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Versions of X/Self: Kamau Brathwaite's Caribbean Discourse

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In the epigraph of Poetics of Relation (1991), Edouard Glissant cites two contemporary Caribbean poets: “*Sea is History*. Derek Walcott” and “*The unity is submarine*. Edward Kamau Brathwaite.” Both quotations are apt not only for this text but for Glissant’s work overall, because the three writers are concerned with excavating existing cultural and historical links between the Caribbean islands and generating new ones, especially through language. Brathwaite’s work is especially rich in this type of creation. By the time Glissant publishes Poetics of Relation, Brathwaite had presented and published History of the Voice, wherein he detailed his conception of “nation language,” but he had yet to introduce his Sycorax video style.

As the epigraph quoted above indicates, Glissant was aware of the commonality between his and Brathwaite’s ideas and he included a paragraph on Brathwaite’s work in Caribbean Discourse. Glissant concluded that Brathwaite revises Aime Césaire’s project with a new twist that places Césaire in “a new context:”

Brathwaite’s link is not as much with Césaire’s poetics as with the broken rhythms of Nicolás Guillén or Léon Gontran Damas. The written becomes oral. Literature includes in this way a “reality” that seemed to restrain and limit it. A Caribbean discourse finds its expression as much in the explosion of the original cry, as in the patience of the landscape when it is recognized, as in the imposition of lived rhythms. (109)

Nathaniel Mackey quoted this section of Glissant’s text to Brathwaite in a 1991 interview and Brathwaite concurred with Glissant’s assessment of his work while lamenting the “meanness and animus and . . . cultural/personal politization” that separates the Francophone and Anglophone writers, both critics and artists (26). Such separation obstructs the development of a unified Caribbean identity, or an identifiable form of “Caribbeanness,” which was a major goal for both Brathwaite and Glissant.

Both writers were involved in writing both creative and critical works. It may be productive to apply Brathwaite’s Caribbean theory to Glissant’s novels, but my project here is the opposite. I plan to read Brathwaite’s poetry through the lens of Glissant’s theories in Caribbean Discourse.¹ Caribbean Discourse is especially applicable to Brathwaite’s work because of its “pulled together” style. It is a compilation of essays written by Glissant at various times; he believed that this type of “piling-up is the most suitable technique for exposing a reality that is itself being scattered” (4). Thus, this fragmented style may be the only way to speak about the Caribbean situation, the only way to initiate a Caribbean discourse. Brathwaite also indicates that “a proliferation of images: a multiplication of complex probes: a cooperative effort from us all” is the only way to produce a working definition of a Creole system (Contradictory Omens 6). This layering is emblematic of Brathwaite’s work; not only does he combine aspects of different cultures--Caribbean, African, Amerindian, American--but he also combines different discourses--literary, historical, sociological--to create mosaic writings in poetry and prose.

Glissant supports this pan-generic type of discourse. He is especially concerned that “history as a consciousness at work and history as a lived experience” not be superficially divided from literature (Discourse 65). Nor should Caribbean literature itself be “divided into genres;” rather, it should “implicate all the perspectives of the human sciences” because such sub-division can only serve as an “obstacle to a daring new methodology, where it responds to the needs of our situation” (Discourse 65). Brathwaite’s “mélange/montage style” also ignores these traditional categories between genres and cultures. Ngugi wa Thiong’o views Brathwaite as a “connecting spirit,” joining European, African, Caribbean and American cultures in his work (678). Although Brathwaite combines aspects of these different cultures and disciplines in a seemingly idiosyncratic manner, his work, as Paul Naylor notes, this is not merely “a pastiche of traditions; rather it is a ‘creolization’ of those traditions” (138).

Another similarity between Glissant’s collection of essays and Brathwaite’s work is noted by Elaine Savory, in her article “Returning to Sycorax/Prospero’s Response.” Savory contends that for both Glissant and Brathwaite, a Caribbean discourse is “a communal and oral language or languages, markedly difficult to situate in the form of the book, for the book brings all kinds of other and often dangerous cultural associations with it” (216). After quoting Glissant’s grim warning about the cultural dispossession related to the acquisition of “book learning,” Savory describes Brathwaite’s “self-set task” as two-fold (217) and related to Glissant’s advice on performing a “close scrutiny of this dispossession” (Discourse 12). Savory concludes that Brathwaite wishes to “work towards some way of fusing orality and the book” while also supporting “a sense of collective self in Caribbean communities” (217). This essay discusses the ways in which Brathwaite works toward the first of these goals, towards making the written oral, in his utilization of Sycorax video style to revise the poem “X/Self xth letter from the thirteenth provinces.” But first, I will examine how both authors consider the possibility of a collective Caribbean identity.

For Glissant, “Caribbean unity cannot be guided by remote control,” that is, only Caribbean artists can “manage” this form of regional “self-discovery” (Discourse 8). In both his poetry and critical writings, Brathwaite focuses on finding this unity, on discovering the things that hold the islands of the Caribbean together. He continually tries to bring this “submarine” unity to the forefront. As Bridget Jones notes, Brathwaite offers “not a politician’s glib regionalism, but a vision which honours carnival, vodoun, wood-carving, yam growing, respect for elders, as facets of a coherent Caribbean culture, much battered but still creative, vitally sustaining” (87). Although always acknowledging his specific grounding in Barbadian (or “Barabajan”) culture, Brathwaite attempts to provide a picture of Caribbeanness in his work.

Glissant regards Caribbeanness, or *antillanité*, as “a fragile reality” which is “threatened” because it is “not inscribed in consciousness” (Discourse 221). For Glissant, the thin threads “woven together from one side of the Caribbean to the other” (Discourse 221) that join the “arch/i/pell/a/go” (Brathwaite, Ancestors 450) are phenomena such as:³

cultures derived from plantations; insular civilization . . .; social pyramids with an African or East Indian base and a European peak; languages of compromise; general cultural phenomenon of creolization; pattern of encounter and synthesis; persistence of the African presence; cultivation of sugarcane, corn, and pepper; site where rhythms are combined; peoples formed by orality. (Discourse 221-2)

Glissant's specificity avoids the essentialism that may be expected from a term such as "Caribbeanness." Caribbeanness is not some insubstantial, inexplicable connection between the people living in the region rather, it is specifically based in a shared experience. The sharing may not be conscious, but the idea is to make it conscious, to protect it by stating/naming it. Brathwaite's work attempts to produce this statement of unity.

In the Mackey interview, Brathwaite observes that unlike the African and European cultures that influence them, Caribbean people "start with the ruins and [should] rebuild those fragments into a whole society" (23). Elsewhere, he advises, "the idea is to try to see the fragments/whole" (Contradictory Omens 7). This "idea" is related to Glissant's notion of layering fragments to create a Caribbean discourse and thus a Caribbean identity. Brathwaite takes Glissant's theory a step further by highlighting both the fragments and the whole; we read him as both Barbadian and Caribbean. Although discussing Brathwaite's relationship to jazz, Paul Naylor's comment that for Brathwaite, the subversiveness of jazz "arc[s] out from the local (Barabajan literature) to the regional (Caribbean literature) to the colonial (English literature) to a global aesthetic that reaches Africa" (144) is applicable to Brathwaite's own poetry. His work also follows the arc of the archipelago to embrace the Caribbean region.

For Brathwaite then, one must nurture the local in order to nurture the regional, or global. Gordon Rohlehr notes Brathwaite's belief that self-knowledge is a prerequisite for communal progress (174); before an artist can determine a collective identity he must first examine himself and his own identity. Thus Brathwaite's work can be simultaneously intensely personal while reflecting sensitivity toward, and awareness of, Caribbeanness. In investigating his own identity, his "X/Self," Brathwaite opens the doors to investigating not only his Caribbean identity in particular, but all Caribbean identity.

Implicit in this self/community exploration, is a consciousness of history; Brathwaite's background in history makes him uniquely prepared to delve into his own, his country's and his region's past. Ngugi wa Thiong'o observes that in Brathwaite's work "[a]cknowledgement of the past becomes the basis of strengthening the present and opening out to the future" (679). By recognizing a shared past, Brathwaite sets the ground for a collective Caribbean present and future. Glissant declares that it is the writer's "duty" to examine his people's obsession with the past, a past that has yet to become history, and to "show its relevance in a continuous fashion to the immediate present" (64). This is precisely what Brathwaite attempts to do in his work. In *X/Self* especially, he explores the past and relates it to his Caribbean present.

Brathwaite's reliance on history illuminates Glissant's concept of reversion (return). In Caribbean Discourse, Glissant details two strategies for dealing with the displacement he views as the Caribbean situation. The first, reversion (return), refers to a longing to return to the homeland. The second, diversion (detour), is less clearly defined, but generally seems to incorporate ways of hiding the former culture within the structures of the new. Glissant gives Creole as an example of diversion. But he does not position either strategy as singularly effective; instead, he argues that "diversion [detour] is not a useful ploy unless it is nourished by reversion [return]; not a return to the longing for origins, to some immutable state of Being, but a return to the point of entanglement, from which we were forcefully turned away; that is where we must ultimately put to work the forces of creolization, or perish" (26).

Brathwaite's poetry incorporates this blending of return and detour. He reaches back to Africa, which he portrays as the "point of entanglement," but without losing sight of the current Caribbean situation. In his essay, "Timehri," Brathwaite emphasizes the "primordial nature of [African and Amerindian] cultures and the potent spiritual and artistic connections between them and the present" (42). Only by a return to the "point of entanglement," can we hope to possess the present and the future; it is here that Brathwaite hopes to discover a creolized "word for object and image for the word" (42).

Brathwaite's time in Africa solidified for him the links between culture there and in the Caribbean. While living in Ghana, he recognized many of the African practices as similar to those in the Caribbean:

The most important event so far, I would think, in my life, to have gone there and to suddenly, no, not suddenly, slowly, realize that what I was seeing there in Ghana is what I had known back in Barbados . . . I began to say, I know this thing, I know this and I began to re-connect the Caribbean with the African experience" (Three Caribbean Poets 11-12)

For Brathwaite, these connections between the cultures confirm Africa as the "point of entanglement," providing some Timehri-like roots, however tenuous.

But Brathwaite is aware that some of his roots are also European and he often acknowledges the Western influence on his work. In his both his poetry and his criticism, his historical references include Greek, Egyptian, and Roman figures. These figures are especially prominent in X/Self, which Brathwaite describes as:

my widening sense of history, of the influences that make up not only the biological history of the Caribbean but the personal one, the intellectual history. X/Self is a biography of my history, if you can put it that way, it is how the things that influenced my own growing up--not the physical aspect of the growing up in a sense it is a Calibanization of what I have read, the things that informed my growth in terms of ideas. (Mackey, "Interview" 15)

In X/Self, then, and throughout his oeuvre in general, Brathwaite is consistent with Glissant's mandate that Caribbean peoples acknowledge both the African and European elements of their history in order to create a creolized, collective vision of the future.

For both Brathwaite and Glissant, however, this future of Caribbeanness requires a language that does not yet exist. Neither Standard French nor Standard English is compatible with the Caribbean identity that the writers envision because it is based in the colonizing system of oppression. Dialect is also an inadequate form of expression for both Glissant and Brathwaite. Glissant considers Creole a form of forced or counter-poetics, which he defines as existing "where a need for expression confronts an inability to achieve expression" (120). This forced poetics is "created from the awareness of the opposition between a language that one uses and a form of expression that one needs" (120). Although counter-poetics is functional as a tool of resistance, for Glissant, it is not as desirable as a free or natural poetics, which describes "any collective yearning for expression that is not opposed to itself either at the level of what it wishes to express or at the level of the language that it puts into practice" (120). Glissant's notion of free poetics, however, seems idealistic as even he admits in a later essay in Caribbean Discourse: to say a language "does not correspond completely" to a people, is to "dignify a language beyond its due" (171).

Brathwaite's conception of "nation language" may be a more realistic alternative to dialect, despite his somewhat ambiguous definition of it. In History of the Voice, Brathwaite refuses both the "pejorative" term dialect and the common perception of this as "inferior English" because it "has a long history coming from the plantation where people's dignity is distorted through their language and the descriptions which the dialect gave to them" (13). He calls instead for the use of "nation language," a form of expression that occupies "the submerged area of that dialect which is much more closely allied to the African aspect of experience in the Caribbean" (13). Although Brathwaite identifies nation language with Glissant's forced poetics (16), based on the two definitions "nation language" would seem to be somewhere between Glissant's free and forced poetics. It exhibits the tension inherent in forced poetics, but this tension is born of a native resistance to European language, and for Brathwaite this very resistance is what makes it a more appropriate vehicle of expression for the Caribbean situation.

One of the strategies Glissant proposes for dealing with the conflict in the use of two related languages (for him, French and Martinican Creole, but also applicable to English and "nation language"), is to "make them opaque to each other," to recognize and perhaps intensify the "irreducible density" of each language. This describes Brathwaite's project as well. He is involved in veiling, or "opaqueing" the Caribbean through language. With "nation language," calibanisms, and the recent development of his Sycorax video style, he makes the language, and thereby the culture and people of the Caribbean, more obscure, harder for outsiders to grasp easily.

Glissant has argued in support of this type of maneuvering of language to create opacity. He maintains that “we need those stubborn shadows where repetition leads to perpetual concealment, which is our form of resistance” (Discourse 4). Glissant wishes to reach a point (or possibly return to a point) where the other is not readily grasped, is not transparent. He insists on recognizing and respecting the irreducible difference of the other. Brathwaite employs precisely this type of resistance in his language. Any reader of his work, or his commentary on his work, is familiar with his use of repetition. He is especially fond of repeating concepts linked to autobiographical data. But he often inserts them in new contexts, giving them new meaning. He refuses to provide his readers/listeners with a single, stable meaning for his work. Brathwaite admits that he frequently edits his own work:

I rewrite things all the time. My impression is that the poetry I’ve been writing since Rights of Passages is some kind of continuum and the continuum can be reshuffled. I can select certain themes out of the threads and that is what Middle Passages did. It’s like the oral tradition: it can be changed, but it has the same basic source. It’s like a river and you can dip into it and take different glasses of water. (qtd. in Rigby 710)

Brathwaite’s penchant for revision is especially pronounced in his use of Sycorax video style. A majority of the works published in this style are revisions of earlier pieces: Conversations is ostensibly a revision of an interview with Nathaniel Mackey conducted in 1993, but it also contains pieces of other works; Barabajan Poems is similarly a revision and expansion of his speech, “The Poet and His Place in Barbadian Culture,” which he presented as “The Twelfth Sir Winston Scott Memorial Lecture” in Barbados in 1987; Middle Passages is a revision of some of his previously published poetry, primarily from the first two trilogies; and Ancestors is a revision of his second trilogy. Perhaps Shar, Zea Mexican Diary and Trenchtown Rock--three works which some critics group together as Brathwaite’s third trilogy--and his most recent publication, MR, are the Brathwaite texts with the most content originally created in the Sycorax video style.

Greame Rigby notes that Brathwaite’s Sycorax video style performs the same rebellious function as “nation language,” which the latter can no longer perform because it has lost its shock value.³ He states that Brathwaite’s “earlier heretical texts played a key role in establishing the cultural legitimacy of “nation language,” but a granted legitimacy too often becomes a pigeonhole, within which the work is ultimately patronized” (714). In order to avoid losing any opacity gained with “nation language,” Brathwaite adds the Sycorax video style as a new layer, an additional veil. Cynthia James has described Brathwaite’s Sycorax video style as a step beyond his previous experimentations with language, such as “condensations and word-splits and coinages,” to create “a process for a new ordering of language” (764). In revising some of his earlier works into Sycorax video style, Brathwaite provides a “new ordering” of meaning within these texts.

Ancestors provides a solid example of Brathwaite's repetition/resistance/ concealment strategy. In his revision of his second trilogy, he not only uses the Sycorax video style to add layers of meaning to his poetry, he also revises or deletes many of the poems from the original books in the trilogy and adds a few new ones in the Ancestors collection. One of the poems he revises is "X/Self xth letter from the thirteenth provinces" which he has published four times: the original appeared in X/Self (1987), then a considerably revised, Sycorax video style version in Middle Passages (1992), followed by a slightly revised version in the American edition of Middle Passages (1993), and finally another revised version in Ancestors (2001).

In "X/Self xth letter" Brathwaite's X/self becomes Caliban as he writes back to his mother from his new place/perspective in history. The poem begins:

Dear mumma
uh writin yu dis letter
wha?
guess what! Pun a computer O
kay?

Here Caliban shows his excitement at finding this new toy, this old apple through which he can communicate with his mother Sycorax. Brathwaite displays a similar excitement at his discovery/development of the Sycorax video style. The versions of the poem that appear in both Middle Passages under the name "Letter Sycorax," were revised while the Sycorax video style was still, according to the publishers' note, "being developed by the author." In "Letter Sycorax," Brathwaite incorporates several fonts, font sizes and alignments as he unreservedly revised his poems in Sycorax video style. His myriad changes reflect more than a "new glass of water" from the river of the previous version of the poem; in these revisions, Brathwaite seems to be Caliban discovering his mother's voice through the computer for the first time. He discovers Sycorax in the computer and he chooses her name for this style of writing/communicating to "celebrate" the alternatives that he finds in this type of technology (Conversations 189).

A reining in of the Sycorax video style is evidenced in the fourth version of "X/Self xth letter" (2001). In fact, in comparison to Middle Passages, Barabajan Poems, and Conversations, the entire text of Ancestors is in a subdued Sycorax video style. For Mother Poem, he uses an Arial type font for the most part, with significant exception of "Pixie" and "Heartbreak Hotel," two of the three additions to Mother Poem. For Sun Poem, he uses an unusual, dot-matrix-like font, but, as with Mother Poem, he is mostly consistent in his use of this font throughout that section. He returns to Arial for the majority of X/Self, but "X/Self letter" and "Troia," the last two poems in section III, are rendered in Times New Roman. Although the collection is by no means ordinary looking--Brathwaite frequently experiments with alignment, scatters symbols throughout the poems and enlarges and/or changes the fonts on scattered lines--, "Pixie" and "Heartbreak Hotel" are perhaps the most visually unusual poems of the collection.

With his new style, Brathwaite uses the computer in a way that disrupts the “dangerous cultural associations” attached to poetry, written language, and the printed page (Savory 216). As X/self/Caliban later declares to his mother, the computer “is one a de bess tings since Cicero” (Ancestors 445). Significantly, Brathwaite does not choose a figure historically associated with writing and/or printing, instead, he chooses the Greek orator Cicero. He sees the computer as an extension of orality. This line is also a part of the original, pre-Sycorax video style version of the poem, wherein Brathwaite’s vision of the computer as oral is not easily identifiable. But when he begins to play with the appearance of the poem in later versions, the connection between his maneuvers on the computer and orality becomes clearer. Like “nation language,” the Sycorax video style brings his poetry closer to orality, incorporating the visual dimension that suggests the gestures and body language that the written word occludes.

Glissant observes that the written word is especially diminishing to Caribbean speech, which is “always excited, it ignores silence, softness, sentiment. . . . For Caribbean man, the word is first and foremost sound. Noise is essential to speech. Din is Discourse” (123). In History of the Voice, Brathwaite makes a similar statement: “the noise that [“nation language”] makes is part of the meaning, and if you ignore the noise (or what you would *think* of as noise, shall I say) then you lose part of the meaning. When it is written, you lose the sound or the noise, and therefore you lose part of the meaning” (17). With the Sycorax video style, Brathwaite can inject the noise into his written “nation language,” he can recapture some of the meaning lost in writing words. He can shout, whisper, “speak” quickly or slowly, authoritatively or in play, all with his fonts and symbols. He can also recapture the ambiguity that is an essential part of speech. Once again referring to Martinican Creole, Glissant notes that “the Creole language will call for a noise, a disorder; thus aggravating the ambiguity” (124). Brathwaite’s “nation language” and Sycorax video style increase the noise within language, thereby increasing the ambiguity, a crucial element of opacity.

Brathwaite evidently values the “X/Self xth letter” poem. Not only is it one of the few to be selected for Middle Passages, but it is also selected for the X/Self portion of Ancestors which features only half of the original set of poems in X/Self. For each version, Brathwaite revises more than simply the font of the poem, resulting in no two printings of this poem being alike. In general, however, the poem simulates a Caliban figure writing a letter to his mother Sycorax with the newfound technology of a computer. He is ecstatic about having access to one of Prospero’s communication tools, but questions the ways in which he can use it to help himself and his people:

But is like what I try

in to sen/seh

& seh about muse-

in computer

& mouse

**& learn-
in prospero ling
age & ting**

not fe dem/not fe dem

de way caliban

done

but fe we

fe a-we

(Ancestors 449)

X/Self wants to be careful that the computer, and by extension, the language he produces on it, is used to benefit the formerly colonized, and not the colonizers. Rather than “conceive of Caliban as a binary opposite of Prospero,” Brathwaite wishes to “see Caliban as a gateway to an alternative” (Mackey, “Interview” 17); the former vision places the emphasis on “dem,” while the latter accomplishes Brathwaite’s goal of granting prominence to the “we.”

He also wishes to use the computer, and his own form of language, to “curse” the colonizers with impunity. In the lines following his “critique of Calibanism,” Brathwaite quips, “for nat one a we shd response if prospero get curse/wid im own//curser” (Mackey, “Interview” 17). Brathwaite is equally playful throughout the rest of the poem; the “nat,” “shd,” and “curser” are appropriate examples of his frequent misspellings, word condensations and puns in “X/Self xth letter.” These examples of “nation language” are more prevalent in the second trilogy than in his previous work. Mackey reads the second trilogy as incorporating more “linguistic turns and detours and fragmentations and neologisms and so forth” than The Arrivants (“Wringing the Word” 15).

Brathwaite continuously plays with punctuation in his Sycorax video style revisions of “X/Self xth letter.” For example, in the 1992 version, Caliban asks (himself or his mother) “like I jine the mercantilists?” (Middle Passages, 1992, 76). But in 1987, it is a declarative: “like I jine the mercantilists!” (X/Self 80). He returns to the proud statement in 1993 (Middle Passages 95), and back to the question mark in 2001 (Ancestors 444). The simple substitution of an exclamation point for a question mark can lead to an entirely revised meaning. His nation language puns and word “interleaving” also becomes more pronounced as his poetic revisions progress; “down” becomes “doun,” “bionic” becomes “bionicle,” and “responsible” becomes “response.”

In considering Brathwaite's use of "nation language," Nathaniel Mackey states that "Brathwaite's work both announces the emergence of a new language and acknowledges the impediments to its emergence, going so far as to advance impediment as a constituent of the language's newness" ("Wringing the Word" 134). Mackey's observation, however, can be applied to both of Brathwaite's language veils--nation language and Sycorax video style. For "nation language," the calibanisms and broken words obstruct readers as they try to decipher Brathwaite's meaning. But, as Mackey notes, they also give way to new meaning. The same observation is valid for the Sycorax video style--oftentimes Brathwaite's use of various fonts and font sizes seems capricious and serve as "impediments" to the reader. At the same time, however, the added visual element opens up new dimensions for Brathwaite's work, making the "old" poems new again. Thus, with the Sycorax video style, Brathwaite is once again tearing apart old concepts--in this case, the traditional print poem--in order to make something new.

Mackey also contends that Brathwaite's calibanism, "stammament," reminds us that "postcolonial speech begins in a stammer" ("Wringing the Word" 136). He quotes "Negus," a poem from *Islands* as an example of this stammering that is present as the postcolonial begins to utilize this new language, in oral or written form. This stuttering is also present in the first version of X/Self's letter:

like de man still mekkin i walk up de slope dat e slide
in black down de whol long curve a de arch
i
pell
ago
long
long
ago
like a
tread
like a
tread
like a
tread
mill
or
mile
stone
or pet
like a pet
like a perpet.
ual plant

or
plantation (X/Self, 1987, 87)

However, it is absent from the later three versions in which Brathwaite stretches the “arch/i/pell/a/go” to one more syllable, but replaces the stammering lines below it with a substantial new section of political critique. This would suggest, following Mackey’s theory, that as Brathwaite becomes more comfortable with his “nation language,” he overcomes the most pronounced stuttering. However, slight “stammamments” do remain in the poem--“like I is a some/is a some//is a some-/body body”--to remind readers that X/Self is not thoroughly versed in his language.

The new material added to the end of the Middle Passages and Ancestors version of “X/Self xth letter” exhibits another aspect of Brathwaite’s opacity: his constant reference to obscure figures and hard to find texts, many of them his own. This is partially due to his training in History, but is also intricately tied to his use of “nation language.” In this new section, Brathwaite groups a myriad of figures at the edge of hell: “dante & dodo & julie & nappo & nix-//son & adolf Kaiser-//mann” are with “idi & splash & bota & a whole rash a de so call creole economiss” (Ancestors 453-454). Excepting the European, or Euro-American figures, these references are, at best, difficult for those outside the Caribbean--and perhaps also for those within it--to connect to known individuals.

At the end of his Introductions to Caribbean Discourse, Glissant concludes that in Martinique, the “discourse on discourse . . . as come too late” causing his country people to lose “the meaning of [their] own voice” (12). He follows this pessimistic outlook with a series of questions, which seem to be leading to negative answers: “Would an awakening to orality and the explosion of Creole satisfy the deficiency [the loss of voice]? Is the revolution that would nurture them still possible? Is the land which will *understand* them still there around us?” (12).

Brathwaite, however, would seem to be trying to find positive answers to Glissant’s questions. His writing is meant to evoke “an awakening to orality” and he is on a quest to find, and somehow to write a definitive voice for Barbadians and for Caribbeans. He is part of the revolution of which Glissant writes. But an answer to Glissant’s last question is still debatable. Brathwaite has received much critical acclaim from home and abroad. The six books of poetry that comprise Brathwaite’s two trilogies have been published by Oxford University Press, which, despite his protestations, is evidence of some support for his work outside the Caribbean. But perhaps there is a valid point in his protests. Although they published The Arrivants, his first trilogy, Oxford did not publish the second trilogy, Ancestors, which was published by New Directions Books instead. This latest edition includes Brathwaite’s revisions to Mother Poem, Sun Poem and X/Self in Sycorax video style, a technique that may have been too unconventional, or opaque, for Oxford. Brathwaite’s most recent publication, *MR*, was published by Savacou North and is difficult to obtain through popular channels. In 1994 Brathwaite received the Neustadt Prize for literature, and in 1976 and 1986, he was awarded the Casas de las

Americas Prize for Black & Blues and Roots, respectively. It would seem, then, that in the Caribbean, in Caribbean academic circles at least, his work is appreciated. But can academic circles suffice as the land that Glissant searches for? Do the Bajan/Caribbean people recognize/understand Brathwaite's work?

Glissant contends that the "value of artistic creation in developing countries . . . remains vital" to the actualization of a collective Caribbean identity (Discourse 235). He realizes, however, that in order to perform this function successfully, the writer will, of necessity, be separated from the community he writes for and about. He will be isolated, not only from the people, but also from "the language in use 'at present'" (Discourse 191). Perhaps this is why it is difficult to determine an answer to Glissant's third question. In striving to create a free Caribbean poetics, a writer may lose the ability to communicate effectively in the present forced poetics. But his efforts are necessary to protect the "word in the Caribbean," which Glissant predicts "will only survive as such, in written form, if this earlier loss [of voice, of the elements of orality] finds expression" (123). So, although it may sometimes seem that the nation for which Brathwaite writes does not yet correspond to his nation language, his experiments with "nation language" and Sycorax video style are important contributions in pushing Caribbean discourse toward Glissant's free poetics.

Notes

¹Edouard Glissant, Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays, trans. J. Michael Dash (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989). All quotations are from this edition.

²Unless otherwise noted, quotations from “X/Self” are from the Ancestors revision of “X/Self xth letter from the thirteenth provinces.”

³Glissant recommends that the writer “forge a new language” and “propose language as shock, language as antidote, a nonneutral one, through which the problems of the community can be restated” (190).

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