

KAMAU BRATHWAITE "TIMEHRI "

Brathwaite laments the "fragmented culture" (344) of the Caribbean and the concomitant pervasive "sense of rootlessness" (344) which is, he argues, the "most significant feature of West Indian life and imagination" (344): to wit, the feeling "of not belonging to the landscape; dissociation, in fact, of art from act of living" (344). The cause of this dissociation is the "creolization" (344), the process of interaction or "interculturalization" (344) between the four "main culture-carriers of the region: Amerindian, European, African and East African" (344) which has led to a "plural society, a plural vision" (345) and the absence of a "sense of wholeness" (345): "Disillusion with the fragmentation leads to a sense of rootlessness" (345) resulting in "dissociation of sensibility" (345). This is, of course, a term which Brathwaite borrows from T.S. Eliot (see his essay "The Metaphysical Poets") but uses to very different ends. What Brathwaite has in mind is not the division between thought and feeling which, Eliot theorised, has afflicted all English literature written after Milton. He has in mind, rather, the split psyche theorised by Fanon where people of black skin prefer to identify with everything white and European, the "inherited non-African consciousness of educated West Indian society" (347).

The question which presents itself in the light of the foregoing is the following: "How does the artist work and function within a plurally fragmented world? How can a writer speak about 'the people', when . . . those to whom he refers have no such concept of themselves?" (347). Brathwaite theorises that West Indian literature to date (the essay was written in 1974) may be divided into two phases. In the first, the "main unconscious concern of . . . West Indian intellectuals and artists in the early post-colonial period was a description and analysis of this dissociation" (345). In the second phase, the task which presents itself to the Caribbean intelligentsia, "having become conscious of the problem, is seeking to transcend and heal it" (345). In a classic statement on the indispensability of Africentricity in the Caribbean in the face of the economic, political and cultural forces of Eurocentrism, he stresses that "the central force of our life of awareness is African. As black people in the Caribbean, that is how we feel it should be" (41).

Much of the essay is also devoted to Brathwaite's personal odyssey to recapture long denigrated roots. In his youth, he recounts how he was immersed in a Eurocentric secondary education system which taught him to despise himself and his colour. On arrival in England to pursue a university education, he describes himself as "ready to accept and absorb the culture of the Mother Country" (346): he was, by his own admission, a "potential Afro-Saxon" (346) until the hostility of his "fellow Englishmen" (346) persuaded him to change his mind. However, perhaps the single most important event in his life was, by his own admission, his trip to West Africa where he rediscovered his 'roots' from which he and other members of the African diaspora were brutally severed. He writes:

I ended up in a village in Ghana. It was my beginning . . . Slowly but surely . . . I was coming to an awareness and understanding of community, of cultural wholeness, of the place of the individual within the tribe, in society. Slowly . . . I came to a sense of identification of myself with these people, my living diviners. I came to connect my history with theirs, the bridge of my mind now linking Atlantic and ancestor, homeland and heartland. When I turned to leave, I was no longer a lonely individual talent; there was something wider, more subtle, more tentative: the self without ego, without I, without arrogance. And I came home to find that I had not really left. That it was still Africa; Africa in the Caribbean. . . . The connection between my lived, but unheeded non-middle class boyhood, and its Great Tradition on

the eastern mainland had been made. (347)

Hence, Brathwaite's stress on the importance of the "primordial nature" (350) of both Amerindian and African culture and the "potent spiritual and artistic connections between them and the present" (350). In the Caribbean, he writes, the recognition of an ancestral relationship with the folk or aboriginal culture involves the artist . . . in a journey into the past and hinterland which is at the same time a movement of possession into present and future. Through this movement of possession we become ourselves, truly our own creators. . . (342)