

## THE MEMORY OF DIFFERENT RHYTHMS AND COLOURS IN E. K. BRATHWAITE'S THE ARRIVANTS

"So the boy now nigratin' overseas..."  
(E. K. Brathwaite, *The Arrivants* 50)

**Keywords:** Afro-Caribbean poetry; rhythm; prosody; cultural memory.

**Abstract:** As a poet and a historian, the Barbadian author Edward Kamau Brathwaite contributed significantly to the configuration of the contemporary multifarious Caribbean cultural identity worldwide. Published in late 1960s, his first poetic work, *The Arrivants: A New World Trilogy*, is one of the most innovative compositions, which has established him as a transnational griot, whose function has been to guard many of the specificities of the Afro-Caribbean cultural memory. Apart from his poetic work, Brathwaite's research on folk culture, Creole society in Jamaica, cultural diversity and history of the voice in the Caribbean has demonstrated an increasing awareness regarding the multicultural phenomenon of hybridization in the region, often conflictual, yet in search of sublime balance. In this context, the poet's experience of migration and his encounter with the image of the Other as Self in Western literature and history generated a particular feeling regarding prosody and subjectivity. This essay explores the novelty of Brathwaite's trilogy in conjunction with his subsequent cultural theses developed in his non-poetic works and their relevance for cultural memory.

Following Renate Lachmann (1997), Lars Eckstein (2006) argues in *Remembering the Black Atlantic* that "literature must also be reckoned as a special form of cultural memory in itself: as a complex *lieu de mémoire* with its very own forms and strategies of observation and writing from older memories and their diverse representations" (ix). When Caribbean literature is at stake, the truth of this statement lies in the numerous novels, short stories, books of poetry, plays and essays published after the Second World War, whose authors have gained international recognition towards the end of the century. Eckstein also takes over Lachmann's argument that Mikhail Bakhtin's traditional difference between the dialogic prose and the monologic poetry does not stand anymore. Indeed, Caribbean poets broke with tradition and managed to colour the English literary canon of the late twentieth century introducing new dialogic and polyglossic styles.

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Cultural memory is a central aspect in *The Arrivants: A New World Trilogy*<sup>1</sup> by Edward Kamau Brathwaite<sup>2</sup>, a collection which particularly refers to remembering Africa in the Caribbean. As the collective trauma and loss of the Middle Passage were lurking on the pages of Western history while he studied in England, the poet drew on his own transatlantic experience to construct a mnemonic artistic device that could reconnect the Caribbean consciousness to the African psyche. In the first book of history he published, Brathwaite (1970) addressed the issue of the Middle Passage from a perspective that demonstrates hope and cultural awakening, without neglecting its long-term traumatic effects, which he simultaneously translated into a unique poetic style:

it is in the nature of the folk culture of the ex-African slave, still persisting today in the life of the contemporary 'folk' that we can discern that the 'middle passage' was not, as is popularly assumed, a traumatic, destructive experience, separating blacks from Africa, disconnecting their sense of history and tradition. Rather, it is a pathway or channel between this tradition and what is being evolved, on new soil, in the Caribbean. (4-5)

His trilogy constitutes a dialogic realm of memory mainly because of the novelty of the poetic technique, meant to sustain cultural difference. By mixing black musical rhythms, such as blues, calypso, jazz, mento, reggae, ska, spirituals, steelpan or worksongs, Brathwaite experimented new forms of poetic discourse. Although in an article entitled "Jazz and the West Indian Novel" (1967) he admitted there was "no West Indian jazz" (336), he adopted its urban aesthetics – specific to the Harlem Renaissance – as "a possible alternative to the European cultural tradition" (337). Literary critics often associate T. S. Eliot's allusions to jazz and the sound of popular music with E. K. Brathwaite's experimental techniques with rhythm and linguistic creolization<sup>3</sup>. As will be shown, such experiments, often produced in front of a large audience, were brilliantly able to articulate individual and collective memory and generate socio-cultural change.

<sup>1</sup> *The Arrivants: A New World Trilogy* is the first poetic work written by Edward Kamau Brathwaite, one of the most innovative compositions of the Caribbean. Published at Oxford University Press in 1973, the trilogy consists of collections entitled *Rights of Passage* (1967), *Masks* (1968) and *Islands* (1969). Composed on the background of the African American Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, they include poems about immigration and exile, a constant search for home, the history and memory of slavery and of pre-colonial Africa, African and Afro-Caribbean religions and rhythms specific to these regions, as alternatives to Western culture and aesthetics.

<sup>2</sup> Born in 1930 in Barbados, Edward Kamau Brathwaite is one of the major voices of the Caribbean literary canon. In the early 1950s, he studied education at Cambridge (UK) and began to work with the BBC's Caribbean Voices Program in London. In 1955, he was offered a position in Ghana, in West Africa, where he spent eight years and witnessed the national movement and cultural revival of this African people. He returned to the Caribbean, where he taught history at the University of the West Indies, in Jamaica. In the 1960s, he was a co-founder of the Caribbean Artist Movement (CAM) from London, an organization that promoted many artists who emigrated to the UK. In 1971, he launched a private journal associated with the CAM, entitled *Savacou*, where many Caribbean writers – poets, prose writers, playwrights, essayists and cultural theorists – were encouraged to publish their work.

<sup>3</sup> See Neil ten Kortenaar (1996).

When the very word “memory” appears in Brathwaite’s trilogy, it is mentioned in the plural. “Memories are smoke / lips we can’t kiss / hands we can’t hold” (28) and “memories / are cold” (78), announces the poet in the first part, *Rites of Passage*, which is set in America. Plurality is relevant as far as the Caribbean is concerned because a multitude of ethnicities – Amerindian, European, African, Asian – have interacted within and across the region over the centuries. It is also relevant against the singularity of memory, often associated with a unilateral European perspective:

For we who have created nothing, must exist on nothing; cannot see the soil: good earth, God’s earth, without that fixed locked memory of loveless toil, strength destroyed, chained to the sun like a snail to its shell and the hatred it dragged in its trail. (79)

Selected from a poem entitled “Postlude/Home”, the fragment clearly proposes a distinct, non-European aesthetics that draws on the music of African rites of passage. The extensive use of radical enjambment and caesuras is a recurrent and very productive fashion in Caribbean poetry, aimed at what has been called “breaking English” as opposed to “broken English”. It is used to create plural, often contrastive meaning, to transmit ambiguity or ambivalence, to produce dialogue. The result is what Bill Ashcroft (2009) called “‘a metonymic gap’ – the cultural gap formed when writers (in particular) transform English according to the needs of their source culture” (174). By laying stress on the break of well-chosen words or expressions, Brathwaite’s poem produces both visual and aural impressions. It visually alters the heroic couplet, a common rhyme scheme found in Geoffrey Chaucer, John Dryden or Alexander Pope. Phonetically, the arrangement in short lines induces a more eloquent reading, marked by suggestive pauses. Concerned with the gap between English poetic styles and the material reality of the Caribbean, Brathwaite (1984) famously proposed a radical perspective:

But basically the pentameter remained, and it carries with it a certain kind of experience, which is not the experience of a hurricane. The hurricane does not roar in pentameters. And that’s the problem: how do you get a rhythm which approximates the *natural* experience, the environmental experience? (10)

The contrasts between creation and nothingness, between locked and broken memory or between love and loveless toil in the quoted poem above bring into question a reality which America began to call into question in the 1960s: Afro-Caribbean and African Americans became more and more aware of their African origin and cultural dislocation. The sense of interruption and unusual reconnection, the loosely regular rhythm and the two line stanzas alluding to drumming – all these seem to have sprung from the poet’s lived transnational experience, while they also reflect the difficulty among African Americans and Caribbean immigrants of conceiving a home in (post)colonial times. Home is a long interrogation: “Where then is the nigger’s / home? // In Paris Brixton Kingston / Rome? // Here? / Or in Heaven?” (77) Brathwaite’s

answer to such driving questions lies in what he coined as “nation language”<sup>4</sup>. Using Creole English, he synaesthetically shows the true colours of the Caribbean: “we, winnin’ / we dinner, // is pick / up we tools fuh the hit // an’ run raid / an’ you better // look our for / you wallet. // An’ watchin’ me brother / here sharpen ’e blade, // I is find meself / wonderin’ if // Tawia Tutu Anokye or / Tom could’a ever // have live / such a life.” (80)

Why is Tom placed in contrast with an African name? Because *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* made black reverend Josiah Henson (1796–1883) famous internationally, after Harriet Beecher Stowe acknowledged his memoirs as sources for her anti-slavery novel. The importance of differentiating between the literary character and the real man is at stake in “The Cabin” too, a poem that must have been written at the time when Uncle Tom’s Cabin Historical Site<sup>5</sup> was moved from its previous location, established by a farmer in the 1940s, to Dresden, in Ontario, Canada, in 1964. Brathwaite describes the place as it looked long before it became a museum. With eyes of a camera operator and a background in history, the poet conveys the image of the then unknown home of the reverend. The colours mentioned or suggested in the poem have a distinct significance: “Under the burnt out green / of this small yard’s / tufts of grass / where water was once used / to wash pots, pans, poes, / ochre appears.” (70) In this first stanza, the “burnt out green” and the ochre, used to transmit the decaying yet inspiring state of the house, is a contrastive combination that subtly alludes to colourful African fashion style and to the Pan-African flag, the Ethiopian flag: green, yellow and red. With this crafty indirect reference, the sense of destruction and loss, suggested by the description of the rusted bucket and the broken fence, is accompanied by a sense of unity, which is further implied by another subtle colour arrangement. The darkness of the wrecked boards of the house and the dark shingles, along with the green and the red or yellow ochre, may stand for the colours of another Pan-African symbol: the flag of UNIA (Universal Negro Improvement Association), a black nationalist fraternal organization founded by Marcus Garvey in the 1920s. At the end of the fourth stanza and in the fifth stanza, subtle references to whiteness and their association with the project of demolishing the house stage a contrast which places racial issues in the background: “the house retains its lemon wash as smooth and bland as pearl / [...] But no one knows / where Tom’s cracked limestone oblong lies.” (71) That the first three stanzas of the poem are repeated in “Anvil”, another poem included in *Islands*, the third part of the trilogy, hints at the role of it in Brathwaite’s attempt to propose written and oral mnemonic devices that can challenge the “dark, defeated silence” (249), the subservient and deferential attitudes to white people, which Tom represented in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel.

<sup>4</sup> Brathwaite (1984) defined “nation language” as “the language which is influenced very strongly by the African model, the African aspect of our New World/Caribbean heritage. English it may be in terms of some of its lexical features. But in its contours, its rhythm and timbre, its sound explosions, it is not English, even though the words, as you hear them, might be English to a greater or lesser degree” (*The Arrivants* 13).

<sup>5</sup> See <http://www.heritagetrust.on.ca/Uncle-Tom-s-Cabin-Historic-Site/Home.aspx>.

The second part of the trilogy, *Masks*, covers the collective memory of African roots. Brathwaite's eight-year stay in Ghana determined him to write "not an idealized, romantic version of Africa, but an existential testament to the continuity that has been truncated by slavery and colonialism" (Badejo xi). In an article entitled "Timehri", Brathwaite (1996) himself reflected upon his return from Africa:

When I turned to leave, I was no longer a lonely individual talent; there was something wider, more subtle, more tentative: the self without ego, without I, without arrogance. And I came home to find that I had not really left. That it was still Africa; Africa in the Caribbean. The middle passage had now guessed its end. The connection between my lived, but unheeded non-middle class boyhood, and its Great Tradition on the eastern mainland had been made. (347)

The poet was one of the first who identified his own transcontinental destiny with the history of the Middle Passage. Through his poetry and live performances, he also gave a wider perspective on the notion of home in the context of transatlantic immigration and viewed the experience of travel not as the burden of dislocation, but as an expression of free will and self-determination.

Choosing the mask as the most relevant symbol of Africa is not accidental. According to art critics Hahner, Kecskési and Vajda (1997), "African masks are matched nowhere else in the world-except perhaps in Melanesia" (12) and "performances of maskers belong in many countries and among many ethnic groups of Africa to the most vital and variable cultural practices" (13). Because dislocated from their natural environment, masks often become mere aesthetic objects elsewhere, Brathwaite's poems are meant to remind us of the performances, costumes and paraphernalia that play various roles in mask rituals associated with supernatural spirits and the African psyche.

In this context, one of the most meaningful poems is "The Making of the Drum", which mentions the skin of the drum and its barrel, the two curved sticks, the gourds and rattles and the gong-gong. The plurality of such details is in line with the plurality of memory mentioned before and emphasizes the material source of the sound and rhythm. A dialogue with a symbolic goat, whose skin is used to make the drum, raises questions about identity: "stretch your skin, stretch // it tight on our hope; / we have killed / you to make a thin / voice that will reach // further than hope" (94). The tension between "you" and "we" reveals remnants of ancient sacrificial rituals. The double possible association of "killing you" and "killing our hope", which may be expressed when the poem is read aloud, alludes to scapegoating and to strategies of survival and resistance through music. The enjambment at work in "thin / voice" goes beyond the expectation of "thin skin", to propose a less racial and more artistic rhetoric.

When the barrel of the drum is made out of Akan tweneduru tree, adom tree or cedar, the craftsman addresses the wood of the trees, which "bleed" and "speak" like human beings. Their personification evokes pre-colonial and colonial African history: "Here in the silence / we hear the wounds / of the forest; / we hear the wounds / of the rivers; // vowels of reed- / lips, pebbles / of consonants, / underground dark / of the continent." (95) The combination of natural, material elements with linguistic,

immaterial elements parallels the double role of the drum, as a musical instrument in an orchestra and as a source of specific sounds, and reflects the double-fold theoretical approach to cultural hybridity in the Caribbean in the twentieth century: post-structuralist and neo-Marxist.

As the timekeeper of the whole performance, the gong-gong beats and leads the rhythm. The poet transfers its role in lines abundant in plosive consonants, repeated so as to render drum poetry: “God is dumb / until the drum / speaks. // The drum / is dumb / until the gong-gong leads” (97). Thus, the poet warns that, unlike speech that needs translation from one language into another, music is universal and can reach God. Following the Shakespearean suggestion that Caliban knows the music of the island in *The Tempest*, the poet listened carefully to folk music, in order to bring forth new rhythms, different from traditional poetry in English, but common to Africa and the Caribbean.

Many poems of the collection bear titles or refer to African musical rituals and instruments. For example, along with several preludes and postludes as musical compositions of European origin, the poet introduces vocabulary of African origin, such as *atumpan*<sup>6</sup>, *mmenson*<sup>7</sup> or *korabra*<sup>8</sup>. Other poems refer to and enact musical styles and ceremonies characteristic to the Caribbean such as *calypso*<sup>9</sup> or *jou'vert*<sup>10</sup>.

The third part of *The Arrivants*, which tackles the Caribbean and is entitled *Islands*, is an attempt to reconnect America, Europe and Africa by invoking “bridges of sound” (162) and “green turtles / that cannot find their way” (164). In these conditions, the trickster Ananse, one of the most important characters of West African and Caribbean folklore, prefigures the cultural theory of the Black Atlantic theorized by Paul Gilroy (1993) and its initial strangeness to the Western world: “he spins drum- / beats, silver skin / webs of sound / through the villages” (165), but “in the yard the dog barks at the stranger” (167). Ananse’s symbolic role in the Caribbean has been to connect the fragmented identities of the islands. Hence Brathwaite’s insistence on plurality in the titles of the collection.

<sup>6</sup> According to Salm and Falola (2002), *atumpan* are “pairs of ‘talking’ drums associated with Akan royalty and used for transmitting messages. They are inclined at a 45 degree angle and played with two sticks shaped like the number ‘7.’” (173) They also say that: “Master drummers were well-versed in the drum language of the *atumpan* and had a vast knowledge of history and tradition. Intensive training began with techniques of drumming and memorization of rhythms.” (175)

<sup>7</sup> An orchestra of seven elephant horns.

<sup>8</sup> A signal drum often played at funerals.

<sup>9</sup> Calypso is a type of music mainly from Trinidad. Influenced by jazz, it has improvised lyrics on topical or broadly humorous subjects. According to Gadsby (2006), calypso is “rife with double entendre concerning a wide range of subjects – sex and sexuality, local and international politics, history, and culture – with humor and sarcasm” (56) and is “an African-based art form that each generation of Caribbeans must be taught to enjoy as part of their cultural heritage” (65). For more theories about the origin of calypso, see Gordon Rohlehr (2001).

<sup>10</sup> *Jou'vert* is the eve of Mardi gras, the Monday morning on which the festivities begin. It comes from French “*jour ouvert*”, the day having been opened.

A radical revision of the African position in the Caribbean is the poem “Caliban”, in which the third person “Cal- / iban” is eventually replaced with a character that speaks in the first person and is convinced that “the music is saving me” (195). The beginning of the fragment identifies the “call” of the drum – the “Ban / Ban / Cal-” – with Caliban’s voice. However, this Caliban is not the same as the Shakespearean personage or – as Homi K. Bhabha would put it – he is the same but not quite. The separative syllabification of the name signals a change: he is a Caliban whom his black gods are calling back, while he *is* able to hear their call:

Ban  
 Ban  
 Caliban  
 like to play  
 pan  
 at the carnival;  
 dip-  
 ping down  
 and the black  
 gods call-  
 ing, back  
 he falls  
 through the water’s  
 cries  
 down  
 down  
 down  
 where the music hides  
 him  
 down  
 down  
 down  
 where the si-  
 lence lies. (193)

The repetition of “down” has several meanings: it is a mnemonic device; it evokes the drum beat; it epitomizes the depths of the unconscious; it is an allusion to the location of the African continent on European maps; last but not least, it reminds us of the limbo dance, whose symbolism is included in the third part of the poem. While reading “Caliban” in front of a Manhattan audience in 2004, Brathwaite stopped and made the following commentary regarding the mnemonic role of the limbo dance, often neglected:

The people who are creating or recreating this memorial are also making a very important point: that they [the slaves] not only suffered the torture of the Middle Passage, but they were able to successfully negotiate that passage, to such a degree that not only do they go under the stick, but that eventually they rise on the other side of the stick from that position of an other, from that position of nothingness, from that position of being absolutely stretched on the floor. They rise like the sun towards the wonderful blow of the drums which are waiting for them on the other side.

The inclusive plural personal pronoun “they” refers to the slaves of the Middle Passage, but also to the contemporary (im)migrants of the Black Atlantic, to the tourists who nowadays play the limbo dance as well as to anyone who experiences any metamorphic depression. Thus, Caliban’s destiny becomes a model of long-term cultural resistance.

Brathwaite defined his new perspective on the Caribbean through a mix of colour and sound too. First, it is the blue of the water that counterpoints “history’s hot / lies” in the poem “Islands”:

So looking through a map  
of the islands, you see  
rocks, history’s hot  
lies, rot-  
ting hulls, cannon  
wheels, the sun’s  
slums – if you hate  
us. Jewels  
if there is delight  
in your eyes.  
The light  
shimmers on water,  
the cunning  
coral keeps it  
blue. (204)

Second, it is the African drum beat that which awakens the need of cultural and political self-definition and re-definition as in the poem entitled “Negus”. The title is an Ethiopic name for a king or a ruler, derived from an ancient Semitic verbal root meaning “to reign”. The poem starts with the repetitive sound of raindrops, goes through the evocative drum beat, before gathering more and more linguistic coherence, which transforms the impersonal pronoun “it” into a demanding “I”:

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

It is not  
it is not  
it is not enough  
to be pause, to be hole  
to be void, to be silent  
to be semicolon, to be semicolon (224)

The singularity of memory in this last poem suggests a return from the collective self to the individual self after experiencing otherness. "Negus" ends with the call for Papa Legba, a spiritual intermediary between divinity and humanity, originating in the Yoruba pantheon, honored in many African countries and in the Caribbean voodoo tradition.

The prominence of word play Brathwaite has been so much committed to all his life comes from his conviction that there is a "mysterious power of sound", which black slaves must have become aware of in time. "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" (237), he wrote in 1971. He found it essential that the emergence of a new English can be the expression of historical transformation and can link the language of former slaves with the language of the contemporary. According to Patke (2006), "many poets before and after Brathwaite have essayed into free verse. Few have done so with as much awareness of what was at stake, and why, as Brathwaite" (223). The most significant theoretical and historical claim, relevant for cultural memory studies, is the poet's idea that the "bacchanalling" of racial, ethnic and linguistic hybridity in the Caribbean entered a new stage in the first part of the twentieth century, meaning that what used to be an apparently unconscious syncretic process had to be transformed into a cultural statement, involving Africa as, according to Brathwaite (1974) himself, "the existing submerged mother of the creole system" (6).

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