

**CARIBBEAN LITERARY EPISTEMOLOGY AS FRONTIER:
TWO CARIBBEAN POETS AND THINKERS –
KAMAU BRATHWAITE AND DEREK WALCOTT**

Philip Nanton

"Language is the perfect instrument of empire" [Bishop of Avila to Queen Isabella of Castile, 1492] (qtd. in Hulme, 1).

"Language is also the perfect instrument of anti-imperialism" (Burnett 128)

This essay argues that in their work the Caribbean poets, Kamau Brathwaite and Derek Walcott, each offer distinct challenges to the inherited colonial language situation of the Anglophone Caribbean. I use the framework of the frontier, defined as a relationship between the 'civilized' and the 'wild', to explore the strategies that each poet has consciously adopted to challenge the existing paradigm of Caribbean literary epistemology. I argue that Brathwaite's challenge, with its emphasis on orality, nation language, noise, consciousness of ritual and shamanistic effects and experimentation with technology, can be read as a form of 'wildness'. Walcott, by contrast, simultaneously engages with and subverts the 'civilized' through the combination of formal and canonical poesis with a postcolonial sensibility. Measured in terms of tangible rewards, the outcome of each strategy has differed considerably. While both poets are recognized as literary masters, the public celebration of Walcott's *oeuvre* through such accolades as the Nobel Prize for Literature suggests its greater congeniality and acceptability to the 'civilised' world than the more difficult to assimilate work of Kamau Brathwaite.

In the Caribbean context in which my paper will be situated, knowledge production presents a particular kind of conundrum. European thinkers have for a long time been at the heart of social theory – Marx, Weber, Durkheim – as well as those of more recent vintage – Foucault, Habermas, Giddens, Derrida – and provide a foundation for contemporary analysts in the framing of their scholarship. While their work is rich and important, it is not without its problems. For example, Gurinder Bhambra has argued convincingly for the widening of conventional epistemologies of social science to include perspectives from the periphery (16). As Robin Cohen has observed, modern European social theory does not have concerns central to the Caribbean situation, in particular discussions of colonialism, post-colonialism, colour, race and racism, identity politics and discrimination (53). In the field of history, Eric Williams' *British Historians and the West Indies* (1966) excoriated the anti-democratic leanings of historians like Carlyle, Trollope and Froude, who were all for crown colony rule and who wrote, he suggested, "almost as if Britain had introduced Negro slavery solely for the satisfaction of abolishing it" (233). These lacunae in turn raise questions of social identity central to societies historically formed almost wholly by voluntary and forced migration; an issue that, for the most part, also falls outside the concern of European theorists. In response to these realities, Stuart Hall has observed of what he calls the *Presence Européenne*: "For many of us in the region this presence is a matter not of too little but of too much" (399). The important question concerning Europe and European theory, he suggests, is how to "recognize its irreversible influence, while resisting its imperializing eye" (400). Hall here challenges the fundamental relationship between epistemic entrapment and economic dependence that holds the region in thrall. The Caribbean sociologist/philosopher, Paget Henry, defines the

problem in Shakespearean terms, showing how “Caliban’s dilemma of getting caught in the languages and discourses of Prospero emerged as a pervasive challenge in most areas of our order of knowledge production” (218).

This conundrum has been the concern of a number of Caribbean thinkers. In attempting to create some distance from European dominance and a colonial mentality, Caribbean thinkers have, nonetheless, drawn selectively from different elements of Western epistemology. Richard Clarke has demonstrated how some Caribbean thinkers, like Aimé Césaire and Kamau Brathwaite, favor arborescent tropes (of African rootedness) to link Caribbean creoles and their African ancestors while drawing on the divide between thesis and antithesis. This strategy, he notes, which lays emphasis on issues of identity formation, is limited by a residual essentialism and a distrust of universal formulae. Other Caribbean theorists, Clarke suggests, like Edouard Glissant and Derek Walcott, equally resentful of colonial rule, but cleaving to a more universal narrative, have chosen to emphasise the synthetic outcome of the dialectical process. For Glissant this has involved what he describes as ‘archipelagen’ or ‘rhizomatic’ thinking, a process that is non-systematic, changeful and open to the unexpected. For Walcott, this process is seen in terms of ‘Adamic’ discovery of the local. At this general level, Clarke argues, both rooted and rhizomatic thinking share an ‘organicist’ problematic, while, more importantly, neither strategy has provided a radical break from overarching Western influence (Clarke 2000 22). However, what I suggest in this essay, is that in each instance (whether rooted or rhizomatic) there has been a sufficient play of difference to be able to identify a change in the shape of dialogue emanating from the region and the beginnings of the escape from a problematic conception of identity through language. One central quest then for the Caribbean thinker is to find or create a language in which to express local realities.

Why do I think this quest to be important? I read the colonial language situation inherited by Brathwaite and Walcott as hierarchical and socially constructed. In Caribbean society the powerful control or at least constrain valorized forms of cultural production and continue to influence strongly the criteria by which cultural value is judged. One means of control, for example, is through access to formal education, prioritized for example, through tests and fees and variable levels of literacy that each Caribbean society maintains. In this sense I recognize that the language situation that this essay discusses, in the context of Brathwaite’s and Walcott’s poetry, is one manifestation of the challenge to the (post) colonial hierarchy that they take up, each in their own way. It is axiomatic that both writers operate from high levels of literacy and so there is, of course, room for paradox in the challenges they each pose: not least when, a strong commitment to the spoken medium is communicated in writing. My essay will examine this question of hierarchical challenge through what may at first sight be considered an unlikely example: that of the Caribbean language situation broadly and, more specifically, its poetry. Why poetry? And what might a theoretical study of the Caribbean language situation offer in this context? As a preliminary answer to my question, ‘why poetry?’ I offer the following statement from the essay that accompanies a poetry anthology edited by Nick Laird, “Why Poetry is the Perfect Weapon to Fight Donald Trump.” In it, he observes: “Populism claims to love the people but of course it hates the individual, and poetry is one mode of opposing that. It only deals in individuals, while its trust in complication is at the far end of the

verbal scale from the demagogue's three word phrases framed as hoarse imperatives."¹

Kamau Brathwaite and Derek Walcott are, in a sense, twin pillars of the edifice of Anglophone Caribbean poetry as it was constructed in the second half of the twentieth century. Adherence to one or the other has long been aligned with identification either with the dominant (linguistically formal) discourse or that of the folk, which Brathwaite has called 'nation language.' Rather than taking sides in this debate, I will show how framing their work in the context of the frontier troubles that dichotomy. Using this lens to examine the ways that they each attempt to challenge conventional poetic boundaries, I will assess the extent to which either has been able to escape the 'imperializing eye' of Western epistemology.

The concept of the frontier, with which I analyse the work of these two Caribbean poets as examples of interventions in the process of unravelling epistemic entrapment, is fully explored in my recent book *Frontiers of the Caribbean*. The argument of the book is based on the frontier as a conceptual tool with which to explore the impact of globalization in the Caribbean context and its wider applicability. It extends the notion of the frontier as physical boundary, to one of moral and ideational tension between an ideologically imposed societal order and organization ('civilization') and the apparent absence of imposed order ('wilderness'). In my thinking, the frontier is a flexible concept that operates as much at the individual as at the collective level. The frontier is never completely closed (the wild is always with us) is often interiorized and 'wild' frontier behavior is often interpreted (by the 'civilized') as transgressive, threatening and constantly in need of taming. However, the process of recognizing the wild, resulting in its recapture or 'taming', is effective only until another recognizable challenge occurs. I adopt Hayden Whyte's understanding of the term 'wild' as a convenient myth whose function is the projection of repressed desires and anxieties (154). Central to this process of repression is the concept of a 'contested terrain.' Such a context is central to the Caribbean language situation, ultimately because of its effect on Caribbean identity. In this way, I arrive at a definition of the frontier as characterized by conflict over ideas and territory, involving some form of outpost status, inconsistent commitment to local infrastructure (including government institutions), prevalent violence and a rough and ready society that privileges masculinity and improvisational skills.

My monograph *Frontiers of the Caribbean* employs an essentially geographical demonstration of the operation of frontier concepts, the focus being on the small and under-researched multi-island Anglophone Caribbean state St. Vincent and the Grenadines. Generalizing from the monograph, in a more abstract sense, the frontier can be read as describing an absence of consolidated hegemony, which is illustrated through an ongoing relationship between the concepts of 'civilization' and 'wilderness.' Thus, the notion of frontier recognizes the existence of contested terrain at the heart of an apparently stable concept (civilization).

The Caribbean language situation has long been recognized in literary and linguistic studies as an example of a contested terrain, best expressed by Caliban's declaration to Prospero: "You taught me language, and my profit on't is / I know how to curse" (1.2.365-

¹Laird, Nick. "Why Poetry is the Perfect Weapon to Fight Donald Trump." *The Guardian* March 17, 2017. Np. Accessed April 11, 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/mar/17/donald-trump-poetry-nick-laird-don-paterson-zoo-of-the-new>.

366). A shared tongue, in other words, is no guarantee of subaltern conformity; having learnt Prospero's language, Caliban implies, it is by rupturing and repurposing it that he can most effectively challenge Prospero's domination. This is the central concern of my paper. One route of partial escape for certain Caribbean thinkers, particularly Kamau Brathwaite, has been through a turn to orality and an alternative system of thought arising from his contact with Africa. Another, quite distinct and alternative route, that of working from within European literary conventions while infusing them with one's own distinctive cultural perspective, has been adopted by Derek Walcott. Although they are not impermeable – Brathwaite's *Arrivants*, for example, is clearly intertextual with Eliot's *The Wasteland* and Walcott has recourse to creole forms – each strategy broadly offers an alternative approach to literary/epistemological boundary breaking. But each strategy has been received very differently. The framing of the strategies in the context of 'frontier,' as defined by the 'civilized' / 'wild' divide, brings out the perceived difference in approach to the oral and written word adopted respectively by Kamau Brathwaite and Derek Walcott. Both are literary innovators and have been central to the articulation of creative strategies of resistance. Brathwaite seeks, through shamanic divination and by dramatizing the history of the diasporic African experience in the Caribbean, to challenge the dominant text-based tradition and remake the language; that is, to replace it with textual forms that aim to capture orality or versions of it. In contrast, Walcott argues that having mastered established forms, the poet needs to use the metrical language that we have been given in ways that subvert its dominion. For him, the means by which the Caribbean will transcend its historical experience is by invoking a sense of newness, remaking the world from the perspective of what he calls 'Adamic wonder.' The question I shall finally confront is whether and to what extent either strategy has facilitated an escape from the domination of Prospero's language. Before focusing on their specific poetic strategies, I shall pause for a moment to consider the language situation that they inhabited.

Devaluing of the Caribbean Language Situation

In the matter of the language situation, the divide between civilization and wilderness in the Caribbean context has been present since earliest colonial times. The debate between the two turns on the legitimacy or otherwise of noise, sound and orality. An underlying feature of the power/knowledge system of Western colonialism is the belief that the origins of Western civilization are not only to be found in written records but are concomitant with writing itself. This is most clearly seen in the nineteenth century preoccupation with all forms of classification, from Darwinism to eugenics, involving the establishment of clearly defined hierarchies understood as scientific. Non-western societies which could not be easily brought into such classificatory systems were perceived as Other by western eyes. One marker of this Otherness was language, which, experienced as impenetrable, was characterized ultimately as noise. This ideology is captured in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* when Marlow recounts how the tribespeople opposing his escape "shouted periodically together strings of amazing words that resembled no sounds of human language; and the deep murmurs of the crowd, interrupted suddenly, were like the responses of some satanic litany" (112). If language and civilization were symbiotic, it followed that African languages were at best 'primitive,' at worst devilish; the same logic applied to the encounter with African religious belief systems, embedded as they are in the precepts of orality. The consequences of this way of thinking can be seen in the denigration of African deities as satanic, idols, fetishes, etc.

The devaluing of orality has a long colonial history in the Caribbean as well, characterized by a situation in which Western epistemology was mediated by colonial administrations. For example, at the turn of emancipation in 1834, John Anderson, an expatriate stipendiary magistrate located in St. Vincent, writing in his journal, dismissed as a hindrance the everyday orality of Sunday market language. "Long, long, indeed will it be," he claims, "before this gibberish becomes intelligible to European ears" (75). This division between the 'wild' popular oral tradition and the 'civilized' literary establishment has remained a constant. In the modern context it is apparent just as forcefully between one Caribbean tradition and another, for example between popular oral performance poetry that emanates from a tradition of protest and formal or literary poetry centered on the text. For example, in Walcott's discussion of performance poetry in the Caribbean the following statement reflects, ironically, his dismissal of the 'wildness' of modern performance poetry for its teleology and its technical limitations:

I think performance poetry is a juvenile thing, you know, an adolescent thing, for the art. . . . [E]ventually the poet wants to do something a little more disciplined, a little more modest, a little more humble, a little less of the 'I', showing himself. . . . I think that there is a sort of virulent, vehement, aggressive incoherence that is taking the place of poetry and I think it's stupid. (Lee 17)

In this interview, he also noted performance poetry's inability to communicate effectively: "If you don't want to tell people your poem, and you want to go for the incoherence that you think is national, I'm not part of that" (Lee 18).

This divide between the oral and the literary in its modern context has been interpreted by the Caribbean literary critic, Gordon Rohlehr, as a question of the relationship of form to social purpose. He suggests that poetry that leans towards the oral tradition is designed for a collective or communal space. Such poetry, often simple, rhythmic, repetitive, rhyming and deliberately eschewing western rules of prosody is as much at home at a 'lime' (informal social gathering), calypso tent or in a church sermon as in a dub or spoken word performance (154). The oral poet sees him/herself as addressing a collective and dealing with matters of collective interest, e.g. genealogy; in the Caribbean the form is called 'performance', 'dub' or 'spoken word' poetry. Performances are often infused with metaphors of resistance, communal initiatives and the nurturing of ancestral links. For example, one Barbadian spoken word performer who captures the elements of warning and liturgy in his performances is Adrian Green. On eight of the fifteen tracks on his first CD *Random Acts of Conscience*, he alerts his listeners to be on guard against re-enslavement by greed, war-mongers, superficial entertainers, false intellectuals whose text books are "littered with lies" and professional exploiters who "don't use chains and whips but brains and tricks." They all represent the generalized threat of "spiritual wickedness in high and low places." The threat is conveyed in his performance utilizing simple rhyme combined with the rising crescendo of a Baptist preacher as he warms to the task:

Man I tell ya, in this nation of blue, black and yella, we raising an entire generation on musical junk food, a strict diet of jam and wine, it's no wonder that we will find the children can't concentrate but are great at rolling their behind.

By contrast, the classical or modernist literary modes that grew out of colonial education has produced a poetic form designed primarily to be experienced in a one-to-one relationship between text and reader. It is out of this tradition that Walcott's poetry emanates: he has consistently emphasized the value of mastering established form. His

early work indicates a commitment to established forms and metrical patterns, for example, the iambic pentameter, as well as free verse. Here are two examples from Walcott's early poetry. The first, from "A Lesson for This Sunday," is in iambic pentameter, while the second, "Oddjob, a Bull Terrier" is in Walcott's free verse conversational style:

The growing idleness of summer grass
 With its frail kites of furious butterflies
 Requests the lemonade of simple praise
 In scansion gentler than my hammock swings. (38)

You prepare for one sorrow,
 But another comes.
 It is not like the weather,
 you cannot brace yourself
 the unreadiness is all. (334)

In the light of the denigration of the local language situation and the authority of imposed form, how then do Walcott and Brathwaite break this apparent boundary?

Two Approaches to the Caribbean Language of Resistance

It is worth emphasizing that both Brathwaite and Walcott's approach to what I have here described as a Caribbean language of resistance have been undertaken consciously. Brathwaite's insistence on African rootedness and the centrality of orality to his thinking are responses to the legacy of colonial language hegemony. Walcott's approach has been to subvert more subtly the inherited colonial language legacy and the authority of imposed form.

Brathwaite's Approach - Challenging Form:

The Barbadian poet, Kamau Brathwaite, is in some sense a shaman whose work is infused with a passionate spirituality, expressed in broken jazz-inflected lines and words, and linguistic structures drawn from a form of orality that he calls 'nation language.' In his early discussion of nation language, Brathwaite openly recognizes a major debt to the work of T. S. Eliot. He states: "What T.S. Eliot did for Caribbean poetry and Caribbean literature was to introduce the notion of the speaking voice, the conversational tone. That is what really attracted us to Eliot" (Brathwaite 1984, 30). Thus, in a sense Brathwaite is part of the Modernist school of western poetry, but his Modernism is closer to a Caribbean and African-inflected mode of expression. But Brathwaite in his poetic work then goes on to build on the fragments and ruins of the Caribbean experience to achieve the ultimate goal, which, to use Edward Glissant's term, is the creation of a 'free poetics,' that is, a transformative mode of poetry that involves simultaneously telling, listening and commenting, all of which are in turn keys to the reshaping of society. The dominant feature of revolt for Kamau Brathwaite harks back to the region's slave past. In his study *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica, 1770-1820*, Brathwaite asserts that the slaves' most important act of rebellion against domination was in their challenge to the language of the masters, adopting strategies that included concealment, ambiguity, parody and mimicry. Thus, Caribbean language, which in Anderson's perception is 'gibberish,' becomes for Brathwaite an essential way of undermining Prospero's dominance, whether

linguistic or political. These strategies are part of what he calls the 'little' or 'folk' tradition (which plays off Leavis's 'Great Tradition' of the English canon) and are founded on a culturally specific conception of the self. Brathwaite writes: "It was in language that the slave was perhaps most successfully imprisoned by his masters; and it was in his (mis-)use of it that he perhaps most effectively rebelled. Within the folk tradition, language was (and is) a creative act in itself; the word was held to contain a secret power" (Brathwaite 1970, 17).

By 'orality,' I do not mean simply the mimicry of speech patterns or the use of dialect but the encapsulating of an alternative world view. In the Ghanaian context, where Kamau Brathwaite wrote some of his early poetry and which has had a lasting influence on his thinking, orality is a complete system encompassing a cosmology, a belief system and a philosophy characterized by distinct and complex concepts. In brief, it is an overriding belief in the simultaneity and interpenetration of spiritual and material worlds, encompassing animism, kinship, rebirth, the contiguity of the dead and the living and the role of the ancestors. A fundamental concept in many African philosophical systems is that of the condition of being human as 'relational' or 'processual'; the field of action of the individual is framed by the society which gives his or her life meaning. Thus the Ghanaian philosopher, Kwasi Wiredu, surveying the ontological concepts propounded by African orality, speaks of a normative idea of personhood – as something to be aspired to and achieved through one's own efforts (104)

The parallels here with the Caribbean context are apparent. While it is through the voice (incantation) that the gods or ancestors are invoked, in West Africa there exist cults the initiates of which are not allowed to divulge the secrets, which may even be in a secret language, or a 'deep' version of a familiar language. Brathwaite argues that nation language is subversive of the official language, the 'grand' tradition, and is essentially oral (and thus communal) and so directly challenges the dominant textual language of government, law and authority bequeathed to the region by its colonial masters. I identify in 'nation language,' the term that Brathwaite gives the alternative language of the Caribbean, features of the continuing 'wild.' He identifies its characteristics in this way:

The poetry, the culture itself, exists not in the 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 its 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. (Brathwaite 1984, 17)

As a contemporary poet, historian and critic Brathwaite however is not interested in merely recreating and preserving the oral dimension. To free the language requires nothing less than a break with the conventional English text. As the critic Stewart Brown observes, he "has always been very much engaged with texts. . . . What his work more and more reflects is his quest to find ways in which texts can be made to accommodate the 'noise' of nation language, to represent 'the new shapes and consciousness of ourselves'" (Brown 2007, 199). This requires a breaking up of the language, as seen and especially as spoken, allowing it to stammer and stutter itself into a linguistic rebirth. The poem 'Negus' from his collection *The Arrivants: A New World Trilogy*, for instance, begins with these stutters:

it
it

it
 It is not
 it
 it
 it
 It is not
 it is not
 it is not
 It is not enough
 It is not enough to be free
 of the red white and blue
 of the drag, of the dragon
 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? (222)

In a note in *History of the Voice*, Brathwaite is clear that the Establishment is challenged by orality through its dislike of and unease with the non-conforming (wild) voice. He notes, in contrast: "It was Eliot's actual voice, or rather his recorded voice . . . which turned us on" (41). He points out further: "And it is interesting that on the whole, the Establishment couldn't stand Eliot's voice" (41). He makes a similar point about the voice of John Arlott, the BBC test cricket commentator, who subverted the Establishment with his "riddmic and image-laden tropes" and his "revolutionary Hampshire burr" (Brathwaite, 1984, 30-31 [note. 41])

Beyond accommodating the noisy challenge of nation language or orality, Brathwaite's creative work has in recent times increasingly experimented with technology, especially with different online fonts, to subvert the conventional notion of a book as written text. In an interview with Stewart Brown in 1989, referring again to *The Tempest*, he calls this "Sycorax video style" (Brown 1989, 84) as well as "writin in light" (84). He argues that the

computer has made it much easier for the illiterate, the Caliban, actually to get himself visible. . . . [T]he miracle of that electronic screen means that the spoken word can become visible in a way that it cannot become visible in the typewriter where you have to cease physically. . . . The computer has moved us away from scripture into some other dimension which is 'writin in light'. It is really nearer to the oral tradition than the typewriter is. The typewriter is an extension of the pen. The computer is getting us as close as you can to the spoken word. (84-93)

The result, as Brown has observed, is that:

There has been an ever present concern with orthography, as if the very technology of printing was loaded against the enunciations of the new/old/evolving oral-now-literary language he wants to use. Brathwaite has experimented with layouts and with syntactical 'calibanisms' as he calls them – innovative or shortened spelling, breaking, spacing, shaping words in ways that dislocate them from their familiar associations and meanings but more importantly allowing nuances, echoes, puns, rhymes and particular

kinds of music 'out' of the language that history has imposed on him to express his experience and vision. (Brown 2007, 200)

In his poetry, Brathwaite becomes a kind of contemporary shaman to whom and through whom various African-centered voices speak of the neglected slave history of the Caribbean. For example, in discussing in a 2005 interview with Joyelle McSweeney how the poem "Namsetoura," from his award winning collection *Born to Slow Horses* (2005), came about, he recounts a revelation in which an image of a spider in its web shattered his camera lens a number of times. Eventually, after capturing the image and trying to provide a narrative of the experience of this female image, he recounts how he heard Namsetoura (in effect his muse) speaking to him "in a mixture of Asante Twi, Ga and Barbadian Nation language" encouraging him to recognize the sacredness of a nearby slave burial ground and how this was connected to the need to protect his own land from the encroachment of officialdom. He further recounts: "But what she said is that I should do some real research, I should defend her sacred space, and I should become concerned therefore with the environment, both historically and spiritually, from where she had come." This clarifies the connection between his attempts both to make language in a new way and to give expression to his alternative view of history. In "Namsetoura," the spider, a Ghanaian folk-figure which emerged in the Caribbean as Anansi, embodies the African belief in animism, whereby all living and inanimate things are imbued with spirit; Namsetoura herself is an ancestor figure, by means of which history is transmitted, not through text but through the voice of a spirit medium. In this way, through his poetry he signifies the complicity of official language in the making of one version of history while offering a different route to ancestral knowledge.

Walcott's Approach – Mastering Established Forms to Change Them:

In contrast, Derek Walcott chose a very different path by which to pose his challenge. On the one hand, he is the arch-compromiser who learns from and adapts the classics. He has spoken often of how, in his early writing, he would mimic the style of established poets in English whom he admired - Auden, Thomas, Yeats, to name but a few. On the other hand, adopting the persona of the shipwrecked mariner, Robinson Crusoe, in his poem "Crusoe's Journal," he observes Friday using the master's language for his own ends. Note how closely this parallels the Calibanic and suggests – again – that Walcott and Brathwaite are after the *same* ends:

parroting our master's

style and voice, we make his language ours. . . . (Walcott 1992, 93)

His mastery of the language of poetry in its formal sense has been a key driver of Walcott's international reputation. In 1964, Robert Graves famously observed in a review of his *Selected Poems*: "Derek Walcott handles English with a closer understanding of its inner magic than most (if not any) of his English-born contemporaries."² Walcott's turn to the classics in his epic poem, *Omeros*, both in language and theme, with characters named after those in Homer's *Iliad* and, in terms of poetic form, using a loose *terzarima* (the form of Dante's *Divine Comedy*) and a hexameter in preference to the more portentous and 'poetic' pentameter, reinforces an apparent concern for tradition and suggests the 'civilizing' influence on his work. Walcott has himself also recognized in the poem what he

²Graves' quote may be found on the bookjacket of Walcott's *Selected Poetry*.

has called 'Homeric endeavors' (like the cutting down of trees) that open the poem. Though it is important to note that Walcott, in discussing *Omeros* in an interview with Luigi Sampietry, also describes the poem as one of *associations* not derivations, and that he consciously strove to downplay the epic dimension in favour of what he calls the "diurnal, day to day heroism of people who go out and face the arrogance."

In another part of the same interview with Sampietro, he explains his choices and specifically the ways in which he believes that he *isn't* writing 'epic' poetry in the grand style, but something which he feels is more appropriate to his subject.

the usual meter for heroic or narrative verse in English is pentametrical. But the echo of the pentameter, it seems to me, it's felt to be a little conventional and a little pre-determined. And, of course – I think – even if you add rhyme to that, you have a risk of either quatrains or couplets. So I preferred to use a longer line – a hexametrical line. Because I felt that the prose – the narrative experience in the poem – would've had less of a sort of an epic echo if it were in hexameter as opposed to if it were in pentameter – in which it would already begin to certainly have echoes of Milton, or Tennyson – something Victorian – in terms of the measure of it. And I don't think that the pentameter would've allowed me the kind of prosaic space that I wanted for the action of the narration – the prose element in it. I think that in the pentametrical measure ordinary things tend to get over-emphasized by the beat. . . . Whereas *here* there is more flexibility, more caesuras. You can relax, you can pick up – accelerate as you wish.

On the face of it these observations make Walcott apparently both more conciliatory to the Western world and accepting of the standard English paradigm. However, the critic Paula Burnett argues that Walcott's "use of metrical language is not a form of Eurocentrism" (126), asserting that "he engages with the literary canon to subvert its domination" (126). One way that he does this is by the juxtaposition of the language of Prospero and Caliban, standard and dialect. In his poem "The Saddhu of Couva," the persona, now grown old, reflects on his life from indentured migrant from India to a member of a local village council in Trinidad, and observes:

I talked too damn much on the Couva Village Council
I talked too softly. I was always drowned
by the loudspeakers in front of the stores
or the loudspeakers with the greatest pictures.
I am best suited to stalk like a white cattle bird
on legs like sticks, with sticking to the Path
between the canes on a district road at dusk.
Playing the Elder. There are no more elders.
Is only old people. (my emphasis; 372)

The poignancy of his situation turns on the juxtaposition between the experience expressed in standard English and the succinct Trinidadian dialect of the last line.

I have noted Brathwaite's preoccupation with history, but Walcott too maintains that all colonials are haunted by the horrors of the past. In his essay "The Muse of History," he writes: "For us in the archipelago the tribal memory is salted with the bitter memory of migration" and the "old vision of paradise wrecks here" (42). He argues that in literary terms, one ancestor, the enslaver, screams for pardon while the slave or victim screams for revenge. But for him it is futile to apply a linear, sequential model of history in wrestling with the past, and he refuses a notion of history as following a predetermined

trajectory, that is, a chain of cause and effect. Such a concept of history results either in "shame" (41) or "awe" (37) and is, he suggests, "filial" (37). He refuses to forgive his ancestors whether white or black, slave or slave owner, since such a stance results in an idea of history which justifies, explains and expiates. Where Brathwaite views history as broken and seeks to heal the rupture, Walcott rather reads history as eternal recurrence and repetition. His interest is in a perpetual starting over. The Caribbean literary theorist, Richard Clarke (2008-2009), reads Walcott's approach as tantamount to history-qua-eternal recurrence, citing Walcott's own claim that the result of this perspective is not a "jaded cynicism which sees nothing new under the sun" but one that offers an "elation which sees everything as renewed" (Walcott 1998, 38). Furthermore, as Walcott has famously observed, "history is fiction, subject to a fitful muse, memory" (Walcott 1998, 37).

Ultimately Walcott's challenge, which he gladly accepts, is expressed neither as resistance nor rebellion, but as celebration of the newness that creolization signifies. This, he claims, is nothing less than the "elemental privilege of naming the new world" (41). Suggestively echoing Brathwaite's appropriation of Shakespearean tropes, Walcott suggests that poets, like himself, who draw on the classics have in common the transcendence of ordinary experience through moments of intense apprehension and awareness, "whether they are aligned by heritage to Crusoe and Prospero or Friday and Caliban" (40). One application of this ordinary experience to boundary breaking in the context of the epic is illustrated in *Omeros*. Patricia Novillo-Corvalan points out how the "characters that inhabit *Omeros* adopt the grandiloquent names of their epic ancestors, but emulate a new type of heroism that arises, not from the battles of high rank individuals, but from the struggles of fishermen and local people who have to survive the socio-economic challenge of the island" (159). Any inheritance, bequeathed by either figure, is there to be transformed, for "Caribbean sensibility is not marinated in the past. It is not exhausted. It is new. But it is its complexity, not its historically explained simplicities, which is new" (Walcott 1998, 54).

The Caribbean Literary Frontier and Epistemological Ruptures

Rather than a simple opposition between accommodation and rupture, then, both poets can be read for their break with colonial epistemology, but there are also clear differences. They have, in the past, also contested the legitimacy of one another's strategy. Walcott famously satirized the opening of Brathwaite's poem "Negus" with the repetition of the words "it/it is not/it is not a good" followed by "it is not a good poem" (40). Brathwaite has in turn damned with faint praise what he describes as Walcott's "first major nation language effort" (Brathwaite 1984, 9) in his comments on Walcott's poem "The Schooner Flight," which opens:

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 Conception
To ship as a seaman on the schooner *Flight*. (Walcott 1992, 345)

Brathwaite traces Walcott's 'first major nation language effort' to Langland's prelude to *Piers the Ploughman*, criticizing it for using the pentameter and thus remaining at some distance from "a rhythm which approximates the *natural* experience, the *environmental* experience" (Brathwaite 1984, 10) of the Caribbean, concluding with his famous claim,

"The hurricane does not roar in pentameters" (10). The Walcott of *Omeros* would appear to agree!

Beyond this shadow boxing, more importantly, each poet's strategy, in its own way, attempts to shake off the influence of Western epistemology and, I am suggesting, each reflects a frontier thinking characteristic of this deeply colonized region. How successful have these strategies been? Both writers can be read as located at the frontier of Caribbean literary epistemology, each in his own way breaking literary boundaries. In the process of incorporating and extending Prospero's language, Walcott's strategy, it would appear, has remained well within the official and 'civilized' sphere of language and any break, where apparent, has been in some ways too subtle to affect his reputation. The international acceptance and recognition that has been given to his poetry over the years (indicated below) would appear to make any claim or suggestion of a fundamental break spurious. His literary strategy of building on traditions from wherever he chooses, but notably his adoption of Western forms and rewriting of Western myths, has resulted in international awards, widespread fame and popularity. It is not that Walcott has necessarily sought out recognition and acclaim, but the fact that his work has prompted them is of itself significant. His association with other international literary names who have been his contemporaries in the world of poetry, including Seamus Heaney, Joseph Brodsky and earlier the Americans Robert Frost and Elizabeth Bishop, indicates also an international acceptance and legitimation of his work and, by implication, for Caribbean or St. Lucian letters. This recognition can be traced back as far as his 'discovery' through the BBC radio programme *Caribbean Voices* in the 1950's, when his poetry was promoted by the programme's editor, Henry Swanzy and other London based critics, as the "real thing" (Nanton 2000, 68).

Kamau Brathwaite's struggle with an epistemological break has been of a different order, more overt in language use, structure and style, transcending conventional notions of what he would call the 'Grand' tradition of English letters. Ironically, however, he has not escaped the prison-house of printed language, albeit produced by digital means, as the means to express his orality. This contradiction is captured by the term that Brathwaite coined 'writin' in light.' More importantly, while the literary world has embraced his experimentation – he has received among many awards the Casas de las Americas Prize for literature in 1976 and 1986 from Cuba, the Neustadt Prize for literature in 1994, the Canadian Griffin International Poetry Prize in 2007, the Robert Frost Medal in 2015 as well as twice winning the Collymore Literary Endowment Prize awarded annually in his home island, Barbados, does this academic and local recognition suffice for one whose espoused aim is for the wider Barbadian/Caribbean people to understand his work?

Edouard Glissant is pessimistic about the local relevance or efficacy of Caribbean poetry or letters, at least as far as Martinique is concerned. As the critic Kelly Baker Josephs has pointed out, in his introduction to *Caribbean Discourse* Glissant concludes that the "discourse on discourse . . . has come too late" (Josephs 11) with the result that his country-people have lost the "meaning of their own voice" (11). She notes that Glissant suggests negative answers to the following questions: "Would an awakening to orality and the explosion of Creole satisfy the deficiency (the loss of voice)? Is the revolution that would mature them still possible? Is the land which will *understand* them still there around us?" (11). Glissant accepts that in attempting to actualize a collective Caribbean identity, a writer will inevitably be separated from the community for which he writes, as well as from the language that is presently in use.

To return to the question of whether it is possible to escape the 'prison house of language,' Richard Clarke is confident that both Brathwaite and Walcott can be accommodated within the Western philosophical tradition, reading both as offering versions of the Kantian sublime. He suggests that, faced with the overwhelming magnitude and inevitable might of the literary and by extension intellectual canon of European provenance, the Caribbean thinker vacillates, at least initially, between discomfort and pain, on the one hand, and terror and even awe on the other (29). These negative feelings are transcended by two possible responses that give rise to two critical impulses, each informed by a particular set of assumptions, not least about the nature of identity, the sign and a posited relation between these two. These are an elated embrace of the tradition and an affirmation of an essential self that transcends time and place (representative of Walcott's world view) and by contrast, a canny irreverence towards and a questioning of the Grand tradition, accompanied by a desire to substitute an alternative founded on a culturally specific conception of the self (more relevant to Brathwaite's world view). The former Clarke identifies as Kantian and the latter Herderian (transcendentalist and historicist, respectively).

Walcott and Brathwaite, each in his own way, have taken up the challenge to break free of Western epistemology. Finally, how are their efforts to be read in the context of a frontier analysis of a globalized world? As two Caribbean poets and philosophers who offer to the world their respective cultural products, might one be read as closer to 'civilized' and the other to the 'wild'? These questions return the analysis to the issue of real politics. Whether one reads their philosophical underpinnings as springing from a common Western epistemology, or from diverse ideological points of origin, an important underlying cultural issue concerns how their respective work as a cultural product is consumed, evaluated and circulated. This is, to some extent, reflected by the rewards they have received for their work.

Put bluntly, the embrace of Walcott's *oeuvre* by a Euro/American readership and critical community suggests its greater congeniality and acceptability than the work of Brathwaite. The former appears closer to the ideology that would consume it as 'civilized' and thus reward it lavishly and the latter closer to the 'wild' and so less congenial, and, I would argue, more unsettling, stranger and ultimately more challenging. This difference can be measured partly in terms of their official reception –most conspicuously, the honouring of Walcott abroad with a Nobel Prize. At home in Castries, the capital of St. Lucia, a square has been named after him, and he has received a knighthood. Following his recent death he was accorded a state funeral. Brathwaite, in contrast, has maintained a conflictual relationship with his national government for many years over control of the land (at his home named 'Cowpastor') in Barbados where he lives since his retirement from teaching in New York. Though he has continued to write and publish, he has become increasingly secluded in his island home. If in the final analysis neither poet has been able to break free of Prospero's embrace, as Caribbean subjects both are demonstrably in creative tension with it. In terms of the frontier between civilization and the wild, however, they have each been accorded a distinctly different position in that negotiation. The multiple significations of this different relation to the frontier offer an alternative to the dichotomies of postcolonialism and thereby a new perspective on these icons of Caribbean literature.

Works Consulted

- Anderson, John. *Between Slavery and Freedom: Special Magistrate John Anderson's Journal of St. Vincent during Apprenticeship*. Ed. Roderick A. McDonald. Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 2001.
- Bhambra, Gurinder K. *Connected Sociologies*. London: Bloomsbury, 2014.
- Brathwaite, Edward Kamau. *The Arrivants: a New World Trilogy*. Oxford: OUP, 1967.
- Brathwaite, Edward Kamau. *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica, 1770–1820*. Oxford: OUP, 1970.
- Brathwaite, Edward Kamau. *History of the Voice: the Development of Nation Language in Anglophone Caribbean Poetry*. London: New Beacon, 1984.
- Brathwaite, Edward Kamau. *Born to Slow Horses*. Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 2005.
- Brown, Stewart. "Interview with Edward Kamau Brathwaite." *Kyk-over-Al* 40 (1989): 84-93.
- Brown Stewart. *Tourist, Traveler, Troublemaker: Essays on Poetry*. Leeds: Peepal Tree, 2007.
- Burnett, Paula. *Derek Walcott: Politics and Poetics*. Tallahassee: University Press of Florida, 2000.
- Clarke, Richard L. W. "Further Thoughts on a Caribbean Sublime: Walcott's Musings on History." *Shibboleths: a Journal of Comparative Theory and Criticism* 3.1 (2008 – 2009): 21-33. [<http://shibboleths.rlwclarke.net/3/1/Clarke,Richard.pdf>]
- Cohen, Robin. "If You Want to Know About Social Identities, Study the Caribbean." *Social Identities* 24.1 (2017): 53-57.
- Conrad, Joseph. *Heart of Darkness*. London: Blackwoods Magazine, 1899.
- Glissant, Edouard. *Poetics of Relation*. Trans. Betsy Wing. Ann Arbor, MI: U of Michigan P, 1997.
- Green, Adrian. *Random Acts of Conscience: from the Mind of Adrian Green, with Ikon and Mwhaki Itrina*. Recorded at Muszikal Firm, Barbados, 2007.
- Hall, Stuart. "Cultural Identity and Diaspora: Identity, Community, Culture, Difference." *Colonial Discourse and Post Colonial Theory: a Reader*. Ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman. London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994. 392–401.
- Henry, Paget. "Epistemic Dependence and the Transformation of Caribbean Philosophy." *The C. L. R. James Journal: a Review of Caribbean Ideas* 22.1-2 (2016): 215–240.
- Hulme, Peter. *Colonial Encounters: Europe and the Native Caribbean, 1492-1797*. London: Methuen, 1986.
- Josephs, Kelly Baker. "Versions of X/Self: Kamau Brathwaite's Caribbean Discourse." *Anthurium: a Caribbean Studies Journal* 1.1 (2003): Paper 4. N.p. [<http://scholarlyrepository.miami.edu/anthurium/vol1/iss1/4>]
- Laird, Nick. "Why Poetry is the Perfect Weapon to Fight Donald Trump." *The Guardian* March 17, 2017. [<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/mar/17/donald-trump-poetry-nick-laird-don-paterson-zoo-of-the-new>]
- Lee, John Robert. "Derek Walcott and the Making of *Bim*: Interview with John Robert Lee." *Bim* 2.1 (2008-2009): 10–21.
- McSweeney, Joyelle. "Poetics, Revelations and Catastrophes: an Interview with Kamau Brathwaite." *Rain Taxi Review of Books* (Fall 2005). N.p. [<http://www.raintaxi.com/poetics-revelations-and-catastrophes-an-interview-with-kamau-brathwaite>]

- Nanton, Philip. "What Does Mr. Swanzy Want – Shaping or Reflecting? An Assessment of Henry Swanzy's Contribution to the Development of Caribbean Literature." *Caribbean Quarterly* 46.1 (2000): 61-72.
- Nanton, Philip. *Frontiers of the Caribbean*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2017.
- Novillo-Corvalan, P. "Literary Migrations: Homer's Journey through Joyce's Ireland and Walcott's St. Lucia." *Irish Migration Studies in Latin America* 5.3 (2007): 157-162.
- Rohlehr, Gordon. *"My Strangled City," and Other Essays*. London: Longman, 1992.
- Sampietro, Luigi. "Derek Walcott on Omeros: an Interview Conducted by Luigi Sampietro." *Caribana: a Review of Caribbean Literatures*. N.p. N.d.
[<http://users.unimi.it/caribana/OnOmeros.html>]
- Shakespeare, William. *The Tempest*. Ed. Frank Kermode. London: Routledge, 1988.
- Walcott, Derek. *Collected Poems, 1948 – 1984*. London: Faber and Faber, 1992.
- Walcott, Derek. *Selected Poems*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Company, 1964.
- Walcott, Derek. *What the Twilight Says: Essays*. London: Faber and Faber, 1998.
- White, Hayden. *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*. Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins UP, 1978.
- Williams, Eric. *British Historians and the West Indies*. London: Andre Deutsch, 1966.
- Wiredu, Kwasi. "The African Concept of Personhood." *African-American Perspectives on Biomedical Ethics*. Ed. Harley E. Flack and Edmund D. Pellegrino. Washington, DC: Georgetown UP, 1992. 104-117.