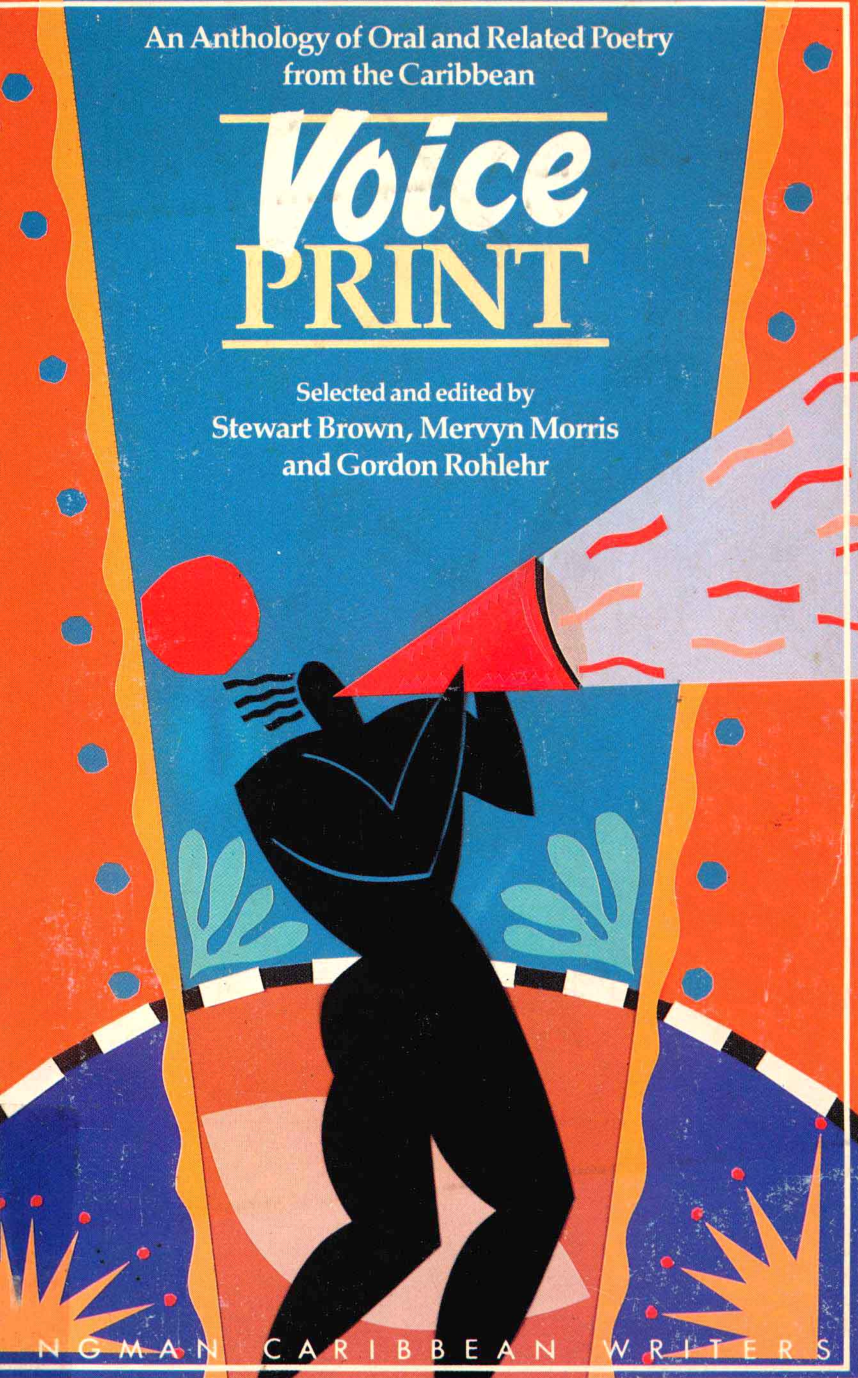
An Anthology of Oral and Related Poetry from the Caribbean
Voice PRINT
Selected and edited by
Stewart Brown, Mervyn Morris
and Gordon Rohlehr
NGMAN CARIBBEAN WRITERS

Voicepri

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Stewart Brown
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Gordon Rohlehr

with an introduction by Gordon Rohlehr

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Introduction

'The Shape of that Hurt'

(i)

It is only since the 1970s that the term 'oral tradition' began to be consistently used in connection with certain developments in West Indian poetry. Before then the debate concerned the viability of 'dialect' as a medium for poetry, and was an extension of the troubled issue of the nexus between education, speech, class, status and power. Creole dialects were thought of as belonging to the semi-literate and poor. To argue, as some linguists did and still do, that Creole is simply another language, neither better nor worse than any other, was to ignore the social and political nature of language. To speak about the vitality and expressiveness of Creole was to sentimentalise warm folksiness without wanting to share in the anguish of its decrepitude, and to display the contempt of a complacent intelligentsia, who secretly wanted to reinforce their superior social status by keeping the mass of the people uneducated.

Nowhere has the 'dialect' versus 'standard' polemic been more bitter than in the question of whether serious poetry can grow out of a dialect base. Since it was widely believed that dialect was a restricted code, incapable of expressing abstract ideas, sublimity or complexities of thought and feeling, the functions permitted dialect were those of drama and energetic folksy humour. While West Indian novelists had from the 1920s begun to reveal the widening possibililties of Creole dialects as flexible literary languages, West Indian poets, with a few notable exceptions, made relatively little use of them. A visible gap also existed between quasi-poetic folk forms such as the mento, chant and calypso, and the formal poetry of the schoolmen. The debate about the status, nature and potential of dialect did little to close this gap, serving rather to harden the prejudices at either edge of the chasm.

One useful concept, however, did emerge, which influenced the direction of literary criticism: that of a 'continuum' stretching

between Creole and Standard English, from which speakers naturally selected registers of the language which were appropriate to particular contexts and situations. The notion of a continuum made sense of what West Indian novelists had been doing for some time, that is, exploring the whole range of language and speech registers open to them. The poets also needed to recognize that alternative registers were accessible to them and to liberate, through an openness to all available voices, such word-shapes as these voices might suggest.

If continuum theory revealed a potential for Creole as a language, the concept of an oral tradition made immediately accessible a virtually limitless range of prosodic, rhetorical, and musical shapes, which inevitably became the basis of new making. Roughly parallelling both the folk/urban and the Creole/Standard continua was an aesthetic one:

> . . . stretching between forms derived from an oral paradigm . . . and forms suggested by various aspects of modernist aesthetics . . . While some writers are able to accommodate both extremes with relative ease, others have been involved in an intense dialectic in which the extremes appear as thesis and antithesis . . . The notion of an aesthetic continuum allows us to understand and accept the existence of both types of writer.[1]

This anthology is partly concerned with poetry based on an understanding of the oral tradition. The inclusion of selections from Claude McKay, Louise Bennett, Philip Sherlock, early Arthur Seymour and Elsworth Keane, illustrates the experiments with voice, fable and rhythm that were taking place fifty years ago. These experiments increased in the 1960s, gaining sudden depth with the publication of Edward Kamau Brathwaite's *Rights of Passage*, *Masks* and *Islands* (1967–69). Brathwaite's trilogy, later to be published in a single volume as *The Arrivants* (1973), absorbed and improvised on earlier efforts at orality ranging from Akan traditional drum-poets, through Caribbean pioneers, Afro-American musicians and poets, and the Beat poets. Out of this web of ancestors Brathwaite wove a network of sound-skeins, in which the full folk/modernist continuum was included.[2]

After the appearance of *The Arrivants*, the terms of the aesthetic debate had to change. On the one hand, the issue hardened into an absolute struggle between two opposite camps; on the other, one became aware of the range and versatility of the oral tradition as a source of creative extension into new poetic forms.

(ii)

The oral tradition is a heritage of song, speech and performance visible in such folk forms as the litanic work songs, chants, battle songs, Queh Queh songs, hymns, thousands of calypsos, mentos and reggae songs, sermons of both the grass-roots and establishment churches, riddles, jokes and word-games. Societies such as Guyana and Trinidad, with their large East Indian communities, possess at least two alternatives to the European models enshrined in the education system. A few calypsos and several songs which blend Hindi and English, suggest that an intercreolization[3] process has been taking place between African and Indian folk elements. The potential of this blend has not been recognized by either community, even though nearly two decades ago musicians such as Joe Harriott, Elsworth Keane, Coleridge Goode and the Johnny Mayer Quintet, had already illustrated the possibilities of fusing Indian classical music and black people's classical music, Jazz.[4]

Music, because it has been the means of preserving linkages between the Caribbean and non European sensibility, has become the container of a wealth of alternative rhythms, a few of which have begun to inform the poetry of the Caribbean. Songs were the Caribbean's first poems, though for a long time, poets limited themselves to the standard ballad style of the Anglo-Scottish tradition. Hence Claude McKay's *Constab Ballads* and a great deal of Louise Bennett were patterned on the iambic tetrametric quatrain shapes of hymns, and Burns's ballads. Prosodic achievement here had to be confined to the tension created through the counterpoint of Jamaica Creole speech rhythms and the fixed metric cage of the stanza. It is in the heightened dramatic situations of Louise Bennett's street poems 'Candy Seller' and 'South Parade Peddler', with their 'tracings' and aggressive performance, that the interplay between voice and metre is greatest.

An illustration of the dominance of the quatrain is seen in the work of Antonio Jarvis from St Thomas, who in 1935 published a small collection of verse entitled *Bamboula Dance*. This title would have led one to expect the shaping influence of the bamboula drums, of Congolese origin, with their warlike rhythms, which were known throughout the Archipelago both before and after Emancipation. One might also have expected Jarvis to draw on the bamboula songs, whose function in St Thomas had once paralleled that of the Kalinda chants and satirical banter songs of mid to late nineteenth century Trinidad and Martinique. This is not the case. *Bamboula Dance* is standard

hymn-book stuff, whose culturally biassed content explains its formal limitation.

> Can I in pride mock sad buffoons
> Who ape ancestral circumstance?
> My fathers, too, these thousand moons
> Cavorted in some tribal dance.
>
> I can still feel, when drumbeats call
> The pulsing blood new rhythms take
> As garment-like refinements fall
> Unconscious longings spring awake.
>
> My honoured sire now would say,
> For all his solemn high degrees
> That drums recall Nigerian play
> And drown out later dignities.
>
> Few naked tribesmen yet remain
> To dance the sacred dance for rain.[5]

The poem is a sonnet in iambic tetrameter, and though it speaks of an African heritage which is still sufficiently powerful to produce the 'pulsing new rhythms' of the St Thomas Bamboula dance, and awaken the 'unconscious longings' which lie beneath the flimsy cloak of 'refinements', that heritage of sound, rhythm and orality contributes nothing to its making. Despite its subversive power, the alternative tradition is recognized negatively as the misguided and nostalgic concern of 'sad buffoons/ Who ape ancestral circumstance?' There is a genuine confusion and contradiction here in how 'heritage' is perceived.

Jarvis identifies his father in this poem as a spokesman for Western Atlantic education and civilization, whose 'solemn high degrees', are drowned out by the older Nigerian heritage. Western dignity is defeated by the childishness of an engrained savagery. In another little poem entitled 'Atavistic', Jarvis describes his 'alien sire' as 'Nordic', and himself as the meeting point of contradictory ancestral tendencies.

> I whose dark ancestors played
> Where the Nile's first drop was laid
> Have within me Nordic blood
> Pulsing like the tide at flood.
>
> Dowered by an alien sire
> Is it strange my tropic fire
> Often cools to virtuous fear
> When nice brown girls venture near?

The epithet 'alien' which he applies to his father suggests that the heritage of Nordic blood, here depicted as powerfully alive, is also strangely cold and distant. It represents 'virtue', but it also represents inhibition, the death of Eros, which is illustrated by his inability to respond to the beauty of women of his own ethnicity.

Jarvis thinks in terms of stereotypes which had been established in the European mind centuries before the twentieth[6] and are still present in the Caribbean today. Africa equals drum, naked tribesmen cavorting, play, passion and backwardness; Europe equals refinement, culture, education, intelligence, virtue and self-control. According to the rigid mathematics of such stereotyping which climaxed in the mid-nineteenth century with Arthur de Gobineau's *The Inequality of Human Races*, the psyche of the person of mixed racial heritage became a battlefield of conflicting elements. Since the African aspect of a mixed colonial heritage was under constant official and personal censorship,[7] the 'mulatto of culture' was faced with the choice of either total negation of, or subversive self-identification with the black ancestor. Since progress, thought and enlightenment were thought to be exclusively Western and 'Nordic', and colonial education entrenched and reinforced such prejudice, the Caribbean mulatto of culture was programmed to believe totally in the white ancestor.

The affirmation of the white ancestor and denial or degraded perception of the black one, was most visible whenever the question of an aesthetic arose. The rigidly stereotyped terms of perception described above, lay beneath the bitter arguments concerning West Indian poetry as late as the 1970s. If in 1935 Jarvis could censor the 'new rhythms' engendered in the 'pulsing blood' by the call of drumbeats, with the argument that the New World mulatto had moved beyond the naked tribesmen whose 'sacred dance for rain' had lost its meaning, Eric Roach would bitterly condemn the emergence of these new rhythms in the poetry of the 1970s, employing the same terms as Jarvis.

> Are we going to tie the drum of Africa to our tails and bay like mad dogs at the Nordic world to which our geography and history tie us?
>
> We have been given the European languages and forms of culture in the traditional aesthetic sense, meaning the best that has been taught, said and done.[8]

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