

At the Edge of Writing and Speech: The Curricular Implications of the Evolving Orality/Writing Matrix

BRONWEN LOW

McGill University

I have been exploring youth-driven poetic forms and movements and their implications for literacy and curriculum, assuming that popular culture both steers and reflects changes to culture more generally and so has something to say about evolving communicative forms and practices. This has meant studying slam poetry and rap music as insurgent poetic forms and practices, enmeshed within the politics and poetics of language under conditions of globalization.

The writings of Edouard Glissant (1989, 1997), generally neglected by cultural theorists in education, have been helpful to me in this project. In his quest for a theory of cultural identity and expression that is more suited to the complexities of Martinican culture and language use than are the fixed binaries of imperial world orders, Glissant develops a powerful conceptual vocabulary that has much to offer education and curriculum theory. Designed in response to the convergence of histories and the proliferation of new forms of cultural being out of the old forms found in the Caribbean, the theory also addresses the continuing “drama of creolization [that] is now taking place on a global scale” (Glissant,

1989, p. 2). Particularly relevant to my interests has been Glissant's thinking on the complex and evolving dynamic between orality and writing, or the orality/writing 'matrix' (Dyson 2005). The matrix, and in particular tensions between oral and written expression, has been a recurring element in my research data that I have not examined sufficiently, even though its persistence suggests its relevance to contemporary youth expression. To begin investigating how it might matter and what this might mean for literacy education, I bring into conversation three scenes of the oral/written matrix from my data, all related to hip-hop culture and yet ranging across time and place: a rap (or deejay toast) performed at a high school talent show in Kingston, Jamaica; online text freestyle battles; and the code-switching characteristic of the multilingual Montreal hip-hop community and generation. I sketch some aspects of the problematic these raise for education, framed first by an overview of traditions of thinking about orality, writing, and education, including Glissant's philosophy.

Beyond "Great Divide" Theories of Speech and Writing

A tension between speech and writing has structured various theories of human relations to and through language. Olson (1994) organizes these into two "Great Divide" traditions, the first believing that speech is superior to writing, and the second, that writing is superior to speech. The first tradition dates back to Aristotle and is one of the founding beliefs of Western metaphysics, what Derrida calls "logocentric" (logos comes from the Greek *legō*, to speak) for it sees speech as having a natural relation to its referents, imagining, for instance, a special conduit between idea and spoken word. Writing is only a representation of speech, or its mirror, further removed from the world of referents. Similarly, through the work of Ferdinand de Saussure, the founder of modern linguistics, writing as the mere transcription of speech becomes

a central tenet of the scientific study of language. Working in a different discipline, eco-philosopher Abram (1996) again values the spoken over the written word, dating the mindset which made possible centuries of environmental destruction back to the invention of the abstractly symbolic Greek alphabet, which he argues produced a sense of remove from the natural world.

The second tradition values writing over speech. Barrett (1999) traces its trajectory to Enlightenment philosophers such as Kant who equated humanity with writing: "In regard to civilized people, the beginning of the art of writing can be called the beginning of the *world*" (in Barrett, p. 67). Such a framework shaped two centuries worth of observations and studies by anthropologists on orality and oral cultures. Much of this work associates the thought and expression of oral peoples with the "primitive" and "childlike," as in Levy-Bruhl's 1926 "How Natives Think," while writing was envisioned as "an instrument of precision and power" (Olson, p. 3). This tradition takes the invention or development of the Greek phonetic alphabet as the break between cultures with "simpler" oral modes of communication, thought, and society, and those complex and literate cultures capable of abstract thought and reason (Havelock, 1963; Goody & Watt, 1968; Ong 1982). In an example of this bias towards writing, Goody and Watt (1963) describe "the notion of representing a sound by a graphic symbol [as] so stupefying a leap of the imagination that what is remarkable is not so much that it happened relatively late in human history, but rather that it happened at all" (p. 38).

Walter Ong (1982) offers a synthesis of what he calls the different "psychodynamics" of orality and writing, which means the ways they shape human culture and consciousness. In primary oral cultures (with no knowledge of writing or print), thought and expression tend to have a "conservative" approach to change, and to be additive, redundant, and repetitive while valuing traditional knowledge (p. 41). Another feature of oral cultures, for Ong, is that they tend to be "close to the human

lifeworld" (p. 42), in that knowledge is conceptualized and verbalized through connections with its context. Because knowledge is grounded in context, thinking is operational rather abstract. In turn, since all oral communication takes place through word of mouth, interpersonal relations shape it. Similarly, orality fosters an epistemology that values human connection: identification, empathy and participation. The Greek alphabet, on the other hand, organized sound into spatial components, abstracting writing from its context. (Ong's work is an important influence on Abram's thinking.) This remove from the "lifeworld" separates communicator from audience, and the knower from the known. This leads, in Ong's account, to the development of introspection, objectivity, the ability to revise or edit one's thinking, and, consequently, to the sharpening of analytic skills.

Many of the assumptions underlying both traditions have been undercut. As Olson (1994) points out, the rigidity of the distinction between oral and written modes has been challenged, with Finnegan concluding in 1973 "it is difficult to maintain any clear-cut distinctions and radical distinctions between those cultures which employ the written word and those that do not" (in Olson, xv). All human languages, including those without written forms, have rich grammatical and semantic structures and capacities (p. 8) (For a more recent discussion of this, see Harrison (2007)). Writing played a relatively insignificant part in the intellectual achievement of Greece; rather, the culture was primarily oral, "favoring the dialectic, that is discussion and argument, as instruments of knowledge" (p. 12). Olson also discredits the emphasis on the superiority of the Greek alphabet over other representations of language, for it ignores the alphabet's limitation as a representation of monosyllabic languages like Chinese, and disregards the high literacy levels of non-alphabetic cultures such as Japan and China.

Despite the limitations and fixity of Great Divide distinctions

between oral and written modes, this schema, and in particular Ong's notion of psychodynamics, provides a starting place for thinking about the effects communicative modes might have, however slippery, on thought and social relations. Ong (1982) also offers the concept of a post-literate "secondary orality" to describe orality in the era of high(er) tech communications, a notion that undoes rigid distinctions between the modes. Secondary orality, "in which a new orality is sustained by telephone, radio, television, and other electronic devices that depend for their existence and functioning on writing and print" (p. 11), carries with it many of the traits of primary orality, such as an emphasis on immediacy, a concentration on the present, and the use of formulas. The style is often spontaneous and casual; however, this is self-conscious, cultivated spontaneity and informality. Some technologies also foster a "participatory mystique" and sense of community, though this audience is now McLuhan's mass-mediated "global village."

Writing before the ubiquity of the Internet, Ong's "secondary orality" is prescient of the casual, spontaneous style and community building that characterizes social networking and other communications online. Secondary orality also aptly describes rap music. As Tricia Rose (1994) makes clear, while the intertextual sampling of rap suggests the collective creation of the oral tradition, the individual rap auteur is also very important; in this way rap "fuses literate concepts of authorship with orally based constructions of thought, expression, and performance" (Rose, p. 87). As well, raps are shaped by African-American oral traditions like verbal toasting and signifying, but use complex rhyme schemes that have been written down and memorized (Rose, p. 87). Central to Rose's use of the secondary orality concept is the role technology plays in rap, for rap "simultaneously makes technology oral and technologizes orality" (p. 86), bringing together African American, black diasporic and other oral traditions with electronic technologies such as the digital sampler, drum machine, and synthesizer.

Theories of the relationship between orality and writing have also been central to decades of thinking about literacy instruction. Anne Hass Dyson (2005) traces some of its pedagogic history. In the 70s, James Britton and others promoted speech as the raw material for writing instruction, both in terms of orthography and ideas, embodied in the mantra “If you can say it, you can write it” (p. 151). Dyson cites Ashton-Warner’s (1963) “first” or “keywords” approach to child literacy, as well as Freire’s (1970) “generative words,” as examples of this philosophy in action, in which not only does speech lead to writing, but writing in turn produces more speech. Linguists working in the late 70s began challenging this valuation of speech, emphasizing instead the differences between schooled and vernacular “channels of communication” and theorizing conversation and academic prose as “maximally different registers of language” (p. 153). Writing theorists worried that some children, in particular those not socialized in middle-class approaches to text and language, were “too oral” since educated written language needed to be distanced from speech. Many of the misconceptions about literacy (as well as the class-bias) of these theories were then challenged by the ethnographically grounded studies of Shirley Brice Heath (1983) and other scholars in the New Literacy Studies (Street, 1984) that explored literacy as a socially located rather than autonomous practice, so that “the nature of the speaking/writing matrix . . . depends on the kind of communicative situation and on the particular social happening” (Dyson, p. 154).

This interest in mixtures also shapes Dyson’s theory of literacy instruction. To sociocultural understanding of the writing and orality matrix, Dyson adds the need to think of children’s writing processes as heteroglossic, borrowing the term from Bakhtin. In response to several studies of spoken word and other poetry classrooms, Dyson describes how students mobilize the multiple languages and discourses that shape their experience. She argues that we should think of children’s writing

development as a process of listening to, appropriating, and then revoicing the world around them. Given the growing importance of a respect and an awareness of the politics and aesthetics of (multi)language use, the “new language arts basics” should include “an ear for the diversity of everyday voices, a playful manipulation of—a flexibility with—those voices, and an alertness to opportunities for performance.” (p. 150)

Dyson’s new language arts basics resonate with many aspects of Glissant’s conceptual framework for understanding culture, language, and literature in the Caribbean.

Creolization, Language, and Oraliture

“My language attempts to take shape at the edge of writing and speech”
Edouard Glissant (1989, p. 147)

One of the central concept-metaphors that Glissant (1997) mobilizes is *creolization*. He defines it in relation to *métissage*, also used to describe hybrid cultural conditions:

If we posit *métissage* as, generally speaking, the meeting and synthesis of two differences, creolization seems to be a limitless *métissage*, its elements diffracted and its consequences unforeseeable. Creolization diffracts, whereas certain forms of *métissage* can concentrate one more time. Here [creolization] is devoted to what has burst from lands that are no longer islands. Its most obvious symbol is in the Creole language, whose genius consists in always being open, that is, perhaps, never becoming fixed except according to systems of variables that we have to imagine as much as define. Creolization

carries along then into the adventure of multilingualism
and into the incredible explosion of cultures. (p. 34)

The Caribbean has acted as one instance, perhaps even a paradigm, of advanced processes of creolization from which one can better understand the cultural mixes taking place elsewhere. This move from the specificities of the Caribbean to the intertwined dynamics of the global is an important vector of Glissant's cultural model. Of another concept in his theoretical cosmology, *Antillanité* or a specifically Caribbean mode of being, Glissant writes that "we rally together and diffract . . . confirming us in ourselves and joining us to an elsewhere" (p. 13). This confirmation of "ourselves" means recognizing the specificities and uniqueness of place, what he calls an "opacity" (1997, p. 190) that resists translation, before imagining the endless connections between here and a larger elsewhere.

While the Creole language embodies these open-ended processes of creolization, Glissant formulates a theory of *langage* that draws on Creole but is not confined to it, since neither French nor Martinican Creole are adequate tools for self-expression—the former is the colonial tongue and the latter is a response to its oppressions. Central to *langage* is the stamp of the oral tradition; as Glissant (1989) poetically formulates (in translation), "My language attempts to take shape at the edge of writing and speech" (p. 147). This attempt exceeds the novelist's experiments at putting colloquial dialogue in written form. Instead, it requires a "synthesis of written syntax and spoken rhythms, of 'acquired' writing and oral 'reflex,' of the solitude of writing and the solidarity of the collective voice—a synthesis that I find interesting to attempt." (p. 147).

While this view of writing as a solitary activity and oral communication as a communal one resembles Ong's (1982) formulation, it reimagines the relation between the modes: rather than being opposed, they merge into one form of expression. An example of this synthesis is what Glissant calls an *oraliture*, which is writing infused with the

qualities of the oral tradition. What are these qualities? Glissant's theoretical and fictional texts display some, for their form enacts their content. Wing, the translator of *Poetics of Relation* (1997), lists some of the oral strategies that mark Glissant's writings, including his use of aphorisms, and the "discontinuities in the text, the melding of discursive syntax with a language whose beat is punctuated by repetition and improvisation . . ." (Wing, xix). Wing further explores the nature of this beat when she writes "one word will unleash another through association or some deeper, almost subconscious logic into powerfully rhythmic sentences" (xix). (p. 124).

The relationship between written and oral language can take many forms. Glissant (1997) writes of these forms as myriad and "inexhaustible" (p. 106), influenced by economic and political conditions. In some relationships, the written language dominates the oral language, dismissed or "pigeonholed as folklore" (p. 105). In others the oral language is confined to the realm of polite subservience, as in domestic service or tourism. In contrast, Glissant describes the subversive power of the *joual* of Quebecois and of African-American Vernacular English, as well as the multiplicity and contagion that "exist wherever mixtures explode into momentary flashes of creation, especially in the languages of young people" (p. 105).

Scene one: "Mi Know Mi ABC"

The first instance of the oral-written matrix from my research data catapults us into one such creative flash in Kingston, Jamaica.

Help mi say mi ABC,
Help mi say mi alphabet,
Help mi say mi ABC,
Help mi say mi alphabet,

Abbada, bedede, cecece, dedede . . .
You nuffi ramp wid mi,
Mi know mi ABC,
Abbada, bedede, cecece . . .
Like dat right ya now.

In the spring of 1999, Tion's secondary school held an open house. Tion, a rapper (aka "deejay" in Jamaica) in eighth grade, was the highlight as he jumped up on stage, four and a half feet of bravado, and sang to the back-beat of another boy's bongo. After a few minutes of his performance, the teacher acting as master of ceremonies motioned for him to conclude, but the students started chanting "we want more." "That kind of boy won't learn in school," his English teacher leaned over and said with a smile. After the assembly, Tion started to write down some of his songs for me, saying he had his own type of spelling, a blend of English and Jamaican Creole (JC), and that I would need a Jamaican to help me read his transcription. He soon gave up, complaining that Creole is hard to spell, and asked instead if I would record his "tunes." I had been teaching part-time in Tion's school and studying the Jamaican Creole and Standard English debates (Low, 2000) about the best way to teach JC native speakers English, the language of schooling. Even though linguists had determined since the 60s that JC is a language with its own coherent syntax and a full lexicon (Cassidy, 1961; Bailey, 1966), there persists a popular sense in and out of school that it is just bad English. In 1999, University of the West Indies professor Carolyn Cooper was regularly promoting in her column in the local paper the recently published Cassidy orthography, in an effort to standardize JC's writing and so legitimize its use in school and the media. However, there had recently been concerns that youth were speaking a language not easily characterized as Jamaican English or JC and that this was largely due to the influence of dancehall deejays.

The piece above is one of the shorter ones Tion performed that day at

school, and is in some ways one of the simplest, a “nonsense” song in which he stutters out the sounds of the letters of the alphabet. In Tion’s song and comments, he occupies an in-between linguistic and artistic space: He composes in a blend of English and Creole, working the Standard Jamaican English (SJE)—Jamaican Creole linguistic continuum. When he tries to write his lyrics down, he faces the resistance to transcription of a predominantly oral tongue. Yet, this interstitial zone is an inventive one. Despite the difficulties of writing Creole, this student feels free to compose and perform in the idiomatic blend of languages that structure his home and school experiences. He works in English and Creole and in the process transforms them both. The student’s play with language pushes at its boundaries, warps it, and in so doing constitutes a particular form of agency. Tion cannot leave behind the constraints of language learning and use, and in particular, the rules shaping English usage and distinctions between the oral and the written; however, his wordsmithing emphasizes the role of language as self-expression. Not clear, however, is how this creative but non-standard “word-work” (Morrison 1994) might play an active part in his formal education, so that Tion might be seen, and see himself, as the kind of boy who can learn in school.

Tion’s tune is a version of the classic alphabet song designed to teach the letters of the alphabet to schoolchildren in North America and Britain, and also, it would seem, in the English Caribbean; the student’s version even replicates the grade-school tone suggested by the rhetorical second person address, “Help mi say mi” However, composed in a form of Jamaican Creole, these are ABC’s rendered with a twist. In place of the refrain “Now I know my ABC’s, won’t you come and play with me,” this singer tells his audience, “You nuffi ramp wid mi, mi know mi ABC.” A JC speaker who is a professional dancehall deejay listened to these pieces with me and could not translate or decipher a number of the words and phrases, since it seemed the student sometimes invented

words to suit his need for a particular rhyme or rhythm. Not only does he translate the paradigmatic English language learning song into Creole, but he also stutters rather than sings the letters. The stutter of language, its involuntary repetition or stammer, usually suggests its speaker's lack of control; this student's stutter, however, is a deliberate performance. The song seems to dramatize the difficulty of language and language learning, and perhaps the dilemma of the remedial English speaker or student, as it plays with and on English and its pedagogies. The stutter also emphasizes the letter as sound, as raw material for rhythm and music.

Understanding the workings of orality and writing in Tion's rap and performance is very dependent on knowledge of their context. The legacy of British colonization in Jamaica means that while the bulk of the population's first language is Creole, a predominantly oral language, written English was and remains a gateway to higher education and professional jobs. Jamaicans' ability to move between the two poles of the English-Creole continuum is largely determined by social class, with upper and middle class Jamaicans commanding the English side of the spectrum. Tion's rap is also a product of the popularity, at home as well as internationally, of dancehall culture and its deejays, whose technologised orality "provides a means of walking around the language barrier rather than jumping it" (Devonish 1997, p. 76). This is clearly a secondary orality, as the pathways of digital music production bring the speech and song of the Jamaican working and underclass to the world. Writing in the 90s about the state's lack of economic resources and political will to engage in a large-scale language planning exercise, Devonish advocates language planning efforts that build on processes extant on the ground, including in popular culture.

Scene Two: Brick City

The second scene of interest in sketching the pedagogic problematic of secondary orality is a website called Brick City (brickcity.net) where members come to freestyle online. A freestyle is an improvised poem, and is closely related to rap music through roots in oral traditions such as verbal toasting and signifying. While accomplished rappers tend to carefully craft their raps in writing, using rhyme schemes that are more complex than those found in even the cleverest improvisations, a rapper's skill is often measured by his or her ability to freestyle. And rap albums often include recorded segments or interludes of freestyling. This blend of orality and written composition is one reason that rap music powerfully illustrates secondary orality.

In 2002 and 2004, in upstate New York, I worked with a teacher and an arts educator to develop and offer a high school language arts curriculum that drew on hip-hop and spoken word culture (Low, 2010; Low, 2011). The first year, there were two students in one of the classes who were widely respected as the top freestylers in the school, and they would regularly entertain us with their rhymes. These skills had been previously unrecognized in their classrooms. I also learned that some of the other students were freestyling online, taking the technologizing of orality and oralizing of technology to new spaces. This freestyling can happen via audio feeds in which participants rap into a mic or through text battles. The former mimic more closely the original although the audience is now virtual. More surprising and indicative of the evolving oral/writing matrix are text battles. These can be as "immediate" as possible in real-time chat room settings, where the MCs come together at a set time and type out their verses back and forth. As one aficionado in the classroom described it, this meant typing as quickly as possible and figuring out how to spell words not usually seen in print. This invention is also the case for the many rap fans patiently transcribing rap lyrics not in an album's liner notes and so developing unofficial orthographies, as they go, of hip-hop English (or Hip Hop Nation Language, Alim 2001)

and other languages. In another version, the text battle takes place over a certain period of, for instance, 24 hours, with a specific start and end time. The battle “call out” sets the terms, including any poetic restrictions (number of lines, theme) and details of the judging process (eg. the requirement that there need be five scores from audience members before a winner is declared).

In one example of a text battle, you can see that the author, whose online alias is “CyPHeR \$iMiLe,” uses a great deal of punctuation, and in particular the tilde, signaling perhaps the fluidity of the emcee’s “flow” (or style of delivery):

Hot_Stylez'll Knock ~Out-Ya-Knees~ And Drop U Over
The ~Balcony~ And "The Bird'll Leave You Real Dirty"
Like Dem ~Falcons-Be!~ (You Couldn't Amount-To-
Me!)/ //heatin up...
So I Hope You ~Ready-Fams~ Cause Like A Horned
Animal I ~Steady-Ram~ While You "Couldn't Murder A
Bear" If U Ate ~Teddy-Grams!!!!~(Wit A Machette-
Fam!)/ // //SHIIIIITTT!!!!¹

The author also plays with the dollar symbol, ellipses, hyphens, slashes, and parentheses, though it is not clear why certain phrases are parenthetical and not others. However, all the symbols seem to stand in for speed, tempo, voice modulation and other elements of live oral performance. The author’s alias references the “cypher,” which connotes a freestyle, often competitive interaction, between two or more people. The “\$imile” suggests both the importance of poetic tropes to freestyling as well as, perhaps, the simulated (or virtual) nature of this cipher.

The next sample of a text freestyle on Brick City is verse 4 by “Angelina,” battling another emcee called “Godlike”:

*You'd dump a clip let off a round? Chill it's all hype, got
you feelin' God.like, but you up against the Goddess now
Honest how since facing noobs [another battler]? He be*

*whorin' guys he's on that meteoric rise but I'm the fucka
sent ta comet down!!*

At the end of the poem, each verse is glossed, and this line refers to the passage above:

4. Minerva, my alias is a Greek Goddess; Calm it/comet;
bar 4 was pretty self ex.

Angelina used a bold font style to signal words that are glossed at the end. The author seems to want the audience to appreciate her poetic ingenuity, or at least understand all of the references, and draws upon the very academic convention of the glossary for this purpose. Like most of the postings, Angelina's work not only receives scores but also critical feedback. Like much of the commentary, except between battlers who are often quite rude to each other, much of it is supportive (and in this instance, from someone who seems to have read Angelina's work before):

The First Two Words Killed Em lol. Naw But Good Shit,
Really Gettin Good Ange, Loved Some Of The Punches..
Especially Jersey Sure! lol. Had Me ROTFLMBO [rolling
on the floor laughing my butt off]!

--- VoR-TeXt

VoR-TeXt's supportive tone was not shared by all of the commentators, including one who gives a glimpse into a reason female emcees (or those performing femaleness in this virtual community) are somewhat unusual on BrickCity:

For the record, everybody in here just wants in your e-
pants (aka your "My Pictures" folder), because it wasn't all
that.

--- MCX

Although the lyrics rely on textual features to signal their delivery, many aspects of the original oral practice are left untranslated in this new mode. Emcees in text battles often write of "mics" and their "sound." At

other points, there are explicit references to the new form this freestyle takes, as with the author who writes: “When I’m typing my ish flows off the hinges” (“ish” a slang reference to “shit,” used here through semantic inversion as a positive expression). Brick City makes clear how challenging it can be to keep up with the evolving forms of the oral/writing matrix, putting into question what we consider to be orality or writing in the first place.

Final Scene: Code-switching In Montreal Hip-hop Lyrics and Everyday Life

Montreal rap lyrics reflect the multilingualism of the hip-hop community. There are arguably more trilinguals in Montreal than anywhere else in North America due to language planning policies that make French the mandatory language of school instruction for most children (only those with a parent schooled at the primary level in English somewhere in Canada have access to English and French immersion schools). Moving between languages, including language crossing or using borrowed words and phrases from languages you do not speak (Rampton 1995), has become a marker of cosmopolitanism among the young generation of the “nouvelle francophonie” (Lamarre et al 2002) in Quebec. Here they resembled peers such as Rampton’s (1995) urban adolescents in England and Pennycook’s (2006) transcultural “global English” speakers. I have been studying multilingual rap lyrics from Montreal (and more recently, Toronto) for a number of years with colleagues Mela Sarkar and Lise Winer, exploring the implications of code-switching for youth identities and language practices as well as forms and notions of community and belonging (Low, Sarkar and Winer, 2009; Sarkar, Low and Winer, 2007; Sarkar and Winer, 2006). Code-switching is foremost an oral practice, found in multi-dialectal and multi-lingual environments. It is also used in art, in literary dialogue,

and in songs as people explore issues of identity and aesthetics. This interest in and openness to linguistic diversity shapes the rap lyrics we have been analyzing, as well as the interviews we have done with members of the hip-hop community, including rappers and fans. As rap group Muzion member J-Kyll described in an interview, “en général, on chante, on rap comme on parle” (‘in general, we sing, we rap like we speak’). Rapper Cotola also describes artistic code-switching as a reflection of the multilingual Montreal speech community:

When you live in Montreal and you’ve been around people that I’ve been in contact with, it always used to be, like, French, English, Spanish and Creole... it’s like having a gumbo soup of different elements in it and at the end it tastes different, you know?... It’s cause of the city we live in. We speak like that.

The following lyrics from Muzion offer one example of this gumbo, in which the artist code-switches in and between lines of verse (the coding below stems from our early system that coded for French, English, Non standard French, AAVE, Hip Hop Nation Language, . . .):

J’**check** Rob : ‘*What up dog?*’
—‘*What up yo! **Shit**, les rues sont fucked up!*’
Enough talk. **Check** le reste du squad.
On *set un get* ce soir. Peace. Hang up the phone.
J’step dehors. Dès que j’sors, des nègs blast des *teck*,
percent mon corps.
J’saigne, fuck up, à l’hôpital, presque mort.
Help me y’all !”
(Impossible of Muzion, “666 thème”, *Mentalité mounne morne*, 1999)

We have argued that the dynamic code-switching in the Montreal (and to a lesser extent, Toronto) hip-hop community constitutes a “conscious ‘translingual’ (Pennycook, 2006b) activism in the service of new

transethnic identities for Hip-Hop identified urban youth” (Winer et al, 2010). Their fluid and hybrid ethnolinguistic identities constitute important challenges to top-down rhetoric and official imposed categories of anglophone, francophone, and allophone (a category only extant in Quebec that groups together all those whose first language is neither French nor English).

While code-switching is a marker of a Montreal hip-hop style, it has found less acceptance in schools. Our project’s most recent set of lyrics and interviews with local rappers and fans have been conducted and transcribed by Louis Dufieux (Lou Piensa) and Nantali Indongo (I am black girl), 2 MCs from the hip-hop music collective, Nomadic Massive, that exemplifies the cultural hybridity of the scene. With eleven members of multiple ethnicities and nationalities, Nomadic Massive regularly raps in five languages. In Nantali Indongo’s radio story “Beyond Franglais” (CBC, *All in a Weekend*) about code-switching in Montreal, she described walking into a classroom where two students, one whose family was from Haiti and the other from St. Vincent, were having a dispute about how to pronounce an Arabic word for “let’s go” – *yallah*. She talks with youth in this local multilingual French public school about their dynamic use of a number of languages, including those from which they borrow words but do not otherwise speak (an instance of what Rampton (1995) calls “crossing”). The students said that they feel their love of switching “shows that we have a lot of culture and that we’re accepting of other nationalities.” However, they also describe how their parents and teachers see this switching as worrisome, something to critique and correct, and a real impediment to mastery of French. As one young woman put it, “our teachers think, if we keep talking the way we talk, *on s’améliore pas* (we won’t improve ourselves).” Particularly worrisome to teachers is code-shifting in writing.

Taken together, these three scenes point to some of the dimensions of the orality / writing matrix, and the problematic it raises for education. By

bringing them together, I do not want to efface the specificities (or opacities) of each context—a Jamaican school talent show, a website, and multilingual Montreal rap and classrooms. Just as literacy practices are profoundly situated, so are language debates and policies. For instance, one needs to understand French language pedagogies in Quebec in light of prescriptivist traditions of French language protection and instruction, as well as thirty years of language planning policy in Quebec designed to protect and promote a minority language in North America. At the same time, there are important resonances across these scenes and contexts, such as the “creolizations” of language, identity, and culture under conditions of contemporary globalization, as well as the persistence and evolution of forms of secondary orality. For ease of discussion, I will group some dimensions of the orality/writing matrix of pedagogic interest into two categories: 1) the adventure of multilingualism and explosion of cultures, and 2) literacy at the edge of writing and speech.

1) The adventure of multilingualism and explosion of cultures.

The students in that Montreal school are being taught to think of their speech practices, and in particular their exuberant code-switching, as at odds with effective French learning and written communication. Tion’s poetic oral movement on the Standard Jamaican English-Jamaican Creole continuum is seen as having no place in his English-language instruction, and he himself rejects the task of writing his lyrics down as too difficult. And yet if these practices are considered as part of an exciting, and inevitable, explosion of languages and cultures in changing times, how might they be considered pedagogic resources rather than impediments? One possibility is to educate teachers through professional development and initial teacher education about language, including the cognitive benefits of multilingualism (Grosjean, 2010; Miller 1983) and the importance of the first language in second and third language instruction (Cummins, 2000; Sarkar 2005). This would help teachers

move beyond the deficit-models that can structure (often monolingual) teachers' perceptions of bi- and multilingual students who are learning the language of instruction. Also important in both pre-service and in-service education for teachers is more instruction about how language works through language awareness (Hélot and de Mejia, 2008) and critical language awareness pedagogies (Fairclough, 1992). These can also be very valuable for the students, such as the AAVE speakers whom Alim (2009) equips with sociolinguistic and critical literacy knowledge, enabling the youth, for instance, to act as street lexicographers of "hip-hop nation language" and to understand processes of "linguistic profiling". This inquiry into language for teachers and students should include explorations of orality. For Tion this could involve studying some of the various informal and formal orthographies of Jamaican Creole; the former would include the language of advertising, which is JC rich, as well as CD liner notes of dancehall and reggae lyrics. Spelling choices could be compared and assessed in relation to the students' own lived experience of the sound of JC. This leads to the next category, which explicitly engages the dynamic relation between oral and written forms.

2) Literacy at the edge of writing and speech.

This work of comparison and assessment of academic and unofficial orthographies makes no assumption about what primarily oral and vernacular languages could or should look like on paper. Writing within a U.S. context, Aldon Neilson (1997) argues that attempts in African American poetics, such as the Black Arts Movement, to develop a "poetic diction rooted in black speech and black music" (p. 9) tended to rely upon an entrenched set of representational strategies. These fostered the illusion that "the critical limits" (p. 9) of orality were known, and that the black vernacular had been satisfactorily defined. This brings me to the text that provides the epigraph to this article. William Melvin Kelley's

under-valued novel (its last printing was in 1970) *Dunfords Travels Everywheres* plays with “performative mechanics of English as spoken by African-Americans” (Neilson, p. 4) and yet “also deftly parodies three centuries of American literary representations of supposed black dialects” (p. 4). At a certain point in its realist narrative, a dream language intervenes with lines such as “Witches oneWay tspike Mr. Chigyle’s Languish” and “Vnt-Anybuddys tell you dWord against Muffiocrity in Sick-cand Closs Tickets at dWhale’s closet?” Reading Kelley’s “Languish” aloud is very helpful to decoding it, and it thus honors oral traditions; however, much of the beauty and playfulness of the texts come from the complexity rendered by the sight of the words.

Just as Kelley takes both spoken and written language to the limits of comprehension, Brick City asks us to reconsider what counts as oral or textual practice. To freestyle online, through text battles, means drawing from both oral and written modes. The performances share some of the spontaneity, sense of immediacy, and improvisational prowess of their oral origins, and participants seem to feel interrelated, part of a critical community in which giving feedback, positive or negative, is important. At the same time, there exists a record of these battles and exchanges, and the virtual community of fans and performers is expansive, potentially unlimited.

The concept of freestyling online, contradictory as may appear, is an example of the creativity of young people as they develop and claim new spaces, in this case technologically mediated, for interaction, cultural production, and identity work. It also suggests the importance for literacy educators and researchers of keeping abreast of changing forms, practices, and conventions of communication, including the evolving orality/textuality matrix and its imbrication in social context, genre, and technology. While this might seem a daunting task, it is facilitated by inviting young people to share and develop out-of-school literacy practices within their classrooms, as our hip-hop and performance

poetry curriculum was designed to do. The teacher in the class learned what a freestyle poem was, and that some of his students were known as the top freestylers in the school. The classroom spoken word and poetry programs (Jocson, 2005; Fisher, 2005) upon which Dyson (2005) reflects were doing similar work, enacting pedagogies of writing, voicing, responding, and revoicing as students were encouraged to mobilize the linguistic and cultural resources at their disposal through spoken word poetry, bringing together written verse with oral performance. These opportunities for oral performance are crucial: they help students to develop their performative abilities, allowing them to draw and maintain attention and to be more effective oral communicators. A performance-rich curriculum can also revalue often unrecognized student talents. Movement back and forth between written text and oral performance also interrogates the media themselves, raising such questions as what might be lost in the translation from oral performance to written text? What conventions shape that translation, and what are their strengths and limitations?

Rethinking literacy instruction in light of the evolving orality/writing matrix should include experiment with writing infused with the heteroglossia of multilingual, code-switching communities, including languages without standard codifications. Here Glissant's notion of oraliture is helpful, and its commitment to bringing together written syntax and spoken rhythms is beautifully embodied in the work of Caribbean authors such as Patrick Chamoiseau and Kamau Brathwaite. Their work, like Kelley's, asks students to think deeply about the poetic force of different language forms, standard and vernacular, written and spoken. Such inquiries into oraliture can be accompanied by discussions of differences between literary and non-literary language, and raise questions about the pros and cons of projects to codify oral languages, including the benefits of fostering intelligibility and social acceptance through standardization versus the possibilities offered by Glissant's

open-ended sets of imagined variables. All of these suggestions ask those of us committed to literacy education and research to retain a sense of humility, curiosity, and even wonder about how, where, and why people continue to use language for their own purposes, bending and remaking the rules as they go.

Notes

¹ Retrieved from

http://www.letsbeef.com/crew_battle_details.php?challengeID=439§ion=tb (2010, July 8)

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