Walcott and Brathwaite:

Caribbean Modernity and "the detritus of the past"

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Abbreviations

Derek Walcott

CP: *Collected Poems, 1948-1984*
FC: "The Figure of Crusoe"
MH: "The Muse of History"
CCM: "The Caribbean: Culture or Mimicry?"

Edward Brathwaite

TA: *The Arrivants*

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT 2

INTRODUCTION 4

CHAPTER 1

TRANSCENDING BORDERS: MAPPING CARIBBEAN CREATIVITY 8

CHAPTER 2

THE CARIBBEAN IN CRUSOE: HISTORY, AMNESIA AND MODERNITY IN WALCOTT'S POETRY 17

CHAPTER 3

ARRIVAL AND RETURN: HISTORICITY AND TRANSNATIONAL MODERNITY IN *THE ARRIVANTS* 28

CONCLUSION 39

WORKS CITED 40

Abstract

The Caribbean quest to conceptualize the modernity inherent in their condition is illustrated in living color by Derek Walcott and Edward K. Brathwaite in their critically acclaimed poetry. In doing so not only do they respond to and defy conventional established tropes and categories but they also evolve new modes of representation uniquely suited to depict the disconnection, dispossession and fragmentation embodied by the Caribbean consciousness. This dissertation attempts to investigate the tenuous modernity depicted in the verses of these poets, and how these depiction transcend not just borders but entire notions of history, identity and selfhood.

"We contemplate our spirit by the detritus of the past."

- Derek Walcott
"The Figure of Crusoe"

Introduction

The difficulties of trying to situate Caribbean art and literature on a broader literary map are echoed by its position on a geographical map of the wider Atlantic: nearly imperceptible strings and invisible, yet irresistible, currents seem to pull at it from multiple directions and hark back to diverse influences of varying degrees that have shaped it into what it is today. Those that gravitate to it do so from the appeal of the distinctive questions posed by these and other interconnected elements originating in the culture and literature of this region. To try to summarize its various intricacies would be to unforgivably water down the complex dynamics that makes writing from this region stand out from others.

The Caribbean poses a situation that is unique within the postcolonial discourse in more ways than one. Yet, there are those that would question the very choice of the word "unique" to describe the region and its writing, which, as is well-known, are a mélange of past, present, European, American, Indian and African that is as frenetic as it is eclectic. In the worn out words of one oft-quoted celebrated Caribbean writer, "Nothing was created in the West Indies and nothing will ever be created." This harsh dismissal of his homeland of origin, however, reflects one of the main threads that run through the Caribbean consciousness—that of disconnection, dislocation and dispossession.

In this dissertation I shall explore how these themes feed into the Caribbean poet's attempts to consolidate the Caribbean self in a way that clearly exemplifies the hallmarks of modernity. In exploring how Caribbean dilemma and the thematics arising from it reflect decidedly modern tropes and modes of thinking that seemingly affirm existing strategies of narration while in fact subverting them. In trying to trace these compelling themes and the threads that tug it across the ocean towards their various origins, I shall be using cross-textual

references to poetry by the acclaimed poet Derek Walcott and his equally well-known contemporary Edward Kamau Brathwaite. It is my goal to show how, despite their immensely different takes on problems of identity, selfhood and the role of art in the Caribbean, they manage to depict a common modern vision that not only challenge older determinist modes of representation but also brings to fore fresh perspectives on the Caribbean as a part of shared creative space of the Atlantic.

The reasons behind choosing poetry to explore issues of identity were vague to begin with, but with the passage of time it became clear that while novels mostly stand to make a point, poems in general have more fluidity and wealth in terms of meaning and signification. More recently the novel as a literary form has been infused with even more implication by the postcolonial discourse. If, as has been suggested, the novel has been the vehicle for the colonial gaze, othering and such diminishing categorization and representation of the other[1], then it stands to reason that poetry should be the most apt tool for the piecing together of a postcolonial self. Many have used the novel to "write back" but poets have used it as a way towards negotiating a resolution to their predicament, come to terms with how matters stand. In the Caribbean especially, poetry evolved as a natural derivative of music instead of strictly being a learned art, something that has given the poetry from this region its distinction.

Derek Walcott is the name most often associated with poetry from the Caribbean. His much deserved Nobel Prize win for *White Egrets* in 1992 has made him and his verses recognizable the world over. His acclaim as a poet who has been able to map the fractures within the postcolonial West Indian psyche owing to a history ravaged by colonialism and slavery as well as a present made uncertain by the implications of that lost past. While Walcott's poetry

[1] See for example Edward Said's *Orientalism (1970)* or *Culture and Imperialism (19)*

present the conflicted vision of a colonial subject yearning for a literature of his own, something that is less evident in Brathwaite's repertoire, his self-awareness and double consciousness far outstrips the latter's, making his writing introspective, self-questioning and a quest for personal identity. I shall be using a range of Walcott's poems, spanning several decades, using the anthology *Collected Poems, 1948-1984* as my key point of reference[2].

Edward Kamau Brathwaite has as much claim to fame as a poet as he does a historian. Works such as *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica, 1770-1820* are his lesser known but equally influential contributions to the discourse of black diaspora and its cultural historical implications, and inform his poetry on several levels. His work symbolizes his on-going attempts to repossess all that has been lost in the course of Caribbean history, a loss that Walcott laments yet cannot hope to ever regain. Brathwaite's quest is for a more communal identity within the black Caribbean spectrum. As such, he feels a closer awareness of the Africa in his past, a greater sense of connection with the more inimitable folk aspects of West Indian life and culture, especially those that are essentially vestigial remains of a lost African heritage. The recovery of roots is a crucial theme in *The Arrivants* trilogy[3], an omnibus containing three of his seminal poetry collections, which uses a cross-oceanic journey to Africa and back as the backdrop for the development of a collective Caribbean identity. Even though Africa has been described as a "mere prelude to the adventure of modernity in the Caribbean" the trilogy introduces many elements crucial to gaining an understanding of the modern consciousness behind it.

My first chapter shall examine the numerous cross-continental connections and themes that form the backdrop for the Caribbean of today, arguing both slavery and colonialism as

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[2] Henceforth cited as *CP*.

[3] Henceforth cited as *TA*.

transformative processes essential to the irruption of modernity in this region. It will try to construct a theoretical framework within which the two poets operate, navigating from point to point establishing an emergent transnational perspective. It will discuss the importance of certain dominant narratives that prevail in this region effecting its culture, dialectics, and discourse. My second chapter will then deal with the poetry of Walcott, and his perception of the anxiety inherent in the tentative connection between a Caribbean and the colonial culture as well as the loss of his Old World heritage, posing this anxiety as not just of a postcolonial nature but also owing to the unique modernity that has been thrust upon the Caribbean. By examining how his poetry has subverted established dichotomous categories I shall attempt to analyse the modern Caribbean captured in his poems. My third chapter will therefore discuss the unique stylings of Brathwaite and how his inimitable poetics illustrate a singular commitment to the decidedly postcolonial goal of reconstructing a spiritual and cultural connection from only the fragments that exist in his social reality. As I critically assess the process of arrival and return to and from the West Indies and Africa in his pursuit of history, identity and heritage, the transnational modern nature of his poetics will be made evident.

Underlying these arguments remains the idea that one has to leave the islands on a journey of cultural search across the Atlantic, albeit for each in diverging seemingly conflicting directions, to find or reconstruct the roots that have been lost in their transplantation onto these islands.

Chapter 1

Transcending Borders: Mapping Caribbean Creativity

One of the major tasks undertaken by postcolonial discourses is the contextualization of literature from different recently decolonized (and latterly nationalized) regions of the world in order to bring out their essential similarities by weighing the influence of imperialism on identity and culture. On a different counter note, it strives to highlight the individual qualities pertaining to their unique circumstances so that a separate recognizable place can be established for each in the global arena (nationalism being one of these ways). The concurrent pursuit of these goals seems on the surface to work at cross-purposes, but they remain interlinked objectives.

It has, however, become more and more difficult to chase such determinist structuralist objectives with the passage of time and the advent of a postmodern consciousness in literature, making it harder to consistently trace the various threads feeding into matters of identity. This is because as older categorical methods of understanding our place in the world break down, they give way to newer more tenuous modes of representation. It indicates a shifting paradigm, from a clear and precise placement of "us" and "other" in first a colonial, or later a postcolonial setting, into a more amorphous nebulous group of individuals floating in the middle in a more globalized, more hybrid and less territorialized setting.

It is now, for this reason, easier to find links between nations, cultures, ideologies and practices that then transcend these contextual separations, blurring lines we insist on drawing to keep them distinct. As newer and more amorphous dialectic evolve from previous conventional ones, the sense of conflict between what was past and what is rapidly taking shape in the present intensifies, a mood subsequently reflected in the literature of these times. It portends a time of creativity, for the artist who undertakes the challenge of reflecting upon such changes must

demonstrate inventiveness in his treatment of what may very well morph into polemic discussions.

The tensions arising from this stretch taut in the Caribbean, and are characterized as resulting from its "irruption into modernity" (Gikandi 4). For nowhere else does the ambivalence resulting from the colonial encounter ring louder and with greater anxiety, making the collation of a coherent uniform postcolonial narrative daunting. The consecutive reeling blows of forced migration, slavery and colonialism have confused and complicated the subject of a contemporary collective identity, for the process of identity formation itself has been fraught with complex subtleties mired in issues of race, nationality, ethnicity, colonial as well as postcolonial conditioning. Untangling them is too ambitious a task to undertake in one single paper. This chapter, therefore, shall focus on outlining a tentative framework and try to trace the more imperative converging points of these issues that make this region such a fascinating study, while posing the friction created at these points of convergence as the fuel that feeds the explosion of creative arts from the West Indies.

On one level, it is possible to view the Caribbean isles as a shared national and cultural space for people of many origins and backgrounds, an uneven yet syncretic whole created through the intermingling of not just bloodlines and races but also varying modes of cultural expression from diverse origins. Contemporary Caribbean society is one whose people share a turbulent history—an amalgamation of alternately violent and triumphant experiences that include colonialism under no less than four different masters, slavery with its dehumanizing gestures, and emancipation from both following long and brutal struggles for liberty as humans, individuals and nations. This shared space and these shared experiences then give birth to a sense of community and cohesion that surpass the neat oblique lines drawn to contain them, allowing

new modes of recognition, identification and expression to emerge—ones that are simultaneously in harmony and at odds with previous modes.

On a different level, the Caribbean is a smaller slice of a shared globe, or on a narrower scale, a single point amongst many in the quadrangular dynamics of the cross-Atlantic black diaspora. These cross-Atlantic cross-cultural connections, drawn from Europe and Africa to the New World, set up a unique background for analysis of ways in which slavery, colonialism and the black diaspora ensuing from these have resulted in the intermingling of several artistic and literary strains that reverberate across the Caribbean. It is an entirely novel way of looking at this contentious space that is proposed by Paul Gilroy in *The Black Atlantic*, through which it is possible to "take the Atlantic as one single, complex unit of analysis in their discussions of the modern world and use it to produce an explicitly transnational and intercultural perspective." (15).

The importance of this stems from an awareness of the oceanic journeys and borderless approach necessary to consolidate the various active influences that work in shaping the Caribbean consciousness, taking the discourse in a different original direction. It has always been safe to say that the Caribbean cannot be viewed in isolation, even if a sense of isolation, one of the prominent themes running through West Indian literature, results from this phenomenon of being pulled in different directions and thus fitting nowhere or existing in the margins. This new perspective, however, extends the borders of the Caribbean to include the whole of the Atlantic, increasing the diasporic reaches of its cultural questions and broadening the scope for answering them.

The strength of the European connection amidst others is characterized in the literature of this region on many levels, but most simplistically through direct and implied depictions,

responses and ruminations on the colonial encounter and its legacy, which has of course received the most ardent attention in global circles since it is something the West Indies have in common with much of the world. A relevant example to show the overwhelming control of the colonial narrative over the minds of people, as well as the prevalence of colonialism as a theme, is the uncomfortable fact that the Caribbean owes its very appearance in the annals of history to Columbus and his ships, before whose arrival there was no record in European history of the existence of these islands. It is a matter that "haunts" the Caribbean discourse on many levels, as posed by Simon Gikandi in *Writing in Limbo*.

It is just one point among many that demonstrates the European colonial domination of the historiography and epistemological devices that actively work in shaping the world and how future generations conceptualize and perceive that world. As noted by Jenny Sharpe, "None of us escapes the legacy of a colonial past and its traces in our academic practice." (99). The importance of countering those conventions in light of their essentialized outlook is evident then. There is a "need to contest the meaning and method of colonial historiography, especially its totalizing gestures" (Gikandi 6), even if the chain of events, the tools for thought, and the instruments for fashioning any coherent identity have, for the most part, colonial origins. This explains the postcolonial preoccupation with colonial discursive elements, be it through resistance, rejection or reconstruction. It must also be noted that more often than not, these very tools give form to counter-discourses that fall into the same trap of binaries and absolutism so criticized in their predecessor. These inevitably fail to capture the plurality and hybrid reality of postcolonial communities, as evidenced in the Caribbean.

Aside from colonialism, slavery (defined here as the systematic capture, relocation, enslavement and dehumanization of African peoples), its direct consequence, has also been a

dominant theme related to this region, especially as expressed in the discourse of black racial and literary thought. It is the genus of the black diaspora as we now know it, the inciting point of its terrible history. The Caribbean has had to contend with the looming specter of the Middle Passage as a point of origin for its people as well as the violent and traumatic bondage that followed, something that threatens to culminate in an inability to look beyond it to the larger thematic of transport and transformation overlaying it. While preoccupation with the former is understandable and has been the starting point for many counter-discourses to colonial historiography, it is the latter that is of particular interest to scholars of modernity and modernism who pinpoint the forced migration of the Middle Passage as not just a transformative experience but as the gateway to more complex categorical structure (Harris). How to then bring the previous now outmoded view of the past that has dominated the history and vision of these islands into reconciliation with the present emerging discourses that encourage a more holistic approach towards culture in order to form any kind of a settled identity becomes a compelling question for its literature.

It is a theme that also establishes the connection with Africa as a transnational link separate from but equally important as the European voyages to the isles. These points on the map make clear that much of Caribbean identity is derivative of points beyond itself, across the water within the black Atlantic space. This makes the imposition of national borders and limits on culture itself impractical as well as implausible while stressing the importance of considering the Atlantic as a complex cultural whole of which the West Indies is one vital part. Its very beginning is steeped in a confused mixture—a direct result of those transformative voyages across the Atlantic—to which the contemporary modernity and fluidity of identity and experience can be traced.

The recurring motif of colonial encounter is understandable in the light of its overwhelming importance, something that is further problematized by the absence of a concrete pre-colonial imaginary with regards to the Caribbean. It is a unique quandary faced by its people because unlike other postcolonial contexts in other parts of the world the West Indies lacks a primordial heritage of its own as a reference point to fuel resistance to colonial cultural domination. What it does possess is a fragmented idea of Africa as a lost homeland, which becomes the idea around which a tentative nationalist ethos can be built. This ethos, however, stands on unstable ground having been built on fragments of a pre-colonial imaginary that the colonial conditioning has worked for centuries to erase.

West Indian literature has therefore at all times treated the matter of the pre-colonial with kid gloves because a primordial African connection is a double edged sword, that may serve to keep alive hopes for a reconnection with some glorious non-existent pre-slavery pre-colonial state for the black peoples. Needless to say any such attempt is impractical due to impossible distances of time, space and experience. It does, nonetheless, establish the presence of Africa in Caribbean cultural consciousness as a vital component in its contextualization, however fragmented, nostalgic or futile it may be. The West India artist's treatment of it is best articulated by Gikandi when he writes:

> …Caribbean writing is not so much motivated by the desire to recover an "original" model—the unhistoried African body that predates slavery and colonialism—as by the need to inscribe Caribbean selves and voices within an economy of representation whose institutional and symbolic structures have been established since "discovery". (10)

These vastly different ways of conceptualizing the patchwork identity of the Caribbean individual is suggested as the emergence of a new modernism distinct to the Indies and particular to its situation, which "develops as a narrative strategy and counter-discourse away from outmoded and conventional modes of representation associated with colonial domination and colonizing cultural structures." (Gikandi 5). It ushers a new chapter of modernity for the region as well, one which is not necessarily "occluded by the dominance of European and American writing elites whose loud modernist voices have dominated the clamour of philosophical and political discourses that reaches out from the eighteenth century to haunt us now." (Gilroy 45). It inaugurates a new way of looking at and responding to the weight—and, in the Caribbean, alternatively the absence as well—of history and literary heritage, one which is distinct from the type espoused by the European modernist approach. The aim is not just reconstruction or restructuring, but also of developing an entirely novel form of representation that borrows from all and belongs to none.

Furthermore, the Caribbean artist is characterized by a "creative schizophrenia", whereby artists gain inspiration from and employ various fragments of style, language, etc to engender new ways of assessing and depicting the Caribbean self, is the biggest asset at their disposal:

> … this writer does not have to choose between self and community, between a private discourse and a national language, or even between the subjective experience and historical traditions. On the contrary this kind of writer is able to move from one value to the other and to break the binary oppositions that sustain such values as mutually exclusive enemies. (Gikandi 13)

In negotiating the shared spaces, they also find unexpected niches where genres, cultures, histories and identities merge to become something different that transcends these individual exclusive categories or the divisions created by ascribing to them.

Derek Walcott's poetry, for instance, finds alternative ways of framing quintessentially Caribbean questions and problems, while firmly steering clear of any pre-colonial glorification, taking his responsibilities as a New World poet as a chance to instead unveil the wonder of the natural beauty of the islands. Nature is an archetypal presence in his poetry, but not to neo-romantic purposes—it serves to firmly root it in the islands in a way that nothing else allows. His focus is centered more on the discovery of these islands as a point of origin of being, laying to rest any persistent pull towards examining what came before. This he does with no little feeling of conflict, anxiety and ambivalence, but his poetry aims to transcend the fetters imposed by the dominant narrative structures of history, memory and past in an attempt to rise above the traumas they have come to represent.

Edward Kamau Brathwaite, however, has made it his quest to reconcile the emergence and existence of the New World with that of the Old World signified by the Africa his ancestors had to leave behind. In doing so he presents a re-envisioning of racial and nationalist discursive standards that challenge standing conventions. To him, the silencing of his history and the forgetting of the past is a crucial matter that begs deep and comprehensive investigation, without the resolution of which the Caribbean peoples cannot come to a cultural identity that is whole and can be lived with or built on. It tacitly acknowledges the arrangement of Atlantic cultural connections proposed by Gilroy, as evidenced by his careful attempts at repossession of the erased past that pains Walcott so. He wishes to reestablish the cultural connection to Africa lost via translocation and colonization, in order to ground the Caribbean.

Ultimately, though, both poets in a sense try to push the boundaries of these dominant narratives with which they are interacting, eventually going beyond them to try to encapsulate their experiences as Caribbean islanders on a search for a resolution to the question of culture that remains a crucial aspect of identity formation. Their formulation of what it means to be Caribbean gives rise to newer style of organizing selfhood, one not entirely reliant on degrees of race, ethnicity, or colonial heritage, but rather on a more experiential one. The common and simultaneous experiences of disconnection, searching, yearning and discovery underlie their writing, shaping a new means to unite a fragmented population.

So what are the kind of artists, poets and writers emerging out of the Caribbean in light of these complexities? They are certainly ones who eschew easy old categorizations and binaries to create instead new ideas of identity conducive to a more fluid definition of self, nation and community. They employ the tensions between the dialectics as they stand and the fragmented present that defies those fixed absolutes as inspiration for the development of a new sense of what it means to be an artist and also what it means to be Caribbean.

Chapter 2

The Caribbean in Crusoe: History, Amnesia and Modernity in Walcott's Poetry

> We create nothing but that is to move from anthropological absurdity to pseudo-philosophical rubbish, to discuss the reality of nothing, the mathematical conundrum of zero and infinity. Nothing will always be created in the West Indies, for a long time, because what will come out of there is like nothing one has ever seen before.
>
> --Derek Walcott[4]

In discussions about Caribbean literature one cannot hope to exclude St Lucian poet Derek Walcott, whose framing of the quest for a coherent Caribbean selfhood have been greatly appreciated by Western and postcolonial audiences alike. Having garnered international acknowledgment as one of the contemporary poets to best capture the Caribbean condition, its continuing struggle with the legacy of colonization, search for identity and hybridity even in a postcolonial postmodern age, Derek Walcott has turned the Western academic eye onto the West Indies and its flourishing literary wealth. This scrutiny has inevitably led to comparison with other poets and writers who have tried in their own ways to represent this land as they have experienced it. Walcott's, however, remains at the forefront of it all, for all its complexity and amorphousness is most true to the consciousness of an islander.

Although Western canon ties him so inextricably to the Caribbean, even a rudimentary look into his work reveals that rootlessness and drifting are at the center of it. Many of his poems reveal a simultaneous yearning for and rejection of the weight of the past, interconnecting the

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[4] "The Caribbean: Culture or Mimicry?." *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs* 16.1 (1974): 3-13. *JSTOR*. Web. 4 Nov 2012. Henceforth cited as CCM

erasure of a turbulent history with the loss of heritage that comes with it. There is, because of this, a yearning for a homeland in a metaphorical sense—a culture and literature to call his own. All of this condenses to form a picture of the Caribbean that subverts older established modes of representation which place needless emphasis on the categorical binaries conflicting in a postcolonial setting. I will be arguing that the presence of various seemingly conflicting themes and categories need not indicate a conflict at all. Rather they simply coexist within the Caribbean consciousness as a sign of its advent into modernity. They create in fact new ways of understanding the Caribbean as a shared creative space, Walcott's poetry being instrumental in framing "their postcolonial experience of modernity" (Pollard 2).

It is the awareness of one's island surroundings that reflects in Walcott's writings many of the prevalent themes and anxieties of this modernity, be it isolation, maroonage, or even the hope of rescue from the dizzying tug of a past that has been forced under the consciousness. "The Castaway", which features a narrator in a situation reminiscent of a shipwrecked Robinson Crusoe, confirms how Caribbean selfhood is suspended in a state of nothingness, between lands, between cultures, between blackness and whiteness. He dwells on his surroundings in listless tedium, but mostly "The starved eye devours the seascape for the morsel/Of a sail" (*CP* 57), revealing therein a silent desperation for hope of some form of connection to something in the wider world that can end this feeling of suspended animation. The poem simultaneously evokes feelings of anxiety and boredom from being cut off—from the world by a vast expanse of water, and from any stream of continuity by the utter paralysis of time.

For Walcott, the figure of Crusoe has been an apt vessel for the Caribbean poet. In a talk titled "The Figure of Crusoe"[5], given at the University of West Indies in 1965 explaining the

[5] Henceforth cited as FC

significance of this character in his poetry, the poet compares him to Proteas of Greek mythology, a symbol accommodating of the various metaphors the poet wishes him to exemplify. He is "is Adam, Christopher Columbus, God, a missionary, a beachcomber" all in one composite whole ("FC" 35). The parallels between Adamic metaphors of origin and the stranded Crusoe's beach scavenging are deftly woven into several of his poems, representing the character's importance as a signifier. Walcott's Crusoe is no longer just a white man come to civilize the native Friday;

> Walcott sees the ambivalence of Crusoe's legacy as an unavoidable part of a Caribbean literary tradition. He responds by situating that legacy in new contexts, contexts that reflect his pragmatic perspective on how best to master that legacy to create an independent future… (Pollard 67)

His reasons for this were articulated in ringing prose which stands as a response to other literary stalwarts who consider the Caribbean a yawning hole of nothingness;

> Crusoe's truimph lies in that despairing cry which he utters when a current takes his dugout canoe further and further away from the island that, like all of us uprooted figures, he had made his home, and it is the cynical answer that we must make to those critics who complain that there is nothing here, no art, no history, no architecture, by which the mean ruins, in short, no civilization, it is "O happy desert!" We live not only on happy, but on fertile deserts, and we draw our strength, like Adam, like all hermits, all dedicated craftsmen, from that rich irony of our history. ("FC" 40)

This, in essence, is what the Caribbean artist faces—an utter lack of tools with which to craft, except those which he can scavenge from the ruins or fragments of greater cultural

superstructures, while working around a disjuncture with the past, coupled with the slow but steady waning of memory which leaves one with the feeling of nothingness. In the eyes of Walcott, though, this is a state of affairs that is to be celebrated. Only in a state of nothingness can ingenuity emerge victorious.

The figure of Crusoe, then, becomes a figure of triumph against loss—of history, of past, of roots, of heritage and of homeland. Its significance lies in being a merger of the many figures that are vital to understanding the historical and cultural narrative the Caribbean artist has to work with. In doing so it breaks apart those absolute distinctions replacing it with a fluid character that can be whatever he is needed to be. The poet, in Walcott's eyes, is one who forages the debris of what is left over from that loss to forge together a new identity that reflects his drifting present. This new identity, like that of Crusoe, is a hybrid mongrel whose internal contradictions reflect the inner conflict embodied in the Caribbean colonized self.

The pieces that construct that identity, simplistically viewed, come from two sources, creating a conundrum which Walcott explains in his essay "The Muse of History"[6] using an allegory of two grandfathers, a tale that confuses the situation tremendously for the simple fact that it is not entirely fictitious. By history of the Caribbean, he is of course referring to one that submits to colonial historiographic parameters, rejecting "not the validity of historicity but the valorization of inherited categories of history" (Gikandi 9). These categories have become symbolic of irresolvable controversy—because of them history becomes a force best left out of the Caribbean process of art and creation lest it poison the product until it "yellows into polemic or evaporates in pathos." ("MH" 371). His method of subversion is not without its advantages. In some ways this divorce from history is a factor that can spur on the creative process:

[6] Henceforth cited as MH

> In the Caribbean history is irrelevant, not because it is not being created, or because it is sordid; but because it has never mattered, what has mattered is the loss of history, the amnesia of the races, what has become necessary is imagination, imagination as necessity, as invention. ("CCM" 6)

In the Caribbean, the necessity of distance from historicity has become the mother of imagination, rendering the New World as truly *new* for the enterprising poet. It allows him, as he prefers, to explore the awe and wonder of an Adamic story of origin—of Crusoe as the first man washed up on the shore of an earthly Eden, rather than remember the past as one of forced translocation, uprooting, and oppression as represented by colonial historicity. Until such time as Western historiography can evolve out of an epistemological perspective that only allows the chronicling of modernity from the master's position—something close to what Gilroy attempts in *The Black Atlantic* (41-71)—rejection of that history, or an ahistoricity rather, acts as a form of resistance.

But remembrance is inevitable. Walcott himself does not manage to remain completely above worrying the wounds of old as he circles back to these conflict-ridden issues in many a poem, demonstrating that history is not a burden so easily shed. What it contains are "corpses", "carcass" and "carrion", violence that cut both ways and spared no one. Even a brief return to the ghosts of the past gives rise to vividly bloody imagery of African battlefields and genocide. The brutality of slavery and the wrenching dilemma of the colonial subject are brought forth in his earlier works, where he debates the injustice done to his people against the pull of the colonial conditioning:

> I who have cursed
>
> The drunken officer of British rule, how choose

Between this Africa and the English tongue I love?

Betray them both, or give back what they give? (*CP* 18)

The specific colonial tool preventing the poet from achieving complete agency independent from colonial influences is language, a problem more acute in the Caribbean than anywhere else.[7]—one which is echoed emphatically once more in the statement "To change your language you must change your life" (*CP* 97). In Walcott's mind his use of English is also a conflict-ridden prospect especially in the light of the colonial horrors perpetrated against his people.

The debate culminates in the rhetorical, almost unanswerable cry "But how can I turn from Africa and live?" It is this question that the Caribbean quest for identity is forced to return to. As a result Walcott depicts the islands not in terms of the pre-modern imaginaries which narrowly focus on this conflict. Instead, he superimposes these various facets on one another demonstrating the fragmentation inherent within the Caribbean postcolonial psyche, one which defies blithe categorization and rather destabilizes previous categories. For Walcott, homeland can never be an idealized imaginary of a singular monolithic African civilization—the very prospect is made difficult by such horrific images of crimes against his people—but language and culture acquired through the colonial experience are also formative aspects of his identity which he is uneasy about accepting or rejecting. These translate into tropes of anxiety representative of a modern angst.

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[7] The absence of a concrete pre-colonial past precludes the absence of a pre-colonial tongue that can serve to provide active resistance to the encroachment of colonial culture through language—in which case Walcott's dilemma is no less than Chinua Achebe's as expressed in "The African Writer and the English Language" (1975), or Ngugi wa Thiong'o's as explained in *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*. There are, however, debates regarding the marginalization of creole and *patois* tongues under various colonial regimes in the West Indies and the imposition of colonial languages of English, French, Spanish, etc

It is the absence of significantly Afro-Caribbean folk tropes that emerge as a sign of that aspect of origin for the West Indian peoples. The severity of the erasure of that heritage is made clear by the recurring motif of amnesia and forgetting in his other poems. The trauma of their slave past is not just significant in having created geographical dislocation and the consequences of that, but also the historical disjunction that results from it. If the story of their arrival in the Caribbean is of an Adamic nature, it is also one of being uprooted and sent adrift into the ocean. In "The Swamp", the pull of that forgotten past is characterized as a gaping black chasm threatening at the edge of consciousness, a murky swampland where every turn threatens painful and potentially fatal results. The contrast between the sun baked imagery of his previous poems and the nighttime deadliness of the vegetation portrayed here are vivid, exposing the dark side of the paradisiacal land and the dark origins of its people:

> Backward to darkness, go black
> With widening amnesia, take the edge
> Of nothing to them slowly, merge (*CP* 60)

This movement backwards in time, towards an undefined darkness, and falling into a "widening amnesia" illustrates an almost willful forgetting of the past resulting from a forgotten past that lurks in the black swamp of racial memory ever encroaching on the Caribbean consciousness despite efforts to suppress it.

The memory that is absent or has been erased is a void at least partially filled by colonization and its consequences. The colonial subject, therefore, is alive and well within Walcott's body of work, and his struggle with it as a poet of a postcolonial reality is a matter unabashedly laid bare for his readers. In this he also reveals the duality at the core of the Caribbean poet. Even though the learned colonial culture becomes his anchor in his state of

drifting, the erasure of a racial past, one he struggles and fails to remember, still factors into his work regardless.

So there is a curious sense of doubleness that pervades Walcott's poetry, one that defies the older binary relationships established by colonial dogmatism but does not fall into a fixed totalizing whole conducive to typical, i.e. unifying, nationalist categorization. This doubleness must not be mistaken for any either/or categories that characterize older dominant narrative styles. It illuminates instead the fissures that exist within the Caribbean self as well as in Caribbean society, making hybridity and plurality a far more sympathetic recourse. The dissolution of those binaries for a more fluid modern approach is evident, as in his poem "Names":

> I began with no memory,
> I began with no future,
> but I looked for that moment
> when the mind was halved by a horizon.
>
> I have never found that moment
> when the mind was halved by a horizon--
> for the goldsmith from Benares,
> the stone-cutter from Canton,
> as a fishline sinks, the horizon
> sinks in the memory. (*CP*, 305)

The contentions with history being thus manifold, it is a past that is floating between their life as a colonized people and as a colonizer in turn. The appearance of colonialism in Walcott's

poetry confirms the strength of its effect on the Caribbean consciousness so much so that its reverberations are a steady beat that runs beneath most of his more introspective poems. It is a critical and complicated attitude, however, that reveals itself in "Ruins of a Great House", which becomes an elegy of empire, colonialism and slavery, simultaneously airing his anger towards and attempting to reconcile all of these elements in his mind. It once again brings to the fore the inexorable pull of colonial culture and the undeniable influence it exerts on the poet while questioning its roots in the Caribbean context. The rotting and decayed plantation house emblematic of the abandoned empire of which the West Indies is a mere offshoot, engenders rage only to begin with, but then segues to grief at the garbled history it symbolizes as well as pity that such a "great house" has been laid so low (*CP* 19). He ends on a note of compassion, not as a colonial sympathizer, but with recognition that this too is a part of the patchwork past of his people and the ruins of empire are what remains for them to make of what they will.

Walcott's feeling of deep connection and attachment with his colonizer's language and literary heritage, while mired in anxiety and guilt, is not one he can set aside, and in fact it informs his work on a rather acute level. Even though he is hailed as a New World poet whose verses best celebrate the vibrant scenery of the islands, his poems also reflect a distinct longing for the certainty and colossal presence of British literary traditions, even while he busily subverts them. The feeling of being adrift speaks not only to the disconnection from a fixed past or the loss of an actual homeland with its own weight of memory and heritage, but also the lack of cultural roots that was borne of the long ago displacement. Walcott's looks to Britain and its literary wealth for inspiration in his attempts to build some connection to a larger body of literature that comes with the weight of history and famous forefathers behind it. "Love in the Valley" expresses his longing for a literature of his own, but circles back around to images of the

Western world made vivid to him by years of reading about it (*CP* 133). He derives inspiration from the heroines of Western tradition, while simultaneously lamenting the absence of Caribbean literary figures that he can turn to. It is not only emblematic of the strong presence of the colonial culture in his life and also pushes the reader to examine its effect on him and its place on his ethos of culture.

One cannot help but notice the decided Western influence on Walcott's body of work—Greek classical tropes and works are not just alluded to, as in poems such as "Sea Grapes", but also emulated, with his masterpiece *Omeros* (1990) as a fitting example of this. It is a recognized and acknowledged reflection of the modernist tropes made famous by T.S Eliot, who has been an overriding influence on Walcott's style and technique (Pollard 2). So how far does this emulation go before it falls into mimicry? In the words of Homi Bhaba "The *menace* of mimicry is its *double* vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts authority." (126). The act of mimicry is in this case a subversion of prior dominant classifications of culture and art. In his 1974 essay titled "The Caribbean: Culture or Mimicry?", where Walcott explains the place of mimicry in the formation of the cultural dialectics of the Caribbean, he justifies the importance of such representations in the process of coming to a point of cultural emancipation. Of the various innovated genres of music and art that arose out of the Caribbean, he emphasize how "… these forms originated in imitation, if you want, and ended in invention." (9).

His approach to Caribbean modernity and its effects on the psyche set up an interesting contrast and complement to the work of his contemporary Edward K. Brathwaite. The groundwork laid down by Walcott in breaking open the previous categorical representation and signification to provide a much wider field of operation becomes the first step towards the

repossession, reclamation and reconstruction of history, identity and self by Brathwaite, all in the context of a rapidly emerging modernity.

Chapter 3

Arrival and Return: Historicity and Transnational Modernity in *The Arrivants*

> I am speaking of archives of song and memory, archives of the oral, archives of spirit, the library as the mirror… Archives of ownership, of reclamation, of a record, of discovery, of yourself in a strange land where the silt ran through my waters, where you lay down and weep… I mean a slave knows that the slave is free when he or she has reclaimed these archives.
>
> --Edward K. Brathwaite

Discussions about Derek Walcott and Edward Kamau Brathwaite seem to always revolve around debates about differences in style, influences and message, pitting one against the other without considering the underlying currents of the Caribbean space that unite them both, or the possibility that both poets, albeit in vastly different ways, are trying to frame the same "postcolonial experience of modernity" (Pollard 2). Mentioned in the same breath as the illustrious Walcott, it is generally understood that Edward Brathwaite's poetry veers sharply away from Walcott's in language, style and themes. There are, nonetheless, many objective areas where they overlap, with musings and themes particular to Caribbean cultural dilemmas running through them both. There is nearly not much mention, for instance, about the interplay between these two in their works, as illustrated by Walcott's explicit dedication of his poem "Names" to Brathwaite (*CP* 305) and the latter's response in "Nametracks"[8].

Whereas Charles Pollard's analysis of this interplay does seem to vindicate the view point that the poets diverge in their framing of a Caribbean consciousness, with Walcott

[8] Pollard. *New World Modernisms: T.S. Eliot, Derek Walcott, and Kamau Brathwaite*. p. 107

preferring to assimilate and Brathwaite striving to reject, their essential commitment to working within the cultural setting of the black Atlantic gives rise to several key moments of solidarity in the transnational modernity of their writings.

It is irresistible and not at all difficult, for example, to try to draw parallels between Walcott's shape-shifting Crusoe and Brathwaite's Uncle Tom. The latter is a recurring narrator who "reflects the creolization of African and Christian cosmologies" only to become "a figure through whom to represent the coalescing of the oral, folk, African, and Amerindian cultural sources of the region." (Pollard 68). Setting aside the differences between the two poet's sources for each figure—one the annals of British colonial literature, the other from one of the most famous narrative argument for abolition—their usage of one key character as a vessel for the fragmented pieces of the postcolonial Caribbean self is testament to a shared common vision of the Caribbean as a fluid space conducive to hybrid identities. When multiple seemingly contradictory categories—colonizing master and loyal Christianized slave, Columbus and native etc—are embodied within these characters, they illustrate a point of departure from the previous dominant narrative strategies, presenting instead a sure step into uncertain yet exciting modernity.

Their treatment of history, which can easily be labeled as their greatest difference in approach, also emerges as two sides of the same coin. Walcott's attempts to excise history from his poetics can be understood as being in direct opposition to Brathwaite's conscious attempts to repossess the lost parts of his heritage. This appears doubtful to anyone who agrees that this desire to reclaim history arises out of that very deliberate loss orchestrated by colonial powers. As explained by Gikandi, "Caribbean writers simultaneously represent colonial history as a nightmare and affirm the power of historicity in the slave community." (6) So the contentions

with history, meaning *colonial* history here, need not be set up in opposition to a belief and adherence to historicity itself. What it means however is that new modes of historical representations need to be developed and for that to happen one must be prepared to grapple with the past and initiate a "reconciliation with history" (Irele 719). If Walcott's poetics show a strong preference for rejection of a colonial chronicle of the Caribbean, then Brathwaite's illustrates a determined bid towards connecting the Caribbean islands he calls home with Africa, his cultural and spiritual motherland.

The poem "The Cabin", for instance, echoes not with any postcolonial condemnation as does Walcott's "Ruins of a Great House" but instead approaches the matter of a slave past being systematically erased, highlighting how more is lost than gained by forgetting since it is the one true connection to their African heritage that remains. The former opens much like the latter, with descriptions of the neglect, but not of any relics of colonial grandeur but of the meager tools for everyday life in slave Tom's cabin.

> Fence, low wall of careful
> stones marking the square
> yard. is broken now, breached
> by pigs, by rats, by mongoose
> and by neighbours. Eucalyptus
> bushes push their way amidst
> the marl. All looks so left
> so unlived in: yard, fence and cabin. (*TA* 70)

It reads as a deliberate parallel to the neglect of the vehicles of expression that evolved from vestiges of leftover African memories--slave music, dance, obeah, and others--that used to be

vital forms of cultural resistance but have now sadly fallen by the wayside. This culminates in the question and demand Brathwaite's entire body of work strains to answer and fulfill:

> But how can we go on
>
> how can we go on…
>
> if this first link is lost
>
> the broken chain tossed
>
> on the doorman's heap (*TA* 71-72)

In doing this, he shifts focus away from the white colonial strains of culture that runs through West Indian customs to home in on the buried African influences. He also reaches beyond his island home to another land, signifying movement in both time and space across that black Atlantic, justifying Gilroy's vision of this space being treated as one cultural unit. In enacting a return to Africa he inaugurates his quest for reconstruction and repossession of the human elements and cultural connections that were lost in the course of the period of slavery.

His ruminations on slavery and the Middle Passage are therefore understandable in the context of a desire to reclaim the loss of historical continuity for the black slaves that resulted from it. There is no valorization in his attempts, however. This return is not the idealized anti-colonial imagining of a pre-modern civilization, or a romantic imagining of Africa as a homeland to be recovered. They are based on the experience of a real return to Africa experienced by the poet whose time in Ghana was fundamentally important in his conception of the connection between the Caribbean and Africa[9].

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[9] Brathwaite, Edward K. *An Interview with Kamau Brathwaite* 26 1991. The Caribbean Writer, St. Croix. 2010. Web. 3 Dec 2012.

The trilogy begins with *Rights of Passage*, where the need for return to Africa and the past is revealed. It is less a contemplation of the ocean as metaphor for maroonage (the way we see in Walcott) and more of a metaphor for journey. The slaves may have travelled to the Caribbean under force, but the return to Africa, movement outward into the world as illustrated in "The Emigrants" is voluntary, something fundamentally necessary to enact some resolution to the conflicted feelings about their geographical island homeland. The poem juxtaposes the past, Columbus from his after-/deck watched the stars, absorbed in water,/melt in liquid amber drifting" (52), and the present, "But now the claws are iron: mouldy/ dredges do not care what we discover here" (53), exposing a jarring dissonance between the two—the fact that the past contains only Columbus and not the black man—thereby justifying the need for a reexamination of that past.

This is particularly manifest in the passages that reflect the anger and emptiness felt by the black Caribbean provoked by an awareness of his missing heritage. Even though it is not an awareness he can articulate in concrete terms, the emotions of a void unfilled are apparent:

> … This is the hate
> that makes my skin
> stink, that gives me my body
> odour. And I feel
>
> bad, mother, I feel
> like a drum with a hole
> in its belly, and old
> horse lost at the hurdle. (*TA* 31)

The motif of a drum here arises as a vital one and is echoed throughout the trilogy. It is pivotal to Brathwaite's characterization of the Caribbean black in search of his past in the sense that it provokes this search. It is present in his present as a reminder of a past he cannot remember but is palpably connected to his current condition of disconnection and disintegration, for which reason it is also something he cannot ignore. The use of the drum in African religious invocations also makes the spiritual nature of the necessary return clear. Brathwaite uses its reverberations as a guiding rhythm underlying each section of the trilogy.

This connection is brought to fruition in *Masks*, the second section of the trilogy, where the author explores the Africa that was left behind. In "The Making of the Drum" (94) the description of how the drum comes into being from various articles originating from the African landscape, condition and context is illustrated through details of the origins of every part of the drum and how it is fashioned into an instrument capable of such powerful transcendental signification.

> You dumb *adom* wood
> will be bent,
> will be solemnly bent, belly
> rounded with fire, wound-
> ed with tools
>
> that will shape you.
> You will bleed,
> cedar dark,
> when we cut you;

speak, when we touch you. (*TA* 95)

The drum is used as a metaphor to give voice to a people who have been deprived of the voice—"God is dumb/until the drum/speaks" (*TA* 97). The return to Africa therefore serves to not only open a way towards reconciliation with the past but also contributes to reconstructing a new history where those voices can be heard. Where as in *Rights of Passage* there is a sense of the drum rhythm *Masks* acknowledges the drums ability to speak for a nation.

Brathwaite's writing also does not wish for, and actually acknowledges the impossibility of, a complete return to the Old World African civilization that was left behind with the sea voyage into the New World. The Middle Passage is characterized as not just a violent rending resulting in haunting discontinuity but also as a threshold of cultural transformation. The dance of limbo, for instance, evolved out of this migration as one of the first application of imaginative innovation signifying a fracture between what was and what will be, the Old World they knew and the New World to come. It is

> not a total recall of an African past since that African past in terms of tribal sovereignty or sovereignties was modified or traumatically eclipsed with the Middle Passage and with generations of change that followed. Limbo was rather the renascence of a new corpus of sensibility that could translate and accommodate African and other legacies within a new architecture of cultures." (Harris 380)

So just as this journey is reversed in the second section of the trilogy with a voyage made from the New World to the Old in a search of the origins to African cultural fragments that have been so important in the development of a Caribbean ethos, the final part titled *Islands* bring the journey full circle with a return to the Caribbean. The significance and necessity of journeys

becomes a prevalent theme in Brathwaite's poetry, with *The Arrivants* trilogy revolving around the idea of cross-oceanic cross-temporal travel being essential to gaining an understanding of the past, thereby acquiring new modes of representation as well as taking steps toward reconstructing the negroid elements of Caribbean identity. This trope opens up the modernity inherent in Brathwaite's writing:

> It is a trope that points to the apprehension of what one might call a "black time," involving a tragic and simultaneously dynamic conception of history, not only in its immediate and forceful bearing upon African experience but also upon the processes of a universal history in which the black race has been profoundly implicated. (Irele 720)

The journey, while one sought and long anticipated, is not without its uncertainties. Just as the slaves stacked into slave ships bound for the New World knew not what they would face when they return, Brathwaite's journey is similarly apprehensive. In "Caliban" he compares being trapped in a slave ship during the Middle Passage to the uncertain fate waiting for the author upon his return to the islands (191). The refrain of "limbo, limbo like me" reinforces the current indeterminate state of the Caribbean peoples, where their culture and identity floats in a state of limbo, with no clear definition or recognition. The poet does however create a womb-like environment signifying a rebirth through this crossing back to the islands.

This final section exhibits the continuing construction of a sense of heritage for the Caribbean people which is now possible due to the revealed African connection and recovery of lost modes of representation and art, as demonstrated by the carving of masks in "Ogun" (242). Uncle Tom "father, founder, flounderer" no longer struggles to "speak/ their shame/ their lack/ of power" (15) but is able to express his emotions in an art-form he now remembers, one which can

now contain all of his long unuttered experiences in the "emerging woodwork image of his anger".

It is not a bid for Africentricity of the kind described by Gilroy (188)—it is an attempt to piece together the black identity which was shattered by the twin blows of the colonialism and slavery alongside reintroducing and innovating new modes of representation that can give back a voice to the people who have been deprived of one. In many ways, Brathwaite's quest for a collective Caribbean identity takes him beyond borders and across oceans, opening up the pursuit for selfhood in exciting new directions rather than boxing it in within a particular set of national limits.

This transnationality does not so much oppose a nationalist discourse as simply reach beyond it. This is why, even while Brathwaite's poetry is said to engender a strong sense of national and cultural unity—he has also been called a "people's poet" in direct contrast to Walcott who is a more introspective personal poet (Ismond 54)—his poetry exhibits a reach beyond determinism of nationalist ethos since so much of Africa bleeds into his conceptualization of a cultural identity for the Caribbean. Several ideas exist simultaneously as in "Wings of a Dove", where the criticism of anti-white pan-African extremism is preceded by the quintessentially Caribbean image of a Rastafarian, a subset of the black nationalist movement. It exposes the contradictions present in the imaginary of a nationalism for the Indies while embodying it core spirit.

The matter is made more complex by the associations of race with the proposed nationalist philosophy for the Caribbean. The matter of race has been a seminal issue in the Caribbean, with intense study and discussion of the relationships between blackness, culture, colonial resistance and nationalism. Pan-African movements have arisen out of active attempts to

align the Caribbean with its non-European cultural parent in an effort to construct an anti-colonial framework for nationalism in this region. This approach, though important on its own merits, sets up newer sets of binaries and in doing so undermines the issues of multiplicity in Caribbean consciousness, of hybridity and colonial conditioning, things that are indelibly linked to its innate modernity as well as to the formation of any postcolonial identity. Wholesale negation of the colonial experience serves only to wipe out vitals parts of the contemporary Caribbean self.

Brathwaite chooses to modulate his view of race by representing the complex dynamic of the Caribbean through its creolized people and culture. In writing about creolization and creole society in Jamaica, he defines this process as, among other things, one "which is a way of seeing the society, not in terms of black and white, master and slave, in separate nuclear units, but as contributory parts of a whole." (Brathwaite 203-4). This characterization gives us a hint of the postcolonial directions of his thoughts, a perspective that wishes to rise above the easy categories of European colonial ethnocentric origins and assert instead a more unique yet modern viewpoint as indicated by the nebulous "whole" he refers to, which is a sum of its parts. When considered in parallel with Gilroy's viewpoint, not only does creolization and its implications become a tiny facet in the reimagining of the diaspora in terms of the Atlantic representing a whole cultural unit, race also becomes just another cog in the machinery of modern selfhood.

This viewpoint is bigger than being only nationalist, because there was never a concrete whole created in the West Indies, rather many separate nation-states that still struggle to articulate their national identity in a way that will align it with a sense of having one culture as a whole. The internal diversity of the cultural structure prevents it from being absorbed into one totalizing monolith. Rather, the existence of fragmented modes of expression from various

origins beyond the Caribbean renders any stable nationalist structure difficult to construct. In light of this a transnational diasporic approach to history, race, culture and literature appears as a more favorable alternative.

His literary endeavors, therefore, present much more complex and richer admixture than can be encapsulated by any fundamentally territorialized previous discourses. While he continues along postcolonial themes for the most part by using modernist techniques to create a type of literature of resistance, he moves away from colonialism as his main theme to focus instead on the slave past and forced migration, which was one of the byproducts of that encounter and an overwhelming symbol of the traumatic past carried by his people, is nonetheless still indubitably important to any questions about a collective identity.

Conclusion

In trying to capture the picture of the Caribbean as painted by Derek Walcott and Edward Brathwaite I have tried to justify treating the Atlantic as a cultural whole of which the Caribbean is a vital port. The poets substantiate such a hypothesis through the cultural appropriation withint this shared space evident in their poems. The variety of influences alluded to within their works intimate their deft negotiation of that space.

In tracing the reactions of these poets to the dominant discourses of colonial history and slavery I have tried to demonstrate how postcolonial agendas of rejection, resistance, repossession and reclamation ultimately construct a fractured selfhood that needs careful piecing together alongside provoking a bitter awareness of the discontinuity of one's past. Walcott and Brathwaite refuse to dwell in that bitterness, reveling instead on the freedom afforded by the subversion of imposed categories of representation.

The emerging modernity emblematized by the breakdown of determinist binary significations in both Walcott and Brathwaite's poetry ushers exciting prospects for West Indian literature. Freed thus from being pushed into absolutist boxes, the rising image of a fragmented conscious and innately critical self is modernity incarnate.

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