Contemporary Literary Criticism

CLC 305

Volume 305

Contemporary Literary Criticism

Criticism of the Works of Today's Novelists, Poets, Playwrights, Short Story Writers, Scriptwriters, and Other Creative Writers

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Wesley, Marilyn C. "Anne Hèbert: The Tragic Melodramas." *Canadian Women Writing Fiction.* Ed. Mickey Pearlman. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1993. 41-52. Rpt. in *Contemporary Literary Criticism.* Ed. Jeffrey W. Hunter. Vol. 246. Detroit: Gale, 2008. 276-82. Print.

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Contents

Edward Kamau Brathwaite
1930-

(Born Lawson Edward Brathwaite) Barbadian poet, cultural historian, literary critic, and playwright.

The following entry presents an overview of Brathwaite's career through 2010.

INTRODUCTION

Brathwaite is one of the Caribbean's foremost cultural ambassadors. The body of his work represents a quest to articulate the authentic Caribbean identity lost hundreds of years ago in the annihilation of the native Amerindians and the oppression of the African slaves transported to the islands during the time of the Middle Passage. Recognized as the most influential contemporary West Indian poet, Brathwaite has published over twenty volumes of verse. He first came to international attention with the trilogy *The Arrivants* (1973), a large collection of poems that retraces the Middle Passage as the poet makes a pilgrimage to Africa in search of the origins of his West Indian identity. Both thematically and stylistically, Brathwaite foregrounds the fragmenting of the Caribbean identity, the result of the European denial of an African history on the colonial plantations as well as the geographic formation of many small islands, which were then further separated by the political and language divisions of imperialist practice. Brathwaite's project in his many volumes of verse has been first to locate the various fragments of the Caribbean identity—often through the symbolic revival of African folklore and voodoo practice and the recreation of the physical and psychic pain of dislocation and slavery—and then to bring all the strands together in what he calls a "creole cosmos" that denies the inferior status of formerly colonized peoples. Brathwaite's mechanism for the assertion of Caribbean authenticity has been skillful and ever-evolving manipulation of what he terms the Caribbean "nation language," defined as "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 servants who were brought in." His interest in the vernacular has led him to produce several popular sound recordings. Highly regarded for his technical facility, Brathwaite has increasingly experimented with a "video" style that exploits unusual typography and visual patterns to enhance the sound of his poetry, much of which is inspired by the rhythm and intonation of jazz and calypso music and, especially, African drumming. Brathwaite has also enjoyed a long career as a lecturer and academic both in the West Indies and the United States. He has published important works of literary criticism and cultural history, including *History of the Voice: The Development of Nation Language in Anglophone Caribbean Poetry* (1984). Brathwaite was named in 2006 the international winner of the prestigious Griffin Poetry Prize for his most recent volume of verse, *Born to Slow Horses* (2005), which reimagines the African diaspora in the figure of the ghost of a former slave. Brathwaite has received numerous other awards, including Guggenheim and Fulbright fellowships in 1983 and the Neustadt Prize in 1994. A professor of history and comparative literature at New York University since 1992, Brathwaite spends his time off from the school year at his home in CowPastor, Barbados.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Brathwaite was born in Bridgetown, the capital of Barbados, to Hilton Brathwaite, a warehouse clerk, and Beryl (Gill) Brathwaite. He attended the island's elite Harrison College, where he started a school newspaper and at the same time began what was to be a long association with the seminal Caribbean journal *Bim*. He attended Cambridge University in England on a Barbados Island Scholarship, graduating with honors in 1953, and then studied an additional year for a teaching certificate. Entering the British colonial service, Brathwaite was posted in 1955 on the Gold Coast, which was reborn as Ghana in 1957. Brathwaite's civil service in Ghana transformed his life. His interactions with the people of West Africa led to his study of the traditional verse and song and pre-colonial myths that became the controlling influences of his poetry. On one of his visits home in 1960, Brathwaite met and married Doris Welcome, another guiding inspiration and the mother of his son. The family left Ghana permanently in 1962 when Brathwaite took a position at the University of the West Indies, first working at the St. Lucia campus and then, one year later, in Kingston, Jamaica.

Brathwaite's return to the West Indies made him aware of the many continuities between the cultures of rural

Africa and the contemporary Caribbean. He began formulating a Caribbean aesthetic sensitive to the African influences and helped to found the Caribbean Artists' Movement in 1966. In 1968, Brathwaite received a Ph.D. in history from the University of Sussex in England for research on slave and Creole culture in the Caribbean. One of the earliest products of that study was the first volume of *The Arrivants,* titled *Rights of Passage* (1967). The second and third books, *Masks* (1968) and *Islands* (1969), followed in quick succession, and the collection was published in its entirety as *The Arrivants* in 1973. The tremendous attention and acclaim accorded this work established Brathwaite in his role as a public man of letters and the voice of the spiritual and ancestral forces that animate the Caribbean identity. Around this time Brathwaite began publishing under the name Kamau, given to him in Ghana. Subsequently, he served as a visiting professor at several schools, including Harvard, Boston University, and Yale, along with an appointment in 1983 as professor of social and cultural history at the University of the West Indies. Ten years later Brathwaite transferred to New York University. Since 1979 Brathwaite has served on the board of directors of UNESCO's History of Mankind project. He was a cultural advisor to the Barbados government in the 1970s and again in 1990. In addition, Brathwaite has worked tirelessly to establish the legitimacy of the Caribbean nation language in the education system of the islands, and he is an outspoken environmentalist as well.

MAJOR WORKS

The Arrivants narrates a three-part journey of migration that tells of the slaves' former tribal history, their dangerous crossing of the Atlantic, and their brutal treatment on the plantations of the Caribbean, where they were silenced into submission. Brathwaite uses the metaphor of branding to describe how the colonial language was carved into the skin of the slaves, symbolic of the erasure of their cultural roots. Critic Dominique Delmaire's comments on this trilogy help to explain the importance of the nation language to Brathwaite: "At stake is nothing less than the issue of language, thematized in terms of the conflict between the slave's and the oppressor's, as the quest ambitions to overcome the enforced dumbness of those Africans taken into slavery." Brathwaite's insistence on retrieving a genuine language drives the themes and style of his poetry, which works toward enunciating a cultural wholeness; as he states in the poem "Negus," "it is not / it is not / it is not enough / it is not enough to be free / of the whips, principalities and powers / where is your kingdom of the Word? / . . . must be given words to refashion futures / like a healer's hand." One of the central figures in the trilogy is Tom, the representative survivor of the Middle Passage and the repository of the memory of the myths of the Ashanti Empire. These volumes and later works invoke such ancestral deities as the trickster figures Legba and Ananse and call on Sycorax, the mother goddess presiding over the dead slaves on the ocean floor, for spiritual guidance. As in William Shakespeare's *The Tempest,* Sycorax appears as the mother of Caliban, the earthy slave and native islander. Sycorax is also Brathwaite's muse, the voice of the collective unconscious and the unspoken indigenous cultures. While Caliban figures as a type of Uncle Tom figure in *The Arrivants,* he is less subservient in Brathwaite's second trilogy, consisting of *Mother Poem* (1977), *Sun Poem* (1982), and *X/Self* (1987), which were later collected and revised in what Brathwaite has termed "the video style" for the one-volume *Ancestors* (2001). The "X" in the title of the last volume of this trilogy signifies the lasting heritage of plantation society, the obliteration of the African identity.

The spirits of Caliban and Sycorax seem to have presided over the transition of Brathwaite's style to a more aggressive positioning of the nation language beginning in the early 1990s. While this later poetry is characterized by the same patios, misspellings, onomatopoeia, unusual word and line breaks, grammatically awkward phrasings, and drum-beat rhythms, it displays greater invention in its manipulation of type fonts and page formats, made possible by Brathwaite's use of a Macintosh Apple computer. He has referred to this approach as "sycorax video style." Elaine Savory explains the description in her commentary on *X/Self*: "In this collection, we first see the voice which crucially informs the *video style* later on, that of Caliban, the dispossessed but highly creative poet of African descent for whom a computer becomes a critical muse—eventually he comes to see Sycorax as the computer, or the spirit informing his creative work done on it." At the same time Brathwaite's poetry took this stylistic turn, it also changed perspective, becoming more intimate in response to a series of personal tragedies he has referred to as his "Time of Salt." *The Zea Mexican Diary* (1993) mourns his wife, Doris, who died of cancer in 1986. *Shar* (1990) describes the destruction of his home and library in Irishtown, Jamaica, by Hurricane Gilbert in 1988. *Trench Town Rock* (1993) is at times almost documentary in approach, using newspaper clippings and other media reports to describe the urban violence in Kingston, where Brathwaite was living temporarily after the loss of his Irishtown house. A triple murder occurred at Brathwaite's residential complex, and one of the dead bodies was found under the author's car. A

short time later, Brathwaite's apartment was broken into, and he was beaten, bound, and gagged by the intruders. In 1997, Brathwaite used the model of rebel slaves to begin his own experiment in maroonage back in Barbados, at his post-hurricane home of CowPastor. For the last several years Brathwaite has been involved in a headline-grabbing effort to keep the government from seizing the property in the construction of an airport road. *Born to Slow Horses* was inspired by Brathwaite's ghostly vision of a long-dead slave woman who urged him not to abandon CowPastor, which she claimed to be the site of a sacred burial ground.

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Critics have focused on Brathwaite's reliance on the transformative power of African myth and ritual to rewrite a Caribbean history lost to slavery and colonialism. They have also recently begun to look at his works, especially *X/Self,* to assess the viability of the "creole cosmos" to transnational cultural relations. Brathwaite's vital contribution to Caribbean poetics is the subject of frequent scholarly study, not just his careful recreation of the rhythm and tonalities of the nation language but also his shaping of words, lines, and stanzas to thematically portray the fragmented quality of the Caribbean identity and the hurt of slavery. His attraction to the subversive forms of jazz has often been analyzed with reference to his misuse of European English in the manner of the underground language of the slaves. It has long since been critical commonplace to place Brathwaite's poetry against that of another famous Caribbean poet, Derek Walcott. The comparison generally reveals a polarity, with Walcott emerging as assimilationist and European, Brathwaite as rebellious and Afrocentric. A number of critics have complained that the video style has made Brathwaite's poetry less accessible, but others have championed the technique for its kinetic energy. Nadi Edwards responded enthusiastically to its use in *Trench Town Rock,* describing the poem's "sonic repertoire of dissonant downbeats" and "sycoraxic 'writing in light' video style with its bold fonts, typographic distortions, and . . . calligraphic and hieroglyphic effects that act as visual equivalents of the explosive boom blast of sound systems, gun shots, and the fret and fever of the city's red hot streets." Brathwaite himself explained the new style as his rebound to creative energy after his "Time of Salt." Still, as Elaine Savory noted, a few publishers have balked at those of Brathwaite's pages containing only a symbol or just one word in very large font. Despite Brathwaite's shift to a more personal vision in some of his later works, he remains best known as the voice of the authentic Caribbean identity and most celebrated for what Anne Collett has described as his "large public persona of the tribal poet drummer."

PRINCIPAL WORKS

Odale's Choice (play) 1967
Rights of Passage (poetry) 1967
Masks (poetry) 1968
Islands (poetry) 1969
Folk Culture of the Slaves in Jamaica (history) 1970; revised edition, 1981
The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica, 1770-1820 (history) 1971
**The Arrivants* (poetry) 1973
Caribbean Man in Space and Time (history) 1974
Contradictory Omens (history) 1974
Days and Nights (poetry) 1975
Other Exiles (poetry) 1975
Black + Blues (poetry) 1976
Mother Poem (poetry) 1977
Soweto (poetry) 1979
Word Making Man: A Poem for Nicolas Guillen (poetry) 1979
Sun Poem (poetry) 1982
Third World Poems (poetry) 1983
History of the Voice: The Development of Nation Language in Anglophone Caribbean Poetry (nonfiction) 1984
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Roots (essays) 1986
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DreamStories (prose-poetry) 1994
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Words Need Love Too (poetry) 2000
†*Ancestors* (poetry) 2001
Born to Slow Horses (prose-poetry) 2005
DS(2): DreamStories (prose) 2007

*Includes *Right of Passage, Masks,* and *Islands.*
†Includes *Mother Poem, Sun Poem,* and *X/Self.*

CRITICISM

Edward Kamau Brathwaite and Marcia P. A. Burrowes (interview date 2001)

SOURCE: Brathwaite, Edward Kamau, and Marcia P. A. Burrowes. "Golokwati Conversations: An Interview

with Kamau Brathwaite." *World Literature Written in English* 39, no. 1 (2001): 9-26.

[*In this interview, Brathwaite ascribes a mosaic quality to the Caribbean aesthetic and explains his concepts of creolization and maroonage. Brathwaite also describes the forces that threaten the Caribbean identity, including the destruction of the island environment due to the tourist trade.*]

I met with Kamau Brathwaite in Barbados at his home in "cowpastuh" in August 2002. Keen to talk, Kamau reflected on what constitutes the Caribbean and where he would place the Diaspora in the discourse. He also revisited the term "creolization", for which he is widely known and sought to invest a greater sense of the act of maroonage within its meaning. Kamau also reflected on the rapid development of Barbados and the effects of the tourist industry on the environment and on the psyche of the Barbadian and Caribbean people. He lamented the resulting changing landscape and the loss of creative space for the artist. Commenting on his notion of crossroads in the African and Caribbean experience, and particularly the crossroads in his life, Kamau provided some insight into the style and substance of his latest work.

[*Burrowes*]: *What is culture?*

[Brathwaite]: Culture is the lived art through time, through generations, through accumulations. The art is then considered over time and considered through time. It is when you accumulate all of the knowledge of your art that you begin to have a culture. So you know how the art is created and you know the standards by which the art is created and you get to understand how you can live through what the art teaches.

So is there a Caribbean aesthetic?

Has to be. Any people who live within a defined space will have to develop an aesthetic because they are responding to their environment and the environment is essentially an aesthetic signal. The environment contains aesthetic signals and the artist lives within that space picking up the signals derived from nature and transforming them into signals which he shares with society.

And this Caribbean aesthetic would go across linguaphones. It would not just be an Anglophone reality?

Yes. You will have variations according to language because language itself is an aspect of environment. Every environment produces its own language. Your tongue has a different shape and therefore your sensibility has a slightly different way of expressing itself. But people living in a space, like the Caribbean space, will all share a similar aesthetic. And the deeper down you go the more similarities it'll have. Like the way of walking, the way you hold your spoon and the way you laugh, the relationship to trees and to rivers and all that, those you will share no matter what the language. The difference will come when you are beginning to express things in terms of words, when you begin to have variations—you call it 'la mer' and the other person calls it 'sea', which means that one person is seeing it as a sibilant and the other person is seeing it as a moon, or some kind of enclosed space. But I mean apart from that they will all relate to the sea in similar ways, even if they call it something different.

Now your body of work has wrestled with the understanding that there is an identifiable source common throughout the Caribbean.

To this space, right?

To this space and when we looked at landscape, you reached for an African sensibility.

You see the African culture is not as essential as some people think. What I'm reaching for is the Caribbean aesthetic. The African has to come in, in order to complete the possibility of understanding it. What I found when I started doing my work is that the African was so absent, so degraded, that we were not seeing our environment with both eyes, we were only seeing it through European eyes, so that the African one helped to complete the analysis. But the main concern is to discover and to articulate and to recognize what is our space, which is a Caribbean space, and that's made up of all the elements that you know—Amerindian, African, Haitian, whatever they are, Creole, 'cause you see what happens in the Caribbean is that the influence of the plantation is so significant that right away you begin to develop hybrids or mixtures or combinations which are quite unique, you don't have them any where else, you get mixed blood, mixed concepts, mixed words, mixed signals looking at the landscape, so that there is really the very centre of the Caribbean sensibility, the Creole, the inter-cultural relation that takes place under pressure on the plantation and you see the plantation is fascinating because it creates a space within a space.

If you say that the Caribbean is a space defined by a circle of islands, an are of islands, then the plantations are spaces created within that geographical space, and it is remarkable because it is a lot of pressure that creates the plantation, you know. I mean it might not have defined boundaries but the plantation is a situa-

tion where a certain number of people are faced through legislation, through custom, through need, through economic drive, through all sorts of things, to create within a space for a certain reason, and they relate to each other in order to perform that function which is to produce sugar, or cotton, or whatever it is, and they develop certain rules and behaviour with that space; so that you have the plantation psychology, economy, everything developing within a Caribbean space. So you have a double thing going . . . the Caribbean is defined not only by the islands but also by the rim that creates it. You have two rims, one is the African rim and the other one is the Mexican rim.

And what do we do now, the Diaspora?

The Diaspora, that is another fascinating experience. No one expected such a thing would happen, but now that it has happened, the Diaspora creates another kind of Caribbean which is a Caribbean now that takes place in the minds of people who live outside of the space. They are recreating the Caribbean in their own external spaces, but at the same time, they are going through a new period of creolization where they are relating to metropolitan sensibility.

So if you had, as I was challenged once to create a represent, a motif of the Caribbean—

—A complete thing

—And they said to me, "Reach for the Map" and I said, "Well, a map does not adequately re-represent the reality".

No, a map can't do it if you include the Diaspora. It is now no longer a geophysical entity. We have a lot of new "Caribbeans" proliferating which is not surprising, because the origin of the Caribbean started with the Diaspora; it's nothing new. It continues the process because the Europeans came in, the Caribs came in, the Africans came in, and that's a Diaspora right there. They did their thing for about two, three thousand years in the Caribbean and then the process continued on into other areas, into North America, into England, those are the two main areas so far.

Well, I'm left wrestling with the question again, what is the Caribbean? What is Caribbean-ness? How would second generation born in the Caribbean Diaspora put it?

They would have some elements of it too and you see, yes, I think the trouble with these questions is that we don't know enough yet to be able to find words for it, you know. It is too new a beginning to recognize that there is such a thing as Caribbean and when we say Caribbean, we mean Plantation Caribbean right? As we know more, we will get to understand maroon Caribbean which we still don't know anything about, and then as we know more still, we then begin to recognize the aspiring Caribbean. Only when you put those three together will you begin to be able to define what is Caribbean.

Yet we are dealing with a living entity which is constantly being challenged—

—And changed

—And changed

—And altered, right? Yes, well, I mean this can go on happening all the time, I don't think you'll ever be able, no, that's not fair, you should be able still to capture the essence of Caribbean. You should be able to capture that essence and even if you're in the Diaspora in Manchester or wherever, there should be certain elements which remain Caribbean and the first element would be people who have all met at a certain cross road, that is the first thing right? Another thing I want to say is this: You know why we're having all this problem defining, we have never studied Indonesia, Malaysia, [the] Pacific. These people are the same history of crossroads Diaspora. Our models are completely metropolitan, the Rome metropolitan and therefore we do not think of culture in terms of "scatteration", we think of culture in terms of the formation of certain power blocks which then process their power to create industry. Now if we start thinking in terms of a culture which is made up of fragments and the fragments are constituted from various parts of the world into a mosaic, that is where Caribbean is defined right away.

It is a mosaic, it is a mosaic which is put and kept together in that shape because of the space of the island and because of the space of the plantation. And over time, the culture which develops in that space keeps the mosaic in place so the culture becomes crucial, not the politics. The culture now creates what we define as Caribbean and the first thing about that definition is the mosaic, the second thing about it is its African nature, all of these elements that make up Africa, the third element, that is the key to it, is the experience of slavery and plantation, survival and the fourth element I would say is improvization because in order to survive, all elements in that society had to improvize; the whites had to improvize. You see, the whites came here without their culture too. You get what I call an alter running; not a true running . . . so they came without their spiritual value, so they had to improvize, they tended to improvize towards materialism.