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BRIDGING THE BLACK ATLANTIC: CARIBBEAN POETICS FROM CALYPSO TO THE BRITISH CANON

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Abstract

After the arrival of the Empire Windrush generation in the 1950s and the American Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, the post-war decades have seen an increase in the number of Caribbean poets publishing their work in the UK. Their poetry began to be recognised as significant literary products of the postcolonial situation, in parallel with the emergence of British cultural studies as a research field, with prominent theorists like Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy. Referring to the literary relationship between home and diaspora, Sarah Lawson Welsh (2020) highlighted the shifting and transitional character of Caribbean writing in its connection with Britain, an aspect which in turn has influenced poets' *ars poetica* substantially. Many Caribbean poets related to Britain by birth, residence or travel have searched for innovative ways of making sense of their diasporic experiences and of creating new subjectivities by delving into the transatlantic nature of a composite identity *par excellence*. The aim of this paper is to show that Caribbean poetry linked to Britain has simultaneously aesthetic and multicultural value. Based on individual and group poetry collections, it maps several poetic novelties brought about by the postcolonial social transformation and argues for a number of reasons why these were employed.

Keywords: *Caribbean poetry; British poetry; postcolonial studies; transnational studies; innovation*

INTRODUCTION

In the preface to the study *The Deregulated Muse* (1998), critic Sean O'Brien formulated one of his concerns regarding the British poetry scene: "a matter of greater urgency to me is the under-representation of women poets and of Black writing" (10). And he reviewed the most important poetry anthologies at the time in the subsequent introduction. Although he mentioned that "an imaginary anthology, a *salon des refusés*" (19) could include poets like James Berry and John Agard among many others and, later in the book, he compared Derek Walcott with Robert Lowell, W. H. Auden and Derek Mahon, the essays covered poetry only by White authors. In the "Afterword," when discussing aspects related to the impact on audiences, the critic emphasised the performative character of Caribbean poetry in Britain—a mix of spoken word, song and theatre—and its social and political dimensions with effects like solidarity and urgency, which overshadowed other poetic works primarily read on the page.

O'Brien's study appeared when British literary critics and historians still had reservations regarding the poetry of the African diaspora, and after Derek Walcott and Toni Morrison had been awarded the Nobel Prize in 1992 and 1993, respectively. A few years earlier, poet, novelist and critic Fred D'Aguiar had been invited to express his point of view in the essay collection *New British Poetries* (1993). He began his essay "Have you been here long? Black poetry in Britain" by commenting on the role of Phyllis Wheatley's poetry and biography as a mediator between the New World and the Old World. Then he focused on a number of Black poets, men and women, to shed light on "the ways in which Black poetry has re-invigorated poetry in Britain and legitimised its contemporary nature" (53). The wry title of his essay echoes the spirit of Louise Bennett's poem "Colonisation in Reverse" (1966) and reflects a type of impersonation extended to criticism. His article is one of the most relevant contributions to the corpus of contemporary Black British literary criticism, which is in line with many of the ideas from *The Black Atlantic* (1993) by Paul Gilroy. The latter focused his attention on "the tension between roots and routes" (133), being "more concerned with the flows, exchanges, and in-between elements" rather than the purism of cultural centrism and "seeking to problematise the relationship between tradition and modernity" (190).

At the turn of the millennium, critic Jahan Ramazani published a collection of essays entitled *The Hybrid Muse* (2001), in which he commented on the poetry of W. B. Yeats, Derek Walcott, A. K. Ramanujan, Louise Bennett, and Okot p'Bitek. His focus was on the use of English language in postcolonial poetry across the globe, in countries where it is an official language as a consequence of the British colonial rule. Intending to remedy the marginalization of their poetry and of poetry criticism, Ramazani stated from the beginning: "Postcolonial poets have dramatically expanded the contours of English-language poetry by infusing it with indigenous metaphors and rhythms, creoles and genres." (1) He is one of the first critics to describe this specific type of literary production by extending the Bakhtinian hybrid view on the novel to the field of poetry:

The postcolonial poem sometimes melds ("an organic hybrid"), at other times sets these resources against each other ("an intentional hybrid"). It may ironize one, both, or neither of its intertexts. In the most successful examples, the result of the intercultural dynamic is transformative—a poem that would have been unimaginable within the confines of one or another culture. (18)

Later, in each chapter, he explained the complex relationships between poetry and postcoloniality and, in the last section, he made several statements about hybridity as a useful research concept. Firstly, he referred to some of its risks and limitations: hybridity may give a false impression of symmetry since it may replicate binaries in spite of its purpose of intercultural exchange; all cultures are hybrid, but they are not all hybrid in the same way and with the same magnitude. Secondly, he pointed out the benefits of hybridity: the concept has critical value because of "the quality of readings, cultural insights and the commentaries it affords," because it "can help to deepen our apprehension of the animated intercultural congress and exchange in the structures—archetype, metaphor, irony, dramatic monologue—that are the contact zones of the postcolonial," and it "can help internationalize a field of study that has remained relatively insular in the West" (179-183).

Ramazani furthered his research in *A Transnational Poetics* (2009), in which he included more poets, questioned the "citizenship of the poem" (25) and proposed a research method based on hybridity to show how "these poets modernize the indigenous and indigenize the modern" (130). In the chapter

“Poetry of the Translocal: Blackening Britain,” he presented a poetry panorama of the African and African Caribbean diaspora, taking into consideration both men and women poets’ work. In the era of the Internet and online social networks, this approach becomes more useful given that the current technological advancement allows various forms of cultural hybridity and the development of poetry in a multicultural framework.

In this expanded context, it is necessary to remember that Caribbean poetry associated with Britain is a rich and diverse literary tradition that has been multicultural from the beginning and has undergone various innovations over the decades, which have emerged as a response to the unique historical, cultural and linguistic experiences of Caribbean people living in the UK.

This paper maps several poetic novelties—in terms of prosody, rhythm, diction, lexis, discourse etc.—brought about by the experience of migration and argues for a number of reasons why these were employed. Without being exhaustive, these formal innovations are as follows: linguistic and cultural creolization; code-switching; live poetry; experimentation with form; and sociopolitical commentary. As far as the primary corpus is concerned, it includes work by Caribbean British poets and also by poets like Derek Walcott and Edward K. Brathwaite who may not be considered British nowadays, but who were born in the British Empire, used to be British subjects and lived for a while in the UK. Although not British citizens after their islands became independent, their work and literary activity are relevant today since they contributed to the expansion of the English literary canon: Walcott insisted on Caribbean literature as a linguistically composite product, while Brathwaite focused on Black culture and its African heritage.

LINGUISTIC AND CULTURAL CREOLIZATION

One of the most significant innovations in Caribbean poetry is the considerable use of Creole, which poet and academic Edward K. Brathwaite (1984) called “nation language” instead of non-standard English or dialect. In this particular postcolonial case, Creoles are born out of the mixing of various languages, including English and other European languages, African languages, and indigenous languages. Jamaican, Guyanese, Barbadian, Trinidadian and other poets have extensively incorporated Creole into their work, creating a distinct

linguistic style that resonates with the playful hybrid identity of the Caribbean diaspora in the UK.

The 1980s was a decade when some Black poets realised their artistic work did not help them feel they were part of British society. For example, although Brathwaite's first three poetry collections of the 1960s were published together in a new edition entitled *The Arrivants* (1973) and his academic work on Creole society in Jamaica and on cultural diversity and integration in the Caribbean appeared in the 1970s, the impact of his work in the UK was limited at the time, and he concentrated his efforts on building international cultural relationships between Caribbean countries, the UK, the USA and African countries. Fred D'Aguiar (1993) explained Brathwaite's view on Creole English by highlighting its transnational continuum:

[It] is really an amalgam of every particular island Creole picked up by black children in British schools and youth clubs and melted down as the children mixed together, adding local dialect words, and even Americanisms. A healthy state of affairs for any language wishing to self-perpetuate itself instead of stagnate and perish! (59-60)

At about the same time, Linton Kwesi Johnson, who studied sociology in London, experimented with calypso, reggae, jazz and blues music and coined the term "dub poetry," establishing a new oral tradition in Britain, with significant implications for the wider youth and anti-establishment cultures. For example, in 1978, he composed, recorded and sang "Sonny's Lettah," an epistolary poem written in Jamaican Patois and addressed to Sonny's mother. It is an Anti-Suspicion poem protesting against the Vagrancy Act, a renewal of nineteenth-century legislation that led to disproportionate arrests of Black British youths. Now available on the internet, it used to be performed on reggae music in underground Black communities and sometimes reached white audiences. In short, held in Brixton Prison, Sonny writes about his brother Jim, beaten to death by the police, whilst being arrested for murdering a policeman. The anxiety of otherness in an increasingly multicultural society, which was not yet aware of its own hybridity, came to light in Creole when transmitted to the Caribbean mother.

As a result, other Caribbean poets nourished the idea of using Creole to write epistolary poems. *Lucy's Letters and Loving* (1982) by James Berry, "Letter from Home" (1984) by Valerie Bloom, "Letter to Mama Dot" (1985) from *Mama Dot* by Fred D'Aguiar and "Coolie Son" paired with "Coolie Mother" from *Coolie Odyssey* (1988) by David Dabydeen show many of the problems immigrants faced during that decade. Whereas Johnson's poem covered stories of street violence, the other poets dealt with aspects of economic status and social degradation, more prominent in the 1980s, and with the invisibility of Black women from the public sphere. When they compared life in the Caribbean and life in the UK, the social realities surfaced differently: while Jamaica or Guyana were represented by direct questions, a focus on family and poverty, the UK was the place where immigrants supposedly achieved a higher social status. The ironic undertones which Creole sometimes entails suggests the existence of a gap between ideals and facts, hence the sense of failure.

One of the effects of such poems written in "nation language" was that they generated a new cultural space for Black poets, women included. For example, in her poetry from the 1980s, Grace Nichols approached the historical trauma of transatlantic dislocation, exploring both cultural and individual memory in her debut volume and using therapeutic humour in the next two collections—Creole was present first to denote an unchronicled history and later as a means to explore contemporary paradoxes. In "Epilogue," from *I Is a Long-Memoried Woman* (1983), she concluded in rhyming standard English:

I have crossed an ocean
I have lost my tongue
from the root of the old
one
a new one has sprung. (87)

However, Creole has continued to be a source of inspiration, resistance and metamorphosis for decades. John Agard and Benjamin Zephaniah, for instance, developed their own styles of performing poetry on stage and across media, to promote cultural, racial and ethnic difference in British society.

The last text in *Spring Cleaning* (1992) by Jean 'Binta' Breeze, "I Poet" is a reflection in Jamaican Creole on being a Black woman dub poet confronted with

the conservative British literary canon and criticism of the 1980s. Her attitude is conciliatory when she affirms her faith in her artistic gift. The “I” of the poem goes through a significant spelling transformation from “ah” in the first section, an interjection hiding a whole history of naivety, illusion and loss, to the bold, yet fragile, “I” in the second part. The change appears in the only question of the poem, “an evryting ah read, ah sey, / but how come I know dis story aready?” (89), which many Black people might have asked themselves when reading texts about Africans, written by White scholars. This volta is employed to mark how conscious the speaker may be of the choice of using Creole spelling. The interjection “ah” – “ah was reading / ah was lovin / befo as was writing” (88) – conveys a sense of nostalgia for an idyllic sense of equality and the joy of reading. In contrast, the “I” section reveals a mix of feelings: the initial awakening, differentiation and change of mind – “I stap readin fi a while / stap lovin fi a while / jus befo I start writin” – is followed by pain – “doah I was well hurt inside / wen yuh all did sey / I wasn’t no poet” – and a sense of determination – “I never mind / cause I sey / I was poet all de time” (89). In the end, the source of strength comes from the family: “so I start write / an I tankful / to madda an fadda”. The last lines – “when I writin / I poem / is you / all you” – summarize a significant play upon the relationship between subjectivity and objectivity and a commitment to otherness and to the literary community as a whole. The article “a” that the pronoun “I” replaces in “I poem” shows that the poet identifies with her text by delaying, displacing and then affirming the unwanted truth that the Black self used to be seen just as an indefinite article, an item, a body of text to trade, which should not be the case nowadays. In this way, Breeze built her poetry on Jamaican English to refine linguistic subtleties, to indicate a change in self-awareness when confronted with criticism and to pay her tribute to the Jamaican community she feels she represents as an artist in the UK. This is in line with what critic Paul Gilroy called “[t]he desire to bring a new historicity into the Black political culture” (190), a view that many Caribbean poets adopted when they read British literature and history.

CODE-SWITCHING

As some of these poets were less enthusiastic about “nation language,” they still found other ways to use it. Moving between English and other languages,

including different kinds of Caribbean Creole, French, Spanish or Dutch, reflects the multilingual reality of the region and its diasporas and adds depth and specificity to the literary expression of such multicultural experiences. Among the poets who preferred to use vocabulary or grammar from several other relevant languages on a regular basis are Derek Walcott and David Dabydeen.

For example, the fourth stanza from “The Light of the World,” included in *The Arkansas Testament* (1987) by Derek Walcott, displays the need for interpretation of an imperative in French Creole heard while travelling by bus in the Caribbean, a reality of people’s daily condition, always socially and historically determined, which, fortunately, is translated as a cultural imperative. A countryside woman wants to get on a bus, she has two heavy baskets and worries she might be left behind:

She said to the driver: “Pas quittez moi a terre,”
 which is, in her patois: “Don’t leave me stranded,”
 which is, in her history and that of her people:
 “Don’t leave me on earth,” or, by a shift of stress:
 “Don’t leave me the earth” (for an inheritance);
 “Pas quittez moi a terre, Heavenly transport,
 Don’t leave me on earth, I’ve had enough of it.” (53)

Fantatising over one found sentence, pointing out the woman’s condition and her relationship with the place and the driver as a representative of the local infrastructure, adding anthropological and philosophical commentary and including the stanza in a longer poem are some of the literary techniques that defined the hybrid poetics of the 1980s. The concomitance of the vernacular, standard English and poetic commentary may not be new, but the place where and the time when it occurs and the writing style reflect a change in the meaning of being Anglophone with British ancestry. *The Arkansas Testament* has two parts entitled “Here”, focused on the Caribbean, and “Elsewhere”, focused on other places, which problematizes the sense of belonging. Of British, Dutch and African ancestry, Walcott was born in Saint Lucia, a small island that changed ownership throughout history and, starting from 1814, was a British colony for more than a century. He witnessed it becoming a state in free association with the UK in 1967 and an independent state in 1979. He was born a British subject,

as his island was part of the British Empire and later of the Commonwealth. However, as he was never a British citizen in the current sense, his attachment to the British literature has been debatable. The above stanza ends with a line that echoes his own condition: “Abandonment was something they had grown used to.” (53) The use of the third person demonstrates his detachment from the whole scene: he does not want to grow used to being abandoned. Like the Caribbean countrywoman, he speaks up, but he differentiates himself through the art of poetry, struggling to get on the imaginary bus of excellent writers. And he did it when he was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1992. Ultimately, his attachment is to Anglophone postcolonial literature. And yet, as some of his collections were published in the UK, he could be awarded the prestigious T. S. Eliot Prize in 2010.

Examples of code-switching can be found in *Omeros* (1990) too, Walcott’s epic poem that draws on Homer, Dante and the immediacy of Caribbean life. On the first page, it features a contrast between the *laurier-cannelles* and the cedars:

“This is how, one sunrise, we cut down them canoes.”
 Philoctete smiles for the tourists, who try taking
 his soul with their cameras. “Once wind bring the news

 to the *laurier-cannelles*, their leaves start shaking
 the minute the axe of sunlight hit the cedars,
 because they could see the axes in our own eyes.” (3)

The former is a tree native to Saint Lucia, a symbol of the New World whose name consists of the French names of two aromatic plants, bay and cinnamon, both known and used for cooking and ritual since ancient times. The latter is a symbol of the Old World, often found in English poetry and a traditional image of the Mediterranean area. Both trees are personified to stage the beginning of an allegorical battle, a code-switching strategy of contrasting opposites that shape the Antillean subjectivity.

In the same work, Walcott often compares the destiny of his native island Saint Lucia to that of the ancient, war-devastated Troy and to that of Helen, a local Black waitress. Caught between three competing lovers, “Helen needed a history” (30)—as sergeant Major Plunkett puts it—and her story hints not only

at postcolonial feminism, but also at political autonomy: on the one hand, *Omeros* celebrates the independence of Saint Lucia from the United Kingdom; on the other hand, it reflects the nostalgia for the colonial stories and the need to rewrite the past so as to be more inclusive. The rivalry between the New World and the Old World is mirrored by the rivalry between Caribbean Helen and Irish Maud Plunkett:

“So, how are you, Helen?”

“I dere, Madam.”

At last. You dere. Of course you dare,

come back looking for work after ruining two men,
after trying on my wardrobe, after driving Hector
crazy with a cutlass, you dare come, that what you mean? (124)

Walcott stages the struggle between the two worldviews by setting “nation language” and standard English in contrast, which involves tense dialogue and the creolization of Maud’s speech, a hint at the British conservative atmosphere of the 1980s and the emerging tendency of internalizing hybridity. Such examples of dramatizing grammatical contrast abound in Walcott works, which makes code-switching a key creative element of his art.

The need for a thorough interpretation of such linguistic differences is much more evident in a previous work, *Slave Song* (1984) by David Dabydeen, an unusual bilingual collection—code-switching between Guyanese Creole and English—accompanied by a generous peritext: an introduction in line with E. K. Brathwaite’s research on the historical role of Creole in the Caribbean; extensive explanatory notes for each poem, echoing previous experiments by Alexander Pope and T. S. Eliot; pictures of planters and slaves from the past; and a postscript in the 2005 edition. The last piece of peritext reveals that, after two decades, the poet distanced himself from “what Wilson Harris called ‘the pornography of Empire,’” but he justified his unique idea by defining it as a way “to resist the commerce of consuming ‘third-world’ produce” (67).

Later, in the poem “Caliban” from *Coolie Odyssey* (1988), David Dabydeen reimagined the mythopoetic figure of the Shakespearean character against a postcolonial background, drawing on the multilingual and multicultural layers

of the Antilles. The poem is a lover's three-stanza monologue addressed to a "white woman, womb of myth" (34) and meant to be a literary self-portrait after their separation. The intersection of European, African and Asian cultures in the poem is orchestrated through a mix-and-match use of language: English grammar and literary inheritance operate as backdrop; the "edge of assegai" alluding to African spears represents the instruments; and the "Hindu corpse" constitutes the subject, a cultureme of South-Asian origin, a reference to Sati, the historical self-immolation ritual practiced by certain castes. The eventual failed love affair between Miranda and Caliban suggests a sense of resistance to cultural assimilation performed at linguistic level.

LIVE POETRY

Paying attention to women's and Black poetry in the 1980s and 1990s required that the literary critics—usually White male—change their evaluation criteria. In this context, Romana Huk (1996) observed that voice became "the site for a new sort of struggle in poetry" (4). Whether on the stage or in print, the voice of the poem—rhythm, pitch, timbre, volume etc.—mattered to a larger extent as it represented realities not usually included in the literary canon.

When researcher Julia Novak (2011) theorised live poetry, drawing on her experience on the UK literary scene, she referred to the insufficient bibliography, noted the narrow views on the relationship between poetic writing and speech, and identified several areas of investigation, hoping "to bring live poetry into the mainstream of literary research and criticism", and still worried about "the neglect of live poetry as a subject worthy of academic study" (14-15). Therefore, it is necessary to remember that some of the Caribbean poets in Britain often draw on their rich oral and musical tradition rooted in different cultures, incorporating elements of performance, rhythm, and sound into their work, to engage with different audiences in powerful ways.

In 1976, distancing himself from Louise Bennett's oral poetry based on African folklore, Linton Kwesi Johnson cultivated "dub poetry," establishing a new oral tradition in Britain with implications for the wider youth and becoming famous for his outstanding shows, with lyrics that covered many of the social, economic and political circumstances of the time. Fred D'Aguiar (1993) recognized a distinct style in his debut album:

Johnson's *Dread Beat and Blood* (1975) was therefore a departure from anything that had ever been published in Britain as poetry in terms of the kind of English used. [...] More particularly, its innovation lay in its deployment of reggae-based rhythms. In addition, the poems had startling resemblances in their social concerns to the best of the Liverpool poets of the decade before, making them anti-establishment in their appeal and popular – qualities unfamiliar to most poets operating in Britain at the time. (54)

Two decades later, Fiona Sampson (2012) included Johnson's work in a "literary political tradition that goes back to John Milton's *Areopagitica*, Thomas Paine's *The Rights of Man* or Percy Bysshe Shelley's campaigning *The Mask of Anarchy*" and noted that "Johnson's experiments with form were personal technical advances, as well as speaking for a community" (105). This shows how novelty and heritage can belong together when they serve a communal purpose.

In 1985, Johnson invited Jean 'Binta' Breeze to perform in England. In her essay, "Can a Dub Poet Be a Woman?" (1990), Breeze mentioned she was acclaimed as "the first female dub poet in a male-dominated field" (397). A graduate of Drama in Kingston, she used to perform dub and slam poetry in Jamaican Patois at several British festivals, but she renounced later because she preferred to write more personal poetry. A member of the following generation, Benjamin Zephaniah continued Johnson's art by adopting a more confrontational style and a rebellious Rastafarian image. His work warned against social injustices, the effects of neocolonialism, manipulation, conflicts and climate change. His political, musical and radical poetry was heard during the 1980s protests in London and reached mass media. When Ian Hickey (2021) explored the ways in which Zephaniah's volume *City Psalms* (1992) overthrew societal norms through the spoken word, the critic argued that Zephaniah was either ahead of his time, or there has been no progress or learning since the publication of Zephaniah's book. Apart from being performers, both Breeze and Zephaniah were also tutors of poetry, a pedagogic approach that has inspired younger generations. As a result, dub poetry has established itself as a creative style transplanted from Jamaica to the UK, where the new generations—more multicultural—could connect with a literary tradition emerged elsewhere.

Although not a musician, John Agard enjoys a special place on the British spoken-word poetry scene, being recognised for his one-man shows, the playful rendering of his concise, witty and mischievous poetry and his conscious use of accent, intonation and facial expression. Heartened by the spirit of calypso, he has encouraged freedom of speech through poetry on a regular basis, feeling empathy to apparently evil characters and endowing them with memorable names and voices: Anancy, Palm Tree King, Limbo Dancer, the Devil etc. His most captivating poems often have a dramatic structure and a composition intended to be recited on a stage. Rich in satirical humour and sometimes melancholy, they explore identity and belonging, questioning stereotypes and challenging inherited views. About three decades ago, Alastair Niven (1996) observed that Agard was “almost totally ignored in critical journals by erudite commentators on modern poetry” and mentioned the “gulf between popular and academic perceptions of quality” (310). Meanwhile, the situation has changed.

With the influence of these poets, the poetry scene of Caribbean import started to gain more energy, but it was not until Derek Walcott won the T. S. Eliot Prize in 2010 and Bob Dylan won the Nobel Prize in 2016 that the added value of live poetry in the UK came to be recognised officially. It was only several years later that poets like Roger Robinson, Anthony Joseph and Jason Allen-Paisant were awarded the T. S. Eliot Prize in 2019, 2022 and in 2023, respectively. Roger Robinson has turned dub poetry into an artistic form that still maintains its former political impetus and reggae sound, but it is less didactic and ranting, more sensorial and inclusive, more detailed and yet universal from a poetic point of view. Adapted for video and using digital technology, the slow cadence of his music conveys the message and the artistic attitude of a poem in ways meant to reshape the social fabric every day, not only locally or underground, but also globally via the internet. Anthony Joseph is part of the same trend. When Julia Novak (2011) interviewed him about his art, he said: “when I’m writing I’m singing the words back to myself to see how they sound, you know, it’s a very integrated process [...] I want to create sculpture in the air” (23). She also highlighted that: “Joseph manipulates his speech so as to produce an audiotext whose rhythmic irregularity and expressiveness transcends that of ordinary speech [...] and that is more markedly self-reflexive and artistic in effect.” (98-99) Since being a performance poet is sometimes used to pigeonhole Black artists, Joseph has rejected this label and preferred to be called a poet and musician or

spoken-word vocalist. From the same generation, poet and multi-disciplinary artist Malika Booker, the founder of the poetry collective Malika's Kitchen, is also known as an innovator of spoken-word poetry in the UK.

EXPERIMENTATION WITH FORM

Some Caribbean poets, among whom Derek Walcott and John Agard are the most prominent, experiment with traditional poetic forms like the sonnet, *terza rima* and other rhyming schemes, subverting and expanding them to suit contemporary artistic purposes. In contrast, others employ unconventional line breaks, punctuation, and structures that disrupt and move away from European traditional poetic expectations, drawing on Caribbean rhythmic heritage or exploring the power of ekphrastic poetry based on the image of the Black people in British art history. What follows exemplifies each of these trends.

John Agard has written a number of sonnets that tackle postcolonial identity issues, some of them published in *We Brits* (2006): "Newton's Amazing Grace," "Ave Eliza," "Shakespeare Addresses Tabloids After Dark Lady Rumour," "Dr Johnson, a Jamaican and a Dictionary (1755)," "Toussaint L'Ouverture Acknowledges Wordsworth's Sonnet 'To Toussaint L'Ouverture'," "Chilling Out Beside the Thames" and "A School Trip to Sambo's Grave, Sunderland Point". They blend colonial history with the current realities and represent different entertaining voices through the technique of persona poetry: historical and artistic figures as well as the contemporary typical immigrant have their say on the urgent topics of the time. Playfulness, satire, colloquialisms, eroticism, eloquence, conviviality and life-affirmation, all cast in the prosodic frame of the sonnet, are some of the characteristics of Agard's poems.

For example, "Dr Johnson, a Jamaican and a Dictionary (1755)" portrays the famous linguist, providing biographical details related to Francis Barber, who was born into slavery in Jamaica and brought to England by planter Richard Bathurst in 1752, where he was then set free and hired by Johnson as his valet-cum-secretary, and who eventually became a village schoolmaster (Fryer, 69). Barber is described as "a harmless drudge, a lexicographer" and "less a servant than an adopted son", while "the signs in those transatlantic eyes / tell me he won't be patronised" (Agard, 43). The poem conflates the sense of family and of overseas relationships, suggesting that distance and length are interpretable,

and recalling that Black people have been part of British society for a long time, including in intellectual contexts. A focus on the rhyming pattern shows some of the contrasts that generate the force of the poem: “companion” / “adopted son,” “slavery” / “dictionary” or “labour of language” / “voiceless bondage”. The end of the poem evokes the moment when Johnson scandalised Oxford scholars with a toast for the next revolt in the West Indies: “Let us drink to the next insurrection / When words unsettle iron’s tyranny”.

In contrast, most Caribbean poetry in Britain, however, has followed the trend of free verse, while experimenting with prosody animated by rhythms of blues, calypso, jazz, rap and reggae, among other musical genres. The cadence of calypso—a music style that originated in Trinidad and Tobago at the end of the nineteenth century and spread to the rest of the Caribbean in the twentieth century, when it became a form of musical free speech, a more or less reliable source of local news and a way to comment on political issues and condemn corruption—has given lyrical substance to many poetry collections. In spite of periods of restrictions, the features of calypso—*double entendre*, scandalous topics, insults, gossip, and related social communication practices—were embraced too by poets more interested in the printed word. It is no wonder that one of the early anthologies, edited by James Berry, was entitled *News for Babylon* (1984).

The calypso aesthetics can be identified in several other volumes. *The Arrivants* (1973) by E. K. Brathwaite includes a poem entitled “Calypso” and many sections echo the songs of Mighty Sparrow and Lord Kitchener as well as African rhythms. As Rajeev S. Patke (2006) stressed in his study on postcolonial poetry in English:

The trilogy also represents one of the most sustained challenges from a former British colony to the conventions of metred and stanzaic verse, to the ideals of smoothness of style and rhythmic flow, to the values attached to coherence of monologue and authorial voice. Many poets before and after Brathwaite have essayed into free verse. Few have done so with as much awareness of what was at stake, and why, as Brathwaite. (222-223)

The unmistakable spirit of John Agard’s poems is often infused with the emotional, shocking and playful quality of calypsos, very often with a humorous

twist rarely found in others' work. Moreover, in the poem "Wherever I hang," from *Lazy Thoughts of a Lazy Woman* (1989), Grace Nichols wrote that "little by little / I begin to change my calypso ways," when she tried to adapt "to de English life" (10). More recently, Anthony Joseph wrote *Kitch: A Fictional Biography of a Calypso Icon* (2018), written proof that his award-winning poetry has been inspired by one of the most popular music styles of his home country.

Influenced by mento, rocksteady and ska, the reggae genre gained momentum in the 1960s as a strophic form with a repeated verse and chorus. Originated in a deep sense of bitterness and the need for survival, it was turned into a popular genre by Bob Marley and the Wailers. Its average tempo, slower than the usual pop songs, made it suitable for poetry when it was transferred to Britain, where it remained marginal, foreign and subterranean for a few decades, aiming at youth culture. The following extract from a 1990s poem by Linton Kwesi Johnson (2006), "If I Woz a Tap Natch Poet," sung on reggae music, still echoes his earlier style:

if I woz a tap natch poet
 like Chris Okigbo
 Derek Walcott
 ar T. S. Eliot
 I woodah write a poem
 soh dyam deep
 dat it bittah-sweet [...]
 whe mek yu weep
 whe mek yu feel incomplete [...]
 still
 inna di meantime
 wid mi riddim
 wid mi rime
 wid mi ruff base line
 wid mi own sense of time
 goon poet haffi step in line (92)

The gap between Jamaican Creole and standard English in print is again an occasion to meditate on the issue of linguistic difference. For instance, spelling

“tap” instead of “top” and “natch” instead of “notch” partially destabilises the message of the informal adjective “top-notch” and adds further meanings. The plural significance of “tap”—a fluid controller, a gentle touch, an electronic device for listening secretly to someone’s conversation or a dance style—and the colloquial abbreviation “natch” of “naturally” contribute to renewed and unexpected readings of the written text. The versatile identity of a “tap natch poet” draws attention to the importance of oral poetry in a multicultural community, in spite of the modernist poets invoked at the beginning.

As mentioned at the beginning of this section, a few poetry collections by Caribbean poets are ekphrastic in structure, as they rely on visual representations of the African and the Caribbean: *Slave Song* (1984) and *Turner* (1994) by David Dabydeen, *Tiepolo’s Hound* (2000) by Derek Walcott and *Picasso, I Want My Face Back* (2009) by Grace Nichols. Although these books could have been part of *The Ekphrastic Encounter in Contemporary British Poetry and Elsewhere* (2012) by David Kennedy, they were not included. All four titles are postcolonial interpretations of images: lithographs from the colonial times in the first case; J. M. W. Turner’s painting *Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying* in the second; Camille Pissaro’s work and Walcott’s watercolours in the third; and Picasso’s cubist paintings in the fourth. All collections aim at rewriting literary history from the perspective of the subject represented in European works of art—enslaved people from the colonies and Caribbeans or Africans in Europe—as a strategy of taking back the past.

SOCIOPOLITICAL COMMENTARY

Caribbean poetry in Britain has had a long and strong tradition of sociopolitical commentary. Many twentieth-century poets have used their work as a means to explore issues of identity, racism and xenophobia, colonialism and trauma, dislocation and migration, social injustice and ecological crisis. They have employed innovative formal strategies to engage different readerships and challenge established power structures. There have been two main trends, often influencing each other. One is more straightforward and lighthearted, based on oral literature, having been set to music and performed in front of large audiences. The other is based on various written poetic genres and techniques,

often either elegiac or satirical, meant for the page and to be read alone or in small groups. The latter has been more rapidly accepted in the conservative circles, while the former, although more popular, has gained formal recognition more recently.

In the 1950s, choosing between staying in and leaving the Caribbean was an act not only related to personal matters, but one with a larger, cultural and political scope. When giving voice to poet Shabine, one of his alter ego characters, Derek Walcott (2014) revealed this tension in the following lines from *The Star-Apple Kingdom*:

I'm just a red nigger who love the sea,
I had a sound colonial education,
I have Dutch, nigger, and English in me
and either I'm nobody, or I'm a nation. (238)

Dropping the verb ending “-s” in the first line of the passage linguistically marks another type of experience, from elsewhere, outside the boundaries of standard English, remarked by Romana Huk (1996) and described as a “situatedness of selfhood” (12). The opposition “nobody” versus “nation” is not made for the sake of separating personal and national identities, but in order to better reconnect them and to demonstrate there is room for action and creativity, there are phases of existence, nuances and degrees of consciousness.

It was mentioned earlier that the epistolary poems played an essential role in the Caribbean British cultural politics of the 1980s, when the voice of Black women became louder either as poets themselves or as literary personas in Black males’ poetry collections. “Letter From Mama Dot” by Fred D’Aguiar empowers the women having remained in the Caribbean by expressing a communal, transatlantic point of view: “I” and “we” alternate throughout the poem. Written in standard English and only sprinkled with vernacular Guyanese Creole, the poem stages the Caribbean society of the time and its political relationships with the former colonial power. Through everyday speech and the enjambment, D’Aguiar portrays an outspoken woman, aware of the control local authorities have on her correspondence. She comments on the destructive politics of the country and is aware of the social shortcomings in Guyana and of her grandson’s vulnerable situation in England, due to his origin, prejudiced mass media or

unwelcoming inhabitants. Whereas the first part of the poem was published separately in *The Poetry Review* in June 1983, under the title “Letter to England,” its version from *Mama Dot* (1985) includes a second part. The breaking of the poem into two sections—one about Guyana as the root culture and one about England as the new route the poet has taken—is meant to indicate the contemporary individual and collective divisive turbulence migration entails, and the need to approach its effects in constructive ways.

Motivated by L. K. Johnson and Jean ‘Binta’ Breeze’s shows and driven by his own experience as a second-generation immigrant in the UK and by street politics, Benjamin Zephaniah interrogated several public clichés regarding Black men in “De Queen an I,” a poem from *Propa Propaganda* (1996):

It’s nice to know dat de Queen
Sits at home studying me.
She study me history,
Wea me born
Me roots an fruits.
An when me go rave
De Queen an I are intellectually engaged.
She study me anatomy
She check out me riddim an me rhyme
Me sleeping times,
I know she’ll check dis
And she always check dat
She study me so much
Mek me proud to be Black. [...]

I am so happy
Dat she chose me
I am de Queen’s subject. (73-74)

The poem relies on mocking the objectification of Black people in the news, as is implied by the Creole object pronoun “me” instead of “I”. The indirect interpellation of the monarchic institution and the display of postcolonial misfortunes of the former colonised are tackled in short lines that convey urgency at a time when former British subjects found out that they might not be

British anymore. The verb “to study” stands for a whole academia that used to objectify the Black subject during the Enlightenment and the Victorian epochs. The two characters perform a study exchange together: she focuses on reggae and Rastafarian culture, while he is interested in how “she get confuse by the news” that he rejected the OBE Her Majesty offered in 2003. His tone is a combination of humour and bitterness and is in line with the symbolic violence at linguistic level, present in the title of the volume too: the word “propa”—a short for “proper” and a half of “propaganda”—suggests both the need to reassess the aims of normativity and an invitation to become more aware of what being a Jamaican in the UK has meant over the past decades.

Among Caribbean women poets in Britain, Grace Nichols has written poetry that has addressed many of the stereotypes concerning the communities of Black women. Her political stance, poured in small quantities in almost every poem, has functioned as a warning against disparaging representations of Black femininity. Without turning her work into ideological ranting, she has created a substantial corpus, often reliant on Patois and direct diction, that aims at every woman, not at exceptional figures.

In contrast, some of the poets of Caribbean origin were much quieter. A particular case is that of Edward Archie Markham, a native of Montserrat, who published a few collections under a pseudonym at the onset of his career, while entering the academic world. Alastair Niven (1996) remarked his noiseless tendency that differentiated him from other poets, which may reflect his wish to be accepted and assimilated as an intellectual and a poet, without the ethnoracial labels: “In many of Markham’s poems one is not aware that the author is black.” (301) Conversely, he developed a written poetic style in which he experimented with enjambment and punctuation, intimate settings and deeply memorable imagery, a direction found in the poetry of Dorothea Smartt as well.

Nowadays, after decades of sociopolitical commentary through both oral and written poetry, Caribbean poetry in Britain is beginning to gain a better position with the work of second-generation poets like Roger Robinson and Anthony Joseph and of emerging third-generation poets. Live poetry proved to have nourished a sense of solidarity not only in the Caribbean or Black communities, but also in the British multicultural society at large, in line with the idea of Fiona Sampson (2012) that poetry is “a collective practice” (284). Meanwhile, literary critics have learned that judging live poetry may mean

taking into consideration not only the words, but also the characteristics of voice, the performer, the audience, the occasion, and other related aspects

CONCLUSION

Over the past half a century, Caribbean culture—already diasporic at home from a historical point of view as Stuart Hall (1990) explained by using the term “double diaspora”—has infused the British literary scene with new ways of writing poetry. Marked by the 1981 Brixton riots, the 1980s was a decade when a new wave of Black poetry emerged in Britain, with Caribbean poetry being the richest and loudest. As this paper has shown, linguistic creolisation leads to cultural hybridity by preserving freedom of expression and maintaining a healthy creative atmosphere. At first ignored by British critics, Patois-based poetry has gained terrain as a literary genre. Moreover, and as the article has illustrated, poetic code-switching may explain the hidden energies of cultural hybridity and prompt a more inclusive and transnational view on culture, and how various types of live poetry can (re)vitalise the poetic voice of a community. In the same vein, music-inspired and imagery-driven poetic forms – live or printed – have made a significant contribution to literary and national history by addressing social, economic and political problems with effective and long-standing results.

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