



Photo: Mark Lumley

Edward Kamau Brathwaite is a distinguished Caribbean poet, literary critic and historian. He is Professor of History at the University of the West Indies. His works include the poetic trilogy *The Arrivants (Rights of Passage, Masks and Islands)*, *Mother Poem* and *Sun Poem*, *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica 1770-1820*, *Contradictory Omens*, *Love Axe/I* and numerous other publications.

The Caribbean islands were originally inhabited by the Taino, Siboney, Carib and Arawak, now called American Indians or Amerindians. After the Columbus encounter with the Caribbean in 1492 came the intrusion of European culture and peoples and a fragmentation of the original Amerindian cultures. Then, with the destruction of the Amerindians, and the importation of Africans as slave labour into the Caribbean, the importation of the Ashanti, Congo, Ibo, Yoruba and all that mighty coast of western Africa into the Caribbean began; and with this a new language structure. "It consisted

of many languages but basically they had a common semantic and stylistic form. What these languages had to do, however, was to submerge themselves, because officially the conquering peoples — the Spaniards, the English, the French and the Dutch — insisted that the language of public discourse and conversation, of obedience and command, should be English, French, Spanish or Dutch. . . So there was a submergence of this imported language. . . Its status became one of inferiority." The status of the languages was inferior because the status of their speakers was inferior. They were slaves — "non-human in fact". "But this very submergence served an interesting interculturative purpose, because although people continued to speak English. . . that English was nonetheless still being influenced by the underground language, the submerged language that the slaves had brought. And that underground language was itself constantly transforming itself into new forms. It was moving from a purely African form to a form which was African but which was adapted to the new environment and cultural imperative of the European languages. And it was also influencing the way in which the French, Dutch, English and Spaniards spoke their own languages. So there was a very complex process taking place, which is now beginning to surface in our literature."

It is this inner movement in language, its orality, its previously reviled but now revived and revitalised forms, probing and excavating the arts — including the art of poetic expression — in the Caribbean and Black Britain and Black America, which is the theme of this brilliant oral essay lecture *History Of The Voice: The Development Of Nation Language In Anglophone Caribbean Poetry*, given to students at Harvard University in 1979.

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# HISTORY OF THE VOICE

the development  
of nation language in  
anglophone Caribbean  
poetry

EDWARD  
KAMAU  
BRATHWAITE

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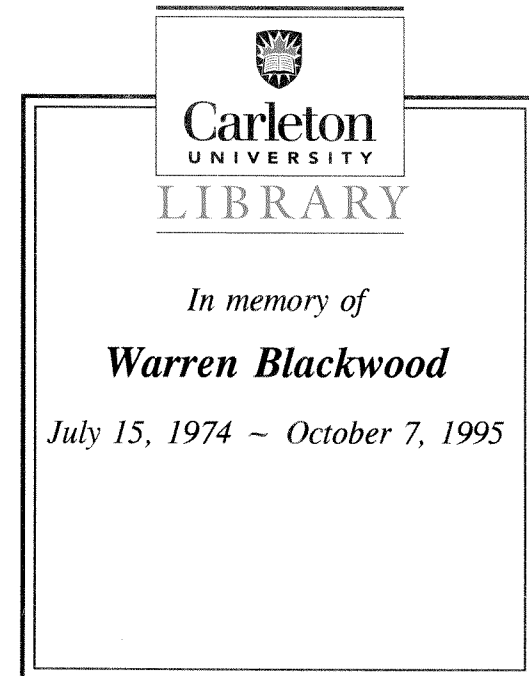
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For  
MICHAEL SMITH, poet

Stoned to death on Stony Hill  
Kingston, Jamaica

17 August 1983



And what does that mean: Congo. What does it mean when  
you say Congo?

*Congo is the nation*

Which nation, the Congo nation?

*The Congo nation*

And people here know what nation they belong to?

*Yes. Everybody know what is a nation . . .*

What is your nation?

*Kromantee and Tembe*

Are you a Congo?

*Kromantee . . .*

Alan Lomax in Carriacou in the 1950s

What I am going to talk about this morning is language from the Caribbean, the process of using English in a different way from the 'norm'. English in a new sense as I prefer to call it. English in an ancient sense. English in a very traditional sense. And sometimes not English at all, but *language*.

I start my thoughts, taking up from the discussion that developed after Dennis Brutus's\* very excellent presentation. Without logic, and through instinct, the people who spoke with Dennis from the floor yesterday brought up the question of language. Actually, Dennis's presentation had nothing to do with language. He was speaking about the structural condition of South Africa. But instinctively people recognized that the structural condition described by Dennis had very much to do with language. He didn't concentrate on the language aspect of it because there wasn't enough time and because it was not his main concern. But it was interesting that your instincts, not your logic, moved you toward the question of the relationship between language and culture, language and structure. In his case, it was English as spoken by Africans, and the native languages as spoken by Africans.

We in the Caribbean have a similar kind of plurality: we have English, which is the imposed language on much of the archipelago. It is an imperial language, as are French, Dutch and Spanish. We also have what we call creole English, which is a mixture of English and an adaptation that English took in the new environment of the Caribbean when it became mixed with the other imported languages. We have also what is called *nation language*, which is the kind of English spoken by the people who were brought to the Caribbean, not the official English now, but the language of slaves and labourers, the ser-

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\*Dennis Brutus, the South African poet-and-activist-in-exile. His presentation preceded mine at this Conference and was part of a Third World segment: Azanian Caribbean and Navajo.

vants who were brought in by the conquistadors. Finally, we have the remnants of ancestral languages still persisting in the Caribbean. There is Amerindian, which is active in certain parts of Central America but not in the Caribbean because the Amerindians are here a destroyed people, and their languages were practically destroyed. We have Hindi, spoken by some of the more traditional East Indians who live in the Caribbean, and there are also varieties of Chinese.<sup>1</sup> And, miraculously, there are survivals of African languages still persisting in the Caribbean. So we have that spectrum—that prism—of languages similar to the kind of structure that Dennis described for South Africa. Now, I have to give you some kind of background to the development of these languages, the historical development of this plurality, because I can't take it for granted that you know and understand the history of the Caribbean.

The Caribbean is a set of islands stretching out from Florida in a mighty curve. You must know of the Caribbean at least from television, at least now with hurricane David\* coming right into it. The islands stretch out on an arc of some two thousand miles from Florida through the Atlantic to the South American coast, and they were originally inhabited by Amerindian people: Taino, Siboney, Carib, Arawak. In 1492 Columbus 'discovered' (as it is said) the Caribbean, and with that discovery came the intrusion of European culture and peoples and a fragmentation of the original Amerindian culture. We had Europe 'nationalizing' itself into Spanish, French, English and Dutch so that

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\* This talk was presented at Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, late in August 1979. Hurricanes ravish the Caribbean and the southern coasts of the United States every summer. David (1979) was followed by Allen (1980) one of the most powerful on record.

1. No one, as far as I know, has yet made a study of the influence of Asiatic languages on the contemporary Caribbean, and even the African impact is still in its study's infancy. For aspects of (anglophone) Caribbean cultural development relevant to this study, see my *Contradictory omens: cultural diversity and integration in the Caribbean* (Savacou Publications, Mona, 1974). For individual territories, see Baxter (1970), Brathwaite (1979), Nettleford (1978), Seymour (1977). See also Norman E. Whitten & John F. Szwed (eds.), *Afro-American anthropology* (New York & London 1970).

people had to start speaking (and *thinking*) four metropolitan languages rather than possibly a single native language. Then with the destruction of the Amerindians, which took place within 30 years of Columbus' discovery (one million dead a year) it was necessary for the Europeans to import new labour bodies into the area. And the most convenient form of labour was the labour on the edge of the *slave* trade winds, the labour on the edge of the hurricane, the labour on the ledge of Africa. And so Ashanti, Congo, Yoruba, all that mighty coast of western Africa was imported into the Caribbean. And we had the arrival in our area of a new language structure. It consisted of many languages but basically they had a common semantic and stylistic form.<sup>2</sup> What these languages had to do, however, was to submerge themselves, because officially the conquering peoples—the Spaniards, the English, the French, and the Dutch—insisted that the language of public discourse and conversation, of obedience, command and conception should be English, French, Spanish or Dutch. They did not wish to hear people speaking Ashanti or any of the Congolese languages. So there was a submergence of this imported language. Its status became one of inferiority. Similarly, its speakers were slaves. They were conceived of as inferiors—non-human, in fact. But this very submergence served an interesting interculturative purpose, because although people continued to speak English as it was spoken in Elizabethan times and on through the Romantic and Victorian ages, that English was, nonetheless, still being influenced by the underground language, the submerged language that the slaves had brought. And that underground language was itself constantly transforming itself into new forms. It was moving from a purely African form to a form which was African but which was adapted to the new environment and adapted to the cultural imperative of the European languages. And it was influencing the way in which the English, French, Dutch, and Spaniards spoke their own

2. See Alan Lomax, 'Africanisms in New World Negro music: a cantometric analysis', *Research and Resources of Haiti* (New York 1969), *The Haitian potential* (New York 1975); Mervyn Alleyne 'The linguistic continuity of Africa in the Caribbean', *Black Academy Review* 1 (4), Winter 1970, pp. 3-16 and *Comparative Afro-American: an historical-comparative study of English-based Afro-American dialects of the New World* (Ann Arbor 1980).



languages. So there was a very complex process taking place, which is now beginning to surface in our literature.

Now, as in South Africa (and any area of cultural imperialism for that matter), the educational system of the Caribbean did not recognize the presence of these various languages. What our educational system did was to recognize and maintain the language of the conquistador—the language of the planter, the language of the official, the language of the anglican preacher. It insisted that not only would English be spoken in the anglophone Caribbean, but that the educational system would carry the contours of an English heritage. Hence, as Dennis said, Shakespeare, George Eliot, Jane Austen—British literature and literary forms, the models which had very little to do, really, with the environment and the reality of non-Europe—were dominant in the Caribbean educational system. It was a very surprising situation. People were forced to learn things which had no relevance to themselves. Paradoxically, in the Caribbean (as in many other 'cultural disaster' areas), the people educated in this system came to know more, even today, about English kings and queens than they do about our own national heroes, our own slave rebels, the people who helped to build and to destroy our society. We are more excited by their literary models, by the concept of, say, Sherwood Forest and Robin Hood than we are by Nanny of the Maroons,<sup>3</sup> a name some of us didn't even know until a few years ago. And in terms of what we write, our perceptual models, we are more conscious (in terms of sensibility) of the falling of snow, for instance—the models are all there for the falling of the snow—than of the force of the hurricanes which take place every year. In other words, we haven't got the syllables, the syllabic intelligence, to describe the hurricane,<sup>4</sup> which is our own experience, whereas we can describe the

3. The Maroons were Africans/escaped slaves who, throughout Plantation America, set up autonomous societies, as a result of successful run-away and/or rebellion in 'marginal', certainly inaccessible, areas outside European influence. See Richard Price (ed.), *Maroon societies* (New York 1973). Nanny of the Maroons, an ex-Ashanti (?) Queen Mother, is regarded as one of the greatest of the Jamaica freedom fighters. See Brathwaite, *Wars of respect* (Kingston 1977).

4. But see Tony Hinkson's poem, below.

imported alien experience of the snowfall. It is that kind of situation that we are in.

The day the first snow fell I floated to my birth  
of feathers falling by my window; touched earth  
and melted, touched again and left a little touch of light  
and everywhere we touched till earth was white.<sup>5</sup>

This is why there were (are?) Caribbean children who, instead of writing in their 'creole' essays 'the snow was falling on the playing fields of Shropshire' (which is what our children literally were writing until a few years ago, below drawings they made of white snowfields and the corn-haired people who inhabited such a landscape), wrote: '*the snow was falling on the canefields*':<sup>6</sup> trying to have both cultures at the same time.

What is even more important, as we develop this business of emergent language in the Caribbean, is the actual rhythm and the syllables, the very software, in a way, of the language. What English has given us as a model for poetry, and to a lesser extent prose (but poetry is the basic tool here), is the pentameter: 'The cúrfew tólls the knéll of párting dáy'. There have, of course, been attempts to break it. And there were other dominant forms like, for example, *Beowulf* (c.750), *The Seafarer* and what Langland (?1332-?1400) had produced:

For trewthe telleth that loue. is triacle of hevene;  
May no synne be on him sene. that useth that spise,  
And alle his werkes he wrougte. with loue as him liste

or, from *Piers the Plowman* (which does not make it into *Palgrave's Golden Treasury* which we all had to 'do' at school) the haunting prologue:

In a somer seson. whan soft was the sonne  
I shope me into shroudes. as I a shepe were

5. Edward Kamau Brathwaite, 'The day the first snow fell', *Delta* (Cambridge, England [1951]), *Other exiles* (London 1975), p.7.  
6. I am indebted to Anne Walmsley, editor of the anthology *The sun's eye* (London 1968) for this example. For experiences of teachers trying to cope with West Indian English in Britain, see Chris Searle, *The forsaken lover: white words and black people* (London 1972) and *Okike* (15 August 1979).

which has recently inspired Derek Walcott with his first major nation language effort :

In idle August, while the sea soft,  
and leaves of brown islands stick to the rim  
of this Caribbean, I blow out the light  
by the dreamless face of Maria Concepcion  
to ship as a seaman on the schooner *Flight*.<sup>7</sup>

But by the time we reach Chaucer (1345-1400) the pentameter prevails. Over in the New World, the Americans—Walt Whitman—tried to bridge or to break the pentameter through a cosmic movement, a large movement of sound. Cummings tried to fragment it. And Marianne Moore attacked it with syllables. But basically the pentameter remained, and it carries with it a certain kind of experience, which is not the experience of a hurricane. The hurricane does not roar in pentameters. And that's the problem: how do you get a rhythm which approximates the *natural* experience, the *environmental* experience?

God talk to de fowl cocks  
early dat mornin  
he tell dem not to crow  
so silence come on  
possess ever wing  
and fear ever feather

*What is dis . . .*

an de quarrelsome shack-shack  
tongue tight  
an de howlin mile tree  
quiet quiet

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7. Derek Walcott, 'The schooner *Flight*', *The star-apple kingdom* (New York 1979; London 1980), p.3. Langland's prelude to *Piers* is often 'softened' into 'In somer season, whan soft was the sonne/I shope me in shroudes as I shepe were', which places it closer to Walcott—and to the pentameter.

and de dancin palm tree  
hand fold  
witholdin duh spirit

*Man better take warnin*

an dawn  
like it smell a rat  
cautious bout what comin  
like it smell a rat  
backin back  
like a cat  
over house  
over tree  
backin back under sea

an star an moon  
heads covered  
turn back to duh beds  
an so  
jus' so  
before grasshopper could blink 'e eye  
de whole sky shut up  
just so  
in terror an  
den de news break

*Hurry man  
Hurry chile  
Hurry lan'  
While you can*

*Hurricane!*

Anthony Hinkson (Barbados) catches, like no-one else I know, the foreboding of the hurricane, but when the hurricane itself comes, when 'leaves collapse' and 'ever man turn owl/ever jack/eye wide/mout twist in surprise', not even Hinkson can catch all the right syllables :

Sirens  
 Churchbells  
 Swells o' panic  
 bustle  
 bustle  
 quick quick to de church  
 mek fuh de shelter  
 Oh lawd  
 oh lawd  
 as de first branch fall'

In 1961, there appeared in *Leewards: writings, past and present about the Leeward Islands*, collected and edited by John Brown, Resident Tutor, Leeward Islands, UCWI, 'Two poems for Anguilla after Hurricane Donna', September 1960 (pp.57-59). One of them, by Anne Nunn (creole? or a visitor? the Hopkins model suggests a visitor), gets to the *effect* of the hurricane:

That hurricane, he came drummed on  
 My door, bowled the whole shack  
 Head over heels, cracked  
 Concrete like biscuit, broke  
 Bed and bone . . .'

But still no 'proper' hurricane; no volcano except Shake Keane's *Volcano Suite* (1979) no earthquake; drought only in Walcott and Brathwaite's *Islands* (1969) and *Black + Blues* (1976), fire in Walcott's 'A city's death by fire' (1948) and (a fuller treatment of the Castries event) in *Another life* (1973 Ch. 13) and (as *cannesbrulées*) again in Brathwaite's *Islands* . . . But we have been trying to break out of the entire pentametric model in the Caribbean and to move into a system which more closely and intimately approaches our own experience. So that is what we are talking about now.

8. Anthony Hinkson, 'Janet', *Slavation*, unpub. coll. [Bridgetown 1976].  
 9. Anne Nunn, 'Donna', in John Brown (ed.), *Leewards: writings past and present* . . . ([Basseterre, St. Kitts] 1961), p.57.

It is *nation language* in the Caribbean that, in fact, largely ignores the pentameter. Nation language is the language which is influenced very strongly by the African model, the African aspect of our New World/Caribbean heritage. English it may be in terms of some of its lexical features. But in its contours, its rhythm and timbre, its sound explosions, it is not English, even though the words, as you hear them, might be English to a greater or lesser degree. And this brings us back to the question that some of you raised yesterday: can English be a revolutionary language? And the lovely answer that came back was: *it is not English that is the agent. It is not language, but people, who make revolutions.*

I think, however, that language does really have a role to play here, certainly in the Caribbean. But it is an English which is not the standard, imported, educated English, but that of the submerged, surrealist experience and sensibility, which has always been there and which is now increasingly coming to the surface and influencing the perception of contemporary Caribbean people. It is what I call, as I say, *nation language*. I use the term in contrast to *dialect*. The word 'dialect' has been bandied about for a long time, and it carries very pejorative overtones. Dialect is thought of as 'bad English'. Dialect is 'inferior English'. Dialect is the language used 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 is distorted through their language and the descriptions which the dialect gave to them. Nation language, on the other hand, is the *submerged* area of that dialect which is much more closely allied to the African aspect of experience in the Caribbean. It may be in English: but often it is in an English which is like a howl, or a shout or a machine-gun or the wind or a wave. It is also like the blues. And sometimes it is English and African at the same time. I am going to give you some examples. But I should tell you that the reason I have to talk so much is that there has been very little written on this subject. I bring to you the notion of nation language but I can refer you to very little literature, to very few resources. I cannot refer you to what you call an 'Establishment'.

I cannot really refer you to Authorities because there aren't any.<sup>10</sup> One of our urgent tasks now is to try to create our own Authorities. But I will give you a few ideas of what people have tried to do.

The forerunner of all this was of course Dante Alighieri who at the beginning of the fourteenth century argued, in *De vulgari eloquentia* (1304), for the recognition of the (his own) Tuscan vernacular as the nation language to replace Latin as the most natural, complete and accessible means of verbal expression. And the movement was in fact successful throughout Europe with the establishment of national languages and literatures. But these very successful national languages then proceeded to ignore local European colonials such as Basque and Gaelic, for instance, and suppressed overseas colonials wherever they were heard. And it was not until Burns in the 18th century and Rothenberg, Trask, Vansina, Tedlock, Waley, Walton, Whallon, Jahn, Jones, Whiteley, Beckwith, Herskovits, and Ruth Finnegan, among many others in this century, that we have returned, at least, to the *notion* of oral literature. Although I don't need to remind you that oral literature is our oldest form of literature and that it continues richly throughout the world today.<sup>11</sup> In the Caribbean, our novelists have always been conscious of these native resources, but the critics and academics have, as is kinda often the case, lagged far behind. Indeed, until 1970, there was a positive intellectual, almost social, hostility to the concept of 'dialect' as language. But there were some significant studies in linguistics: Beryl Loftman Bailey's *Jamaican creole syntax: a transformational approach* (Cambridge 1966), F. G. Cassidy, *Jamaica talk* (Kingston 1961), Cassidy and R. B. LePage *Dictionary of Jamaican English* (Cambridge 1967); and, still to come, Richard Allsopp's mind-blowing, *Dictionary of Caribbean English*; three glossaries from Frank Collymore in Barbados, and A. J. Seymour and John R. Rickford of Guyana; plus studies on the African

10. But see the paragraphs (and notes) that follow.

11. See for example Finnegan (1970, 1977, 1977), Andrzejewski (1964), Vansina (1961), Babalola (1966), McLuhan (1962), Nketia (1955), Opie (1967), Ogot (1967), Ogotemeli (1948), Rothenberg (1968), Beier (1970), Tedlock (1972), Egudu & Nwoga (1973), Miss Queenie (1971) and the wonderfully rich literature on Black Culture in the Americas. See Bibliography for details of these and other references.

presence in Caribbean language by Mervyn Alleyne, Beverley Hall, and Maureen Warner Lewis.<sup>12</sup> In addition, there has been work by Douglas Taylor and Cicely John, among others, on aspects of some of the Amerindian languages; and Dennis Craig, Laurence Carrington, Velma Pollard and several others, at the University of the West Indies' School of Education, on the structure of nation language and its psychosomosis in and for the classroom.

Few of the writers mentioned, however, have gone into nation language as it affects literature.<sup>13</sup> They have set out its grammar, syntax, transformation, structure and all of those things. But

12. Frank Collymore, *Notes for a glossary of words and phrases of Barbadian dialect* (Bridgetown 1955, with several rev. and expanded editions); A. J. Seymour, *Dictionary of Guyanese folklore* (Georgetown 1975); John R. Rickford (ed.) *A festival of Guyanese words* (U of Guyana 1976, 1978); Mervyn Alleyne, 'The cultural matrix of Caribbean dialects', unpub., paper, UWI, Mona, n.d., 'What is "Jamaican" in our language?' a review of Cassidy/LePage's *Dictionary in Sunday Gleaner*, 9 July 1967, *Comparative Afro-American* (Ann Arbor 1980); Maureen Warner Lewis (sometimes as Warner), 'African feasts in Trinidad', *ASAWI Bulletin* 4 (1971), 'Africans in 19th century Trinidad', *ibid.* 5(1972), 6(1973), 'Trinidad Yoruba — notes on survival' *Caribbean Quarterly* 17:2(1971), *The nkuyu: spirit messengers of the kumina* (Mona 1977), also in *Savacou* 13 (1977), *Notes to Masks [a study of Edward Kamau Brathwaite's poem]* (Benin City 1977); Edward Kamau Brathwaite, 'Brother Mais [a study of Roger Mais' novel, *Brother Man*]', *Tapia* 27 Oct 1974 and as Introduction (earlier version) to *Brother Man* (London 1974), 'Jazz and the West Indian novel', *Bim* 44-46 (1967-68), 'The African presence in Caribbean literature', *Daedalus* (Spring 1974), reprinted in Sidney Mintz (ed.), *Slavery, colonialism and racism* (New York 1974) and trans. Spanish in Manuel Moreno Fraginals (ed.) *Africa en America Latina* (Paris 1977), 'Kumina: the spirit of African survival in Jamaica', *Jamaica Journal* 42(Sept 1978) and (earlier version) in *The African Dispersal* (q.v.).

13. A special exception has to be made of the work of Roger D. Abrahams (see *Bibliography*) whose work on Caribbean and New World speech drama is invaluable pioneering. But no one else has (yet) followed and there has (so far) been no connection between Abrahams' socio-cultural sense of rhetoric/imagination and our linguists, socio-linguists, sociologists and literary critics. Nor has the link between Nketia, say, and Abrahams been appreciated; though recent work by Velma Pollard (see especially her 'Dread Talk' in *Bibliography*) feels like its lighting a match . . . I should also like to invoke J. J. Williams', *Psychic phenomena of Jamaica* (New York 1934). But that is another story. Perhaps another book.

they haven't really been able to make any contact between the nation language and its expression in our literature. Recently, a French poet and novelist from Martinique, Edouard Glissant, had a very remarkable article in *Alcheringa*, a 'nation language' journal published at Boston University. The article was called 'Free and Forced Poetics', and in it, for the first time, I feel an effort to describe what nation language really means. For the author of the article it is the language of enslaved persons. For him, nation language is a strategy: the slave is forced to use a certain kind of language in order to disguise himself, to disguise his personality and to retain his culture. And he defines that language as a 'forced poetics' because it is a kind of prison language, if you want to call it that.<sup>14</sup> And then we have another nation language poet, Bruce St John, from Barbados, who has written some informal introductions to his own work which describe the nature of the experiments that he is conducting and the kind of rules that he begins to perceive in the way that he uses his language.<sup>15</sup> I myself have an article called 'Jazz and the West Indian novel', which appeared in a journal called *Bim* in the early 1960s,<sup>16</sup> and there I attempt to show that a very necessary connection to the understanding of nation language is between native musical structures and the native language. That music is, in fact, the surest threshold to the language which comes out of it.<sup>17</sup>

In terms of more formal literary criticism, the pioneers have been H. P. Jacobs (1949) on V. S. Reid, Mervyn Morris (1964)

14. *Alcheringa*, New Series 2:2 (1976).

15. See Bruce St John, Introduction to his 'Bumbatuk' poems in *Revista de letras* (U of Puerto Rico en Mayaguez, 1972).

16. See Brathwaite, n.12, above.

17. Extended versions of this lecture attempt to demonstrate the link between music and language structures e.g. Brathwaite and *kaiso*, *aladura*, *sookee*, sermon, bop post-bop; Shake Keane on jazz (he is a jazz trumpeter), *cadence*, *anansesem*; Kwesi Johnson, Oku Onuora and reggae/dub, Michael Smith and ring-game and drum-beat, Malik *kaiso* and worksong, Keens-Douglas and *conte*, Miss Lou folksay and street shout, St John and litany. Recent developments in *kaiso* (Shadow/*Bass man*, Short Shirt/*Tourist leggo*, Sparrow/*Music an rhythm: How you jammin so*) suggest even more complex sound shape developments . . .

on Louise Bennett and most of Gordon Rohlehr's work, beginning with 'Sparrow and the language of calypso' (1967).<sup>17a</sup>

And that is all we have to offer as Authority, which isn't very much, really. But, in fact, one characteristic of nation language is its orality. It is from 'the oral tradition'. And therefore you wouldn't really expect that large, encyclopedic body of learned comment on it that you would expect for a written language and literature.

3

Sound & relation  
to Nation Language

Now I'd like to describe for you some of the characteristics of our nation language. First of all, it is from, as I've said, an oral tradition. The poetry, the culture itself, exists not in a dictionary but in the tradition of the spoken word. It is based as much on sound as it is on song. That is to say, the noise that it makes is part of the meaning, and if you ignore the noise (or what you would *think* of as noise, shall I say) then you lose part of the meaning. When it is written, you lose the sound or the noise, and therefore you lose part of the meaning. Which is, again, why I have to have a tape recorder for this presentation. I want you to get the sound of it, rather than the sight of it.

In order to break down the pentameter, we discovered an ancient form which was always there, the calypso.<sup>18</sup> This is a form that I think nearly everyone knows about. It does not employ the iambic pentameter. It employs dactyls. It therefore mandates the use of the tongue in a certain way, the use of sound in a certain way. It is a model that we are moving naturally towards now. Compare

17a. See H. P. Jacobs, 'The Dialect of Victor Reid' *West Indian Review*, May 1949, pp.12-15; Mervyn Morris, 'On Reading Louise Bennett, seriously', *Sunday Gleaner* June 7-28, 1964, *Jamaica Journal*, Dec. 1967, pp.69-74; Gordon Rohlehr, *CAM Newsletter* 2 (April/May 1967), *Savacou* 2 (Sept. 1970), pp.87-99.

18. The calypso (*kaiso*) is well treated, in historical and musicological perspective in *Caribbean Quarterly* 4(1956) and by J. D. Elder (1970) and Errol Hill (1972). But it is Gordon Rohlehr, a critic and Reader

(IP) To be or not to be, that is the question

(Kaiso) The stone had skidded arc'd and bloomed into islands  
Cuba San Domingo  
Jamaica Puerto Rico<sup>18a</sup>

But not only is there a difference in syllabic or stress pattern, there is an important difference in shape of intonation. In the Shakespeare (IP above), the voice travels in a single forward plane towards the horizon of its end. In the kaiso, after the skimming movement of the first line, we have a distinct variation. The voice dips and deepens to describe an intervallic pattern. And then there are more ritual forms like *kumina*, like *shango*, the religious forms,<sup>19</sup> which I won't have time to go into here, but which begin to disclose the complexity that is possible with nation language.

The other thing about nation language is that it is part of what may be called *total expression*, a notion which is not unfamiliar to you because you are coming back to that kind of thing now. Reading is an isolated, individualistic expression. The oral tradition on the other hand demands not only the griot but the audience to complete the community: the noise and sounds

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in English at the UWI, St Augustine, Trinidad, who apart from a few comments by C.L.R. James and Derek Walcott, is almost the only major Caribbean writer to have dealt with its literary aspects and with the relationship between kaiso (and reggae) and literature. Among his articles: 'Sparrow and the language of calypso', *CAM Newsletter* 2(1967), *Savacou* 2 (Sept 1970); 'Calypso and morality', *Moko* 17 June 1969; 'The calypso as rebellion', *S.A.G.* 3(1970); 'Sounds and Pressure: Jamaican Blues', *Cipriani Labour College Review*, (Jan 1970); 'Calypso and politics', *Moko* 29 Oct 1971; 'Forty years of calypso', *Tapia* 3, 17 Sept, 8 Oct 1972; 'Samuel Selvon and the language of the people' in Edward Baugh (ed.) *Critics on Caribbean literature* (London 1978), from 'The folk in Caribbean literature', *Tapia* 17 Dec 1972.

18a. Brathwaite, 'Caribbean theme: a calypso', *CQ4*:3&4(1956)p.246; *Rights of passage* (1967: as 'Calypso'), p.48; sung by the author on Argo DA101(1969), PLP1110(1972).

19. See G. E. Simpson, *Religious cults of the Caribbean* (Rio Piedras 1970); Honor Ford-Smith, 'The performance aspect of kumina ritual', Seminar Paper, Dept of English, UWI, Mona (1976) and Brathwaite and Warner Lewis as at n.12, above.

that the maker makes are responded to by the audience and are returned to him. Hence we have the creation of a continuum where meaning truly resides. And this *total expression* comes about because people be in the open air, because people live in conditions of poverty ('unhouselled') because they come from a historical experience where they had to rely on their very *breath* rather than on paraphernalia like books and museums and machines. They had to depend on *immanence*, the power within themselves, rather than the technology outside themselves.

Let me begin by playing you, first of all, some West Indian poets who are writing in standard English, or if you like, in *West Indian standard English*. The first poet is Claude McKay, who some people think of as American. He appears in American anthologies, especially of Black Writing. (Until recently, American anthologies hardly ever contained black writers, except perhaps Phillis Wheatley.) But McKay (1889-1940) was born in Jamaica and was a policeman in the constabulary there for some years before emigrating to the States where he quickly became a leading figure in what has come to be known as the Harlem Renaissance. But although he is very much identified with the black movement, McKay, except perhaps for the most productive years of his life, was rather ambivalent about his negritude.<sup>20</sup> In this recording, made towards the end of his life in the forties, when he had moved from Communism to Catholicism, he is saying, in the lead-in to his most famous and militant poem 'If we must die', that he is a *poet*, not a *black poet*, not, as he said in those days, a 'coloured' poet. And he goes on to recount the story of how a copy of 'If we must die' was found on the body of a dead (white) soldier during the First World War. The newspapers recorded the occasion and everyone started quoting the poem. But no one, McKay says, said—'perhaps they did not even know,' he says—that he was black. Which was okay by

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20. See Wayne F. Cooper, *The passion of Claude McKay* (New York 1973).



him, he says, because it helped ensure his 'universality'. (Winston Churchill also quoted this poem—without attribution to the author who, when he had gone to Bernard Shaw for encouragement in earlier days, had been advised by that Grand Old Man (after taking a shrewd look at him) that he'd better try it as a boxer!)

Well, that's the first stage and story of our literature. We want to be universal, to be universally accepted. But it's the terrible terms meted out for universality that interest me. In order to be 'universal' McKay forsook his nation language, forsook his early mode of poetry,<sup>21</sup> and went to the sonnet. And his sonnet,

distinct vs. nation lang;  
 distinct formal by  
 performance

21. McKay's first two books of poetry (1912), written in Jamaica, are unique in that they are the first all-dialect collections from an anglo-phone Caribbean poet. They are however *dialect* as distinct from *nation* because McKay allowed himself to be imprisoned in the pentameter; he didn't let his language find its own parameters; though this raises the tricky question of *critical relativity*: could McKay, in the Jamaica of 1912, have done it any differently, with a svengali like Walter Jekyll, for instance, plus his *Dan-is-the-man-in-the-van* school-teacher brother? We can certainly note the results of his literary colonialism in the primordial (?) anglicanism of *Constab ballads* (London 1912) and *Songs of Jamaica* (Kingston 1912):

I've a longin' in me dept's of heart dat I can conquer not,  
 'Tis a wish dat I've been havin' from since I could form a t'o't . . .

Just to view de homeland England, in de streets of London walk,  
 An' to see de famous sights dem 'bouten which dere's so much  
 talk . . .

('Old England', *Songs*, p.63).

By the time we reach Louise Bennett in the forties there is much less of a problem. Though the restrictive forms are still there, there is a world of difference in the activity of the language, and one suspects that in *performance* this very 'restriction' (the formal meter) is an aid to memory. Other less adventurous spirits in the fifties attempted dialect in their first editions but revised them 'upward' in subsequent versions. We are fortunate to have for purposes of comparison, in N. R. Millington's *Lingering thoughts* ([Bridgetown] 1954), two versions of 'On return from a foreign land' (the dialect entirely absent from subsequent editions).

Oh, what a rare delight  
 To see you once again!  
 Your kindly, strong, familiar face  
 Comes easily to my remembrance.

'St Isaac's Church, Petrograd', is a poem which could have been written by a European, perhaps most intimately by a Russian in Petrograd. It certainly could have been written by any poet of the post-Victorian era. The only thing that retains its uniqueness here (in terms of my notion of nation language) is the *tone* of the poet's voice. But the form and the content are very closely connected to European models. This does not mean that it is a bad poem or that I am putting it down. I am merely saying that aesthetically there are no unique elements in this poem apart from the *voice* of the poet reciting his own poem. And I will have a musical model which will appear after you have listened to the poem, and you can tell me whether you think I am fair or not. (On tape: McKay reading his sonnet followed by the 'Agnus Dei' from Fauré's *Requiem*.)

Our last meeting was on Roebuck Street  
 Which used to be so rutty.  
 The mule-drawn car is gone;  
 Gone, too, the railway;  
 Running on the tarmac  
 Are the fussy buses.  
 Small estates are combining into large . . .

(p.40).

"Who you and whay you come from?  
 Yuh voice soun' Bajan  
 An' yuh face familiuh.  
 Las' time I see yuh was 'pon Roebuck Street,  
 Dat use' to be suh full o' holes.  
 But now uh hear dat all de roads been tar  
 De tramcars gone, de train gone too  
 An' buses runnin' everywhay  
 At any owuh o' de day.  
 De little estates all shut down,  
 An' everybody rush to town . . ."

(p.43).

Two more points: (i) Millington places the dialect version in quotes to signal (for him) its dramatic/conversational mode; (ii) at a reading of this poem by the author in 1979, he had removed the awkward standard English 'rutty' and imported from the dialect version the more natural 'full of holes'.



How important was  
1945 for Jamaican  
independence?

Bow down my soul in worship very low  
And in the holy silences be lost  
Bow down before the marble Man of Woe,  
Bow down before the singing angel host . . ."

The only trouble is that McKay had 'trouble' with his syllables. His *Clarendon* vowels are very evident and he didn't always say 'the', but sometimes 'de'. And these elisions, the *sound* of them, subtly erode, somewhat, the classical pentametric of the sonnet . . .

Our second poet is George Campbell also of Jamaica. In 1945, Jamaica, after a long history of struggle, was granted by Britain the right to move toward self-government and independence with a new political Constitution and the formation of the People's National Party. George Campbell was very moved by and involved in these events and he wrote what I consider his finest poem :

On this momentous night O God help us.  
With faith we now challenge our destiny.  
Tonight masses of men will shape, will hope,  
Will dream with us; so many years hang on  
Acceptance. Who is that knocking against  
The door? . . . is it you  
Looking for a destiny, or is it  
Noise of the storm?"

Now what you see here is a man becoming conscious of his nation. But when he comes to write his greatest poem, it is a Miltonic ode; or perhaps *because* he's writing his greatest poem, it must be given that kind of nobility.<sup>24</sup> And it is read here by our Milton of the Caribbean, George Lamming, our great organ

22. McKay, 'St Isaac's Church, Petrograd', first pub. in the *Survey Graphic* v.53, March 1, 1925, in *Selected poems* (New York 1953), p.84, *The passion of Claude McKay*, p.127 and read here by the author on *Anthology of Negro poets* (Folkways FL 9791, New York 1966).
23. George Campbell, 'On this night', *First poems* (Kingston 1945), p.67.
24. See *critical relativity*, n.21, above.

voice, a voice that he himself in his own book *The Pleasures of Exile* (1960) recognizes as one of the finest in English orature.<sup>25</sup> But the point is that from my perspective, George Campbell's ode, fittingly read by George Lamming, isn't giving us any unique element in terms of the Caribbean environment, though it is still a beautiful poem wonderfully read. (On tape : Lamming reading Campbell's poem . . .

Must the horse rule the rider or the man  
The horse.  
Wind where cometh the fine technique  
Of rule passing through me? My hands wet with  
The soil and I knowing my world

. . . followed by the opening of Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony*).<sup>26</sup>

The models are important here, you see. The McKay can be matched with Fauré, Campbell/Lamming with Beethoven. What follows next on the tape, however, is equally important because our *local* Beethoven employs a completely different model. I'm not saying his model is 'equal' to the *Fifth Symphony*, but it makes a similar statement, and it gets us into what

25. "I can read verse much better than most English poets alive. That is a fact. And I read it [at the ICA, London] exactly as I would have done in the West Indies. After all, it was my poem. I had made it. It was my own trumpet; and I knew the keys. If I were afraid to blow it, whom would I expect to do it for me? So I made a heaven of a *noise* [my italics] which is *characteristic of my voice and an ingredient of West Indian behaviour*. The result was an impression of authority. That's why they left me alone . . ."
- George Lamming, *The pleasures of exile* (London: Michael Joseph, 1960), pp.62 - 63.
26. The tape recordings used in this lecture were taken from a wide variety of sources: LPs, field recordings, copies from radio broadcasts, interviews etc. The Lamming recording is from one of our finest radio programmes, *New World of the Caribbean*, a series sponsored by Bookers of Guyana and broadcast on Radio Guyana in 1955/56. It was conceived of and written by Lamming and Wilson Harris and produced for radio by Rafiq Khan. The Lamming reading of Campbell's poem had as background the theme music of the entire series, Dvorak's *New World Symphony*.

I now consider the nation or native language. Big Yout's sound poem, 'Salaman Agunday' begins with a scream (on tape: Big Yout's 'Screamin' target'/'Salaman Agunday' from the LP *Screamin' target*, Kingston c.1972) followed by the bass-based reggae-canter of downbeat on the first 'syllable' of the first and second bars, followed by a syncopation on the third third, followed by full offbeat/downbeats on the fourth:



The other model that we have and that we have always had in the Caribbean, as I've said before, is the calypso, and we are going to hear now the Mighty Sparrow singing a *kaiso* which came out in the early sixties. It marked, in fact, the first major change in consciousness that we all shared. And Sparrow made a criticism of all that I and Dennis have been saying about the educational system. In 'Dan is the Man in the Van' he says that the education we got from England has really made us idiots because all of those things that we had to read about—Robin Hood, King Alfred and the Cakes, King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table—all of these things really haven't given us anything but empty words. And he did it in the calypso form. And you should hear the rhyme-scheme of this poem. He is rhyming on 'n's' and 't's' and he is creating a cluster of syllables and a counterpoint between voice and orchestra, between individual and community, within the formal notion of 'call and response', which becomes typical of our nation in the revolution.

(Solo) According to de education you get when you small  
 You(tl) grow up wi(th) true ambition an respect for  
 one an all  
 But in *my* days in school they teach me like a fool  
**THE THINGS THEY TEACH ME A**  
**SHOULDA BEEN A BLOCK-HEADED**  
**MULE**

27. 'Salaman Agunday' from *Screaming target* juxtaposed, on tape, with title tune.

(Chorus) *Pussy has finish his work long ago*  
*An now he restin an ting*  
*Solomon Agundy was born on a MunDEE*  
*DE ASS IN DE LION SKIN . . .*<sup>28</sup>

I could bring you a book, *The Royal Reader*, or the one referred to by Sparrow, *Nelson's West Indian Reader* by J. O. Cutteridge, that we had to learn at school by heart, which contained phrases like: 'the cow jumped over the moon', 'ding dong bell, pussy in the well', 'Twisty & Twirly were two screws' and so on. I mean, that was our beginning of an understanding of literature. 'Literature' started (*startled*, really) literally at that level, with that kind of model. It was all we had. The problem of transcending this is what I am talking about now.

A more complex form by Sparrow is this next poem, 'Ten to One is Murder'. Now it's interesting how this goes, because Sparrow had been accused of shooting someone on the eve of Carnival, just before Lent. (Kaiso and Carnival are two of our great folk expressions.) Now Sparrow apparently shot someone, but because of the popular nature of the calypsonian, he was able to defend himself long before he got into court by creating the scenario for the reason why he shot the man. He shot the man, he says, because for no reason at all, ten angry men suddenly appear one night, surround him, and started throwing stones. The one in front was a very good pelter, and he didn't know what to do. He couldn't even find shelter. So he ran and ran and ran until finally he remembered that he had a gun (a wedger) in his pocket. He was forced to take it out and shoot *pow pow pow* and the crowd start to scatter. As a result he had the community on his side before the trial even started. But even

28. The Mighty Sparrow [Slinger Francisco], 'Dan is the man in the van', from an EP recording (1963). The fourth line of each quatrain, shouted by Sparrow on this recording, represents the 'response' part of this form and is sometimes sung by chorus and/or audience. For text of this *kaiso*, see *One hundred and twenty calypsoes to remember . . . by the Mighty Sparrow* (Port of Spain 1963), p.86.

if he hadn't written the song, he would have had the community on his side because here you have a folk poet; and folk poets are the spokesmen whose whole concern is to express the experience of the people rather than the experiences of the elite. But here is 'Ten to One is Murder'. Each slash-phrase is an impressionistic brush-stroke :

About ten in de night on de fifth of October  
*Ten to One is Murder!*  
 Way down Henry Street, up by H. G. M. Walker  
*Ten to One is Murder!*  
 Well de leader of de gang was a hot like a pepperr  
*Ten to One is Murder!*  
 An every man in de gang had a white-handle razorrr  
*Ten to One is Murder!*  
 They say ah push a gal from Grenada  
*Ten to One is Murder! . . .*

Now that is dramatic monologue which because of its call-and-response structure (in addition, of course, to its own intrinsic drama) is capable of extension on stage. There is in fact a 'tent' form known as calypso drama, which calls upon Trinidadian nation-forms like *grand charge*, *picong*, *robber talk*, and so on, which Sparrow is in fact consciously using in this calypso and which some of the younger Trinidadian *nation* poets like Malik, Questel and Christopher Laird, for example, are bringing into play in their poetry.

Man a start to sweat. Man a soakin wet  
 Mama so much threat : that's a night a can never  
 forget  
*Ten to One is Murder! . . ."*

Next we have the poet who has been writing *nation* all her life and who, because of that, has been ignored until recently; the poet Louise Bennett (Miss Lou) of Jamaica. Now this is very interesting because she is middle class and 'middle class' means

29. Sparrow 'Ten to one is Murder', EP recording (Port of Spain 1960), text in *One hundred and twenty calypsoes*, p.37.

'brown',<sup>30</sup> urban/'respectable' and 'standard English' and 'the snow was falling in the canefields'. It certainly doesn't mean an entrenched economic/political position, as in Europe. For instance, Miss Lou's mother's and Miss Lou's own upbringing was 'rural St Mary':<sup>31</sup> hence the Honourable Louise's natural and rightful knowledge of the folk, though it was not until the post-independence seventies that she was officially—as distinct from popularly—recognized and given the highest honours—including the right to the title of Honourable. But one is supposed, as V. S. Naipaul once said at a memorable Writers Conference in Jamaica,<sup>32</sup> *to graduate out of these things*; therefore there is no reason why Louise should have persisted with Anancy and Auntie Roachie and *boonoonoonoos* an *parangles* an *ting*, when she could have opted for 'And how are you today': the teeth and lips tight and closed around the mailed fist of a smile. But her instincts were that she should use the language of her people. The consequence was that for years (since c.1936)<sup>33</sup> she performed her work in crowded village halls across the island, and until 1945<sup>34</sup> could get nothing accepted by *The Gleaner*, the island's largest, oldest (estab. 1834) and often only newspaper, and at that time (still is, to a large extent) a budding writer's only outlet. (Claude McKay had published in Kingston, including *The Gleaner* in 1912 but he had had an influential white sponsor, the Englishman Walter Jekyll, compiler of *Jamaican song*

30. For the role of colour in the Caribbean, see Fernando Henriques, *Family and colour in Jamaica* (London 1953).

31. See the (in progress) Ph.D. dissertation by Mary Jane Hewitt (Dept of English/History, UWI, Mona) on Louise Bennett and Zora Neale Hurston as 'cultural conservators'.

32. ACLALS (Association of Commonwealth Lit. & Lang. Societies) Conference held at the UWI, Mona, Jamaica, in January 1971; see my 'The love axe/1: developing a Caribbean aesthetic' in *Speaking Black: essays in the criticism of African, Caribbean, and Black American literature*, ed. Houston A. Baker, Jr (Cornell Univ. Press, 1976), *Bim* 61-63 (1977-78); and, in detail, in a book of the same title, forthcoming New Beacon Books, London.

33. Hewitt, loc. cit.

34. Hewitt's information is that Louise Bennett began to write for *The Gleaner* in 1942—two years after that company had, in fact, printed her first book of poetry, *Dialect verses* (1940).

Bennett as  
 Nation language

and story [1907]).<sup>35</sup> And although by 1962 she had already published nine books, she does not appear among the poets in the *Independence Anthology of Jamaican Poetry* but is at the back of the book, like an afterthought if not an embarrassment, under 'Miscellaneous'. She could not be accepted, even at the moment of Political Independence, as a poet. Though all this, as I say, is dramatically altered now with the revolution of the late 60s, her consciousness of this unfortunate situation remains where it hurts most: 'I have been set apart by other creative writers a long time ago because of the language I speak and work in . . . From the beginning nobody recognized me as a writer'.<sup>36</sup>

I couldn't satisfactorily reproduce in print Miss Lou's 'Street cries' played for the lecture from her LP *Miss Lou's Views*.<sup>37</sup> Here instead are two examples of her more 'formal' verse from the book collection *Jamaica labrish* (Kingston 1966). Recordings from which, Miss Lou informs me, should be available alongside

35. McKay's relationship with Jekyll is recorded in McKay's autobiography, *My green hills of Jamaica* (Kingston 1979), pp.65-72, 76-79. "Now is your chance as a native boy [to] put the Jamaican dialect into literary language. I am sure that your poems will sell" (p.67). Jekyll's *Jamaican song and story* was published by David Nutt, London in 1907 and reprinted by Dover Publications, Inc., New York in 1966. For useful notes on Jekyll, see Cooper, *The passion of Claude McKay*, pp.318-19.

Mary Jane Hewitt gives this account of McKay's influence on Louise Bennett:

It was during this period of high unemployment, labour unrest and Garveyism in the 1920s that Louise first saw Jamaican creole language in print. When she was about seven years of age, a teacher at Calabar School in Kingston (Miss Dukes), knowing the child was always telling her classmates Anancy stories, gave her a copy of Claude McKay's *Constab Ballads* (1912), saying, "Here are some verses a man wrote in the Jamaican talk. You must read some of them. They're very funny!" [Miss Lou] took the book home and showed it to her Grandma Mimi who liked the poems. Bibs [Louise] memorized some of them, but whenever she told someone she knew Claude McKay's *Constab Ballads*, they would respond with, "Oh, yes", and refer to his sonnets from *Songs of Jamaica* (also 1912).

Ms Hewitt is in error here in that McKay's sonnets do not appear in print until *Spring in New Hampshire* (1920)—after he'd gone to the USA. Both the 1912 books are in 'dialect'.

36. Bennett, *Caribbean Quarterly*, 4: 1&2 (March-June 1968), p.98.

37. Federal 204, Federal Records, Kingston ?1967.

the revised edition of *Labrish* quite soon.<sup>38</sup> First, 'Pedestrian crosses':

If a cross yuh dah-cross,  
 Beg yuh cross mek me pass.  
 Dem yah crossin' is crosses yuh know!  
 Koo de line! Yuh noh se  
 Cyar an truck backa me?  
 Hear dah hoganeer one deh dah-blow!

Missis, walk fas' an cross!  
 Pickney, cross mek me pass!  
 Lady, galang an mine yuh business!  
 Ole man mek up yuh mine  
 Walk between dem white line!  
 Wat a crosses dem crossin yah is!

De crossin a-stop we from pass mek dem cross,  
 But nutten dah-stop dem from cross mek we pass,  
 Dem yah crossin is crosses fe true!"

And 'Dutty tough' begins

Sun a-shine but tings noh bright,  
 Doah pot a-bwile, bickle noh nuff,  
 River flood but water scarce yaw,  
 Rain a-fall but dutty tuff!

And ends on this note of social commentary:

De price o' bread gan up so high  
 Dat we haffe agree,  
 Fe cut we y'eye pon bread an all  
 Tun dumplin refugee!

38. Personal communication, Louise Bennett Coverley, 25 September 1978.

39. Louise Bennett, 'Pedestrian crosses', *Jamaica labrish* [Kingston] 1966. p.74.

An all dem mawga smaddy weh  
Dah-gwan like fat is sin,  
All dem deh weh dah-fas' wid me,  
Ah lef dem to dumplin!

Sun a-shine an pot a-bwile, but  
Ting noh bright, bickle noh nuff!  
Rain a-fall, river dah-flood, but  
Wata scarce an dutty tuff!

6

These are the models that we have, and I could give you much more complex examples than the ones you have so far heard. What I am going to do now, however, since there is a constraint on time for this session, is give you an idea of how the 'mainstream' anglophone Caribbean poets reached the stage signalled by Miss Lou.

The 'mainstream' poets who were moving from standard English to nation language were influenced basically, I think, (again the models are important) by T. S. Eliot. What T. S. Eliot did for Caribbean poetry and Caribbean literature was to introduce the notion of the speaking voice, the conversational tone.<sup>40</sup> That is what really attracted us to Eliot. And you can see how the Caribbean poets introduced here have been influenced

40. Bennett, 'Dutty tough', *Labrish*, pp.120-121. The tyranny of the pentametre can be seen/heard quite clearly here, although Miss Lou erodes and transforms this with the sound of her language. Its riddim sets up a counterpoint *against* the pentametre: "River flood but water scarce/yaw"; "Yuh noh se/Cyar an truck *backa me*". The 'Africanisms' (*koo de, galang, yah, yaw, noh nuff, deh dah-blow and fe*, for example) carry this even further, crystallising in brilliant roots images such as "like fat is sin" and "tun dumplin refugee", which not only has its 'English' meaning, but its folk-speech underdrone of African sound-words for food: *tun, tum, tuntum and fungee*. A whole essay could (and should) be written on the phonemic structure of nation language and how this relates to syntax and prosody, in addition to the historical and critical/comparative approaches hinted at in note 21 of this study.
41. For those who really made the breakthrough, it was Eliot's actual voice — or rather his recorded voice, property of the British Council — reading 'Preludes', 'The love song of J. Alfred Prufrock',

30

by him, although they eventually went on to become part of their own environmental expression.

The first poet (writing in the 1940s) is a magistrate and historian from Barbados, H. A. Vaughan, and he is reading a sonnet called 'For certain demogogues'. It is a 'standard English' poem except for a passage toward the end when the image of 'blackbirds' appears. Here, suddenly for the first time and rare in Vaughan's poetry, he imitates the sound and the motion, the movement of the hopping of these peculiar birds and gets this into his poetry, which becomes one of the first and early stages of nation language: *mimesis*. In fact, had I not *heard* this poem, I might never have 'recognized' it.

'We love the people, sir!' You do?  
You ought to! nay, indeed, you must  
Shouting their needs has brought a new  
Elation to your fickle dust

...  
You prey, but not like *beasts* of prey;  
The cobblers fly too far to be  
Your emblem; in a higgling way  
You have a place in history;

*The Waste Land* and the *Four Quartets* — not the texts — which turned us on. In that dry deadpan delivery, the riddims of St Louis (though we didn't know the source then) were stark and clear for those of us who at the same time were listening to the dislocations of Bird, Dizzy and Klook. And it is interesting that on the whole, the Establishment couldn't stand Eliot's voice—far less jazz! Eliot himself, in the sleeve note to *Four Quartets* (HMV CLP 1115, n.d.) says: "What a recording of a poem by its author can and should preserve, is the way that poem sounded to the author when he had finished it. The disposition of lines on the page, and the punctuation (which includes the *absence* of punctuation marks . . .) can never give an exact notation of the author's metric. The chief value of the author's record . . . is a guide to the *rhythms*" [my italics]. Another influence must have been the voice of John Arlott, the BBC test cricket commentator, who stunned, amazed and transported us with his natural, *riddmic* and *image-laden* tropes, in its revolutionary Hampshire burr, at a time when BBC meant Empire and Loyal Models and Our Masters Voice: and cricket, especially against England, was the national war-game, our colonial occasion for communal catharsis. Not only was Arlott 'good' (all our mimics tried to imitate him) but he subverted the Establishment with the way and where he spoke: like Eliot, like jazz . . .

Interesting that Brath-  
links modern nation lang.  
to TSE + John Arlott

31



*Like blackbirds in their shiny coats  
Prinking and lifting sry, proud feet,  
Bickering and picking sodden oats  
From horses' offal in the street.*<sup>42</sup>

Now we must also hear from Frank Collymore, who is<sup>43</sup> a schoolmaster and editor of the magazine *Bim* that I mentioned earlier. Here is the conversational tone of the early 50s. He is talking about going back to school and the materialist dangers of scholastic education, continuing the theme in fact being raised by Dennis Brutus' lecture and Sparrow's calypso and Big Yout's 'Salaman Agundy' but getting it all into a wonderfully achieved style and tone. There is however, no nation language as such here; no unique element similar to Vaughan's 'blackbirds', for instance. But the *conversational mode* can have a corrosive effect on the tyranny of the pentameter:

In a couple of weeks' time school will reopen  
If not with a flourish of trumpets at least with a shout  
From the several hundred boys gathered together in the building,  
And though a few perhaps may wonder what it's all about . . .  
This fuss of education, I mean . . . their parents and the others  
Who have to fit the bill of books and shoes  
Will be prouder than ever that their young are well on the road  
To knowledge—not that they'll be caring particularly who's  
Going to dish out the stuff, or even what it is for that matter,  
Only the platters have got to be picked clean,  
And afterwards with the School Certificate nicely framed  
And the New Order hovering suspiciously near the scene!  
French irregular verbs, quadratic equations,

42. H. A. Vaughan 'For certain demagogues', read by the author on *Poets of the West Indies reading their own works* (Caedmon TC 1379, New York 1971) from *Sandy Lane and other poems* (B'town 1945), *Caribbean voices II*, ed. John Figueroa (London 1970), pp.71-72. By *cobblers* Vaughan does not mean ye olde English shoemakers, but sea-birds. Vaughan's reading of the stanza italicized is especially interesting . . .
43. Colly (b.1893) died in July 1980, while this version of my talk was being prepared. I should like here to pay tribute to his warmth, kindness and humanity, and to his enormous contribution to Caribbean literature.

Maybe a century in the First Division . . . who knows?  
And for those who can't take it all in by the prescribed method  
There's a road to the brain through the backside by blows . . .<sup>44</sup>

Our third 'established' poet, John Figueroa, writing in the late 60s, now begins to use nation language, but he uses it as a very self-conscious and formal contrast to standard English, as a reaction, no doubt, to the folk/nation rupture (I won't say irruption, though some hoped that it was merely an *interruption*) that had taken place in our poetry with the publication of *Rights of passage* (London 1967) and the effects of the literary debate that had taken place a few years before on the issue of 'literature and dialect' (1965) when it was demonstrated for perhaps the first time at last that a nation language poem could be 'serious' and employ not only semantic but *sound* elements: in this case, the sound-structure of Rastafarian drums and the 'Dry bones' spiritual in 'Wings of a Dove':

Watch *dem* ship *dem*  
come to town *dem*

full o' *silk* *dem*  
full o' *food* *dem*

an' *dem* plane *dem*  
come to *groun'* *dem*

full o' *flash* *dem*  
full o' *cash* *dem*

*silk dem* food *dem*  
*shoe dem* wine *dem*

date *dem* drink *dem*  
an consume *dem*

44. Frank Collymore, 'Voici la plume de mon oncle', *Collected poems* (Bridgetown 1959), p.92; read by the author on *Poets of the West Indies*, q.v.

*praisin' de glory of the lord . . .*<sup>45</sup>

This riddimic aspect of Caribbean nation language was to be further extended in the late seventies by the Jamaican reggae/dub poets Oku Onuora (Orlando Wong), Michael Smith (whom we shall hear from later) and Linton Kwesi Johnson of Black London in, for instance, 'Come wi goh dung deh' from his LP *Dread beat an blood* :

de people demma fite  
fe work dung deh  
de people dem a fite  
one annadda dung deh

de people demma fite  
fe stay alive dung deh  
de people demma fite  
fe dem rites dung deh  
. . .

soh come we goh dung deh  
mek wi mek a stop dung deh  
soh come wi goh dung deh  
mek we forward dung deh  
gonna badituppa badituppa badituppa . . .

come wi goh dung deh !<sup>46</sup>

or, more complex,

- 
45. Edward Kamau Brathwaite, 'Wings of a dove', *Rights of passage* (London 1967), p.44. *The arrivants* (London 1973), p.45; read by the author on Argo DA 101 (London 1969), Argo DA 1110 (London 1972). The literary debate took place at the UWI, Mona (1965) at a Sunday Morning Seminar involving, among others, Errol Hill, Derek Walcott, Mervyn Morris, Rex Nettleford and Edward Kamau Brathwaite. Transcripts (were) available from the Radio Unit at Mona.
46. Linton Kwesi Johnson, 'Come wi goh dung deh', *Dread beat an blood*, Virgin Records (London 1978), text in *Dread beat and blood* (London 1975), p.49.

night number one was in BRIX/TON :  
SOFRANO B sounn sys/tem

was a-beatin out a riddim/wid a fyah,  
commin doun his reggae-reggae wyah;

it was a sounn shakin doun you spinal col/umn,  
a bad music tearin up you *flesh* ;  
an th'rebels-dem start a-fightin,  
th'yout dem jus tunn *wild*.

it's *war* amongst th' rebels :  
mad/ness . . . mad/ness . . . *war* . . .<sup>47</sup>

so wid a flick  
a de wrist  
a jab an a stab

th' song of blades was *soun/ded*  
th' bile of oppression was *vom/ited*  
an two policemen *woun/ded*

*righteous righteous war*<sup>48</sup>

But nation language isn't confined, as you must have recognized by now, to rhythmic variations. Miss Lou follows the traditional Scots tune very nicely thank you with her 'Every secky got him jeggeh/Every puppy got him flea'; while I got pretty close to Bajan country speech (free cadence and vocabulary) in 'The Dust', also from *Rights of passage*, where some women are recalling a volcanic eruption in another island :

. . . Some say  
is in one o' dem islands away

where they language tie-tongue  
an' to hear them speak so  
in they St Lucia patois

- 
47. Linton Kwesi Johnson, 'Five nights of bleedin' from the LP *Dread beat an blood*, and the book. p.15, as cited above.
48. *ibid*.



is as if they cahn unnerstan'

a single word o' English.  
But uh doan really know. All uh know  
is that one day suddenly so  
this mountain leggo one *brugg-a-lung-go*

whole bloody back side  
o' this hill like it blow  
off like they blastin' stones  
in de quarry.

Rocks big as you cow pen hois'  
in de air as if they was one  
set o' shingles. That noise,  
Jesus Chrise, mussa rain down

splinter an' spark  
as if it was Con-  
federation.<sup>49</sup>

But the roots and underground link to all these emerging  
forces was the now almost legendary Rastafarian poet, Bongo  
Jerry, whose revolutionary mis/use of Babylonian English was  
practically apocalyptic:

**MABRAK**

Lightning  
is the future brightening,  
for last year man learn  
how to use black eyes.  
(wise!)

**MABRAK :**  
**NEWSFLASH!**  
'Babylon plans crash'

49. Edward Kamau Brathwaite, 'The dust', *Rights*, pp.66-67, *The arrivants*, pp.65-66, read here on Argo 102 or 1111. (The Argo recording is on two LPs).

Thunder interrupt their programme to  
announce:

**BLACK ELECTRIC STORM**  
**IS HERE**

How long you feel 'fair to fine'  
(WHITE) would last?

How long in darkness  
when out of BLACK  
come forth LIGHT?

.....

**MABRAK** is righting the wrongs and brain-whitening...  
Not just by washing out the straightening and wearing  
dashiki t'ing

**MOST OF THE STRAIGHTENING IS IN THE**  
**TONGUE—so . . .**

Save the **YOUNG**  
from the language that **MEN** teach,  
the doctrine Pope preach  
skin bleach . . .

**MAN** must use **MEN** language  
to carry dis message:

**SILENCE BABEL TONGUES**: recall and  
recollect **BLACK SPEECH**<sup>50</sup>

50. Bongo Jerry, *Savacou* 3/4 (Dec 1970/March 1971), pp.13-15. At the Harvard lecture, a tape recording of Bongo Jerry reading 'Mabrak', with *funde* and *repeater* drums, at a Rasta *grounation* (Kingston 1969) was used. Also Jerry's 'slide-trombone' tribute to Don Drummond, Bob Marley's musical and spiritual ancestor, from Dermott Hussey's (JBC Radio 1969, 1980) *Requiem for Don Drummond*. The influence of this *roots underground* is described in my 'Love axe/1' (p.32).

Now Figueroa's nation language, and that of many other of the established poets who followed, was very likely a reaction to (and against) all this. But the difference at this stage between Figueroa/mainstream and the natives (the *cultural gorillas*) per se, was that while for the natives nation language informs the very shape and spirit of their poems, for Figueroa in 'Portrait of a Woman', for instance, the control and narrative, the 'classical', even *Prosperian element*—the *most* part of the poem—is in *English*. The marginal bit, that of the voice and status of the domestic helper, *the house slave*, Caliban's sister, is in nation but a nation still sticky and wet with the interposition of dialect; though Figueroa might claim that the glory of Caribbean English is that it has a wide range of resources and we should use them all. In any case, Figueroa, when all is said and done, finally sets up a most memorable cross-rhythm:

Firmly, sweetly  
refusing . . .

Tall for seventeen fit  
for a tumble

(*'A guess hard time  
tek er'*) she said  
referring to  
her mother's misfortune  
(Her strict mother whose  
three men had left  
her holding five pledges to fortune)

She came easily into  
my arms  
refusing only to kiss

(*'any familiarity an  
we stop right now'*)

Dixerat—as lacrymae rerum used to say.  
She's in the public domain  
she's lost her patent rights . . .

*'You have bad min'  
doan tell nobody  
doan tell nobody  
doan mek me do it  
mek mi  
doan mek me do it  
mek mi  
lawd!*

You see I intend to be a nurse'  
No need to apologise  
(*Lawd it sweet!*)  
'But if you try to kiss  
me I will scream.'<sup>51</sup>

51. John Figueroa, 'Portrait of a woman', *Savacou* 3/4 (Dec 1970/ March 1971), pp.138-39, *Ignoring hurts* (Washington, D.C., 1976), pp.98-99, my italics; read by the author on *Poets of the West Indies*. Figueroa's *dialect* (not *nation*) position in the debate perhaps best expresses itself in this poem (in the *Ambit* 91 (1982) anthology) 'Problems of a writer who does not Quite . . . /For: Derek Walcott, his brother Roddy, his mother Alix and After reading Helen Vendler's Review of Walcott in The New York Review of Books' (pp. 84-85):

Roddy broder, teacher Alix son,  
Bwoy, you no hear wa de lady say?  
Watch dis pentemeter ting, man.  
Dat is white people play!

Wha de hell yu read Homer—  
A so him name?—fa!  
Yu his from the horal tradition  
And must deal wid calypso and reggae na!

Mek I hadvise yu boy  
If yu trouble white people toy  
(Especially as yu win big prize an t'ing)  
Yu arse goin swing

Like metronome, yu'd say,  
But a black bwoy should play  
Widout dem mechanical aids  
Full of rydhm like all true spades.

(Eh eh a since when yu tun black?  
Yu note-book does say yu never did notice  
Whedr the sore was black or white dat wear de poultice,  
But de lady slap 'black experience' in yu back!)

Next Derek Walcott, the Caribbean's most accomplished poet/playwright, with a poem about a little night-violence in New York called 'Blues', which is not a blues at all; it doesn't have that form. But it is a wonderfully speech-textured piece, giving *form* to Collymore's conversational style. And the blues is there in Walcott's *voice*. You will hear in his reading (the print/text can't reveal these things) the sound of Don Drummond's trombone . . .

Those five or six young guys  
 hunched on the stoop  
 that oven-hot summer night  
 whistled me over. Nice  
 and friendly. So I stop.  
 Macdougall or Christopher  
 Street in chains of light . . ."

---

See what dat pentameter an' ESSAY do  
 To yu bwoy! Long time I school yu  
 To break  
 up yu

Lines

Lines

Lines

Like dat black writer Poe, black like his raven

Bruck it

up

Man

Bruck it up man

Bruck it

up

man an' wid de drums

de drums

De tinti

nab u

la

tion of de drums, de drums

Black bwoy black bwoy

black

Bwoy . . .

52. Derek Walcott, 'Blues', *The gulf and other poems* (London 1969), p.34; (New York 1970), p.67; read by the author on *Poetry International '69* (Argo, London 1970). In my presentation, Walcott's reading was followed by Don Drummond's 'Green Island' solo (Kingston c.1966).

Don Drummond, Jamaican ghetto/culture hero of the fifties and early sixties, was a jazz musician of genius (I would compare him with J. J. Johnson), who was at the same time one of the originators of *ska*, the native sound at the yardway of the cultural revolution that would lead eventually to Bob Marley, reggae and *The Harder They Come*.<sup>53</sup> It is a connection of Caribbean and Harlem/New Orleans which Buddy Bolden and Congo Square knew about, which McKay was to carry forward and which, in this poem, among some others (see especially *The Gulf*) Derek Walcott continues. And it is this connection which brings in the influence of Langston Hughes for instance, and Imamu Baraka for instance, and Sonia Sanchez for instance, and Miles Davis, which further erodes the pentameter . . .

My face smashed in, my bloody mug  
 pouring, my olive-branch jacket saved  
 from cuts and tears,  
 I crawled four flights upstairs . . .

I

remember a few watchers waved  
 loudly, and one kid's mother shouting  
 like 'Jackie' or 'Terry',  
 'Now that's enough!'  
 It's nothing really.  
 They don't get enough love.

- 
53. The premier of the Jimmy Cliff roots/reggae film, *The harder they come* (Kingston 1972) marked a dislocation in the socio-colonial pentameter, in the same way that its music and its stars and their *style*, marked a revolution in the hierarchical structure in the arts of the Caribbean. At the premier, the traditional 'order of service' was reversed. Instead of the elite, from their cars moving (complimentary) into the Carib Cinema watched by the poor and admiring multitude, the multitude took over—the car park, the steps, the barred gates, the magical lantern itself—and demanded that they see what they had wrought. 'For the first time at last' it was the people (the raw material) not the 'critics', who decided the criteria of praise, the measure and ground of qualification; 'for the first time at last', a local face, a native ikon, a nation language voice was hero. In this small corner of our world, a revolution as significant as Emancipation.

You know they wouldn't kill  
 you. Just playing rough  
 like young America will.  
 Still, it taught me something  
 about love. If it's so tough,  
 forget it."<sup>54</sup>

Today, we have a very confident movement of nation language. In fact, it is inconceivable that any Caribbean poet writing today is not going to be influenced by this submerged/emerging culture. And it is obvious now to most Caribbean writers, I would say, except perhaps some of the most 'exiled',<sup>55</sup> (and there are less and less of them!) that one has to communicate with the audience. No one is going to assert that a poet cannot live in his ivory tower, or that a poet cannot be an 'individual'—all that we have been through already. But the point is that for the needs of the kind of emerging society that I am defending—for the people who have to recite 'The boy/stood on/the burn/ing deck' for so long, who are unable to express the power of the hurricane in the way that they write their words—at last, our poets, today, are recognizing that it is essential that they use the resources which have always been there, but which have been denied to them—and which they have sometimes themselves denied."<sup>56</sup>

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54. Walcott, 'Blues'. After this comes 'The schooner Flight', read by the author in Port of Spain 1978, text in *Trinidad & Tobago Review*, (May 1978), *The star apple kingdom* (New York 1979).
55. Exile is the first significant feature of anglophone Caribbean writing: the need—or the imagined need—to emigrate to metropolitan centres in order to exist as writers. Our native literature begins with McKay the exile (see *Home to Harlem*, New York 1928) and is ending its first phase with George Lamming (*The pleasures of exile*, London 1960) and V.S. Naipaul (see *Newsweek*, August 18, 1980).
56. In 'The love axe/1' (see n.32, above) I have gone at some detail into the context of this assertion.

I shall end with the violet and red extremes of the spectrum. Here, first, is *fundamental nation*, the language of a *kumina* queen, with its *kikongo* base. Again, although there is no question about the beauty and power of Miss Queenie's language and images: she is, after all, priestess, prophet and symbolist: without hearing her (*seeing* her of course completes the experience because then you would know how she uses her eyes, her mouth, her whole face; how her arms encircle and reject; how her fingers can become water or spear); but without hearing her, you would miss the dynamics of the narrative: the blue notes of that voice; its whispers and pauses and repetitions and stutters and *eleisons*; its high pitch emphases and its low fall trails; and that hoarse quality which I suppose you know from Nina Simone. With Miss Queenie, we are in the very ancient dawn of nation language and to be able to come to terms with oral literature at all, our critics must be able to understand the complex forces that have led to this classical expression . . .

One day . . .  
 a remember one day a faen some lillies . . .  
 an a plant de lillies-dem in row  
 an one Sunday mornin when a wake . . .  
 all de lillies blow . . .  
 seven lillies an de seven a dem blow . . .

an a leave . . .  
 an guh dung in de gully bottom . . .  
 to go an pick some quoquonut  
 an when a go  
 a see a cottn tree an a juss *fell* right down . . .  
 at de cottn tree root . . .

in de night  
in de cotten tree comin like it holloow  
an hi hinside there  
an you have some grave arounn dat cotten tree  
right rounn it  
some *tombs* . . .

but dose is  
some hol-time Hafrican  
yu unnerstann . . . ?

well dose tombs arounn de cotten tree . . .  
an hi inside de cotten tree lay down  
an a night-time a sih de cotton tree *light* hup wit  
cyandles an . . .  
a restin now  
put me an *dis* way an sleepin . . .

an a honly hear a likkle *vice*  
come to mih  
an dem talkin to mih  
but dose tings is spirit talkin to mih  
an dem speakin to me now  
an seh now . . .

'Is a likkle *nice* likkle chile  
an oo gwine get im right up now . . .  
in de hafrican worl . . .  
because you brains  
you will *take* someting . . .  
so derefore . . .  
we gine to *teach* you someting . . .'

Well de *firs* ting dat dem teach me is  
*s'wikkidi* . . .

*s'wikkidi lango*  
which is sugar an water . . .

sih?  
an dem teach me dat . . .

an dem teach me m'praey-ers . . .  
which is . . .

*Kwale kwale n'den den de*  
*Belo ko lo mawa kisalaya*

*Pem legele*  
*Len legele*

*Luwi za'kwe n'da'kwe so*  
*Be'lam m'pese m'bambe*

which is de same Hour Fader's Praeyer . . ."

Michael Smith (b. Kingston 1954) is such an intransigent sound-poet that he's not concerned with written script at all. He 'publishes', like a calypsonian, at his public poetry readings at Zinc Fence Theatre or School of Drama auditorium or like the early Louise Bennett, in all the large or little places throughout Jamaica where he's constantly invited to appear. But whereas it was years before Louise was 'recognized', Smith is a pop star like Oku Onuora and Paul Keens-Douglas, two other very popular sound-poets, who have actually appeared, in performance with Marley and Tosh and Sparrow; while the sound/poems of Linton Kwesi Johnson are on the charts in Britain.<sup>57</sup> For these inheritors of the revolution, nation-language is no longer anything

57. Imogene Elizabeth Kennedy (Miss Queenie), tape recorded conversation with Maureen Warner Lewis and Monica Schuler, Kingston, June 1971. See Brathwaite and Warner Lewis, n.12, above.
58. Both Kwesi Johnson's LPs to date (*Dread beat an blood* 1978, *Bass culture* 1980) have been on the British reggae charts. *Bass culture* was at No. 3 in June 1980 (see *Black Music and Jazz Review*, June 1980, p.12). Oku Onuora has performed with Bob Marley, Keens-Douglas with The Mighty Sparrow and with Miss Lou, Brathwaite with the Mystic Revelation of Rastafari and Light of Saba, Michael Smith with Saba (*Word Sound*, Kingston 1978) and Malik (Trinidad) has presented several elaborate concerts with his own musicians. For more on these developments, see Brathwaite, 'Explosions in Caribbean "sound poetry";' *Caribbean Contact* (Oct. 1978); *Jamaica Daily News* 6 Oct 1978.

to argue about or experiment with; it is their classical norm and comes out of the same experience as the music of contemporary popular song: using the same riddims, the same voice-spreads, syllable clusters, blue notes, ostinato, syncopation and pauses; with, in Smith's case, a quite remarkable voice and breath control, accompanied by a decorative S90 *noise* (the S90 is an admired Japanese motorbike) which after a time becomes part of the sound-structure<sup>59</sup> and meaning of the poem. On the page, Smith's *Lawwwwwwwwd* is the S90. He also, like Big Yout and Sparrow and Miss Lou, uses ring-game refrain and proverb as reverb/eration with again amen and amen to the pentameter/computer

*Mi sey mi cyaan believe it  
mi sey mi cyaan believe it*

room dem a rent  
mi apply widin  
but as mi go in  
cockroach an scarpian also come in

*an mi cyaan believe it*

one likkle bwoy come blow im orn  
an mi look pan im wid scorn  
an mi realize ow mi fine bwoy pickney  
was a victim a de trix  
dem kall partisan pally-trix

59. The concept of *noise* ('sonority contrasts') as part of the music of oral tradition has pervaded (for several reasons) this presentation. I am indebted to Kwabena Nketia for clarifying for me the idea. (See also his *The music of Africa* (London 1975), esp. pp.67-138, on Instrumental Resources). Noise is that decorative energy that invests the nation performance. Unnecessary but without which not enough. Whistles, grater, scraper, shak-shak, shekesheke, wood block, gong, the cheng-cheng of the steel band, the buzz of the banjo or cymbal, the grill of the guitar, vibrato of voice, sax, sound-system, the long roll of the drum until it becomes thunder, Coltrane's sheets of sound, Pharoah Sanders' honks and cries, onomatopoeia, congregational kinesia . . . See also Shake Keane's LP *That's the noise* ACL 1219 (London 1966). One of the poems that perhaps best employs this kind of resource is my 'Nametracks' in *Mother Poem* (London 1977), pp.56-64.

*an mi ban mi belly an mi baaal  
an mi ban mi belly an mi baaal  
Lawwwwwwd  
my cyaaan believe it*

Mi dawta bwoyfren name is sailor  
an im pass trew de port like a ship

more gran pickney fi feed  
but de whole a wi need  
wat a night wat a plight an we cyaan get a bite/mi life  
is a stiff fite  
*an mi cyaaan believe it . . .*

*Hi bwoy  
yes mam  
Hi bwoy  
yes mam  
Yu clean up de dwag shit?  
yes mam  
an mi cyaaan believe it*

Doris a moder a four  
get a wuk as a domestic  
boss man move in  
*an baps si sicai she pregnant again  
baps si sicai an she pregnant again  
an mi cyaaan believe it . . .*

*lawwwwwwwwwd . . .*

but mi know yu believe it  
*lawwwwwwwwwwwwwd  
mi know you believe it . . ."*

60. Michael Smith, 'Mi cyaaan believe it', *Word Sound* (Light of Saba, Kingston 1978) with written version from draft by Smith and transcription by Brathwaite in Brathwaite (ed.), *New poets from Jamaica* (Savacou 14/15, Mona 1979), pp.84-86.



A full presentation of nation language would of course include more traditional (ancestral/oral) material than I have done (shango, *anansesem*, Spiritual (Aladura) Baptist services, groundations, yard theatres, ring games, tea-meeting speeches etc: in fact, I've included none of these here), in addition to the extended performances by Malik, Paul Keens-Douglas and the Barbados Writers Workshop, among others. In addition to the influence of Caribbean music on Caribbean poetry, there has also

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Since these notes were written (1981), the three leading Jamaican nation language (dub/reggae) poets: Mutabaraka, Oku Onuora and Michael Smith have bloomed from strength to strength. Apart from increasing local recognition and influence, they have all made immensely successful metropolitan tour/impacts: Muta in the USA, Oku and Smith in the UK and Europe; they each have published at least one LP (plus, in the case of Oku and Muta, several 'singles') and these discs have been receiving wide airplay in Jamaica and all the countries they have visited. I was present (and participating) in the poetry reading at the First International Book Fair of Radical Black and Third World Books held in London in April 1982 when Oku and especially Mickey Smith were received into the bosom (I can find no better expression) of that tremendous audience of our people; and I was later able to get a sound copy of the BBC TV special on Michael Smith which contained, along with context shots and poetry of Jamdung and Brixton, a conversation with Smith and C. L. R. James. On 19 August 1983 the following item appeared in Kingston's *Daily Gleaner*:

One of the country's leading 'dub' poets (those who recite poetry to reggae rhythm), Michael Smith, 29, of Golden Spring, St Andrew, was killed on Wednesday morning, August 17, in the neighbouring area of Stony Hill, when he was hit on the head by a stone thrown by one of three men who had attacked him . . .

The police reported that Smith was on the Stony Hill Road near the old St. Jude's Church when he was set upon by the men. Struck on the head, he fell to the ground.

He was taken to the clinic at Stony Hill by a passing motorist and then to the Kingston Public Hospital but by that time he had died. His attackers fled before the arrival of the police . . .

He was to leave the island next month for engagements in the United Kingdom, where he had performed before . . .

Rumours persist that his killing was a flash of that same political violence which his work so eloquently decried.

been jazz, for example,<sup>61</sup> and the wonderful speech rhythm effects being achieved in a more formal context by Morris, Scott and Derek Walcott, among others

O so yu is Walcott?  
You is Roddy brother?  
Teacher Alix son?<sup>62</sup>

Indeed, since this *History* was first conceived and presented at Carifesta 76 in Jamaica, there has been such a liberation of the voice in Caribbean poetry, that nation-language has become not the exception but almost the rule, except that because of its organic, its person-centred, fluid/tidal rather than ideal/structured nature, that word won't really be appropriate in this context. What we need, now, to go along with the liberation, is a re-orientation of criticism, an aesthetic, that will help us to re-define our current pseudo-classical notions of literature. In the same way that we have come to accept the idea (and reality) of Caribbean speech as continuum: ancestral through creole to national and international forms, so must we begin to be able to recognize and accept the similarly remarkable range of literary expression within the Caribbean and throughout Plantation America. To confine our definitions of literature to written texts in a culture that remains italy in most of its people proceedings, is as limiting as its opposite: trying to define Caribbean literature as essentially orature—like eating avocado without its likkle salt.

But we are dealing, too, with far more than sacred text or resonanting tape. The detonations within Caribbean sound-poetry have imploded us into new shapes and consciousness of ourselves, so that suddenly a *Dictionary of Caribbean English* is no longer list but life. Bob Marley and Oku's riddmic words become Authorities for linguists. The hidden world and proverb and conundrum (drum) reconquer the curriculum and make

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61. See Brathwaite, 'Jazz and the West Indian novel', loc.cit., n.12. For Caribbean jazz poems, see Brathwaite's 'Jazz Poems' in *Kyk-over-al* 27(Dec 1960), pp.83-86, with versions in *Other exiles* (1975), pp.12-16; and some of the poems in Anthony McNeill's *Credences at the altar of cloud* (Kingston 1979), esp. influenced by McCoy Tyner.

62. Derek Walcott, 'Sainte Lucie', *Sea Grapes* (London 1976), p.46.



once more neglected Gran an expert on the culture. The word becomes a pebble stone or bomb and dub makes sense (or non-senseness) of politics demanding of it life not death, community not aardvark, new world to make new words and we to over-stand how modern ancient is. Like in this nation-language poem that doesn't even have to use a verb of nation . . .

Strange my writing to you  
 Can I say a cliché  
 Never thought I would see the day when you would cut  
 me glimpsed you in should have said at should  
 have said near a bank one day; smiled; waved; and  
 you cut me  
 Catherine name from the north  
 . . .  
 Catherine name like a fir  
 The leaves turn with a fine cadence The dancers touch  
 hands under the elms  
 . . .  
 I cry to the stones because I am lonely, the girl said to the  
 dark  
 Perhaps if I look through this file I will find her charred  
 letter  
 Catherine and Natalie, moving  
 The most beauteous virgin weeps in the rain  
 Catherine if I talked to a fern do you think it would  
 answer if I stopped at your window what  
 Hyacinths I dial a number soft click  
 A thrush glides in slow circles over the brook  
 Catherine stands by the fence, watching a leopard  
 I call you from fire in the white wheel  
 I give you the valley

Tony McNeill\*

63. Anthony McNeill, *Credences at the altar of cloud*, pp.134-35. McNeill's stops and spaces in this poem and in much of the book from which it comes, have been influenced, he has said in several lecture/readings, by McCoy Tyner, the jazz pianist.

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Since the background/framework material and ideas that make up this study are comparatively new—there are no Established Authorities!—I have been urged by New Beacon Books, my publishers, to provide a selected Bibliography of the major items used in preparing it. The result is something (along with Notes and Documentation) almost as long, if not longer, than the text. But that's the point. We are not trying to overwhelm anybody and of course you can always skip it. But I hope you'll eventually come back to it after you've read and absorbed the text, okay? Because this *History of the Voice* is only a beginning—and is an invitation and challenge to others to go further and examine and carry forward these ideas which are, in my view, pertinent not only to our developing literature, but to the socio-political matrix out of which it comes. I have, you will see, instead of a simplex alphabetical list, provided a classification of my listening/reading resources and hope that the very act of classification in itself will help add shape and shadow to the project. In future, perhaps, an annotated bibliography but that's another story. . . .

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 Washington, D.C : Three Continents 1982

Walcott, Derek  
*The castaway*  
 London : Cape 1965

Walcott, Derek  
*Epitaph for the young*  
 Bridgetown : The author 1949

Walcott, Derek  
*The fortunate traveller*  
 New York : Farrar, Straus & Giroux 1981, London : Faber 1982

Walcott, Derek  
*The gulf*  
 London : Cape 1969, New York : Farrar, Straus & Giroux 1970

Walcott, Derek  
*In a green night*  
 London : Cape 1962

Walcott, Derek  
 'Sambo Agonistes' in

*Bim 15* (1951)

Walcott, Derek  
*Selected poems*  
 New York : Farrar & Straus 1964

Walcott, Derek  
*The star-apple kingdom*  
 New York : Farrar, Strauss & Giroux 1979

Walcott, Derek  
*25 poems*  
 Bridgetown : The author 1949

Whitman, Walt  
*Leaves of grass*  
 1855

Wordsworth, William  
*Lyrical ballads*  
 London 1798

#### POETS VOICES

(recordings other than those inc under nation)

*Caedmon treasury of modern poets reading their own poetry*  
 New York : Caedmon TC 0994, 0995  
 inc Yeats, Auden, Sitwell, Dylan Thomas, MacNiece, Graves,  
 Gertrude Stein, MacLeish, Cummings, Marianne Moore,  
 Empson, Spender, Aiken

Collymore, Frank  
 'Voice la plume de mon oncle'  
*Poets of the West Indies*

Eliot, T. S.  
*Four quartets*  
 London : HMV CLP 1115, n.d

Eliot, T. S.  
*T. S. Eliot reading Poems & Choruses*  
 New York : Caedmon TC 1045; rec London 1955

Eliot, T. S.  
*The waste land / and other poems*  
 New York : Caedmon TC 1326, n.d

Figuroa, John (ed)  
*Poets of the West Indies reading their own works*  
 New York : Caedmon TC 1379, rec c1970  
 inc McNeill, Scott, Morris, Walcott, Brathwaite, Collymore,  
 Roach, Figuroa, Vaughan

First International Book Fair of Radical Black & Third World Books

*An evening of international poetry*

London : Alliance Records PLP 001, March 1982

inc Agard (Guyana), Berry (Ja), Bloom (Ja), Brathwaite (B'dos), Accabre Huntley (Black Britain), Linton Kwesi Johnson (Ja), Laird (T'dad), Markham (Montserrat), Mapanje (Malawi), Onuora (Ja), Okot p'Bitek (Uganda), Rajendra (Malaysia), Sarduy (Cuba), Mushtaq Singh (Pakistan), Michael Smith (Ja), Fred Williams (Ja)

Gielgud, John

reading 'Ode to the West Wind' on *The voice of poetry*

London : Columbia 78 DB 1887, n.d

Ginsberg, Allen

readings

Hughes, Ted

*Selections from Crow & Wodwo*

New York : Caedmon TC 1628, n.d

Henri, Adrian & McGough, Roger

*the Incredible new Liverpool scene*

London : CBS BPG 53045, 1957

Lamming, George

reading George Campbell's 'On this night' on

*New World of the Caribbean*, loc cit

McGough, Roger

see Henri & McGough (1957)

McKay, Claude

reading on *Anthology of negro poets*, loc cit

McNeill, Anthony

reading from *Credences at the altar of cloud*

Mona : UWI (Radio Unit tape)

Orr, Peter (ed)

*The poet speaks 5*

London : Argo RG 455

inc Ted Hughes (1962), Porter (1963), Gunn (1965), Plath (1962)

Orr, Peter (ed)

*The poet speaks 10*

London : Argo Records RG-583

inc Blunden, Muir, Grigson, Wain, Abse, Barker, Graham,

Logue, Lucie-Smith, Brathwaite

Orr, Peter (ed)

*Poetry international '69*

London : Argo Records MPR 262, 263, 1969

inc Auden, Holub, Austin, Clarke, Pilinszky, Yannis Ritsos, Ogden Nash, Bly, Brathwaite, Walcott, Vasko Popa

*Poets of the West Indies*

see Figueroa (ed)

Thomas, Dylan

readings

Vaughan, H. A.

reading on *Poets of the West Indies*

Voznesensky

readings

BBC

*Caribbean Evening*

London : BBC 3 (January 1979)

a series of 12 half-hour programmes of Caribbean cultural expression, recorded in the Caribbean and London, produced by Joan Griffiths

*Caribbean Voices*

London : Caribbean Service (1943-1958)

the single most important literary catalyst for Caribbean creative and critical writing in English : 15 half-hour weekly years : a most significant contribution to and confirmation of our oral tradition though, alas, the BBC has (had to) scrub(bed) this tremendous archive. The scripts, however, have been deposited with the UWI Library, Mona. Una Marson, George Lamming, Sam Selvon, Edgar Mittelholzer, Andrew Salkey, Vidia Naipaul, Shake Keane and Edward Kamau Brathwaite, among many, many others, were associated with the programme; the very first reader was Cameron Tudor. The most influential producer (drive, enthusiasm, sympathy, critical acumen and length of service) was Henry Swanzy