more than Walcott, to survey historical and cultural gaps, such as those embedded in the word “postcolonial” itself. The postcolonial experience helps to explain not only Ramanujan’s metaphorical exuberance but also his ironic awareness of the edges and differences crossed by metaphor, as we have seen in his poignant fingering of the fissures that separate him from his origins and endings—from other times, other places, other traditions, even other members of his extended family. On the one hand, Ramanujan can write an indulgently metaphoric poem like “In the Zoo,” in which he jocularly imagines that grey storks look “like Madras lawyers,” white ones “like grandmother’s maggoty curds,” flying clumsily “like father” with his broken umbrellas (128). On the other hand, in the palinode “Zoo Gardens Revisited” (133–34), appropriately written in prose, Ramanujan fiercely scrutinizes such movements of metaphor:

Once flamingoes reminded me of long-legged aunts in white cottons, and black-faced monkeys of grave lowbrow uncles with movable scalps and wrinkled long black hands. Now animals remind me only of animals. . . .

Ramanujan self-critically implicates the pathetic fallacy in the disregard that leads zoo visitors not to “gape at ostriches” but to “set their tail feathers on fire,” even to feed endangered monkeys “bananas with small exquisite needles in them.” The magic of metaphor, which can afford openings to other cultures, times, and even life forms, can also turn into black magic, used in the colonizing occlusion of the otherness of the other, perhaps even torture and destruction. At his best, Ramanujan fuses the contrary energies exhibited in his zoo poems—antimetaphoric questioning with metaphoric energy. His agility in fusing passionate attachment to metaphor with trenchant skepticism, rainbow-eyed postcoloniality with postcolonial irony, positions him to be read in coming decades as one of the leading poets of our transnational world. As the field of postcolonial studies attends to the significant interrelations between metaphor and postcoloniality, perhaps it will begin to grant Ramanujan and other Indian English poets like Adil Jussawalla, Arun Kolatkar, Eunice de Souza, Meena Alexander, Reetika Vazirani, and Agha Shahid Ali the close literary analysis that their work richly deserves.

CHAPTER FIVE

Irony and Postcoloniality: Louise Bennett’s Anancy Poetics

Irony has not always found a welcome home in postcolonial criticism. Condemning a novel by the Indian writer Amitav Ghosh, Javed Majeed argues, for example, that irony is “politically ineffectual” and “can have little place in the fashioning of post-colonial national identities.” This critique, frequently leveled against such postcolonial ironists as Salman Rushdie and V. S. Naipaul, is related to an older complaint about the social implications of irony. “Ironists have often been accused of elitism,” according to Wayne Booth, who cites Kierkegaard’s famous statement that irony “looks down, as it were, on plain and ordinary discourse immediately understood by everyone; it travels in an exclusive incognito.” Yet the links between irony and postcoloniality are profound and fertile, so much so that to ignore them because we assume irony to be more appropriate to Western bourgeois or postmodernist writing is to impoverish our sense of postcolonial literature’s tonality and rhetoric, vision and politics. The intimate relationship between irony and postcoloniality is rooted in a mutual doubleness—a structural kinship like the one we traced in our earlier discussion of metaphor. Indeed, theorists of irony, like theorists of metaphor, often use tropes of double vision, meaning, and perception. But they represent the implicit tension within irony as less resolvable than metaphor—the one is “additive,” the other “subtractive.”

Emphasizing the disharmony between parts, they characterize ironic cognition and rhetoric in terms of a “perceptual split” or dédoublement, “psychic scission” or “semantic disjunction.” As we saw in our discussion of metaphor, a comparable doubleness of vision, or layering of perspectives, characterizes the postcolonial condition, due to the forced convergence of colonial and “native” cultures. In an essay on postcolonialism and postmodernism, Linda Hutcheon briefly connects irony with the “twofold vision of the post-colonial. . . . This is the doubleness often represented in the metaphor of Prospero and Caliban. It is the
doubleness of the colonial culture imposed upon the colonized. But it is also
doubleness of the colonized in relation to the colonizer, either as model
or antithesis. This suggestive line of analysis starts in binarism but need
not remain there. Within the "contact zone" of postcoloniality or of irony,
the crossings and conjunctures result in compound formations irreducible
to either source. Hybriding often contradictory cultural perspectives, post-
colonial writers have in irony a potent rhetorical correlational for their bifocality
and bifulturalism.

Since theories of irony and of postcoloniality have been kept largely sep-
ate, it may be worth developing the homology between postcolonial and
ironic doubleness, starting with concepts of the relation between irony’s dual
levels. In irony as in postcoloniality, the relation is described as being con-
tradictory without being symmetrical or simply binary. Irony, according to
D. C. Muecke, "is a double-layered or two-storey phenomenon" with an "up-
per" and a "lower level." In complex or "double" irony, as opposed to merely
"corrective" or "simple" irony, the difference between these layers or
perspectives remains unresolved. Interestingly enough, the hierarchical
rhetoric of upper and lower constructs the ironic dyad as a relationship of
power, with a "victims" perspective at the lower end. Further, the dualities
in irony don’t cohere; they clash. Almost as if describing postcoloniality,
Muecke finds in irony "the clash and shock as of two co-existing but irre-
concilable, irreparable realities. Our minds which naturally seek to relate and
synthesize are atrophied." In irony as in postcoloniality, the twin perspec-
tives aren’t merely juxtaposed; they are in a relation of antagonism, or at the
very least of disharmony. Even when irony involves the negation of one
perspective, Booth argues, that rejected meaning “is still somehow kept in
mind, as part of our awareness of the irony.” Thus the mind “clicks back
and forth” between incongruous images. Irony is said to involve an oscillation
or “a kind of vibration between meanings.” In brief, a credible theory of
irony, as of postcoloniality, must attend not only to the convergence of mean-
ings but also to their persistence alongside each other, often in a relation of
dynamic tension or even mutual exclusion.

In spite of critiques linking irony with Western bourgeois elitism or
postmodernist dilatory play, the ancient notion of the eiron should help to re-
mind us that, along with its potential for elitist conservation, irony can also
be a powerful tool of subversion. Feminist, gay, and African-American critics
have celebrated the potentiality of irony as transgressive “counterdiscourse,”
unsettling the dominant discourse from within. Adapting this view, Linda
Hutcheon sees irony as a trope neither of apolitical play nor of unqualified
subversion but of “compilcitous critique” in postcolonial literatures, a

trope that works from within a power field but still contests it.” Hutcheon’s helpful model leaves open the question of identifying the “power
field” within which postcolonial irony operates. Is it subversive of and complicitous toward imperial power alone, as Hutcheon implies? What of indig-
igenous power? For Rushdie’s Midnight’s Children, is the power field that of
the British empire and the West or is it postcolonial India and Pakistan?
Rushdie’s fate after the publication of The Satanic Verses indicates that his
ironies were not felt to be exclusively anti-Western. In these and many other
postcolonial texts saturated with irony, the power field engaged by a given
work is often multiple and ambiguous. This is not to say that postcolonial
irony is apolitical, but that its “edge”—to borrow Hutcheon’s figure from her
later book on irony—often cuts more than one way. To view the irony of
postcolonial literature as either apolitical or subversively anti-Western is to
oversimplify it. Indeed, the multifaceted irony of writers like Rushdie and
Soyinka, Naipaul and Walcott helps to explain why their work has been
maddeningly barbed for readers of both the Third World and the First.

But postcolonial irony not only cuts; it also gathers. While offending,
these writers have also helped local and foreign readers to imagine commu-
nities beyond what the state—whether Western or Third World—imagines
for them. Irony’s affiliative potential is another reason to reject concepts that
schematize the trope as merely elitist, or subversive, or apolitical. In Wayne
Booth’s account of irony, “the building of amiable communities is often far
more important than the exclusion of naive victims. Often the predominant
emotion when reading stable ironies is that of joining, of finding and com-
muning with kindred spirits.” Thus, when Johnson calls Bolingbroke “a holy
man,” he “catches more of us in his net than he would have with Boling-
broke is an unholy man”: “unholy” is a harsher and narrower term, whereas
“holy as irony can be accepted and enjoyed by everyone who is in any degree
suspicous or critical of Bolingbroke.” Similar examples could be drawn
from Walcott’s ironic descriptions of self-serving politicians, Naipaul’s dic-
tatorial regimes, or Oktos of nationalistists fighting each other in the name
of African unity. Such irony reflects a collective experience of postcolonial
disenchantment with indigenous state politics, but its negative or subversive
edge is inseparable from its affiliative force—the communal laughter that
arises from seeing through the pretenses of native governments, as of their
imperial predecessors.

In contrast to the view that irony “can have little place in the fashioning of
post-colonial national identities,” the Jamaican poet Louise Bennett exem-
simplifies the central role a literary ironist can play in the formation of postcolonial community. A master of irony, Bennett is an outstanding example of the poet as public figure in the postcolonial situation. Though little known among poetry enthusiasts outside the West Indies, Jamaica's national poet is arguably one of the most significant English-language world poets in the middle decades of the twentieth century. Her stunning lack of foreign recognition—Jamaican critics have written nearly all the sustained criticism on her work, and she seldom makes it beyond regional anthologies—has been matched by the reverse reception on the part of the Jamaican public. Bennett published poetry in Jamaica's national newspaper, the Gleaner, on a weekly basis through much of the 1940s. Later, she had her own regular radio show, "Miss Lou's Views" (1965–82), and a children's television program, "Ring Ding" (1970–82). Building a mass audience in Jamaica for performance genres, "Miss Lou" regularly delivered dramatic renditions of plays, folk songs, and pantomime, sometimes before tens of thousands. Jamaican schoolchildren have often recited competitively her dramatic monologues, sometimes with Bennett herself serving as judge. Although Bennett's cultural prominence has waned in recent decades with the ascendancy of Bob Marley and other heroes of reggae and dance hall, her iconic significance has persisted: in the year 2000, Bennett's recitations of her poetry occupied Air Jamaica's entire on-flight "folk" channel, and she was the "feathered author" at Sangster's, the largest supplier of books in Jamaica. On the fiftieth anniversary of Bennett's professional debut, Jamaica's National Commercial Bank apostrophized her full-page image, "Jamaica wouldn't be the same without you."

While we might expect such a public poet to be the composer of sorrowous and solemn odes to the nation, to native political figures and institutions, Bennett's crafty poetry is nothing of the kind. Bennett builds an "amiable community" of Jamaicans not by aggrandizing but by wryly ironizing the emergent nation-state and its symbols, nationalists and antimaterialists, the poor and the wealthy. Nor is she reluctant to deflate British administrators or visiting American politicians, American racism and British imperial arrogance. Like Yeats, Walcott, and Soyinka, Bennett directs her postcolonial irony both within and without, against the foibles of empire and of the indigenous nation. She embodies not only the emergent nation's cultural pride in itself but also its carnivalesque capacity for mockery and self-mockery.

Although irony may seem to be a Western formalist concept, one of the world's most vibrant figures for the ironist is the folk hero Anancy—the mythical spider who gives his name to animal tales and even to West Indian storytelling in general. Derived from a West African prototype, he is arguably the Afro-Caribbean counterpart to the Greek eiron, and comparable if distinct trickster figures exist in a wide range of postcolonial and American minority cultures. The folklorist Daryl Dance writes of Anancy's social significance in the West Indian context: "Anancy is generally a figure of admiration whose cunning and scheming nature reflects the indirection and subtleties necessary for survival and occasionally victory for the Black man in a racist society." By virtue of his ironic witlessness, Anancy is often able to triumph over stronger animals. Reimagined by such West Indian writers as Kamau Brathwaite, Dennis Scott, Andrew Salkey, and Wilson Harris, Anancy is of signal importance to Louise Bennett, almost as her mythical avatar. As a folklorist, Bennett collected and published Anancy tales alongside her own in Anancy Stories and Dialect Verse (1950/1957), the title itself, like her subsequent Anancy and Miss Lou (1979), suggesting a correspondence between her poetry and the oral tales. Carolyn Cooper insightfully links "the morally ambiguous craftiness of Anansi" with the "proverbial cunning of the Jamaican woman" and its manifestation in Bennett's poetry. The comparison between the trickster hero and the poet is worth extending further to see if it sheds more light on both figures.

Because of Anancy's trickery and "unsparingly cunning," some Jamaicans worried about his possibly degrading influence on the "national character." Middle-class critics also accused Bennett of damaging Jamaica. They were particularly anxious about her celebratory use of Jamaican English, the lingua franca forged by slaves in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries through a blend of English dialects, other European languages, and such West African languages as Twi and Ewe. Bennett's pride in the three-hundred-year-old language of everyday Jamaican speech was thought to be a bafileful influence on people who should be trying to better themselves by using Standard English. Mervyn Morris cites a heated controversy as late as the 1970s over "Miss Lou's Views." Bennett's radio commentary: detractors claimed the program "tends to perpetuate ignorance in Jamaicans" and "is slowly destroying our young ambassadors of this great land." Here, too, the connection with Anancy is suggestive, since in "dialect" stories the trickster often speaks a lisping, old-fashioned version of West Indian creole. Ventraloquizing Anancy, Bennett says, "Im tawk wid a lisp tongue. 'Im tongue tie." As the hero who out-dialects dialect in his
tudes. Anancy is arguably a regional emblem of dialect—of the witless and opacity of Caribbean English.

Anancy also personifies the close interconnections between irony and West Indian creole, once a toxic bond for some West Indian conservatives. In his clever ruses, Anancy ironically manipulates language, saying one thing while slyly meaning another, using periphrasis to prompt another animal to say a dangerous word, or deliberately distorting norms of pronunciation. 

Exploiting the slipperiness and polyvalence of creole, he sometimes dupes other animals with double meanings and puns, but at other times falls into his own linguistic traps. Courageously choosing creole as the language of her poetry, Bennett suggests that it is a language more redolent of ironic and comic possibility, "rich in wit and humour," or as she put it in an interview, the "nature of Jamaican dialect is the nature of comedy"; not for her the dutifulness of a poetic vocabulary, tonality, and syntax that bow to the Queen's English. 

When Kamau Brathwaite refers to Bennett's "teeth and lips tight and closed around the mailed fist of a smile," she encapsulates the laughter, aggression, and trickster-like disguise of her poetry. According to Lloyd Brown, "The grinning mask of the oral tradition therefore represents a deeply ingrained irony that goes back to the original rebellion of the African slave through the Westerner's language." This subversive appropriation of English may well recall Caliban—the most familiar paradigm for the West Indian writer. But whereas Caliban famously declares to Prospero, "You taught me language, and my profit on't is, I know how to curse," Anancy is perhaps a more adequate figure for the creolization, and not merely the appropriation, of the master's language, because of his hybrid, Euro-African speech. Further, the African-derived folk hero Anancy is free of Caliban's Western, high literary pedigree. Nor is he permanently trapped in a binary model, like the Caliban/Prospero dyad. If Caliban allegorizes the anti-empirical resistance of the West Indian writer, Anancy more accurately suggests the playful and polymorphous, all-ironizing folk wit of a creole poet like Bennett.

With her Anancy poetics, Bennett ran the perpetual risk of the ironist—the incomprehension and even anger of some members of her audience. On the eve of Jamaicas first elections under universal suffrage in 1944, Bennett wrote in the voice of an overconfident first-time voter, who boasts she will (incorrectly) mark the ballot by crossing out some names and leaving others. "Misreading the poem's final ironic flourish, several angry readers of the Gleaner wrote letters "accusing Miss Bennett of misleading the public on how to vote." Bennett responded by composing a corrective poem that explains the "Rightful Way" to mark a ballot: "Yuh doan haffe cross out nutten... Jus mark a X side o' de name." But having first ridiculed her unedu-

cated speaker, too impressed by the new-found power to vote, she redirects that irony toward the sort of "gentleman" and "distant, educated / Smaddy [distant, educated Somebody]" who missed the ironies of her earlier poem. Even at the solemn first moment of universal suffrage, Bennett is unwilling to straightjacket the twists and turns, the multiply-directed ironies of her creole verse.

As creole ironist, Bennett resembles what the anthropologist Roger D. Abrahams has labeled the West Indian "man-of-words" or, more specifically, the "broad talker," who brings "the vernacular creole into stylized use, in the form of wit, repartee, and directed slander." Referring to West Indian joking practices like "giving rag, making mock, and giving fatigue," Abrahams attributes such aggressive joking and artful broad talk to Afro-Caribbean men. But as a major indigenous folklorist in her own right, Bennett both rectifies and exemplifies this ethnography: she proves broad talk to be a domain of female mastery, as demonstrated by the creole wordplay of her female persona. Although "Jamaica Oman [Woman]" often strategically disguises her verbal and physical power, she "know she strong" and "Outa read an eena yard deh pon / A dominate her part." Poetically adapting "labrish" or gossip and Anancy tales, Bennett shows these oral, yard-based, predominantly female discourses to be less animated by irony and mockey, wit and verbal display than male broad talk. Abrahams's analysis of broad talk helps to illuminate the social purpose of Bennett's carnivalesque poetry. "By playing the fool or by describing the antics of the trickster Anansi," according to Abrahams, "the broad talker therefore enacts something of an anti-ritual for the community; he produces a needed sense of classless liminality and serves as a creative channel for antisocial community motives." In her national role as poet—sometimes, indeed, her nationalistic national role—Bennett used irony to draw audiences from different classes into a humor-based liminal solidarity. "I think I speak to all Jamaica," she remarked, observing that "a large cross section of the community from the Governor-General to the man in the street can react to the lines and the situations I present. So I can't feel that I belong to any class or that I write for any class." Like Anansi stories, carnival performances, and West Indian gossip, Bennett's doubly ironic poetry recalls a form of joking behavior that Abrahams calls "permissable rudeness." Bennett would form a community of hearers and readers unafraid to laugh irreverently at the contradictions of either imperial or indigenous power and ceremony.

Despite—or perhaps because of—her extraordinary achievement in fusing such discourses as broad talk, gossip, and Anancy storytelling with formally accomplished verse, Bennett was barred from the ranks of West In-
Bennett thematizes language in self-reflexive poems that serve as a useful point of departure for a close reading of her work. Although oral or perfor-
Charles of the dialect used even by writers in the Oxford Book of English Verse, such as Chaucer, Burns, and Lady Grisel. In radio and stage performances, Bennett scoffs that the evolution of Standard English is described as “a derivation but Jamaica Dialect is corruption!”

We can pinpoint Bennett’s ironic strategies in “Bats a Killin’” by looking at a single verb and a pun. Repeated through much of the poem, the verb “kill” at first represents the vehemence and violence of Mas Charlie’s dialectophobias. But as the poem shows that the word’s objects would logically have to include not only Jamaican but other dialects and even the “wit,” “humor,” “variety,” and “Originality” of dialect verse (which now includes canonical English verse), “kill” becomes the ironic emblem of his imploding viewpoint. Far from narrowly targeting an ignorant group, his violent impulse turns out to be indiscriminate and finally self-directed:

An mine how yuh dah read dem English
Book deh pon yuh shell,
For de yuh drop a “h” yuh mighta
Hafy kill yuhself!

Bennett’s punning rhyme on “yuh shell” and “yuhself” brings the poem to its ironic climax. According to the Dictionary of Jamaican English, “Initial [h] is frequently lost in unemphatic contexts and used as a hypercorrection in emphatic contexts.” If Mas Charlie lets his guard down and drops an h, he might reveal himself as a Jamaican speaker, for all his hypercorrective efforts. In this climactic rhyme, the ironic disjunction between the poem’s dialectophile and dialectophobic perspectives is at its sharpest and wittiest. For this stanza, to drop an h would be to commit such a shameful mistake that he might have to redirect upon himself his ferocious desire to “kill” dialect.

Anancy-like in her delight, the poet suggests the opposite meaning by her rhyme: that to drop the h would be for Mas Charlie finally to climb down from his high “shell” and give life to his Jamaican “self,” just as her punning substitution of the letter h turns a space for his probably unread books into a word for identity. Verbally twinning these discordant perspectives, Bennett’s irony is the rhetorical correlate for the “perceptual split” of postcoloniality.

Who are the targets of the poem’s irony and who the co-conspirators? Humorously skewering a Jamaican mimic, Bennett deconstructs the linguistic distinctions and hierarchies that are the basis for Mas Charlie’s feeling “inferior” about Jamaican dialect and dialect verse. Her irony resists the empire that initially codified these distinctions and hierarchies, as well as the Jamaican middle-class power field that perpetuates them. Yet the irony is also aesthetically “complicitous” with imperial power and its local props, in that the poem’s terms of reference for undoing these distinctions remain the language and literature of the British Isles, from Shakespeare to Burns. Even the characteristically hybrid form of Bennett’s poem represents an ambivalent relation to empire, since its creole orthography and phonetics are emphatically Jamaican, but its ballad stanza and rhyme descend from British prototypes.

While targeting various “victims,” does Bennett’s irony also implicitly construct an amiable community? The first-order implied community is that of Jamaican creole speakers, joining the broad-talking poet in rudely laughing at the contradictions and pretensions of a mimic who forsakes his culture and language for the metropolitan centers. The power relations implicit in the poem’s two-story irony invert the colonial hierarchy, placing the subaltern perspective at the upper level and the enighted imperial perspective at the lower. Outside readers like me temporarily join this local community, as members of an international audience competent to read Bennett’s poem, perhaps with the help of dictionaries and commentaries and, thus, able to derive pleasure from the unmasking of Mas Charlie’s affectations and misguided assumptions about linguistic hierarchy. The community-building efficacy of Bennett’s irony becomes evident if we imagine a poem with the same viewpoint but without the irony. Earnestly attacking linguistic imperialisms and indigenous mimics, solemnly lauding the virtues of Jamaican English, such a poem would likely have squandered the robust spirit of Jamaican creole and failed to catch so many readers in its web, to adapt Wayne Booth’s metaphor to Anancy.

To dramatize the relation between Jamaican creole and Standard English in a variety of poems, Bennett brilliantly deploys strategies of linguistic juxtaposition. Other West Indian writers, as Katherine W. Wiggan observes, also “create comic situations on the level of language as the disparity between Creole and Standard English is great and the social distance helps to enhance any potentially comic situation”; the same could be said, moreover, of traditions in British music hall and calypso. Bakhtin theorizes such “double-voiced,” “double-accented,” and “double-languaged” writing as the “intentional hybrid”; two socio-linguistic consciousnesses... come together and consciously fight it out on the territory of the utterance.” The goal of intentional hybridization, according to Bakhtin, is “the illumination of one language by means of another.” In “Dry-Foot Bwoy” (meaning thin-legged or inexperienced boy), perhaps the best among these poems about language, a group of creole-speaking women unmask a boy who has adopted a pompous English diction and accent (1–2). The poem’s Anancy-
like speaker first pretends she thinks the imperially infatuated boy has caught a "bad foreign cole" and has "a bad sore-troat"; his English sounds like language emanating from a diseased body. Ultimately, she can only conclude from everything he says—"Oh, jolley, jolley!" "Actually, 'What, 'Oh deah!'—that it is foreign twang / De bwoy wasa put awn!" Bennett deflates the seeming superiority of English English by inscribing it in a creole poem as "foreign twang." In this ironic inversion of imperial hierarchies, the "Standard" comes to seem deviant and the creole becomes the norm. The speaker's furious responses to the boy demonstrate the potential vigor of creole and the relative paucity of the mimic's empty rhetoric:

No chat to me wid no hot pittata
Ena yuh mout!

No yuh name Cudjoe Scoop?
Always visit Nana kitchen an
Gi laugh fi gungoo soup!
[Give laughter for pea soup!]

Just as posed with banal and hollow cliches like "Actually," "Oh deah," "How silly," the metaphorization of pseudo-British as hot potato—impeded speech instances the creative vitality of creole. Similarly, the boy's abstractions contrast with a creole diction that etymologically evinces the ancestral roots he would deny: a common Afro-Caribbean name, "Cudjoe" is from the Twi "day-name for a male born on Monday"; "Nana" is Twi for grandparent; and "gungoo" is from the Kongo word for pea. Since "Cudjoe" can also mean "a heavy stick or cudgel," the word also hints at the force of the speaker's anger, as do the /k/ sounds and the emphatic masculine rhyme of Scoop/soup, especially in contrast to the boy's triple feminine rhyme: "How silly! / I don't think that I really / Understand you, actually." Much as the speaker etymologically reroots the boy, so too her references to family and to food expose emotional and bodily dependencies on a culture he would forget. In ironic contrast to the boy's pretensions, the broad-talking poem displays creole flexibility, terseness, and phonemic vibrancy.

Bennett dramatizes the consolidation of a community of creole speakers, brought together by their ironic exposure of the mimic boy. Gossip- or labrish-based knowledge, produced and exchanged in the female realm of the Jamaican yard, equips the speaker and her friends for their spirited rite of unmasking. As the boy storms out of the room, they all mockingly "bawl out alfa him" in his own empty imperial cliches: "Not going? What! Oh deah!"

Their ironic mimicry of his anglophile mimicry joins them in laughter "from dat night till tealh." Mimicry is a major issue in theories of both irony and of postcoloniality. Irony has been said always to involve an "echo," the as-if quotation of another person's words or thoughts, which the ironist pretends to sanction but repudiates. Whereas earnest mimicry, like the dry-foot boy's, tries to reproduce faithfully colonial discourse, ironic post-colonial mimicry, such as that of Bennett's mocking women, self-consciously opens the gap between signer and signified, making audible the disharmony between colonial original and postcolonial copy. Bennett anticipates similar scenes of collusive female irony in other postcolonial texts, such as the market girls' parodic appropriation of English-accented, anti-African patter in Soyinka's Death and the King's Horseman.

Demonstrating her versatility in handling dramatic monologue, Bennett reverses the dramatic situation of "Dry-Foot Bwoy" in "No Lickle Twang": here the speaker is the alazon, sharing a negative view of Jamaican English with the dry-foot boy and Mas Charlie, but her vivid creole ironizes her foolish sense of inferiority about her indigenous language (2–4). She is deeply ashamed that her son has returned after six months in the United States "not a piece better," especially because she has failed to "improve" his speech: "Not even lickle [little] language, bwoy? / Not even lickle twang?" Like Mas Charlie and the dry-foot boy, she has internalized the linguistic hierarchy that elevates the Standard English of the metropolitan center (now the United States) above the "bad," ecolocized talk at the margins. Yet as soon as she describes her shame—"Me proudness drop a grung [ground]!"—she unwittingly instances the expressiveness of Jamaican English. Deploring her son's failure to return with an American coat, the speaker again blindly illustrates the wit and metaphorical resourcefulness of creole: a "pass de riddim coat" is so called, according to Mervyn Morris, because it is conceived as "a coat which ends below (pass/past) the buttocks (de riddim/the rhythm section)." In contrast, her attempt to use a formal phrase from Standard English—when she refers to her "lamented son" lately returned from America—ironically backfires, verbally killing off her son instead of merelyexpressing her disapproval. Her blunders culminate when she tries to obviate her husband's imagined disappointment at returning home to find his son still speaks the same as ever:

Ef yuh waan please him, meek him tink
Yuh bring back someting new.
Yuh always call him "Pa"—dis evenin
When him come, seh "Poo."
Aspiring to the imaginary, superior discourse of empire, the speaker’s failed mimicry abases the father instead of honoring him, since “poo” can be “a baby-language word for faaces.”” By the trick of this last word, the Anancy-like poet brings to a climax the ironic disjunction between what the speaker means and what she says. The speaker is so caught up in the allure of metropolitan language that she is in danger of losing her grip on the social embeddedness of oral communication: she would prefer for her son’s speech to be incomprehensible, like her daughter’s, who after only a week in America “talk so nice now dat we have / De jouse [douce] fi understand.”

The remoteness of “Standard English” from the Jamaican experience recurs as the source of considerable humor in Bennett’s poetry. Bennett’s code switching enact this difference discursively, pasting together snatches of colonial song and poetry with creole gossip. In these collage-like poems, the “perceptual split” or “semantic disjunction” at the core of irony again functions as the literary equivalent for postcolonial doubleness. In “Bed-Time Story,” Bennett spices nursery rhymes into creole gossip or “labrish,” abruptly shifting from one linguistic register to the other (6). The speaker of the poem tries to put her daughter to sleep by telling her Anglo-American nursery rhymes and at the same time tries to convey salacious gossip to a friend. The soporific rhymes and eye-popping gossip cross and clash, forming accidental semantic and syntagmatic connections that only highlight the gap between the discourses. Their friction verbally inscribes the forced political conjunctions that initially occasioned those juxtapositions.

While reciting “Mary Had a Little Lamb” and “Jack and Jill,” the speaker also tries to tell her friend that Miss Mattie’s son Joe has impregnated a girl named May and that Miss Mattie’s daughter has given birth to a girl named Marta. Rhyme and meter weave the Anglo-American rhymes into the creole, only to make their distance even more apparent:

Mary had a little lamb
—Miss Mattie li bwoy Joe
Go kick May slap pon hat doorway—
His feet was white as snow.

An everywhere dat Mary went
—Oim Molder never know.
An when she ear she ongie [only] sch—
De lamb was sure to go.

The innocent world of Mary and her little lamb seems impossibly remote from the sexual encounter the speaker wants to relate. A signifier of this re-moteness, snow is unknown in Jamaica, but numerous West Indian authors relate having to memorize English and American verses about this alien meteorological event. Imbedded in this context, the colonial nursery rhyme comes to stand for a fraudulent image of pastoral virtue and simplicity. The salaciousness of the Jamaican gossipironizes this false purity, even as the Anglo-American nursery rhyme ironizes the gossip. The protestation of snow-white purity ironically confirms that Joe has penetrated not just May’s “doorway.” Similarly, “Jack and Jill,” recontextualized within a story about birth out of wedlock, turns into a rhyme in which crown breaking is sexual intercourse, or “tumbling.” Syntactically, lines of nursery rhyme promiscuously connect with adjacent lines in creole, so that Anglo-American rhyme and Jamaican gossip ironically warp or twist, amplify or undercut each other’s meaning. Already an overtly “mixed” discourse, the creole in Bennett’s poem further coalesces creole. Rhetorically echoing the fractured, jump-cut, collage-like experience of postcoloniality, the diglossic disjunctions of the poem intimates the difficulty of raising children in a world so linguistically and culturally split.

In “Sammy Intres,” Bennett humorously runs together creole gossip not with children’s verses but with “high art” poetry (7–8). Encouraged by a teacher to take an interest in her son’s studies, Sammy’s mother tries to memorize a poem that her son has been forced to learn. Longfellows “Excelsior,” intercuts with the mother’s conversation, “Excelsior” metamorphoses into another ironic signifier of the remoteness of such colonial verses from the Jamaican experience. Here again the “snow an ice” of the poem remind us of the strangeness of this imposed discourse in the West Indian context, like the “banner wid de strange device” borne by Longfellow’s hero. The speaker refers to “singing wid—de accent / Of dat unknown tongue,” not realizing that she is commenting on her own efforts at colonial ventriloquism. The primary target of the irony in both this poem and “Bed-Time Story” is the Jamaican speaker who recites rhymes either that she cannot grasp or that accidentally comment upon her gossip in ways that escape her. Thus, in a certain sense, each benighted speaker could be seen as the “victim” of a colonial discourse that betrays her ignorance. But to read the ironic resistance this way would be to miss the implied targets of the irony—namely, the colonial power that imposed these English verses and the local elite that continued to perpetuate their enslavement as a discourse higher and better than indigenous bed-time Anancy tales or poems. Bennett’s broad-talking irony is doubly resistant, beholden to neither power field.

In Bennett’s self-reflexive poems about poetry, language, and postcolo-
Theorists indicate that puns share with irony in a "simultaneity" and "superimposition of meanings." Puns can be conceived in terms of a "homonymic collision," in which "the messages converge and clash in an irresolvable dislocation of meaning." Such a description of colliding, clashing, dislocated meanings is especially evocative in the postcolonial context. The primary target of the poem's ironic punning on "pass" is Miss Jane's daughter, who has been sent to the United States for an education. She proudly writes to her parents: "Fi seh she fail her exam, but / She passin dere fi white!" In the course of the poem, the word "pass" clicks back and forth between its sociocademic and its racial meanings:

She couldn't pass tru college
So she try fi pass fi white.

She passin wid her work-mate-dem,
She passin wid her boss,
An a nice white bwoy she love dah gwan
Wid her like seh she pass!

Some people tink she pass B.A.,
Some tink she pass D.R.—
Wait till dem fine out seh she ongle [only]
Pass de colour bar.

In its semantic doubleness, the word "pass" enacts the duplicity of the daughter's racial passing: it seems to be one thing but then suddenly and unpredictably turns into another. That is, the strange passage of "pass" from one meaning to another is the verbal correlative for the undecidability of her racial identity. Miscegenation has resulted in the daughter's racial doubleness, which Bennett in turn recasts in the simultaneity and superimposition of her postcolonial irony. While the humor of the poem is constructed around the differences between passing in the theaters of race, the academy, sexual relations, and social class, the circulation of the word from one realm to another highlights the false parities between one set of hierarchies and boundaries and another. To fail or pass an exam, to win or lose as a sexual object, to get ahead or fall behind in the economy — the pun on "pass" reveals how the daughter conceives all of these as being symmetrical with and comparable to failing or succeeding at being white. In the poem's parody of the colonialist mentality, all these hierarchies are linked, confused, and erroneously seen as equivalent, as suggested by Bennett's telling rhyme:

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Although many Jamaicans deny paying attention to skin color, race continues to shape the destiny of individuals and groups in Jamaica, as in much of the West Indies. According to Aunty Roachy, Bennett's frequent radio persona, "de real fac a de matter when it come to class an colour ena Jamaica is dat plenty people still a judge dem one anudder class by de colour a dem skin!" Bennett wrote a series of sharply ironic poems about race after the end of the Second World War, when the Allied fight against ethnic hatred elsewhere, the treatment of interracial "war babies," the increase in emigration, and the upsurge in Jamaican nationalism made the contradictions in Anglo-American and Jamaican thinking about race increasingly evident. As a serious and consequential matter, race might not seem to admit readily of ironic treatment, but irony, like race, works through oppositions, reversals, and symmetries. Bennett can thus hammer an ironic wedge into the racial binary, splitting it open in poem after poem. The ironic force of her poetry about race is directed primarily at the racial distinctions, false symmetries, and hierarchies originally put in place by colonial regimes in Jamaica, dating back to the Spanish conquest. But, to her mind, black nationalism perpetuates such racialized thinking, even as it inverts its values. Her poems about race help to elucidate further the powerful connections between irony as a double-voiced rhetorical structure and the postcolonial inheritance — specifically, the experience of racial division, hierarchy, mixture, and passing.

One of Bennett's most humorous, if painful, poems on race, "Pass fi White" (1949), is brilliantly built around a pun on the word "pass" (101–2).
Jane get bex [vexed], seh she sen de gal
Fi learn bout education,
F. look like seh de gal gawn weh
Gawn work pon her complexion.

While the ironic edge of the poem is clearly directed against Jane’s daughter, the girl may be no more than what theorists of irony call a “pseudo-victim,” since Bennett attacks not so much her as the colonizer’s racial hierarchies, which make possible the girl’s confusion and distortion of values. Indeed, the father’s perspective on her racial passing suggests that there may even be method in her seeming foolishness:

De gal puppa dah laugh an seh
 ‘I serve Merica right—
Five year back dem Jim-Crow him, now
Dem pass him pickney [child] white.

Him dah boas all bout de districk
How him daughter is fus-class,
How she smarter dan American
An over deh dah pass!

Surely the father here, too, is the butt of the poem’s irony, since he can’t see that his desire for revenge ends up reinforcing the racial hierarchy that victimized him in the first place. Yet perhaps he and his daughter are also taking an Anancy-like delight in fooling a system that treats whiteness as socially superior and that confuses racial, academic, and social hierarchies. Possibly because of the more graded, if still racist, hierarchy of color in Jamaica, the father perceives the falsity of the severe racial binary in the United States. The daughter seems to be both the dupe of racism and the dupe of American racists, both stooge and stealthy manipulator. The dual irony of the poem is directed both at home and abroad, both at the daughter’s internalized racism and at the American racism that rewards it. The community of readers formed by this irony sees through both the girl’s misguided emphasis on racial over other forms of “improvement” and the racist system that rhymes “education” with “her complexion.”

If “Pass fi White” mocks the desire of Afro-Caribbeans to assimilate to whiteness and repudiate blackness, “Back to Africa” is no less ironic in its treatment of the reverse desire: to “return” to Africa and repress other aspects of West Indian identity (104–5). Written in 1947, Bennett’s poem suggests that the “Back to Africa” movement, strong at this time in Jamaica, may also fall into simplistic racial polarities, merely inverting the essentialism of colonialist racism. In its final stanza, the poem leans heavily on the word “homen- lan,” ironizing both the concept of an originary, ancestral home in Africa and its Eurocentric prototype in the concept of an imperial “homen- lan”; to go either to Europe or to Africa is to “Go a foreign,” since a Jamaican’s “homen- lan” is “right deh.” From the start of the poem, Bennett humorously deconstructs the Garveyite notion of the return to African origins by literalizing “coming from” and “going back”:

Back to Africa, Miss Mattie?
Yuh no know what yuh dah seh?
Yuh haft come from somewhe fus
Before yuh go back deh!

An Afrocentric alazon, Miss Mattie is betrayed by the very words she uses to describe her racial quest for origins: not having come from Africa, she can’t very well go back. If Miss Mattie were to follow consistently the logic of ancestral return, she would have to acknowledge, the poem indicates, not only her African but also her English, Jewish, French, and indeed Jamaican-born forebears. If she goes to Africa on the basis of her face’s “great resemblance” with Africans’, then, by the same token, blue-eyed, white Americans should return to England. Aby exploiting the symmetrical structure of the ballad quatrains, Bennett wields the hyperlogical ironies of an eighteenth-century wit.

Suddenly shifting strategies, Bennett amusingly piles up a series of onomatopoetic words to suggest phonemically the massive confusion that would be caused if all people tried to return to their place of ancestral origin:

What a devil of a bump-an-bore,
Rig-jig an palam-pam
El de whole worl start fi go back
Whe dem great grampa come from!
[What a devil the pushing and jostling,
The lively crowdendance and noisy confusion . . . .]

The echoic form of these words for confusion and dance also suggests bouncing back, return to origins. But since each echo transforms the preceding phoneme, these words also hint that no return is without change and revision. Bennett ironizes the black nationalist idea of an essential racial identity, traceable to a single place, by pitting it against the ineluctable reality of racial mixture and displacement throughout the world, particularly in
Jamaica. Her own lively intermingling of the French “parlez-vous” with Creole words like “Bun Grung” [a place name meaning Burnt Ground], of elevated English words like “countenance” and “resemblance” with homely Jamaican “yuh” and “deh,” suggests at the level of diction the very creolization and postcoloniality that she thematizes.

Whether using interracial blending for ironic leverage against quests for pure origins or denials of mixed origins, Bennett treats racial mixture with a humor that contrasts with the agonized meditations of other West Indian poets, most famously Walcott’s “A Far Cry from Africa” and “The Schooner Flight.” Witness her poem “Colour-Bar,” about the “torment” of the “mulatto” or “red-kin nayga”:

> Me sorry fe po’ red-kin, for
> Dem don’ know wey dem stan’
> One grampa w’ite, an’ t’oder grampa
> Big, black, African.

> Wat a debil of a mix-up!
> Wat a dickuns of a pligty!
> Dem sey dat dem noh nayga,
> Nayga sey dat dem noh w’ite.”

Bennett is no less aware than other Afro-Caribbean poets of the “plight” of the “mulatto,” but she satirizes the racial divisions and social demarcations that create this predicament. Here, the speaker inverts the typical social stratification by taking pity on those normally considered higher on the racial totem pole in Jamaica. She is relieved to have been “hawn nayga,” solidly on one side of the “colour-bar”: unlike redskin blacks, she suffers neither demeaning desires to affiliate with whiteness (“bex dat dem noh w’ite” [vexed that they’re not white]), nor fears of being rejected by whites, nor discomfort with her blackness:

> Wen red-kin hitch too much pon w’ite
> Wite peple tun dem back,
> An dem fraid fe talk to black people
> Less people tink dem black.

In another 1949 poem, “White Pickney,” Bennett again addresses the fate of the racially mixed: “Dem half a dis an half a dat, / Dem neider dose nor dese—” (98). But her homely vernacular, and in particular the mechanical symmetries implied by her consonances and alliterations (“dis” and “dat,” “dose nor dese”), evacuates any tragic seriousness. This poem’s improbable

plot hilariously fuses the denial of and the quest for origins. The speaker has read in the newspapers that after the war, “Five tousan black baby dah lef / Britain fi Merica.” Here is the obverse of the Afrocentric theme of return to origins—namely, being returned to “black” origins by the farce of British racism. The irony of the poem centers on a false symmetry between the fate of these offspring of black American fathers and white British mothers and the Jamaican offspring of white fathers and black mothers. The speaker reasons that if the “war babies” are classified as racially the same as their father and returned to their paternal home, then, by the same logic, Miss Mary’s mixed race daughter should be classified “white” and sent to England, presumed homeland of her father:

> Ef dem-deh baby mumma call
> Dem “black” den is awright,
> Since him puppa is white man,
> Fi call fi-yuh pickney “white.”

The poem mocks the speaker’s dim understanding of the racial binary, which, far from even dividing mixed race children as black and white according to their paternity, labels them all black. Sure of her erroneous inferences, she jubilantly offers to help Miss Mary pack up her “baby tings”: “newspaper tell me broad / sch dat yuh baby white.” But the poem suggests that to label the baby “black” is just as false as labeling it “white.” The Afro-Jamaican speaker is again the pseudo-victim of the poem’s irony. Her innocent reasoning reveals the harsh illogic at the heart of the imperially drawn racial order. It demonstrates that this order depends on symmetrical oppositions—black and white, home and abroad—and on asymmetrical hierarchies that warp and weight these differences.

While Bennett is skeptical toward black nationalist and white imperialist assumptions about origins, toward Afrocentric and pass-for-white suppression of racial heterogeneity, her irony does not always dissolve collective political identifications. As the emphatically creolized language of her poetry suggests, Bennett also wants to affirm Afro-Jamaican identity. Many of her poems enact a delicate balance between skepticism and pride toward the African inheritance in Jamaica. The poem “Nayga Yard” (1948) favorably expounds on African heritage and accomplishment in Jamaica (102–4). Here again Bennett satirizes the essentialist racial thinking behind the Jamaican diaspora, “Dese days when white man comin home / An nayga gwine back.” But using the West Indian concept of “yard” to cast the Jamaican nation as a collective home, the speaker asks, “Is who-for-yard Jamaica is?” Cit-
Thomas Hardy uses the tensions of verbal irony to perform in language the seeming contradictions of history. In her stunning poem “Colonization in Reverse,” Bennett ironically superimposes the midcentury Jamaican migration to England on the three-hundred-year English settlement of Jamaica. Even the word “colonization” in her title verbally enacts the irony of the historical “situation,” yoking together the empire’s forcible and exploitative occupation with the economic migration of Jamaicans seeking to rise out of their colonial poverty.

The first wave of mass Jamaican migration to Britain began on 21 June 1948, when the Empire Windrush arrived near London with 492 Jamaicans. Encouraged by the postwar labor shortage in England and the scarcity of work at home, 300,000 Jamaicans followed before the doors closed in 1962, many of them skilled and semi-skilled workers, braving the journey to the “motherland” in search of better economic opportunity. England’s official national policy allowed for the free entry of all “British” subjects. But the British government betrayed intense anxiety over the arrival of “coloured colonials,” assumed to be racially and socially inferior to whites: officials referred to the Windrush’s landing as an “incursion” that should not be followed by further “influxes.”

Although colonial education in the British West Indies had encouraged the colonized to conceive of themselves as British and of Great Britain as their “home,” they encountered upon migration a sharply different attitude, which defined black or West Indian Britishness as a separate sphere of national identity from that of white British subjects. Formally British, Jamaican immigrants found themselves classified as “alien” intruders.

In Bennett’s “Colonization in Reverse,” England’s apprehension implicitly shadows the speaker’s ebullient tone (106–7). The poem humorously turns on its head the British alarm over the Jamaican “invasion”:

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What a joyful news, Miss Mattie;
Ah feel like me heart gwine burs—
Jamaica people colonizin
Englan in reverse.

By de hundred, by de tounan,
From country an from town,
By de ship-load, by de plane-load,
Jamaica is Englan boun.
```
Dem a pour out a Jamaica.
Everybody future plan
Is hi get a big-time job
An settle in de motherlan.

What a islan! What a people!
Man an woman, ole an young
Jussa pack dem bag an baggage
An tun history upside dung!

In another ironic twist, the speaker's euphoria inverts a long history of Jamaican bitterness over the violence of empire: that she greets the news of colonization with glea is a striking historical paradox. The migratory bursting of geographic boundaries finds its bodily equivalent in the speaker's feeling that her heart will burst for joy. At the level of the poetic line, the strong caesurae and syntactic parallelism in the second and fourth stanzas reinforce the sense of mirror-like inversion, as if the poem were an hourglass. These rhetorical, rhythmical, and stanzaic symmetries form the scaffolding for the poem's ironies of historical reversal.

At the level of the word, the poem ironically repossesses the rhetoric of colonization, starting with the word "colonize" itself. To call this influx of Jamaicans into Britain a "colonization" is to ironize the exaggerated British sense of the migration as a threat to English identity. Bennett's verbal irony decolonizes the word "colonize," appropriating it for the use of the colonized in their triumphant countercolonization of the "motherland." Similarly, to "settle" is no longer the prerogative of the colonizers; the colonized now furnish England with new inhabitants as the English once did Jamaica. To demonstrate verbally how Jamaicans "tun history upside dung" after three centuries of British rule, Bennett turns the language of colonization upside down. Jamaicans are "shippin off" their "countryman" to "immigrate an populate / De seat a de Empire." The word "populate" here ironically echoes its colonial usage, going back to the sixteenth century: "To furnish or supply (a country, etc.) with inhabitants; to people." Perhaps less obviously, the speaker's exclamations wittily recall the language of colonial "discovery": "What a islan! What a people!" Seeming to be about joy at the Jamaican "discovery" of England, the referent of the line pivots from metropole back to colony when, in a further reversal, the next line describes Jamaicans preparing to migrate. These mirrorings, inversions, and verbal echoes humorously focus the differences between the imperial occupation and the peaceful postcolonial migration.

Mocking the British colonial enterprise and fears of the Jamaican "invasion," Bennett also turns her irony on her fellow Jamaicans, now that they have become postcolonial settlers. Characteristically suspicious of lofty pretensions swaddled in abstract nouns, Bennett pokes fun at Jamaican profiteers who "open up cheap-fare- / To-Englan agency," ostensibly to "show dem loyalty." In "shippin off / Dem countryman like fire," these travel agents are no more pure in their motives than were their supposedly high-minded British counterparts. In an ironic "turnabout" of Jamaican history, the exploited now exploit their former exploiters, as vivified by Bennett's colorful metaphor: "Jamaica live fi box bread / Out a English people mout."

Stunning to play on the word "settle," Bennett ironically uses the word in two more senses: "Some will settle down to work / An somi will settle fide dole." The migration of the word from one meaning to another—"to establish a colony," "to take up residence," and finally "to be content with"—is emblematic of the shifts in the direction of the poem's irony. The Jamaican settlement of England couldn't be as exploitative as the English settlement of Jamaica, yet neither is it altruistic.

A character named Jane exemplifies the reverse exploitation of the colonizers: she is paid

Two pounds a week fi seek a job
Dat suit her dignity.

Me seh Jane will never fine work
At de rate how she dah look
For all day she stay pon Aunt Fan couch
An read love-story book.

From Jamaica's imperial masters, Jane appropriates not only money but also highfalutin welfare rhetoric about one's "dignity." People like Jane, the poem suggests, are doing unto others what was done unto them. But in a further twist, the once-jubilant tone of the poem goes a little sour: economic parasitism may be debilitating and unattractive, whoever commits it. Having highlighted differences between Jamaican migration and British imperialism, Bennett inverts the emphasis of her ironic counterpart, wondering if colonization in reverse may resemble colonization plain and simple, though on a vastly different scale. In a final, Anancy-like turnabout, Bennett recurs in the poem's last quatrain to the anxieties of the imperial center. Her tongue twirling in her cheek, she offers her mock sympathy for English fears of being swamped by black Britons:
What a devilment a Englan!
Dem face war an brave de more;
But ah wonderin how dem gwine stan
Colonizin in reverse.71

The rhetoric of reversal, at its strongest in the doubly ironic structure of “Colonization in Reverse,” is central to Bennett’s poetics more generally. Her irony oscillates in the gap between a series of mirrorlike oppositions—between colonizer and colonized, center and metropole, white and black, dialect and standard. As we have seen, Bennett marshalls a variety of poetic devices to encode formally these oppositions and inversions, from the symmetrical structure of the ballad stanza and lexical antitheses to syntactic repetitions and verbal echoes. Indeed, her poetry more often looks like a hall of mirrors than like John Donne’s “little rooms.” In her array of ironic inversions, Bennett locates a language and poetic form to express that sameness-with-a-difference at the heart of postcolonial experience.

The rhetorical reversals of Bennett’s emigration and independence poetry crystallize a question that has long been important in discussions of postcoloniality—namely, the inverse relationship between colonizer and colonized, particularly during nationalist struggles for independence. Franz Fanon theorized this relationship in terms of reciprocal violence: “The violence of the colonial regime and the counter-violence of the native balance each other and respond to each other in an extraordinary reciprocal homogeneity.”72 Because the Jamaican struggle for independence was itself relatively nonviolent, Bennett is less often concerned with the violence of this “reciprocal homogeneity,” revealing its many other manifestations. But in one poem, “My Dream,” violent nationalist reaction comes to the fore (112–13). Written in the decade before independence, “My Dream” is a dream allegory of resistance to the British empire. A humble washerwoman, personifying Jamaica, watches indignantly as Cousin Rose, or imperial England, greedily devours abundant provisions and “never gi me none!” Cousin Rose then starts to “tease,” “taunt,” and hit the washerwoman. The speaker’s feelings reflect the upsurge of Jamaican nationalism in 1949 and after:

An when de lick-dem bun me, an
Ah feel me jaw dah swell,
Me temper bwire, me vengeance grow,
Me heart bawl out “Rebel!”

Acting out nationalist impulses, the washerwoman wants to reciprocate Cousin Rose’s violence, so she “start miltreat de clothes.” Up to this point,

the poet’s sympathy has been entirely on the side of the oppressed Jamaicans, but once the washerwoman tears up the clothes, merely provoking Cousin Rose to laughter, the speaker begins to look like the butt of the poem’s irony. As Fanon would write, the violence of empire goes “far beyond in horror and magnitude any answer the natives can make”: the washerwoman’s violence is symmetrical without being equivalent.73

But in contrast to Fanon, Bennett wonders if this reciprocal violence in the Jamaican context, instead of being cleansing and purifying, is self-defeating. After her revolt, the speaker vividly pictures her island nation as victimized by both colonizer and herself, floating helplessly in a toxic sea. Her sudden recognition of the mutual suffering in Jamaica and war-ravaged England finally lifts her out her despair:

Ah feel just like a bug een a
Big pool a D.D.T.
Den ah hear a vice seh, “Keep heart:
Yuh no wusser off dan she.”

Dog a sweat but long hair hide i,
Mout a laugh, but heart a leap!
Everything wha shine no gore piece.
An me jump out a me sleep.

The strikingly divergent readings of the poem’s end by Bennett’s principal editors help to illustrate the poem’s ambivalence toward both imperialist suppression and reciprocal nationalist violence. For Rex Nettleford, the final proverbs are about the washerwoman’s and, hence, Jamaica’s concealed “undercurrent of dissatisfaction.”74 Mervyn Morris reads them as referring instead to Britain’s hidden weakness after World War II, which makes Cousin Rose not so different from the struggling washerwoman.75 Bennett’s dual irony supports both readings. Thematizing protective concealment, the proverbs themselves exemplify Anancy-like disguise, as if the poet were aiming at deliberate occlusion, to remain inassimilable to nationalistic or imperialist dogma.76 Bennett’s allegorical figuration further imbeds the meaning of the poem in layers of hermeneutic disguise.

Allegory, disguise, opacity—these are key features not just of Bennett’s poem but of creole itself, according to Edouard Glissant, who refers to the necessity of furtive communication among slaves to explain why creole “has at its origin” a “conspiracy to conceal meaning.”77 If so, then Bennett’s sly strategies of saying and unsaying, of ironic and unpredictable turnabout, are true to a “counterpoetics” that extends well beyond her personal aesthetic.
The coming moment is one to be pondered by every Jamaican with humility and with pride. It is the hour of our coming of age. It is the hour in which we will begin our greatest political adventure. Poetically endowing its prose with syntactic layering and delay, with conflagrations in heaven and earth, the editorial engulfs all Jamaicans in an unambivalent joy and pride at the moment of independence. Every inch of social space in Jamaica reflects the “national centre.” The symbols of nationhood—the anthem, flag, and stadium—gather all Jamaicans into a single identity; indeed, later in the same issue of the Sunday Gleaner, these and other national symbols were given a full-page pictorial spread. There is nothing accidental in the emergence of the new Jamaica: at midnight, “the efforts of many men will have climaxed with achievement” and “culminated in the attainment of independence.” This is not a day for equivocation or criticism. As another writer puts it: “Today is no bad day to count our virtues. Tomorrow is time enough to acknowledge our defects. But until the flag breaks at the masthead a few seconds after midnight, we can justifiably indulge our proper pride and take note of the positive qualities we possess and from which we hope to create an original nation.” Joining the univocal chorus of celebration are the official congratulations not only from the queen but also from Khrushchev, Chiang Kai-Shek, and many other world leaders, official letters reprinted on the front pages of the newspaper.

At this moment of political decolonization, literature can itself function as a symbol of newfound and rightful independence alongside the flag, the anthem, and the stadium, as indicated by the publication (and review in the Sunday Gleaner) of the Independence Anthology of Jamaican Literature. But Bennett’s poetry, though also often published in the same newspaper, seems irreducible to this symbolic economy. How does her poetry about Jamaican independence compare with the independence poetry and prose printed in the Gleaner, governed by the historiographic rhetoric of culminating achievement and destiny, by ideological principles of nationalist pride and idealization, and by the symbolic subordination of difference in totemic emblems of unity? Though herself a powerful cultural force for Jamaican decolonization, Bennett responds to Jamaica’s grand moment of political independence with ironic guile and Anancy-like complexity, turning inside out the dominant rhetoric, ideology, and symbolism of the moment. Her fine sequence of poems on independence reveals Bennett to be no less ironic in her treatment of Jamaica’s official self-representation than she is of the British empire.

“Jamaica Elevate” recalls but deranges the rhetoric of the decolonizing
struggle and destiny (113–15). Compare this speaker's historiography with the Gleaner:

So much tings happen so fast an quick
Me head still feel giddy!
Biff, Referendum! Biff, Election!
Baps, Independence drop pon we!

Far from being a glorious achievement and attainment of Jamaican heroes, independence is almost accidental, dropping like fruit from a mango tree. Not that the speaker is immune to national pride. She seems impressed by the international chorus of “congratulation / From de folks of high careers” and glad that Jamaica’s politicians “Dah rub shoulder an dip mout / Eena heavy world affairs.” But her conflation of metaphors for such contact humorously literalizes and thus deflates them. In reporting how Jamaica responds to other nations, she uses verbs that betray her newly bloated sense of national prerogative: “we meck” world bodies “know” we will join them, “we meck Merica know” we support them, and “tell Russia,” “tell Englan” we dislike or disdain them. But in her overidentification with the newly independent nation, this alazon exaggerates both her own power and the Jamaican state’s in independence. “Any nation dat we side wid,” she claims, “Woulda never need to fret,” though all she can enlist for the national defense is “half a brick,” a “broken bottle,” and a “coocoomaca stick.” Her credibility undone by this contradiction, the speaker further contradicts herself by swinging suddenly from belligerence to pacifism. Years earlier, after the 1944 Constitution gave new power to Jamaican political leaders, Bennett was already satirizing such delusions of grandeur, as in this scathing quatrain:

1 is de rulin powah, gal!
1 is Authority!
1 meck dis country jump wid joy,
Or rock wid misari!

Parodying the collective identification with symbols of independent nationhood, as in the Gleaner, the speaker of “Jamaica Elevate” boasts the key indices of Jamaica’s newfound autonomy, including the stadium constructed in time to be the ceremonial site for transferring sovereignty from Britain to the new state. Obsessively repeated, the word “owna” suggests not only her identification—“our own”—but her possessive sense that she now “owns a” series of powerful new totems:

We got we owna Stadium,
We owna Bank fi save,
We owna National Anthem
An we owna flag a wave.
We owna Governor-General,
A true-bawn Native Son... .

For the speaker, the new governor general is the most impressive of all these symbols of nationhood, chiefly because of his blackness. At first she mistakes his newspaper picture for that of a family member, Bada John-John:

De fus day im picture print, de
Paper drop outa me han;
Me heart go boom, me bawl out
“Somethin’ bad happen de John!”

Humorously playing on the racist homogenization of black faces, Bennett mocks the speaker’s foolish misidentification, as well as her assumption that a black face in the news is bad news. Only at this point does the speaker realize she is literate, unable to read the caption. But Bennett’s irony is once again double-edged, directed not only at the speaker but at the racist colonialism that has made a black face in the newspaper so rare that it looks like a family member’s in trouble—a colonialism that has made a black political leader’s face nearly inconceivable for an Afro-Jamaican.

As this and other examples suggest, Bennett’s independence poetry does not accord easily with received histories of postcolonial literature and decolonization. In the 1950s and 1960s, according to a chronicler, “Many writers in English from the African and Caribbean colonies took up the call to include literature as a moving spirit in the nationalist struggle. Anti-colonial resistance became for them a rallying cause, an enabling context, and a local subject.” Surely Bennett’s poetry is broadly “nationalist” insofar as it indigenizes literary language, personifies vibrant local voices, and ironizes colonial domination. Yet the independent nation is hardly the telos of the poetry. In “Independence Dignity,” Bennett celebrates independence and at the same time pries open the ironies of the national celebrations (116–17). Implicitly critiquing the official celebrations, she stages a poetic celebration that is richly ambivalent, concerned to preserve a space for the independence of the poet’s and other individuals’ nonconformist irony and doubt, even at a moment of massively orchestrated collective feeling. As in “Jamaica Elevate,” the poem takes the form of oral news-telling to someone who is
missing the actual events, thus overtly competing with the official print news. The as-if “reporter” relates to Cousin Min how “Independence Celebration / Capture Jamaica.” For Bennett, the moment of decolonization is ironically one of capture: the nation is recolonized by the fomented fervor for independence. Not that such ironic insight should be mistaken for pro-colonialism. Bennett parodies the colonially inherited poem “The Burial of Sir John Moore,” a Napoleonic war elegy by Charles Wolfe:

Not a drum was heard, not a funeral note,
As his corse to the rampart we hurried,
Not a soldier discharged his farewell shot
O'er the grave where our hero we buried.

Bennett humorously transfigures a death lament into a nativity ode. She tropes the empire as death and Jamaica as birth:

Yuh wan see how Jamaica people
Rise to de occasion
An deestant up demself fi greet
De birt a dem new nation!

Not a stone was fling, not a samfi sting,
Not a soul gwan bad an lowrated;
Not a fight bruck out, not a bad-wud shout
As Independence was celebrated.

Reincarnating the threnodic rhetoric of anaphora, negation, and caesura, Bennett borrows the colonial poem, the excessively reverential and conformist spectacle of the independence celebration, as well as her people's frequent stone flinging, fighting, and cursing.

Yet the poem is not immune to the collective joys of independence day:

Concert outa street an lane an park
Wid big-time acs performin,
An we dance outa street
From night till soon a mornin.

The polysyndeton “street an lane an park” suggests the sweeping scope of the shared revelry. So too does the prepositional reach of “From night till soon a mornin,” a rhetorical pattern reenacted as spatial expanse in “From Packy Piece to Macka Town.” The poem verbally reenacts this spreading joy. But Bennett worries lest this collectivism be so all-encompassing as to defeat the very principle of independence being celebrated. Newspaper advertise-

ments linked banking, real estate, alcohol, and many other products and services to Jamaican independence, a commodification that Bennett humorously questions:

Independence pen an pencil,
Cup an saucer, glass an tray;
Down to Independence baby bawn
Pon Independence Day.

How does Bennett's independence poem distinguish itself from these independence products? By opening up a space for ironic reflection on just such incongruities as the unindependent celebration of independence. The epistrophe repetition of “ting” (thing) in the line “Everying was Independen ting” suggests the paradoxical risk of hemming in independence. The preposition “up,” repeated with finite verbs throughout the poem, suggests verticality; the collective attempt of the Jamaican people to rise above their usual selves in accordance with the pride and decorum of the occasion: they “deestant [decent] up demself” and the lights “preety up” and “sweeten up” the crowd; unruly Jane “stan up straight,” and lazy Joe “Serious up him face,” both of them to sing the national anthem. But this temporary upward movement builds to suggest the inevitable slump into normalcy that will follow. Bennett constructs the last two lines of the poem out of four substantives, suggesting that everything and everyone in Jamaica freezes in a temporary pose:

Jamaica Independence
Celebration dignity.

In brief, while Bennett's poem shares in Jamaica’s joy over independence, it resists the totalizing and programmatic orchestration of univocal affect. Bennett knew that this joy was complicated for many Jamaicans by other feelings, such as regret over the collapse of the short-lived West Indies Federation (1958–61), elegized in her poem “Dear Departed Federation.” In contrast to the nationalist subordination of all human difference in the seamless identity of the new state, Bennett reimagines the individual acts of self-overcoming required for this evanescent conformity. “Teet an tongue was all united,” she writes, “Heart an soul was hans an glove,” but these humorously conflated idioms for undifferentiated cohesion indicate the suspect nature of attempts to merge with the homogeneous, mass, fabricated identity of the postcolonial nation. As Lloyd Brown remarks, Bennett gives expression in her poetry to the “Jamaican's national consciousness” not by offering “an
overview of a collective consciousness" but by expressing "the contradictions, self-conflicts and uncertainties" within and among individuals. 91

"Independence finds a ready Jamaica," proclaimed a headline in the independence issue of the Sunday Gleaner. 92 The article returns to this claim ever and over, as if by repetition to convince the author and the readers of its veracity. "After 300 years of tutelage in the British way of life and in the development of a parliamentary democracy," begins the piece, "Jamaica is ready for independence." Independence means a state of political maturity and self-sufficiency. "Socially, too," the article goes on, "Jamaica is ready for independence," because of its mature racial and religious tolerance. "Economically, Jamaica is also ready for independence," because of its industry and raw materials. "With all these assets, spiritual as well as material, sophisticated Jamaica is ready for independence." But in the most compact poem in the series, "Independance," Bennett allows herself to wonder about the nation's readiness (117–19):

Independance wid a vengeance!
Independance raisin Cain!
Jamaica start grow beard, ah hope
We chin can stan de strain!

Instead of adopting a pose of unflinching self-assurance, Bennett gives voice to doubts about the preparedness and fate of the postcolonial nation. Literalizing the clichéd association of national with personal maturity, Bennett humorously depicts independence as a newly sprouted beard that a man's chin may or may not be able to support. She makes visible the masculinist assumptions behind the gendered rhetoric of national development and self-sufficiency.

The prime minister of Jamaica, Sir Alexander Bustamante, referred in his independence message to the "heavy responsibilities ahead of us. Independence means the opportunity for us to frame our own destiny and the need to rely on ourselves in so doing. It does not mean a licence to do as we like. It means work and law and order." 93 "What Independance mean" is also a question that Bennett joins in her poem:

Mattie seh it mean we facety.
Stan up pon we dignity.
An we don't allow nobody
Fi teck liberty wid we.

Independance is we nature
Born an bred in all we do.

An she glad fi see dat Government
Tun independant to.

The word "facety," meaning impudent and cheeky, continues the face trope from earlier in the poem (the bearded chin). If the prime minister hoped that independence would mean not only self-reliance but orderliness, Mattie projects her own more assertive, brash, even overbearing self-conception onto the new nation. For her, independence is independence from disrespect and imposition. Like the speakers in Bennett's other independence poems, Mattie undergoes an inflation in her self-conception, seeing her fantasies of personal power and heedlessness fulfilled in the political realm. Much as the speaker of "Jamaica Elevate" makes bullying use of verbs like "tani" and "meck know," so too Mattie wants to "tell" the personified "map" how to represent her nation, and implicitly herself:

She hope dem caution worl-map
Fi stop draw Jamaica small,
For de lickle speck cyaan show
We independantness at all!

Moresomever we must tell map dat
We don't like we position—
Please kindly teck we out a sea
An draw we in de ocean.

The poem mocks Mattie's naivete about maps, but it also suggests that behind each of her foolish assumptions is, paradoxically, a shrewd insight. While Mattie is mistaken to believe that graphic size on a map absolutely corresponds to a nation's relative "independantness," colonial mapmakers did bloat the size of Europe's nations by comparison with their colonial outposts. England hardly appeared as a "little speck" in British maps of the world. Similarly, Mattie foolishly believes that such depictions can be changed at will, yet colonial powers have often wilfully manipulated maps of their nations for political purposes. Her mistaken assumption that maps are humanoid betrays the insight that maps are constructs, subject to the geopolitical self-perceptions of their makers. Here as elsewhere in Bennett's independence poetry, the irony that cuts against the colonized cuts no less against the colonizers. But for Bennett, to reverse the colonizer's grand self-perception is not enough; little will have changed if Caliban is as blindly self-aggrandizing as Prospero. She would not only "reverse the maps of domination," in Susan Williss phrase, but also reveal the assumptions behind all such mapping, whether by colonizer or colonized. 94
Chapter 3

Bennett recalls a different developmental model of the nation toward the poem's end, humorously recalling the frequent association of independence with birth: "Jamaica people need a / independence formula!" If Jamaica is gaining its independence because of its mature readiness, then why is it, like other emergent nations, often metaphorized as a newborn baby, in need of a special infant "formula"? Bennett mockingly suggests the inadequacy of either the maturation or the birth metaphor for the newly independent nation:

No easy-come-by freeness rings,
Null labour, some privation,
Not much of dis an less of dat
An plenty stediation.

The speaker's recipe for successful independence strangely mixes ingredients appropriate to the newly matured male (self-restraint, hard work, economy, and the newly born child (the finger-wagging behest, "Not much of dis an less of dat," and subsequent study in school). At the end of the poem, Bennett returns to the literalized figure of competent nation as mature male:

Independence wid a vengeance!
Wonder how we gwine to cope?
Jamaica start smoke pipe, ah hope
We got null jacks' rope!
We've got enough local tobacco!]

In her independence poetry, Bennett intimates that nationhood has taken so long to arrive that it is almost anticlimactic, yet at the same time its arrival is almost violent in its suddenness ("wad a vengeance!"). Despite all the journalistic posturing about "readiness," Bennett allows for feelings of uncertainty, even helplessness, in the once colonized population.

If the independence ceremonies attempt to form a sense of national community around officially structured events, galas, and symbols, Bennett evokes in her poetry the reverse kind of community-formation, revolting around ironic insight into the follies of the nation's self-representation and self-aggrandizement. Even at the moment of independence, she, like the West Indian broad talker, rudely questions the self-importance, pomp, and gaudy grandeur of the national celebrations. As a national poet, Bennett joins officials in seeking to inspire a sense of lininality across lines of class and gradations of color, but in place of their cultural rites of universal reverence and submission, she offers poetic "antirituals" that are closer to what Abrahams calls the broad talker's "wit, repartee, and directed slander"—tac-

tics that serve as "a creative channel for antisocial community motives." Bennett's antinationalist irreverence dovetails with her anti-imperialist wit in helping to evoke and form a carnivalesque community of the once colonized. Her poetry builds, as Bakhtin rhapsodically writes of carnival, "a second world and second life outside officialdom," on the basis of a laughter that "knows no inhibitions, no limitations," that "boldly unveiling[s] the truth": "Laughter purifies from dogmatism, from the intolerant and the petrified; it liberates from fanaticism and pedantry, from fear and intimidation, from didacticism, naiveté and illusion, from the single meaning, the single level, from sentimentality." 195

Admittedly, Bennett's complex irony makes her as hard to pin down as the trickster Anancy. As we have seen, the double structure of her irony is a central way in which she aesthetically embodies postcoloniality, insofar as both are "to double business bound." In this regard, she exemplifies the scope of an ironic poetics that is shared by other Caribbean writers, such as Walcott and Naipaul, and indeed a host of other postcolonial writers across the Third World. India, for example, has given rise to many of the most powerful contemporary ironists, including poets like Ramanujan and Eunice de Souza and novelists like Rushdie and Arundhati Roy. Unwilling to settle for a poetry of nationalist dogma or imperial rhetoric, Bennett frustrates the effort to track her ever-shifting ironies from one poem to another or, indeed, from one stanza or line to the next. Even the model of double irony hardly does justice to the variety of her ironic strategies. The full measure of her accomplishment can only be found in the specific texture and structure, the verbal fabric and rhetorical play of individual poems in relation to their informing historical contexts.

"Dialect" poets like Bennett are often condescended to in poetry criticism, assumed to be primarily of "local" interest. Only recently have African-American "vernacular" poets like Sterling Brown and Langston Hughes received the kind of close literary analysis their work deserves. American and British critics have been still less welcoming of postcolonial poets who represent the variety of modern English. But to regard Standard English as the common language from which a world poet should not deviate is to repress an outdated imperial norm, disguised as a formula for universal accessibility. This normativist critical view is entangled in the old European concept denounced by the poet David Dabydeen (Guyana/United Kingdom): that black people are "linguistically illiterate" and "ignorant of the rules of grammar." Their language is mere broken, stupid utterance." Along with other Afro-Caribbean poets like Walcott, Brathwaite, Mervyn Morris, Dennis Scott,
The vexed relation between postcolonial literatures and anthropology has sometimes been condensed in one of two conflicting propositions: that postcolonial literatures are ethnographic or that they are nonethnographic. According to the first formulation, advanced primarily by Western critics, postcolonial literatures are saturated with ethnographic information, conveying for a foreign readership the customs and beliefs of native cultures. Reviewing Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and other African novels, Charles Larson finds “anthropological passages,” “anthropolological overview,” and “ethnological background” woven into their narrative fabric: “The anthropological is indeed important. Without it there would be no story.” More recently, Christopher Miller has argued that “francophone African literature has always practiced some form of anthropological rhetoric,” using “devices such as footnotes, parentheses, and character-to-character explanations in order to provide the reader with the necessary cultural information.” While conceding the troubled, “imperialist” history of anthropology in Africa, Miller believes that “a fair Western reading of African literatures demands engagement with, and even dependence on, anthropology.”

According to the contrary view, advanced primarily by postcolonial writers themselves, Western critics have, in Kwame Anthony Appiah’s words, “been all too eager to attend to the ethnographic dimension of African literature.” In specifying their social milieu, postcolonial texts are no more ethnological, argues Appiah, than are Scott’s *Ivanhoe* or Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*. The popularity at home of postcolonial writers like Soyinka and Achebe indicates that they intend not a foreign but a local audience. Haunted by anthropology’s complicity in the colonial enterprise, many postcolonial writers reject any recolonization of postcolonial literatures under the rubric of Western anthropology.

Each of these arguments illuminates an aspect of the