EDWARD KAMAU BRATHWAITE
"THE AFRICAN PRESENCE IN CARIBBEAN LITERATURE" (1970)

This is yet another essay in which Brathwaite addresses the issue of Caribbean cultural history in general and literary history in particular. He begins by recounting the fact that between "fifteen and fifty million Africans were imported into the New World coming to constitute a majority of people in the Caribbean and significant numbers in the new world" (191). He then points out that there is a "persistent, established theory which contends that the Middle Passage destroyed the culture of these people, that it was such a catastrophic, definitive experience that none of those transported during the period from 1540 to 1840 escaped trauma" (191). However, he argues, gesturing towards the work of anthropologists such as Herskovits, "modern research is pointing to a denial of this showing that African culture not only crossed the Atlantic, it crossed, survived and creatively adapted itself to its new environment. Caribbean culture was therefore not pure African, but an adaptation carried out mainly in terms of African tradition" (191-192). Arguing that "each culture has a distinguishing style or characteristic" (192), Brathwaite contends that "everyone agrees" (192) that the "culture-focus" (192) of "African culture in the Caribbean was religious" (192).

Brathwaite turns his attention to the "anti-African argument" (192), advanced (he claims) by historians such as Orlando Patterson in works such as The Sociology of Slavery, that the slaves only brought with them a "religion already tending to fetish and superstition than to theology and ethics" (192) but "no philosophy, no military organisation, no social life, no family structure, no arts, no sense of personal or civic responsibility" (192). This view is wrong, Brathwaite asserts because it is

> based (and biased) on "[1] mistaken notions of culture, culture change and cultural transference; [2] untenable, sometimes ignorant, concepts of African culture; [3] a lack of intimacy with traditional African culture . . .; and [4] an almost total ignorance of Afro-American folk culture. (193)

Brathwaite argues that until "sensitive African scholars" (193) (as opposed to "European scholars, with both intellectual and interpersonal problems relating to Africa" [193]) study the "folk cultures" (193) of the region, the "presence of African elements within this subculture is bound . . . to remain obscure" (193). There is no other explanation, Brathwaite claims, for the "success of the Haitian Revolution . . . unless we consider it as a triumph of Afro-Caribbean folk arts and culture over European mercantilism" (193).

Brathwaite argues that African culture is predominantly "based upon religion" (194) and even that "it is within the religious network that the entire culture resides" (194). Moreover, advancing what many Africanists believe is a somewhat monolithic conception of African culture, he writes that

> this entire culture is an organic whole. In traditional Africa, there is no specialisation of disciplines, no dissociation of sensibilities. In other words, starting from this particular religious focus, there is no separation between religion and philosophy, religion and society, religion and art. Religion is the form or kernel or core of culture. (194)

This is why "African culture survived in the Caribbean through religion" (194) and as a result of which, when it comes to religion in the Caribbean, a "whole cultural complex is also present" (194).

Brathwaite stresses that one must take into account the "depredations and fragmentations imposed upon African culture by the slave trade and plantation systems" (194) even though that this "should not alter our perception of the whole" (195). The African culture "survived and flourished under slavery" (194) because it was possible for

plantation slaves "not immediately or always under the surveillance of the master" (194) to "continue practising their religion and therefore their culture, or at least those elements of it that had survived under the conditions--elements signalled by things like drum, dance, *obeah*, song, tale and herb" (194-195). (Brathwaite contends that the "African religious complex, despites homogeneity, has certain interrelated divisions or specialisations" (195): worship, rites de passage, divinations, healing and protection, obeah subsuming the last two.)

However, Brathwaite contends that African culture in the Caribbean "came under very severe attack at emancipation" (194). Firstly, the missionaries were "naturally against African or African-oriented religious practices among their ex-African adherents" (195), leading to the banning of the drum (the "voice of god or worship: *nyame*–one of three Akan names for the Supreme Being" [195]), the "gradual replacement of African foods and foodstyles (*nyam / yam*) by European or creole substitutes" (196), and the "Christianisation of names (*nommo*--Bantu for the Word) and ideas (*nam*)" (196). As a result of these three principal strategies, the "ex-slaves began to lose or disown the most crucial elements of their culture. . . . They bagan . . . to go to churches and chapels rather than beat their drums" (196).

Secondly, Brathwaite argues that at emancipation, a "process of education, first clerical, then secular, but always colonial"(196) existed. The ex-slaves were "moulded into the British or French or Spanish system" (196). They were taught to read and write and thereby "diverted from the oral tradition of their inheritance" (196) and became "literate in a language which was foreign to them, 'liberated' into a culture which was not theirs" (196) without any "countervailing influence to help them learn about their own tradition" (196). Education in the Caribbean could have been "truly bi-cultural" (197) but, "under the dictates of mercantilism, education had a more monolithic and materialistic aim: control of the ex-slave for the profit of their labour" (197).

Thirdly, Brathwaite argues, the plantocracy "supported these two 'missionary' drives with social legislation design to prevent the former slaves from achieving very much" (197), hence no voting rights, curtailed socio-economic mobility, etc. Brathwaite stresses the "success of the Europhone establishment at devaluing African culture in the New World" (199) and the fact that at least up to 1970 that African history was taught spasmodically and that African culture "is not taught" (199). He laments that any attempt to emphasise things African is met by a "multiracial howl" (199) that attempts to keep Africa "diluted, even submerged, and certainly safely out of the way" (200) in order to "salvage from the cultural wreck the multiracial (creole) notion of 'Caribbean'; not totally European, nor is it purely African" (200).

Brathwaite advocates an "educational programme based on a revolutionised value system" (200) that will seek to cultivate certain continuities. Religious continuities can be glimpsed, he argues, in the "Baptist churches" (200) and others which "shifted away from a Euro-American kind of organisation into congregations that were not only run by blacks, but included African religious elements in their services" (201), "myalism" (201) (the "divination aspect of Afro-Caribbean religion" [201], a "fragmented form of African religion, expressing through dreams, visions, prophesying, and possession [*kumina*]" [202]), and an "emphasis on colour" (202). Taken together, all these suggest that a "radical Afro-*myal* movement underlay the more liberal / reformist creole concern with justice and land" (202). This leads Brathwaite to note the "potential for explosion and ramification that has made blackness such a radical, if subterranean, feature of plantation political culture" (203).

Brathwaite admits that it is difficult to "maintain that African continuities are as easily traced in our literature as in the socio-ideological world" (204). He contends that

there is an "African presence in Caribbean / New World writing" (204) but that "much of what we have come to accept as 'literature' . . . ignores, or is ignorant of, its African connection and aesthetic" (204). He argues that a "re/vision" (205) is needed: until our notion of culture is "reexamined in terms of its totality, not simply its Europeanity, we will fail to discover a literature of negritude and, with it, a literature of local authenticity" (204). Moreover, we must "redefine the term 'literature' to include the nonscribal material of the folk / oral tradition, which . . . turns out to have a much longer history than our scribal tradition" (204). To put this another way, "while a significant corpus of 'prose' and 'poetry' has been created--and read--by a few persons in the major Antilles; folk song, folk tale, proverb, and chant are found everywhere without fear or favour and are enjoyed by all" (205). In other words, Brathwaite stresses that one should ignore the "oral tradition" (209) in the region.

The earliest literature produced in the West Indies was by white writers, Brathwaite points out. The work of historians like Edward Long was informed by the "need, if they were to retain their hegemony, to destroy, subvert, or psychologically control the black majority" (205). Some, such as the anonymous Hamel the Obeah Man (1827), sought to describe slaves "in terms of their own culture" (205). After emancipation, white writers were not "centrally concerned with Caribbean Africans (or Indians)" (207). It is not his intention to "exclude white writers from our literary canon" (207) but, he claims, the majority of them are "not yet prepared to allow the boundaries set up around their minds by the physical / metaphysical plantation, and so do not yet recognise that their world has become marginal to the majority sense of local reality" (208).

Caribbean literature "as truly native enterprise and expression" (208) only begins with the American "occupation" (209) of Cuba and Puerto Rico where artists began to "develop distinctive literary and creative forms that have come to be called indigenism and *negrismo*" (209). Notwithstanding that the majority of the inhabitants of these islands are white and "ex-Spanish" (209), Brathwaite argues, the literature which "came out of these white creoles (and mulattoes) was black based; they recognised that the only form of expression which could be used as protest, or an authentic *alter / native*, to American cultural imperialism, was ex-African" (209). To put this another way, literary 'expressions of the African presence" (209) are "responses to white cultural imperialism" (209). During slavery, this took the form of "worksong, gospel, blues, the spiritual, *mento* . . ., shango . . ., shango hymn, and folk tale" (210). The post-slavery period saw the "entrenchment of the literature of the hounfort" (210). Urban immigration from about the end of the nineteenth century led to the "formation of black ghettos and the emergence of a new urban folk art--the dozens, urban blues, new urban shouter churches, the Harlem Renaissance, Garveyite creative work, Rastafari, the Nation of Islam, and Carnival" (210). In short, Brathwaite argues, Caribbean literature emerged in response to a series of "crises" (210): American imperialism produced Haiti's Price-Mars, Hippolyte, and Roumain, and Marti and negrismo in the Spanish Antilles, and calypso in Trinidad. European imperialism, which came to a head in World War II, produced negritude in the Francophone Antilles and what he calls, gesturing to Soyinka's famous rejection of negritude, "*tigritude* literature in the black colonies of Africa and the Caribbean" (211). More recently, he proposes, neocolonialism has given rise to the Black Power movement, the "re-emergence of 'native' churches, a certain revitalisation of calypso, and a generally increased awareness of the authenticity of folk forms" (211). These folk forms, he argues, "continue to be uniquely, vitally, and creatively African in form, rhythm and soul" (211).

Brathwaite argues that there are "four kinds of written 'African literature in the Caribbean'" (211). The first is "*rhetorical*" (211) (Brathwaite also speaks of "romantic rhetoric" [211] in this regard) where the "writer uses Africa as mask, signal or nomen. He

doesn't know very much about Africa necessarily, although he reflects a deep desire to make a connection. But he is only saying the word 'Africa' or invoking a dream. . . . He is not necessarily celebrating or activating the African presence" (211). In general, he points out, "rhetorical literature is static, wishful and wilful in nature. Although it betrays a significant instinct for Africa, the instinct is based on ignorance and often . . . on received European notions of 'darkest Africa'" (214. Many of the writers evince an "attraction / ignorance" (214), Brathwaite writes, as a result of which the two cultures "present a dichotomy" (215) between which one must choose. He contrasts Walcott in this regard with the "*acceptance* of this dual cultural inheritance" (215) on the part of the Cuban mulatto poet Nicolas Guillen.

The second kind, according to Brathwaite, is the "*literature of African survival* . . . which deals quite consciously with African survivals in Caribbean society, but without necessarily making any attempt to interpret or reconnect them with the great tradition of Africa" (212). It "inheres most surely and securely in the folk tradition--in folk tale, folksong, proverb, and much of the litany of the *hounfort*" (216). The mode of expression is

> intransigent un-English or, as I prefer to call it, *nation-language*, since Africans in the New World always referred to themselves as belonging to certain *nations*. . . . Here there are no African word-fragments or phrases as in the hounfort, but the tonal shape of the language, its rhythm changes, structure, contours of thought and image, erupting into song / dance / movement, make it clearly recognisable as African speech-form. (219)

There is also "considerable metaphysical life and symbolic association contained and hidden away in some of the folk-songs and poems that have been preserved" (220) and as a result of which the "folk / metaphysical mind can be seen working in concert with African symbolism" (221). There is, he argues, "very little in the written 'educated' tradition which offers anything approaching these insights into our collective psyche" (222).

Alluding openly to both Edward Long's racist History of Jamaica and Fanon's efforts to comprehend the psychopathological effects of racism, Brathwaite argues that the "problem for the Caribbean writer . . . is that because of the processes of imperial education, he has often come to absorb / reject this [negative] image of himself and in both ways then come to see himself as Other: the classic case of alienation (*Black Skin White Masks*)" (226). Brathwaite contends that "what is really surprising, given the Caribbean psycho-cultural inheritance, is not really the fear . avoidance response with regard to the African presence in the New World, but the persistent attempts, at all levels, to deal with it. No writer in the plantation New World can, in fact, ignore 'Africa' for long" (228). One "area of African survival" (228) which most Caribbean writers do not address is what Brathwaite terms "physical and psychological maroonage" (228). The Maroons, whether in Surinam, Jamaica, the Windward Islands, or Brazil, were proof that the "people of Africa were concerned with response: suicide, accommodation, escape, rebellion. Escape / rebellion often led to the setting up of African communities outside of and often in opposition to, the great Euro / creole plantations" (229). The reason for the ignorance of Caribbean writers on this score Brathwaite attributes to "European brainwash" (230). He claims that those who are aware, moreover, are "too cut off to conjure line or metaphor from this matrix" (230). Harris is one of the few writers to recognise the importance of the Maroons but not in precisely the same way as Brathwaite who criticises Harris for speaking of an "over-'emotional' negritude" (231) and for arguing that the "African slave . . . must / could have come here equipped with very little . . . to offer" (231).

Thirdly, according to Brathwaite, there is the "*literature of African expression*, employing often unconsciously, elements of African and / or African American style,

content, vocabulary, custom / culture" (212). Works in this category "represent a shift from rhetoric to involvement" (234) and are connected to the hounfort, the "heart and signal of the African experience in the Caribbean / New World" (234). At stake here, according to Brathwaite, is the "process of transformation" (236) by which the "art of the hounfort" (236) is changed into an "art of the novel" (236), a process which "has its roots in a certain kind of concern for an attitude to the *word*, the atomic core of language" (236). In "all pre-literate, pre-industrial societies" (236), Brathwaite proposes, "language was and is a creative act in itself. . . . The word (*nommo* or name) is held to contain secret power" (236), a power of "conjuration" (238), the "power to affect life" (241). This is a "concept and use of word . . . found throughout the entire black / African world" (239-240) and "present in modern as well as traditional African literature" (240). It is a "way of using the word" (241) that "depends very much upon an understanding of the folk tradition out of which it comes" (241) but which few linguists have attempted to study by undertaking a "sociology of nation language" (242).

In addition to "sound-symbols" (243), Brathwaite argues, "nation-language sets up certain tunes, tones and rhythms which are characteristic of the folk tradition, and are essential features of its expression. The overall space / patterns of this language . . . are controlled by a *groundation* tendency in which image / spirit is electrically conducted to earth like lightning or the *loa*" (243). Another aspect of African style, Brathwaite argues, in addition to "rhythm and repetition" (249), is "improvisation (rhythmic and thematic)" (246) which is characteristic of jazz as much as "black / African literature" (246). Brathwaite claims that all "African-influenced artists, whatever their individual styles, participated in certain modes of expression, and that understanding the patterns of one could lead to an understanding of how the work of all relates in a mutual continuum" (246). Improvisation is a form of transformation and can, as such, "also invade and erode the shape / sense of the word" (252).

The fourth kind, according to Brathwaite, is the "*literature of reconnection*, written by Caribbean (and New World) writers who have lived in Africa and are attempting to relate that experience to the New World, or who are consciously reaching out to rebridge the gap with the spiritual heartland" (212). It involves a "recognition of the African presence in our society not as a static quality, but as a root living, creative, and still part of the main" (255). The goal of works like Paule Marshall's The Chosen Place, the Timeless People is to transform the "Afro-Bajan out of his drab, materialistic setting with meaningful correlates of custom from across the water in ancestral Africa" (257).