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NOTES ON VOICE AND TEMPO IN ANGLOPHONE CARIBBEAN LITERATURES

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ABSTRACT

This article outlines a historic panorama of the dynamic relationship between written and oral forms of expression in the Anglophone Caribbean, focusing on key literary works of poetry, the novel, and theater, as well as musical genres like calypso and reggae. The aim is to identify trends, and the relationships between them, that expand beyond territorial and temporal limits, in order to better understand how the scribal and oral spheres have interacted under the pressures of colonialism and its residual effects. The article begins with a contextualization of the vernacular's place in literary works in the Anglophone Caribbean during the colonial period and discusses several concepts that have been key in debates on language as a form of cultural resistance. The second section focuses on the growing anticolonial sentiment that began to sweep through the region in the 1930s and the literary, intellectual, and musical developments that sought to articulate these political inclinations. The third and final section examines reggae aesthetics as a driving force of cultural expression since the 1970s, considering the influence of Rastafarianism and reggae's impact on various forms of literary production.

KEY WORDS: Anglophone Caribbean literatures, vernacular language, African diaspora, reggae, calypso.

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When Kwame Dawes suggests that Anglophone Caribbean writers in the 1970s "lagged behind reggae musicians" in their quest to convey the shifting cultural paradigms of the era (*Natural Mysticism* 44), he not only recognizes the intellectual relevance of a popular music genre, but taps into the problematic relationship between scribal and oral mediums which has characterized much of the region's literary history. The question of representing Caribbean speech and sounds in written literature has long concerned both authors and critics alike, with varying ideological motives that range from asserting Euro-Western dominance to exploring the politics of national identity and liberation. Language carries the weight of a cultural world, to paraphrase Fanon (25), and, in the case of the Caribbean, that world is defined by colonial relations and all that arises from such power structures. It is no coincidence, then, that imaginative literature, as the inherited form of metropolitan cultural models, failed to guide Caribbean societies into the postcolonial period, as Dawes argues, whereas reggae, having emerged from the disenfranchised masses, articulated a distinct aesthetic to speak to and for the communities where it flourished, spreading a sense of national consciousness.

Looking inward, toward popular cultural expressions, such as reggae or Rastafarianism, strongly influenced how many Anglophone Caribbean writers during this period began to think about their writing in connection with the societies they belonged to. While this moment marks a clear aesthetic watershed in the subregion's literary development, isolated projects dating from the early and mid-20th century provided the building blocks on which to construct an indigenous literary tradition. In this article, I intend to outline a historic panorama of the dynamic relationship between written and oral forms of expression in the Anglophone Caribbean, focusing on key literary works of poetry, novel, and theater, as well as musical genres like calypso and reggae. I am particularly interested in identifying certain trends and the relationships between them that

expand beyond territorial and temporal limits in order to better understand how the scribal and oral spheres have interacted under the pressures of colonialism and its residual effects.

The Question of Voice and Language in a Colonial Context

While many critics have argued that Anglophone Caribbean literature is not an exclusively 20th-century phenomenon, much of the literature written in this subregion during the 19th century follows metropolitan aesthetic and ideological conventions (Ramchand 2004; Donnell 2006; Warner-Lewis 2001). Brathwaite, in his essay "Creative Literature in the British West Indies During the Period of Slavery," shows how poetry and narrative from that era responded to an elite reading public of the white plantocracy. As such, these works were "not 'West Indian' but 'tropical English,'" with minimal literary innovations and a clear perspective of white superiority (Brathwaite, *Roots* 130). Although we can find certain anomalies that break from this trend, such as the anonymously published *Hamel, The Obeah Man* (1827), which, according to Brathwaite, recognizes the continuity of African culture in the enslaved people of the Americas (*Roots* 168-169), or slave narratives such as *The History of Mary Prince* (1831), the colonialist, exoticizing gaze characterizes much of the Anglophone Caribbean literary production up until the first half of the 20th century.

However, literary and intellectual activity during this period cannot be reduced to a mere copy of metropolitan models. As Ramchand recalls, "for many Whites and would-be Whites this is the period [near the end of the 19th century] when the West Indies began to become home" (32), and thus many authors who fell into that social/racial class embarked on nationalist projects stressing the affirmation of Caribbean or national identities. Authors like H.G. de Lisser and Thomas MacDermot (Tom Redcam), although writing from ideological antipodes, illustrate this development in the case of Jamaica. De Lisser's prolific output of fiction, stylistically positioned somewhere between the novel of manners and gothic narrative, thrust forward nation-building

ideals that represented the interests of the dominant plantocracy. Nevertheless, his work expresses realities connected to Jamaican life, as in *Jane's Career*[1] (1913), the first novel to introduce a black female character that peeks into the hardships of rural-urban migrations. Redcam, as early as 1904, inaugurated the All Jamaican Library, a short-lived nationalist initiative that sought to carve out spaces for local writers and audiences, himself publishing two of the four books that made up the collection.

In terms of language, however, many of these early writers were unable to see how Caribbean speech could be pivotal to building a sense of national identity. Narrative from this period tends to reserve Creole for dialogue, as a means to provide linguistic flare to characters and garnish the author's Standard English prose with "local color." This not only creates a representative separation between Caribbean characters and the apparently sophisticated narrator, but also reinforces stigmas long associated with Creole as the language of the uneducated and formerly enslaved masses (denominations such as broken or bad English are still widely used throughout the region). Trinidadian linguist John Jacob Thomas stands out in this sense, for, while his work remains within the essay genre, he provides one of the earliest defenses of Creole use from the region: *The Theory and Practice of Creole Grammar* (1869). Thomas earned his place in Caribbean intellectual history by penning *Froudacity: Or, West Indian Fables Explained* (1889), a response to Oxford University professor James Anthony Froude's prejudice-riddled book on Caribbean life and politics published a year earlier. As a black Trinidadian born into poverty, Thomas's work attests to how race and class consciousness would become indispensable elements in forging political and cultural independence.

Given the social structure that favored white West Indians,[2] it is no surprise that both

1 Also published as *Jane: A Story of Jamaica*.

2 I use this term following Kim Robinson-Walcott, who notes the plasticity of "Creole" as a racial category for people of European and little to no African ancestry (17-18). In this paper, Creole will refer solely to language.

Redcam and De Lisser stayed in Jamaica while many of their black counterparts sought literary careers abroad. This was the case of Claude McKay, who, in 1912, left for the United States, where he elbowed his way into the black intelligentsia and eventually assumed a pivotal role in the Harlem Renaissance. The Caribbean imaginary constructed by McKay flourishes in books such as his posthumous autobiography, *My Green Hills of Jamaica* (1979), or the novel *Banana Bottom* (1933), which Ramchand describes as the first classic of Anglophone Caribbean literature due to its complex intersections of class, race, language, and migration (237). Aside from taking antiracist struggles to a universal audience, McKay also inaugurated a tradition of writing poetry in Creole, referred to by some as *dialect poetry* (Morris 1999) or *creole poetics* (Donnell 2006). His first two books, *Songs of Jamaica* and *Constab Ballads*, both published in Jamaica in 1912, constitute the first volumes of poetry in which the lyric speaker relies fully on Creole. According to Donnell and Lawson Welsh, "in McKay's finest creole poems, such as the dramatic monologues 'A Midnight Woman to the Bobby' and 'The Apple-Woman's Complaint' he combines the immediacy and resilience of spoken language with the strong sense of the ballad form, as a residually oral form geared to the ebb and flow of speech itself" (38). Financed by English folklorist Walter Jekyll, who wrote an introduction and abundant footnotes for *Songs of Jamaica*, the books seem to address a foreign audience and are steeped with dynamics of white patronage of black art, not uncommon at the time. Despite such circumstances and McKay's disinterest in cultivating Creole as a literary language in later works, both books stand as early experiments that blur the limits between scribal and oral forms.

Edward Baugh identifies an oral poetic tradition that developed in parallel to the high scribal form, characterized as "the anonymous, 'simple' expressions of the dispossessed black slaves—folk song, ballad, chant, and work song—which articulated their observations and feelings about

slavery's day-to-day experience"[3] (227). While McKay channeled these cultural expressions into his early poetry, it was Louise Bennett who, several decades later, built off this vibrant repository to revolutionize Caribbean literature in both written and oral forms. Through radio, television, theater, newspaper, and book publications, Miss Lou—as she is affectionately known—devoted her life to creating spaces for popular Jamaican culture to flourish and gain legitimacy. Classic poems such as "Colonization in Reverse," "Back to Africa," "Colour-Bar" or "No Lickle Twang!," develop tragi-comic dramatic monologues that deal with serious issues like colonization, racism, migration, and linguistic discrimination. Bennett's acceptance in the male-dominated literary field was by no means automatic: during the first decades of her career, she was often considered an entertainer, not a poet (Morris, "On Reading" 70). Her impact among the Jamaican population cannot be underestimated, though. As Rex Nettleford recalls in the introduction to one of her collections, "Bennett wrote many of her poems for performance and even those published weekly in the *Sunday Gleaner* throughout the forties were read in tenement yards – probably by the one literate person in each yard. Many listened" (Nettleford 11-12). In addition to poetry, Bennett recovered Anancy stories, such as "Anancy and Yellow Snake" or "Beeny Bud (Mussirolinkina)," following in the footsteps of predominant figures who had turned their attention to folk culture, such as Phillip Sherlock, but from a more intimate perspective of a woman seeking to recover connections to her and her country's African heritage. In this sense, her work displays a pedagogical drive that often explicitly engaged with a young Jamaican audience, for she believed it important that "de pickney dem learn de sinting dat belong to dem" (qtd. in Morris, *Is English* 19). Beyond the humor and apparent simplicity of her work, Bennett crafted a complex body of literature that combines traditional and progressive views and forms, essential for the burgeoning nation-building process

3 Brathwaite has also explored this branch of oral literature in his study *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica 1770-1820*, especially chapter 15, "The 'Folk' Culture of the Slaves," and in his article, "The African Presence in Caribbean Literature," published in *Daedalus*, both of which also consider religious music as a form of oral transmission.

in the 1940s and ’50s, and the post-independence years of the 1960s and ’70s.

Brathwaite’s poetic and critical work is one of the more extensive quests to merge written, sonic, and musical forms in Anglophone Caribbean literatures. His conceptualization of *nation language* offers a useful means to go beyond stigmatic notions of dialect to value the relationship between vernacular speech and African-grounded identity. Nation language, while it incorporates Creole, is not necessarily an alternative category for it, referring to both Creole and standard forms of English spoken in a Caribbean accent. In his seminal text, “History of the Voice,” where he offers the broadest definition of national language, Brathwaite says,

> Caricature speaks in dialect. Dialect has a long history coming from the plantation where people’s dignity was distorted through their languages and the descriptions that the dialect gave to them. Nation language, on the other hand, is the submerged area of that dialect that is much more closely allied to the African aspect of experience in the Caribbean. It may be in English, but often it is in an English which is like a howl, or a shout, or a machine-gun, or the wind, or a wave. It is also like the blues. (*Roots* 266)

This “tongue-cosmos,” as Glissant describes it (Brathwaite and Glissant 34), is a wholistic experience that involves the body, breath, and other acoustic elements of Caribbean life. It is a way of linking forms of expression to a territory and also identifying underlying cultural aspects that traverse the artificial linguistic borders carved out by different European colonial enterprises. In this sense, nation language is a conceptual tool beneficial for developing anticolonial discourses, for it rejects the hegemonic models imposed by the former colonizers and envisions forms of expression coherent with how people think, feel, and experience the world from the Caribbean. Directly addressing the intellectual damage of colonial education, Brathwaite observes that, “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" (*Roots* 263). This often cited passage eloquently illustrates the alienating effects of colonialism, in a similar vein to how Victor Stafford Reid describes growing up with a "familiarly alien" sensation or Merle Hodge noting how "reality and rightness" always seemed to be found abroad (qtd. in Morris, *Is English* 8). Postcolonial criticism has referred to such situations as the daffodil gap, after a flower common in Romantic English poetry that does not grow in tropical areas like the Caribbean, but which formed part of the colonial imaginary for many school children in the first half of the 20th century.[4]

Stemming essentially from the oral sphere, nation language poses many problems for written literature, such as how to capture or recreate living language on the page. While there are clearly elements that are lost when transferring from the oral to the scribal, many authors, including Brathwaite himself, have found ways to create new meaning by using visual resources to compensate for the missing voices. Techniques like slashes, blank space, capitalization, font size and style (such as Brathwaite's "Sycorax video-style"[5]), among others, are strategies that authors use to push readers closer to the Creole voice or the sounds of nation language.[6] Maureen Warner-Lewis has identified these strategies as lending "verisimilitude to the linguistic culture of the Caribbean" ("Language Use" 25). While Creole in literature has quite clearly become a mechanism of cultural resistance to colonialism, the reality in a color-stratified, postcolonial Caribbean is that "the historical legacy lingers," and "Facility in Standard English—the language of the masters, originally—confers a measure of social status" (Morris, *Is English* 7). In this scenario, poet and

4 One recent example of an author engaging with such topics is Ann-Margaret Lim in her volume of poetry *Kingston Buttercup*, which refers to an indigenous flower similar to daffodils.

5 In the 1990s, Brathwaite experimented with new computer technologies to develop a writing format he called "Sycorax video-style," in allusion to Caliban's Algerian-born invisible mother from *The Tempest*, which exploits different typefaces, fonts, and distribution of letters and images across the page (and the computer screen) in a non-linear poetics of visualizing sonic and aural experiences. All of Brathwaite's poetic and essay work since has been published in this style. For an in-depth analysis, see Noland.

6 Closer analysis of these strategies can be found in Morris's essay "Is English We Speaking," particularly of John Agard's poem "Listen, Mr Oxford Don" (*Is English* 10-12); and in Warner-Lewis's "The Rhythms…," which reflects on various situations of intermedial transfer.

essayist Mervyn Morris has shown that what appears to be Standard English on the page can often be a representation of Creole, arguing that while Caribbean literature is accessible to most English speakers, it resonates closer to those familiar with Caribbean speech patterns and intonations, an idea captured in the title of his essay "Is English We Speaking."[7] In a perspective shift echoing theories of transculturation and creolization, Pauline Christie suggests that, "West Indian literature also serves as a guide to the standard" (13), reminding us that the subaltern also influences the dominant culture, whether through direct or virtual contacts.

Anti-Colonial Awakenings: From the Yard to Transatlantic Broadcasting

Some twenty years before the literary Boom of the Anglophone Caribbean, Trinidad witnessed the emergence of a powerful intellectual movement in the 1930s led by figures such as C.L.R. James, Alfred H. Mendes, and Albert Gomes. This movement, which Norval Edwards (2014) calls the Trinidad Renaissance and Reinhard Sander (1988) refers to as the Trinidad Awakening, was concentrated around two major cultural magazines: *Trinidad* (1929-1930) and *The Beacon* (1931-1933, 1939). The first, founded by James and Mendes, was an ephemeral, predominantly literary project that only published two issues. The second, founded by Gomes, was inspired by the earlier project, but intent on taking it beyond the arts to incorporate political analysis and essays. *The Beacon* published a total of 28 issues and became the nucleus of the intellectual group often known by the same name. This group, publishing in *The Beacon* and other local, regional, and metropolitan journals, criticized Trinidad's conservative cultural and political establishment, focusing on class/race inequality, religious dogmas, and the colonial order.

The two central literary figures of this group, Mendes and James, cultivated *barrack-yard narratives*, a subgenre within social realism whose name derives from the typical construction of

7 Morris elaborates on this idea in the interview "What Seems to Be Standard English Often Isn't," conducted by Rothe (2018).

tenement homes throughout the Anglophone Caribbean. James's stories "La Divina Pastora" (1927) and "Triumph" (1929), as well as his novel *Minty Alley* (1936), are pioneering texts that would offer character and narrative models to later writers, although James himself would go on to become a renowned historian and political thinker. In these works, we clearly see what Sander has classified into a typology of barrack-yard characters, such as the *kept woman* (objectively pretty and gullible, of mixed race but with straight hair) and the *sweetman* (an abusive womanizer who usually gambles and drinks) (56-57). Mendes drifted away from such archetypal characterization and whatever he considered thematically limiting, but his stories like "Afternoon in Trinidad" and "The Man Who Ran Away," and his novel *Black Fawns*, all published in the 1930s, offer fine examples of this subgenre. One particularity of the barrack-yard literature introduced in Trinidad during this period is its novelty focus on the urban poor. These stories and novels presented characters, settings, and language that had previously been ignored by Trinidad's literate classes, often upsetting the conservative establishment, which regarded them as obscene. However, the distance between the represented subjects and the middle-class authors speaking for and about them can be problematic at times: both James and Mendes even rented rooms in tenements as a way to more accurately portray this world. Sander admits that early barrack-yard stories tend to exoticize urban poverty, including elements of sex, violence, and Obeah, while later stories better demonstrate the emergence of a social consciousness (65).[8]

In terms of language, this appears in the Creole rhythms, which Sander argues stray from caricaturist representations and evoke an ethical sense that stands as one of the genre's great achievements (57). With this underlying ethic, authors tend to criticize the social and political

8 This is not to say that Afro-Caribbean religious or spiritual beliefs, such as Kumina or Obeah, cannot offer a means to construct social consciousness—on the contrary, they often do, as seen in the example of Rastafarianism, discussed below. However, many authors who portrayed barrack-yard life often saw and thus portrayed these practices from a distance, rendering them as superstitions characteristic of the disenfranchised black masses.

structures of Trinidad, but with humor, in what seems to take a cue from calypso, the island's most popular musical form. For these reasons, Sander argues that these narratives initiated an indigenous literary tradition in Trinidad that sought new forms to deal with problems emanating from their social and cultural surroundings. Edwards has pointed out that,

> The poetics of the "yard" are imbricated within the politics of nationalism and other anticolonial and counterhegemonic narratives such as pan-Africanism, Marxism and the emergence of trade unions and political parties that agitated for both local and constitutional reform. (114)

Although the barrack-yard narratives emerged in Trinidad, the notion of the *yard* occupies a central place in the imaginary of the Anglophone Caribbean in general, as is shown in *Jane's Career* and later Jamaican novels, such as Roger Mais's *The Hills Were Joyful Together* (1953) and *Brother Man* (1954).

Prior to these narratives, however, subjects from the barrack yard had appeared regularly in calypso songs, represented by singers from the same social and cultural spaces. With origins that can be traced back to kalinda music rituals of the early 18th century, which involved stick fighting and performative combat dance, calypso developed primarily in Trinidad among the formerly enslaved Afro-descendant population. Musically, calypso can be described as picong (comical banter) inserted into the ballad form, combining elements of popular speech through Creole and idiosyncrasies, along with transculturized rhythms and melodies of African and European origin. It is widely recognized that folk music with similar characteristics developed throughout the Caribbean archipelago, as in the case of Jamaican mento, Antiguan benna, Cuban son, Martinican bèlè, among many others. In the first decades of the 20th century, calypso tents were a popular meeting place for entertainment and public discussion among the working, often illiterate classes. Calypsonians, through their music, would tell fictional stories, narratives of everyday life, comment

on current events, escalate rumors, criticize the colonial administration, represent downtrodden life, and offer humor as a release amidst despair. Gordon Rohlehr, a leading scholar of calypso, points out that, "They [calypsonians] tell these stories not only as observers, but as participants in a life which had many facets and dimensions" ("Images" 200). In this sense, calypso gatherings became an important counterhegemonic space to form public opinion[9] and the music itself functioned as a discursive universe that upended hierarchies, validating comic creativeness and eccentric behavior. Rohlehr also identifies the barrack yard as a predominant topic in this musical genre, so much so that he refers to the *barrack yard calypso* and the narrative voice that emerges in this form: "The protagonist of the typical 'barrack-yard-calypso' is a 'macho', a peeping Tom, a gossip or simply a reporter of incidents which he always claims to have personally witnessed" ("Images" 199).

Rohlehr has periodized several stages in the development of this musical genre since the mid-19th century up to the late 20th. The Oratorical period, from 1860 to 1920, introduced the still popular "Sans Humanité" (without humanity) form of extempo improvisation, which led to caplypsonians gaining status among their peers as "men-of-words" ("Images" 198). The second period, roughly spanning from the 1930s to the 1950s, solidified calypso's popularity through recordings, many of which began in New York studios, helping to internationalize the genre. This period also ushered in political satire, turning calypso into a medium to articulate class struggle and anticolonial discourse, running parallel to major political processes, such as universal suffrage and the growing trade-union movements. British colonial authorities controlled the content of recorded calypsos, mainly censoring what was considered profane sexual images and political commentary. However, either the criteria were not standard or workers purposefully allowed some content to slip through, as seen in the explicitly political songs recorded by Atilla the Hun. The extent to which

9 It may be productive in future work to consider these spaces under the guise of Nancy Fraser's concept of subaltern counterpublics.

calypso was perceived to threaten the colonial administration can be seen in a 1934 law granting the Commissioner of Police the power to permit or prohibit public calypso performances (Rohlehr, *My Strangled City* 280). The final period in Rohlehr's study covers the years from 1970 to 1984, a moment when the political calypso consolidated its popularity throughout post-independent Trinidad and Tobago, occupying all sorts of public spaces such as radio stations and carnival competitions. Here, we find images of both support for and criticism of Eric Williams's government and the People's National Movement, as seen in songs by The Mighty Sparrow, Chalkdust, Black Stalin, among others. In general terms, Rohlehr helps understand calypso music as a forum for popular discontent, much more extensive than the scribal sphere of, say, the Beacon Group. In this sense, "The calypsonians have kept open a vein of desperately sane reflectiveness on the chaos of our civic life, and in the process have inched an art form rooted in conflict, celebration and the catharsis of light entertainment, towards the deeper qualities of anguish and compassion" (Rohlehr, *My Strangled City* 293).

Authors like V.S. Naipaul, Derek Walcott, Jean Rhys, Samuel Selvon, Earl Lovelace, and Lakshmi Persaud, among many others, have engaged with the musical elements, topics, and cultural importance of calypso in Trinidadian and Caribbean society in general.[10] Of these works, Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* (1956) established a significant milestone as one of the first novels narrated in Creole.[11] Not only is the novel representative of the Windrush Generation, illustrating the trials and tribulations of a group of predominantly West Indian immigrants in London, but it also revolutionized how to express that experience through the cultural lens most intimate to these characters. The language here is fundamental: Selvon crafts a literary vernacular that can slide across the continuum between Standard English and various Caribbean Creoles, tapping into

10 For in-depth analyses of some of these authors' works, see the special issue published in *Anthurium* in 2005, especially the articles by Aiyejina, Davis, Morgan, Rahim, and Westall.

11 Prior to Selvon's novel, Victor Stafford Reid published *New Day* (1949), which is also narrated in Creole.

an improvisational aspect related to orality and music, particularly calypso and jazz. As Susheila Nasta observes, "Selvon's 'ballad' style in *The Lonely Londoners* shifts easily between an oral and a literary tone and bears many correspondences with the native tradition of Trinidadian calypso" (85-86). One could go further and posit that the narrator takes on the role of a calypsonian who actually *tells* or *sings* the story of these struggling immigrants. Similar to Rohlehr's observation of the inside perspective present in the barrack-yard calypso, here the narrator is clearly one of "the boys," avoiding the anthropological tone that occasionally emerges in works like James's "Triumph," and all the while he is able to articulate their situation in London as disenfranchised immigrants from a privileged perspective. Just like the barrack-yard narratives, most of the male characters in the novel are sweetmen and often refer to their rented rooms as "yards," a translation of spatial semiotics that would require further analysis.

Another musical reference comes in a passage describing summer near the end of the novel, referred to by Ramchand as a "free-flowing prose poem" (99). Here, the entire section is one long paragraph without punctuation, which in a sense, elicits a jazz standard, where the song's melody structure provides a frame for each musician's improvised solos. Perhaps this is not the novel's core, but it certainly stands out as an important narrative shift, flooded with spontaneity and hopes that contrast with a habitually cold, gray London cityscape. In the style of calypso, the novel tells a story—or multiple stories—of these immigrants with a humorous tone, while also reflecting on the Caribbean diaspora, racial discrimination, colonialism, and the means of acquiring a political consciousness. Ramchand remarks that, "The work is an admirable illustration of how writing can feed on oral literature and, further, on the stuff that oral literature itself also draws upon without losing its identity" (95). Selvon would continue to explore that cultural and literary identity by intertwining the scribal and oral, often adapting his own writing to be read on the radio.

Parallel to the crucial function of little magazines in the region, such as *The Beacon*, and others like *BIM* in Barbados and *Kyk-Over-Al* in Guyana, radio provided a fundamental medium in solidifying the Anglophone literary tradition and canon, particularly through the BBC program *Caribbean Voices* (1943-1958). Nearly all writers associated with the West Indian literary boom recited their poems and short stories on this program, including George Lamming, Walcott, Brathwaite, Selvon, Naipaul, Wilson Harris, Andrew Salkey, Gloria Escoffery, and John Figueroa. Throughout its fifteen years of existence, 372 collaborators appeared on the program, of whom 71 were women (Nanton par. 3). Broadcast for half an hour every Sunday throughout the British territories of the Caribbean, the program helped to create a reading and listening public for the region's literature, establishing a link between writers in the diaspora and the Caribbean world they represented in their works. Caribbean listeners at this time, distributed across Jamaica, Trinidad, Guyana and the Windward Islands, amounted to nearly three million people with access to 93,000 radios, according to data collected by the United States Information Agency in 1954 (Newton 491). *Caribbean Voices* established a forum to discuss literary and cultural issues, articulating a critical space for advancing Caribbean intellectual production, in addition to a physical network of writers. Henry Swanzy, producer and editor during the program's prime years from 1946 to 1954, fulfilled a crucial role in this sense, scouting material and securing that contributors were paid, no minor detail for immigrant writers trying to support themselves and their families in England. Both Lamming and Selvon were hired as permanent readers, meaning they read their own texts but also those of other authors, a role that displays the importance of listening to the Caribbean voice in relation to the written word.

Although Swanzy has remained the central figure of *Caribbean Voices*, the program was originally designed by Jamaican journalist and poet Una Marson. In 1941, Marson was hired to work

on *Calling the West Indies*, a program in which Caribbean soldiers in World War II would have their letters broadcast to their families in the Caribbean. She was the BBC's first black woman employee (Donnell, "Introduction" xix) and quickly became the program's producer. As such, she fashioned the content to include literary readings and discussion and advocated for more airtime, leaving Swanzy with a model to continue using when she left. The BBC at that time was not a very diverse or progressive organization, and Marson's success was an extraordinary feat that, however, can be associated to her later depression, resignation, and eventual return to Jamaica in 1945 (Griffith 199). As Leah Rosenberg has pointed out, it is a great irony that Marson, whose work was ignored by Boom writers, founded the program that helped launch their careers (354).

Prior to her work at the BBC, Marson had already made a name for herself in Jamaica as a respected journalist, editor, playwright, poet, and vocal feminist. By the time she left for her second sojourn to England in 1938, she had edited the Jamaica Stenographers' Association monthly journal, *The Cosmopolitan*, contributed regular columns to the conservative *Daily Gleaner* and the progressive weekly *Public Opinion*, and had published three volumes of poetry and written three plays. Among these, her third play, *Pocomania*, staged at Kingston's Ward Theater in January of 1938, is by far her most important in terms of introducing African-based religious beliefs and music to Jamaican spectators. Proclaimed to be the "Birth of Jamaican National Drama" by *The Daily Gleaner* (qtd. in Rosenberg 170) and described by J.E. Clare McFarlane as "the first authentic drama of native life" (9) in *Public Opinion*, where it was reviewed in three consecutive issues by different critics, *Pocomania* performed a conflicting search for national identity at a time when protests throughout the region were stirring up anticolonial sentiment and people began to recognize Caribbean culture as belonging to a larger African diaspora.

Set in rural Jamaica, the play alternates between the Manners's middle-class home and

Revival leader Sister Kate's balm yard, where people gather to practice Pocomania (also spelled Puk Kumina). Stella, the younger Manners sister who bears a striking resemblance to Marson, has been attracted to the drumming of Pocomania since childhood, almost hypnotically lured out of her family's protection and into the world of syncretic religion. The drums function as a centripetal force throughout the play: on the one hand, they appear as a symbolic connection to Africa (Sister Kate tells how the congregation's drummer learned to play from his father, who in turn learned from his father, who had been shipped to Jamaica as an enslaved African [33]); and, on the other, they provide a constant background pulse, as the stage directions, included usually at the beginning and end of each scene, indicate that drums can be heard beating somewhere on or off stage. One can only imagine the kinetic energy evoked in the original performance, with musical interpretations by the East Queen Street Baptist Young Men's Fraternal and Winston White[12] (Donnell, "Introduction" xix). All of these elements contribute to disrupting the ostensibly respectable place of theater with vernacular culture and arousing a connection with the African heritage of Jamaica. And while, as Donnell observes, "the ending of this work ventures a seemingly conventional closure that leaves the potential of self-realization literally in the air and yet unfulfilled" ("Introduction" xvii-xviii), Marson obliges the audience, as good literature should, to leave with more questions than answers. Playwrights and theater groups to come, such as Derek Walcott, Trevor Rhone, Honor Ford-Smith and Sistren, would try to answer these questions and pose new ones in their own dramatic works.

Reggae Aesthetics: Rastafarianism, Politics, and Dub

In his book *Natural Mysticism, Towards a New Reggae Aesthetic*, Ghanaian-Jamaican poet and critic Kwame Dawes masterfully combines personal memoir with keen analysis to show how writing from the Caribbean, and especially Jamaica, after the '70s has been heavily influenced by

12 A 2023 restaging of *Pocomania* by British-based collective Decolonising the Archive demonstrates the play's enduring relevance. For more information, including trailers and recordings, visit: https://www.decolonisingthearchive.com/pocomania.

reggae. For Dawes, reggae consists of a complex and varied body of work that represents a distinct postcolonial Caribbean aesthetic and establishes standards in which Third World music infiltrates the mainstream (*Natural Mysticism* 57). His definition of aesthetic goes beyond just music, the visual or the literary to consider "a cultural, ideological, and formal framework that is identifiable within an artistic form to which it gives coherence" (*Natural Mysticism* 67). Dawes structures his analysis around four major areas present in reggae aesthetics: 1) Ideology, which stems from Rastafarianism and black redemption; 2) Language, relying heavily on Jamaican Creole and Rastafari speech; 3) Theme, which covers a diversity of topics and manners in which they are approached; and 4) Form, dealing with the internal structures of the music and dance patterns.

The focus on history and race in Rastafarianism has had an important impact on reggae's ideological stance. A socio-religious movement that Rex Nettleford calls "one of the most significant phenomena to emerge out of the modern history and sociology of Plantation America" (qtd. in Pollard 3), Rastafarianism offers the reggae artist a very complex archive in which to articulate and create dialogue between the political and the spiritual. It makes history accessible for the working class,[13] rendering music an important tool to articulate political inclinations and sensibilities. The examples proliferate: from Burning Spear's "Slavery Days," with its mantra-like repetition of "Do you remember of the days of slavery?," to "Slave Master" by Gregory Isaacs, who, through a characteristically cool demeanor, takes on the voice of the enslaved to incite a plantation rebellion, and Judy Mowatt's "Black woman," which identifies historical structures of gender and racial oppression. Dawes reminds us that, "The lyrics of many reggae artists explore the relationship

13 Walter Rodney's work also testifies to reducing the gap between high-brow conceptions of history and the popular sectors of West Indian societies. During his time in Jamaica, for example, he not only gave lectures on African History and Black Power outside academic spaces, but also met with Rastafarians to learn of their spiritual and historical knowledge. "You have to speak to Jamaican Rasta," says Rodney, "and you have to listen to him, listen to him very carefully and then you will hear him tell you about the Word. And when you listen to him, and you can go back and read *Muntu*, an academic text, and read about *Nomo*, an African concept for Word, and you say, Goodness the Rastas know this, they knew this before Janheinz Jahn. You have to listen to them and you hear them talk about Cosmic Power and it rings a bell. I say, but I have read this somewhere, this is Africa. You have to listen to their drums to get the Message of the Cosmic Power" (67).

between history and the present, an exploration that frequently redefines both past and present in a radical act of reinterpretation" (106). This situates the reggae artist as an important figure in Jamaican society, taking on attributes of a public intellectual who provides spiritual and political guidance.

The direct relationship that reggae establishes with Rastafarianism, feeding off its doctrines and beliefs, also contributed to legitimizing this socio-religious movement in Jamaica and beyond. Although different elements of Rastafarianism are more socially accepted in Jamaica today, from its inception in the first decades of the 20th century up into the '60s, it was misunderstood and discriminated against in the Jamaican public eye. Smith, Augier and Nettleford's report on *The Ras Tafari Movement in Kingston, Jamaica*, helped abate some stereotypes from an institutionalized academic perspective, but it was reggae music that unabashedly thrust Rastafarian beliefs and themes into the airwaves of Jamaican radio and dancehalls. Quickly, the universal popularity of reggae spread these ideas even farther, seen, as just one example, in some of Bob Marley's most-played songs, including "Rastaman Chant," "Natty Dread," "Crazy Baldhead," "Natural Mystic," and "Exodus." Regardless of his international fame, Marley, just as other prominent reggae singers, spoke first to the community from which he came and only later addressed the outside world, making no concessions of accessibility to a foreign audience.

The language in reggae lyrics is heavily influenced by Rastafarian language, also known as Dread Talk, which Velma Pollard considers the organ of Rastafarianism. In her study of Dread Talk, Pollard poses three categories fundamental to understanding this coded language that expands upon Jamaican Creole. Category I covers items that acquire new names, such as "chant" for "discuss" or "chalice" for "ganja pipe." Category II observes words that rearrange certain phonetic elements, such as "downpress" instead of "oppress," evoking the action of keeping someone or something down.

Category III consists of the repertoire of "ai" or "I" words, which themselves have two main uses: 1) a pronominal function, such as "I-man" to denominate Rastas or the common "I an I"[14] to refer to oneself in a wholistic connection with the universe; and 2) initial consonant syllable changes, such as "aiserch" for "research" or "ital" instead of "vital." For Pollard, "It is in these categories that the stance of protest, of revolt in words, is evident" (27). Rastafari speech is filled with poetic creativity, spontaneity, and improvisation, which reggae came to employ and further explore in harmony with the flourishing beats and rhythms of the effervescent '70s. Dawes sees this relationship as providing a model for written literature, which, up until that point, had largely been self-conscious of its language, aimed primarily at a metropolitan audience (105).

In terms of theme and form, Dawes highlights the variety present in both aspects. Reggae, he says, does not limit its topics and is open to absorbing outside influences without losing its own coherence. This provides a multidimensional quality that allows for opposites to coexist in the same space, such as the profane and the sacred. As for the form, while always experimenting with new sounds and instruments (as in the work of Lee "Scratch" Perry), Dawes identifies a common assembly that is useful for understanding the musical composition. This core ensemble includes: a dub organizer or mixer who arranges and directs the music; the bass, offering a repetitive and melodic grounding sound; and the drum, which, again, establishes a connection to Africa and the Rastafari ethos. All the other instruments ranging from guitar to trombone and voice, fall within this framework, which Dawes calls a *dubscape*. Beyond the lyrics, these musical aspects are fundamental for understanding reggae's emotional and political potential, for its participatory dynamic engages both mind and body: it forces listeners to become dancers, especially in Jamaican society, where dance historically embodies a discursive act, a means to express how the body

14 As in "I and I," also sometimes spelled "I n I."

interprets societal changes. Reggae creates spaces in which tensions brought on by social disparities may be released, spaces which also allow for reflection, beyond the initial catharsis, upon the past, present, and future.

This newfound influence of an indigenous musical form led to the emergence of hybrid literary experimentation that sought to articulate direct relationships between scribal verse and music, as seen in dub poetry, promoted by poets both in Jamaica and in the diaspora. Dub poetry, also referred to as reggae poetry or performance poetry, often uses the musical support and sound techniques of reggae as a basis to recite poems composed in Jamaican Creole or Dread Talk. Ideologically aligned with reggae, the poems that tend to be associated with this genre look to encourage political awareness by addressing topics like black consciousness, anti-colonialism, Garveyism, Rastafarianism, and Marxism. The term itself was coined by poet Oku Onuora, who describes the genre in the following way:

> Dub poetry simply mean to take out and put in … It's dubbing out the penta-metre and the little highfalutin business and dubbing in the rootsical, yard, basic rhythm that I-an-I know. Using the language, using the body. It also mean to dub out the isms and schisms and to dub consciousness into the people-dem head. (qtd. in Morris, *Is English* 38)

These ideas recall Brathwaite's discussion of using nation language to replace colonial models of expression and imaginaries.

However, many dub poets have expressed their desire to shed the adjective "dub," which they see as limiting and no longer necessary to differentiate their craft. Regarding this label, Dawes observes that, "It was a limitation, I feel, which had to do with the actual positioning of 'dub poetry' as a subset of the reggae industry, and its critical positioning as antithetical to 'conventional' scribal

poetry"[15] (86). Indeed, some of the poets most associated with the genre, such as Linton Kwesi Johnson, Mikey Smith, Mutabaruka, and Jean "Binta" Breeze, write poems to music not necessarily related to the African diaspora, while others write poems that have nothing to do with music or are not meant for performance. Smith's work serves as an example: his famous poem "Mi Cyaan Believe It" is a powerful text that comes alive through performance but without relying on a musical background—rather, the syncopations emanating from raw verses, framed by the repeating line "Mi seh mi cyaan believe it," compose their own melodic force, carried solely on Smith's voice. Another of his poems, "Black and White" holds its own weight on paper as a critical commentary of the racialization implicit under colonialism. Johnson's poems, even those considered classics within dub poetry, such as "Inglan is a Bitch" "Street 66," "Five Nights of Bleeding," or "Reggae fi Rodney," also stand the test of scribal formalities, evidenced by their inclusion in his *Selected Poems*, published by Penguin in 2006.

The Caribbean Artists Movement (CAM), founded in 1966 and operating between England and the Caribbean, contributed significantly to the development of critical works and aesthetic shifts that privileged popular culture. The movement's magazine, *Savacou*, run primarily by Brathwaite from Jamaica, put many groundbreaking—or tidebreaking, as Brathwaite might have put it—ideas into circulation throughout the region and the Caribbean diaspora. Debates over the use of Creole and orality in literature peaked with *Savacou* 3/4, a double issue published in 1971, which included a selection of writers experimenting with Rastafari aesthetics and worldview. Contributions by Bongo Jerry, Ras Dizzy, Mark Mathews, and Anthony McNeill sparked heated exchanges between Eric Roach and Gordon Rohlehr, primarily in Trinidadian periodicals.

15 As Dawes illustrates in *Wheel and Come Again. An Anthology of Reggae Poetry* (2005), much poetry that directly engages with reggae music does not necessarily fall under the category of dub poetry. Aside from classic "dub" poets like Johnson and Breeze, the volume includes many authors not associated with the term, such as Edward Baugh, Fred D'Aguiar, Pam Mordecai, and Olive Senior, attesting to the variety of what can be called reggae poetry.

Rohlehr's initial response, which Walmsley calls "the first scholarly, substantial and sympathetic defense for a new direction in Caribbean poetry" (265), accuses Roach of propagating a Eurocentric and colonialist perspective. It is noteworthy that this issue also includes translations of poetry by Nicolás Guillén, whose work explores Afro-Cuban speech patterns but falls clear of Roach's criticism, problematizing notions of the Caribbean voice in translation (Rothe 230). CAM's assemblies and collective and personal publications directly influenced future trends in Anglophone Caribbean art and literature, and legitimized the use of oral forms in writing, as well as considering oral expressions a form of literature. Dub poetry is just one example of a genre made possible because of such developments.

Rastafarianism, reggae, and dub have also made their way into more traditional literature, taking on unexpected forms that do not just emulate, but offer new ways to understand the importance—and also the problematic aspects—of these expressions in Jamaican and Caribbean cultures. Brathwaite's extensive body of work is a testament to this, as are the works of Roger Mais, N.D. Williams, Colin Channer, Lorna Goodison, and younger authors such as Marlon James, Ishion Hutchinson, Kei Miller, Nicole Dennis-Benn, Desiree C. Bailey, and Safiya Sinclair, among many others. Goodison in particular illustrates some of these new forms in poems like "Jah Music," where the speaker effortlessly shifts between different registers of Standard and vernacular English to illustrate, through color, smell, and taste, the sentiment of self-worth that reggae evokes; "Jah the Baptist," on the other hand, employs Dread Talk strategies of rearranging phonetical elements to resignify the canonical figure of John the Baptist; and in "Ocho Rios II," Rastafarian language is redesigned to articulate a criticism of extractive tourism, as seen in the following lines: "Today I again I forward to the sea / … You see we need rain for food to grow / so, if is your tan, or my yam, is just so" (31-32).

Through both poetry and narrative, Kei Miller has also explored different nuances of Rastafarianism in Jamaican society. *The Cartographer Tries to Map a Way to Zion* (2014) is a volume of poems built around the conversation between a Rastaman and a cartographer, ensuing in their conflicting views of the world, reason, and faith. Miller expanded this poetic vision two years later in his novel *Augustown*, which uses different temporalities to tell the story of Alexander Bedward, a Revivalist preacher of the early 20th century who claimed to fly, and a present-day Rasta family afflicted by marginalization and prejudices. Vibrating with Jamaican Creole and reggae, the novel touches on a variety of issues that range from colonialism, colorism, class privilege, homosexuality among Rastas, and, ultimately, the forms in which knowledge is created and legitimized by a community. The Creole term "autoclaps," used to designate a disaster of sorts, rests at the core of this story, not only as a narrative device for climax in both timelines, but also as a philosophical understanding of how to cope with catastrophe. After mulling over several possible origins of the word, that range from a creolized version of the biblical apocalypse to 14th-century English dialect, the narrator concludes,

> An autoclaps is not quite the same as an apocalypse. An autoclaps does not come with four horsemen or seven trumpets or seven seals or any of the other things you might have read about in the Bible. An autoclaps does not mean the end of all time, nor the end of all humanity—though it might very well mean the end of one life. Possibly two. … It's funny, isn't it, this whole process—how various dialects bleed into each other; how every language is a graveyard of languages, how every language is a storehouse of history. But what does it all matter, this useless fretting over the beginnings of a word? Autoclaps. The fact is, the word exists. Even to say it causes a sense of dread. And all these various meanings bear their weights down onto the word. // AUTOCLAPS: the collapse of the heart; a small apocalypse; the afterclap. (*Augustown* 158-59)

Here, etymology meets folklore, scientific method meets spiritual conviction, reason meets magic. Miller's novel blends ostensibly opposing principles and techniques to guide readers into a creolized storytelling experience, one in which we can perceive the different layers of history and cultural practices that make up present day Jamaica. Whereas much of the written literary expressions discussed in this section take on, or at least experiment with, what Dawes refers to as a reggae aesthetic, perhaps *Augustown* can be considered under the guise of a Rastafarian aesthetic, accounting not only for part of the origin story of this socio-religious movement, but also focusing on key Rastafarian emblems, such as the symbolism of dreadlocks, Dread Talk, and Afrocentric reinterpretations of the Old Testament. Clearly, both reggae and Rastafarian aesthetics overlap in many respects, but I find it useful to highlight the novel's emphasis on the ideological elements and political potential of Rastafari practices, as well as their place in Jamaican society.

Coda

In the quest to break from colonial models and produce literatures that speak to the societies in which they are inextricably connected, Anglophone Caribbean authors, both in the region and in the diaspora, have infused their writing with popular speech patterns, musical cadences and lyrics that connect readers to a variety of Caribbean soundscapes. And many, in attempting to create more horizontal dialogues, manage to establish continuum relationships between the scribal and the oral, as seen especially in dub and performance poetry, but also in more traditional poetics, as well as theater. On the other hand, musical genres like reggae and calypso, which draw heavily on the lyrical complexities of oral tradition, can also lean toward more scribal literary forms. Perhaps narrative, particularly the novel, with its basis in long form and measured prose techniques, is less inclined to engage in dynamic oral interactions with Caribbean readers, but it does offer many innovative ways of imagining cultural groundings, as well as representing Caribbean voices and

stories far beyond the region. Likewise, scribal poetry has revolutionized the page in compensating for the absence of voice: while some aesthetic proposals look to drastically intervene in visual fields and push readers toward a situated sonic awareness, others surreptitiously plant non-standard versions of English, undermining conventional written literature within its own boundaries.

My attempt to highlight certain tendencies and connections between written literary expressions, orality, and music in the Anglophone Caribbean is by no means exhaustive. While this sort of panoramic work must always involve decisions of inclusion and exclusion, it can also bring to light relationships not necessarily evident at first glance. It is this relational aspect, as Glissant might argue, that allows us to conceive a sense of regional unity based on difference and detect a larger cultural identity in constant evolution. In this case, it may help see how a barrack-yard story published in an obsolete literary journal nearly a century ago is tied, by history and culture, to the inclinations of a young Trench Town musician who sings of redemption. Or how radio and stage performances could guide writers into new ways of practicing their craft and interacting with readers. These relationships can also extend far beyond the region, to establish connections or points of comparison with the literary and cultural expressions of regions as different as Latin America, Africa or Asia. Just as listeners of reggae can connect with a music emanating from the socio-political particularity of a postcolonial Caribbean island, so too can readers of written Caribbean literatures, especially if they go beyond the page to listen to the authors and the people they write about.

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