

Kamau Brathwaite: A Voice out of Bounds

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Stuttering upon alien prospero sounds?
Stammering in the joyless strangling stronghold of
Margaret's iron sugary words?

No.

He sings out loud and clear¹ in a voice which is all the more the collective voice of his African-Caribbean people as it is uniquely his own; a voice which is all the freer as it is a reminder of past and all-too-present shackles. A voice which is no longer constrained into any reassuringly separate genre.

Already in his first trilogy Brathwaite's words are resonant and disturbing, embracing as he does the many-faceted voice of street and home in his complex retrieval of roots and in his quest for submerged allegiances and repressed suffering. His second trilogy is more directly personal. Its bearing is at the same time even more universal, and the language is more thoroughly and creatively imbued with "dub riddims and... calibanisms."

But so far his voice could be circumscribed circumvented enclosed in the recognizable form of poems. So far "facts" and "fiction"—whatever the poet's own insistence—could still be thought of as distinct and separate. So far, however unhappy he may have been about it, there was his poetry on one side, his notes and criticism on the other.²

Now his unmistakable reshaping shuffling and ruffling of sounds and words has invested all aspects of his writing, has become an integral part of the way he lives and breathes. Whatever the context, language is never allowed to be something dead that can be disposed of in mummified phrases; it twists itself into surprising and always surprisingly appropriate combinations. This squeezing of new significance out of unexpected combinations, images, distortions of words is no longer confined to "poems" (in fact he hardly writes easily identifiable poems any more) but has become part of his common

¹ The words are borrowed from the mouth of the lavender seller reporting the strange behaviour of an inspired mason who was once her lover in *The Anathemata* by David Jones, another writer whose creative use of language was as perceptible in his notes, essays and private letters as in the "poems" proper.

² See the apologetic introduction to the notes he appends to *X/Self*: "my references [to Caribbean culture] may appear mysterious ... So the notes ... which I hope are helpful, but which I provide with great reluctance since the irony is that they may suggest the poetry is so obscure in itself that it has to be lighted up; is so lame, that it has to have a crutch; and (most hurtful of all) that it is bookish, academic, 'history'" (113).

everyday use of language, rather in the same way as in the case of Wilson Harris. This much is clear if we look at the three books I am going to refer to, *The Sea Mexican Diary*, *DreamStories* and *Barabajan Poems*, published in three successive years (1993, 1994 and 1995 respectively). It is certainly striking if we consider side by side the two pieces he contributes to the 1995 issue of *Wasafiri*, both related to Jean Rhys. There is no doubt that they are texts of different kinds; but a simple labelling of "Days and Nights" as a poem and of "A Post-Cautionary Tale" as a critical rejoinder would not be satisfactory. His bitter witty reply to Peter Hulme's survey of critical literature on *Wide Sargasso Sea* is not just a nice instance of his newly developed "videostyle," through which I will discuss later, it also repeatedly explodes readers' expectations through such re-creative juxtapositions as "& why in 1994 shd I still be reading obvious, oblivious and heavy-handed snides..." or "when we run into a strait of binaries (versuses & / or viruses)." In the other piece the sad cheerful creole voice of Christophine unobtrusively modulates from delightful vignettes of everyday life—comparing the behaviour of nine-year-old Betty to that of a cat ("evva see a cat dat does rub up its furr / pun yuh foot when it feel/like it: an den when it done: when it dun / rub yuh dung//de chat gone: / gone long like if it doan know you/from adam or even ezeziel?") or describing the play of light on Ann's twelve-year-old face ("de doctor bird visit de hibiscus tree / an de hovering green of it wing in ann eye//when it move / de light of it brilliant wah up pun de silk / o she skin like sheer water")—to the contained drama of white Betty's interfering with black Ann's feeding the puppy and Ann's subsequent gnashing rebellion against Mistress Jackson's rebuke, to the incantatory reminder of the age-old ever-present marks of slavery ("how / de ankle bone twiss / / how de stock marks lock in she flesh") and a chilling update of the auctioning of fresh ebony flesh ("the coiner's voice of the fat / auctioneer: the pulpit his strumpet & / chair // making meat of god's wonders"):

four five sex and a live tv show
do i jook
do i cook
do i hook
unto you
flushun you out with my soap flakes
& fire
rustlin you out with my germ heat &
wire

Different voices, but one stirring creative breath in both, as indeed in lectures and speeches given on all sorts of occasions as well as in private letters, or in the splendid speech-poem with which the 1994 Kamau Brathwaite special issue of *World Literature Today* opens.

Such revitalizing of the language, such innovative shaping and reshaping of words into unexpected and often lateral meanings most properly deserves the name of poetry. And poetry in our (un)free and unfair mercantile society is, almost by definition, an act of resistance. It is an act of defiance against the mindless uniformity that encroaches on all local cultures along with the happy mixture of thrilling entertainment and horror news on television channels and with the apparently irresistible dominance of a shapeless transnational form of

English as a means of one-sided communication. Poetry has become a matter of survival; not just survival of the ability to use language creatively—survival of languages, survival of our common ability to use language meaningfully; survival of our ability to think and feel; survival.

The definition Brathwaite gives of the word "poet" at the beginning of *Barabajan Poems* (also quoted by Cynthia James 762) is revealing of the way he sees the position and function of poets, marked by a to and fro movement, a joining of sky and ground, of individual and people:

(i) *Poet*

is a craftperson, oral or literary, ideally both, who deals in metrical and/or rhythmic—sometimes *riddimical*—wordsongs, wordsounds, wordwounds & meanings, within a certain code of order or dis/order—what Antonio Benitez-Rojo calls creative chaos. These word/sound/meanings are caught out of the mind or moment's sky as it were & etched into the ground and underdrome of the poet's/of the artist's culture. And from the ground of that culture is he/she grown // is he/she known // is he/she be/come.

The splitting of the last word points to the complexity of the dialectical relationship between the artist and her/his collective ground: she comes from it, but also derives her essence, her being from it; and from it, through it, thanks to its collective supporting power, she becomes, develops, emerges into her own light and sky, evolving into the personal/collective identity Brathwaite now uses everywhere: "mwwe."

In Brathwaite's case the fleshing of his new voice, or rather of the newly-acquired unity within diversity which marks his latest writings, emerged from the purifying fire of extreme personal trials. As he puts it in his interview with Northumberland poet Graeme Rigby:

The things that it³ has come out of: first of all there was the death of my wife in 1986. That is a chasm of the utterest kind. Then in 1988, a hurricane destroyed my home and everything that I have. Then in 1990, I am murdered...
G.R.: Bbb... You're murdered?... I'm sorry...?

K.B.: Yes. Well, metaphorically, let's call it. Some gunman came into my home and pulled the trigger and it goes off: click! I should be dead in other words (Rigby 710).

And so the experience of violent mugging recorded in *Trench Town Rock* is used and transformed into a metaphor of death and rebirth. Similarly, though less explicitly, the destruction of his archives and computer set-up in Irish Town by Hurricane Gilbert (reported in *Shar A Hurricane Poem*) may have contributed to throw him back to his own resources and prompted new developments in his videostyle, whatever—or precisely because of—the extent of the deprivation he experienced at the time.⁴ Even the rending apart and

³ In the interview "it" refers to a third trilogy—possibly the three books briefly discussed here.

⁴ See the following comments in *Barabajan Poems*:

The disruption/loss of the IT archive became for me like a loss of memory and as if when you look up at the familiar night sky, you see either only DARK or different DIS-EQUILIBRIOUS CONSTELLATIONS so that you don't know where you are - so that you don't know in fact IF you are ... for instance I had to turn down the UNESCO *history of the Caribbean* request to write the chapter on "The Folk Culture of the Caribbean"—something I had always wanted the opp to do all my (mature)

annihilation he went through when his wife died is not healed but transcended in a sense of comforting presence and peaceful communion. The poetry is reborn out of the ashes of these accumulating inflictions and visitations, which can then be seen as ordeals leading to a more powerfully integrated level of perception and expression.

It is tempting but would, I think, be misleading, to read his latest works merely in relation to these personal ordeals. After the apparently straightforward expunging of pain in *The Zea Mexican Diary*, *DreamStories* can be read as an exercise in exorcism in which he turns private nightmares into word shapes. Brathwaite himself describes it to Gordon Rohlehr

like a kind of RIFT VALLEY in my senscape after the psychic disaster slippages of Mexican (86) Shar (88) TTR (90) (*DreamStories* iii).

In this perspective *Barabajan Poems*—a most extraordinary combination, negation, invalidation of genres—marks a further stage in Brathwaite's recovery. There is often downright anger and protest in these pages in which the most personal and autobiographical meets and fuses with the most collective, but exorcism is not necessary any longer, and they begin and end on notes of celebration and thanksgiving in which collective involvement is obvious. Yet even at earlier stages in the mourning process, even when he is crossing the mystics' "dark night of the soul," the very act of writing is also an act of release, is also a liberation out of the terrible condition described in "4th Traveller": what he calls "i/sol ence"—insolence, isolation, sol itude, lonely exposure of an unrelated "I" (as opposed to "mwe") to the abrasive indifferent sun/sol.⁵ The collective implications of any individual experience is expressed in all these writings, even in *The Zea Mexican Diary*. And this is what I hope to show in the following pages. But first a word on the new presentation of his voice on the page.

Kamau's production after 1986 cannot be thought away from what he calls his "videostyle."⁶ This major change in his working/writing process is

intellectual life—and was well equipped to do, if I may say so myself—because of the loss/disruption of memory/vision of the Archives As if my BRAILLE had gone (306).

It further contributed to his estrangement from the academic community on the Mona campus of the University of the West Indies. He deeply resented the lack of support and sympathy among his former friends and colleagues, and a number of (wilful?) misunderstandings led to his gratefully accepting the help offered by Carolivia Herron, Director of Harvard University's Center for the Study of Epic Poetry (see *Barabajan Poems*, Appendix V, 362ff) and to his eventually leaving the island on which he had spent close to 25 years of his life.

⁵ "4th Traveller" is the fourth of the seven stories in *DreamStories*, which gives a much more bitter account than what can be gathered from *The Zea Mexican Diary* of the sense of rejection he experienced at the time of his wife's death. The narrator is cornered into "i/sol ence" after he has felt not just ignored but chased and hunted by the indifferent domino or warri players in the village of the dead.

⁶ Inevitably, the presentation of the text on the page is an aspect which is discussed by practically all critics writing on his work after *X/Self*: see Rohlehr viii; Torres-Saillant 700; Rigby 709 & 713; Walmsley 748–9; Savory 750–1; James 762–3; Donahue 272–3.

announced in a poem from the *X/Self* collection. In "X/Self's Xth Letters from the Thirteen Provinces" the writer of the letter tells his mother that he now uses a computer, which is not "like i jine de mercantilists" but rather a way of getting one's own back after "dem tief/in gun / powder from sheena and taken we blues" (80). He is, he says there, "learnin prospero language" "for not one a we should responsible if prospero get curse / wid im own / / curser" (84–5). The phrase is characteristic of Brathwaite's use of words in that it irreverently associates the little blinking line we are all familiar with on our screens with Prospero's curses backfiring upon himself, and this without Caliban having any part in it. In his notes to *Barabajan Poems* he describes the "curser" as the "computer's tongue"—and indeed it can be the flickering tongue of the serpent but also the tongue of a new kind of speech, a new mode of inhabiting words within their very shapes. Brathwaite's Stark/Sycorax videostyle is pure word-napping, a beautiful instance of subverted technology, of investing with life and creative potential a technique that is often felt to threaten with greater alienation. The possibility to play on various fonts—typefaces and sizes—also adds to the suggestive capacities in language, as when, for the student who wanted "to take Cambridge by storm" and to this end went to mumble some confused demand to Peter Hall, of the Cambridge University Players, the word "weep" springs out of the word "sweep" in what he took to be an insulting rebuff "Could you sweep the stage?" (*Barabajan Poems* 57) or when the chosen nam(e) KAMAU is both deconstructed and built up from its complementing elements (*Barabajan Poems* 239–40). The intensive use of word processing to shape a text is also, as he explains in the "brief verbal interview" appended to the *Barabajan Poems*, a way of "seeing things that I was saying" (378). In the speech/poem he addressed to the Oklahoma audience on the occasion of receiving the Neustadt Prize for International Literature he refers to it as "computer legba"—or threshold, entrance: "a second major trigger phase" in his poetry resulting in the "postmodern Sycorax dream-video style" (*World Literature Today* 658).

Rohlehr points to the use of "several fonts and type sizes" as attacking "conventional modes of representation of the text... the aim being to unsettle the reader's expectations by unfixing or unhooking of word and image" (Introduction to *DreamStories* viii). But while changes from one font to another may appear arbitrary and disturb our reading habits their function is a closer adequation between the look of the words on the page and their sound their ring their subring (underdrone) and buried emotion in speaker/writer readers' hearts. As Walmsley writes, words on the page become a performance, letting readers hear their exact pitch and "skeletonality" (748). Videostyle is not intended to create confusion but to make readers see, as one would hear, various voices, various intonations, various and endlessly varying degrees of confidence or anguish or distrust.

Published in 1993, *The Zea Mexican Diary* is one of the most poignant testimonies of love I have ever read. It must have been carefully edited and

Note that his wife had long been familiar with computers. She had used one to assist him long before they had become the almost indispensable writing tools they are now.

polished and largely rewritten after the event. Yet it still has such a raw naked exposed quality of emotion that it is at times almost unbearable. It is also the travel tale of a journey through the valley of death, going through the several and sometimes overlapping stages of mourning (beginning almost exactly three months before the beloved's death): disbelief, grief, rebellion, anger, and finally sadness and acceptance, a form of reconciliation with death, and thus with life, though the tearing can never be mended. It consists of diary entries, of a section describing the moment of her death down on UWI campus at his sister's house ("The Middle Passages") while he was away up at Irish Town finishing her bibliography, of his letter to Zea Mexican on the following Sunday just before the funeral, of Ayama's letter to him during the ceremony with his own interpolated comments, of his friends' rallying notes, of his letters to his sister Mary Morgan, of the tribute which was read at the funeral, of two sections which are connected with local rites and beliefs—one a turning away ("This obeia business") and one a celebration of continuing life ("The Tulip Tree") with prayers which are neither Christian nor African but rooted in the Caribbean lore, and finally of his parting vision of the land beyond, its light and loneliness, which also marks his own return to life on this earth ("The Awakening").

Section XI, "The Tulip Tree," is a powerful illustration of the communal dimension in a grief now all too often confined to the private sphere. While Section IX, "This Obeia Business," expresses his distrust and unease in front of rituals that express fear and revulsion, in front of traditions that compulsively erect barriers, the "Tulip Tree" section blossoms out into a song prompted by heartfelt love. It begins with the wary and weary recording of preparations for the ritual planting of a tulip tree with and among Irish Town people. Although there is a sense of hallowed concentration and communion among the attending community, we also feel, in the sober monochord of the printing, that at this juncture this is one more harassment and embarrassment for the husband. Until Mr Reid steps in, the "likkle" old man from up the hill, "D's first firm friend up here." The printing style changes too, the voice becomes bolder, and Mass Reid's song-prayer lifts and soars and is left vibrating on a never ending note in unison with the tree stem / her stem (and *Stizime?*) / Mexican singing. His words are very few, but (in contrast with other people's contributions? Can we perceive a slight annoyance in the parenthesis "(D's 'Charity' again)" after "Mrs H read from Corinthian," 200?) there is nothing conventional about them, and his are the very words that still had to be said. Together with his equally limited but necessary action, they represent the ritual that was called for at this point for the retrieval/perpetuation of life. He is seen standing "down beside the new-made hole, alone, looking out across the landscape—across the valley out to Kingston and the sea—like... some kind of sentinell" (201), and at this point he is Legba, the Yoruba god of passages, presiding over the proper translation of his friend, the writer's wife. In his spare words, in the movement of his hands working, kneading timelessness into their present/their presence, he removes all barriers and separations ("it was like talking to himself & Mexican & me and then to all of us and from us to the trees & wind & grass & then the hillslope where she/her ashes were becoming w/ the sky its blue so very blue that morning & with God & with

the God in all of this in all of us circle through circle through cycle through time," 202); he turns the green stem of the tree into "the string of life" (206) and they hear her voice released from time in his voicing the sacred syllable of peace.

Seven of Brathwaite's *DreamStories* were published by Longman in 1994. In the short bio-bibliography to be found in the Autumn 1994 issue of *World Literature Today* it is called a prose collection and contrasted with *Barabajan Poems*, which is called a verse collection. The two labels are equally inadequate. Though the stories collected in the Longman volume may look like prose to an uninquisitive eye, even the lay-out indicates that this is no ordinary "prose." When read (whether aloud or in the resonance of our minds) the stories certainly do not sound like prose; even those tight-knotted desperate paragraphs soberly printed in a Times Roman font in "4th Traveller" ring with more than prose rhythms.

"DreamHaiti" is one of the pieces which, even on a first reading, have a more collective impact than, say, "Dream Chad," "Salvages" or "4th Traveller." The text I am going to comment on is not the version published by Longman but a longer version printed in 1995 by Savacou North.

The differences between the two versions are interesting and will be mentioned in the course of the discussion. They are essentially of three kinds. The Longman edition has only a small number of instances of non-standard spelling, although this contributes to the flavour of the text, and in some instances to its semantic complexity.⁷ For understandable reasons of cost, the lay-out is compressed and there are fewer changes in fonts. Thirdly, whole passages either are omitted in the Longman version or have been added in the Savacou version.

One of the people the piece is dedicated to is a friend who spent twenty years in the US Coast Guard and who had just died when the poem was written/started (May 1992), this perhaps as a reminder that people are not divided into heroes and villains and that those on board the cutter are not spared by death. In the Savacou version the text of the dreamstory stands within a parenthesis consisting of a dedication in Haitian creole and its English translation. The "little gesture" of loving-kindness is offered to those Haitian people who vainly try to reach the shores of Florida but are ruthlessly repelled "pasque yo pa Cuben," because they are not Cuban refugees, good for anti-Castro propaganda. Neither point of view nor time nor place are fixed. Several voices relay each other in unannounced shifts, taking readers from the liquid corrosion of the waves to the grey unreality of the deck on the coast guard cutter: the two main voices are that of a drowning / long drowned Haitian ("The sea was slake grey of what was left of my body & // the white waves // I remember / they was like v/ snake on my skin," 11) and that of some helpless writer on board the cutter/Gutter ("I do not know why i am here... since I am suppose to be a poet not a coast guard cutter or fireman or one or two oth-

7 For instance, the Longman edition has "hand" instead of "hanm," "send" instead of "senn," "startling" instead of "starlin," "slate" instead of "slake," "there was" instead of "they was," "had tried" instead of "had try," "their arms" for "theyy arms."

ers on this deck," 16; "while we stann on the soff hard deck of the / Coast Guard / 'Impeccable' watchin them poem," 49). Beyond these personae the voice of Kamau Brathwaite is heard directly at least once, when he claims the right to tell and repeat, to try and find words for the tale of horror that perpetuates itself. The following indignant questioning printed in a bold face is to be found towards the end of a long passage which occurs only in the Savacou version—six pages of whispered screams, jumbled memories of terrible passages, the rifting and tearing on which the black Caribbean is founded—

& you chide me
for chanting like
this? for lament
=ing this seem
=ing perpetu
=al pogrom & pro
=gram like this?
this
season on season
persist
=uant anomies?
for tryin to ghost
words to holler
this tale?
(Savacou 45-6)

The story is adrift on the destructive waves of history, wav(er)ing between the protecting/corroding salt seawater and unreliable decks (or holds). It brings together a number of different and yet similar experiences in time, going back to the first European landing in the "New World" ("COLOMBE 12 October 1992," 34) and the subsequent triangular transportation that sealed the uprooting of the slaves in the limbo dismembering of the middle passages ("anything starlin & unusual that people on board the / MIDDLE PASSAGES / rush to see to relieve the ruins of what becomes like limb / or limbo on board the bells of the ship," 37), incorporating incidents of the Haitian revolution (showing what a tale of deceit it was from the start), and having its present-day anchoring in the plight of Haitian boat people attempting to escape poverty and oppression. A combination of appeal and of formal, administrative distancing can be felt in the repeated and highlighted quotation "«Haitian Refugees», which is blurred into a massive, somehow inaccessible and carefully warded block (see Savacou 12, 15, 33; Longman 95, 97, 106; see Figure 2 in Appendix). Place names on Haiti—Goave, Gonaïves—echo the name of that other island off Senegal from which slaves were shipped ("the green tide ruining us all the way back to distant Dakar / to the dungeons of the cyclops Gorée Gorée Gorée Gorée," 42). The description of the ship on board of which the poet-speaker strangely finds himself points to the long history of the slave trade: "evvating on board that hillside was suppose to be

slipshape if you know what i mean about Bristol fashion" (14). "Hillside" because of the movements of the deck, also accounting for "shipshape" becoming "slipshape"; besides, for the Africans taken away on transatlantic vessels the voyage was a long tearing slippage; in the usual unthinking use of the phrase "Bristol fashion" is a synonym for "shipshape," but it also acts as a reminder of the function Bristol (or La Rochelle, or Saint-Malo) had in colonial times as a harbour from which trading vessels started and to which they brought their bounties on the last legs of their triangular journeys.

Two thousand seasons of dispossession and dereliction are related to reminders of the man that possesses us all, not just the sliding sniding sides of the Coast Guard Gutter but—on page 30—"Madame MARGARET EUGENIA AZUCHAR MARKETPLACE"⁸ with "a harsp gruff whip and chauffeur of a voice" (31). This, in my reading, is even more openly political and committed, if not topical. Yet the idiom is the same; the playful inventiveness of the language is the converse of any wooden speechifying. She is seen playing the tourist licking the sun in sinister "dark l-zard glasses" (32) and being then "able to come to a firm political decision... about commanding the heights of the economy & level playingfields of light at the end of the tunnel etc etc" (33). As a consequence the farmers she was expected to support are reduced to leave their "shorne hillside" (31) and agglutinate on tiny vessels doomed to capsizes:

& i remember feelin v/v/cold even though we was

25

in that boat designed as the TV commentator kept
sayin./like to cry or carry only

13 or 14 or 15

In this passage, the two figures making up 25 are not just big, they are distorted by wart-like protuberances suggestive of people clinging to every possible part of the structure. The distancing reference to a TV commentator introduces a necessarily different perspective: the way we are informed of one tragic incident among many, with the failure to comply with sensible safety measures substituted for any questioning of real causes. This enforced and baleful flight calls up all sorts of clearances, evictions and less obvious yet nonetheless imposed emigrations for economic reasons.

References to the Haitian revolution at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth century are obvious in a passage that highlights the sense of dereliction and betrayal. The drowned speaker describes the sense of choking in the whirl of waves:

i remember that it was like some dark gaoler of convex of glass
was like lockin us up against // & against // & i cd hear the long
echo/ing noise of the metal doors of my lungs clanging shut in our

⁸ The main market in Port-aux-Princes is the "Ironmarket." "Eugenia" may refer to the insistence on genetic purity, while "Azuchar" could point to the fields of sugar canes and thus to the plantation economy.

face as if it was Christophe on La Ferrière walking that sloe
corridor of water

as if it was Toussaint Legba all the way out on Napoleons joyless
eyeless island of torture on the glacial seas of the Jura

(39)
The sense of helpless compulsive repetition is combined with blows of European aggression in the repeated "against." The echo of doors being locked may recall the passage in the last section of Eliot's "Waste Land" in which the elaborate reference to Dante's story of Ugolino and his sons locked to starve into their prison cell—

... I have heard the key
Turn in the door once and turn once only
We think of the key each in his prison—

points to our isolation. The local reference is to the "Citadelle du Roi Christophe" near Cap Haïtien, "built in the early 1800s and also known as La Ferrière" (*South American Handbook* 1980, 1118) and to the terrible early history of Haitian independence. Henri Christophe had been one of Toussaint L'Ouverture's lieutenants, along with Jean-Jacques Dessalines. In 1803 Dessalines defeated Napoleon's army and proclaimed the island's independence along with the official and irreversible abolition of slavery. This may be symbolically important to historians of the Caribbean. But on the island itself those generous principles soon proved to be mere words. Even in the early part of the nineteenth century independence from Europe was only maintained at the cost of an ever increasing dependence towards the young American Republic, and the end of slavery did not mean the end of enslavement and degrading conditions. Even at the time when independence was proclaimed the former lieutenants had fallen out among themselves and were seeking personal glory, one taking the title of Emperor in Port-aux-Princes, the other calling himself King at Cap Haïtien and ordering splendid mansions and citadels to be erected, whatever the human cost. As Bridget Jones points out, La Ferrière provides ruins in the Caribbean (Brown 93). But are they ruins going back to a time of unqualified victory? And does Brathwaite's "Cap" celebrate the achievement of King Christophe in building the Citadelle at Le Cap" (Jones in Brown 93; see *X/Self* 53-4) when the towering figure in this poem is Columbus (another Christophe) confronting the burning eye/lids of Toussaint?

The next historical association brought up by the sound of metal doors being locked shut is with the dismal end of Toussaint L'Ouverture himself, the former slave turned general who gallantly fought the British army when they wanted to take advantage of the military weakness of France in the throes of its revolution in order to take over the island of Saint Domingue, but who was then betrayed by the little upcoming Corsican general Napoleon Buonaparte. In a Christ-like way he decided to sacrifice himself for the greater good of the (former) slaves he was fighting for and knowingly walked into the trap that had been laid out to catch him. He was exiled to a fortress in the Jura (Fort de Joux) where he soon died, partly on account of the cold, partly on account of the way he was treated. Brathwaite calls him Legba, the Yoruba god of the

threshold, an African translation of his French surname L'Ouverture which points to a vodoun rather than Catholic Church allegiance.⁹

Another reference ("La Crête-à-Pierrot") occurs almost at the end of the piece, and part of its irony is lost in the Longman version. In the Savacou version of the passage leading to this placename, which is also the name of a particularly bloody battle, the wobbling of words made up of all sorts of different fonts is expressive of the complete confusion of those seeking justice where justice is not to be found, and the way the accented e in the place name is represented in the unmistakable shape of a machine gun includes a note of terrible irony.

In spite of tenuous allusions to a possible resurrection, such as the use of "barley" for "barely" ("we cd barley see that nobody wasnt throwing no lifelines," 40), which may be a hint/wink at the old vegetation folksong "John Barleycorn," there is very little rebirth in the story. One of its recurring motives is the dangling drowned head of "Sun Bryan," first seen by the poet on board the cutter bottom of page 26. It is compared to a "living life buoy," to a "smilin triangle out of timmin," or "a lief [leaf] of cardboard," or—and this is presented as the most convincing image—"a kind of sea-island kite" (27). The whole body is compressed and contained in "this kite & rockin triangle" (29) and nothing else can be seen: "nothin but this rockin & smilin triangle of the head rollin / swiffly pass" (30). It is seen again, as a skull capsizing, at the beginning of the six pages that only occur in the Savacou version (41), after the cut of the *vévé* and the "whole wide worl / of the thunder of / Atacama"—the blurring of death by water compared to the blurring of dust whirled by the wind in the Chilean desert.

The modulations of perspectives now almost collide, since we are looking down at the "crowded [and soon capsized] boat of my brothers" and up at "the single star of my sister /—the US Coast Guard cutter," with the skull, previously seen from the cutter, in front. It then modulates into the assertion of, and lament on, all the middle passages and straits and humiliations he and his brothers have gone through.¹⁰ Repeated in various sizes along these six poignant pages, among echoes of loss which culminate in the dead body of a "likkle bwoy," we have a kind of hieroglyph _ ^ . The two warding lines on each side can be seen as representing "the two intransigent consonants (or continents) of sound" protecting the pointed roof of the A or "alpha of our beginning," in the "nam" or essence of our name (see *Barabajan Poems* 241). "Nam" ("man" in reverse) is "name" without the tail end of the "e," a form which therefore cannot be caught and taken away by "the man who possesses us all."

⁹ See also *Barabajan Poems* 172: "Toussaint Louverture—the Liberator or 'Opener' of S Domingue into Haïti—himself a cripple—*fatras baton* they once called him Crook Stick, Soff Dick, Flat Spine, Th(e) He who Limp(s) Along—& whose French sobriquet—'Louverture'—was surely a direct translation of the Dahomey Legba (Open/Doorway) & why not?"

¹⁰ The climax of inclusive compassion felt in the full text when the words "Middle Passages" are printed in half-an-inch-high, emptied letters is not to be experienced in the same way when they appear in the same elongated wavy letters used throughout the piece in the Longman version (Savacou 37; Longman 108).

The piece ends with the poet/ speaker on the deceptive safety of the deck of the cutter—called “Impeccable,” without sin or blemish—“watchin them poem,” i.e. turning this age-long suffering—drowning, remembering and dis(re)membering—into a poem. A cynical ending denoting detachment? Or the only possible way to survive beyond the “bridge of dirt or psyche of stone” he tried to cross at Irish Town (35)?

Of *DreamStories* and *Barabajan Poems*, the second, in spite of its title, is perhaps closer to “prose” in that it is structured as a scholarly work, with a separate chapter for “Notes and references,” another one consisting of “Appendices” and the last one a nineteen-page index. On the inside of the back cover we have a kind of poem celebrating the Caribbean not as “margin of Western culture” but as being “at the very heart—sometimes horror—/ of the BIG BANG GENESIS of the UNIVERSE... at the very start or crashing—certainly the CROSSROADS /—Van der Post—/ of a civilization.” As penultimate chapter Brathwaite has included a tongue-in-cheek interview with himself called “a brief vertical interview” in which, among more punning such as “listeners” or “straying to say,” he points to the writing process allowing him “to discover oceans within myself, if I can put it this way, that I did not know before were there.” The frame of the first thirteen chapters or sections is the speech he was asked to deliver on the occasion of the opening of the Frank Collymore Hall or Memorial Auditorium by the Central Bank of Barbados in December 1987, that is to say, hardly more than one year after his wife’s death. The speech functions as a kind of “frame story” with occasional reminders of Brathwaite the speaker addressing a patiently or impatiently listening audience. (See for instance pages 147–8).

This passage, incidentally, also illustrates the relation between the personal and the collective in Brathwaite’s language. His use of the vernacular is strikingly similar to Joyce’s in *Finnegans Wake*. The shortenings, the sound changes belong to the way people speak. But then the alterations are loaded with punning meaning: “about 3/4 way true” (also meaning that truth is never a 100% thing), “back and froth,” which brings in again the lapping of the sea and tidalectics, and “twine” instead of time also brings in, perhaps not so much the strong thread used for packages, as the joining of strands which accounts for its etymology: the twining, intertwining, weaving, relating.

The “tonnelle” into which we are coming is a complex and recurring image. To a French-speaker the word has delightful connotations, redolent as it is of cool living shadow when the sun beats down. As used here it has a further specifically vodoun meaning. It is the passage between “houmfort,” “place of spiritual conversation/celebration” and “pitaou mitan,” or place of possession; it is the “psychic/spiritual tunnel—w/light/ill/transformation at its ‘end’” (letter to me, 24 January 1996). It thus works as a connection with another dimension, which we may call heaven or the world of ancestors or God—or that dimension of light in which he sees Mexican walking away in the last section of *The Sea Mexican Diary*.

The present of the telling/writing is sometimes the occasion of the speech, sometimes the moment when he revises his text three or four years later. This

might be confusing if he was not careful always to provide signposts and even a chronology of various versions on the last page of the book but two.

Within the frame of the speech, he uses poems from previous collections, not just as biographical illustrations but because they capture the essence and flavour of a collective experience. This rereading, new reading of large sections of former collections—to which he adds (with a vengeance?) several pages from “The Boy and the Sea,” a story that had never been published before, provides another way of reading them, of letting them ring in a new context which sometimes brings out implications that may have gone unnoticed. This is what happens to the “Pebble” poem, from *Islands* (1969). A short poem in itself, it stands out boldly / roundly on ten large pages. In spite of its size it does not in any sense “gets at” readers (precisely because of the rounded shape of the letters); it is laid out as a quietly confident assertion of self-sufficiency and eternity, with something of an anguished love for its barrenness. But this smooth hardness and austerity is qualified on the next (facing) page when we are suddenly surrounded by swarms of children, and from the mineral world of the “pebble” we dive into the waves of the sea.

Both the first and the last pages are celebrations. Almost the whole of the last chapter/ section (267–83), significantly called “Beginning” (which may recall Eliot’s “In my beginning is my end,” but this of course is a wisdom common to many traditions) consists in a series of local proverbs as they were discovered and brought to light with awe and wonder by one of his undergraduate students (see his note 57, page 328). The section begins with a resuming of his speech, indeed, almost a literal resuming of the opening words of the book “First of all / Mr Chairman / I must give thanks to the Central Bank of Barbados for bringing me here...” and, as on the first page, the thankfulness for personal gratification at being recognized at home, and the qualification: this is not going to be the kind of speech you might expect. But while on the first page the recalling is of three events that had just taken place (James Baldwin’s death in Paris, events in Haiti, and the formal Independence of Barbados) and the libations are “to three great peaceful powerful beautiful spirits who should have been with me—with us—here this evening,—and who are with me—with us—here this evening,” namely his Mother, his wife and Frank Collymore, before moving to a more impersonal ritual, at the end the invocation is immediately collective thus also establishing his own life as representative of a whole people. In a few lines he sums up and compresses the landmarks of his route through his / Bajan life, and this leads to the convolution of the Shango sign—shango the movement of the train songs, but also the mystic experience described earlier at his uncle’s houmfort, inspired by the “Yoruba/Dahomey god Shango of hammer & axe & electricity & fire & blinding lightning/thunder” (172). The whole passage, all of Section VII, and indeed much else and much more, would deserve to be reproduced as layed out and printed—had we but world enough and time. He begins with the shamefaced denials of any “native religious culture,” the many layers of sterilized accepted Christian “no-different-from-anybodyelse” platitudes to be peeled away before the drumbeat/heartbeat that unites and opens the other inner dimension of connectedness is acknowledged. After his own reverent reference to the gods of the Middle Passage, including one of his early Shango

poems in *The Arrivants*, he describes his gradual perception, while still standing outside the hounfort, of the tonnelle of sound inside leading to vision / illumination, the rhythm and counter-rhythm—the sharp sibilant counterpointing the singing and handclapping by “the rest of the room / sound (womb / song)” (177) and the woman “comin(g) into the being of Da Da Damballa the Dahomean loa of movement & healing & rainbow” (179). The framed “Choreography of sound inside the hounfort” follows the very movement of the Shango sign: “in reality the movement does not go ‘one way’ (i.e. up) but creates a circle, the trump ‘ascending,’ if you like, as the dove ‘descends’ and of course rather than being separate, the elements I try describe a collective / communal polyrhythmic polyvalent tidalectic ‘jazz-voiced improvisation’/ engine” (180). As consciousness alters, so do the voices change: “increased nasalisation, deeper and deeper vertiginous fallings and flattings of octaves” (182). This in turn leads to his discussing the word and the (“psycho/illogical”) Xperience of “possession,” how it helps them to “cope with the persistent legacies of the plantation—loneliness (lost livelines lost loveliness)... disappointment... dispossession... poverty & fear” (184), graphically presented as the jail grid of material and mental constraints. Now, as in any extreme experience (particularly when it is “illogical”?) there is danger here too: the danger of fanaticism, the danger of coming to deny that movement never goes in one direction only, of forgetting complexities and complementarities, of focussing on a form of collective identity that would define itself in terms of exclusion and rejection—which means more nationalistic wars. Such danger, however, is foreclosed in Brathwaite’s poem. Any possibility of bias is waved aside in the Xperience of retrieving a submerged culture, of feeling liberated from imposed beliefs and connected with something essential conveyed by the singing and dancing. The convulsion of the Shango sign / the experience of shango possession means relief and release, the ability to escape the straits and nets of arrows and turn them into the living coral proliferation of circles.

Possession thus becomes a way of countering colonial alienation, of retrieving and proudly acknowledging/ entering/ repossessing a suppressed sense of communal identity. A triumphant freedom of the soul is achieved through rhythm, (Miss Lou’s “riddim”) through music, through the entwining of voices, the sending out and the taking in that we can make happen within one and the same movement.

“Sometimes you have to play for a long time to be able to play like yourself.” Those words by Miles Davis are an apt epigraph. The music of Brathwaite’s writing is as unmistakably his as any fugue by Johann Sebastian Bach or any trumpet solo by Davis. Brathwaite’s voice is a mighty weapon in the struggle against the stifling power of established non-thinking (perhaps even non-feeling) which makes it possible for the present globally suicidal system to reduce people to the solitary despair of unemployment when it does not diligently dig graves of war and oppression. Unbounded and all-pervasive as it has become, Brathwaite’s voice is the quietly forceful expression of the great inner power of a heart and of a mind that have gone through personal and collective suffering and can now open alternative ways of living/loving.

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