ABSTRACT

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

WILLIAMS, EMILY B.A., SAINT PAUL'S COLLEGE, 1977

M.A., VIRGINIA COMMONWEALTH UNIVERSITY, 1979

TROPICAL PARADISE LOST AND REGAINED:
THE POETIC PROTEST AND PROPHECY OF EDWARD BRATHWAITE,
CLAIRE HARRIS, OLIVE SENIOR, AND DAVID DABYDEEN

Advisor: Dr. Phyllis Briggs-Emanuel

Dissertation dated: July 1997

This dissertation examines the poetry of four Caribbean poets: Edward Brathwaite, Claire Harris, Olive Senior, and David Dabydeen. A presentation of the background issues which shape their voices of protest and prophecy, stemming from the colonization of the Caribbean region, governs the discussion. While the African ancestry of the poets Brathwaite, Harris, and Senior provides the cohesion of this critical analysis, Dabydeen, of East Indian ancestry, fits within the matrix of this analysis due to the thematic centering of his poetry on the issues of dislocation and dispossession surrounding the colonization of the Caribbean region.

This analysis is organized into six chapters. Chapter One, the introduction, presents a historical overview of the Caribbean region and the scope of this dissertation. Chapters Two through Five are devoted to an analysis of selected works of each poet. Finally, Chapter Six synthesizes the powerful notes of protest and prophecy sounded by each of these poets in their quest for a home which empowers and embraces its people, a Paradise Regained.
TROPICAL PARADISE LOST AND REGAINED:
THE POETIC PROTEST AND PROPHECY OF EDWARD BRATHWAITE,
CLAIRED HARRIS, OLIVE SENIOR, AND DAVID DABYDEEN

A DISSERTATION
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF CLARK ATLANTA UNIVERSITY
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR
THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF ARTS IN THE HUMANITIES

BY
EMILY ALLEN WILLIAMS

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

ATLANTA, GEORGIA
JULY 1997
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Sincere thanks to my husband, Kenneth Williams; my father, Joseph Allen; my late mother, Cornelia Allen; my sisters, Mary and Glenda; and my nephew, Cedric, for their faith and encouragement during the writing of this dissertation. I am forever indebted to Dr. Phyllis Briggs-Emanuel for her expert guidance and wisdom in her role as my primary advisor. Her unwavering support gave me the courage to continue writing.

Dr. David Dorsey, my second reader, deserves a special thank you as my professor for three years; he always presented me with an academic challenge. Dr. Janice Liddell, my third reader, is greatly appreciated for providing critical commentary which will serve well in future scholarly endeavors.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Historical Overview</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scope</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. STRENGTH FROM THE PAST: HISTORICAL EMPOWERMENT IN</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BRATHWAITE'S THE ARRIVANTS</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. CLAIRE HARRIS: THE POETIC SHAPE OF WOMEN'S WORDS</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. PIECING THE ANCESTRAL QUILT: ARAWAK, AFRICAN, AND</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EUROPEAN INFLUENCE IN THE POETRY OF OLIVE SENIOR</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. RATIONALIZING THE JOURNEY: DAVID DABYDEEN'S POETIC</td>
<td>115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RENDERING OF THE INDO-CARIBBEAN EXPERIENCE</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI. HOME AT LAST: THE CARIBBEAN AS PARADISE REGAINED</td>
<td>146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WORKS CITED</td>
<td>159</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

iii
Chapter One

Introduction

_Brief_

_Your dark eye is a prism to reflect the new world in its glass?_

_Shatter that rass and roam the darker continent inside._

___Mervyn Morris___

Caribbean literature is inextricably intertwined with the language, politics, acculturation, and spirit of the colonizer and the colonized. Caribbean literature, constantly developing and evolving, exhibits thematic strands illustrative of an indelible colonial legacy counterbalanced by a persistent emancipating tone that reflects the abandonment by Caribbeans of the language and ethos of inhibitive colonial structures in favor of shaping a unique literary tradition. The literature historicizes, prophesizes, and criticizes the culturally complex world view of the Caribbean region using historical, biographical, psychological, and deconstructionist critical strategies across genres.

The analysis of Caribbean literature has expanded in the last two decades (the 1970's and 1980's) with a proliferation of journals and conferences focusing exclusively on literature from the Caribbean region and from writers of Caribbean descent living outside the region. While these evolutions in the critical landscape of Caribbean literature have, to a substantial degree, increased the critical discourse, the existing body of criticism is by no means extensive in a specific genre or on specific authors. The reasons for the growing but still limited body of criticism supporting the bountiful produce of Caribbean writers is pluralistic and complex; however, they emanate from the relationship which existed between the colonizer and the colonized during the massive
European cultural, political, social, and economic saturation of the Caribbean. The colonized peoples of the Caribbean were not allowed, by the colonizers, to freely engage in their arts, beliefs, and social and political customs. Consequently, any literature of colonized peoples, oral or written, was viewed as marginal and unimportant for critical analysis according to European standards. Amon Saba Saakana in The Colonial Legacy in Caribbean Literature offers an analysis of the marginalized viewing of Caribbean literature in juxtaposition to European literature:

A leading Indo-Caribbean critic, Kenneth Ramchand, in comparing the literary tradition of Britain and the Caribbean says of the latter "... a cultural void" existed. This comparison was made erroneously when he said that from the time of Chaucer the English working class had a tradition that was only to be democratised, but the former African slave had none...

Because history is written from the point of view of the conqueror, the historical experience of the conquered is usually ignored. Levi-Strauss put it another way, "... No culture is capable of true judgement of any other, since no culture can lay aside its own limitations, and its appreciation is therefore relative..." Thus it is power positions within society which are responsible for the canonisation of particular forms of popular culture. (32)

The general (mis)understanding of the issues of slavery and indentured labor as they form the basis of knowledge about the Caribbean region confirms the importance of placing the history of the Caribbean in context. The history and literature of the Caribbean region are often viewed monolithically, suggesting an area and a people with communal interests and backgrounds, while in actuality the history of the Caribbean and its consequent literature are complex. Such a skewed approach to the study of Caribbean
literature negates the geographical composition of the Caribbean and the cultural, political, social, and economic complexity of the area. Without question, the issues of slavery and indentured labor in the Caribbean serve as the "conductors" of the many explicit and implicit messages to be found in the literature. The enslavement of Africans and the indenture of East Indians, Chinese, and Portuguese to satisfy the rapacious desires of the colonizer exist as the molding forces of Caribbean society for more than 400 years.

Africans possessing their own sophisticated and intricate culture were torn from their families and comrades and found themselves in a land where the weather may have seemed the only element fondly reminiscent of their original homes. Christopher Columbus's initial voyage to the Caribbean region around 1492, often and historically viewed as a "discovery," served as the catalyst for the presence of Africans in the Caribbean. In his goal to reach India for the discovery of riches, Columbus "stumbled" upon the fertile Caribbean region; hence, the saga of deprivation and poverty for the masses and access and wealth for a few was born. Feeling that this area would fulfill his aspirations for power and wealth, Columbus set about planning strategies with the kings of Spain and Portugal to commandeer the gold and other riches he surmised would be found in the Caribbean.

Columbus's flawed voyaging was to have a dramatic impact on the lives of the aboriginal populace of the Caribbean, the Amerindians, and the transported population, the Africans, for several hundred years into the present. While the dramatic scenario (the Caribbean region) as well as the directors and producers (colonizers) were to remain the same for hundreds of years, the actors (objects of labor and abuse) on center stage were to shift during this period from the Amerindian to the African to the East Indian as slavery evolved into another cruel system of domination, the indentured labor system.
The aboriginal populace of the Caribbean was mutilated, killed, and some groups driven into extinction as the Spanish monarchy attempted to utilize the native population to cultivate their "newfound" paradise. When Columbus and the Spanish came to the region, they encountered three distinct cultural groups: the Carib, the Ciboney (or Siboney), and the Arawak (Rogozinski 13-14). The Ciboney people dominated the northwestern regions of Cuba and Hispaniola and are still considered the most primitive of the three groups of aboriginal people based on their isolated living quarters, caves situated along the northwestern coasts of Cuba and Hispaniola. Perhaps far from primitive, they were ingenious in subverting the onslaught of enforced European civilization through a protest articulated by their retreat into caves and rock shelters. The Carib people were located in the area now known as the Lesser Antilles and parts of the Virgin Islands and Trinidad. The Arawak, the first native group the Spanish encountered, told them that they had come to the area after the Ciboney people and were warding off the Caribs, often noted for their aggressive behavior.

While most of the available research shows that these three groups spoke essentially the same language, they differed in their social and political organization and their religious beliefs. Nevertheless, the colonizers' attempts to utilize this aboriginal populace to cultivate their newly "discovered" paradise met with resistance and destruction in some cases. In the case of the Arawak, largely described as peaceful, they seemed unable to endure the harsh and cruel treatment of the colonizers and were extinct within a few years of the Spanish invasion/discovery. The Carib, however, largely characterized as warlike and fiercely competitive, fought against the colonizers and resisted attempts, often successfully, to enslave them for the economic cultivation of the Caribbean. Even though characterized by their fierce and resistant behavior, their behavior may, in fact, be
exaggerated. It is averred that the Carib were extremely friendly when the French and British first settled in the Lesser Antilles in the 1630's; apparently, they only resorted to violence after repeated attempts to enslave them by the Europeans (Rogożinski 17). When these efforts to cultivate the land by the enslavement of the Amerindians proved unsuccessful, Africans were shipped to the Caribbean Islands and subjected to a foreign plantation system during the period from 1496 to the mid-1840's. Laboring for the white European under adverse physical conditions, Africans saw much of their humanity, culture, and language dissipate before their eyes in a world not "new," but one filled with massive doses of inhumanity, displacement, suffering, and contempt for all things African.

With the abolition of slavery in the mid-1840's, the system of indentured labor ushered in a new era of disfranchisement for Portuguese, Chinese, and a disproportionate number of East Indians. By 1917, when Indian protests (in which Mahatma Gandhi joined) ended the indenture system, 340,000 laborers had been imported into British Guiana, nearly 240,000 of them from India (Reno 5). The absence of a "command" labor force throughout the Caribbean Islands in the mid-1840's established an urgent need for plantation owners to commandeer another force. While many former African slaves were willing to work for the planters, they demanded a "fair" wage of approximately 30 cents a day, which was far from a palatable arrangement for the planter. To circumvent paying the freed slaves at their requested level, the planters began seeking indentured laborers, who would work for much less, from Portugal, China, and India, with the majority of this new workforce coming from India.

While the indentured labor system as designed by the British government was a temporary five-year arrangement between laborer and the planter, the atrocities suffered
by the indentured laborers from India were often of the same magnitude as those endured by the former slaves. Clearly, the major and incomparable difference in the dilemma of the African and the East Indian was the length of dehumanization and the lack of any monetary compensation for work performed; Africans were ravaged by slavery for hundreds of years in comparison to the indentured labor system which lasted less than 100 years.

Concurrent with the emancipation of the African slave, the European mythology of the "new" African people asserted the oneness of all African people without a full understanding of the uniqueness of the black man and woman in this "new world" of the Caribbean. Europeans, in failing to move past the perception of the evolving African presence as monolithic, did not initially realize that a "different" black man and woman, the "new and culturally pluralistic native Caribbeans," were emerging from the plantation manors and fields of toil and pain. The Europeans were not fully aware that all of the people from the West African region did not share the same cultural arts, beliefs, and social and political customs. Consequently, the merging of various tribal entities in the movement through the Middle Passage to the Caribbean region brought together a group of people in a most immediate manner for survival. The African slaves, in addition to having to learn to communicate and co-exist with Africans from other tribes, were "forced" to meld their culture with that of the colonizer in forging a system of communication suitable for the marginal existence defined as slavery. In Dark Ancestor, O. R. Dathorne addresses the cultural background(s) of the African people brought to the Caribbean region and their subsequent evolution:

Before the New World Black had become aware of the varieties of European culture, he knew of the way by which his own specific indigenous culture
flourished for him independently and in relation to the cultures of other Blacks around him. This was the training school of the Middle Passage. Before, there was Africa, but no Africa existed—only a person within a group. In the slave holds he sought a compromise that would have later ramifications in the enforced adaptation of the slave shacks. He absorbed the various Black and White cultures around him and made them part of his being. (4)

This transformation of the Caribbean people will be analyzed through the poetic expressions of four Caribbean poets from the Anglophone Caribbean: Edward Brathwaite from Barbados, Claire Harris from Trinidad, Olive Senior from Jamaica, and David Dabydeen from Guyana. These poets have been selected for their revealing artistic commentary on the lives of the Caribbean people as a geopolitical community. Their poetry also provides an exposition of a recognizable though not easily defined cultural heritage. The African ancestry of the poets Brathwaite, Harris, and Senior provides the cohesion of this critical analysis; however, Dabydeen, an Indo-Caribbean, fits within the matrix of this examination of protest and prophecy due to the thematic centering of his poetry on the issues of dislocation and dispossession within the region. J. Edward Chamberlin sheds light on the semiotic relationship of these poets’ messages through an analysis of the "bonding" impact colonization had on displaced peoples:

Race and region . . . are not exactly congruent categories in the West Indies these days. Nor are they in most places around the world, though the convergence of ethnicity and nationality is increasingly obvious . . . But despite the diversity of West Indian society, and in line with Naipaul’s own conflation of African and Indian inheritances in The Middle Passages, the most powerful expressions of political coherence and cultural continuity in the West Indies have generally been
images of a heritage that belongs to blacks first of all, and is shared with others
insofar as they identify with the experience of dislocation and dispossession which
that heritage represents—whether they came from Africa by way of the Middle
Passage; or from India across the kali pani, the black water; or in the other ways
that people come to the new world to satisfy old-world wants and needs. (48)

Contrary to V. S. Naipaul's infamous statement that "nothing was created in the West
Indies," the works selected for analysis will illuminate the Anglophone Caribbean literary
canon as replete with thematic strands of exile, displacement, and colonialistic cultural
domination. The poetic offerings of Brathwaite, Harris, Senior, and Dabydeen are
illustrative of an evolutionary expansion of these themes as their messages empower, not
embitter, the Caribbean people. While their voices are often raised in protest, they
resound with prophetic messages of future gains attained through a meaningful
connection to the past. While an unmistakable European influence and grounding
pervade much of the poetry of these men and women, their poetry contains an
unmistakable and realistic connection to their African and Indian heritage. Interspersed
with the language and imagery of the colonizer is the language and imagery of "home," be
it Africa or India. Paula Burnett, editor of The Penguin Book of Caribbean Verse, offers
a catalogue of the contents of the Anglo-Caribbean poetic canon:

The Caribbean offers us a literature about the process of growth through, or in spite
of, a history of exploitation and prejudice, about the turning of negatives into
positives and the creative synthesis of ancient traditions, and is therefore relevant to
all peoples engaged in the search for forms of creative cohabitation: the assertion
of cultural self without the denial of that assertion to others, and the sharing of as
much as can be shared. Its recurrent themes are universal: the gritty celebration of
survival and the festive celebration of an inheritance of place, tongue and tradition; 
the lament for the lost and the quest for identity; the championing of faith and hope 
in the teeth of betrayal and disillusion. The poets of the English-speaking 
Caribbean have much to say to all those who care about the future, and who are 
prepared to look critically but constructively at the past. (xxiii-xxiv)

This dissertation is organized into six chapters. The introduction serves to present the 
background on the language, politics, acculturation, and identity of the Caribbean people. 
These are the primary issues that shape the poetry of the four poets from the Anglophone 
Caribbean. Chapter Two is devoted to an analysis of selected poetry from The Arrivants 
trilogy by Edward Brathwaite. The Arrivants is chosen for analysis due to its emphasis 
on the importance of both physical and metaphorical journey in the quest for selfhood and 
identity. An examination of the centrality of Africa along with Brathwaite’s employment 
of "nation language" as a unique and necessary means of conveying the African 
experience will govern the discussion. Chapter Three focuses on selected poetry from 
Claire Harris’s collections Fables From The Women’s Quarters, Translations Into Fiction, 
and Drawing Down A Daughter. These three collections of poetry focus on the centrality 
of placement and journeying in the lives of Caribbean women in their relationships with 
men. The emphasis will rest on Harris’s interest in creating a unique voice for the 
women of the Caribbean regardless of their racial or cultural background. The poetic 
selections highlight her use of fragmentation and linguistic word play which moves 
beyond modernistic conventions. Chapter Four turns to the poetry of Olive Senior with 
an emphasis on selections from her only published collection of poetry, Talking of Trees. 
Senior’s works showcase her ability to effectively synthesize the Arawak, African, and 
European influences which culminate in her presentation of Jamaican culture from both a
rural and urban perspective. Chapter Five turns to the poetry of David Dabydeen and the manner in which he presents messages of the shared protest and prophecy of all disfranchised Caribbean people with an emphasis on the East Indian experience. An analysis of the impact of British colonization on his poetry will constitute a segment of this chapter. Dabydeen’s collections *Slave Song* and *Coolie Odyssey* will provide the basis for this analysis. *Slave Song* is analyzed based on the "black" (East Indian and African) experience in the Caribbean; *Coolie Odyssey* is examined based on Dabydeen’s focus on the East Indian experience through the journey from India to Guyana to England.

Finally, Chapter Six will correlate the powerful notes of protest and prophecy sounded by these poets. This chapter reveals that at the core of endeavor of each artist is the overwhelming desire to communicate the issues of a people who gave definition to the Caribbean region through their years of hard labor, debasement, and survival. Because of colonization, a region which was viewed as a "paradise" by many of the colonizers was rendered a region of immense suffering and abuse for the "arrivants" who were brought there by force (African slaves) and those who came under the guise of better opportunities (East Indians). Many of the Africans and East Indians left the region during the period of colonial rule in search of the social, political, and economic opportunities which were denied to them based on race and culture. Brathwaite, Harris, Senior, and Dabydeen poetically address the Caribbean peoples’ management of their centuries-long, and continuing, struggle toward holistic reclamation of self and place. Edward Brathwaite, Claire Harris, Olive Senior, and David Dabydeen offer hope toward the viewing of the Caribbean region as a "Paradise" not just for tourists but a "Paradise Regained" for the "arrivants" who are the "new" indigenous peoples of the Caribbean. While these poets write to an international audience, their poetry offers hope and empowerment, in a
specific manner, for those who have remained in the Caribbean. Brathwaite, Harris, Senior, and Dabydeen also send out a message to those Caribbeans living outside of the region to make the journey back "home" to Paradise to (re)gain their social, political, and economic rights.
Chapter Two

Strength from the Past: Historical Empowerment in Brathwaite’s The Arrivants

Trapped

Butterfly
trapped in a mould
of molten steel
wings open
poised for flight
cought by more
than the matter seen
wish I knew where history been
wish I knew
where they make the fire
that melt the steel
that make the prison
to hold the butterfly
that spirits made

— Merle Collins

Edward Brathwaite was born in 1930 in Bridgetown, Barbados, enveloped by a
dominant colonial presence which permeated the lives of the Barbadians whether
consciously or subconsciously. In his quest for a higher education, Brathwaite graduated
from Harrison College and secured an Island Scholarship which led to his entry into
Cambridge in 1950. He went on to teach in Ghana between 1955 and 1962, which was to
have a profound impact on his literary output; his colonial upbringing was to be overlaid
with an intensive exploration and acknowledgment of his African ancestry.

Brathwaite is one of the most important writers to promote a scholarly approach to the
Caribbean poetic tradition with a methodical look at the importance of the oral and scribal
traditions. His poetry is written in Caribbean Creole (which Brathwaite calls "nation
language") and standard English as well as a creative mingling of the two. Based on a
series of lectures and informal talks given by Brathwaite in Mysore in the early 1980's,
Chandrabhanu Pattanayak captures the essence of Brathwaite’s evolution as a writer:
Brathwaite emerged with the generation of Caribbean writers of the ‘60s, who turned away from the British audience and British critics that had first applauded West Indian writing as a new discovery, and began to write in the Caribbean and for the Caribbean itself, with ‘styles and concerns that were not a part of the romantic vision of the Colonies.’ (61-2)

Brathwaite’s poetry is particularly evocative in that it moves the reader historically, socially, and psychologically through a world of dichotomized existence brought on by the ravages of European colonization. His poetic language moves positively in searching for self and in attempting to make sense of the past for living in the present. Brathwaite’s poetry is painfully illustrative of the double consciousness and dichotomy present in many Caribbean writers’ work.

The collections *Rights of Passage, Masks, and Islands* make up *The Arrivants: A New World Trilogy*, in this order. The publication in 1967 of Edward Brathwaite’s *Rights of Passage* was by far the most outstanding literary event in the Caribbean in the late sixties (Asein 96). *Rights of Passage* renders the trail from Africa to the Caribbean through Brathwaite’s eyes as a voyage of African disenchantment, disenfranchisement, and disillusionment in the face of European engenderment, empowerment, and entitlement. It is a dualistic story told in the "new" dualistic language which is Brathwaite’s trademark. Brathwaite’s physical, mental, and spiritual passage toward a more expansive understanding of his individual and collective African Caribbean "status" becomes much more lucid through his intricate word play. The importance of Brathwaite’s physical return to Africa informs his poetic discourse both in its content and linguistic structure.

Simon Gikandi in his essay "E.K. Brathwaite and the Poetics of the Voice: The Allegory
of History in 'Rights of Passage' clarifies the centrality of Brathwaite's sojourn in Africa upon the structure and content of his poetry:

The importance of Brathwaite's "return" to Ghana to the language and structure of his poetry has been documented by Gordon Rohlehr in his definitive study of The Arrivants: the discovery of Asante culture forced Brathwaite to reconceive or revise his own understanding of poetics, not only by enabling him to textually realize African as a precondition for what Rohlehr calls the "wholeness and self-knowledge of Afro-Caribbean man" (3) but also by endowing the poet with the knowledge that those African forms which white cultural imposition had tried to repress (worksongs, gospel, blues) were indeed valid forms which the poet could use to produce a poetics of resistance, one directed at dominant cultural practices.

(727)

To read Brathwaite's poetry is to take a historical journey: his journey toward understanding through a culturally, racially, socially, and politically complex voyage from Barbados to England (Cambridge) to Ghana back to the Caribbean (Jamaica). In the poem "Sunsum" in Masks, Brathwaite highlights the importance of a "connection" to the land of his ancestral birth through the referencing of an African custom. He explains the importance of the West African custom of burying the placenta and navel string after the birth of a child. This custom dictated that the child was not considered an inhabitant of this world until nine days had passed at which time she or he was brought out of doors and exposed to the elements. If the child lived, then it was given a name. If the child died before this period, she or he was regarded as not having been born. In Brathwaite's express need to integrate his African heritage with the Caribbean cultural tradition, he envisions a "birth" connection with his African heritage empowered by the nearness of
Ananse, the Akan spider/trickster-hero. This connection holds the same significance for him in terms of "naming" and selfhood as it holds for a newborn child:

... Some-
where under gravel
that black chord of birth
still clings to the earth's
warmth of glints, jewels' pressures, spin-
ing songs of the spider:
Kwaku Ananse who gleams
in the darkness
and captures our underground fears. (The Arrivants 148-49)

The "spade" in "Sunsum" symbolizes Brathwaite's relentless pursuit for knowledge of his ancestral place and people. As he "digs" for knowledge, the spade hits hard, unyielding stone which, "in this ghetto," temporarily hampers his understanding toward selfhood. The spade hitting the stone emphasizes the dearth of knowledge about the past that impedes the movement toward selfhood and identity:

But my spade's hope,
shattering stone,
receives dumbness back
for its echo.

Beginnings end here
in this ghetto. (149)

A plaintive note mingled with frustration is sounded as Brathwaite implores Anokye, the high priest, to provide clarification for the brutal enslavement of the Akan people:
Why did the god’s
stool you gave us,
Anokye,
not save us from pride,
foreign tribes’ bibles,
the Christian god’s hunger
eating the good of our tree;
flesh of my brother’s flesh
torn to feed ships,
profit’s sea?
too proud?
too loud
in our white teeth
of praises?
too rich?
too external?
too ready
with old ceremonial? (The Arrivants 149-150)

The "stool" is evoked as a symbol of power dating back to the end of the seventeenth century when Osei Tutu became asantehene, king of Asante. Osei Tutu was strongly influenced by the high priest, Anokye, who, according to tradition, caused a stool of gold to descend from the sky to seal the union of Asante states. The Golden Stool remains a national symbol of great importance to the Asante past and in Asante ritual.
While a clear feeling of despair permeates this poem, Brathwaite insists that the journey and the use of his tool, "the spade," must continue regardless of the difficulty inherent in treading a "pathway of stone" which represents the difficulty ("hardship") in acquiring information about the ancestral culture:

The years remain
silent: the dust learns nothing
with listening;
feet return to the stone,
pain of pathway: home-
less departer who stumbles on dark . . . (The Arrivants 148-150)

Through Brathwaite's examination of colonization and the wasted souls and bodies left in its wake, the reader is invited into the bitterness of the African Caribbean's historical journey in an effort to reclaim enough strength from a heritage that Brathwaite views as having "crack[ed] under the white gun of plunder" ("Sunsum"), to forge a new relationship with themselves and their land. Within this "cracked" heritage, however, Brathwaite suggests that there is enough enduring value and strength to fortify the present generation, a message which is pervasive in The Arrivants.

Brathwaite's work as poet, historian, educator, archivist, and essayist come together dramatically in his adept organization and presentation of the African Caribbean world view in his geographical-historical rendering of the material in his trilogy The Arrivants. It is in this collection that his poetic influences are clearly manifested. In an interview with Erika Smilowitz with The Caribbean Writer, on February 26, 1991, Brathwaite says:
The basic influence on my work came from Ghana, from talking and being exposed to the work of J. H. Nketia, director of Ghana Institute for Study of African Culture, a remarkable man; and Efua Sutherland, who started the Ghana Folk Theatre, and before that, living in the villages, hearing the drums and the festivals. That is really where my sense of rhythm came from. My influences were not literary. That’s why I had a sense of alternative. There’s no literary influence that could have given me a sense of alternative. (77-78)

In "Prelude," the opening poem of Rights of Passage, the forces of oppression and resistance exist side by side: "Drum skin whip/ lash, master sun’s/ cutting edge of/ heat, taut/surfaces of things/ I sing/ I shout/ I groan/ I dream" (4). The oppressive force of the colonizer is seen contained in a small, slender object furling out in a request for submission from the enslaved Africans. Concurrently, there is a "noisy" questioning of the reasons for their subordinate condition in the Africans’ expressive and retaliatory songs, shouts, and groans. Edouard Glissant in his essay "Free and Forced Poetics" speaks to this issue:

At the beginning was the shout--the beginning is, for us, the time when Creole was created as a means of communication between the master and his slaves. It was then that the peculiar syntax of the shout took hold. To the Antillean the word is first and foremost a sound. Noise is speech. Din is discourse.

(qtd. in Gikandi 727)

While these retaliatory "noises" take an intangible form in opposition to the fierce tangibility of the whip, these expressions are timeless sources of deep irritation for the colonizers and powerful mechanisms of sustenance for the African slaves. The African songs, shouts, groans, and dreams, largely unintelligible to the colonizers, served as
distancing mechanisms from the European power structure while simultaneously
providing an enclave of survival for the slave through a seemingly simplistic yet
startlingly sophisticated code of communication.

Yet, the resounding voice throughout Rights of Passage is unmistakably one of
pronounced and profound loss and alienation. In the movement across the water to the
area dubbed the Caribbean, Brathwaite provides a view of both the internal and the
external anguish of the African; it is as if the vast waters of the Middle Passage dissolved
the "roots" of the African experience leaving a withered stalk in the soil incapable of
growth. It is this issue of rootlessness in a symbolic context that permeates much of the
poetry in Rights of Passage. Brathwaite's use of fire, the sea, and pathways extends
beyond their denotative meanings toward expanded poetic connotations. These
references recur throughout his poetry and in the myths that surround the Akan people of
Ghana making these references "archetypal" in their ability to elicit certain and expected
emotional responses and to serve expected cultural functions. Summarily, fire, the sea,
and pathways become universal symbols of the struggle of the African people(s) in the
Caribbean.

Brathwaite's emphasis on the capacity of fire as a destructive force is highlighted
throughout the trilogy. He places an almost equal emphasis on its power as a "cleanser"
in preparing the tools ("swords and spears") for survival and preparing the ground for new
growth as illustrated in "Prelude," thereby illustrating the dual messages inherent in his
poetry:

Grant, God,
a clear release from thieves,
from robbers and from those that plot
and poison while they dip
into our dish.

Grant, too, warm fires, good
wives and grateful children.

But the too warm fire flames.
Flames burn, scorch, crack,
consume the dry leaves of the hot
house. Flames trick the seasons,
worms, our neighbors' treacheries,
our bars, our bolts, our prayers,
our dogs, our God. Flame,
that red idol, is our power's
founder: flames fashion wood; with powder,
iron. Long iron
runs to swords,
to spears, to burnished points
that stall the wild, the eyes, the whinneyings.

Flame is our god, our last defence, our peril.

Flame burns the village down. (The Arrivants 7-8)

Brathwaite captures the duality of emotion in his enslaved ancestors through the
movement between despair and hope that is seen in the poem "Tom." The use of Tom as
a persona creates the "voice-bridge" which serves as the link with the world before the
Middle Passage, Africa, and the world after the Middle Passage, the Caribbean region.
Tom's story is an intricate one full of complications, conflicts, rising and falling action,
and climaxes; yet, it is bereft of one of the essential components of any dramatic rendering: a resolution. The reader can argue that while there is no closed resolution for Tom, there is clearly an open-ended one for his children (ancestors). It is precisely this open-endedness to such an exposition of heinously inhuman affairs that defies the term resolution, in its traditional sense, to be applied to the ravages of the Middle Passage which have spawned centuries of suffering, uncertainty, and social, political, and psychological chaos. Thus, Tom’s "story" is timelessly revelatory in its presentation of the ethos of the African Caribbean people.

It is toward an identity and affinity with the culture of Africa co-mingled, however forcibly, with the new, primarily European culture that Brathwaite’s "Tom" struggles so desperately for in "All God’s Chillun":

Yes, I remember . . .
but what good
is recollection now
my own mock
me; my own seed,
ruined on this rock
of God, struggle
to strike me (The Arrivants 18)

Tom emphasizes the centrality of sugar in the lives of the slaves as he blends his mental and emotional pain borne of separation from his heritage with the physical pain which stalked the sugar cane fields. The rampant abuse of Africans to satisfy the burgeoning greed of the Europeans reached a peak in the third decade of the eighteenth century when sugar production was the main economic activity throughout most of the
Williams 22

Caribbean. Brathwaite uses the imagery from the sugar cane industry of "roots," "cart-wheels," and the "crushing" force necessary to process the cane into refined sugar to render a portrait of immeasurable cruelty and suffering:

... and what need

my story in these fields

where these cart-wheels
turn over heart

crush hard our hurt

destroy the roots of love

with pain. (The Arrivants 18)

Tom's stultifying realization of the futility of his children to initially take pride in their heritage produces a tension which distances his offspring from him and their ancestral heritage. Tom's children mock him and view him as a relic, out of touch with the "realities" of present existence:

They call me

Uncle Tom and mock me

they laugh

laugh loud

laugh loud at me

from the barrels

of their bellies

swishing loud with liquor.

They laugh and the white man laughs; each
wishing for mercy, each
fearful of mercy, teaching their children to hate
their skin to its bitter root in the bone. (The Arrivants 20)

Behind the frustration looms the omnipresent questioning of Tom as to where the solution resides for the erasure of alienation and dispossession from his children:

These my children?
God, you hear them?
What deep sin
what shattered glory?
When release
from further journey? (21)

Masks, then, is about that "further journey," a return to Africa in terms of synthesis of the past with the present rather than a holistic reclamation of a heritage that is more aptly described as denied rather than lost. Rather than losing their heritage the Africans in the Caribbean were denied the continuity of their arts, beliefs, and social and political customs. Further, for the African Caribbean people to speak of a reclamation or return to their lost heritage is to speak of an impossibility, "freeze-framing" time. The Africa from which the very first Africans were forcefully transported evolved dramatically in the 350 years of slavery in the Caribbean region. The Africa of the fifteenth or seventeenth century from which the first people were taken into slavery is not "waiting to be awoken from inside by its returning sons and daughters" (Hall 11).

Brathwaite is acutely aware of the evolution inherent in the passage of time as he takes a journey toward an illumination and understanding of his ancestors and their world.
space. In his journey to West Africa, he discovered the strength of identification with his ancestors and his primal home toward a (re) creation of the arts, beliefs, institutions, and social and political customs which would shed light on the identity of the African Caribbean people. **Masks**, the second volume in *The Arrivants* trilogy, functions as the center of this trilogy in its movement of the reader from the center (Africa) through the Middle Passage (*Rights of Passage*) to the Caribbean (*Islands*) region.


Brathwaite’s sojourn in Ghana from 1955-1962 had a dramatic effect on the poetry in *Masks*; it was in Ghana that Brathwaite received his primary understanding of traditional drum and oral poetic forms of the Akan people, a people living in parts of Ghana and the Ivory Coast. His work is a clear expression of the expansion of his poetic techniques and language to accommodate and literally embrace the aesthetics of the African oral tradition. Manifested clearly in his consistent reference to the *atumpan* drum, the reader feels the weight of Brathwaite’s personal encounter with his ancestral heritage. The drum was a principal musical instrument of the African people and yet holds massive importance in the retention and transmission of defining aspects of African culture.
Brathwaite evokes the atmosphere of "call-and-response" in the poem "Atumpan."

Within this context, the audience becomes part of the artistry as the narrator/singer solicits a response from the audience. The participation moves speaker and audience into a cohesive unit of sharing, whether of joy or pain. Brathwaite, as narrator in this poem, evokes participation from the audience (reader) as he strives to impart renewal to wounded spirits:

Odomankoma ‘Kyerema says
Odomankoma ‘Kyerema says
The Great Drummer of Odomankoma says
The Great Drummer of Odomankoma says
that he has come from sleep
that he has come from sleep
and is arising
and is arising
like akoko the cock
like akoko the cock who clucks
who crows in the morning
who crows in the morning
we are addressing you
ye re kyere wo
we are addressing you
ye re kyere wo
listen
let us succeed

listen

may we succeed . . . (The Arrivants 98-99)

This invocatory chant prepares the reader for Brathwaite’s physical journey toward a mental and spiritual understanding of the Akan people. Brathwaite achieves his impact in this section of the trilogy because he does what so many poets within the African Caribbean tradition have not: he moves beyond the concept of Africa (as home) as a construct of the imagination and presents a poetic discourse grounded in the historical and experiential. It would be a mistake to say that Masks presents a world of ancestral understanding such that the blights of reality grounded in the African Caribbean experience are erased or rendered impotent, yet the critique offered by John K. Hoppe in his essay "From Jameson to Syncretism: The Communal Imagination of American Identity in Edward Brathwaite’s The Arrivants" fails to capture the impact this collection has in charting the direction of the African Caribbean people’s colonization experience:

If "Rights of Passage" figured the internalization of the subjected and disempowered structural position of the African peoples in exile, "Masks" offers little promise of security or power based in a place--Africa. The poet moves imaginatively through the time and history of Ghana, tracing the tragic history of his people and his own inability to re-connect with the ancestral past in any material way. Even in Africa, Brathwaite indicates, his people were constricted by suffering and death; thus the hope of a return to the old ways as an escape from modern sufferings prove only illusion. (100)

These assertions concerning The Arrivants are neither novel nor encyclopedic because while any racial or cultural entity can scarcely find solutions in the past for present
conditions, it is culturally imperative to have a continuity of knowledge of one’s heritage to move toward the embracing of the "promise of security or power based in a place" which Hoppe addresses. Brathwaite powerfully asserts that travel, both metaphorically and physically, is essential in moving toward an attachment, an identity. In "Volta," travel is evoked repeatedly as painful yet necessary toward identity and community:

I am very tired, Munia. My head
aches, my feet
are weary; sometimes
the light seems to sing before my face.
My blood cries out for rest.
But still you won’t rest
you won’t give up. Can’t we
stop here? Have we
not travelled enough? (The Arrivants 107)

This poem addresses the centrality of journey for the Akan people in their epical journey from their primal home near the Red Sea evoked in the poem "Axum." Historical accounts suggest that Akan groups migrated from the north to occupy the forest and coastal areas of the south as early as the thirteenth century (Berry 83). The on-going nature of the journey, fraught with internal conflicts, is captured in the archetypal imagery of fire and water:

Ever since our city was destroyed
by dust, by fire; ever since our empire
fell through weakened thoughts, through
quarreling, I have longed for
markets again, for parks
where my people may walk
for homes where they may sleep,
for lively arenas
where they may drum and dance.
Like all of you I have loved
these things, like you
I have wanted these things.
But I have not found them yet.
I have not found them yet.
Here the land is dry, the bush
brown. No sweet water flows. (The Arrivants 107-108)

A pervasive questioning permeates Brathwaite’s encounter with his ancestry in the questioning sequence in "Volta" which bears meaning for his ancestors and for the twentieth century Caribbean people:

Can you expect us to establish houses here?
To build a nation here? Where
will the old men feed their flocks?
Where will you make your markets?
So must we march
all the time?
Walk in this thirsty sun
all the time? (108)
Brathwaite’s poetry in *Masks* is compelling in its examination of the enabling as well as the disabling aspects of his ancestral past. In Section III, "Limits," the poem "Forest" addresses the importance of remembering and temporarily detaching from remembrance for survival purposes. Memory and suspension of the same are essential for survival:

But the lips remember
temples, gods and pharaohs,
gold, silver ware; imagination
rose on wide unfolded wings.
But here in the dark,
we rest:
time to forget
the kings;
time to forget
the gods. (*The Arrivants* 113)

While the tone of displacement permeates this poem, tones of a permanent and irreversible defeat are largely missing as the poet speaks of beginnings carved out of the fragments of yesteryear in a language that simultaneously resonates with the often harsh messages of reality mingled with notes of hope. The same "forest-space" which recalls the flight and pain of capture now embraces the African people with the hope of a new beginning in the midst of the "bones, sinews, saliva, grease, and sweat." An understanding of their pain toward the goal of rebuilding is captured in the "dance":

So that with new warm arms the forest holds us.

From this womb’d heaven comes the new curled god
with goblin old man’s grinning, flat face smiling,
crouched like a frog with monkey hands and
insect fingers. This we will carve and carry
with our cooking pots, wood mud and wattle;
symbol sickness fetish for our sickness.
For man eats god, eats life, eats world, eats wickedness.
This we now know, this we digest and hold;
this gives us bones and sinews, saliva grease and sweat;
this we can shit. And that no doubt will ever hit
us, the worm's mischance defeat us, dark roots
of time move in our way to trip us; look, we dance. (The Arrivants 116)

Section IV ("The Return") and Section V ("Crossing the River") in Masks sound
notes of hope in dealing with the possible impact knowledge of the past may impart on
the journey toward identity. In the poem "The New Ships" ("The Return"), Brathwaite
skillfully employs the interrogative mood in his exploration for knowledge of his past.
The first section of the poem deals with the importance of welcome and hospitality for
African people(s) which is in dramatic contrast to the lack of welcome for those who
survived the Middle Passage to arrive in their "new world" home:

   Akwaaba they smiled
   meaning welcome
   akwaaba they called
   aye koou
   well have you walked
   have you journeyed ... (124)
The ancestors welcome their "new world" relative with a kindly but persistent questioning of his knowledge of his heritage. They ask him questions revolving around their traditions which will verify his association to them as ancestors. He is asked to take a seat on a "stool" which holds great meaning for the Akan people. For the Asante people, members of the Twi-speaking branch of the Akan people, stools functioned as symbols of chieftainship (Berry 7-8). Additionally, the "new-world" relative is implored to wash his hands, a part of ritual, in preparing to partake of food as he is asked of his memory of the defining "ingredients" of his culture:

welcome
you who have come
back a stranger
after three hundred years
welcome
here is a stool for
you; sit; do
you remember?
here is water
dip
wash your hands
are you ready
to eat?
here is plantain
here palm oil:
red, staining the fingers;
good for the heat,
for the sweat.
do
you remember? (The Arrivants 124-125)

While there is comfort in such an embracing welcome, the poet realizes the inability of his return to Africa to serve as the sole means of establishing his identity. He comes to painful terms with the recognition that there is a lack of continuity in connection to his ancestral heritage. More important, he realizes that the return to Africa, in itself, is not sufficient in the eradication of his ignorance of his heritage. Brathwaite asks a painfully pluralistic question pursuant to his relationship to others. The question becomes pluralistic rather than simplistic as he questions his relationship not only with those in Africa but with those in the Caribbean and the generations to come on both sides of the ocean. His seemingly simplistic question, therefore, becomes one laden with implications of his past, present, and future connectiveness:

I traveled to a distant town
I could not find my mother
I could not find my father
I could not hear the drum
whose ancestor am I? (125)

Brathwaite consistently uses the technique of questioning as a method of examining the issue of his heritage. In the poem "Bosompra" in Section V, "Crossing the River," the poet questions the power of an association with the ancestral past to consume the flames of dispossession and disillusion along the path to selfhood. Bosompra or "Pra" is the river marking the boundary between the Fante and the Ashanti. According to tradition,
Osei Tutu, king of Asante, was killed crossing this river. Since then the Asantehene is not supposed to cross this river.

"Bosompra" becomes a place where Brathwaite and his ancestors should avoid because it evokes painful memories of loss. He places himself on one side of the river bank and his ancestor(s) on another in a simulation of the painful separation of ancestors from one another in the massive pillaging of the continent to satisfy the economic appetites of the Europeans. The waters of the Middle Passage are recalled as Brathwaite uses sensory language which moves the reader along the journey on the tumultuous seas of the Middle Passage:

You there on the other bank, walking away
down the slope,
can you hear
can you hear me?
Cool river water
can you soothe
the wind’s salt
scorching my eye,
blue finger of water,
heat’s solace? (The Arrivants 136)

Brathwaite uses alliteration powerfully with an emphasis on the "s" throughout "Bosompra" to suggest a silencing of the African people as they were torn from one another with no hope of communicating with one another again. The "s" further emphasizes the silencing brought on through separation by means of the sea:
Can you hide me now
from the path's hopeless dazzles, halts,
meetings, leaves' sudden
betrayal of silence, the sun's
long slant sloping
to danger? (The Arrivants 136)

While much of the mood in Masks is one of uncertainty, the final section of Masks culminates at dawn with the theme of hopefulness and possibility which is symbolically linked to the beginning of each day. While the return to Africa is not a panacea for the African Caribbean, it is one that provides a vital link in the chain toward wholeness. The poet cautiously and "slowly" approaches the knowledge of his ancestral past in terms of integration with his present in his journey "back" to the Caribbean. In "The Awakening," Brathwaite invokes Asase Yaa, the Akan Earth Goddess, as he begins the journey from his ancestral home to the only home he has ever known, the Caribbean:

Asase Yaa, Earth,
if I am going away now,
you must help me . . . (The Arrivants 156)

Brathwaite calls on the power of the Odomankoma 'Kyerema, the Creator's (Sky-God-Creator) drummer, to assist him should he ever get "lost" again on the "dark path" which represents his former lack of continuity to his heritage:

Divine Drummer,

'Kyerema,

if time sends me
walking that dark path again, you must help me.
If I sleep, you must knock me awake ... (The Arrivants 156)

Brathwaite uses akoko, the cock, to symbolize the behavior he must exhibit to successfully blend knowledge of his heritage with the reality of his life in the Caribbean. He must learn to integrate the necessary elements of the past with those of the present for successful living into the future. He must perform like the cock as he "akoko bon anopa" (the cock crows in the early dawn) and "akoko tua bon" (the cock rises and crows). He must not be stagnant; he must use his knowledge of his heritage to make his life richer; he must not fail:

I will rise
and stand on my feet
slowly slowly
ever so slowly
I will rise
and stand on my feet
like akoko the cock
like akoko the cock
who cries
who cries in the morning

akoko bon 'opa
Williams 36

*akoko tua bon*

I am learning
let me succeed
I am learning
let me succeed . . . ([The Arrivants](#) 156-157)

In *Islands*, the final section of *The Arrivants*, the poet returns the reader to the Caribbean region. The tone of the poetry is one which is informed by the "return" journey, the return to Africa and the passage back home. For while Africa is the primal base for the African Caribbean, coming "home" refers, unmistakably, to the Caribbean. It is in this section that reality and myth come face-to-face, resulting in a reckoning of sorts as to the dualistic, even pluralistic, heritage of the African Caribbean people. Mark A. McWatt contends:

Although *Islands* seems to suggest a return to the West Indies, the island landscape is suffused with the presence of African deities and folk memories, as the very names of some of the individual poems suggest: "Legba," "Ogun," "Negus," "Veve," "Ancestor." The atmosphere of the poem is a kind of imaginative double-exposure, where the rich and haunting historical suggestiveness is superimposed upon the barren landscape and people; it is a creative juxtaposition of themes and perspectives that infinitely enriches the reader’s sensitivity to, and awareness of, the total "myth" of West Indian man. (61)

The impact of this geographical-historical journey on the poet’s present state in the islands is thrust upon the reader through an inversion of the colonial language which serves as a protest against the linguistic forms the African on the Caribbean shores had to integrate with their native languages. To complicate matters, this so-called integration
was not a systematic one in terms of teaching the Africans the Europeans’ language, but an "on-the-job" synthesis created out of sheer necessity. *Islands*, then, is the part of *The Arrivants* that announces the "newness" that must work within as well as against the parameters of the existing culture(s) of the African peoples.

This integration is illustrated masterfully in the section of *Islands* entitled "Limbo" in a poem that deals with the devastation of a mother and her children by separation brought on by colonization. Brathwaite "toys" with the language in a manner similar to the movement of child’s play as the playground instrument, the seesaw, is used metaphorically in the poem, "The Cracked Mother." The images of a mother’s children being taken away from her into bondage is suggested by the up and down motion of the seesaw which powerfully evokes the rolling motion of the sea of the Middle Passage. Other children frolicking in a park on a seesaw prove to be disturbing as they remind the mother of her children riding the "seesaw" sea, hence the "cracked mother":

See?
She saw
the sea
come
up go down
school children
summer-
saulting in the park.
See?
Saw
what on the sea
water?

Some-

thing floating? (The Arrivants 181)

Brathwaite's "cracked mother" speaks about the "beads" offered as currency for her children as she watches them leave her for their new "mother" (Britain/colonizer) who will "teach them [her] ways" with no respect for their cultural heritage:

See:

here are your

beads: I saw

you take

my children.

Bless

them, mother;

teach

t them your

ways.

See?

She saw

the children

summer-
saulting in the

sea. (The Arrivants 181-182)

The "Cracked Mother" also alludes to the primal "education" of the African Caribbean in terms of dominant and subordinate status. Additionally, it is painfully illustrative of an
unmistakable colonial influence, yet the "see/saw" also suggests an attempt by the African Caribbean people to synthesize the necessary elements of the colonial tradition with the ingrained elements of the African tradition. J. Edward Chamberlin in *Come Back To Me My Language: Poetry and the West Indies* offers his perspective on "The Cracked Mother":

This passage returns not only to the roots of West Indian experience—the destruction of the aboriginal tribes and their replacement by African slaves and their European masters—but also to the roots of West Indian education. "I see a ship on the sea" is the first sentence of a standard text in West Indian elementary schools, J. O. Cutteridge's primer for beginning readers. It is also Caonoba's first lesson in Caribbean history, and the one her cracked mother cannot get out of her mind. The phrase "see/saw" brings together the present and the past, as well as the roles of the poet as both seer and sayer. It also establishes a grim image of a "divided child," playing on a see-saw. (187)

Brathwaite's poem "Caliban," also in *Islands*, blends the contemporary with the historical, making the seemingly trivial dance, the limbo, a tour de force. Brathwaite poetically equates the confining spaces below the decks in the ships of the Middle Passage with the restrictions involved in performing the limbo. While this dance of supreme physical agility is equated with the physically confining horrors of crowding on the ships of misery and mercantilism of the Middle Passage, more important, Brathwaite equates this dance, the "limbo," with the endurance of the survivors in "coming up" on the dry shores of the Caribbean out of the vast waters of the Middle Passage:

sun coming up

and the drummers are praising me
out of the dark
and the dumb gods are raising me
up
up
up
and the music is saving me
hot
slow
step
on the burning ground.  (The Arrivants 195)

The poetry in Islands is defined by the central presence of African deities which underscore Brathwaite’s conviction that an understanding and affinity for the ancestral way of life blended with the necessary elements of the "new" world are mandatory on the journey to selfhood. "Jah" which opens "New World," in Islands, presents the differing perspectives, African and Western, of God. Little solace can be found in this poem, however, for an unquestionable omnipotence of either the Western God or African deities. Brathwaite views the Western God as flawed, a commercial construct that confines rather than nurtures the spirit:

God is glass with his type-
writer teeth, gospel
jumps and pings off the white
paper, higher and higher . . . (162)

The impact of the god(s) of the African people(s) in the "new world" is presented as similarly impotent due to the failure of African Caribbeans to journey to the past,
spiritually as well as physically, (as Brathwaite so urgently insists) toward a primal understanding. In "Jah," the Akan spider/trickster-hero, Ananse, is reduced in stature content to peep "over the hills with sunrise" and "to spin webs in the trees" (164); Ogun, the Yoruba god of war and creativity, is rendered silent as a voiceless volcano whose red eyes are shut tight to surrounding conditions. Similar to the Western god of glass and steel, Ananse and Ogun, portray a scenario of dormancy. Even the libations offered to the African gods are ineffective due to the inability of the people(s) of African descent to remember toward empowerment:

The gods have been forgotten or hidden.

A prayer poured on the ground with water,

with rum, will not bid them come

back. Creation has burned to a spider.

It peeps over the hills with the sunrise

but prefers to spin webs in the trees. (The Arrivants 164)

In Section III of Islands, "Rebellion," in the poem "Negus" Brathwaite returns to the centrality of the power of the "word" in the movement from hopelessness and rootlessness toward identification. Brathwaite clearly views language as a source of redemption; his poetry suggests that a person’s language is the conduit to a true expression which is unfettered by another culture’s linguistic conventions. Brathwaite goes further to remind the "dominant" power structures about the true meaning of freedom in sounding a prophetic note in "Rebellion" suggesting that the terms of the "freedom contract" require revision:

it is not enough

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? (The Arrivants 222)

Brathwaite highlights the removal of language as one of the most serious elements of
conquest and disfranchisement. Brathwaite’s recognition of the duality of the African
Caribbean people is articulated in his insistence in "Negus" upon a means of
communication unique to his people which is capable of expressing their responses to
their present life. In terms of such an expression, he moves as close as possible to a
means of "insuring" a link with the past which is capable of synthesizing past and present
toward a more lucid future. While Brathwaite articulates in the first person, in doing so,
he captures the pervasive feelings of people of African descent:

I
must be given words to shape my name
to the syllables of trees
I
must be given words to refashion futures
like a healer’s hand
I

must be given words so that the bees
in my blood’s buzzing brain of memory
will make flowers, will make flocks of birds,
will make sky, will make heaven,
the heaven open to the thunder-stone and the volcano and the un-
folding land. (The Arrivants 223-224)

In his essay "The Phenomenon of Recognition: The African Ideal in the Caribbean

Text," Joseph Kubayanda addresses the importance of the "word" to Brathwaite:

Language makes self-rehumanization possible; indeed, Brathwaite employs
"Nation language" to this effect. Nation language is a discursive practice "more
closely allied to the African aspect of experience in the Caribbean"; in poetry, it
emphasizes the absence of the traditional English pentameter . . .

It is significant to note, then, that nation language in . . . poems by Brathwaite,
in effect, promotes freedom of expression for the Caribbean writer, liberates
language itself by creating a new metrical system, and allows the Black agent to
pursue an undercover history and enunciate a sub-text of counter-discourse.

(181-182)

For Brathwaite, the importance of language is intertwined with religion as he
examines the power of the African deities in the Caribbean. In "Veve," Legba, the
African-Haitian god of gateways and of the crossroads, provides a bridge between man
and god toward the hope of a brighter future. The past meets the present head-on as
Legba appears in disguise as a peasant reminiscent of Ogun, also known as the patron god
of farmers. Brathwaite makes a dual reference as he presents the "Word" as an African
"god" in much the same manner as the Western world views Christ as the "Word" made flesh. In so doing, Brathwaite emphasizes the importance, in a dual sense, of the African Caribbean’s own language and religion on the journey to selfhood and sense of home:

For on this ground
trampled with the bull’s swathe of whips
where the slave at the crossroads was a red anthill
eaten by moonbeams, by the holy ghosts
of his wounds
the Word becomes
again a god and walks among us;
look, here are his rags,
here is his crutch and his satchel
of dreams; here is his hoe and his rude implements
on this ground
on this broken ground. (The Arrivants 265-266)

Brathwaite extends the importance of the ancestral religion for African Caribbean people through his use of one of the symbols, veve, from the vodoun ceremony. Veve refers to the symbolic drawing made on the ground by the priest at the beginning of the vodoun ceremony suggestive of the incorporation of the African deities into the lives of African Caribbeans. The god Legba, with his "hoe and rude implements," offers the possibility of growth through the cultivation of the "broken ground" which is symbolic of the broken spirits and fragmented identities of many African Caribbeans. As the Dahomean-Haitian god of the gateway, Legba serves as the essential link between man and the other gods, hence, his invocation at the beginning of the vodoun ceremony.
Legba's satchel of dreams must not be mistaken as a symbol from a fairy tale but viewed as a symbol of a realistic projection of a "satchel of limitless possibilities" for the African Caribbeans seeking to successfully incorporate the past with the present.

The final poem of the trilogy, *The Arrivants*, "Jou'vert," clings, however tenuously, to the importance of incorporating the arts, beliefs, institutions, and social and political customs of the African past with the "newness" of the present. Brathwaite's poetry prophetically suggests that such a fusion is essential for African Caribbeans in their quest for a future which encompasses an identifiable heritage. He offers immense hope that out of the "shattered" yesterdays there is yet salvageable material for the creation of "something torn and new":

as the ping-pong
dawn comes
riding
over shattered homes
and furrows
over fields
and musty ghettos
over men now
hearing
waiting
watching
in the Lent-
en morning
hurts for-
gotten, hearts
no longer bound
to black and bitter
ashes in the ground
now waking
making
making
with their
rhythms some-
thing torn
and new . . . (The Arrivants 269-270)

The Arrivants is illustrative of the importance of the "cycle" to Brathwaite in terms of centering the self in the present through a look to the past. Such an integration of past and present, Brathwaite contends, will assist toward a successful shaping of the future of Caribbean people. While messages of disfranchisement and disillusionment form the foundation of Brathwaite's poetic discourse, he does not linger in a chasm of despair. In his cyclical journeying in The Arrivants, Brathwaite emphasizes the importance of the temporary movement away from his "new world" home (the Caribbean) to his ancestral foundation (Africa) back to his birth-home (the Caribbean) with a renewed sense of placement and belonging. Such a placement, Brathwaite suggests prophetically, assists in the movement toward selfhood and identity. Consequently, Brathwaite's messages are "hopefully" empowering--just measures away from a promise of a richer future.
Chapter Three

Claire Harris: The Poetic Shape of Women’s Words

Words

(for his estranged wife)

Everything revolved at first, then settled
to an elate stillness.
You move, pristine through memory,
a stranger I have always known,
big-boned and careless and capable,
likelier than I was to stand than run,
pursued now by two dreamless daughters.

The only people in the world
you could never outface or outwait!
I know this is inappropriate,
that these lines, splaying, miss the ground
where you dream, a distracted, vague tree
or felon for her freedom,
and think that there must be ways to give
back what you gave.
But the sentence stands. We never found
words in which we could both live.

__Wayne Brown

Born in 1939 in Trinidad, Harris has had a diverse education having studied English, education, and communications at universities in Ireland, Jamaica, and Lagos. Claire Harris, like Edward K. Brathwaite, makes a journey back to Africa which she contends changed the shape of her writing, yet the primary reason for her journey differs dramatically from Brathwaite’s. In Harris’s movement away from her birth-home (the Caribbean) to her ancestral home (Africa), Harris realizes that exploration and discovery toward selfhood need not culminate in the physical journey alone. She insists that her spiritual and physical placement is firmly in the Caribbean and that the physical return to Africa presented her, primarily, with an opportunity to associate with and to understand her ancestors in another land. In the prefatory note to her first published poem "Seen in Stormlight," in Fables From The Women’s Quarters, Harris attempts to explain:
I did not go to Africa looking for my "roots." These are very deeply embedded in the black earth of the West Indies. But my much maligned ancestors came from Africa. I wanted to stand where they might have stood. I did. This poem is included here because it is important to me. It was the first long poem I wrote. The first poem I published. It was published in ODUMA, a literary magazine edited by the English Department of the University of Lagos, in 1975, after J.P. Clarke looked it over, shrugged and said, "Well, you might as well begin ..." So I did. (43)

The poem, written just before the fall of General Gowon in Nigeria, evokes a tension created out of the pre-coup atmosphere which permeated the lives of the Nigerian people. The placement of Harris's words on the page in expressing this time of tense uncertainty suggests a grasping at hope in an effort to avoid a sliding down into ruin. Women and children are depicted at the center of this uncertainty; however, their presence is one of promise with women as creators and children as (re)generators of the future:

But grip slipping
claws slither
down slidin
slow scrawls on bored walls
In spite of stabbing
of frantic scrabbling
with pincers broken
back to the muck and slime
so under thunder
And children curve dream smiles
or else cry

at the hyena gnawing inside

Women suckling life in struggle

dream earth a new race

in spite of thunder--
or else dream ease and grace

this

where the shrines of the tribes

are broken in the rain

and the shards are

scattered

emblems of God pain (Fables 51)

While her physical movement to Africa permeates a great deal of Harris’s poetry, the issue of reclamation of self is perhaps most powerfully manifested when she writes about the tensions that inform the lives of women and their common bonds, or the lack thereof. In Harris’s poem "Framed," the narrator explores her feelings of a heritage she ignored which resulted in a diminished sense of self. Her refusal to effectively synthesize her colonial education with the Trinidadian culture creates the dichotomy which she addresses. Ironically, the narrator shares this intimate slice of her life with a tourist, someone who does not understand or care, who shops hastily for a visual remembrance of an island vacation:

She is in your painting
the one you bought when the taxi
snarled in market lines
you jumped out and grabbed a
picture of stilted wooden houses against the vivid island
even then there was recognition

She is the woman in a broken pair of men's shoes       her
flesh slipped down like old socks around her ankles   a tray
of laundry on her head    I am there too       but I would not
be like her               At supper she set the one plate and the whole
cup at my place            for herself a mug a bowl my leavings . . .
they said I resembled her   I spent hours before the mirror
training myself to different lines
At night while I read     she folded the blanket on her
narrow board          coalfire smooth on her face       She boiled
scrubbed     ironed       the musk of soap and others soil like
a mist around her head   often she dreamed       I would have
a maid       like her     she laughed       I studied harder and harder
she grieved      I was grown a woman     I was grown (Burnett 278)

Despite her initial retreat from the knowledge of "self," Harris's narrator realizes the
inability to "escape" from one's primacy in her poignant coming to terms with the
importance of her mother's teachings in her development as a young woman:

For the calling       her eroded hands        cupped like a chalice
she offered me the blasted world as if to say     This is our
sacrament drink     I would not       this is all there is       I
could not           I left school       I left       she faded       the
island faded       styles changed      you hid the dusty
painting in the attic        But I am still there the one in the
While she has tried to escape from her heritage by fading into the "lines of soft white," the young woman realizes, perhaps in time to salvage her life toward selfhood, the futility of allowing absorption by others (the colonizers) without retention and knowledge of her ancestry. She finds, in the final analysis, that she has too long existed in "the middle ground" (between colonialism and her Trinidadian culture) yearning for direction.

As a distinctly non-traditional voice in the growing community of Caribbean writers from the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago, Harris’s unique manipulation of language presents a challenge to potential critics not only in the manner she uses words to express limits as well as limitlessness but also in the manner in which she places words onto a blank "page/canvas". In doing so, Harris makes an effort to appropriate the language of her colonial upbringing to accommodate her life which is a blend of African and Caribbean traditions. Additionally, her non-traditional hyphenation of words is a protest against the linguistic bondage of African people. In the essay "After Modernism: Alternative Voices in the Writings of Dionne Brand, Claire Harris, and Marlene Philip," Lynette Hunter focuses on Claire Harris’s poetic ability to create language which adequately conveys the feelings of Caribbean people:

In her essay "Poets in Limbo," ... she talks about the educational background of the Caribbean, here specifically Trinidadian, writing in English. She talks about the educational indoctrination that students in Trinidad experience, an indoctrination into Western European language, culture, and tradition: "We learnt English folk songs, put on by Gilbert and Sullivan. British gym mistresses taught us Morris dancing among other survival skills." The pupils
were also forced to learn huge quantities of English literature by rote—
Chaucer, Wordsworth, Arnold—and the oral folklore "saved our imaginations."
"We remain," she suggests, "poets whose sense of the art is essentially rooted in the English tradition. When we turn away, that is what we turn away from.
What we turn to we have essentially to make ourselves."  (259)

Consequently, Harris attempts to fashion from the colonial language a discourse which adequately expresses the truth of women’s lives in a manner which simultaneously empowers women and avoids belittling men. In doing so, Harris moves toward the complex goal of Wayne Brown in "Words" to find "words in which we could both live."

It is no secret that the critical response to the literary offerings of Caribbean women writers is, in the twentieth century, still deficient. While the literature of Caribbean women is relatively new in terms of its "consumption" by audiences outside their immediate communities, it is a literature no less important in the revelation of the ethos of the Caribbean than that of the male Caribbean writer. Carole Boyce Davies and Elaine Savory Fido contend:

The Caribbean woman’s text is now being (re)written and in witnessing a literature in the process of becoming, the participating critic can only make tentative statements, mark and observe as she attempts to understand a literature in the process of unfolding. The critic must struggle as well to find an appropriate critical voice, wading through the various critical discourses, to carry her observations.  (2)

Harris experiments with the English language in creating an innovative voice which speaks to the issues affecting women’s lives. While these issues such as human rights, racial discrimination, education, and career opportunities are similar to those affecting Caribbean men, Harris gives voice to women’s ways of seeing and responding as
expressed in "women-speech" or, more simplistically, women's words. Carole Boyce Davies and Elaine Savory Fido address the issue of the Caribbean woman's voice and the paucity of critical commentary on the works of Caribbean women writers like Claire Harris:

The concept of voicelessness necessarily informs any discussion of Caribbean women and literature. It is a crucial consideration because it is out of this voicelessness and consequent absence that an understanding of our creativity in written expression emerges. By voicelessness, we mean the historical absence of the woman writer's text: the absence of a specifically female position on major issues such as slavery, colonialism, decolonization, women's rights and more direct social and cultural issues. By voicelessness we also mean silence; the inability to express a position in the language of the "master" as well as the textual construction of woman as silent. Voicelessness also denotes articulation that goes unheard. (1)

Harris's linguistic techniques toward the development of a voice which demands attention require involvement by the reader on a dual semiotic level to reveal the meaning that often lies between the spaces on the page as well as within the words she arranges artistically. Her 1984 collection Fables From The Women's Quarters moves the reader into a metaphoric space which is crowded with the hopes, fears, aspirations, and experiences of the Caribbean woman. In the quasi-narrative poem "Nude on a Pale Staircase," the reader is given fragments of the story of a once young and frightened East Indian woman who sacrifices her ties to her family in order to survive the brutality of a massacre. The spacing of the words on Harris's "page/canvas" suggests the lack of
continuity the woman is now experiencing with her family, her land, and all else that signifies selfhood:

Afterwards she floats clear waits for the first soft changes of January light
to toll her to the strangling boredom of this solitary woman’s life she
thinks idly of family compounds susurrus of saris and barefeet
clanging of plots charcoal fires stringy dogs and curries all the
busy folk music of feuds and flies lit by passionate particular friendships

The sudden radio hauls her to alarm *Massacres in Assam* from her
cold hood a memory of blue bottles encrust swollen lips the mad
thunder of an ancient jeep ruts the dirt roads small stones fly the
sludge in the ditch the leaves quiver in a miasma of such fear that even
today here safe her throat fills The voice slides from disaster to
music as soothing as a lollipop while her secret self crashes against
these cliffs she clings nude rides this pale staircase the house collapsing
around her though it would have happened whether she had stayed to
watch or not (Fables 12)

While Harris is a Caribbean of African descent, "Nude on a Pale Staircase" looks at

the issue of woman’s survival across racial and cultural boundaries. While Caribbeans of

African and East Indian descent have long maintained recognizable distances as a result

of the clever manipulation of the colonizers in the divisive implementation of slavery and,

later, indentured labor, Harris does not focus on these distances.

Harris presents the "pale staircase" as the white male power structure that invariably is

mounted, clung to, and ridden, whether temporarily or permanently, in what amounts to

an imitation of survival for all Caribbean women. As she grows older this young East
Indian woman realizes the futility of hiding as "... she retreats to the soft white pillows veils her mouth with the/ sheet/ She herself has given him this right who ignored the centuries'/ hollow voice in favor of youth’s ache of the secret singleminded self open-/ ing . . ." (Fables 14).

The woman’s retreat into the white pillows suggests an effort to "veil" the memories of her ancestry in a physical manner which she is incapable of achieving mentally and emotionally in her "uprooted" state as she becomes his, "the pale staircase’s," creation. The "veil" also functions as a connection to her ancestral heritage despite an appearance of being consumed by Europeanism/"the pale staircase." Yet, there is a complexity and duality involved in operating within this veil; the young woman looks through the veil "cloudily" at a world which refuses to acknowledge her relevance and self-consciousness:

She knows
he does not
see her
not as he used to
naked
in the eyes of
others
their rush of kindness
bitter
as herbs    Uprooted
dry pressed
between the pages of his
culture
the rough cut of her
foreignness
is faded to nuance
he approves (Fables 17)

While women's sense of self in a world of male and colonial domination are major thematic departures for Harris, she also scrutinizes these issues further to examine the proliferation of racism and sexual abuse in Caribbean society. A particularly poignant poem, "Policeman Cleared in Jaywalking Case," crosses time and space in its reference to a newspaper article in the Edmonton Journal (Canada) which tells of a city police officer being cleared of any malfeasance in the arrest of a juvenile girl for jaywalking. While the narrator does not explicitly say that the officer is white and she is black, such is implied from the reference to the African tradition of signifying. According to the Edmonton Journal, the young girl is arrested, strip-searched, and jailed in the adult detention center. Reading the article causes the narrator to remember, twenty years earlier, the violation of her rights as a young woman in a startlingly similar manner. The narrator, unlike the young black Canadian female discussed in the newspaper article, survive[d] to be "released with a smile" (39). Yet, the narrator cannot stand mute; she is impelled by the urgency of immediate identification with the devices of racism to "signify," which to those of African heritage means to share through intimate knowledge of the same experience:

Look you, child, I signify three hundred years in swarm around me
this thing I must this uneasy thing myself to the other stripped
down to skin and sex to stand to stand and say to stand and say
before you all the child was black and female and therefore mine . . . (38)
The narrator’s plaintive voice erupts as it separates the events of [to]day and [yester]day (signifying the timelessness of racial and sexual abuse) into "white works" and "other works" with "white" representing subject and "other" representing object:

Observe now this harsh world full of white works or so you see us and it is white white washed male and dangerous even to you full of white fire white heavens white words and it swings in small circles around you so you see it and here I stand black and female bright black on the edge of this white world and I will not blend in nor will I fade into the midget shades peopling your dream . . . (Fables 38)

The narrator ends her signification on a paradoxical note which suggests a life of duality. She presents an image of herself as central, “bright black,” in a world that refuses to acknowledge her presence. She, in turn, refuses to fade into "midget shades" or a dull black in her defiance of the abusive world of "white works." Ending on a prophetic note, the narrator speaks of how easy it is for blacks to become consumed by the white power structure. Without a spiritual return to the ancestral tradition of signifying against racism and sexual abuse, the narrator expresses uncertainty about a positive change:

Even I fear the ease you make of living this stolen land all its graceful seductions but I fear most myself how easy to drown in your world dead believe myself living Who stands ‘other’ and vulnerable to your soul’s disease

Look you child, I signify (41)

Harris’s response is one which is informed by colonialism; however, the language she uses to protest against the ravages of colonialism is necessarily (re)formed to more adequately posit the African-Caribbean concerns in a new "subjectified" language.
In this respect, Harris’s poetry both embraces and moves beyond modernistic strategies in her "bending" the language to convey the emotions of the Caribbean people. Simon Gikandi in his discussion of colonialism and modernism in literature clarifies the duality present in the Caribbean writers’ texts:

For Caribbean peoples . . . "re-sounding" away from slavery and colonisation demanded a certain reconceptualization of the colonial language and its ideological terrain. The result was a creole culture that according to Patrick Taylor "enabled peoples disrupted by the slave trade to recreate themselves, to distance themselves from those who tried to control their minds." Modern Caribbean writers are framed by this creole culture on one side and the colonial episteme on the other side. (Writing 12)

Harris highlights the necessity of creating a language capable of expressing the experience of the Caribbean people in her poem "A Black Reading" in the collection Translation Into Fiction. She addresses the limitations of the colonial language in expressing the experience of the African-Caribbean people with an emphasis on the need to have names and words which address the differences which inform the lives of the people of African descent living in the Caribbean. A language created by people who enslave others is viewed as inappropriate and inadequate for those breaking the bonds of enslavement. Harris expresses a need to have words that will address the "movement" from bondage into a "long Arabian stride" on the way to "the black truth":

I dream of a new naming

new words new lines

shaping a new world

I ride it
as at a durbar
barelegged through wide fields
of baobab soaring in the wash
of midnight
I am real
when my long
Arabian stride breaks through
daylight I cling to the black
truth race
bareback towards the light
dream hooves churning
the yellow lies
I make anew the shape of things (Translation 35)

Harris explains that while her attempts to shape the "master" language to adequately express the ethos of black life have not eradicated the problems associated with limited expression, the problems are beginning to "slip a little." She describes the colonial power structure as "a molten mask, three hundred years nightmares, and straightjackets" that are beginning to lose their hold on the language of the black people in the Caribbean. Thus, Harris’s narrator in "A Black Reading" insists that word crafting is vital to life:

In the end
this life is shared
with the lidless eyes
of dreams bones of fact
shells of words
and yet
this molten mask
these three hundred years
nightmares
straightjackets
slip a little
as I insist
on my small particular dance
dark
I move into the enormous dusk
my hands held out
to catch the actual names of things (Translation 36)

Harris's unique manipulation of language and her spatial artistry in placing words on a page may be initially viewed as stemming from the conventions of modernism; however, Harris extends the "conventions" of modernity through her "inventions" in a manner which is distinctly postmodern. Harris's poetry clearly breaks from the traditional use of the "comfortable" English pentameter while it simultaneously embraces innovative techniques to artfully and realistically incorporate the language, history, and culture unique to Caribbeans of African descent. In his essay "The Phenomenon of Recognition: The African Ideal in the Caribbean Text," Josaphat Kubayanda refers to the "superiority of colonial discourse" which "erects and maintains typical binary structures" as the defining elements of European modernism which since its beginning, with Columbus's entry into the "New World," has "consistently represented the African and Caribbean difference as the absolute antithesis to tradition" (176-77). Harris inverts this hierarchy
through syntactical and semantical inversions. In her collection *Drawing Down A Daughter* the issue of language is discussed as the pregnant narrator seeks to tell her unborn child of the strictures of the English language. Living in Canada, the mother laments the fact that despite her geographic location, it appears that she will be unable to offer her daughter a world "unsullied" by the language of the colonizers due to the widespread use of English:

    Daughter there is no language
    I can offer you no corner that is
    yours unsullied
    you inherit the intransitive
    case Anglo-Saxon noun *(Drawing 24)*

While there are *at least* two cultures that will form the unborn child’s heritage, it becomes clear to the mother that one, the colonizer’s, will reign dominant in terms of societal acceptance. While she is realistic in not seeing any immediate change to this situation, the mother implores, in writing, her unborn child to do as she has not done: insist upon the articulation and perpetuation, the subjectivity, of her words and their meanings as well as accepting the words of the "other." Harris, thereby, emphasizes the importance of "black things" in juxtaposition to "white things":

    she thinks of Africa
    she should have insisted on Yoruba Not given in to the
    angry gaze the wanting to be rid of this North American
    threatening to squeeze herself into his ancient space
    did he fear her lilt
    that she would have taken over his
language made it chip
to the beat of calypso (Drawing 24)

The narrator/mother searches painfully for a weapon against the language/power of the
dominant structure in an effort to imbue her unborn daughter with hope and resolve, yet
she finds herself deficient as she realizes her lack of identification with that which spells
cultural heritage toward selfhood:

a woman without forest gods without red earth or sullen
rivers without shame or any tongue to exchange for his
harsh imperatives the quick curd of consonants (25)

It is here that the familiar techniques of poetic modernism are extended as Harris
moves beyond simple word play to incorporate the burgeoning centrality of language and
placement/grounding toward a true social, cultural, and political representation of the
African Caribbean. She emphasizes the centrality of language in the perpetuation of a
culture’s value system. Josaphat Kubayanda, like Claire Harris, addresses this issue from
the standpoint of Africa as imaginative or realistic construct in the writing of African
Caribbeans. He emphasizes the necessity of connection to Africa for the continuity of
expression:

Africa, whether as a utopian core or a reality, in part provides the base upon
which to build a new episteme (knowledge as power structure) because it has its
own value systems, its own languages and modes of expression, in short the
symbols of its own culture which it recognizes. However deformed or transformed
those symbols have been in the Americas, they have nevertheless generated an
anchor for the African diaspora where Eurocentric discourses have principally
fostered dominance and subjugation . . . The self uses language to relate to the other, to "discover" the other, to establish or destroy its identity and integrity.

(Kubayanda 179-80)

While Harris continues to place emphasis on the "power of the word" in her collection Translation Into Fiction, much of the poetry revolves around issues of antithesis whether from a racial, gender, age, social, or political perspective. While Harris uses the "word" to posit oppositions, she does more with her "word-brush" as she "paints" the page in making her statement literally and visually. Harris's poem "By thy senses sent forth/go right to the rim of thy longing give Me garment," is a remarkable synthesis of traditional, modern, and postmodern literary techniques. In crafting such a poem, Harris informs the reader of the impossibility of telling the pluralistic African Caribbean story from one perspective. The poem implicitly asserts that the reality of the lives of the African Caribbean people cannot be reduced to one simplistic formula because of the melding of the Africanism and colonialism which "create" the African-Caribbeanism. Her technique of spatial fragmentation is indicative of the anxiety of the African Caribbean people in having to relate their experiences in the words of the colonizer who has largely defined the parameters of history, culture, and social and political discourse. Harris's "By thy senses sent forth . . . " emerges as a poetic counter-discourse within such inhibitably defining parameters as she separates the poetry into "strips" on the page suggestive of the various layers of experience which characterize the African Caribbean experience:

_Awakened_

_by a touch_

_or a rush of wind_

_spreadeagled_
in the red light
flaring
through the corn
she lifted her head
to find herself
skewered
on the One Eye
of God
a quiet
so intense
it was the absence
of sound
eventually
the color faded
darkness
seeped from
the western sky
And she ran
transfigured on the braid rug
swiftly
in that hot wooden room
cautiously
through the corn
home to hide
a spatter of rain
dodging
Through the kitchen window
she saw that the tropical sun
had begun to face
the children’s hour was over
"think" she said

the Bible closed in her hand
"think of the cool benediction of snow"
and seeing bright inquiry on their faces
"a down a sort of icy down billions of feathers"
her footsteps and felt a fleeting pity

He worked alone His green face tho' knotting into righ-
teousness still smiled easily He refused to acknowledge the
heat the rains the wild tropical growing Even as he laughed
about her open fear of giving birth alone (the baby and her
entrails in a stream of blood he taking her intestines in his
curling fingers to put them back) It had not happened except
in dreams And she still feared . . . (Translations 13-14)

Harris presents her concerns in three "layers" by the use of parallel and interwoven
columns of complementary poetic discourse. In so doing, she suggests that her concerns,
of a pluralistically complex nature, require a juxtaposition of linguistic forms, or more
appropriately, a synthesis of linguistic forms to access her concerns. She moves the
reader in and out of three "worlds" of thought as she deals with her separation from the
Caribbean, her lover, and her "Africanness" in her new Canadian home. Lynette Hunter
offers an additional critique on Harris's fragmentary poetics in this poem:

In "By thy senses sent forth . . ." the writer chooses to present a three-strand
narrative emerging in typographic form as fragmented prose on the left opening,
and two strips of poetry on the right. The right opening is composed of modernist
verse, often mythically allusive, in italics and ranged to the left margin; it is
opposed by shorter, metaphorically, more intense rhythms of verse, in roman type
and ranged right. The three strands could stand alone, but as presented they
comment upon each other as if the writer were admitting that she cannot speak
adequately and is giving us three stylistically different versions. (264)
The concerns of the Caribbean mother as expressed in the poem "By thy senses sent forth/go right to the rim of thy longing give Me garment" appear again in Harris's collection, Drawing Down A Daughter. While Translations Into Fiction captures the concerns of women on a full range of social, political, and economic issues, Drawing Down A Daughter is a more intimate presentation or "look-listen" into the life of a woman as she embarks on the journey of birthing. The reader is invited into the private conversations between a mother and daughter which span a diversity of topics and landscapes. The reader is swept away with the narrator as if in a dream in the binding relationship of mother and child from womb to world space through Harris's artistic blending of poetry in the form of letters, narratives, and journal entries. It is in this collection that Harris, undoubtedly, moves beyond traditional and modern literary techniques in creating forms that she feels will adequately capture the special language of woman and child of African Caribbean origin.

In the beginning of the collection, Harris's mother/narrator attempts to make sense of her life, her lover, and their respective locations; he is in the islands "searching" for a new "home" for his family while she remains in Canada to write and await the birth of their daughter to whom she writes in a journal. Harris employs various forms of address in conveying the multiplicity of feelings within the mother. She begins with a brief apostrophe with the mother addressing her unborn daughter "assuring" her that her father's absence is honorable and purposeful:

are you there Girl

your daddy's looking to find a safe place

for your childhood and his (Drawing 15)
Harris suddenly switches to a third person form of address as the mother attempts to "step outside" of herself in dealing with the concerns of parenting, romantic relationships, and career. Harris in using the third person creates a scenario of the woman outside herself as observer, briefly, before she goes back to addressing her unborn daughter. Such a swift transition of the mother from concern of self back to the concerns of her lover and her unborn child emphasizes the mother's concern with others often at the expense of her own happiness:

she won't be able to hold out she thinks of teaching the career she's built her writing Child if he hauls us home
your collage may never be published remembers certain calls 'have you ever thought to send us something
Canadian set here' what she is doing here is/ & important . . .

he'll never buy it

her missionary work (Drawing 15)

Harris's mother/narrator grapples with the immediacy of life in Canada for the many Caribbean people who have made Canada their new home. The mother's refusal to return to live in the Caribbean is based on the limitations she feels such a return will place on her and her child despite her lover's need to escape from what he perceives as racism in Canada. In a brilliant juxtaposition of her child as a "tropic grace" of "shimmering black" against the starkness of a snow-covered Canada, Harris reveals the duality that resides in the hearts of those women who take "flight" physically for survival while remaining spiritually and emotionally grounded in their true and only home, the Caribbean:
inside her the child thrashing
daughter she needs
dreads
for who would bring a child
skin shimmering black  God’s
night breath curled crisp
about her face  courage
of enslaved ancestors in her eyes
who would choose to cradle such tropic
grace on the Bow’s frozen banks
and this man
fleeing racism as his body must once
have fled the coffle  (Drawing 17-18)

Harris’s use of space and fragmentary devices further illustrate her desire and need to move to the "center" in controlling the modulation of emotions that run through a life defined by polarities of culture (Trinidad and Canada). In the following segment from Drawing Down A Daughter, Harris moves from the left to the right of the page, leaving barren space/ground in the midst of this movement, as she seeks "poetic grounding" in the realities of choosing which govern the mother/narrator’s life :

she rises from the couch
to feather green
time through
her fingers  how apt
that what was weed
pestilential in Trinidad

(where green is riotous
threatens numberless armies of thin
spear forever poking from fecund
earth as if three centuries of pain
grief early dying
ensures
an eternal
rage in fertility

now here is curdled
into ornament memory scents the house
with morning gardens of Cedros bee of purple
white pink old maids hibiscus hedge yellow
glories anthuriums and bourganvilla (Drawing 20-21)

It is in this new place, away from home/Caribbean, that the mother/narrator
smells/immerses herself into the possibility of a future and success much like she
smells/immerses herself into the pleasures of "purple/white pink old maids hibiscus
hedge yellow/glories anthuriums and bourganvilla [sic]." In the mids: of an outwardly
frosty Calgary (Canada), the mother/narrator speaks fervently to issues of warmth as they
relate to the soul and spirit. While the outward surface of the Caribbean may be that of
warmth and tropical beauty, the mother/narrator searches for more than a pleasing facade
by moving inward beyond the "houses iced with snow" toward a warmth of spirit and
purpose creating a more meaningful life for her daughter, fellow immigrants, and herself:
waist deep in snow she sees
ragged road sides explosions of tiny white
stars orange dots cream notes with dusky
centres all no-name and possibility
chaos and delight
through glass walls she looks east over Calgary
now delicate haze blues the bowl where
she sits from the rim
of this escarpment working class
houses iced with snow hike toward
the Bow pines dusted sparkling cars
rush at hills search out openings in
north sky the whole space
occupied with the mute formidable
energy of immigrants (Drawing 21)

In the midst of signifying for the community of African Caribbeans, Harris’s
mother/narrator takes time out to move closer to an individualistic stance toward a
consideration of African Caribbean male/female sexuality, often rendered as "othered,"
intertwined with Canadian reality and her African heritage. She speaks of watching her
lover while he is sleeping, realizing that his need to return to the Caribbean is necessary
for his survival. He cannot exist successfully in the frozen confines of Canada which
"other" him, cramping and denying him a chance to be a man. While he feels his life in
Canada is stultified, the mother/narrator is faced with an overwhelming challenge:
Heart-stunned of the third generation
in snow othered into exterior
darkness cramped and denied
the classic stances of manhood so subtly
she is an open wound a hostage
to life itself a claw endlessly searching
he does not know she has lain awake at night
to watch him sealed and dreaming
where she cannot tread (Drawing 30)

The narrator addresses the placement of God in her life and the lives of her ancestors
as she attempts to educate her unborn daughter as she moves toward mental and
emotional management over the “loss” of her lover in his newfound love of Trinidad:
she slips into reverie
conjuring tangy-sweet smell
of bakes with lemon-peel oven fresh
dripping salted country butter
and she is a child again seven years old
between dreams in the dim kitchen
of the house where Grandmother Cardinal
died sitting straight up in scent
of holy oils

waiting for her husband

and God (41)
Harris’s use of “Grandmother Cardinal” dying in the scent of holy oils is an allusion to the impact of Christianity on the lives of the colonized people of the Caribbean. The “waiting” refers not only to the narrator’s desire to escape the fate of her grandmother in waiting for her husband’s return; it is also a desire/hope for the Caribbean people to escape the unfulfilled “promises” of a religion that has too long left them dead in the “scent of holy oils” waiting on their “husband” (God). Harris, thus, sounds a prophetic note of relevance not for women alone but for all Caribbeans.

Harris’s dual religious imagery depicts the impact of religion in the lives of African Caribbeans. The importance of religion in their lives is central to an understanding of their mental and emotional state from the period of slavery to the present. Whether their religious practices were a result of reaching back to and retaining the religious practices of their various African tribes, a turning to forms of Christianity, or a blending of the two, the centrality of religion as a form of control as well as solace cannot be minimized.

Clearly, control was sought by the slave masters through the enforcement of their religion on the slaves replete with the masters’ (re)interpretation of the scriptures to fit the needs of slavery. Concurrently, the slaves sought to manage their own lives through a religious experience on a "higher plane" through the combination of African and New World religious symbols and practices. Orlando Patterson discusses religion, symbolism, and social death in his book *Slavery and Social Death*:

The social death of the slave and his peculiar mode of reincarnation on the margin of his master’s society was reinforced by the religious institutions of kin-based societies. As we have seen, the slave was usually forced to reject his own gods and ancestral spirits and to worship those of his master. (66)
Harris’s narrator in *Drawing Down A Daughter* speaks poignantly to the African Caribbean people’s loss of connective power to their Gods, who have been reduced to ineffectual symbols, in the assimilation with the New World God:

> as we can never wait who have reduced Him to the cool deceptive logic of symbol who make terrible the darkness with endless unknowing (41-42)

Even though worship and faith remain central in the African Caribbean experience they exist in "survivalist" forms with traces of the original African rituals of worship mingled with the elements of Christianity. By the mid-nineteenth century, most people of African descent in the Caribbean were Christian converts or heavily influenced by their family and friends who were converts. Yet, many African Caribbean people retained major components of African cosmology. The belief in a person having several spirits or souls with specific purposes and the retention of ritualistic ceremonies surrounding death and afterlife remained central in the African Caribbean communities. While the Roman Catholic religion was dominant in Saint Lucia, Trinidad, Grenada, Dominica, and the French Antilles with a large base of Protestantism throughout Guyana, Jamaica, and Barbados, one of the central figures which remained prevalent in the African Caribbean communities was the Obeah woman or Obeah man. The Obeah woman/man was a powerful magician-like figure with the power to heal, harm, or cure as the situation dictated. While many Africans were rapidly being indoctrinated into Christianity, they were slower to completely relinquish their religious ties to Africa. Such a religious
connection to their past was a means of maintaining identity and selfhood. O. R.

Dathorne in The Dark Ancestor offers another point of view on the role of religion for the "new world" African:

Religion survived and perpetuated African culture because it effected a compromise. Blacks changed the names of gods or, rather, alternated the names with those of Christian saints. They altered the sexes of their African gods, distorted their functions, and fused their mythology as deliberate devices for survival. (20)

While Harris addresses the power of words in her poetry, in dealing with the role of religion in the African Caribbean peoples' lives she speaks of the limitations and binding parameters of the colonial language in connecting with God. She is concerned that the language of the colonizers is inadequate to express the African Caribbean people's concept of divinity. The language lacks the rhythm of the ceremony complete with the "orbiting hips" which Harris views as necessary for a spiritual connection. She ponders briefly on her grandmother's patience and faith; these are qualities Harris feels are lost through the lack of suitable words needed for a (re)"creation" of the ancestral worship patterns:

God dispersed

while we

confined by words

trapped in numbers

and time

seek

to deconstruct creation
lost the power of orbiting hips of ceremony
and chant lost the drums that could tempt Him
to join us in shaping a world our feet stamping
out the rhythm of life
Grandmother’s easy faith
a shower of sparks
beyond the horizon

Creation pure austere formula (Drawing 42)

The importance of continuity is important in any racial or cultural group; however, it is more than important, it is essential, for groups of people who have been disfranchised and dislocated. Harris’s poetry highlights the manner in which identity is fashioned by the public symbols representing a culture as well as by what a group of people intellectualize and practice as their culture. The rejection of the traditional symbols of culture and the replacement of them by another cultural group’s symbols may be viewed as a rejection of one’s presence in the world. Harris’s mother/narrator in Drawing Down A Daughter speaks to her unborn daughter about the importance of remembrance and ancestral heritage. She strongly urges identification as opposed to rejection without romanticizing the issue; she carefully implores the child to retain that which is needed from her ancestral past as she moves forward in the sharing of the family history:

Daughter to live is to dream the self
to make a fiction
this telling I begin
you stranded in landscape of your time
will redefine shedding my tales
to grow your own

as I have lost our ancestors your daughters will lose me

remembering only a gesture a few words

‘what you don’t want in your kitchen

will sit in your drawing room’

and a few recipes

history in a pinch of salt

a lower temperature a turning

wrist and Girlchild as we move together

on this swell of water

this swimming and whirling

‘the sea ain’t got no backdoor’

and ‘don’t marry for colour marry where

colour is else the race goin’ lost in you (Drawing 43)

Harris reminds African Caribbeans of the importance of cultural traditions as the mother/narrator talks with her daughter about cooking and the importance of authenticity ("the real real thing"). In doing so, the narrator imparts a sense of cultural pride to her daughter as she connects her female relatives to the recipes which are a defining part of African Caribbean culture:

Girl All of us in this family know how to make float how to make bakes The real real thing and acra Not even your father’s mother make so good and pilau and callaloo with crab & salt pork barefoot rice rich black
Williams 77

cake cassava pone (is true your Carib great aunt on your
dad side teach your mother that) but the coconut ice cream
and five-fingers confetti buljol those are our
things (Drawing 44)

Harris’s poetry is a dramatic and intense testament to her need to express the truth of
her and other women’s lives in words pregnant with meaning yet light with liberating
messages. In her effort to move backward in capturing the essence and power of her
ancestral heritage, she plants "word-roots" in the present which will bear fruit in the
future. This is the function of the discourse in her poetry and it is powerfully manifested
as the mother/narrator speaks to her daughter about finding her "pure space" and selfhood
through the limitlessness of expression/word while being cognizant that words can limit
and stultify freedom and growth as well. She is, however, convinced of the "power of the
word" to enable her and other Caribbean women to "enter pure space of being":

Here on this bank of the Bow white sky
arching over us white snow below
I write this tale for you Daughter this account
as a Matter of Fact
enter it

as we enter
pure space of being

moving to what is
radiant black (48)

In the movement toward reclamation of a cultural identity and selfhood, Harris
emphasizes the importance of community in the journey. Her discourse moves between
first person singular and first person plural as she underscores the impossibility of self-actualization without others of her kind. Concurrently, Harris evokes images of Africa as she creatively melds past and present into an identity which will empower Caribbeans in the present and into the future. This union of community and empowerment through knowledge of the past are viewed as essential to self-discovery:

where we can be truly
where great doors of ebony and beaten brass
hard carved fables that blossom
to touch and courage compassion truth
feathered stars bones whirl to the drums
here sweet hips intricate veined feet design
    worlds
here under cool ixora thickets music and her sisters
engage time in intricate forms so full of seriousness from
their fullcarved lips wordspills sun burnishes (Drawing 48)

The material in Harris’s collections, *Translation Into Fiction* (1984), *Fables From The Women’s Quarters* (1984), and *Drawing Down A Daughter* (1992), presents the concerns of women with the male figure at the center of those concerns. While the poet continually emphasizes the pursuit of cultural identity and selfhood, it is orchestrated through conversations about female relationships with husbands, lovers, and fathers. In *Drawing Down A Daughter*, Harris places an emphasis on the importance of women creating a strong relationship with one another through her "conversations" with her unborn daughter. These “conversations” highlight the importance of discourse which examines rather than laments the reasons for the lack of knowledge and continuity to the
ancestral culture. Through such discourse, Harris highlights the strength that is garnered from knowing that the journey toward selfhood for women, and all Caribbeans, is not a solo one. She shapes the "word" to invite those about "whom" she writes to read about themselves, thereby writing to herself and the community of Caribbeans who share her concerns. Harris reminds the audience, with prophetic undertones, that there is power in the word, "radiant black" words, despite the power of "others'" words.
Chapter Four

Piecing the Ancestral Quilt:

Arawak, African, and European Influence in the Poetry of Olive Senior

Tree

I am a tree--
Not the tender seedling
Young, vulnerable.

Nor the supple sapling.
Flirting, flaunting
Greenery in the wind.
I am a tree--
I am a tree--
Broken, gnarled
Rooted fingers
Clutching desperately to my soil.
Battered, bruised shoots.
Struggling fiercely towards the sun.

I am the tree
You chopped.

Colleen Smith-Brown

The healing power of the movement: back to country, community, and family is a recurring theme in Jamaican literature. Writing from a central perspective of dispossession, Olive Senior crafts powerful poetry that embraces the ethos of her rural Jamaica near the Cockpit Country, the famous enclave of the Maroons. Demonstrative of a shedding and retaining of the ingrained rituals and mores of Jamaican culture which shape the daily lives of Jamaican men, women, and children of African heritage, Senior's poetry resounds alternatively with explicit and implicit protests against the years of colonially-inspired physical and mental deprivation along with the economic and political dispossession of the Jamaican of African heritage. Senior's poetry, however, articulates a powerful protest which is devoid of exhibitionistic display and pleas for sympathy. It is as if her poetry captures the angst, but more importantly, the resolve of the Jamaican people through the years in their reaction to a life of compromise mingled with survival.
Senior’s lucid rendering of this resolve is addressed thus by Stella Dadzie:

Jamaica not only experienced as many slave rebellions as all the other British West Indian colonies together, but it is also renowned for its Maroons, who plagued the plantocratic establishment from the period of earliest Spanish settlement. In its turbulent history of slave rebellion, no single decade passed without some major incident of slave unrest. (22)

Senior, through an intricate weaving of words, provides a window, into the dichotomy that is, in many ways, a commonality that bonds the African Caribbean people in Jamaica. From the matrix of her poetic activity, the issues of ancestral heritage defined by an emphasis on the Caribbean mother illustrate the tensions between the mother and father. Senior’s poetry, then, is an artful melding of the cultural influences which emanate from mother and father and from her Arawak, African, and European heritage culminating in the "formative-piecing" of the mosaic/quilt of her, primarily, African Jamaican cultural heritage.

Born in Jamaica in 1943, Olive Senior, in an interview with Anna Rutherford, talks about her formative years as ones of isolation and economic deprivation. In a discussion about her movement toward writing as an emotive outlet, Senior responds:

As a small child I first wanted to become an artist and I’m still interested in drawing and painting though I have never pursued art seriously. Then at a very early age, and for some strange reason, I decided I was going to be a journalist. I’m not even sure I knew what a journalist was, but I knew that writing was somewhere in my future. I used to write things as a child--poems, stories, and at school I used to win prizes for all kinds of things, essays, poetry, but I only started to write seriously when I was at the University of Canada. That for me represented
a period when my own identity crisis came to a head and I started writing as a means of trying to integrate myself, trying to make a whole person out of a very fragmented part; so writing served a largely therapeutic function at that stage. I started to write out some of the things that had been hurtful and painful to me. I have gradually moved from that early, highly subjective stage to a more conscious objective pursuit of writing as a craft. (qtd. in Rutherford 213)

Senior’s poetry is highly effective in bringing together a number of elements into a unique whole as she creates poems that present the individual as an amalgamation of attitudes, philosophies, and mores. Velma Pollard, in her essay “An Introduction to the Poetry and Fiction of Olive Senior,” recognizes this quality in Senior’s writing:

Senior’s short stories and poetry are the work of a creative talent of great sensitivity which expresses tremendous understanding of the human condition, particularly that of poor people both rural and urban. The attempt to slot her writing into a particular genre immediately gives one an uncomfortable feeling. For the work is knit together by a common landscape and a recurring concern for humanity. Both poetry and prose bring the country paths of Senior’s childhood and the urban experiences of her young womanhood into focus. The themes of both concern the experiences of people in these environments who represent different points along a scale of social and financial privilege. (540)

The merging of these "paths" is presented in "Ancestral Poem" as Senior’s narrator explains that her ancestors are more than mere pictures, inanimate objects. She has a spiritual connection with her ancestors which transcends any photographic memory. She evokes the imagery of the ancestors’ habit of treading on the backs of old shoes (worn in the yard) to explain that her "nearness" to the ancestors is in spirit:
I

My ancestors are nearer
than albums of pictures
I tread on heels thrust
into broken-down slippers (Talking 9)

In using inanimate objects ("pictures") which exist as signifiers of people or things but not the "real" thing, the narrator places a needed distance between her desired closeness to her ancestors in dealing with the actual and painful ("broken-down slippers") distance she feels from her ancestors due to her limited connection with her past. In a movement toward understanding of past for present and future survival, Senior’s piecing together of a multitude of thematic strands is highly visible in "Ancestral Poem" as the narrator describes two very different individuals who formed a union and became her parents:

II

My mother’s womb impelled
harvests perpetually. She
deeply breathed country air
when she laboured me.

III

The patterns woven by my
father’s hands lulled me
to sleep. Certain actions
moved me so: my father
planting.

When my father planted
his thoughts took flight.
He did not need to think.
The ritual was ingrained
in the blood, embedded
in the centuries of dirt
beneath his fingernails
encased in the memories
of his race.
(Yet the whiplash of my
father’s wrath rever-
erated days in my
mind with the inten-
sity of tuning forks.
He did not think.
My mother stunned wept
and prayed Father
Forgive Them knowing not
what she prayed for.) (Talking 9-10)

Despite a surface description of two individuals tied to the land in a similarly essential manner for survival, the second stanza in Section Three contains the suggestion of difference in the manner each parent "manages" a life of curtailed opportunity. The narrator paints a vivid picture of anguish and despair born of physical abuse emanating from the disfranchised patriarch of the family. While the narrator contends that the land is a painful reminder of her father’s ancestors in another land ("centuries of dirt/beneath
his fingernails/encased in the memories/ of his race"), she yet feels that even painful memories of this nature do not justify her father’s physical abuse and the later psychological effects of such abuse.

Senior presents the land as a dual symbol keeping the family in touch with its heritage. Conversely, the land is a painful reminder of their lost heritage, a pain which works toward a dismantling of the individual self and family unit. The narrator "breaks new ground" in her attempt to blend the memories of her past with the reality of the present in an intricate balancing of past and present, old and new, rural and urban:

IV

Now against the rhythms
of subway trains my
heartbeats still drum
worksongs. Some wheels
sing freedom, the others
Home.
Still, if I could balance
water on my head I can
juggle worlds
on my shoulders. (Talking 10)

In this delicate balancing act, one of Senior’s central concerns, the role of religion in shaping the day-to-day lives of African Caribbeans, is presented in the final stanza of the third section of "Ancestral Poem" from an "integrated syntactical" perspective:

One day I did not pray.
A gloss of sunlight through
the leaves betrayed me so
abstracted me from rituals.
And discarded prayers and
disproven myths
confirmed me freedom. (Talking 10)

Senior's linguistic technique here, specifically her use of syntax, magnifies the
multiplicity of feeling in coming to terms with a dichotomized life complicated by the
often unwelcomed (by Africans) synthesis of African worship rituals and "new-world"
Christianity. In his book, Come Back To Me My Language, J. Edward Chamberlin
comments on Senior's syntactical structure:

The irony of the final line of this whole passage, where the deeply ambivalent ritual
of religious confirmation provides a gesture of freedom in a language that
accumulates betrayal and abstraction, is hauntingly reminiscent of one of the
themes of this book, for the ambiguous syntax is generated by the local use of the
word me in a literary context. And the final word freedom, with its rhetorical
flourish, is as much a gesture of ill-fated defiance of her heritage as a description
of any new liberation. (250)

Senior, in an interview with Anna Rutherford, speaks fervently of the overwhelming
impact of religion on the lives of the disfranchised:

I felt more oppressed by religion as a child than I did by anything else. A very
restricted, narrow kind of Christianity combined with poverty is, I think, a ruthless
combination, in that they are both anti-life, they are both anti-freedom, soul
destroying as far as I am concerned . . . (qtd. in Rutherford 213)
Senior steps further back into an exploration of her heritage in her poem "To My Arawak Grandmother" in which the narrator unites with the minuscule knowledge that exists of her Arawak ancestors in the wake of European hegemony. The European "invasionary-discovery" created a plethora of conflicts between the Europeans and Africans; however, the marginalization of the indigenous and now totally extinct Arawak Indians is seldom evoked in the discussion of the colonialistic terrors which were abundant in the Jamaican society. The Arawak Indians were one of the three dominant groups (the Ciboney and Carib are the other two) that populated the Caribbean islands when Columbus made his landing in 1492. All of these peoples came from South America with the Arawak primarily residing in the Bahamas, the Greater Antilles, and Trinidad. The Ciboney lived on the fringes of Hispaniola and Cuba, and the Carib lived primarily in the Virgin Islands, areas within the Lesser Antilles, and the northwestern fringe of Trinidad.

What is known about the Arawak people has been conveyed largely by the Spanish explorers and archaeological finds as the Arawak did not have a written language. They were, however, a people with formal systems of government and religion. Their governmental system was much like that of the Spanish people. The islands were divided into provinces led by chiefs which were sub-divided into districts governed by sub-chiefs and further divided into villages governed by headmen. The Arawak’s religious beliefs revolved around the existence of evil and good spirits which they believed could be managed by their shamans (priests) through the containment of such spirits in statues called *zemis*. Nevertheless, these highly organized people were a peaceful people and were no match for the Caribs who were famous as warriors nor for the brutal enforced labor of the Spanish settlers. In *Slavery and Social Death*, Orlando Patterson addresses
the swift movement of European rule and the orchestration of slavery throughout the Caribbean with a view toward the Arawak’s demise:

The decimation of the Indian populations throughout the Americas following attempts to enslave them or force them into encomienda relations and reservations is well known; it is the extent of the genocide that has been fully appreciated only in recent years.

Nowhere were the attempts more extreme and the consequences more disastrous than in that familiar theater of European imperial horrors, the Caribbean. Hispaniola was Spain’s first colony, with a large Indian population of over a million souls when it was discovered by Columbus. In sixteen years it was reduced to about fifty thousand, by 1520 there were hardly ten thousand persons, and by 1550 under two hundred fifty. Jamaica was even less fortunate. Its Arawak population was wiped out within a decade. (112-113)

Senior, in "To My Arawak Grandmother," returns to the issue of religion as a shaping force in the African Jamaican’s life through a simultaneous movement between a connection and disconnection with the worship rituals which informed the lives of the Arawak ancestors:

I reach but a finger across the universe.

Distance is the only space-time and we exist in the continuum. Understanding reaches to shake hands across history books blood kinship may well be a fairy tale heredity myths mere lies, Yokahuna as real as the Virgin Mary, Coyaba as close as Heaven. (Talking 11)
The narrator makes a choice in terms of her spiritual sustenance as she gravitates toward the ancestral worship patterns through an affirmation of their validity and parallelism to the icons of Christianity (Yokahuna: Virgin Mary as Coyaba: Heaven):

My spirit ancestors are those
I choose to worship and that
includes an I that existed long before me.
I choose you
for affirmations pulsing still
in spite of blood shed or infused.
Baptismal certificates are mute
while the whisper of a clay fragment
moves me to attempt this connection
I cry out
to you. (Talking 11)

The centrality of identification versus assimilation is a powerful concern in Caribbean literary discourse and is a substantial thematic departure in Senior's poetry. The historical issues which surround the need for cultural identity are multiple ("in spite of blood shed or infused") and ongoing even as the twenty-first century struggles to be born. Senior speaks out against the colonial "naming" of African people ("baptismal certificates are mute") as she looks beyond the realm of containment and to a sense of self and belonging. Essentially, her poetry is a protest of a forced impersonation of Europeans in a shedding of African cultural traditions. In "To My Arawak Grandmother," Senior moves the reader closer to understanding why the identity of the African Caribbean people is an issue of pluralistic cause which sparks a lively and continuous dialogue.
While the questions surrounding the issue of identity as problematic for Caribbeans are manifold, some of the reasons for the problem of identity are clearly linked to the issue of beginnings. Beginnings, or origins, define the substance of people’s lives in terms of their location, arts, beliefs, and social and political customs. Without some sense of the who, what, where, and how, identity is an elusive quality to be sought through the piecing together of bits of the past with the reality of the present. The issue of Caribbean cultural identity is problematic because most of the indigenous peoples of the Caribbean area do not exist any longer. The confrontational encounter of Europeans with many of the indigenous peoples of the area caused the extinction of several racial and cultural groups such as the Arawak which Senior claims as her ancestors. Much of the "piecing" of her ancestry is imparted, in Senior’s view, through the remembrances of the mother and the father in Caribbean society. What Senior determines is that each parent brings a different perspective to bear on her worldview and projection of self in relation to her ancestral heritage.

Senior’s poem "Cockpit Country Dreams" is another immersion into the shaping of a life by a mother and father with markedly different insights, priorities, and future aspirations for their daughter. Senior’s poem addresses the marked difference in the points of reference for her narrator’s mother and father as they seek to mold a youthful mind toward cultural empowerment based on a knowledge of ancestral culture:

III

Listen child, said my mother

whose hands plundered photo albums

of all black ancestors: Herein

your ancestry, your imagery, your pride.
Choose *this* river, *this* rhythm, *this* road.

Walk good in the footsteps of *these* fathers.

(Yet she could no more stop my mind slipping
those well-worn grooves of piety, work, praise
than rivers cease flowing).

Listen child, said my father
from the quicksand of his life:
Study rivers. Learn everything.
Rivers may find beginnings
in the clefts of separate mountains
Yet all find their true homes
in the salt of one sea. *(Talking 4)*

The mother contends that her sense of self is to be found in the African past, the "black ancestors," as she attempts to guide her daughter along *this* direction. The father, conversely, sees the daughter’s heritage as a mixture of many cultures that will find its oneness in her: "the salt of one sea." In this poem, Senior presents the centuries of economic, political, and social disfranchisement of the African Jamaican in a distinctly female and male construct of knowledge. The mother clearly embraces the importance of reaching back to the past for present and future empowerment while the father insists on a more holistic approach to the knowledge of origins. In other words, the father’s instruction is pursuant of a synthesis of the ancestral patterns with the "best" of the colonialistic ethos while the mother’s instruction appears to insist on an unconditional embrace of the ancestral cultural patterns. What results, unfortunately, is a further fragmented mind in the young girl as she attempts to ferret out the meaning of a life
complicated by colonialistic domination multiplied by the divisive directioning of her parents, her primary founts of knowledge and strength:

IV

Now my disorder of ancestry

proves as stable as the many rivers

flowing round me. Undocumented

I drown in the other's history. (Talking 5)

The dichotomy in the young daughter is a catalytical situation born of the dichotomized relationship of the parents as illustrated by Senior in "One Night, the Father." It is not clear why there is such discontent between the mother and father; however, it can be posited that some of the problems stem from their lack of identity and sense of self under the colonial regime. The narrator in the poem places emphasis on the word "all" as she emphasizes that the troubles in the family do not stem primarily from alcohol ("drunken brawl"). The problems are bound up in the totality of disfranchisement which the mother and father feel and impart to their bewildered children:

One night

the father

split

a house

in two

one side

the only

sound the

mother
weeping
weeping
the other
ricochet
of bullets
butchering
banana leaves.
One night
the father
held them
in a state
of siege.
Furniture
loomed
barricades
against
the door
as in
war lore
each child thought:
this bullet
is meant
for me.

One night
he neighbors
said a
drunken brawl
is all
the mother
shouted
an obstinate
No. (Talking 22-23)

The ravages of colonization, whether in the era of slavery or post-slavery, wreaked havoc on the traditional African family structure. The family roles which gave definition and structure to African culture were contested and, in the wake of such contestation left fragmented individuals and dysfunctional families. The narrator in Senior's poem insists that this scenario of upheaval and abuse has greater import than that of "a drunken brawl"; in fact, it may hinge upon the inability of the patriarch to fully extend himself in the "New World" as master of his house because of his subordinate role to the "master" of "New World" colonization.

In a look backward at the placement of the male and female in the African family structure, it becomes apparent that African female assertiveness is not simply a New World convention. It was and is, in truth, an accepted and integral ingredient in the effective machinations of African family life. It is safe to posit, then, that the "New World" colonial "masters and mistresses," eager to use emasculating techniques in securing the "objective" status of the African male, contributed to the destructive behavior of the father in "One Night, the Father." O. R. Dathorne in Dark Ancestor: The Literature of the Black Man in the Caribbean addresses the historical relationship of the
Williams 95

African mother and father in the passage from Africa to the "New World." He highlights the cooperative division of labor and responsibility which is seen in a state of collapse in "One Night, the Father":

Although it has become commonplace for social anthropologists to assert that the masculine sort of Black mother stereotype in the New World is the direct consequence of slavery, it is definitely not so . . . According to the arguments of such anthropologists, the Black male had never been assigned a responsible role to play in his society, and therefore the Black woman had been conditioned to the acceptance of the dual responsibility of mothering and fathering.

Further investigation reveals that in the original African context, role playing is indeed essential. The woman--child bearer and wife--is also provider; in West Africa she is a farmer and market seller . . .

Role fulfillment was also significantly emphasized for the father and other kin, both in the African and New World context. The father in Africa was not only expected to be a farmer but to take on the economic responsibilities of the extended family. This included the obligation of rearing a dead brother's family, for example, and was part of the family system disrupted by slavery. (Dathorne 7)

While Senior's description of the father is one which has him firmly tied to the land, it is a forced relationship brought on by the rapacious greed of the colonists in the sugar cane trade and dramatically different from the beneficial relationship with the land experienced by many of his ancestors in Africa. There is no sense of accomplishment and/or pride in the father's fruitless labor; the soil claims his spirit, destroys his family, and reclaims him in a death which appears to claim little or no victory for its spoils:
When the father
spent the bullets
for them he’d
also spent himself.
Came
like a dried
canes stalk
trashed
by hooves
of obstinate
mules
turning
the cane mill
round
round
round
till the day
the father
finally
broken
became
part of
that ground. (Talking 23-24)

Senior speaks powerfully to the challenges which render the patriarch impotent in
culling a productive life for his family out of the hilly Cockpit Country in her poem
"Hill Country." The narrator, a father, speaks of his aspirations and labor in futile terms as little seems to grow out of the unyielding hillside:

The sun etches out the minutes of my days under my dark eyes. The train, our only regulation, shakes down the hours stakes out the limits of our lives on this, my harsh and gentle island. (Talking 17)

The train appears as a central motif in Senior’s poetry. In this poem, it highlights the forces of modernity on rural Jamaica. The train quickly consumes people to shuttle them off to work to emit them once again in the evening, spent and with meager wages. The monotonous but necessary train ride underscores the barrenness of the land and the lack of economic opportunities. Velma Pollard addresses Senior’s physical surroundings and their impact on her poetry in relationship to the train as realistic and imaginative construct in her poetry:

Olive Senior hails from the Cockpit country, hilly limestone terrain in western Jamaica known for its isolation and its peculiar landscape. Her early years were marked by journeys, chiefly by train, from one location in this area, in the parishes of Trelawny, Westmoreland, Hanover and St. James. This environment—the topography and the people—is continually reflected in Senior’s prose and poetry. (479)

The barrenness and limited harvest from the landscape is compounded by images of brokenness and fissure in the daily activities of the father and mother as they pound and chip away at the land for sustenance. The barrenness is further emphasized by the father’s lament of his home as a place that does not count—even the census takers pass
them by. With such a limited number of people, the father's concern turns to continuity of the race and culture through grandchildren:

My ring finger tinges as my machete flints on a stone. From far hear my wife pounding cassava in a cracked mortar singing a cracked tune O the futility of a crop cultivation in this place the census takers never come. To whom shall I marry my daughter? (Talking 17)

Senior's imagery in "Hill Country" is in diametric opposition to the images presented in the very lush pictorials designed to bolster tourist trade in the Caribbean region. Her images are not those of wind-swept beaches, carefree walks, and leisurely meals representative of a bountiful produce from the land and sea; her images convey the rawness of survival from a land defined by ruggedness. Her description is of a place that seems to defy time in its failure to evolve from generation to generation; the father sees his sons approaching a fate similar to his in their marginalized home:

The sun marks the minutes, the train the hours. Among the yam vines and the trumpet trees we need no clocks, no timepieces, no time for the hunger in our bellies tells us which way a clock's hands should go.
The train pulls home the day
draws it into citylights on two
black parallels. Later
when my sons discover the agonies
of leached hillsides
it will draw them too

O weigh
down these memories
with a stone. (Talking 18)

While the father in "Hill Country" seems devoid of hope for his present situation and for his children’s future, in "Nansi Story," Senior explores the power in connecting to the African past. A grandfather replenishes his hope by returning to the knowledge of his past and by telling his progeny that he and his kind in this "New World" can yet achieve empowerment by reaching back to a cultural and religious heritage as rich as anything their new enforced surroundings offer. The patriarch tells a glowing "once upon a time" tale to reform the current time; he references, Anansi (the Akan trickster/spider-hero) to suggest the African Caribbeans’ ability to work their way out of seemingly insurmountable situations. Senior captures this "magic" as the grandfather recalls a tale of a "reassembled heart":

"Once upon a time . . ."

Anansi

leapt from the bag

Heaven’s doorkeeper

laughed
The grandfather's story of the "reassembled heart" is his message to his ancestors to "piece" together the best of the ancestral heritage with the culture of the "new world" in a return to selfhood and identity. He suggests that such a synthesis will empower the African Caribbeans who seek to live successfully within the pluralistic social and political climate of the Caribbean region.

While many of the Jamaican female poets writing in the latter part of the twentieth century employ "nation language" effectively to speak out against the social and political conditions that permeate their lives, Senior primarily uses international English with occasional touches of creolization. She does, however, as demonstrated in "Nansi Story" incorporate the importance of a connection with African cultural and religious traditions in her poetry. In the essay "Their Pens, Their Swords: New Jamaican Women Poets And Political Statement in Nation Language," Thelma B. Thompson discusses "nation language" and the emerging voices of the Jamaican female poets:

With the assumption that language embraces or reflects other hallmarks of a culture such as class, race, history, or heritage, several "new" English-speaking poets have
set out to achieve political functions or effects through their art. Using the
language of the folk, they attempt to exemplify the idiom "of the people, for the
people, and by the people." Whether or not these poets are truly of the people is
debatable, and surely, some of them from their upper middle-class backgrounds
seem hardly "of the people." Yet, with conviction and sincerity, they unite
language and theme to call attention to the politics of Caribbean life. (49)

Senior's poem "Colonial Girls Schools" deals with one of the prevalent themes in the
politics of Caribbean life: the political and social indoctrination of young children by
means of a "colorless" colonial education. Senior provides a vivid portrait of the
"masking" of African Caribbean children in their forced assumption of another culture’s
behaviors and appearances. The dilution toward the disappearance of African identity is
methodically ingrained through "education":

Borrowed images
willed our skins pale
muffled our laughter
lowered our voices
let out our hems
dekinked our hair
denied our sex in gym tunics and bloomers
harnessed our voices to madrigals
and genteel airs
yoked our minds to declensions in Latin
and the language of Shakespeare (Talking 26)
Not only were the children directed to find their physical appearance, laughter, and manners unacceptable, there was little to no continuity to their arts. In *Caribbean Cultural Identity: The Case of Jamaica*, Rex Nettleford contends that the lack of continuity as well as dilution of traditional art forms of the African Jamaicans persists in the twentieth century:

... Shakespeare was made to rank virtually with the Good Book among those who were literate and the tritest of English soap opera or situation comedy from the cultural memory of English expatriates with a settler mentality and a yearning for provincial England, was mistaken for ‘good art’, ‘desirable art’ and even excellence ...

Shakespeare, whose greatness cannot be denied, is still often mistaken as the national playwright by some people and the latest successes on the commercial Broadway theatre are given facsimile productions in Kingston with commercial success. (31)

Senior addresses the ingenious erasure of any reference to Africa or the Caribbean in the colonial educational system. She highlights the "skill" of colonial historiographers in their "selection" of subjects and sources for study which render African geographical and ancestral placement as non-existent:

**Studying: History of Ancient and Modern**

Kings and Queens of England

Steppes of Russia

Wheatfields of Canada

There was nothing of our landscape there

Nothing about us at all  (*Talking* 26)
Senior, in using "us" and "we" to speak of the systematic dismantling of cultural associations, addresses the pluralistic ancestral heritage of people in the Caribbean. She also addresses the issues that bind all peoples of African descent whether in the Caribbean, United States of America, or Africa. Senior’s incorporation of the issue of desegregation in Little Rock, Arkansas, is illustrative of one of the common concerns of peoples of African descent in the Caribbean and America. The parallels in the effects of slavery and the essential but often difficult post-slavery assimilation into the mainstream of society is evident in even a cursory look back at the pre- and post-slavery social, psychological, political, and economic status of the African Caribbean and African American. Senior effectively juxtaposes a major political and cultural icon of the African Jamaican people (and African American people), Marcus Garvey, with a situation of racial discontent in the United States (desegregation in Arkansas). Additionally, she recalls a political icon in Africa (Lumumba, first prime minister of the Congo/Zaire) in connecting all African people(s) in the common quest for identity and selfhood in the face of reading and hearing "others" give definition to the black "self":

Marcus Garvey turned twice in his grave.

‘Thirty-eight was a beacon. A flame.

They were talking of desegregation

in Little Rock, Arkansas. Lumumba

and the Congo. To us: mumbo-jumbo.

*We* had read Vachel Lindsay’s

vision of the jungle *(Talking 27)*

The denial of expression, whether through physical appearance, speech, or belief system, has a devastating effect on the individual and the community of African Jamaican
people. With limited freedom of expression, they lack access to those elements which render the African Jamaican as an identifiable cultural entity:

Feeling nothing about ourselves

There was nothing about us at all (Talking 27)

Senior responds to this "feeling nothing" from those "pale northern eyes" with a powerful reclamation of Anansi, the Akan trickster/spider-hero, as she questions the pervasive influence of the colonial teachings in the present. The "breaking" of the mirror is tantamount to the dismantling of the mirror-image of the Europeans which was thrust upon the African Jamaicans. They are "waking up" to the reality of self; it is as if Anansi has been loosed from his bag, giving hope and escape from bondage of the mind:

So, friend of my childhood years

One day we'll talk about

How the mirror broke

Who kissed us awake

Who let Anansi from his bag

For isn't it strange how

northern eyes

in the brighter world before us

Pale? (Talking 27)

Central in Senior's poetry is her concern with the mental bondage (which has continued beyond the physical bondage) of the African Jamaicans; she captures the aura of this mental enslavement with an air of stark realism in her poems that deal with the African Jamaican in the world of the city. In her poem "Apartment Life," a clear picture
of the African Jamaicans failing to retain the rituals and mores of their indigenous culture is articulated plainly and painfully:

   The man downstairs needs music loud
to fill his head
The music is so white
any day now
it will snow and snow "(Talking 59)

The technologies of popular culture (television, radio, etc.) are seen as filtration devices presenting a world of white "perfection" ("snow") which is near enough to touch but is largely inaccessible. Further, the television and radio offer the poor masses unattainable images which lead to already demoralized individuals becoming even more disoriented. Potential violence, rioting, in the cityscape reigns as a major concern wherein "white snow" (dreams) will turn to "red snow in the lane" (blood) from the rioting over joblessness and misplaced dreams:

   already it is snowing
   on TV screens across the nation. Soon
   it will snow
   red in the lane
   where the school-less unemployed
   nine-to-five faces grow and grow (Talking 59)

Senior creates a paradoxical situation with the growth of the unemployed from the "concrete yards" to express a barren cityscape incapable of producing life and energy; only wasted individuals who are devastated, consciously and subconsciously, by their fruitless flight to the city will grow from this inert environment. In an effort to re-
introduce Jamaicans to their culture, the narrator plants a "Kingston Buttercup" to
integrate the cityscape. Yet, there is irony here as the "Kingston Buttercup" is a weed,
unwanted and useless, as the unemployed view themselves:

In the concrete yard I
will crack to open wide
invite a Kingston Buttercup inside
nothing's tougher--than the janitor
with weedkiller and
the lane where
the school-less unemployed
nine-to-five faces grow and grow (Talking 59)

Yet, the narrator's "Kingston Buttercup" is consumed by the snow (the post-
consequences of Caribbean colonialism) as a new type of inorganic acculturation
(concrete and television screens) grows from the hardened landscape replacing the
African Jamaicans' organic relationship, often marred by abusive labor, with the earth.
The plentiful and abusive labor of slavery has been replaced with a lack of labor which, in
turn, proves abusive in the deterioration of the minds and spirits of the people:

I only know
the Kingston Buttercup retreats
far underground for snow keeps falling
on television screens across the nation
while (in Living Colour)
the school-less unemployed
nine-to-five faces grow and grow (60)
Senior uses language that addresses the dwellers' psychological status in the cityscape. Senior moves in for the "close-up" as she writes, photographically, as if she is a journalist reporting on the urban landscape and its inhabitants. In "City Poem," Senior presents the abject objectivity and suffering of many of the unstable human beings fleeing country for city only to find more suffering. She adeptly forces the reader to move through levels of discourse in dealing with a multiplicity of socio-psychological conditions:

I

Now the afternoon crossing of back streets
brings the call of voices: hello hello. Psst psst.
but I cannot answer: The Age of Anxiety
alas, is still very much alive.
(And if you taught me to speak
with your words would I touch
could I reach beyond the collapse
of garbage cans in hungry streets?) (Talking 65)

Senior addresses the necessity of people having their own language as she seeks to communicate fully with those whose situations defy description. She searches for the words to communicate with them as well as to understand their devastation as she asks to be "taught" the language of her people. She moves into the use of Jamaican Creole as she tells the story of the fragmentation of a poor inner-city woman, Mavis, as the movement of the "bulldoza" spells progress for the white establishment but digression and dislocation for Mavis. Senior emphasizes the rich/poor relationship of the people as she
relates that "all we have is children"; they are rich to have offspring but poor in their ability to sustain them:

II

Wen de bulldoza come a back-a-wall
we jus pick up all we have an all
we have is children an we leave
Mavis doan wan leave Mavis aksin
why why why A seh Mavis
move fus aks question las
de ting out dere biggern yu
an it caan talk
so Mavis move to but is like
she leave all sense behin. Fram dat
all Mavis good fah is aksin
why. (Talking 65)

Mavis is an extreme example of the effects of the ravages of inner city poverty on the human psyche as her response to the "bulldoza" becomes a cyclical questioning which, predictably, yields no answer for "de ting out dere biggern yu." Insanity becomes an escape for Mavis who cannot make sense of a world that, for her, yields only pain. Mavis's "why" is a questioning which transcends her personal situation to incorporate the questions of centuries of disfranchised peoples.

The issue of insanity and some of its motivating causes is also explored in Senior's poems "The Scavenger" and "The Victim." In "The Scavenger" even the local vulture, John Crow, bemoans his state as he finds little to eat within the impoverished cityscape.
The crow is a symbol of the African Jamaicans who feel that their situation is worse than anyone else’s only to discover that others are overwhelmed by poverty and hunger:

Peel head John Crow
sit upon stump
scouring the dump.
John Crow know this city find
carcass and body dog head and
foetus three day baby eyelid
and footstump hardly any food kind on
dump Brother Festus an his tribe
no grab dat already?
Peel Head John Crow
sit upon stump
scouring the dump
John Crow everywhere
John Crow know
John Crow hear (Talking 67)

In "The Victim," the scenario, whether city or country, turns dark and embodies the violence that permeates the lives of many African Jamaicans. In a sparse and poetically distressful tone, Senior’s narrator speaks about the futility of bemoaning the physical state of the dead and, in doing so, suggests that the living need to avoid victimization at any cost:

Bobby Curren alias Festus alias Gre Gre
never come home last night
Bobby Curren

tie up tight

in crocus bag
two fingernail

and him eyelid gone

Bobby Curren won't

walk again

without toes

but who need that

or head

when you dead? (Talking 72)

In "City Poem," "Scavenger," and "The Victim," Senior uses nation language with a dramatic effect. These poems become a means of protest of the conditions that have become economically, socially, and politically pervasive in the lives of the African Jamaicans. Senior elucidates the impossibility of adequately expressing the concerns of her people in a colonial language which does not have the words, "nation language," to express the multiplicity of emotions and situations unique to African Jamaicans. Thelma B. Thompson in "Their Pens, Their Swords: New Jamaican Women Poets And Political Statement In Nation Language" addresses the impact of the use of nation language in poetic discourse:

In the adoption and practice of nation language, the post-colonial English-speaking Caribbean poets often find themselves fighting against an economic imperialism that as Ngugi wa Thiong'o argues, has replaced traditional colonialism. By writing in the language of the masses, these poets capture the political tensions that
permeate the lives of the masses... Unlike the colonial writers, who lashed out at the colonizers, the current complaints are placed mainly at the feet of native politicians. (58)

A major thematic interest in Senior’s poetry is the influence of the mother and the father in shaping the African Jamaicans’ lives. She places emphasis, however, on the centrality of the mother in the formation of the part of her world view that has continuity and value as the journey moves beyond the Cockpit Country into the urban landscape. In an interview with Anna Rutherford, Senior speaks candidly about the status of the woman in Caribbean society:

Caribbean women have had to be very strong because they have had to assume the role of both mother and father, because the father is usually absent for one reason or other. There are a lot of contradictions in her situation. The myth of the black matriarch projects an image of the Caribbean woman as strong and powerful, and she does play a powerful role in the family, even though that role may be forced on her because of an absence of male support. But the myth disguises the fact of her powerlessness in the wider society. The majority of working women are in low-paid, low-status jobs such as domestic service, and women, especially, young women, experience the highest rates of unemployment. Women have little share in the formal power structures although they are the ones who are the domestic managers. Caribbean women shoulder the most tremendous burdens.

(qtd. in Rutherford 213)

The burdens of Caribbean women are treated in Senior’s poem "To the Madwoman in My Yard" as she paints a portrait of two women who have been decimated by the ravages of poverty, abuse, and isolation. While both women are faced with the same situations,
one of them, at least on the surface, appears to "manage" life a bit better. Yet, the woman who addresses the "madwoman in her yard" suffers from a dichotomized existence: she is "trying hard with her life" as she attempts to fit in with a "society" that apparently does not fully recognize her due to her "attempts":

Lady: this is nonsense. Here I am trying hard with my Life. With Society. You enter my yard dressed like furies or bats. Bring right in to me all the hell I’ve been trying to escape from. Thought a Barbican gate could hold in the maelstrom. Keep out the Dungle. And bats.

What you want? Bring me down to your level? (Talking 55)

In painting these very distinct portraits, Senior is careful to highlight the two women’s commonalities by asserting that the major, and perhaps only, difference in the women is their "madness management technique." For one of the women, the narrator, "Life Equals Control," while the antagonist’s world is likened to a "maelstrom," replete with bats. While their management technique is markedly different, each woman has traveled the same road to the same point of losing control. The narrator’s description of the culminating causes of their distress is concise, yet the women’s pain, isolation, and deprivation span years and belie the brevity of the poet’s words:

--A life built on scraps. A fretwork of memory which is garbage. A jungle of images: parson and hellfire all that’s sustaining. The childhood a house built of straw could not stand. The man like a roach on the walls. So you choose
out of doors. Or my garden.

Lady: as you rant and you shout, threaten
and cajole me, seek me out then debar me
you don’t move me one blast: Life Equals Control.

Yes. Here is what the difference between us
is about: I wear my madness in. You wear yours out. (Talking 55-56)

Senior, like many female Caribbean writers, works through a patchwork of emotions
to an understanding of the necessity of devising means of survival. Her poetry is
effective in its messages of self-survival which she offers to the community of women
and the African Jamaican community at large. In her essay "Textures of Third World
Reality in the Poetry of Four African-Caribbean Women," Elaine Savory Fido offers a
critique on the function of Senior’s poetry for self and others:

Poetry becomes the balancing point, the crossroads at which all directions have to
meet . . . Senior determines life through an awareness of many directions and
contradictions facing the individual, and her poetry becomes the place where at
least distances and schisms can be spoken of and accepted . . . Part of the solution
to these tensions is the control which poetry gives. In "To the Madwoman in My
Yard," the poet speaks with an exasperated understanding and sisterhood but in the
end they are divided by the certainty in the poet that "Life Equals Control." (34)

Olive Senior’s literary achievements also include the short story and non-fiction prose;
however, her poetry is a major and compelling part of her writing with its powerful
association to and realistic depiction of the many facets of the lives of Jamaican people of
African ancestry. By weaving together the material of lifelike pieces of fabric for a quilt,
Senior recreates the joys, sorrows, triumphs, and tribulations of a people. Through an
intricate weaving of past and present, Senior constructs vivid word pictures of a world of ancestors gone by, a world of the present carved out of the past, and a world of hope for the future built on the foundation of a rich ancestral heritage coupled with a strong sense of selfhood in the present.
Chapter Five

Rationalizing the Journey:

David Dabydeen’s Poetic Rendering of the Indo-Caribbean Experience

Epilogue

_I have crossed an ocean_
_I have lost my tongue_
_from the root of the old one_
_a new one has sprung_

— Grace Nichols

David Dabydeen’s poetry focuses on the concerns of the people of his Caribbean homeland, Guyana, in much the same manner as does Olive Senior’s on those of the people of Jamaica. He explores the physical terrain of the East Indians living in Guyana and England along with their psychological terrain as defined by the political, social, and economic impact of indentured servitude and British colonization. His view of the subsidized status of people of East Indian descent is comparable to, as well as distinct from, that of people of African descent due to the later introduction of East Indians into the colonized societies of the Caribbean region. Victor Ramraj in his essay "Still Arriving: The Assimilationist Indo-Caribbean Experience of Marginality" concurs:

A prominent aspect of the early and current Indo-Caribbean experience as depicted by Caribbean writers of East Indian extraction is the Indo-Caribbeans’ sense of marginality in their adopted homes, be it the Caribbean itself or the European and North American countries to which they migrated. In the Caribbean, they are the late arrivers, whose deeply rooted culture kept them apart from and prevented easy assimilation into the dominant British culture that was imposed on the colonies. Those who came to accept assimilation as an inevitable course are depicted as perpetual travellers in a constant state of arriving. (77)
The state of "perpetual arrival" for the East Indian is presented in a confrontational conversation between a young Guyanese, urbanized and well-traveled, and an older Guyanese peasant in Dabydeen’s poem, "Two Cultures." The marked departure of the behaviors, tastes, and acculturation of the two Guyanese men is evident; the elderly Guyanese peasant views the behavior of the young Guyanese male as feigned and pursuant to wish-fulfillment rather than realistic endeavor:

Hear how a baai a taak
Like BBC!

Look how a baai a waak
Like white maan,

Caak--hat pun he head, wrist--watch pun he haan!

Yu dadee na Dabydeen, plant gyaden near Blackbush Pass?

He na cut wid sickle an dig wid faak?

He na sell maaket, plantain an caan?

An a who pickni yu rass?

Well me never see story like dis since me baan! (Slave Song 42)

The vehemence with which the old peasant responds to the young man’s appearance and speech, both aspects of cultural identity, illustrates the older man’s resolve in attempting to hold on to the East Indian culture. The old peasant is adamant concerning the retention of the East Indian arts, beliefs, and social and political customs necessary for the continuity of a cultural entity. The old man reminds the young man of his attachment to his homeland by telling him that his father, Dabydeen, is a farmer as are many peasants in Guyana. The insistence of their connection in terms of a defining diet ("yu teet yella
like dhall/An yu tongue black like casrip!") is an important issue; the reference to their cuisine serves as a cultural connector.

The elderly peasant attempts to make the younger man feel inferior as he accuses him of being viewed as a thief by white people; such a strategic movement is made in the attempt to make the younger man reconsider "disconnection" from his ancestral heritage:

Is lungura like yu spoil dem good white people country,
Choke an rab, bruk-an-enta, tief dem people prapaty!
So yu tink can come hey an play big-shat,
Fill we eye wid cigarette, iceapple an all dat?
Aweh po country people bu aweh ga pride:
Jess touch me gyal-pickni, me go buss yu back-side. (Slave Song 42)

Dabydeen was born in 1955 on an old slave plantation in Guyana, then referred to as British Guiana. Educated at Oxford University, Dabydeen's initial experiences in Guyana were limited. He was there only until he was twelve years of age when he and his parents left for England, in the 1960's, as part of the immigration from the Caribbean. In an interview with Wolfgang Binder, Dabydeen talks about his parents in putting his heritage into perspective:

... They are both Indians and my grandparents are all Indians, and there has never been any intermarriage with Blacks in the family, there have been changes in terms of marriages between Moslems and Hindus. And, of course, the Indians have lost all sense of caste. So the Middle Passage for the Indians--they came in 1838--was creative in the sense that you could "decaste." You could leave all those negative and destructive definitions behind; you could open up to the Indians, and eventually to the African population. (68)
Dabydeen’s first published collection of poetry, *Slave Song*, is illustrative of this "opening up"; the title, itself, suggests the merging of the concerns of blacks, Africans and East Indians, in the Caribbean. Dabydeen writes from the informed perspective of the physical and mental suffering of the East Indian populace; however, it is a historical fact that the East Indians, unlike the Africans from West Africa, were not in slavery in Guyana but in indentured servitude after slavery was abolished in 1838. The importation of Indian laborers into the Caribbean after the emancipation of the African slaves caused tension, specifically among the ex-slaves and the "new" labor force. In many ways, it is clear that the colonizers saw the "tensions" between the slaves and indentured servants as a means of containing a diverse populace of people, who, if unified, might successfully revolt and cause the demise of colonial rule in the Caribbean area. Bridget Brereton in "Society and Culture in the Caribbean: The British and French West Indies, 1870-1980" addresses the manipulative strategies of the colonizers in dividing the East Indians and Africans:

... the manager of an estate in Berbice, Guyana, believed in 1848 that the safety of the whites depended on the "want of union" among the laborers, arguing that the Indians, Chinese, and Portuguese would always "stand by the whites." Things had not changed fifty years later; in 1897 a Guyanese planter said of the Indians and the Creoles: "they are totally different people; they do not inter-mix. That is, of course, one of our great safeties in the colony when there has been any rioting. If the Negroes were troublesome every Coolie on the estate would stand by one. If the Coolies attacked me, I could with confidence trust my Negro friends for keeping me from injury." (96)
Dabydeen's collection of poems, *Slave Song*, is novel in its synthesis of the concerns of "black" people whether of East Indian or African descent. While Dabydeen's poetic discourse is firmly grounded in the experiences of the East Indian in Guyana, he incorporates the ethos of the enslaved African and the indentured East Indian through the employment of Caribbean Creole. Creole, according to Dabydeen, as a language, is angry, crude, and energetic (*Slave Song* 13). "Another feature of the language is its brokeness [sic], no doubt reflecting the brokeness and suffering of its original users--African slaves and East Indian indentured labourers" (13). Consequently, *Slave Song* is a testament to the ravages of colonization whether during the era of slavery or post-slavery.

Much of the poetry in the collection *Slave Song* revolves around the day-to-day experiences of plantation life and the resultant emotions of those who labored in the plantation houses and plantation fields. What Dabydeen appears to strive for is a language that captures the raw intensity of survival mingled with the defeatist tones of a people, both African and East Indian, who felt powerless to control the "colonial machine." In his essay, "On Writing *Slave Song*," Dabydeen addresses the "creation" of a language capable of conveying an epoch of immeasurable import:

In describing the plantation experience which is the dominant experience of the West Indies, the white English poets falsified that experience through their peculiar use of the English language. James Grainger, for example, published in the eighteenth century *The Sugar Cane*, in which the barbaric experience is wrapped in a napkin of poetic diction and converted into civilised [sic] expression. Grainger did not speak of 'overseer', he used instead the pastoral term 'master-swain'; he wrote of 'assistant-planters' instead of slaves, and 'Afric's sable progeny' instead
of ‘blacks’. *The Sugar Cane* is an excellent example in English verse of the refusal to call a spade a spade.

I write on plantation life in Creole, in reaction against this tradition (one always writes in response to English poetry), emphasizing the barbaric energy and the brokenness of Creole. (46)

Dabydeen’s "native speech" in his poem "Slave Song" inscribes a world populated with sugar cane, pain, and resistance. While the resistance is presented as primarily mental as opposed to physical, it is nevertheless a gripping exposition of the dramatic possibilities of the mentally privatized resistance of the Guyanese peasant:

Tie me haan up.
Juk out me eye.
Haal me teet out
So me na go bite.
Put chain rung me neck.
Lash me foot tight.
Set yu daag fo gyaad
Maan till nite--
But yu caan stap me cack floodin in de goldmine
Caan stap me cack splashin in de sunshine!
Whip me till me bleed
Till me beg.
Tell me how me hanimal
African orang-utan
Tell me how me cannibal
Fit fo slata fit fo hang.
Slice waan lip out
Waan ear an waan leg--
But yu caan stap me dippin in de honeypot
Drippin at de tip an happy as a hottentot! (Slave Song 28)

This poem is a verbal retaliation for the abuse of all East Indian indentured laborers; however, Dabydeen appears to limit his focus in highlighting abuse of the planter’s wife as retaliation for the sexual abuse and degradation of the East Indian female. The "imagined" sexual violation of the planter’s wife escalates and evolves from a physical assault to become a major and symbolic assault on "whiteness," colonialism, and its attendant premises. Benita Parry in her essay "Between Creole and Cambridge English: The Poetry of David Dabydeen" addresses the issue of sexuality as a weapon:

That colonialism engendered a sexual pathology in both black and white, women and men, is not in question. What is at issue is how texts speak these psychoses. The slave who proudly resists the master’s degradations by asserting an un-colonized sexuality, dreams of taking revenge by abusing the slave owner’s wife.

(5)

Yet, this "imagined" abuse of the planter’s wife by the slave moves beyond a sexual act, as suggested by Parry, to signify a type of violence which negates the intimacy associated with a "normal" sexual encounter. The slave’s primal need to inflict a physically visible pain on the planter’s wife in the dismantling of the strength of colonialism and its pervasively "white-washed" control becomes the slave’s primal goal. He is shaped and influenced by his need to destroy as he has been destroyed.
In "The Canecutter's Song," Dabydeen employs the images of courtly romance in describing the white woman walking through the fields, in a flirtatious manner, "courting" the peasants:

White hooman walk tru de field fo watch we canecutta,
Tall, straight, straang-limb,
Hair sprinkle in de wind like gold-duss,
Lang lace frack loose on she bady like bamboo-flag,
An flesh mo dan hibiscus early maan, white an saaf an wet
Flowering in she panty.
O Shanti! Shanti! Shanti!
Wash dis dutty-skin in yu dew
Wipe am clean on yu saaf white petal! (Slave Song 26)

Ironically, the canecutter calls the white woman by a Hindu woman’s name, Shanti. The name is also part of a religious phrase (‘Om Shantih, Shantih, Shantih,’ the final part of an Upanishad, a group of philosophical treatises explicating Vedic theology). The starapple, the edible fruit of a tropical evergreen tree, is also presented as both a sexual and spiritual symbol by the canecutter. Through the pluralistic allusions to religion, violence, and womanhood, Dabydeen highlights the frustration of the canecutter.

The canecutter’s song escalates quickly from an idyllic presentation to a violently passionate one as he dreams of defiling the planter’s wife in a manner similar to the violation of his flesh by animals and insects (“masquita," "snake," and "malabunta/ local wasp") as he labors in the cane fields and even at night when he attempts to rest. An air of restlessness permeates this song; there is no replenishing sleep, only depleting dreams:
Bu when night come how me dream . . .
Dat yu womb lie like starapple buss open in de mud
An how me hold yu dung, wine up yu waiss
Draw blood from yu patacake, daub am all over yu face
Till yu dutty like me an yu halla
Like when cutlass slip an slice me leg, an yu shake
Like when snake twist rung me foot, when we cut cane . . .
So me dream
When night come
An masquita wake up from de bush,
Malabunta move. (Slave Song 26)

In fantasizing about raping the planter’s wife, the canecutter achieves a type of "equalization." By bringing the planter’s wife down to his level in equating his violation of her with the violation of his flesh by insects, reptiles, and work tools, the slave, simultaneously, brings the planter down to his level. As the canecutter is violated by the ravages of work in the cane fields, so is the planter and his wife "soiled" by the canecutter’s sexual intrusion into their lives. While this poem, "The Canecutter’s Song," presents the psychological effects of indentured labor on the male population, Dabydeen also addresses the female concerns with as much energy and space in Slave Song.

"Song of the Creole Gang Women" registers a clear and pluralistic complaint from the women’s quarters. The song combines a protest against the unfavorable working conditions and the overall oppressiveness of white colonial society. Yet, the complaint runs much deeper to incorporate the female need for release, sexual release, from the tensions that inform their daily lives. Dabydeen presents the issue of domination by the
white planter as dualistic; the first woman in the gang (work group) discusses her
ownership by "Booker" as painful yet his "saach deep in me flesh," related in lilting,
sexual language ("patacake" and "juk! juk! juk! juk! juk!"), suggests that she nonetheless
experiences gratification from her sexual "conquest" of the planter. Additionally, the use
of the East Indian terms, "patacake" and "juk" provide evidence of Dabydeen imposing
East Indian linguistic-shaping and innuendos on the Creole language:

Wuk, nuttin bu wuk
Maan noon an night nuttun bu wuk
Booker own me patacake
Booker own me pickni.
Pain, nuttin bu pain
Waan million tous’ne acre cane.
O since me baan--juk! juk! juk! juk! juk!
So sun in me eye like taan
So Booker saach deep in me flesh
Kase Booker own me cutlass--
Bu me dun cuss . . . Gaad leh me na cuss no mo! (Slave Song 17)

The chorus of women sing "Dutty-skin, distress, shake aff we babee/When we reach
wataside shake off we patakee" (18) after the second woman speaks of the additional and
precious load she bears in the fields, her young child strapped to her back. The shrill call
of the Kiskadee, a tropical bird named for its shrill call, is employed by the second
woman ("Kiss-kiss-kidee! Kiss-kiss-kiss-kideee!"), perhaps signifying her need for
sexual release as well as release from her multiple and heavy burdens. Dabydeen uses the
water in this scenario to symbolize the purification and redemption the women so
desperately seek. During their lunch break the women "drop" everything—their babies, their cutlasses, their clothes, their cares—as they seek renewal as well as cleansing from Booker’s semen in the water, the symbolic stream of life. "Booker" represents the European planter and encodes, undoubtedly, an allusion to "buckra" which means white man.

The helplessness that the gang of women feel from "Booker" is expressed through yet another analogy by the third woman in the gang. She speaks of the crappau, a native frog, as being squashed just before he leaps, drawing an analogy to the situation of the oppressed female laborer. In the frog season in Guyana, it is nearly impossible to walk around without squashing a frog or encountering those already squashed, while the smell of dead frogs permeates the air. Dabydeen utilizes the image of the crappau in creating an analogy for the feelings of futility the women experience in not being able to exact more than a momentary release from their marginal existence. Before the women can even "leap," they are dead. The smell of the frogs is equated with the "stench" of inequality that characterizes the indentured labor movement, as Dabydeen implies through the sensory impact of his crappau analogy.

The fourth woman in the gang, much like the males in "Slave Song" and "The Canecutter’s Song," fantasizes about "complete release" as she envisions the release of her "caad." The women tie their waists and stomachs tightly with cords to prevent irreversible damage to their intestines due to the repetitious bending while planting and harvesting the cane: "Everyting tie up, haat, lung, liva, an who go loose me caad?" (18). The woman fantasizes about the pimpla, a gigantic white thorn indigenous to the countryside of Guyana, as piercing her womb toward release. Dabydeen uses the image of the pimpla in rendering an image of the white man as a brute force to avoid, while
creating a scenario in which the woman seeks to "use" her "dominator" to exact personal relief thereby "conquering" the white man via the sexual act:

Shaap, straight, sudden like pimple, cut free
An belly buss out like blood-flow a shriek?
Or who saaf haan, saaf-flesh finga?
Or who go paste e mout on me wound, lick, heal, like
starapple suck? (Slave Song 18)

The concerns of East Indian women in Guyanese society are extended by Dabydeen’s internal examination of the life of a Guyanese peasant family as presented in "For Ma" with a clear emphasis on the never-ending tasks of the women in Guyanese society. The women are responsible for waking the household as they begin their repetitious labor: cooking, cleaning, planting, and raising children. The sheer intensity of the labor necessary for a marginal personal existence, in addition to the labor demanded on the sugar cane plantations, is synergistically conveyed through Dabydeen’s use of alliteration and assonance:

Roll roti! roll roti! roll roti! roll roti!
Curry cookin in de karahee
Bora boilin wid de bagee
Woodsmoke sweet in me nose like agarbattee--
Ayuh wake up wake up ayuh pickni wake up ayuh man
Wid de sunshine in yu eye an de river a flow
An brung doves burstin from de trees an de kiskidees
An de whole savannah swimmin green an a glow! (37)
This type of work ethic by the peasants threatened the stability of the planters. The planters had lost a largely controlled labor force with the abolition of slavery and any industriousness by the indentured labor force sent out an alarm. There was the constant worry that if peasants were given more land and more time, they would be reluctant to sell their time to the planters at the marginal wages offered. Consequently, the industry of the women in "For Ma" was not encouraged. Essentially, the planters wanted the benefits of slavery under the guise of an indentured labor system. Jay R. Mandle in "British Caribbean Economic History" comments on governmental intervention intended to maintain the economic stability created by slavery:

Thus the peasantry that emerged in the region did so despite official discouragement and only, in Sidney Mintz's phrase, "in the crevices of their societies." Government, responsive to plantation interests, did not jeopardize the plantation system by allowing small farm incomes to rise to the level where they would allow peasants to establish their independence from the estates. . .

Furthermore, the peasant sector suffered from neglect by public officials with regard to activities such as research on the food crops they produced, and the provision of facilities essential for efficient marketing, distribution, and storage of that output. (235)

"Men and Women" captures the milieu of the East Indian peasants' lives with its attendant sorrows, abuse, and deprivation. The East Indian belongs to the peasantry group which developed during the post slavery period. Approximately 239,000 East Indians were imported to the colony of British Guiana between 1839 and 1917; their industriousness in terms of cultivating rice had a major impact on the economy, yet they were compensated poorly within the manipulative "legal" agreements worked out by the
planters. Dabydeen imaginatively constructs how such economic and political inequities spawned domestic unrest between the men and women. In "Men and Women" the use of alcohol, as a panacea, undermines the structure of the East Indian family, already weakened by colonization. Physical abuse of the women and abandonment of the children were too often the elements of Guyanese peasant life:

So me saary.

Bu when yu grow old an yu voice weak an yu mout dribble
An yu foot-battam crack,
Is too late
Foh seh saary.
But me still saary.
Kase me drink rum an beat yu
Young saaf wet-eye face.
Kase me gi yu big belly year after year
Nine pickni foh feed, an me run way wid sweet-hooman
Sport all me inheritance whore-house.
Kase yu wuk in de field maaning till night, bruise--
Up yu small haan an yu skin peel in de sun.
Kase when yu sit dung an roll roti, or rock baby in hammock,
Yu na sing glad-glad like odda hooman
How yu mout sour like aachar. (Slave Song 36)

It is too late to recapture the past, and the old man is regretful. While he brings a heart full of remorse, he brings empty hands in any movement toward reparation of his deeds.

His individual remorse appears to be Dabydeen's attempt to "wring" a collective apology
from the colonizers for their large-scale abuse of the peasants in much the way that the old man should individually apologize for the devastation of his wife and children which he, unfortunately, cannot repair. Dabydeen, thus, creates a parallel portrait of the catalytic force of colonialism in the upheaval of individuals and families:

Me come back now, but now yu old
An yu na know me
How yu mind weak
An yu eye dull.
Bu blood stir in me bady still when me look pun yu,
Like laang-time, when yu was me midnight bride,
Bright, fresh, hopeful, an me lay yu dung dunlopilla bed--
Downstairs dem a beat drum, dem a sing love saang, dem a
dance in de firelight! . . .
An me saary bad! (Slave Song 36)

Dabydeen’s second collection of poetry, Coolie Odyssey, was published four years after Slave Song, in 1988. In this collection of poetry, Dabydeen shifts from the language used by the narrative voice in Slave Song. While the language in Slave Song is Caribbean Creole with East Indian references, the language used in Coolie Odyssey is primarily British English. This shift in the language enables Dabydeen to take the reader along his ancestors’ path from India to Guyana to England. Additionally, the language is tailored to the audience to which he primarily writes, the British. The first poem in the collection, which is also the title poem, is dedicated to his Grandmother, whom Dabydeen calls Ma. He does not hesitate to move quickly in his assessment of the "popularity" of writing about his ancestors in his new home, England. Dabydeen comments sarcastically:
Now that peasantry is in vogue,
Poetry bubbles from peat bogs,
People strain for the old folk’s fatal gobs
Coughed up in grates North or North East
‘Tween bouts o’ living dialect... (Coolie Odyssey 9)

Dabydeen is careful to assert that while such themes are in "vogue," there is more than a singular story to tell; there are many stories and they are varied and rich with the details of the journeying of young and old across the kali pani, the black water:

It should be time to hymn your own wreck,
Your house the source of ancient song:
Dry coconut shells cackling in the fireside
Smoking up our children’s eyes and lungs,
Plantains spitting oil from a clay pot,
Thick sugary black tea gulped down. (9)

The first stage of the journey can be seen through the eyes of Old Dabydeen who longs for the past, existing in a dream-like state with little motivation. He exists in young Dabydeen’s mind as the epitome of the effects of colonialism on the weak-spirited.

Additionally, Old Dabydeen is illustrative of the early group of East Indians in Guyana who made an effort to maintain the traditional East Indian customs by distancing themselves from the Creole language spoken by "low-caste coolies" and blacks:

Heaped up beside you old Dabydeen
Who on Albion Estate clean dawn
Washed obsessively by the canal bank,
Spread flowers on the snake-infested water,
Fed the gods the food that Chandra cooked,
Bathed his tongue of the creole
Babbled by low-caste coolies. (Coolie Odyssey 10)

An emotional journey takes place in Dabydeen's recreation of the physical journey as he recalls the abuse meted out to Chandra, the wife of Old Dabydeen. Year after year, Chandra was pregnant and fearful of keeping her children which she would give to her mother for safety. The drinking and subsequent beatings of Chandra by Old Dabydeen took their toil on both of them; such a memory in this odyssey is a painful one for young Dabydeen who expresses contempt for the old man:

Ever so old,
Dabydeen's wife,
Hobbling her way to fowl-pen,
Cussing low, chewing her cud, and lapsed in dream,
Sprinkling rice from her shrivelled hand.
Ever so old and bountiful,
Past where Dabydeen lazed in his mudgrave,
Idle as usual in the sun,
Who would dip his hand in a bowl of dhall and rice--
Nasty man, squelching and swallowing like a low-caste sow--
The bitch dead now! (11)

In this same poem, young Dabydeen's return for his grandmother's funeral sets the stage for a head-on confrontation with his "responsibility" as an educated man and writer in chronicling the lives of those who are unable to read and write and who feel that their lives are too base and too sorrowful to be immortalized in word. As he returns to this
"library of graves," Dabydeen has a "conversation" with his dead grandmother who insists on the futility of writing about the lives of the old Guyanese peasants:

I have come back late and missed the funeral.

You will understand the connections were difficult.

Three airplanes boarded and many changes

Of machines and landscapes like reincarnations

To bring me to this library of graves,

This small clearing of scrubland.

There are no headstones, epitaphs, dates.

The ancestors curl and dry to scrolls of parchment.

They lie like texts

Waiting to be written by the children

For whom they hacked and ploughed and saved

To send to far away schools. (Coolie Odyssey 12)

As Dabydeen’s deceased grandmother speaks, the language shifts back to Creole. The space between the past and present, traditional and modern, and young and old is emphasized as Grandmother Dabydeen discounts the value of her life. She views her life and that of her generation as worthless, indicative of the psychological damage of colonization:

Is foolishness fill your head

Me dead.

Dog-bone and dry-well

Got no story to tell. (12)
Yet, young Dabydeen feels compelled to relate the stories of his ancestors and stands before the grave seeking knowledge from the past. Dabydeen addresses the lack of knowledge ("starved of gold") about his ancestry and the centrality of such knowledge for a successful life in England. What young Dabydeen discovers, ironically, is that while life in Guyana is futile, the result of the journey to England is largely futile as well. The experience in England creates a cultural void that compounds the feelings of futility Dabydeen hoped the flight from Guyana would cure:

- Still we persist before the grave
- Seeking fables.
- We plunder for the maps of El Dorado
- To make bountiful our minds in an England
- Starved of gold. (Coolie Odyssey 12)

The effect of writing about the pain and suffering of his ancestors causes Dabydeen an anxiety that surfaces in the last stanza of "Coolie Odyssey." Through his fictive reconstruction of his ancestors’ lives, he becomes a witness who "signifies" for his people. In his embarrassment over exposing the raw details of the suffering, abuse, and deprivation of his people, he seeks to embarrass the audience (to whom he writes), the whites in England. In the last stanza of "Coolie Odyssey" Dabydeen balances the scales with the white audience and the "absent" East Indian audience, momentarily, in his embarrassment over the exposure of the details of the East Indian peasants’ lives and in, what should be, the embarrassment of the whites in their voyeuristic stance:

- We mark your memory in songs
- Fleshed in the emptiness of folk,
- Poems that scrape bowl and bone
In English basements far from home,
Or confess the lust of beasts
In rare conceits
To congregations of the educated
Sipping wine, attentive between courses--
See the applause fluttering from their white hands
Like so many messy table napkins. (Coolie Odyssey 13)

In clarifying the meaning behind this last stanza, Dabydeen asserts:

... The stanza is intended to dampen applause after I have read the poem. This poem was saying, “Look, I have a grandmother, and she is a ‘folk’ grandmother, and she is dead and I want to write about her.” I cannot write about her in the way the Irish, like Heaney, would write about their folk... My folk is not like their folk, and there is nothing romantic or snug about my folk... Nevertheless, I want to find the narratives; I want to find the “folksiness” in my folk...

(qtd. in Binder 77)

Dabydeen extends his discourse on the black Caribbean experience in England by highlighting the remarkably strong relationship between mother and son in "Coolie Mother" and "Coolie Son (The Toilet Attendant Writes Home)." The centrality of education for empowerment and "erasure" of disfranchisement is conveyed in the painfully vivid portrait of an aging mother working in miserable conditions to send her son to one of the famous universities in England. England becomes a "promised land" for the mother in her hope that her son will avoid the fate of his "dadee." Ironically, the mother assists in the creation of an "alien," an individual who becomes distant from his culture; he does not return home, as projected, to encourage and empower his people:
Till she foot-bottom crack and she hand cut-up
And curse swarm from she mouth like red-ants
And she cough blood on the ground but mash it in:
Because Jasmattie heart hard, she mind set hard
To hustle save she one-one slow penny,
Because one-one duty make darn: cross the Canje
And she son Harilall got to go school in Georgetown,
Must wear clean starch pants, or they go laugh at he,
Strap leather on he foot, and he must read book,
Learn talk proper, take exam, go to England university,
Not turn out like he rum-sucker chamar dadee. (Coolie Odyssey 16)

In "Coolie Son," the son writes home to extol his successes; however, the "promised land" offers him little but a dream deferred. The son is ingenious in subverting the real nature of his situation in England by embellishing his lowly post as a toilet attendant. The subversion is his effort, his very need, to appease the "home-folk," who have invested so much faith in his ability to transcend the marginalized status attributed to the East Indian by the colonizers. The young man becomes absorbed and "faceless" in a world that has no cultural connections of importance for him--"no gold." In maintaining "some" connection to his ancestry, Dabydeen switches the language back to Creole in the son's letter to his mother:

Soon, I go turn lawya or dacta,
But, just now, passage money run out
So I tek lil wuk--
I is a Deputy Sanitary Inspecta,
Big-big office, boy! Tie round me neck!

Brand new uniform, one big bunch keys!

If Ma can see me now how she go please . . . (Coolie Odyssey 17)

Dabydeen deals extensively with the migration of the East Indian to England and its impact on the psychological and social status of the black man in his attempt to "belong" both in Guyana and in England. Dabydeen extends his discourse in Slave Song from the violent defilement of the white woman in the quest for redemption and empowerment; in Coolie Odyssey he focuses on the orchestration of a tenuous romantic relationship based on dependency in an effort to achieve parity within the power structure of England. The movement in time from the collective concerns over the cruelties of indentured servitude to a more individualistic concern for survival in the black Caribbean's new home tempers the response in Coolie Odyssey. The concerns, however, are the same in both collections--social, economic, and political respectability.

In the exposure of these concerns, Dabydeen creates a dramatic scenario based on two characters, Miranda and Caliban, from William Shakespeare's The Tempest. The poems "The Seduction," "Caliban," "Miranda," and "New World Words" explore the colonial world of "subject" and "other" through the roles of Miranda and Caliban. Dabydeen presents a poetic explication of the East Indians' centuries-old longing for social healing and inclusion. However, in the presentation of the East Indian as Caliban"deformed," he initially maintains the same polemics as the colonizers: black man as socially, economically, and politically inferior. In his recall of a date with "Kate\Miranda\colonialism," the rendering of the black man as deformed and deficient in "The Seduction" is highlighted in Caliban's inability to gain control via the sexual act:
She said her name was Kate
And whether he would mate
On such and such a date
Or else tonight before too late
Before the pause to contemplate
Before the history and the hate.

I cannot come to you tonight
With monstrous organ of delight
I have no claw no appetite
I am not Caliban but sprite
But weakness flutterance and flight
An insect scurrying from the light. (Coolie Odyssey 30)

Dabydeen uses a semiotic typographic strategy as he separates the discourse by placing Kate/"subject" on the left and Caliban/"object" on the right. In so doing, he suggests the inability of two people separated by "history and hate" to "mate." In his placement of the dialogue of the male to the far right, Dabydeen suggests the East Indian is relegated to a marginal status. Ironically, he further disempowers self and his people by rejecting the image of Caliban through his assertion that he is "sprite" or Ariel, an "airy" or inconsequential being.

He suggests further denigration of self as he evokes the "nasty" word, "cannibal" ("I have no claw no appetite"), to describe his lack of motivation/"appetite." The Spanish named the Carib people, characterized as warlike, caribal from which comes the English term cannibal (Rogozinski 17). In actuality, however, the Carib people did not eat human
meat on a regular basis; cannibalism was a component of a religious rite in which the captors tortured, killed, and ate the bravest of the warriors captured in battle (17). Additionally, only certain organs (such as the heart where emotion and bravery were thought to reside) were eaten.

Dabydeen’s cannibalistic imagery appears to support the issue that Europeans still harbor mythical notions of black Caribbeans as savages; however, upon closer scrutiny, he appears to highlight the misunderstanding of the term, cannibal. "Catching Crabs" evokes "fond" memories of childhood "cannibalism," in the family "crab-feasts;" however, such memories are discarded as demeaning and valueless for the Indo-Caribbean living in England, Canada, or the United States of America. The young adults now voluntarily "leave behind a mess of bones and shells" suggesting the shedding of savage behavior during their "crab feasts" synonymous with the shedding of their indigenous culture for an Anglicized apartment life and a university education:

Tonight we’ll have one big happy curry feed,

We’ll test out who teeth and jaw strongest

Who will grow up to be the biggest

Or who will make the most terrible cannibal.

We leave behind a mess of bones and shell

And come to England and America

Where Ruby hustles in a New York tenement

And me writing poetry at Cambridge . . . (Coolie Odyssey 44)

Such a skewed representation, in literature, of the black population in the Caribbean region can be traced back to the inability of the colonizer to see differences as anything other than negative. Since writing can be an effective tool in perpetuating myth as well
as truth, it is evident that a great deal of the colonial and post-colonial literature presents
the black Caribbean population as substandard, marginalized, and in need of
"reformation" from their "deformed" Caliban-state. In late twentieth-century post-
colonial discourses, critics of European encounters with other cultures, such as Hulme
and Todorov, have exposed Columbus's position regarding the Caribs, resulting in a
skewed modernist system of representation (Kubayanda 176). Other kinds of European
writing (from Shakespeare’s *Tempest* to Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* to the works of Carey,
Conrad, Kipling, and other colonial writers) have contributed to perpetuating this
negative recognition (176).

In addition to introducing the issue of cannibalism in his use of the Caliban trope,
Dabydeen focuses on the "relationship" between Miranda and Caliban rather than the
relationship between Prospero and Caliban. In doing so, Dabydeen inverts the trope in
what he contends is an expansion of the thematic meanings which lie behind the Miranda-
Caliban-Prosero trope. In an interview, Dabydeen contends that the inversion of this
trope extends beyond retaliation for colonial oppression:

... By shattering them [myths] in your own personal way, you not only shatter
them you alter them profoundly. So it may be that Miranda becomes a whore, or
else she becomes the virgin who lysts after our dark skins and tropical experiences,
or whatever... I don't think it is sufficient just to curse the master with his own
tongue; it would mean you are not progressing beyond retaliation, reaction. I think
what you have to do is to revise the myths in a creative way, and in so doing
perhaps reveal hidden or original layers of meaning. In other words, it is not
sufficient to rape Miranda, because rape is destructive. It is better to love her, the
sexual romance peopling the isles with new Prosperos. (qtd. in Binder 78-79)
Dabydeen, in his articulation of "peopling the isles with new Prosperos" as opposed to "peopling the isles with new Calibans," subscribes to the Western notion of Caliban as "a savage and deformed slave" both physically and linguistically. Prospero, "the right Duke of Milan/conquering magician," becomes the chosen type to people the isles—a human capable of changing to fit the situation. Consequently, Dabydeen’s "peopling" suggests the Indo-Caribbeans’ need to meld in the creation of a person physically unlike "self" which tragically leads to the eradication of any movement toward mental and emotional empowerment. Further, if Dabydeen’s assertion is to be interpreted at face value, then, Caliban’s language will be rendered impotent, effectively making him and all the "Calibans" of the Caribbean region mute. Houston A. Baker, Jr., in "Caliban’s Triple Play," offers another perspective on this issue of Caliban, language, and empowerment:

The icons or pictures of Caliban’s island reflect the usurpations of the Renaissance West—a social world of displaced knowledge-seekers that mocked (to distraction) honestly salvific people like Gonzalo. A shared nature as language—as a fruitful ecology of communication—was, thus, subjected to usurpation by men who refused to brook difference. Tyranny demanded self-sameness and subjugation . . . (392)

In pursuit of this "self-sameness and subjugation" which Baker speaks about, Dabydeen’s Caliban "romances" Miranda, a mother/lover figure, in his desire to "lose" himself in a European education and lifestyle in his search for selfhood. Yet, Dabydeen’s "Caliban" cannot move beyond the images of colonialism (sugar cane, sun, slave vessel) which impede his ability to transcend his perceived, and largely self-acknowledged, status as "savage-deformed-other." Miranda, as the personification of European promises of empowerment, is "created" by Caliban in his effort to access the "magical" abilities of a European Prospero. Rather than empowered, Dabydeen’s Caliban in "Miranda" is
reduced to a "frail slave vessel" in the face of a relentless "sun" which represents the
certainty and power of colonial oppression (the "sun") in the post-colonial Caribbean:

That when he woke he cried to dream again
Of the scent of her maternity
The dream of the moon of her deep spacious eye
Sea-blue and bountiful
Beyond supplication or conquest
A frail slave vessel wracked upon a mere pebble of her
promise.
And the sun resumed its cruelty
And the sun shook with imperial glee
At the fantasy. (Coolie Odyssey 33)

The empowerment that the black man seeks in the arms of the white woman
repeatedly falls short of his expectations; she sees him as "goldleaf or edge of assegai
(spear)." Additionally, Caliban’s failure to find "healing" in the arms of the colonial
oppressor (England) signifies the inability of one racial and/or cultural entity to find a
meaningful identity through negation of "self" and acceptance of "other," particularly
when the self is viewed as a primitive curiosity as in "Caliban."

The first night
I endured your creation
We talked desperately
Foraging the details of my youth
Like two tramps at a tip:
Finding riches among the rubble was your Romance.
I remember diving into the pit but coming up
Glittering in your eye
Goldleaf or edge of assegai: ... (Coolie Odyssey 34)

Dabydeen inserts a Hindu image to illustrate his dual reference to the white woman as "creator" and "destroyer":

You were always bountiful with fantasy,
Fashioning me your Image or casting me Native:
White woman, womb of myth, foundry or funeral pyre
Where like a Hindu corpse I burn and shrink
To be reborn to your desire! (34)

It is ironic that Dabydeen highlights the curiosity of the Europeans about the black people of the Caribbean because for so long (and still) blacks in the Caribbean have viewed themselves as "other" rather than "subject." In a dramatic juxtaposition of the known/unknown and white/black in "New World Words," Dabydeen sparks a discourse based on an inversion of the historical presentation and perception of black peoples in the Caribbean. The European civilization is presented as a bird (pigeon) with dulling plumage looking for new worlds (the black Caribbean) to conquer to enliven their static "elderly civilization."

Dabydeen’s poetic discourse takes a dramatic turn in his employment of the pigeon as a symbol. The pigeon (the white woman/Miranda) is symbolic of a person easily duped suggesting that these machinations of romance by Caliban are not demeaning to him but are employed to "conquer" the enemy under the guise of romance. This clever insertion of the "pigeon symbol" by Dabydeen strips away the "exotic mystification" the white woman insists upon extracting from her "relationship" with the black Caribbean.
Consequently, Dabydeen renders Miranda/colonial oppression as a slowly, but clearly, diminishing force. More importantly, the "pigeon symbol" serves to repair the movement of Dabydeen’s discourse from one which denigrates the black Caribbean people to one of empowerment:

And his speech was plain and impotent
As English drizzle on gritty pavement-stone,
No strange, lingering, soulful fiction
Of forest flute
Nor bark of trapped beast,
The darkness of his skin enfolded
No bewitchment.
Whilst she, in the dull plumage
Of her elderly civilization,
Empty, expressionless,
Fat with boredom, familiar, sluggish
Like a London pigeon in a dreary London street,
Longing to be startled into primeval flight,
Longing for the giddiness of hummingbird
Sipping at brilliant flower. (Coolie Odyssey 37)

David Dabydeen’s language is infused with an undeniable vigor and physicality which portends a series of dangerous situations. In Slave Song his language evokes the subversive psychological patterning of the slave and indentured laborer in "creating ways," whether mental or physical, to control their lives which had become montages of degradation, disempowerment, and disfranchisement. Dabydeen effectively "rewrites"
the narrative of black peoples in comprised situations in their own language, Caribbean Creole, and in doing so negates the traditional tropes of the white Western tradition. His Slave Song is a linguistic challenge for those readers and critics who cannot and will not appropriate the time and effort to decode the messages of the black Caribbean. Yet, according to Dabydeen, Caribbean Creole in its "barbaric energy and brokeness" conveys the "vulgarity" of the Caribbean people’s lives, colonial and post-colonial, with its dearth of "grace, peace, or politeness" ("On Writing Slave Song" 46) as the end results of oppression.

While Dabydeen writes about the East Indian experience within the larger Caribbean tradition, he also effectively accesses the experiences of blacks living and working in England. The British black, as a writer, occupies a strange berth in writing to his "audience" who Dabydeen portrays in 'Coolie Odyssey" as largely "congregations of the educated," and white. Dabydeen, then, and other black writers in England, are challenged with inviting these "congregations" into the lives of the black Caribbean people with its sheer intensity of pain mingled with moments of pleasure extracted from oppression. Slave Song undeniably serves to alienate those that cannot successfully navigate the linguistic terrain of the black Caribbean people, yet Coolie Odyssey appropriates language that is linguistically accessible to the pluralistic community within England, throughout the post-colonial world, and, importantly, the entire Anglophone post-colonial world.

In the presentation of two distinct linguistic styles in his poetic collections (Slave Song and Coolie Odyssey), Dabydeen presents Ma’s question on how the British will navigate the meaning of his "language" in the prophetically powerful poem, "Ma Talking Words":
And how she go understand all that burden and fruit
You bear for we?
And how she go crave your soul and seed
Who always eat plenty
From different pot? (Coolie Odyssey 40)

Dabydeen addresses the need to accommodate his audiences at every level and does not ignore the need to effectively convey the history of black people in language that reflects the ethos of a complex period in history that forever altered the lives of the people of African and East Indian descent in the Anglophone Caribbean. Dabydeen’s poetry alters the traditional landscape of poetic discourse, rendering the conventions of critical commentary reserved for traditional and some modernist forms of poetry inadequate. He forces the literary critic and the literary community, at large, to read closely for the pluralistic messages embedded in his unique linguistic presentation of the black Caribbean experience.
Chapter Six

Home at Last: The Caribbean as Paradise Regained

Tapestry

The long line of blood
and family ties

An African countenance here
A European countenance there
An Amerindian cast of cheek
An Asianic turn of eye
And the tongue’s salty accommodation
The tapestry is mine
All the bloodstained prints
The scatterlinks
The grafting strand of crinkled hair
The black persistent blooming.

—Grace Nichols

Barbadian Edward Brathwaite, Trinidadian Claire Harris, Jamaican Olive Senior, and Guyanese David Dabydeen, while from different areas of the Caribbean, share a common bond: they all poetically address the concerns of displaced peoples, past and present, living in the Caribbean region. These four poets are also actively engaged in a poetic discourse which addresses the lives of those who took "flight" from the Caribbean for a multitude of reasons, primarily summarized as an access to a better life. Of primal importance to Brathwaite, Harris, Senior, and Dabydeen is their concern with the perpetuation of the stories of their ancestors toward a sense of belonging, a sense of home, for the Caribbeans living in the era of post-colonialism. Additionally, their poetry accesses this continuity of ancestry in connection with the issues of slavery, sexuality, male and female relationships, economic disparity, identity, and the power of the word. The access achieved by Brathwaite, Harris, Senior, and Dabydeen comes at a cost: the duality, in some cases plurality, which is still inherent in the lives of those Caribbeans who yet attempt to find "self" out of the complexity of "being" both black and European.
That the people of the Anglophone Caribbean are influenced, informed, and "created" out of the melding of several major cultures (African, East Indian, Amerindian, and European) is not an issue. What emerges as an issue, and is expressed with urgent sensitivity in the poetry of these four writers, is the inimical relationship, which acts as a roadblock on the journey to identity and selfhood, still existent among the cultural factions in the Caribbean region today. While the relationship among the major cultural groups of the Anglophone Caribbean is undeniably symbiotic due to "culture-melding," there still exists a clear polarization characterized by the ongoing discourse of separateness relating to race and color. The question emerges, then as Brathwaite asks in *The Arrivants*: "Where then is the nigger’s home?"

In coming to poetic terms with the issues of selfhood, cultural identity, and home, Brathwaite, Harris, Senior, and Dabydeen present enslavement as the major factor in the schisms which have and still define the relationships among the various cultural and racial entities in the Caribbean region. The presentation of slavery as a massive and destructive control mechanism is panoramically presented in Brathwaite and Dabydeen’s poetry in their collections *The Arrivants* and *Slave Song*, respectively. Their presentation is panoramic in their coverage of virtually all aspects and effects of slavery. Both poets examine, without compromise, the psychological and physical devastation of enslaved men, women, and children. With an emphasis on the impact of slavery on the individual, Brathwaite and Dabydeen effectively present portraits of individual pain which propagated collective chaos in marital relationships and families. Consequently, the reader is provided with a poetic examination of the plural effects which slavery had on people socially, psychologically, and politically. Their poetry clearly illustrates the various devastations of slavery as a means by which the Europeans exacted social,
psychological, and political control. Orlando Patterson in *Slavery and Social Death* extends this idea by presenting another aspect, "the cultural facet of authority," of the power-control relationship:

The power relation has three facets. The first is social and involves the threat of violence in the control of one person by another. The second is the psychological facet of influence, the capacity to persuade another person to change the way he perceives his interests and circumstances. And third is the cultural facet of authority, "the means of transforming force into right, and obedience into duty" which, according to Jean Jacques Rousseau, the powerful find necessary "to ensure them continual mastership." (1-2)

Brathwaite and Dabydeen access this violence and "continual mastership" in their exposition of the physical brutality meted out from one human being to another. Brathwaite captures the devastation of his ancestors in "New World A-Comin’" as he speaks to the brutal resolve of the Europeans in bringing their "cargo" to the Caribbean region:

> Watch now these hard men, cold
> clear eye’d like the water we ride,
> skilful with sail and the rope and the tackle
> Watch now these cold men, bold
> as the water banging the bow in a sudden wild tide,
> indifferent, it seems, to the battle
> of wind in the water . . . (The Arrivants 11)

While Brathwaite’s poetry provides a major exposition of the horrific physicality of slavery, Dabydeen focuses more on the psychological devastation of the enslaved and the
immense "tricks" the mind plays in its fantasies of freedom and revenge. With such a focus, he descriptively demonstrates that slavery is at the core of the Caribbean experience, past and present, as it gives form and color to his poetic messages. At the "core" of his poetry is sugar cane and the power of its desired "sweetness" to transform the lives of those in slavery and indentured servitude to lives of immense and immeasurable bitterness. Dabydeen captures the angst of the enslaved in their fantasies of violence against a European planter's wife in providing a temporary, although not enacted, means of revenge and release of escalating tensions:

But when night come how me dream . . .
Dat yu womb lie like starapple buss open in de mud
An how me hold yu dung, wine up yu waiss
Draw blood from yu patacake, daub am all over yu face
Till yu dutty like me and yu halla (Slave Song 26)

While Brathwaite and Dabydeen primarily examine the impact of slavery and its emasculating effects on the male laborers, Harris and Senior examine the overall impact of slavery on romantic and domestic relationships. Harris is intimately concerned with the usurpation of the female spirit by the white male, yet she presents the "blame" as shared; both the black female and the white male are culpable. She illustrates in "Nude on a Pale Staircase" the reluctant-willingness of the female to be consumed by the European culture in an effort to belong, to identify with something tangible and powerful. Yet, her absorption by and in European culture has not moved her closer to selfhood and clearly not to cultural identity; she ironically finds herself envious of her relatives who are not as "lucky" as she. In recalling a violent massacre, from which she escaped, she finds
herself more imprisoned by her choice than her relatives who perished. A painful lesson about choices is implicitly highlighted:

    She strips the bed  straightens the rocker  draws the blinds
    remembering she chose  loving him  loving herself  immodestly
    Sudden envy of those others huddled together in the scent of blood surprises searches her (Fables 14)

    Harris places emphasis on the effect of post-colonialism on the family structure as people are geographically separated from each other in their choice of "space-survival."

In her collection Drawing Down A Daughter, she examines, through written conversations with her unborn daughter, the strain which economic survival places on a romantic relationship; her lover chooses to stay in Trinidad and she chooses to stay in Canada to have full access to opportunities to promote her writing. This poetic collection is largely centered on the inability of the man and woman to effectively create a middle ground, "a place where both can live," to further the "rooting" of their unborn daughter. Such a display of rootlessness, in this collection, suggests that the unborn daughter, like her father and mother, will also struggle with issues of selfhood and cultural identity largely due to the fragmentation of her immediate family.

    Senior, like Harris, also accesses these concerns in her examination of the relationship between father and mother in her collection, Talking of Trees. She examines the duality experienced by African Jamaicans which grew out of the seeds of divisive difference planted by a mother and father who had markedly different views about their ancestral heritage and about their hopes for their daughter's future. She presents a marital relationship marred by striving to "wring" sustenance from a land that yields little; tensions mount in the parents' exercise of survival as they pull away from each other
instead of pulling together. Senior depicts the dramatically different world views of the
two parents in their explanation of a plane flying overhead:

green nurtured me
till mules turned circles round the mill
and large dark wings
like War

--Planes bringing bombs, said my father

--Babies, said my mother

(Portents of a split future). (Talking 3)

Senior reveals that the dichotomy felt by many African Jamaicans is, in fact, dually
rather than singularly generated. While the marginalized psychological, political, and
economic status of the African Jamaican people must be attributed to the colonization of
the Caribbean region, it would be a major oversight to ignore the role the ancestors played
in shaping the ideology and aspirations of their children. The mother and father in
Senior’s Talking of Trees highlight the impact of the differing views of mothers and
fathers on the shaping of the world view and aspirations of African Jamaicans of today.

The emphasis on the Caribbean peoples’ pursuit of selfhood and identity pervade the
poetry of Edward Brathwaite, Claire Harris, Olive Senior, and David Dabydeen. Each
poet is acutely aware of the "power of the word" in conveying messages of importance to
Caribbean people. Concurrently, they show how imperative is the possession of a
language in shaping selfhood and cultural identity. These poets often employ Caribbean
"dialect"; however, use of the term “dialect” suggests that there is some higher standard
to which people should adhere in written and verbal communication. Edward Brathwaite
has done much to eradicate this kind of thinking by labeling the pervasively used speech
of the Caribbean people of African descent as "nation language." Brathwaite succinctly addresses the function and power of language for the slave and the slave master in

The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica 1770-1820:

It was in language that the slave was perhaps most successfully imprisoned by his master, 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 . . . (237)

Any discussion of the "(mis-)use" of the English language by the population of Africans and East Indians in slavery and indentured servitude in the Caribbean region is met with stringent debate; however, it is clear that at least four major cultural groups (in terms of population) were instrumental in creating a new language and a new culture: Africans, East Indians, Amerindians, and Europeans. Yet, the European planters were determined not to recognize other cultures through their insistence of the dominance of the European culture. There was a total unwillingness, on the part of the European planters, to accept that the existence of distinct cultures side-by-side could merge in the formation of a language adequate to the needs of the culturally pluralistic population which then, and now, characterizes the Caribbean region. The Europeans were convinced of the supremacy of the English language from their Mother Land in defining a high standard of language to be used by everyone with goals of economic and political gain and social acceptability. Without question, full access to the colonial language was not seen as necessary for Africans, East Indians, and Amerindians as these groups of people were viewed as sub-human by the Europeans. More importantly, full access to the colonial language would have imbued the cultural groups, viewed by the Europeans as marginal, with the power necessary for social, economic, and political mobility.
While there were no methodical efforts to educate all of the people in the mother tongue, supreme efforts were taken to eradicate any use of native language by the Africans and East Indians. J. Edward Chamberlin offers an example of the measures employed by the Europeans in "quieting" the native tongues through a marginalized education for the children and little or none for their parents:

Children were discouraged from speaking their mother tongue and from participating in their family and tribal life, for these were viewed as regressive and pernicious. Instructed in English in school, children were beaten for speaking their native languages, even in recess or in the residences away from home in which they often lived while they were at school. (69)

Claire Harris addresses this systematic dismantling of African culture through education in her essay "Poets in Limbc." Her remembrance of her education is described as "an indoctrination into Western European language, culture, and tradition" (Hunter 259). Olive Senior similarly addresses her personal anguish over such language oppression, along with other culture-robbing tactics, under the guise of educating the masses in her poem "Colonial Girls School." She sums up the rampant abuse of the people of African descent by saying, "Told us nothing about ourselves/There was nothing about us at all" (Talking 26).

In some respects, it appears that some of the messages of "inferiority" of Caribbean Creole were "successfully" implanted in David Dabydeen's mind. While his poetic collection, Slave Song, is written in Creole, Dabydeen does not embrace the language as one of beauty or one that he necessarily feels proud to claim as part of his cultural heritage. He asserts that the language imparts barbaric and savage imagery which supports the pervasive European devaluation and decimation of the Creole language:
I am not so much concerned with the politics of expression as with the virtue of Creole and its resourcefulness in conveying certain experiences. In *Slave Song* I talk about the brokenness of the language, and in the brokenness of the language resides not just a certain barbaric energy, but also the capacity to be experimental with a language; it is almost like using Shakespearean English... The brokenness has a capacity to convey a greater sense of tragedy and pain, of energy...

(qtd. in Binder 76)

Brathwaite and Senior do not agree with Dabydeen’s assessment of the language as "broken and barbaric"; however, they do concur with Dabydeen in his assertion that Caribbean Creole is "resourceful in conveying certain experiences." Senior demonstrates this vividly in her poem, "City Poem," as she comments upon the necessity of a "native tongue" to help her understand the social conditions of her people:

(And if you taught me to speak

with your words would I touch

could I reach beyond the collapse

of garbage cans in hungry streets?) *(Talking 65)*

Brathwaite’s poetry, unquestionably, embraces the power and beauty of Creole in adequately conveying messages relevant to a specific cultural entity; it also examines the centrality of language for selfhood and identity. In his poem "Negus," Brathwaite outlines the impact of the word in empowering disfrockined people; he speaks to opening silent mouths and filling them with words, *their* words to exact a sense of selfhood and identity out of their past and present:

I

must be given words to refashion futures
like a healer’s hand
I
must be given words so that the bees
in my blood’s buzzing brain of memory
will make flowers, will make flocks of birds,
will make sky, will make heaven,
The heaven open to the thunder-stone and the volcano and the up
folds land.
It is not
It is not
it is not enough
to be pauses, to be holes
to be void, to be silent
to be semicolon, to be semicolon;
fling me the stone
that will confound the void
find me the rage
and I will raze the colony
fill me with words
and I will blind your God. (The Arrivants 224)

While Claire Harris does not employ Caribbean Creole as a major technique in her
poetic discourse, she does take liberty with standard English in shaping her messages.
She engages extensively in poetic fragmentation in creating a portrait on the page much
like a visual artist. Where words alone may not adequately convey her messages, the
interaction between word and space captures the essence of her meaning. In a stunning presentation of words and space, Harris "signifies" for those who have been, and remain, voiceless. She is concerned with this voicelessness and places herself as a "voice-bridge" for the many who yet crave the words to express themselves. Harris believes:

We sit back and say, oh well, that’s the way things have to be, other people have suffered worse than you, nothing ever changes, and so nothing ever does. I think my poetry is a witness. I testify to the way things are for some people. For some without a voice. (qtd. in Reid 41)

In the use of language exemplified by Brathwaite, Harris, Senior, and Dabydeen, whether it be "nation language," language incorporating post-modernistic techniques, standard American or British English, or some creative couture of these, each poet makes a powerful statement with language as well as through the messages that the language bears. Furthermore, these four poets of the Anglophone Caribbean demonstrate concerns that extend beyond the portrayal of the Caribbean region as a paradisal escape for tourists; they examine closely the concerns which have been pervasive for centuries in the quest for a paradise regained for its citizens. Brathwaite, Senior, Harris, and Dabydeen use language that extends beyond the confines of colonial-inspired discourse in their exposition of the lives of the black peoples of the Caribbean region; they also use their unique linguistic forms in imparting a sense of pride to people who have for centuries felt that their language was a distortion of some higher form of communication. By establishing their poetic discourse as serious and grounded in the experiential as opposed to fantastical, Brathwaite, Senior, Harris, and Dabydeen have created a challenge for those who are not a part of the communities which their messages surround. Yet, while there is some danger of alienation of audiences beyond those about which these poets
write, their linguistic molding of language is not inaccessible. To understand these poets’ use of language requires a similar level of effort that was necessary for their ancestors to survive in having to synthesize, without choice, their linguistic systems with those of the colonizers. Yet, Creole language is not simplistic; it requires an attention to both the oral tradition, primarily stemming from Africa, and the literary tradition in the Caribbean region which is representative of the creolization of African, Indian, and British cultures.

It is as if the "discovery" of the power of the oral tradition and postmodern linguistic techniques has charted a new journey for Caribbean poets in dismantling the myths about Columbus's "discovery" of the region and its indigenous peoples. Edward Brathwaite, Claire Harris, Olive Senior, and David Dabydeen spark a dialectic with their audiences in merging the old and new, the traditional and modern, and the past and present. These poets, however, are not submerging their audiences in exhibitionistic displays or writing with shock value as their major concern. Their poetic blending of past and present returns the Caribbean people to an expression of their lives in language that is pliable and tangible: "words in which they can live." The Caribbean people have voices through these poets: voices which express their concerns in their own words, their own language. These poets have moved beyond the lamentations of the past in heaping abuse on the heads of those guilty of past atrocities. In place of such vehement discourse is nation language along with postmodern poetic forms which speak of identity, selfhood, and the Caribbean as home.

These four poets move toward reparation, with their unique use of language, for the centuries of deprivation of freedom at every level with an emphasis on language as a defining element in selfhood and identity. In the reclamation of the word, there is power, and Edward Brathwaite, Claire Harris, Olive Senior, and David Dabydeen provide a
pathway to that power through their poetic discourse. Implicit in their poetry is the pride and the hope clearly defined by the embrace of language as a tool to enable Caribbean people to envision, in their own terms, their selfhood and identity. With such models, the citizens of the Caribbean region can perhaps begin to view their home, the Caribbean, as a Paradise Regained.
Works Cited

Primary Sources


Secondary Sources

Articles


Books


