ENGL 205: Medieval Songlines
Professor Ardis Butterfield

By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with University regulations. — Zara Ranglin

Tread to the Dread Ahead: Wordplay on the Journey to Identity Development in "Erthe toc of erthe" and "The Road of the Dread"

by Zara Ranglin '25

A native tongue may be first borne on tongues nonnative—

Language is the process of encountering and countering, mixing, selecting and rejecting to form a system that not only enables communication, but also reflects the gradual development of the identity of its speakers. That identity is a dynamic product of its environment, altered by change: times and laws, war and peace, pride and prejudice in public perception. Middle English was produced by such flux—framed by conquest at its inception and social renaissance at its close[12]. As a result, it was also the subject of social biases arising from those external influences. The Norman Conquest of 1066 introduced French as an occupying language in Britain; English was relegated to the lower classes, among whom it served as the primary spoken language[3]. However, French and Latin dominated in both religious and secular formal settings and heavily influenced English lexicon, creating a multilingualism that existed both between languages and within English itself. Middle English therefore evolved under this period of occupation as a conquered language, with an identity largely defined by its formative influences, still gradually increasing in autonomy as a language in its own right.

Tongues which echo whispers, words and wails of tongues before.

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[1] "In terms of 'external' history, Middle English is framed at its beginning by the after-effects of the Norman Conquest of 1066, and at its end by the arrival in Britain of printing (in 1476) and by the important social and cultural impacts of the English Reformation (from the 1530s onwards) and of the ideas of the continental Renaissance." [i]

[2] Durkin, Philip. n.d. "Middle English – an Overview." *Oxford English Dictionary*. https://www.oed.com/discover/middle-english-an-overview/#borrowing-from-latin-and-french.

[3] "Although trilingual overall, late medieval England was essentially diglossic, with Latin and French used in prestigious domains, both secular and religious, and with English, though the dominant spoken language, reserved for domestic situations and ephemeral daily transactions." [iii]

With this type comes an antitype; English has acted not only an occupied language, but also as an occupier. In 1655, less than two hundred years after the end of the Middle Ages in England[4], the English tongue made its debut in the Spanish colony of Santiago, previously the Taíno-inhabited Xaymaca—the "land of wood and water"—and later the British colony of Jamaica. With colonialism came a new age of encountering and mixing, one in which English functioned as a domineering ingredient largely overpowering West African, Taíno, Spanish and other influences to exert the greatest impact on its progeny. That progeny, known today as Jamaican Patwah (Patois) or Jamaican Creole, bears the scars of its violent conception and difficult labour.

Erthe toc of erthe • erthe wyth woh • [5]

To take is often to enact violence. *Erthe*—Earth—is no stranger to violence. The Earth has endured millennia of abuse at the hands of inhabitants who have long engaged in taking from what amounts to be themselves: according to scripture, the inhabitants of Earth are made of earth and return to earth upon their death. The fourteenth-century quatrain "Erþ toc of erþ" ("Erthe toc of erthe"[6], Harley 2253) reflects upon this principle, which finds its basis in Genesis 3:19, a sombre passage in which God doles out punishment to man for his first sin, declaring: "In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return."[7] Dust is earth, and ergo, earth is dust—man, taken from the earth, is born of dust, and is encumbered by base instincts reflecting his squalid origin. However, man was created by God, "in the image of God"[8], and therefore also carries a divine inheritance that counters his baseness and promises to elevate him from it. Wrongdoing perpetrated by man hence carries the possibility of redemption: "For God, who

[4] Commonly accepted to be by the end of the 15th century. [i]
[5] Ardis Butterfield, ed., *Medieval English Lyrics*, Norton Critical Editions (Norton: forthcoming), "Charnel amour/ *momentaneum est*/ Erthe toc of erthe", No. 34, line 6. All "Erthe toc of erthe" quotations are from this edition and cited by first line, number, and line numbers.
[6] "Erþ" is an alternate spelling of "erthe", utilising the rune thorn (þ) in place of "th".
[7] Genesis 3:19, *The Bible*, King James Version.
[8] Genesis 1:27, *The Bible*, King James Version: "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them."

commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ."[9]

The various interpretations of "erthe" mirror the development of language identity in an occupied environment: as the inhabitants of earth seek to define their place in times of social turbulence and upheaval, their language becomes dynamic, with meanings determined by the context of conquest. Critic Marjorie Harrington proposes such a model for the understanding of "erthe", suggesting:

> The single Middle English word erþ represents a wide field of related concepts. In addition to denoting the ground as a surface, burial place, or field, or the soil of which the ground is composed, erþ may also refer to the earth as part of divine creation (in contrast to the heavens above and hell below) or function as a symbol of worldly goods and pursuits. Moreover, erþ can also be the 'earth' or 'dust' of which God formed Adam and, consequently, all of mankind as made of 'earth.' In each instance where it appears in ''Erthe upon Erthe,'' the reader is invited to ponder the multivalence of erþ and to explore the different interpretations of the line made possible by its semantic range. [10]

Moreover, the divine acts as a unifying counterpoint to this instability, creating a framework from which development and interpretation of language may occur. Harrington suggests that wordplay creates "hidden truths" such as the presence of the divine within lyric, allowing words to achieve diverse meaning beyond that evident at face value:

> As Rosemary Woolf observes, rhetorical devices like wordplay and punning were understood in the Middle Ages as ''linguistic indications of the intricate unity of the divine plan.'' Knowledgeable readers interpreted the ambiguities of meaning embedded in homophones as a means to discern hidden truths. As a result of the poem's sophisticated wordplay, the full meaning

[9] 2 Corinthians 4:6, *The Bible*, King James Version.

[10] Harrington, Marjorie. 2014. "Of Earth You Were Made: Constructing the Bilingual Poem 'ERÞ' in British Library, MS Harley 913." *Florilegium* 31 (January): 105–37. doi:10.3138/flor.31.05.

of “Erthe upon Erthe”[11] emerges only when one considers the word’s several meanings simultaneously, while the numerous repetitions of the word erþ force the reader to scrutinize the many concepts associated with it. [iii]

That dey road no pave
like any other black-face road [12]

The colonial ideology is one of violent taking: the colonised nation is controlled in every area, from economic resources to cultural heritage and national identity. The reprehensibility of colonial conquest formed a shroud of sombre spiritual darkness. Such spiritual darkness is not to be confused with Blackness—though Blackness is often conflated with negativity, its true meaning is one rewritten by an independent Jamaica to show the “strength and creativity of the people”[13][14]. It was therefore through Blackness that new creation was made to shine through spiritual darkness: the subjugated populations of Jamaica, especially the formerly-West African enslaved, were able to craft an independent language through the process of creolisation. Creolisation responds to violent removal, blending elements of cultures brought into proximity by the colonial process to create a new language and cultural identity belonging solely to the developing Creole nation. Jamaica has uniquely experienced this development of language identity through creolisation, as the English brought by British colonisation has fused with various languages initially brought together by violence to form a patois, or creole, with distinctive phonology, lexicon, grammar and syntax.

However, even when free from overt oppression, this creole language identity cannot be separated from the suffering and violence endured by its creators. That violence is encoded in various elements of the

[11] Harrington refers to the “network of related poems sharing themes, phrases, and poetic techniques (most notably the insistent repetition of “earth”) collectively as “Erthe upon Erthe.”
[12] Goodison, Lorna. 1980. *Tamarind Season*, Institute of Jamaica, “The Road of the Dread”, lines 1 & 2.
[13] On the Jamaican National Flag, black originally represented hardships. In 1992, this was changed so that black represents the strength and creativity of the people.
[14] “Jamaican Flag – Jamaica Information Service.” Jamaica Information Service. Accessed December 12, 2023. https://jis.gov.jm/information/symbols/jamaica-national-flag/.

language, from its lexicon, which includes words with etymology marked by conquest[15], to its usage within artistic forms as a representation of liberty marked by struggles of the past. "The Road of the Dread", by Jamaican poet and essayist Lorna Goodison, explores experiences of Blackness along a literal and figurative road to formation and acceptance of creole language identity from the perspective of a persona historically marginalised by his socioeconomic status as an impoverished dread[16], a practitioner of the Rastafari religion. The persona endures the dread of unfamiliarity along a road that lacks the accustomed paving of other "black-face" roads—he is entering an era untried, one of self-determination for a people previously inhibited from completing development of an identity independent of that imposed on them. The road is dreadful because there is no compendium for dealing with its ever-present perils, which the persona has no choice but to face:

> it no have no definite color
> and it fence two side
> with live barbwire.[17]

Erthe other erthe to the erthe droh •
Erthe leyde erthe in erthene throh • [18]

Genesis 4 tells the story of Cain and Abel, a chronicle of jealousy and hate ending in fratricide: the first murder on a young post-Creation Earth. Cain, the elder brother, killed Abel in a fit of resentment, drawing him to the dust from which his parents had been directly formed by the hand of God. Cain's act demonstrates the wickedness inherent in man, separating him from God and enabling the acts of discrimination, conquest and oppression which have defined much of human history and framed the development of the languages and identities of both the conquerors and the conquered who have sought to establish themselves outside the bounds of oppression. This oppression manifests itself also as violence

[15] For example, the Jamaican Patwah word for "child", "pickney", originated as a contraction for the word "pickaninny", a racially offensive term once used to refer to Black children.
[16] "Dread" refers to both a Rasta (practitioner of the Rastafari religion) and the dreadlocks hairstyle typically worn by Rastas.
[17] Goodison, Lorna. 1980. Tamarind Season, Institute of Jamaica, "The Road of the Dread", lines 3–5.
[18] Butterfield, ed., "Charnel amour/ *momentaneum est*/ Erthe toc of erthe", No. 34, lines 7-8.

against the Earth: as humanity wages war and destroys itself, it also devastates the Earth, which is soaked with the blood of the fallen and pockmarked by the damage of exploitation. Moreover, the destruction of the Earth is tied to the journeying of humanity through space and time, as man seeks to claim new territory and escape the devastation of the past.

Cain's violence initiated a time of journeying in his life, as he was made to be a perpetual traveller on the Earth, and was prevented from receiving further sustenance from the earth he corrupted:

> **10** And [the Lord] said, What hast thou done? the voice of thy brother's blood crieth unto me from the ground. **11** And now art thou cursed from the earth, which hath opened her mouth to receive thy brother's blood from thy hand; **12** When thou tillest the ground, it shall not henceforth yield unto thee her strength; a fugitive and a vagabond shalt thou be in the earth.[19]

This sentence acted both as punishment and as redemption for Cain's defilement of the Earth with his brother's blood, as he was granted a mark of protection to allow him to live out his natural days:

> **13** And Cain said unto the Lord, My punishment is greater than I can bear. **14** Behold, thou hast driven me out this day from the face of the earth; and from thy face shall I be hid; and I shall be a fugitive and a vagabond in the earth; and it shall come to pass, that every one that findeth me shall slay me. **15** And the Lord said unto him, Therefore whosoever slayeth Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold. And the Lord set a mark upon Cain, lest any finding him should kill him.[20]

The journey of Cain allowed him to move beyond his evil act while bearing a permanent scar reminding him of its occurrence. These scars were passed down through generations that followed, as Cain's exile defined the home of his offspring and influenced the choices they made. In an analogous manner, the act of conquest impacts the development of language identities not only at the time in which it occurs, but also longitudinally, as individuals make choices influenced by those of their ancestors and their language

[19] Genesis 4:10–12, *The Bible*, King James Version.
[20] Genesis 4:13–15, *The Bible*, King James Version.

bears scars of violence from its predecessors. Therefore, as “Erthe other erthe to the erthe droh”, the earth became a place not only of betrayal and death, but also of reformation and resurrection. “Erthe leyde erthe in erthene throh”, yet this earthen grave does not act as a final sentence, but rather as a threshold for transition as enacted by both resurrection and transformation of language identity.

for sometime you pass a ting
you know as . . . call it stone again
and is a snake ready fi squeeze yu
kill yu
or is a dead man tek him
possessions tease yu.
Then the place dem yu feel
is resting place because time
before that yu welcome like rain,
go dey again?
bad dawg, bad face tun fi drive yu underground
wey yu no have no light fi walk
and yu find sey that many yu meet who sey
them understand
is only from dem mout dem talk.
One good ting though, that same treatment
mek yu walk untold distance
for to continue yu have fe walk far
away from the wicked [21]

Hate, betrayal and death also deck the road to creole language development: along the road of the dread, one must be watchful and wary. This need for vigilance stems from a history of discrimination. In the decades preceding independence from British rule, Jamaican society experienced stratification along lines established by colonial principles. A distinct partition separated the upper and lower classes of society, and language played a significant role in the establishment of this demarcation. Standard English was the

[21] Goodison, Lorna. 1980. Tamarind Season, Institute of Jamaica, “The Road of the Dread”, lines 10–28.

acrolect[22] and Patwah the basilect[23]; social mobility could be achieved only through deliberate adoption of the acrolect, or an intermediary mesolect[24].

Creole language has also struggled to be acknowledged as an official language of the independent nation. Lingering colonial sentiment caused Patwah to be rejected as a "dialect" belonging to the lower classes of society. Bajan poet and literary critic Kamau Brathwaite asserts that this description of Patois as a dialect is an invective designation, explaining:

> The word dialect has been bandied around for a very long time, and it carries very pejorative overtones. Dialect is thought of as "bad" English. Dialect is "inferior" English. Dialect is the language when you want to make fun of someone. Caricature speaks in dialect. Dialect has a long history coming from the plantation where people's dignity was distorted through their languages and the descriptions that the dialect gave to them. [25]

The Rastafari are highly familiar with discrimination: to be a dread was to live in dread in mid-twentieth-century Jamaica, as police targeted dreadlocked Rastas with threats of violence and even death[26]. The "bad dawg" and "bad face" that "tun fi drive yu underground" along the road of the dread denote the ever-present threats of violence faced by Rastas who sought only to uplift Blackness and reimagine the oppressive religion of the coloniser as something geared towards the salvation rather than the oppression of Black people. The discrimination faced by the Rastafari extended to linguistic disparagement. Rasta language, known as Dread Talk or Iyaric[27], developed as an "adjustment of the

[22] The acrolect is the variety of regional language considered to be most prestigious; in a region with creolized forms of language, the acrolect is typically the language of the coloniser.
[23] The basilect is variety of language considered least prestigious, typically the Creole form of language in a region.
[24] A mesolect incorporates elements of both the acrolect and basilect to create an intermediate variety of the Creole language. Mesolects are often created when a native speaker of the basilect attempts to code switch to the acrolect but does not incorporate all elements of the acrolect in doing so.
[25] Brathwaite, Kamau, *History of the Voice: The Development of Nation Language in Anglophone Caribbean Poetry* (1993).
[26] Turner. 1991. "Women, Rastafari and the New Society: Caribbean and East African Roots of a Popular Movement against Structural Adjustment on JSTOR." w*ww.Jstor.org*. https://www.jstor.org/stable/43157919?seq=12.
[27] "Iyaric" is formed by combining Iya (higher) with Amharic, the language spoken by Haile Selassie I, who is considered the saviour within Rastafari knowledge.

lexicon of Jamaica Creole to reflect the religious, political and philosophical positions of the believers in Rastafari"[28]. Dread Talk adopts features of both Jamaican Patwah and English, but seeks to challenge the colonial violence remaining in the language. Linguist Velma Pollard describes three categories of Dread Talk lexicon:

Category I	In which known items bear new meanings. e.g., chalice = pipe for smoking ganja
Category II	In which words bear the weight of their phonological implications. e.g., downpress = oppress
Category III	/ai/ "I" words i. Pronominal function, e.g., I, I-man = I; me ii. Initial syllable replacement, e.g., I-lalu = callaloo

Each category utilises a distinct strategy to achieve an overall goal of erasing scars of developmental trauma from the creole language. Iyaric words may fully replace colonial meanings, as in category I, or merely recentre colonial focus, as in the introduction of "I-words" in category III. The word "dread" is uniquely able to subvert colonial meaning, with an openness to multiple interpretations reminiscent of that of "erthe". As observed by Pollard:

> "Dread" is one of the more significant words in the Rasta vocabulary. It belongs to Category I in the sense that its primary meanings are not the same as those accorded it in English. As an adjective, it conveys the ultimate of either suffering or joy: good or bad. The connotations in Scott's lines quoted above are negative. The "dread" time is one in which the human being goes

[28] Pollard, Velma. *Dread Talk : The Language of the Rastafari*, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2000. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/yale-ebooks/detail.action?docID=3331751.

through extensive and intensive tribulation.

Moreover, it is notable that those who would discredit the legitimacy of Dread Talk often refer to it as a "dialect", reintroducing the "pejorative overtones" described by Brathwaite. Pollard quotes Jamaican-American anthropologist Leonard Barrett, who reflects this rejection of Rasta-led linguistic reinterpretation of past tribulation:

> …it is a religious language of a strange type. Few outsiders can make sense of what the average cultist says. In the first place it is ungrammatical when spoken by the uneducated; secondly it is Jamaican dialect used on the philosophic level, a burden which it was not created to bear; and finally the Rastafarian speech is almost devoid of subject-object opposition as well as without verbs. Students of Rastafarianism must be prepared to translate the material into English, or to do research only among the most educated brethren. [29]

"The Road of the Dread", though written primarily in Jamaican Patwah, displays elements of the disparagement faced by Dread Talk. The dread is driven "underground" as his language and overall identity are looked down upon; he is greeted with violence even in places that formerly seemed accepting of him. His journey is on foot as he must slowly and painstakingly overcome each facet of this oppression, linking his journey to that undergone by all members of the lower classes of Jamaican society in order to move beyond a violent past. As is pithily posited by Jamaican critic Edward Baugh, "[t]he idea of the journey on foot as fact and symbol of life is a deep, archetypal reality in Jamaican folk consciousness."[30]

tho hevede erthe of erthe • erthe ynoh • [31]

[29] Barrett, Leonard T. 1968. *A Study in Messianic Cultism in Jamaica*. Caribbean Monograph Series No. 6. Rio Piedras: Institute of Caribbean Studies, University of Puerto Rico.
[30] Baugh, Edward. 1986. "Goodison on the Road to Heartease." *JSTOR*. https://www.jstor.org/stable/23019650.
[31] Butterfield, ed., "Charnel amour/ *momentaneum est*/ Erthe toc of erthe", No. 34, line 9.

Den why I tread it brother?
well mek I tell yu bout the day dem
when the father send some little bird
that swallow flute fi trill me
and when him instruct the sun fi smile pan me first.
And the sky calm like sea when it sleep
and a breeze like a laugh follow mi.
Or the man find a stream that pure like baby mind
and the water ease down yu throat
and quiet yu inside.

And better still when yu meet another traveler
who have flour and yu have water and man and man
make bread together.
And dem time dey the road run straight and sure
like a young horse that cant tire
and yu catch a glimpse of the end
through the water in yu eye
I wont tell yu what I spy
but is fi dat alone I tread this road.[32]

Decolonisation has led to a gradual shift in acceptance of Jamaican Patwah and Dread Talk, a change driven by increasing acceptance of the creole as a distinguishing form of national identity. Brathwaite characterises this progression as resulting in the creation of an organic language rising from the social consciousness of both rural Jamaicans and the urban working class and underclass—a "nation language" that replaces the language of the coloniser[33]. The bubbling development of this nation language provides the persona with strength to continue on his difficult road to acceptance. He draws on the divine as a source of refuge and centrality for his development, giving thanks for the times "when the father send some little bird / that swallow flute fi trill me", a gift which indicates divine acknowledgement of the importance of the voice to identity ("trill" refers to both a trill in voice and a thrill). This provision of divine aid amplifies the last line of "Erthe toc of erthe". If God is considered to be the "erthe" who "hevede of erthe • erthe ynoh", it may appear that He sees the Earth He created as hopeless because of the

[32] Goodison, Lorna. 1980. Tamarind Season, Institute of Jamaica, "The Road of the Dread", lines 37–55.
[33] Brathwaite, Edward Kamau, *History of the Voice: The Development of Nation Language in Anglophone Caribbean Poetry* (New Beacon Books, 1984, ISBN 978-0901241559), pp. 5–6.

gravity of man‘s sins, and therefore chooses to abandon His creation. However, it often appears that He instead chooses redemption: having “had enough” of injustice, He provides the possibility of change. This change is often evident even within trying circumstances—by the end of the poem, the persona is able to find brotherhood and describe it using Dread Talk, as “man and man / make bread together.”

The nation language is powerful: it has the potential to free cultures from historical shackles through linguistic reclamation. The strength of a nation lies in its ability to recognise value, and the acceptance of the nation language is the most essential step in declaring that this value lies in the people of the organic underclasses. This powerful identity reclamation has occurred in typical and antitypical instances, with echoes beginning in the past, as with Middle English “erthe”, and reverberating throughout the present and future through nation languages such as Jamaican Patwah and Dread Talk which will continue to form and solidify towards an end worth treading this road.

Glossaries for "Erthe toc of erthe" and "The Road of the Dread"

Erthe toc° of erthe • erthe wyth woh •	°earth, soil; humans (as dust) °took °woe; sin
Erthe other° erthe to the erthe droh° •	°another °drew
Erthe leyde erthe in erthene throh° •	°grave
tho° hevede erthe of erthe • erthe ynoh° •	°then °had °enough

The Road of the Dread
Lorna Goodison

That dey° road no pave	°there
like any other black-face road	
it no have no definite color	
and it fence two side	
with live barbwire.	
And no look fi° no milepost	°for / to
fi measure yu° walking	°you / your
and no tek° no stone as	°take
dead or familiar	
for sometime you pass a ting°	°thing
you know as . . . call it stone again	
and is a snake ready fi squeeze yu	
kill yu	
or is a dead man tek him	
possessions tease yu.	
Then the place dem° yu feel	°them / they (used also for pluralisation)
is resting place because time	
before that yu welcome like rain,	
go dey° again?	°there
bad dawg°, bad face tun° fi drive yu underground	°dog °turn
wey° yu no have no light fi walk	°where
and yu find sey° that many yu meet who sey	°say
them understand	
is only from dem mout° dem talk.	°mouth
One good ting though, that same treatment	
mek° yu walk untold distance	°make
for to continue yu have fe° walk far	°to (another spelling of "fi")
away from the wicked.	
Pan° dis° same road ya° sista°	°on °this °here °sister

sometime yu drink yu salt sweat fi water
for yu sure sey at least dat° no pisen°, °that °poison
and bread? yu picture it and chew it accordingly
and some time yu surprise fi know how dat full
man belly.

Some day no have no definite color
no beginning and no ending, it just name day
or night as how yu feel fi call it.

Den° why I tread it brother? °then
well mek I tell yu bout the day dem
when the father send some little bird
that swallow flute fi trill° me °thrill (but also a play on "trill")
and when him instruct the sun fi smile pan me first.
And the sky calm like sea when it sleep
and a breeze like a laugh follow mi°. °me
Or the man find a stream that pure like baby mind
and the water ease down yu throat
and quiet yu inside.

And better still when yu meet another traveler
who have flour and yu have water and man and man
make bread together.
And dem time dey the road run straight and sure
like a young horse that cant tire
and yu catch a glimpse of the end
through the water in yu eye
I wont tell yu what I spy
but is fi dat alone I tread this road.