

## EXAMEN DE LIBROS

### EROSION, NOISE, AND HURRICANES:

A REVIEW OF EDWARD KAMAU BRATHWAITE'S  
*HISTORY OF THE VOICE: THE DEVELOPMENT OF NATION  
LANGUAGE IN ANGLOPHONE CARIBBEAN POETRY*

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*The hurricane does not roar  
in pentameters  
Brathwaite*

Brathwaite's book is not a new book, but it is an important book, and anyone wishing to understand Anglophone Caribbean literature should read it. It may be read by a general audience, and it would be quite useful for a high school or college level introduction to understanding certain points of Anglophone Caribbean poetry. Brathwaite's lecture, given at Carifesta '76 in Jamaica and again at Harvard in 1979, is here recorded in textual format and first published in 1984 by New Beacon Books, London and Port of Spain, 87 pp.; it may be read as entering into dialogue with what we now call Postcolonial Theory and its engagement with language. This is not the first time Brathwaite has written on the subject of the Caribbean culture or the Caribbean voices. We may see his implied and explicit commentary in his poetry, his essays such as *The Love Axe* (1977-1978, 61-63,), and in his books such as *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica: 1770-1820* (1971). He has written and published extensively throughout his career as a history professor, poet, and internationally recognized scholar. I need not go into the ways in which his past work informs this text; yet we should understand at least that Brathwaite has been writing about "nation lan-

guage" for a long time whether or not he deemed to call it such at the time. He proves this point by using his own earlier works as references throughout the text and in the "nation language" section of the quite useful extended bibliography at the end of the text.

Brathwaite's text shows that historical studies of the Anglophone Caribbean language(s) are not new. But they have not done what he is attempting to do: to go beyond "grammar, syntax, transformation, structure" (p. 15). He does note that there have been a few "pioneers" with concern to "more formal literary criticism," and he names specifically "H. P. Jacobs (1949) on Vic Reid, Mervyn Morris (1964) on Louise Bennett, and most of Gordon Rohlehr's work, beginning with *Sparrow and the language of Calypso* (1967) (pp. 16-17). The text also historically links nation language all the way back to Dante Alighieri and his Tuscan vernacular (p. 14), which is a problematic attempt to search for origins (or at least precedence) for authenticity of Brathwaite's notion of nation language. Yet, a more problematic moment occurs when Brathwaite, within a few lines of his "origins" argument, conflates the notion of nation language with "oral literature" (p. 14); I do not believe that he means to make them synonymous. Yet there it is. On the other hand, he makes a clear distinction between nation language and dialect, for as he claims, "caricature speaks in dialect" (p. 13), and nation language is definitively not to be confused with caricature.

When I read *History of the Voice*, I cannot help but wish that I were in the audience to which he lectured, for this text is missing the sounds that Brathwaite so often stops and requires his audience to hear. The recorded voices of poets and calypso singers alike inform his argument that the Caribbean voice is not a dialect of English but a distinct nation language. Brathwaite argues that this difference — the sound of the voice — occurs where the iambic scribal text loses its thrust as a cultural signifier for the Anglophone Caribbean.

Brathwaite asserts that one difference between standard English and Caribbean nation language is the structural difference between iambic pentameter and dactyls. To show the history of the development of nation language, Brathwaite first

gives examples that he asserts are not yet nation language. He follows with others that he asserts are nation language. Take for example, Brathwaite's quote from Derek Walcott's *The Schooner Flight* (p. 10). The difference between dialect and nation language here is skewed ambiguous. Obviously the lines are in iambic pentameter (IP), but the voice is that of the Caribbean sailor, Shabine. Certainly according to Brathwaite's formulations, this "first effort of nation language" by Walcott must be a failure in this regard: first, as he states, because it is still mimicking *Piers the Plowman* and second because it is still in IP. We must realize that indeed Brathwaite meant for us to understand, especially in this early section of the text, and given that it is only after all Walcott's first effort at nation language "that it does not yet qualify for this title". Brathwaite is showing the history of the Caribbean poets on the "cusp" of approaching nation language.

These "almost nation language" poems inform Brathwaite's argument because they are early instances of when the standard English usage begins to "erode" around the edges of the language, which then enables regional sounds to come into focus. At this point, Brathwaite claims, "we haven't got the syllables, the syllabic intelligence, to describe the hurricane, which is our own experience, whereas we can describe the imported alien experience of the snowfall (pp. 8-9). He quotes from his early poem titled *The day the first snow fell* first published in 1951 as evidence (p. 9). It is a Caribbean-authored poem about snow, and composed in iambic pentameter. This is an unmistakable representation of colonial mimicry, which is clearly not yet nation language. But the poetic effort becomes more complicated, as we see with the now often-cited example of the poem containing "the snow was falling on the cane fields" (p. 9). The poem problematically conjoins European snow with Caribbean cane. What Brathwaite is showing is indicative of the Caribbean dilemma that so many Caribbean scholars have written about: the "cultural schizophrenia" that stems from learning a language and culture that is not supported by the daily realities of the environment in which one lives. We may thus understand the significance of attaining a general understanding and a support of nation language in the Anglophone Caribbean.

Even after dismissing Shabine from the realm of nation language, we should note that at least Walcott's subject in *The Schooner Flight* is a Caribbean sailor. But Brathwaite would argue that *The Schooner Flight* is still missing a vital element: noise, and we must remember that "the hurricane does not roar in pentameters" (p. 10). Brathwaite includes Walcott's "Blues" in later sections as evidence of nation language "voices," which include work by Mikey Smith, Louise Bennett, Miss Queenie, The Mighty Sparrow, and many more. Yet he includes Walcott's *The Schooner Flight* poem in his "nation language poetry texts" bibliography, so is it nation language or not?

Brathwaite argues that "noise" is a contributing factor to nation language. He offers poems by H. A. Vaughan (1940s), Frank Colleymore (1950s), and John Figueroa (1960s) as early examples of nation language, and Oku Onuora, Michael Smith, and Linton Kwesi Johnson as more recent nation language poets. He gives his own *Wings of a Dove* from *Rights of Passage* (1967) and reprinted in *The Arrivants* (1973), as a sample of the "riddmic aspect of nation language" which in this case reflects the "sound structure of the Rastafarian drums" (pp. 32-33).

watch *dem* ship *dem*  
come to town *dem*

full o' *silk* *dem*  
full o' *food* *dem*

and *dem* plane *dem*  
come to *groun'* *dem*

full o' *flash* *dem*  
full o' *cash* *dem*...<sup>1</sup>

Brathwaite states that "nation language isn't confined... to rhythmic variations" (p. 35), and he gives examples from Miss Lou (Louise Bennett), Rastafarian poet Bongo Jerry, Walcott again

<sup>1</sup> Brathwaite's italics.

with references to jazz trombonist Don Drummond, and the film *The Harder They Come* (1972). He reminds us also how expansive and influential nation language has become, how recently "Bob Marley's and Oku's riddmic words become authorities for linguists" (p. 49).

Following Brathwaite's lead, we may look into Caribbean writing (that is not poetry), and we will still see an engagement with "noise" in Caribbean literature. George Lamming, Barbadian author and intellect, refers specifically to noise multiple times in describing identity issues in *The Pleasures of Exile* (1960). He discusses that when reciting his poem in London, he "made a heaven of a noise which is characteristic of my voice and an ingredient of West Indian behavior.

The result was an impression of authority (p. 63). Lamming also quotes from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, which he uses in his own version of *Writing back to the center*. It is Caliban's voice in Act III Scene II: "Be not afeard; the isle is full of noises, / Sounds and sweet airs, that give delight and hurt not / Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments will hum about mine ears" (p. 14). With Erna Brodber, Jamaican author and intellect (whose work is often compared to Lamming's), we may also see a creative representation of the "noise" factor in nation language in the first pages of her novel *Myal* (1988). The novel itself may be deemed a nation language novel. *Myal* aptly begins not with a hurricane, but close enough, with a lightning storm and all the metaphoric possibilities inherent in it: "this discord could shake a man out of his roots" (p. 1).

Brathwaite's text, in its scholarly endeavor to create an understanding of the cultural implications of nation language in Anglophone Caribbean poetry, thus opens up similar routes of analysis for understanding the various forms of Anglophone Caribbean literature. Indeed, Brathwaite does not even stay within the poetry context of his title and stated mission.

The end of Brathwaite's *History of the Voice* gives a useful select bibliography, and adds thirty-seven pages to the fifty pages of the original lecture. The bibliography includes references to creative writing, criticism, music, and poets reading their poems as well as other performance artists such as the Sistren Theater

(in Jamaica). Some of his subsections are divided further to denote nation language interests such as "Nation Language/Criticism" or on the other hand "Poetry Texts (Not Nation) Connected with the Study". By including this bibliography with his lecture, Brathwaite forces the reader to acknowledge that he has an abundant resource file by which to make his argument. The bibliography also reasserts Brathwaite's star as a historiographer of the Anglophone Caribbean. He shows that he has indeed done an extensive survey to support his conclusions. The bibliography, as well, provides us with resources with which to grasp the intricacies of nation language that he discusses.

Brathwaite's text does not end with the bibliography, for it is invoked perhaps since the day it rolled off the press. Dr. Carolyn Cooper, (current Chair of the Literature in English department at the University of the West Indies in Mona, Jamaica), for one, has invoked Brathwaite's notion of nation language, as she uses a quote from *History of the Voice* as an epigraph in her collection of critical essays *Noises in the Blood* (1993) as well as in her introduction and in her discussion of the peculiar reversal of situations in Michael Thelwell's textual appropriation into novel form (1980) of the film *The Harder They Come* (1972). Brathwaite himself, in *History of the Voice* discusses the film in a footnote; "for the 'first time at last', a local face, a native icon, a nation language voice was the hero. In this small corner of our world, a revolution as significant as emancipation" (p. 41). First stated in 1976 (and in print by 1984), we must thus understand the critical importance that Brathwaite places onto the concept and usage of nation language.

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