture, with its “sound”, house music, rap, and hip hop; the protest tradition of Jamaica, and its tradition of active social criticism; and the image of creole speakers as the underclass, the poor, and the Other.

As for literacy in the Latin alphabet, it has been a favoured tool of colonisation by the British Empire, both through missionaries, and through the working styles of colonial administrations. The latter had a preference for establishing colonial bureaucracies consisting of specially trained local agents. This “special training” was a training in English literacy.

The task of learning to read and write is essentially the memorisation of prescriptive spelling rules. If a learner employs an orthography different from the standard, their “literacy-ness” will not be understood as such, since an important marker of literacy in the European languages is control of standard spellings. Those who do not employ any standard code correctly “are classified as imperfect members of the dominant group, or as members of [the colonised] group one of whose defining features is their imperfection.” (Hodge and Kress, 82) An important consequence for colonial administrations is that prescriptive spelling rules in written English create a powerful group boundary.

This boundary is the site of struggle in these particular texts. The use of eye-spellings and other markers of difference in print declares an alternate version of social relations, making concrete a resistance to exclusion on its own terms. The fact that this struggle goes on in the narrow field of English writing reflects the particular history of creole: its birth as a hybrid language (Holm 1988) and its survival in close contact with standard English.

These are the historical circumstances in which creole eye spellings and syntax are deployed as strategies of anti-colonial resistance; but this is still a description of semiotic relationships at a fairly general level. What is the semiotic relationship between the actual letter and sound in a written text? And how does the intervention of another interest in this relationship leave its own trace? The next section considers the written-spoken relationship at this level of detail.

**The grapholect English**

In semiotic modalities involving words, the medium always affects the typical patterns of syntax (order of words) and lexis (word-choice) of the language. We do not write the way we speak, and we certainly do not speak the way we write, even though, technically, it is the same “language”, e.g. English (Gregory and Carroll 1978). There is, then, provisionally, that which one may call written English and that which one may call spoken English. Written English corresponds to Ong's grapholect:
A national written language has had to be isolated from its original dialect base, has discarded certain dialectal forms, has developed various layers of vocabulary from sources not dialectal at all, and has developed also certain syntactical peculiarities. This kind of established written language ...[is] a 'grapholect'. (107). Where grapholects exist, 'correct' grammar and usage are popularly interpreted as the grammar and usage of the grapholect itself to the exclusion of the grammar and usage of other dialects. (108)

Ong is abstracting from the wide range of types of written language to posit an idealised written language. However, it must be said that in each medium (spoken and written) there are in practice many registers, or degrees of formality and functional styles, so that ritual language such as liturgy and formal greetings are spoken, while stream-of-consciousness writing (closely imitating casual speech and thought) is written. Each of these versions presumably has a written/spoken counterpart. We can always read aloud what we have written; in a poem such as Allen's "The Subversives", the taped oral version is very close in syntax/lexis to the written version. Other written texts can be spoken precisely as written.

However, registers are closely associated with a typical medium. "Casual" is associated with speech; "formal" with writing. "Formal" liturgy is precisely that which is read directly from a page; the written medium has preserved each and every word, and they have become typical of that register (e.g. King James English). "Casual" writing is reserved for the imitation of speech or thought in fiction (even the imitated speech/thought of the narrator) and for personal notes and letters. It is as if the imitation of some of the features of spoken English in written English brings with it an associated level of informality. The distinction that Ong makes between the "language" of standard writing and that of a wide range of other diatypic varieties is in practice, if not in principle, workable.

Let us start then, with a distinction between first-order writing, which is a typical pattern of syntax and word-choices (the grapholect), and second-order writing, or the translation into writing of a more typically spoken style. I say "translation" because even in highly verisimilitudinous transcriptions of thought by skilled novelists such as James Joyce and Virginia Woolf (as monologue, or self-speak), it is always a representation/translation rather than a transcription. A faithful transcription of a real monologue or conversation reveals numerous hesitations, false starts, filler words and expressions, that are edited out of Joyce and Woolf's imagined monologues. The representation of speech or verbalised thought in writing demands a certain type of editing to accommodate the product (the final text) to the medium.

Partly this is because the activity of reading is different from that of listening to speech. Words and morphemes are recognised as whole units rather than composites of letters (unless a wholly new word is in the text). And, “sentences are not perceived as linear sequences of independent lexical units, but rather, key words are selected and relationships established to their environments through morphological and syntactic particles.” (Hellinger 1986:65) Many of these key words, in addition, are not “read” phonetically -- they are merely recognised visually. It is extremely important for efficient reading that words and morphemes (such as “is”, “and”, “the” “-tion”, “-ty”) remain visually consistent for pattern recognition; and that syntax, also, do not deviate very much from the typical patterns of the grapholect (which has, as Ong has argued, a syntax of its own).

Thus second-order writing is a translation, not a transcription. But what happens when a writer wants to represent certain sounds in writing? We have seen that the patterns of spoken syntax and lexis can be represented in writing (with the aid of conventions). What about spoken sound patterns, typical of a marked dialect, for example? This would be a third-order writing: if first-order writing is the grapholectal pattern of syntax and word-choices, and second-order writing is the translation into writing of a more typically spoken style, then third-order writing is the attempt to represent typical sound-patterns found in
certain kinds of speech. This is closer to the task of the poet in writing creole, as in, for example, Allen's "Riddim An Hardtimes":

An' him chucks on some riddim
    an' yu hear him say
    riddim an' hardtimes
    riddim an' hardtimes

music a prance
dance inna head
drumbeat a roll
hot like lead

Mojah Rasta gone dread
natt up natt up
irie
red
(Allen 1993:63-64)

In this text Allen has chosen to represent some sounds phonetically but not others. For example, the word "chucks" in the first line, Allen pronounces in a taped oral version as "chooks", with a rounded vowel, rather the Canadian English "ch∧ks" or "chaks". This is the most common strategy that creole speakers employ when writing: the orthographic base is English, with only a few adaptations used to convey specific sounds. Often the variations are unsystematic and inconsistently spelled (Hellinger 1986:60-62). This is not "phonetic" writing in the way that one normally conceives of the term.

There is a stability in the spellings of this text, however -- the stability of the standard English spellings. English orthography must be one of the most standardised and policed of semiotic systems. If the modern grapholect of English, as Ong writes, "has been worked over for centuries... by normative theorists, grammarians, lexicographers, and others," (129) so has the orthography of English, as codified in printed dictionaries since at least the sixteenth century. This was the time of the discovery of printing; the standardisation of spelling was not only fostered by the technology of the printing press (see Steinberg 1974), but also, according to Ong, "[p]rint produced exhaustive dictionaries and fostered the desire to legislate for "correctness" in language." (130).

In English, the wide distance between the “one sign, one sound” rule of phonetic writing and the actual spellings is due to drastic sound changes in spoken British English from the time the first presses were invented. Our present-day spellings reflect pronunciations current in the sixteenth century. Subsequently, even as spellings were being standardised, final e's in speech became silent, most long vowels changed in value (due to the Great Vowel Shift, see Millward 218-220), and r's became silent at the end of stressed syllables (although they remain in North America). These are only a few of the changes in the sound of British English since the early Renaissance. None of them are reflected in spellings. Furthermore, as spellings became more and more standardised dialects diverged; Australian English, American English, and Jamaican English, for example, developed as separate dialects even as their orthographies became more alike under the influence of spelling standardisation (for they all used the same grapholect).

Finally, there was never an originary for a complete identity between sound and grapheme. Two different speakers of London English in Caxton's time would write the word they pronounced [soroful] as "sorrowful", "sorofull" or "saroful", depending on their exposure to written texts, and the way they heard themselves say the first syllable of the word. A person can be taught that "a" is for an [a] sound, but unless they have had years of training and memorisation of standard spellings, the value of [a] in all its
different phonetic environments (i.e., within different words) will be reflected in a fairly wide range of spellings.

Superficially, this analysis of the speech-writing relationship is similar to Of Grammatology’s in that it sees writing as having a tenuous relationship to the speech it is supposed to “transcribe”. Derrida’s route to the same conclusion, however, incorporates the formal doctrine of the sign. It is therefore worth tracing his argument in order to find a more precise model for the speech-writing relationship.

**Derridean writing**

Of Grammatology begins with a statement of intent to establish a science of writing, of “grammatology”, because it has been neglected in linguistics, and because it would correct the “logocentric” bias of Western scholarship. By logocentric, Derrida means, from the point of view of linguistics, a bias towards the spoken word; and therefore towards a conception that the most developed and “civilised” writing is phonetic.

“Exergue” introduces the first chapter as a “meditation and painstaking investigation on and around what is still provisionally called “writing”” (4). The meditation is carried out on the phrase “signifier of the signifier” as a description of phonetic writing. Although Derrida does not go into detail, the phrase “signifier of the signifier”, in relation to “phonetic” writing, is conceived to work on these principles: a letter is the signifier of a sound: for example, the grapheme “t” signifies the sound [t]. A simple example of a sign, one might say. The problem is that [t] has no meaning in itself -- it is only the smallest unit of sound possible in speech - the phoneme. Letters in writing are thus the signifiers of the signifiers. (This is the most common notion of phonetic writing. The International Phonetic Alphabet is based on the same principle of one letter/one sound equivalence.)

Derrida then describes “signifier of the signifier” as a movement rather than a static state such as a sign. This is because he realises there is no signified that is not always already a signifier. This has been demonstrated already in this article with the analysis of the grapholect English, and second- and third-order transcriptions of speech in writing. From this point of view, however, everything in which we find meaning -- film, football, political strategy, any semiosis -- is “writing” in the sense that the mode is always a signifier for another mode or level of meaning, which points to another level again and again. There is no sole signified: there is only the perpetual movement from signifier to signifier. The new sense of “writing” (or “arche-writing”) describes this more general principle of meaning-making.

Armed with the powerful concept of arche-writing, Derrida then draws on the tension between one's conception of phonetic writing (the “vulgar” concept of writing, 56) as derivative, a secondary semiotic system, and his discovery that arche-writing actually gives each semiotic modality -- speech and writing -- an absolute autonomy. This is because there is no way of bridging the formal gap between signifier and signifier. It is partly in order to explore the radically autonomous aspects of writing as semiosis that he in fact goes further, and privileges “writing” (now arche-writing) over speech. “Writing” is the perfect metaphor for semiosis, he says: it is the most obvious demonstration of the general semiotic principle that there is no signifier, no originary, only the movement from symbol to sign, and only the perpetual trace.

One will have noted a slippage towards the end of this argument, from writing as a specific technology of a specific time and place, to arche-writing as a new term that describes a theory of meaning-making. As I discover while reading closely this text, the argument goes along carrying an ambiguous sense of the word “writing”. Yet Derrida takes pains to point out -- he is right to do so -- the contiguity between all aspects of “writing”, from the phonocentric, “vulgar” notion of how the technology works, to the highly philosophical arche-writing: “I have already begun to justify this word ["writing"], and especially...
the necessity of the communication between the concept of arche-writing and the vulgar concept of writing submitted to deconstruction by it.”(60)

**Vulgar vs. arche-writing**

What exactly is the link between the common-sense notion of writing as phonetic and arche-writing? Since the answer is difficult to isolate within the circularities of Derrida’s style, the best approach seems a close reading. In order to spot the exact moment of transition between the “vulgar” concept and a more philosophical conception of writing, I find that I must search back and back. The passage on pages 6 and 7, under the subtitle “The Programme”, seems a promising start:

> By a slow movement whose necessity is hardly perceptible, everything that for at least some twenty centuries tended toward and finally succeeded in being gathered under the name of language is beginning to let itself be transferred to, or at least summarised under, the name of writing. (6)

I find, as in most other passages on these pages, that key words must be searched for in the text that comes previous to the passage under examination. In this case I wonder if any special features have already been attached to the words “everything”, “language”, and “writing” that can make better sense of this sweeping statement.

The second of the three terms, at least, “language”, can be referred to a small passage in the previous section, which is part of the opening paragraph for chapter one: “at present [the problem of language has] invaded, *as such*, the global horizon of the most diverse researches and the most heterogeneous discourse, diverse and heterogeneous in their intention, method, and ideology.”(6; italics in original) As evidence, Derrida offers “The devaluation of the word "language" itself, and how...it betrays a loose vocabulary”. But is the over-extended use of the word “language” evidence that “the problem of language” has “invaded” the horizon of (as Derrida implies) every research and discourse? Rather than evidence, it seems a concomitant event. Not only the question of which could be cause and which could be consequence is left open, but also that of controls: are there any other (unmentioned, unnoticed) phenomena that accompany this movement?

Thus, as far as identifying terms goes, “the problem of language” so far is unglossed but central. As a lay reader and a linguist, I take the philosophical statement that there is a “problem” of language on trust, as the following are a part of my lifeworld: the problem of language and meaning in literary texts, the problem of language in a philosophical tradition of semantics (which includes propositional logic and speech acts), and the fact that critical philosophers such as Heidegger and Nietzsche have problematised something called language.

Later in the same paragraph, there is a description of language that is reminiscent of infinite semiosis:

> ...a historico-metaphysical epoch *must* finally determine as language the totality of its problematic horizon. It must do so not only because all that desire had wished to wrest from the play of language finds itself recaptured within that play, but also because... language itself is menaced in its very life, helpless, adrift in the threat of limitlessness... (6)

Knowing what comes later, I can easily decode “all that desire had wished to wrest from the play of language”, as, in essence, the transcendental signified. But again, the word “language” is left tantalisingly unglossed.

In the search for *Of Grammatology*’s “vulgar” concept of writing, and how it relates to arche-writing, I press on:
...the concept of writing -- no longer indicating a particular, derivative, auxiliary form of language in general...the signifier of the signifier -- is beginning to go beyond the extension of language. In all senses of the word, writing thus comprehends language. (6-7; italics in original)

What is language, here? If it is semiosis, as implied in the use of "play of language" in previous passages ("It must do so not only because all that desire had wished to wrest from the play of language finds itself recaptured within that play..."); then where does writing finally take up residence? Does it reside in a transcendental space, beyond the previously posited totality of the "problematic horizon...a historico-metaphysical epoch must finally determine as language" (6)? In this case, the argument is positing an expanded horizon, which writing offers, beyond the "play of language". That is, perhaps, and paradoxically, the desire weaving through the rhetoric of these two pages - that there is some transcendence over the "threat of limitlessness".

A small meditation follows on the phrase “signifier of the signifier” (7). The phrase describes a movement rather than a static state such as a sign. There is in fact no signified that is not always already a signifier; and "The secondarity that it seemed possible to ascribe to writing alone affects all signifieds in general...There is not a single signified that escapes, even if recaptured, the play of signifying references that constitute language." (7) The flow of this statement again depends on several ambiguities, which achieve its rhetorical passage between writing and the expanded horizon of language while leaving the logical passage less than clear. Whereas writing earlier had "designated" the "signifier of the signifier", it is now a "signified". This movement is justified by the contents of the small meditation on the signifier of the signifier. Writing, like all other signifieds (that is, everything that has meaning, as an object, in semiosis), is subject to the "play of signifying references that constitute language."

But the metaphorical movement from “vulgar” writing to all other elements of semiosis, here labelled “language”, is what seems to constitute the relationship I wish to explore. It is a relationship of analogy: the feature of writing, or the characteristic of writing, that is “secondarity”, is also a feature/characteristic of “all signifieds in general”; and “all signifieds in general” enter the play of “language”.

Here, “language” is the totality of the “problematic horizon” of our epoch. The next logical step, then, as in a syllogism, is the conclusion: therefore, writing is language, which is the totality of the horizon of our (historico-metaphysical) epoch. Note, however, that writing, by this analogy, does not go beyond the “extension of language”. It does not so far, as Derrida has stated, “comprehend” language. It is only analogous to language, working on the same principle of secondarity.

Con/version

And yet, creole transcription suggests that secondarity is not a characteristic of writing. Writing is like any other semiosis in its acquisition of immediate significations; in its engulfment of secondarity; and in its move to complete identity, from symbol to sign, and, within the sign, from binariness to the collapse of the signifier/signified distinction.

In the previous exploration of writing within the traditions of register and dialect variation, I stressed its autonomy (from a phonetic point of view). But, in fact, there is a relatively stable sound system to English spellings. As Millward points out,

The fact that most of us spell most words correctly is evidence of this. Moreover...the conversion of spelling to sound is highly predictable. Most of us know how to pronounce most of the new words we encounter in reading. For example, when I asked a group of thirty native speakers to say the nonwords lape, morantishly, permaction, and phorin, there was virtual unanimity in their pronunciation, including even the placement of major stress. (1988:203)
The key word here is "conversion". The speakers she tested have internalised the rules of this conversion from spelling to sound in order to decipher the pronunciation of the new words. In order for the conversion rules to operate, each of the two systems the rules link (sounds and spellings) must be internally consistent. What is not required is that the connection between the two systems be more than arbitrary, in the Saussurian sense.

A speaker of Jamaican, Indian, and Australian English will produce different sounds from the same combinations of graphemes. They will produce them systematically, according to their internalised orthographic grammar; but it is never the case that there is a one-to-one correspondence, across all users of the same grapholect English, between the graphic signifier and the spoken signified. What is regular is the system of differences between the grapheme clusters; there is another system of differences among the phonemes; and, as in Saussure's wave analogy, there is a "mysterious process by which 'thought-sound' evolves divisions":

The characteristic role of a language in relation to thought is to supply the material phonetic means by which ideas may be expressed. It is to act as intermediary between thought and sound, in such a way that the combination of both necessarily produces a mutually complementary delimitation of units. Thought, chaotic by nature, is made precise by this process of segmentation. But what happens is neither a transformation of thoughts into matter, not a transformation of sounds into ideas. What takes place, is a somewhat mysterious process by which 'thought-sound' evolves divisions and a language takes shape with its linguistic units in between those two amorphous masses. (Saussure 1983:111)

I am suggesting this not as a model of language, but as an analogy for thinking about phonemes. The same "mysterious process" acts to link the sound patterns that are conceptualised sounds ("phonemes") to graphic signs. The sound patterns are quite close in nature to the "thought" that Saussure uses as an example for his explication of the signifying process; as he explains elsewhere, when linguists speak of phonemes, they are speaking of a conceptualised sound rather than a sound "in the raw".

Phonemes as such have no physical reality. They are aggregates of different but related sounds that are conceptualised by speakers of the language as one sound:

Phonemes are no more than convenient symbols for groups of allophones. Phonemes represent a form of linguistic knowledge. Even though we never pronounce a phoneme, only its allophones, there is ample evidence that speakers mentally store the phonological system of their language in terms of phonemes. It is not surprising, for example, that English spelling uses only one letter for both [r] and [l]...Generally, spelling systems ignore phonetic variation that is non-distinctive. (O'Grady and Dobrovolsky 1987:63)

For example, Canadian English speakers have two sounds which they conceptualise as one. In words such as "loud", "loot", "lottery", they pronounce the first sound [l] (called a dark l, with the back of the tongue raised); in words such as "lead", and "leek", they pronounce the first sound [l]. Neither is a version or a variation of the other; they are both the real sounds that Canadians think of as one. They do not often perceive these sounds as different, since the difference creates no meaningful variation in the words.

However, English distinguishes [r] and [l] as separate phonemes; they are the distinguishing sign between the words “right” and “light”, and the distinguishable meanings of “right” and “light” in turn help to maintain the perceived difference between the sounds [r] and [l]. It is in fact due to the contingencies of history -- the dominance of the European scholarly tradition in the twentieth century -- which codifies this distinction into the “International” Phonetic Alphabet. If the alphabet had been devised by Japanese speakers, the IPA grapheme “r” would have been visually presented as a member of the “l” family -- with a diacritic by the “l” perhaps.
In the same way that different groups of European speakers have different values for the Latin alphabetic grapheme “r” (e.g., Spanish trilled /ɾ/, French uvular /ʁ/, the English “flap” version of /r/), different groups of English-dialect speakers have different values for the English grapholectal sign “a”. In both cases, the dialects can be mutually unintelligible. What matters is not the raw sound, but its role in anchoring a segment of difference in the total phonemic inventory of the dialect.

Deconstruction…

As “The End of the Book and the Beginning of Writing” continues, it makes an interesting statement about the relationship between phonetic writing and arche-writing. Before taking it up, I would like to call attention to a major element in alphabetic writing systems. English orthography is based on a large number of sight units, or morphemes which are pronounced differently but spelled the same. Examples are the plural marker “s” (pronounced variously as [s] in “cats”, [z] in “cars”, and [ζ] in “judges”); the past marker “ed” (pronounced [d] in “played”, [t] in “worked”, and [d̪] in “hunted”); and consistent syllable spellings in alternations such as “electric/electricity” ([ilektrik]/[ilektriːti]) which facilitate sight recognition of meanings but do not belong in an alphabetic system of the type Derrida envisages as “phonetic” writing. The most prominent of morphophonemic devices, according to Venezky (1977), are the vowels a,e,i,o,u, which remain visually consistent in order to preserve the sight-meaning correspondence of their morphemes, but represent different sounds in environments such as “sane/sanity”, “meter/metric”.

In many cases visual morpheme representation is a product of diversity in pronunciation not just over time but over space. An American knows the visual sign “bar” is pronounced [bar]; a Briton, with the same certainty, knows it is pronounced [baː]. The Briton notes the written “r” as a clue to the meaning of the grapheme “bar”, but treats it is a graphic signal of meaning only, without ever comparing his knowledge to any others’ system of phoneme-grapheme correspondence.

*Of Grammatology* treats graphic signals of meaning, without mediation through sound, as features of superior systems of writing and as signals of the limitations of “phonetic writing”:

I have already alluded to *theoretical* mathematics; its writing -- whether understood as a sensible *graphie* [manner of writing] (and that already presupposes an identity, therefore an ideality, or its form, which in principle renders absurd the so easily admitted notion of the "sensible signifier"), or understood as the ideal synthesis of signifieds or a trace operative on another level, or whether it is understood, more profoundly, as the *passage* of the one to the other -- has never been absolutely linked with a phonetic production. (9-10)

The paragraph points out first of all the impossibility of escaping the identity of signifier and signified ("absurd...the 'sensible signifier"’); but then attempts a reformulation of that sign relationship as a “synthesis” of signifieds; or as the product of sign activity on different “levels”; and finally, as the movement of a trace from one of these levels to the next and the next... It is still not clear why this type of writing challenges the “ideal of phonetic writing and all its implicit metaphysics” (10), unless Derrida, together with the thinkers he is criticising, conceives of phonetic writing as a one-to-one relationship between letter and sound, in which the grapheme is merely a “detour for the purpose of the reappropriation of presence”, as he describes the metaphysics of the alphabet (10).

Adds Derrida:

But beyond theoretical mathematics, the development of the *practical methods* of information retrieval extends the possibilities of the "message" vastly, to the point where it is no longer the "written" translation of a language, the transporting of a signified which could remain spoken in its integrity. (10)
Presumably, by “practical methods of information retrieval”, he means methods such as those used in computerised library catalogues, where pushing a button on the keyboard is a sign of the command “go to the next screen”; or computer programmes, whose languages depend on a relatively small group of tokens signifying similar commands, as well as on elements of a simplified syntax. There is no difference, however, between this aspect of these languages and the grammatical functions of any natural language; the word “is” in English, to take a powerful example, means “a link of identity is hereby made”; it has no other meaning, even in philosophical statements such as “God is”. The point is that the nature of English sight spellings and of orthographic signifieds across diverse English dialects renders problematic the assumption that a “‘written’ translation of a language [is] the transporting of a signified which could remain spoken in its integrity.”

There is thus a weakness in *Of Grammatology*’s representation of “phonetic” alphabetic writing as a phonemic transcription of spoken sounds. But why does it matter that there is an overly-narrow working notion of phonetic writing as a first step in *Of Grammatology*’s argument for the perpetually evasive signified? If this narrow version of phonetic writing, this phonocentrism, is a straw man, surely there is no point in knocking it down?

The phonetic writing presented in *Of Grammatology* is not just a straw man. It is the foundation of the argument for the perpetually evasive signified, and the argument itself is a demonstration of the formal principles of deconstruction. Arche-writing -- the deferral of meaning -- is based on following through the implications of the original phonocentric “phonetic” version of writing which Derrida argues against. He shows that it is untenable by bringing the logic of secondarity -- that a letter is a signifier of a signifier -- to its furthest conclusion -- that the signified is never reached, either in phonetic writing or in any other kind of “writing”.

This is an argument whose conclusion -- that writing is autonomous -- contradicts its premise -- that writing is completely phonetic (i.e., dependent on a simple one-to-one relationship between letter and sound, in all environments). And yet, the conclusion depends on its premise for validity. If writing were not conceived of as phonetic to start with, there would be no ground for establishing its autonomy. If one concedes that contradictions can be true -- and I do -- then the argument is airtight.

Unless: writing is not autonomous. Unless one argues against both sides of the contradictory formula: that the technology of writing is not the simplified phonetic one that is presented in *Of Grammatology* and that writing is not a code which is independent of historical time and place for its meaning.

**What happens when a dub poet wishes to write her songs?**

When a speaker of creole chooses to write a text in an English-based orthography that is nevertheless distinctive for being not-standard, what they are doing is calling attention to a perceived difference in two dimensions. The first is standardness: in "Riddim An' Hardtimes", some sounds are represented in non-standard spellings that reflect fairly widespread pronunciations (e.g. "yu"). The effect aimed at seems to be an indication of non-standardness rather than a guide to the pronunciation of “you”.

The second dimension is cultural identity on a phonetic level: the written text of “Riddim” contains graphemes for key, identifying sounds of Jamaican creole. Writers of creole seem to feel that "identification of a text as creole must not rest on morphological, syntactic and lexical clues alone" (Hellinger 1986: 62). That is, creole writers seem to feel that an important creole identifier is its sound.

However, only a few phonetic spelling variations are necessary to suggest a dialect in writing. Speech communities use "stereotypes" to identify social groups (Labov 1972:248), which are the linguistic
variables that are popularly ascribed to a group, both internally and externally. Compared to the number of features that really distinguish dialects from each other, the number of stereotypes necessary to suggest a dialect are really very few.

For example, this is the novelist Chaim Potok’s rendering of French with the help of French stereotypes:

"Mrs. Levy," I said. "Where do the wife and two children of Lucien Lacamp live?"
"Wife and one child. The other child died."
"I am sorry to hear that."
"She had the asthma. They live now on the Rue d'Aboukir in the Second Arrondissement...."
"Thank you," I said. "I am in your debt." (Potok 1990:197)

The stereotypes of French in this text include the use of the definite article in front of the name of an illness and of a street, a periphrastic possessive, and frequent, unfamiliar politeness formulae. Although the text is in English, stereotypes of French convey the intention of the writer to signal that the language is French. Note that variations are both symbolic and mimetic (in the sense that they imitate real French phrasal structures). In the same way, only a few stereotypes of creole in "Riddim An' Hardtimes" convey an impression of creole.

Speakers who feel the need to convey certain sounds within a highly standardised orthography such as written English necessarily feel themselves to be bi-dialectal (and not just to control different styles and registers), and have attached one set of sounds to the standard English orthography. This is because they are aware that the orthography is meant to represent an internally consistent inventory of sounds; they conceive of dialects/languages as unitary. They also have a sense that another highly identifiable and "focused" (LePage 1980) set of sounds needs expression in a grapholect. They are, in practice, expanding the registers of the creole, making it and making for it a written language.

The emergence of European written languages, as Ong and others have pointed out (e.g. Alleyne and Garvin 1982), has involved the consciousness by vernacular speakers of the status of the speech community as a nation state, and the desire to dignify the vernacular with the roles and functions formerly associated with a separate, written language (in the case of the European vernaculars, Latin; see Winford 1985 for a comparison of Caribbean creole speech communities and classically diglossic situations). Bound up with all of this, in the case of a very standardised grapholect, is the choice of representing the creole as "deviant" (in the context of standardisation). Deviance in this context is a strong signal that the new writing is not the same as the old, which is represented as a whole by the standard orthography.

The sociolinguistic situation of Jamaican English Creole is that most speakers of it control at least one other dialect of English and sometimes more:

Nearly all speakers of English in Jamaica could be arranged in a sort of linguistic continuum, ranging from the speech of the most backward peasant or labourer all the way to that of the well-educated urban professional [who speaks Standard Jamaican English]. Each speaker represents not a single point but a span on this continuum, for he is usually able to adjust his speech upward or downward for some distance on it. (DeCamp 1961:82)

However, the continuum can be correlated with other features besides social class, education, and geography. Functional varieties can also be placed on the continuum: writing is associated with the end of the continuum closest to Standard Jamaican, while protest songs and oral genres such as dub are associated with the end closer to “the speech of the... labourer.” Making the distinction more concrete, it can be said that orality is in the dialect of one end while literacy is in the dialect of the other (a dialect, not coincidentally, much closer to the grapholect in syntax and lexis).
The transplantation of Caribbean creoles to the metropolitan speech communities creates a wider range of dimensions on which to draw symbolically, as well as a more emphatic division between speech types. With some exceptions (Rampton 1995), the use of creole is restricted to members of a specific ethnic group. This reinforces its status as a distinct linguistic entity. However, the fact that this language is excluded from the print mass media and other vehicles of mainstream literacy means that those of its poets who wish to participate in central institutions of literacy -- and who wish to participate in literature as an institution of power -- must somehow create the creole through the medium of written English.

Therefore, Allen's representation of Jamaican English Creole in “Riddim An' Hardtimes” is both a defiant gesture and a technical coup de force. She does succeed in aurally evoking, to some extent, a certain set of sounds. She cannot have done it, however, without reference to very specific, even ephemeral public knowledge: the sound of Caribbean creole in diaspora in the 1990’s. Spelling deviations thus partake of the “play of signifying references” (Derrida 1974:7) within particular times and places.

In fact, Derrida’s phrase “signifier of the signifier” denotes an impossibility. Without a signified, the signifier cannot mean -- it would not be a signifier. The chain of signification in a relationship like speech-writing, therefore, is not one of signifiers as identical, formal elements, but of signifiers as transparent (Kress 1993), which at any one time and place must have a signified -- though not necessarily (and perhaps never just) the coded one. That is, at each point in the chain, the signifier acquires social and embodied signifieds.

For protest writers, furthermore, the signifier does not randomly and arbitrarily wander in search of other signifiers. For them, meaning is a political issue, and the implicit social agreements linking signifiers in a chain are an important battle ground. Although in times of crisis and change it is easy to see that meaning is permanently unstable, this does not mean that meaning-making is an autonomous process.

…and reconstruction

Allen, Breeze, and other poets who think of themselves primarily as performance artists, compose rather than write their poetry, and are very aware of the differences in essence and technique between oral and written versions of the "same" text. In the Preface to her 1993 publication of selected poems, Women Do This Every Day, Allen writes,

> Because words don't (always) need pages, I have published extensively in the forms of readings, performances, and recordings. I have been reluctant to commit my poetry to the page over the years because, for the most part, these poems are not meant to lay still.

> As I prepared poems for this collection, I was required to "finalize" pieces I had never imagined as final. Like a jazz musician with the word as her instrument, reading and performing these poems is an extension of the creative and creation process for the work… (9)

It is these performance poets who tend to go to extremes in their written negotiations with the standardised code of spelling. Their emphasis on the process of creation, on “versions” rather than on a final written artefact, is part of a resistance against language forms that are relatively rigid. Their view of writing is reminiscent of Derrida's notion of arche-writing as the ultimate sign; in this case, fighting social structures symbolised, or even propagated by writing as a metaphor, they subvert the process of codification of their signs by creating multiple oral versions:

> You have taken my abstractions
> broken my images
> carved images-of-broken on my mirror
Even though the practice of the deferral of meaning (through versions) is quintessentially Derridean, there is also a concern that post-structural “images-of-broken” separate the poet from “self / race / gender / history”. This is not a reactionary essentialism, but a recognition of the effects of a racist history on the present day, and of the effects of racism on the self.

The method of deconstruction essentially displaces the links made by a phonocentric sign; its method is to constantly remind the reader that these links are not made by the necessity that the metaphysics of presence claims for them. It carries out this project in constant awareness of the interests of the status quo served by as-yet undisplaced links of signification; but it does not have a logic to re-establish links. Its project is therefore perpetually reactive. And, as necessary as the first step of destabilising meaning is to any resistance against oppression, the aims of postcolonial resistance must include a subsequent rewriting of the links between specific, historical signifiers and the experiences of the present day.

For the carriers of the signs “black” and “female”, the experiences of the present day are doubly oppressive. The meanings of the signs are constantly recreated in ways that are palpable and inescapable:

…A woman who thought she was human but got the message, female and black and somehow those who gave it to her were like family, mother and brother, spitting woman at her, somehow they were the only place to return to …..

…and it was over by now and had become so ordinary as if not to see it any more, that constant veil over the eyes, the blood-stained blind of race and sex. (Brand, 27)

Gender and race are embodied meanings, inseparable from the physical carrier of the signs “female and black”. In this sense, the body is the site of irreducible meaning, because, though it is the cultural meanings “black” and “woman” that are the source and target of oppression, in lived experience these meanings are embodied. They are also internalised by the (social) subject, who must in consequence deal with powerful contradictions and, at some stage, a measure of self-hatred/body-hatred.

However, it is important not to assume the stability of the term “body”. The poets I am writing about are acutely aware of the social constructedness of their bodies as objects, and of the instability and
contradictions that result. They focus on their bodies as an entry into meaning by exploring the “meaning” of their bodies as sites of both oppression and power. “Meaning” in this sense is seen as something alternative, subversive, and even radical in relation to dominant meanings/bodies:

…I saw my own body, that
is, my eyes followed me to myself, touched myself
as a place, another life, terra. They say this place
does not exist, then, my tongue is mythic. I was here
before.

from “hard against the soul” (Brand, 51)

Grace Nichols’ *Fat Black Woman’s Poems* also have as a theme the relationship of subject of consciousness to object-body -- the body of a fat black’ woman in the context of an orientalist, urban European culture:

*Thoughts drifting through the fat black woman’s head while having a full bubble bath*

Steatopygous sky
Steatopygous sea
Steatopygous waves
Steatopygous me

O how I long to place my foot
on the head of anthropology

to swig my breasts
in the face of history

to put my soap
in the slimming industry’s
profitsome spoke
(15)

There is a strong emphasis throughout *The Fat Black Woman’s Poems* on structures of repetition, and especially on parallelisms. The sound patterns in “Thoughts drifting” are not in metric feet and rhyme schemes, but in the parallelisms created by the repetition of "steatopygous" together with different nouns, which, when juxtaposed in this way, create the list: sky, sea, waves, me. This list in turn expresses the fat black woman's experience of her body as a natural element, just as splendid and powerful in its natural state as the sky, the waves, and the sea. Both the juxtaposition of the elements at the end of each line through repetition, and the structure of analogy by which the fat black woman's body is transformed into something splendid, free, unbound, and natural, are techniques of oral delivery (Okpewho 1992: 70-101).

I make a provisional claim that oral and orality-oriented texts are more embodied than written texts, although this appears to create a hierarchy of materiality among semiotic modalities. But more importantly, it confronts historical, collective constructions of the signs “race” and “gender” by re-situating (made) meanings in the body of the maker.

**Conclusion**
… a fully post-colonial reading will locate the meaning of the untranslated words and the special, culture-specific resonances of the text. It might even offer a radical reshaping or rethinking of what Habermas has called our ‘communicative rationality’. The post-colonial text persuades us to think through logical categories which may be quite alien to our own. For a text to suggest even as much is to start the long overdue process of dismantling classical orientalism. (Mishra and Hodge, 282)

Standardised alphabetic writing, especially across sometimes mutually unintelligible English dialects, is much more and much less than autonomous; the “signifier” sound object of the “signifier” letters is both direct (not secondary) and multidimensional. In the case of creole writing, spoken creole and its representation in writing are interdependent versions of each other, and the relationship is mediated by historical phenomena. A description of the change that occurs in orthographic and dialect systems over time and space is an important one for postcolonial text analysis. Even more important however, and necessarily married to the latter, is the description of the political in relation to alphabetic writing.

Language is subject to highly political symbolic appropriations. One of the strongest appropriations, in the European tradition at least, has been in the service of standardisation. Standardised systems in turn are intimately involved with relations of power: non-standard regional and class dialects are living systems nourished by resistance to all the tangible, daily implications of standardisation. The system of standard printed spellings, however, is far more rarely challenged.

As both consequence and cause, the common-sense notion of writing as phonetic is a powerful symbolic vehicle for spelling standardisation: the notion itself is the upholder of the standard. That is, without a belief that there is a very necessary and inevitable connection -- a metaphysics of presence -- between letters and sounds, the possibility of alternative spellings could be imagined; once imagined, they are a challenge to the myth of “phonetic” writing, and thus to standardisation.

This is one way “to think through logical categories which may be quite alien to our own thinking”. Our own thinking is conditioned not just by the larger Western culture, but by our positions within its social and class structure. One’s adherence to and policing of systems of standardisation is an accurate index of relative privilege in this social structure. The fact that Of Grammatology sees the “advent of writing” as inevitable, and as both the reinforcement and the transcendence of “phonetic” writing, suggests that its political position is at the centre of a culture of a very specific tradition of thought.

The orality I have described, both as a medium of transmission and as a mode of expression, is quite clearly outside of this tradition. Yet the historical and cultural condition of postcoloniality has brought about a confrontation between orality and standardised writing in some important texts, by women whose bodies are the target of colonialism through the standard meanings of “gender” and “race”. Their work provides an initial, momentary glimpse of the historicity of strong norms and contributes to a dismantling of the colonising aspects of grammars of gender and race.

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I am aware that I am eliding the difference between many different English-based creoles in the Caribbean, as well as their diaspora counterparts. (See Sebba 1993 for a description of London Jamaican, 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 in this paper, "creole" means either London Jamaican or one of the Caribbean English Creoles used either in the Caribbean or in Toronto.

Transcriptions such as those written by conversation analysts, which include the length of pauses, laughter, and sometimes intonation, could conceivably be called third-order writing. Like second-order writing, such a transcription is a written version of speech. However, this type of transcription can convey a range of styles depending on situational context. It captures the word-order of spoken language, but can also "transcribe" the speech of a pastor reading liturgy -- that is, transcribe speech read from writing meant to be spoken at a very formal level. Thus, formal linguistic transcriptions using the graphic signals agreed on by a community to convey specific aspects of a text of interest to that community are not located on the same style/medium axis as first- and second-order writing.

[A] roughly corresponds to the vowels in Canadian English "duck", "mud", etc.

"...even if one wished to keep sonority on the side of the sensible and contingent signifier (which would be strictly speaking impossible, since formal identities isolated within a sensible mass are already idealities that are not purely sensible), it would have to be admitted that the immediate and privileged unity which founds significance and the
acts of language is the articulated unity of sound and sense within the phonie. With regard to this unity, writing would always be derivative, accidental, particular, exterior, doubling the signifier: phonetic. “Sign of a sign,” said Aristotle, Rousseau, and Hegel. (Grammatology, p. 29)

Perhaps a more nearly phonetic alphabet exists in French, or rather, French spellings seem more regular to speakers of French such as Derrida. But my observations about the relationship between a standardised orthographic code and its relation to dialects holds for French as well.

This is an idealisation for the present purposes; one important function of the continuum model is to emphasise the artificiality of dialect boundaries.

Although I find this term racist, I use it because it has the widest usage amongst the poets under discussion. I find it racist because of its connotations, which are emphasised when one considers that black and white are only a very small part of the mix of colours in the individual and collective skin pigmentation of the groups concerned; and that “black” is also used in the UK and the U.S. to designate recent immigrants from many parts of the world besides diasporan Africa. This creates the lexical sets: black/non-white/not-us and white/us, which are the collocates of the dominant group.