The primary objective of this unit is to familiarise you with poetry from Brathwaite's oeuvre published in his second trilogy and in works of the late 1980s and 1990s. The poetry analysed in this unit is from the collections *Mother Poem* (1977), *Jah Music* (1986) and *Middle Passages* (1993). It demonstrates Brathwaite's broader engagement with Caribbean religious cults, literature and historical antecedents. The unit will also include some details about Brathwaite's recent experiments with poetic forms particularly evident in print and typography.

5.1 The "Video Style"

Reception of Brathwaite's poetry in the eighties and the nineties has shown two contradictory trends. On the one hand he has gained recognition as a poet of international repute and on the other he is finding it increasingly difficult to find publishers for his work. In 1986 he was awarded the Casa de las Américas Prize for Literature for *Roots*, a volume of essays on Caribbean literature and culture. In 1994 he was selected by an international jury of writers as the thirteenth laureate of the Neustadt International Prize for Literature. In the same year the autumn issue of *World Literature Today* was completely devoted to his work and contained articles by internationally renowned critics. It is therefore surprising to learn that many of the writer's completed works, both prose and poetry, have not been accepted for publication on the grounds of there being no market for experimental work.

In my analysis of "Ananse" I had explained how Brathwaite conceives the role of the poet in the Caribbean as similar to that of the *griot* in African cultures. The *griot* is both carver of wood and singer of songs thus combining the aural and visual aspects of creation. Brathwaite speaks of his recent creative output in these terms:

When I started off, everything I did I read aloud into the tape recorder. I also wanted it to look interesting. Now, with the
computer, I have really gone into that, into what I call my Video style.
I think that oral traditions do have a very strong visual aspect. In the African tradition, they use sculpture. Really, what I'm trying to do is create word-sculptures on the page, but word-song for the ear. (qtd. in Rigby 708)

The poetry in *The Zea Mexican Diary*, *Middle Passages*, *Barabajan Poems* and the prose of *Dream Stories* is written in this style. Brathwaite's "word sculptures" explore the capacity of the computer to render graphically the nuances of language by experimenting with several font and type styles. The reader is unsettled by the different fonts and types used on the same page to indicate tonal quality. For instance a word spoken in a higher than normal pitch in ordinary conversation might be in large type and be highlighted or italicized. Words are broken, deliberately misspelt, given faulty punctuation, interspersed with brackets, asterisks,
abbreviations and other characteristics deliberately in opposition to the poetic conventions of "Prospero's language." As Elaine Savory has observed, Brathwaite has forwarded the idea of Caliban returning home, linguistically and spiritually, to his mother Sycorax. There is more freedom for Caliban in turning to his mother's language than in using his energy to curse Prospero. He recounts his relationship to the computer, his aide in the reclamation of his mother's language, in "Letter Sycorax" from Middle Passages:

Dear mamma
i writing you dis letter/wha?
guess what! pun a computer o/kay?
like i jine de mercantilists?
well not quite . . .
if yu cyaan beat prospero
whistle

Brathwaite has spoken of Sycorax as the muse in the computer. This is a playful way of accounting how the computer has become an ally in his poetic challenge to Prospero's world (Savory 228). This extract contains many features of the video style such as the use of italics, slashes and lack of punctuation in the first and last lines. It is, however, fairly close to normal type settings which makes it relatively easy to publish unlike some of Brathwaite's other poems.

Given above is a page from Barabajan Poems. You can see for yourself the difficulty which any publisher would face in printing this, and yet, since the work has come out in print, the problems are not as insurmountable as they are made out to be. The reluctance of leading publishing houses like Oxford University Press who were associated with Brathwaite's early work can therefore be seen as Prospero's containment of Caliban's rebellion against language (Savory 221).

5.2 ANGEL/ENGINE

5.2.1 Shango/Ogun

Worship of the Yoruba deities Shango and Ogun is concretised in this poem through the chants of the worshipers and an enactment of possession. The poem captures ideas of transition between the indigenous world and modernity, between the African past and the Caribbean present, as well as the presence of the one in the other. Ogun is the Yoruba patron deity of war, iron and metallic instruments; Shango is the god of the thunderbolt and lightning. Together the Ogun/Shango persona is a spirit of fire, energy and iron resolve in the breasts of the subjugated (Rohlehr, "Rehumanization" 175). In his essay "The African Presence in Caribbean Literature" Brathwaite has outlined the attack launched on African forms of worship and socialization by the plutocracy in colonial times. This was intended to prevent the slaves from grouping as a community. The legislation passed against cults of Shango worship, obeah and cumfu persisted in many Caribbean countries like Trinidad and Surinam even after independence. However, these spiritual traditions have become politically important as defences against oppression in recent times. In this poem the poor woman who joins a worship group is one of the common exploited masses for whom possession by loas (gods) is a possible means of escape from her existence.

The setting for the rituals of this worship group is a zionist chapel rather like the one described by Walcott, "a tin-roofed shed in the back of a choirmaster's house, half shango-chapel, half Presbyterian country vestry . . ." ("WTS" 28). Here the repetitive chanting induces a state of transcendence in the chanters. As Brathwaite has explained in The Arrivants, possession is induced by the drums or by rhythmic hand-clapping and chanting. The celebrant's body acts as a kind of lightning conductor for god, the "divine electrical charge" becomes grounded so that the earth and the things
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of the earth assume a special significance. He also adds that this experience was commonplace in the early Christian churches which, in many ways, were more "African" than "European" (271). The reference to Christianity is significant because of the relationship of some shango cult beliefs to vodoun in which Christian saints are merged into the rituals. The title of the poem indicates this by the word "Angel" included in it. The second word of the title refers to the engine of the locomotive which has become one of the guises of Shango, god of thunder and creativity, in the New World. Their almost-similar pronunciation and the slash between them points to the identity-in-difference between the Christian and African forms of worship mentioned by Brathwaite in his notes to The Arrivants.

5.2.2 The Text

Angel/Engine

1

The yard around which the smoke circles
    is bounded by kitchen, latrine and the wall
of the house where her aunt died, where

her godma brought her up, where she was jumped
    upon by her copperskin cousin
driving canemen to work during crop

time, smelling of rum and saltfish;
    who gave her two children when, so she say,
her back was turn to the man, when she wasn't lookin.

the children grew up quietly
    the boy runnin bout like a pump-kin vine, the girl name christofene

they went to st saviour primary school
    then the boy sit down an win a exam
an gone down de hill to de college.

christie still bout here turnin foolish
    she us:ed to help me to sew
an mek up de cloze pun de singer

sewin machine: but she fingers gone dead
    and she int got eyes in she head.
then one two tree wutless men come up in here

an impose a pregnant pun she.
    one tek
but de other two both foetus dead.

now she sittin up dere wid she hann in she lapp in de corner
    rockin sheself in a chair by de window
and as far i know, she too cud be dead

2

i tek up dese days wid de zion
we does meet tuesdee nights in de carpenter shop

praaze be to god
i hear de chapman hall preacher shout out
praaaaze be to god

an i hear de black wings risin
and i feel de black rock rock

praaaaze be to
praaaaze be to
praaaaze be to gg

praaaze be to
praaaaze be to
praaaaze be to gg

an i holdin my hands up high in dat place
and de palms turn to

praaaaze be to
praaaaze be to
praaaaze be to gg

an the fingers flutter an flyin away
an i cryin out

praaaaze be to
praaaaze be to
praaaaze be to softly

an de softness flyin away

is a black
is a bat
is a flap

o de kerosene lamp

an it spinn
an it spinn
an it spinn-

in rounn
and it stagger-
in down

to a gutter-
in shark
o'de worl'

praaaaze be to
praaaaze be to
praaaaze be to gg

praaaaze be to
praaaaze be to
praaaaze be to gg

de tongue curlin back
an muh face flowin empty
all muh skin cradle an crackle an ole
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i is water of wood
ants
crawlin crawlin

i is spiders weavin
away

my ball
headed head

is ancient an
black an it

fall from de top
of de praaze be to

tree to de rat-
hearted coco-
ut hill.

so uh walk-
in an talk-
in: uh stepp-
in an call-
in thru
echo-

in faces
that barren an bare of my name

thru crick.
crack

thru crick

thru crick

a creak-
in thru crev-
ices, reach-
in for i-
icicle light
who haunt me

who haunt me

my head is a cross

road

who haunt me

is red
who haunt me
is blue

is a man
is a moo
is a ton ton macou

is a coo
is a cow
is a cow-

itch

*bub-a-dups*
*bub-a-dups*
*bub-a-dups*

huh

*bub-a-dups*
*bub-a-dups*
*bub-a-dups*

hah
is a hearse
is a horse
is a horseman

is a trip
is a trick
is a seamless hiss

that does rattle these i: ron tracks

*bub-a-dups*
*bub-a-dups*
*bub-a-dups*

huh

*bub-a-dups*
*bub-a-dups*
*bub-a-dups*

hah

is a scissors gone *shhaaaa*

under de rattle an pain

t  de go
* huh *

t  de go
* shhhaaaa *

an a black curl callin my name
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praaaze be to
praaaze be to
praaaze be to
sh
praaaze be to
praaaze be to
praaaze be to
shang
praaaze be to
sh
praaaze be to
gg
praaaze be to
praaaze be to
praaaze be to

ssssssssssssssshhhhhhhhhhh
3
an de train comin in wid de rain ...

Glossary

copperskin: brown-skinned

canemen: workers in sugarcane plantations

saltfish: salted dried codfish imported from Canada, historically as standard food for slaves, but currently a valued item in many Caribbean dishes. The word is also used as a derogatory reference to somebody of a low class or character. Both senses are implied here.

Christofene: creolized version of the name Christophe

wutless: worthless

zion: name for nonconformist chapel

chapman: literally pedlar but probably used here by Brathwaite because of its similarity with chaplain, a clergyman officiating in a private chapel.

flap: broad hanging piece attached by one side only

shark: "sharking" in Caribbean vocabulary is a word used for greedy, gluttonous behaviour

water: a disease which causes swelling of the body with fluid
5.2.3 Analysis

The "womanist" experience is central to this poem in which the first section mentions a series of relationships between women: the house belongs to the subject's aunt, she was brought up by her "godma" and has a "foolish" daughter named "christofene." The poverty-stricken surroundings are evoked in the first few lines with a mention of the communal yard around which the kitchen, the "latrine" and the house is grouped. The setting is typical of lower working-class neighbourhoods as described in H.G. De Lisser's novels at the turn of the century. De Lisser was a Jamaican novelist whose works Jane's Career and Susan Proudleigh appeared posthumously in the 1950s. He was one of the few writers to evince interest in working-class female subjects. Brathwaite's exploration of this sensibility shows the influence of this early twentieth century writer. Like De Lisser the women in Brathwaite's poetry are survivors. The unnamed female subject central to this poem lives through orphanage, poverty and sexual exploitation by her drunkard cousin who is probably an overseer at a sugarcane plantation. The low character of this man is indicated not only in the derogatory reference to him as "smelling of rum and saltfish" but also in his use of the woman as an object for his perverse sexual needs. Of the two children she has out of her sexual encounters with him only the girl is identified by name. While the boy is physically and mentally agile and succeeds in winning a scholarship for higher studies, the girl is "foolish" or simple minded. She is another one in the family's line of women taken advantage of by worthless men. That she wasn't always listless and foolish is said so by her mother to whom she was a help in her work of stitching people's clothes. It is only when she loses her child or "foetus," as her mother clinically observes, that she becomes her present self. What happens to the one child she conceived and gave birth to, as the word "tek" indicates, is not made clear. However, from the inactive, depressed state in which she sits by the window in her rocking chair the evident surmise would be that this child too must have died soon after birth.
While the first part alternates between the poet's and his subject's (the woman's) voice, the second section of the poem is entirely the latter's first person account. She describes how she joins a group of worshippers who meet every Tuesday night in a carpenter's shop. The plebian origins of this worship group with a "chapman hall preacher" ensure some kind of solidarity on non-exploitative terms for people like this poor woman. Her experience is interspersed with the chants of the preacher and the congregation. Although she undergoes a transcendental experience in which she feels her fingers reaching towards heaven, she cannot bring herself to join in the chanting. It is almost as if she chokes on the word god, unable to pronounce it, "præae be to gg." Like her fingers she feels her "soft" voice ascending upwards. This she compares to a bat and to the flap of a kerosene lamp. The bat's flight and the flame of the lamp both convey a sense of movement. She experiences possession which might be the result of the chanting she tries to participate in. Her voice raised in praise seems to have acquired a will of its own for it eddies round and round like a whirlpool and then finally descends to the lower depths of this materialistic world. Probably what is being suggested is that worship is a temporary solace and that finally adherents in any belief have to cope with the actualities of the world, however sordid they might be.

This realization taken in conjunction with her inability to articulate the name of "god," whom the others are praising, brings grief to her. Although her tongue curls back to utter the word the effort is a wasted one and brings tears which run down her "crackled," wrinkled skin. She feels that she has incurred the wrath of the deity she is unable to invoke. The feeling of guilt manifests itself in the sensations of her body swelling, ants crawling, getting trapped in a web of her own "weavin" and falling from heights. The call and response pattern of the chanting is indicated through the formula "crick crack." Echoing the preacher's voice the people in the congregation seem to be linked to each other. But this is only a superficial unity, for apart from the name of "god" they do not know each other even by name. In their search for the "light" of belief they are like mice digging upwards from the earth. The woman feels she is haunted by a presence which, going by the colour "red," could be a shango visitation. Rather than feel elated by this experience she feels disturbed, equating this with the presence of an inquisitive, meddlesome, foolish person. The series of images given here is linked by sound rather than strict logic. See for instance the passage in which she calls her visitant a cook and a manipulating person who is as irritating as the "cow-itch" plant. In another passage he is seen in conjunction with images of death: "hearse," "horse," "horseman." The liberation she feels is a "trip" of joy but since it is short-lived it is also a "trick."

An additional association of Shango, linked not only with railroads but more commonly with bursts of rage against dishonesty and injustice, occurs not only in this poem but also in "Word Making Man," a poem from Brathwaite's Middle Passages. The last part of the poem stresses these associations repeatedly through the various sound effects. The "rattle and the pain" of this woman is temporarily suspended in the mysticism of possession. Hers is not anger against an unjust society but rather a hope of amelioration. This repository of this hope is the being under whose influence she believes herself to be even if she is not able to utter this deity's name. The god/shango duality becomes an unresolvable choice for her since she is unable to speak either word. The last line of the poem contains a reference to the "train," one of the guises of Shango. It seems to proffer the view that caught between the Christian/African world views, each with their attendant religious beliefs, it is the latter at which people will arrive after achieving some kind of a resolution of these almost contradictory belief systems which are the legacy of colonialism to Caribbean society.

5.2.4 Breathweight

"Angel/Engine" is from the final section of Brathwaite's 1977 collection Mother Poem. This section is entitled "Koumfort" and in its the possibility of spiritual
renewal is imagined. Coined from the Haitian creole word for temple, *houmfo*, the title of this section suggests ways in which African connections are preserved (Dash 206). Religion is one such way and this poem details its performative nature primarily through the oral effects captured in it. I have called this section “Breathweight” which is a Brathwaite neologism and a pun on his own name, particularly apt in terms of the way in which his work plays on the voice. The sound of the steam engine hissing is onomatopoeically reproduced in the reiteration of "bub-a-dups." Besides signalling the presence of Shango it probably indicates the location of the area where the meetings of these worshippers are held. I pointed out at the beginning of the analysis that this is a working class neighbourhood. It could well be that it is a shanty town clustered, like many such towns, near the railway tracks. The sound effects interspersed through the poem are also present in the form of explosions of breath: "huh" and "hah." These have been explained as the primal sounds of the loa's lovemaking and as the early stages of divine language when "words were breathed sounds scarcely differentiated from one another" (Roheleh, "Rehumanization" 199). Under the influence of the loa, vocabulary becomes monosyllabically primal. As the woman becomes completely possessed by the loa her voice is subsumed until towards the end the hissing sound has only Shango as its referent.

5.3 STONE

5.3.1 Death of the Author

Political censorship and violence is a feature of contemporary Caribbean culture. Martin Carter of Guyana, an activist, poet and historian has described how he was arrested in Trinidad and later extradited to Guyana, his native country, only to face three months at a detention camp. This was in 1953 when Britain imposed direct rule on Guyana. Carter's *Poems of Resistance*, published in 1954, arose out of this experience of persecution for his nationalist political activities. Edgar Mittleholzer from British Guiana faced rejection slips from his British publishers for nearly twelve years. He had attempted suicide in 1936. Eric Roach of Trinidad who wrote lyric poetry with peasants as his subjects swam out to sea in 1974. The bomb which killed the radical Guyanese historian Walter Rodney in 1980 was labelled a successful suicide attempt by the authorities. In an address given at the Guyana Prize for Literature, 1987, Gordon Rohlehr commented on the detrimental effect of the Caribbean social, political and cultural conditions on writers: "Under such states, such unchange, some writers have chosen the amnesia of alcohol. Others, like Mittleholzer, Leroy Calliste, Eric Roach, the painter and folklorist Harold Simmons, committed suicide by rope, poison, the knife or fire" (qtd. in Markham 40). I use the word "Death" in the title of this section not metaphorically (as in Roland Barthes's essay with the same title) but literally. Silencing here is not only by the imposition of censorship and publishing restrictions but more often by the death, self-imposed or murderous, of the author.

The life and career of Michael or Mikey Smith (1954-83) prove that even death may not succeed in silencing a revolutionary voice. Smith was born in Kingston, Jamaica and came from a working class background (his father was a mason and his mother a factory worker). Although he claimed to have been educated on the streets he did graduate from the Jamaican School of Drama in 1980. There he used to "hang out" a lot with Brathwaite with whom he became, in Brathwaite's own words, "quite close" as a student. Smith's rise as a performer of his own work was meteoric. He performed at the Carifesta (Caribbean Festival of Arts) in Barbados in 1981, at the First International Bookfair of Radical Black and Third World Books in London in 1982, did a B.B.C. commentary and a UNESCO performance in Paris in the same year. On 17 August 1983 he was stoned to death by four men at Stony Hill, St. Andrew, Jamaica, during the election campaign. Brathwaite's poem "Stone" from the 1986 collection *Jah Music* is a tribute to Mikey Smith. In the same year Race Today
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Publishers published a collection of Smith's work, *It A Come*, selected and introduced by the Jamaican poet Mervyn Morris. Records of Smith's performances specially "Mi Cyaan Believe It," his film for the BBC along with Brathwaite's poem and Morris's collection of his work, ensure that death has not silenced his voice which continues to influence poets and performers.

5.3.2 The Text

**Stone**  
*(for Mikey Smith)*

When the stone fall that morning out of the johncrow sky  
if was not dark at first, that opening on to the red sea sky  
but something in my mouth like feathers, blue like bubbles and light  
carrying signals & planets & the sliding curve of the world like a water picture  
in a raindrop when the pressure drop

When the stone fall that morning i  
couldn't cry out because my mouth was full of beast & plunder  
as if i was gnashing badwords among tombstones  
as if angry water was beating up against the curbstones of the palisadoes  
as if that road up Stony Hill round the bend by the churchyard on the way to the post office was a bad bad dream and the dream was on fire all the way past the white houses higher up the hill and the ogogs bark ing all teeth & furnace and my mother like she upside down up a tree like she was screaming and nobody i could hear could hear a word i shouting  
even though there were so many poems left and the tape was switched on & running  
and the green light was red and they was standing up everywhere in London & Amsterdam & at UNESCO in Paris & in West Berlin & clapping & clapping & clapping & not a soul on Stony Hill to even say amen. and yet it was happening happening the fences began to crack in my skull and there were loud *hoodooosongs* like guns going off them ole time magnums or like fireworks where i dreadlocks were in fire  
and the gaps where the river coming down and the dry gully where my teeth used to be smiling and my tuff gong tongue that used to press against them & parade pronunciation

now unannounce and like a black wick in i head & dead  
and it was like a heavy heavy riddim low down in i belly bleeding dub and there was like this heavy black dog thumping in i chest & pumping murderemmmmmmm  
and my throat like dem tie like dem tie a tight tie around it, twist ing my neck quick crack quick crack and a never wear neck tie yet and a laughing more blood and spittin out lawwww wwwwww and i two eye lock to the sun and the two sun staring back bright from the grass and i
bline to de butterfly flittin. but i hear de tread of my heart
the heavy flux of the blood in my veins silver tambourines
closer & closer. st joseph band crashing &
closer & bom sicai sica boom ship bell &
closer & bom sicai sica boom ship bell &
when the saints...

and it was like a wave on Stony Hill caught in a crust of sunlight
and it was like a broken schooner into harbour muffled in the silence
of its wound
and it was like the blue of peace was filling up the heavens with its
thunder
and it was like the wind was growing skin the skin had hard hairs
hardening
it was like Marcus Garvey rising from his coin. stepping towards his
people
crying dark. and every mighty word he trod the ground fell dark &
hole behind
him like it was a scream i did not know and yet it was a scream. my
ears were bleeding
sound. and i was quiet now because i had become that sound

the sunlit morning washed the coral limestone harsh against the soft
volcanic ash
i was & it was slipping past me into water & it was slipping past me
into root
i was & it was slipping past me into flower & it was ripping upward
into shoot
while every tongue in town was lashing me with spit & cutrass wit &
ivy whip &
wrinkle jumbimum. it was like warthog grunting in the ground. and
children run
ning down the hill run right on through the splashes
that my breathing made when it was howl & red & bubble and sparrow
twits pluck tic & tapeworm from the grass
as if i-man did never have no face as if i-man did never in this place

When the stone fell that morning out of the johncrow sky
i could not hold it back or black it back or block it off or limp away
or roll it from me into memory or light or rock it steady into night be
cause it builds me now and fills my blood with deaf my bone with dumb &
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Caribbean Poetry

dreadlocks: members of the Rastafarian cult usually wear their hair uncut and falling in long, plaited or matted locks about their shoulders.

dub: dub music has a two beat rhythm and is associated with Black folk-culture in the Caribbean.

tambourines: small drum held in the hand with loose jingling metal discs.

band: at Carnival a group of masqueraders in highly ornate costumes illustrating in particular sections a particular theme (historical, topical or imaginary). They jump through the streets to the music of a steelband.

boom: a big bass drum used by masquerade bands

schooner: a ship with more than one mast

Marcus Garvey: founder of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA) in Jamaica in 1914. It was later based in USA and gave rise to Garvey's 1922 'Back-to-Africa' repatriation movement.

cutrass: probably 'cutlass,' a labourer's tool for cutting cane, bush, etc.

wrinkle jumbimum: a jumbi is an evil spirit of the dead that assumes human form. In the story "Ol Higue," a Guyanese folktale retold by Ralph Prince, an old woman "wrinkled skin Becky Winter" sheds her skin every night to suck the blood of children.

warthog: a large-headed African swine

5.3.3 Analysis

The poet assumes the persona of Mikey Smith to present the last moments of his life when he was stoned to death. Nature assumes a predatory aspect, the sky is first called threatening or "johncrow" and then later, when the stone comes flying through it, "red sea sky." I think here the allusion is to the waters of the Red Sea parting to allow the Israelites to pass through and then closing in to drown the Pharaoh's soldiers pursuing them. Besides the Biblical allusion the colour "red" also assumes symbolic significance because of the perpetration of violence on the individual whose thoughts constitute the poem. Before the stone hit him there was no darkness but rather a feeling of peace, almost ecstasy, which is compared to a microcosmic view of the world reflected in a drop of water as it falls from the sky.

The persona describes how he was not able to articulate the pain he felt that morning because he seemed to be choking on all the anger, rage, resentment he had within him. The futility of these emotional outbursts against injustice, which Smith expressed in his poetry, is captured in the words "gnashing badwords among tombstones." Other images used to describe the same feelings are: water beating against barriers and the dogs barking with nobody paying any attention to them. This refers to the social and political implications of Smith's poetry which dealt with issues like poverty, education, exploitation of the lower classes, and materialism in contemporary society. The most powerful image conveying futility in the poem is that of the mother hanging upside down from a tree with nobody paying any attention.
to her screams. Please recall that Smith's mother was a factory worker, so this image is probably meant to convey the hapless life-in-death existence of all working class women in general. Looking at this sight the poet "shouts" out his indignation (in verse) but it seems as if his words are wasted, "nobody i could hear could hear a word i shouting." These would also have been the themes of his future poetry had he been given a chance to keep "the tape... switched on and running." Smith had performed his poetry all over Europe and had also given a performance for the UNESCO in 1982. The acclaim he received there is indicated by the reiteration of the word "clapping." This is contrasted with the silence on Stony Hill where there is nobody to pronounce even a blessing on the dying man.

The last moments of Smith's life are described by him in terms of a release of all the emotions which were expressed in his poetry. Fences cracking, guns going off, a river rushing down a gully, dreadlocks on fire are images used to convey both the physical and the emotional effects of the attack. The blood running inside his mouth is like a river flowing down; his tongue has lost its power to speak with the emphasis it previously had. Like a dysfunctional instrument it now has the power only to "unannounce." The only word which comes out, in a "heavy riddim" from the guts, is "murderererrererrr." Life ebbing out of him is experienced as somebody slowly twisting his neck so that the only activity possible is spitting out the blood and uttering the name of the lord. Nature as an unresponsive witness to this act is evinced in the "stare" of the sun and the "flittin" of the butterfly. In these few moments before death he becomes acutely conscious of usually unnoticed functions like the flow of blood in the veins. This natural bodily music is like the music played by "bands" at Carnival. The masqueraders in Carnival select a particular theme each year whether historical, topical or imaginary. Smith imagines that the band whose music he hears has selected a nautical theme. The noise of the ship bells reproduced in the poem is a reverberation of the sound of his own bodily functions heard by the dying man. Wave-like, the music rises only to hit against the "broken schooner" of his injured body seeking its "harbour."

The sense of peace which he now feels outside is also within him. Experiencing oneness with the elements of nature he speaks of the wind as a tangible presence much like Marcus Garvey come alive. An affinity with Garvey is stressed because of his emphasis on social reform and on Africa as a means of asserting Black identity. Garvey's ideas were considered the precursor of the Rastafarian movement. Smith's links with the Rastas are evinced throughout the poem in his use of the pronoun "i" and a mention of "dreadlocks." Garvey's words did have an effect on people's minds in his times and on subsequent generations. This is presented as his "mighty word[s]" making holes in the ground he trod upon. It impinges upon Smith's consciousness like a "scream" quite unlike his own scream in the first half of the poem which is not heard by anybody. In a way Garvey's demands for social justice and equality were echoed by Smith. He becomes conscious of this only in the moment when his ears "bleed" or are full of sounds which had an impact on him and he recognises "i had become that sound."

Throughout my analysis of the poem I have emphasised how the elements are invested with the emotions of the dying man. These last few lines which I will now discuss reinforce this theme. Fire, water and air are the three elements the poet has already touched upon. Now it is the earth or rather the "soft volcanic ash" which he sees as having regenerative potential. While nature follows its own course, giving rise to life in the form of flowers and other plants, it is men who deviate from the natural course of their lives to attack others. These attacks can be verbally or actively vicious. No poet with a reformist agenda can please everybody. It is to his detractors, who attacked him with a violent "wit" and with threats of possession by "jumbis" or evil spirits, that these lines are directed. They are labelled "warthogs" snouting around for something they can take offence at. Idyllic scenes of children running, birds twittering are juxtaposed against his own agonised breathing which is more like a howl. The birds are as indifferent to his plight as if he never existed. Towards the end of the poem it is the inevitability of the attack which is highlighted:
"i could not hold it back or black it. . . ." The coming together of the object as well as the subject of attack concludes the poem. Unlike an imaginative perception which the poet can retain in his memory and later transmute into poetry, the stone is a concrete material object which leads to the physical effects of impairment and finally death. It is significant that the Smith persona in this poem does not directly affix the blame on his attackers. The stone, from being the instrument of death, comes to epitomise the condition of the man who has died since he becomes as inanimate as it: "i am the stone that kills me."

5.3.4 Performance Poetry

In the Caribbean, poetry is not just words printed on a page but also spoken aloud for an audience. There has been a tradition of poets teaming up with musicians for performances. Even the deejays, who erase the words from records, retaining the music to improvise the words as they perform, have been labelled as poets. Michael Smith belonged to a group of poet-performers called "dub poets" by the British Caribbean performer Linton Kwesi Johnson. Dub poetry is characterised by lines meant to be spoken, generally to a two-beat rhythm, dealing mostly with the life experiences or point of view of Black people. The most celebrated example is Smith's frequently anthologised poem "Me Cyaan Believe It." I give below a few lines from it:

Me seh me cyaan believe it
Me seh me cyaan believe it
Room dem a rent
me apply widin
but as me go een
cockroach rat and scorpion
also come een

(Hinterland 286)

If you read these lines aloud you will be able to get some idea of its beat. As is apparent the lines are about a poor man forced to rent a room (probably in a tenement) infested with insects and animals. It is in this poem that Smith uses the technique Brathwaite has incorporated in his tribute to him: "But me know yuh believe it/ Lawwwwwwwd/ me know yuh believe it." Elsewhere Brathwaite has commented on Smith's remarkable voice and breath control on stage accompanied by the "decorative" noise of the Japanese S90 motorbike: "On the page, Smith's Lawwwwwwwd is the S-90" ("History" 301). Not only is this reproduced in this poem but it is also added to when Brathwaite makes the Smith persona pronounce "murdererrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr
had only got rid of a third)" (221). The beginnings of this moment which inaugurated New World history for Europe is delineated in Brathwaite's poem.

The figure of Columbus, like that of Crusoe, has held a special attraction for Caribbean writers. Brathwaite himself has used the Columbus motif in many poems in *The Arrivants*. As Simon Gikandi has observed: given the consequences of European "modernization" of the New World, it appears almost impossible for Caribbean writers to accept Todorov's claim that "we are all direct descendants of Columbus" and that "it is with him that our genealogy begins" (2). The claims to modernization and discovery made on behalf of Columbus's arrival are all more problematic considering the fact that it was by accident that he came here. He had originally set out to reach Asia by a Western route. To add to this was the fact that his motives were openly mercenary, only tangentially geographical and civilizational only in so far as they helped further the former. This should put to rest any Eurocentric assumptions about Columbus's arrival being universally beneficial and hence a cause of 'celebration.'

5.4.2 The Text

"Colombe"

C

olombus from his after-deck watched stars, absorbed in water,
melt in liquid amber drifting
through my summer air
Now with morning shadows lifting
beaches stretched before him cold & clear
Birds circled flapping flag & mizzen
mast. Birds harshly hawking, without fear
Discovery he sailed for. was so near.

C

olombus from his after-deck watched heights he hoped for
rocks he dreamed. rise solid from my simple water
Parrots screamed. Soon he would touch
our land. his charted mind's desire
The blue sky blessed the morning with its fire
But did his vision
fashion as he watched the shore
the slaughter that his soldliers
furthered here? Pike
point & musket butt
hot splintered courage. Bones
cracked with bullet shot
tipped black boot in my belly. The
whips uncurled desire?

C

olombus from his after-deck saw bearded fig trees. Yellow pouis
blazed like pollen & thin
waterfalls suspended in the green
as his eyes climbed towards the highest ridges
where our farms were hidden
Now he was sure
he heard soft voices mocking in the leaves
What did this journey mean. this
new world mean. dis
cover? or a return to terrors
he had sailed from. Known before?
I watch him pause
Then he was splashing silence
Crabs snapped their claws
And scattered as he walked towards our shore
Caribbean Poetry

Glossary

afterdeck: deck near the rear portion of a ship
amber: yellow coloured
mizzen mast: mast next to the rear of the main mast
hawking: flying with the intention of preying on other birds
Pike: long wooden shaft with pointed metal head
musket: gun
bearded fig tree: a tree with fig like berries, called bearded because of the resemblance of its hanging aerial roots to beards
pouis: a large decorative tree which sheds its leaves and flowers annually

5.4.3 Analysis

The letter "C" in bold type with which each stanza of the poem is superscribed is apparently formed by splitting Columbus's name so that all three stanzas begin with "olumbus." Not only is the letter "C" indicative of the name of the explorer but also of the region he claimed to have discovered: the Caribbean. It also has the same pronunciation as "sea," on which the discoverer sailed to come to this region. Brathwaite's play with language acquires other dimensions if the world "olumbus" is broken into its constituent words, each of which has a typically Caribbean meaning. It can be seen to be made up of "ol," "um" and "bus." Take the first word which means old and implies that Columbus was in his old age when he discovered the region. This is historically accurate for his date of birth is usually taken to be c.1445 which means that he was approaching old age when he landed at San Salvador in 1492. The second constituent "um" is creole for the third person pronoun 'him,' sometimes used derogatively. The last word "bus" is a shortened form of "bluss" meaning to deliver a sudden blow, cut, wound or whip. Taken together these words posit Columbus as the perpetrator of violence which is elaborated upon in the second stanza.

The idea of peace conveyed through Columbus's observation of the stars reflected in the sea gives a false sense of security. Towards morning the sight of the beaches a little distance away marks the goal of his voyage. The poem is from the perspective of a native inhabitant of the area discovered by the voyager. This Amerindian shifts between the first person singular and plural pronouns, "my" and "our," to describe the devastation wreaked on his land and its inhabitants. It is therefore curious to observe that Columbus's anticipation and expectation is also vividly presented in the poem. The Amerindian persona clearly has an omniscient perspective. That the scenario would be a wish fulfilment fantasy for Columbus is borne out by the words that the land is "his charted mind's desire." An idyllic sunrise in the blue skies, the sight of trees native to the region (bearded fig and pouis), the gushing waterfalls are all a fulfilment of his exotic imaginings. This exoticism is undercut by the harsh reality of the violence unleashed on the natives by the soldiers accompanying and following Columbus. Significantly the weapons used for attack: the pike and the musket emblematise the missile which, in Brathwaite's view, is the governing symbol of Western culture. Needless violence is a prefiguration of colonisalism, "whips uncurled desire."
Even the fulfilment of his longed for dream of discovery does not satisfy Columbus. He imagines he hears voices among the trees which mock his life's endeavour. Breaking the word "discovery" into two Brathwaite changes its sense so that it comes to mean an uncovering of "dis," the underworld in classical mythology. This does not mean that the New World is hellish but rather that the impulse which led Columbus to its search was dark in its origin. If he had undertaken the voyage for a cathartic purpose, to rid himself of whatever was dark or negative in him, then clearly that purpose has been defeated. Like the crabs snapping their claws the colonists reveal the ugly side of human nature when they come in contact with those living on the land they claim to have discovered. It is with this potent image of antagonism embedded in human nature that the poem ends.

5.4.4 Seametrics

A previous version of this poem was published in the first volume of The Arrivants. There it is a part of a longer poem from the "Islands and Exiles" section of Rites of Passage and is titled "The Emigrants." Like the Caribbean emigrants to first world countries Columbus is seen as an emigrant to the New World, a placing which somehow represses the historical enormity of Columbus's "emigration" for the Amerindians. This is not surprising for at that stage in his career Brathwaite has admitted to "having written a history book which had said there were no Amerindians. . ." With a change in perspective there came a changed version of the poem. The difference is primarily in the typography. If you look at this poem carefully you will observe that the printed matter tapers upwards from the left and right sides at "c." The last line is longer than the others and forms a kind of a base. Draw lines along the printed matter and observe that the shape is very much like a rocket or a missile. And yet the poem captures the ebb and flow of the sea thematically. Brathwaite has explained this through his concept "seametrics":

I have a thing that I call seametrics, because the sea influences the landscape. The sea influences the nature of poetry—the pauses between the words, the tidalectic nature of the sea; which is different from the notion of the dialect of the marksman: all of these things are there in the poetry.

(qtd. in James 763)

While the 'shape' of the poem is that of the marksman, the pike, the bullet, the missile are symbols of an expansionist like Columbus; the rhythm or dialect is that of the sea. This movement of the water backward and forward is expressed through the close and distant scenes which alternate in the poem. From the stars in the water to the heights of the rocks, from the trees near the shore to the "hidden" farms, all are filtered through the consciousness of the Amerindian persona who imagines Columbus observing them. The juxtaposition of an icon of Western civilization with the rhythm of the New World illustrates their encounter in visual and thematic terms.

5.5 LET US SUM UP

I hope you have read Brathwaite's later poetry carefully and now have an idea about the change in his poetic concerns particularly in the eighties and nineties. The diversity of perspectives exhibited is a particularly noticeable feature. Based on an assessment of his first trilogy many commentators had dismissed Brathwaite as a "folk" poet with all the pejorative connotations of parochialism this word seems to have acquired. The selection of poems in this unit is intended to dispel this erroneous notion about his poetry. Freedom from the shackles of pentameter, conventional punctuation, print format and fixed meanings of words through the evolution of a distinct "video style" is evinced in all the poems analysed.
5.6 QUESTIONS

Q.1 How has Brathwaite presented the impact of religion on the sensibility of the common people in "Angel/Engine"?

Q.2 What aspects of the "video style" can you discern in the three poems included in this unit? Examine the politics behind them.

Q.3 Brathwaite often gives us paradigms for an analysis of his own work by coining neologisms. Discuss any two coinages with reference to his poetry.

5.7 SUGGESTED READINGS

Primary Material


Secondary Material


