

CARIBBEAN POETRY PROJECT

**University of Cambridge, Centre for Commonwealth Education
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Word and Sound

Approaches to Teaching Caribbean Poetry (Towards a Caribbean Literary Aesthetic in Poetry)

The main premise of this presentation is that the teaching of Caribbean poetry cannot be effectively pursued without an understanding of Caribbean culture as a dynamic, ever-changing, living process with the various aspects of the social and historical past which have shaped, and still is shaping it. It appears to me that the word, 'culture' and the concept it conveys has been used so often in our everyday discourses that it is beginning to assume a certain platitudinous quality, to the extent that it is taken for granted.

Poets, when reading to an audience, more often than not begin with an introduction to the poem in an attempt to place it within a meaningful context and to make clear certain cultural or personal references. This contextualization is even more important for a fuller appreciation of Caribbean poetry, where often exist unfamiliar cultural references. The poem, as text, remains always the point of departure in an analysis which falls between two polarities: the structural aspects of the poem as a crafted thing - an art object in fact; and the poem whose meaning is given life by the poet's engagement with her/his cultural environment. In Caribbean poetry these two aspects do meet in an 'in-betweenity', a place of balanced synthesis where they coalesce: a language of culturally-based experiences made into literature with distinctive characteristics of its own, and lending itself to the proposed method of *cultural literary analysis*. The cultural peculiarities of text and its meaning are inseparable. The poet, as is the poetry, is the product of her/his culture.

I am advocating therefore, the use of a cultural literary analysis when we study Caribbean poetry. Development of ideas involve always an inter-relational process of reasoning; let us then follow the trail from the text of the poem back to its historical, cultural source, encountering on the way all the contributory factors that gave it its life as literature.

'*Caribbean poetry*', as part of the title of this presentation, implies the real existence of a recognized 'corpus' of poetry written by Caribbean poets, a sort of 'aggregate' literature with a development within a cultural environment that occupies its own historical time and space. Within this space, interactive factors exist which exert their influence on the psyche of people in the communities resulting in that ever-changing entity which we perceive as a Caribbean culture.

It is a matter of perspective: the mind's vision from an objective distance, the vantage point of historical time. In this 21st century it should be common knowledge that the demography of the Caribbean can be traced back to a history shared with the UK and Europe.

It began with the discovery of the New World/the West Indies; the subsequent exploitation of its natural resources; the oppression of indigenous peoples; the slave trade and the atrocities of the Middle Passage; the hardships of working in the sugar plantations; the prohibition of speaking native tongues and the imposition of the colonizers' languages; the wars between England, France and Spain for the possession of the Islands, ending in the Treaty of Paris in 1763 and the distribution of the West Indian Territories. Then followed in 1835, a quasi-freedom of emancipation, indentured labour, using first the Chinese then the more successfully-controlled East Indians. It is patently irrevocable that the history of the Caribbean is part of the history of England, France and Spain in their role as colonizers. In my view this is a fact that cannot be ignored in the teaching of Caribbean poetry.

The misdeeds perpetrated on the peoples of the Islands caused great psychological and emotional damage which, on an unconscious level, has passed on from generation to generation and manifests itself today in a sense of displacement, a searching for an identity and the social tensions subtly distinguishable as backstories in some of the literature of the region. Rarely do poets in the Caribbean tackle head-on in their poems the atrocities of their terrible history. They remain true to instinctual poetic sensibilities in their use of language. This is what the late Tobagonian poet and critic, Eric Roach said in a 1971 'Savacou' interview:

"... to be preoccupied with race and dispossession is to bury one's head in the stinking dunghills of slavery". (*E.J. Chamberlin, 1993 Come Back to me My Language*)

Furthermore, Derek Walcott also has strong views on what Caribbean literature should be. E J Chamberlin comments: "Walcott has written a lot about how West Indian poets must find their own voice ... to transform their anxiety and anger into a new expression of what it is to be West Indian and into a new West Indian literature. Rejecting what he calls a 'literature of revenge written by descendants of slaves or a literature of remorse written by descendants of masters'". (*Come Back to me My Language*)

But removed from these two strongly articulated points of view, there are poets who find catharsis in expressing in their works celebration, irony and a wry view of life in the islands. Here is the Trinidadian poet, Christopher Aboud in an ironic frame of mind:

"Stay awhile Christopher Columbus,/ the flags above your boats/ look pretty in the wind". (*Christopher Aboud 2004 from the poem, 'More Coloured Animals', Lagahoo Poems.*)

The following extract from Sam Selvon's poem, 'Poui Tree' is in essence pure celebration, albeit, with an admixture of philosophical thought:

"To get the essential view / of this particular / Poui tree in the park, / that is to say, to watch / the yellow blossoms patch / the blueness of the tropic sky, / I must stand some distance off". (*Sam Selvon, 2012 Poems of Sam Selvon Cane Arrow Press*)

Kamau Brathwaite has a diametrically different notion; though I do believe the objective is the same: a literature that is truly Caribbean. Brathwaite believes that a Caribbean literature "must represent the central heritage of slavery shared by black West Indians". He believes that blackness is an image of slavery which defines dispossession and exploitation.

He further advocates that, "for West Indians now seeking their own identity, a study of the slave period and especially a study of the folk culture of the slaves, is so important." (*E. K. Brathwaite 1981, Folk Culture of the Slaves in Jamaica, p6*)

With Brathwaite's deep-seated empathy for the African slave, he believes that they were using resources of their inherent spiritual strength for survival, along with memories of their African traditions, to create something new, which is culturally Caribbean and recognizably African in essence. Brathwaite is aware of the development in the West Indies of the extraordinarily rich tradition of imaginative expressions that draw deeply on African inheritances. He is especially aware of the circumstances during slavery of the relative discontinuity and incoherence due to the multiplicity of tribal languages. However, their traditional method of collaboration on tasks, and their getting together on market Sundays to sell their 'ground provisions', formed the catalyst for the development of a vernacular important in the shaping of an adaptive social culture. Brathwaite conceived this as the beginning of 'Nation Language'. Yet, one must bear in mind the root source for Nation Language, in the main, is English.

Students need only examine the text of any of his collections, to mention but a few: *Mother Poem*, *X-Self*, *Sun Poem*, and his astonishing publication, 'Born to Slow Horses', to find overwhelming evidence of the poetic idiosyncrasies of his language and his concerns with exile and identity. We should look into the inventive structure of his writing for a defiance and rebellion towards Euro-centric literary traditions.

In exploring the work of Brathwaite, his strong interest in jazz and reggae must also be noted; this aspect of his interest contributed inspirationally to the performance mode of a host of modern rap poets, chief exponent of which, in the UK, with an international reputation combining poetry with the music of his own band, is Linton Kwesi Johnson. This is further illustration of a cultural phenomenon to which a short presentation such as this one cannot do justice.

Presenting the work of Derek Walcott to students requires an insightful knowledge and understanding of this poet against the cultural background of the Caribbean, which, during its nascent period of development in colonial times, the Euro-centric hegemony was the order of the day. Walcott's apprenticeship as a poet was steeped in the English literary traditions. Unlike Brathwaite, he did not set out to use dialect, and his early literary experiments leaned towards the avant-garde style of T. S. Eliot and Gerard Manley Hopkins and many others. However, it has to be said, he is a West Indian, a Caribbean poet, and his soul-driven impulse to express his experiences through his Caribbean sensibilities is all-abiding, albeit with the creative tensions of integrating English literary traditions with the vernacular spoken in the Caribbean communities to produce a literature uniquely his own. It is his desire, as he puts it, "...to write /

verse crisp as sand, clear as sunlight/ cold as the curled wave, ordinary / as a tumbler of island water". (*Derek Walcott Collected Poems 1948 – 1984, Island, p52*)

There is an apprehension, however, that in our unrestrained admiration and celebration of Derek Walcott and Kamau Brathwaite, that their names become synonymous with Caribbean (West Indian) poetry. In the context of pedagogy, and for the sake of historicity, students of Caribbean poetry must be made aware, that at a time when a recognized Caribbean literature was merely a dream, there were also significant contributions made to the realization of that dream by a panoply of poets and writers: Aimé Cesairé, C L R James, George Campbell, Edgar Mittlehowzer, Wilson Harris, Martin Carter, George Lamming, Samuel Selvon, Louise Bennett, Lorna Goodison, Olive Senior; and many, many more. Significant contributions continue unabated by Caribbean poets writing today, some of them living in the UK, we must not forget.

To eliminate any lingering doubts regarding the validity, and indeed, the effectiveness of the proposed cultural literary analysis as a means of penetrating the peculiarities of Caribbean poetry, I would like to draw your attention to a statement made by professor Edward Baugh in the introduction to Frank Collymore's *Barbadian Dialect*: "A people's language is the distillation of their culture". And may I inculcate, by reason of emphasis, the idea that a close look at Caribbean culture as a complementary study would give insights into the referential particularities of its literature. According to *Chamberlin 1993*, literature "...ultimately is one of the most powerful ways in which a society negotiates its identity".

There will always be a justification for pursuing further study. Certainly, venturing into history noting its 'geo-socio-political' and economic inferences, folklore, religious/spiritual traditions, and most importantly, the inter-relational dynamics in the way language is transformed, would foster a greater depth of understanding. This would be advantageous to teachers of Caribbean poetry; and for students whose aim is the pursuit of this subject as a specialism.

I must concede, however, that I used the sub-title, *Towards a Caribbean Literary Aesthetics in Poetry* in the spirit of intellectual curiosity and a certain provocation. Arguably, it may present a challenging terrain to venture into, but prompted by the need for discourse on the subject of teaching Caribbean poetry, I aim to spot light the subject of a Caribbean poetry aesthetic with the question: Is it possible, in the socio-political configuration of Island nations, to shape a unified aesthetic in Caribbean poetry? Whether or not this question has already been posed, or whether it is an impossible question to which a definitive answer could be given, I do believe it is an interesting subject for further exploration.

It is evident that such intellectual explorations conducted in the University of the West Indies by scholars like Edward Baugh, Mervyn Morris, Walcott and Brathwaite among them, and supported by a body of critical writings, engender a wider awareness and understanding of the structure of a Caribbean literature which reflects the perceptions and living experiences of Caribbean poets. These critical writings effectively give a voice to the poets, recognizably ".....a voice uniquely their own and courting the language of their people: soaked in the salt of the sea that surrounds them; connected by the Middle Passage to their African and European

inheritances, and by its language to the literary traditions in which they are becoming themselves". (*Chamberlin, 1993*)

One must bear in mind the relative infancy of the West Indies/Caribbean as an archipelago of separate island nations. It is only a blink-of-an-eye 170 odd years ago that some of the peoples of the Caribbean experienced an emancipation of sorts. This, in the context of the history of human civilization, is no time at all. This propinquity of Caribbean history presents a wonderfully ideal opportunity for close examination. Not obscured by the fog of time, we can virtually see the development of a culture happen before our eyes. Herein is the relevance and opportunity of the proposed methodology of a cultural literary analysis: educators are in the eminently advantageous position to be working with living poets of the Caribbean culture.

In the teaching and learning of Caribbean poetry, the teacher must not only be engaged with the niceties in the quality of language, but must also have at least a working knowledge of the factors which shaped and is still shaping Caribbean culture with consequential influence on the content of its poetry. It is self-evident that different approaches in teaching the age groups eleven to eighteen must be at the point of delivery, appropriately modifying the level and presentation of content while maintaining authenticity.

Based on my experience as a poet working in education establishments, I am convinced that all Primary school children in our multi-ethnic society should be introduced, as a matter of educational policy, to Caribbean poetry, taking into account the social advantages that this implies. We should begin to nurture an interest in poetry at Primary school age with poems that tap into children's uninhibited energy, curiosity and desire for self-expression. I do enjoy working at the level introducing Caribbean poetry with the rhythms of calypso, reggae, rhyme and repetition, call and response patterns, and poems which inspire comparisons of experiences in common, while maintaining the integrity of cultural differences. This is an enriching experience; and indeed, a preparation for the later cultural intricacies of language and meaning. I hasten to add, that there are many Caribbean poets in the UK who have carried and are still carrying the Caribbean poetry torch. There is so much more that can be done.

A draft skeletal schema for "Approaches to Teaching and Learning Caribbean Poetry" is outlined below:

I begin with an introduction to Caribbean poetry at Junior School level; a study to be picked up again at the secondary school stage and on to college and university as a specialist subject.

At every stage there should be contact with living Caribbean poets, either as one-day readings/workshops or as longer periods of residencies: dead poets will still haunt through the poems in their collections.

Juniors: Performance: The poet introduces her/his poems with descriptions that put them into a cultural context; workshops which introduce the principles fundamental to good creative writing in poetry, for example, to name two: 'why show and not tell', and 'the use of the five

senses in writing; poems of rhythm and rhyme; choral poems/ group poems; call and response poems; poems that tell a story. Residences backed up by the poets' collections in libraries.

Secondary: Performance/workshops by visiting poet; reading the poems and discussing cultural matters related to the text; looking at the peculiarities of the language, the differences between 'nation language' and standard English; making comparisons with cultural subject matter contained in the poems.

College/higher education

Bringing Cultural Literary Analysis to the study of Caribbean poetry.

Reading/in-depth study of individual prominent Caribbean poets in relation to the cultural factors which shaped their work; introducing cultural complementary studies prompted by the text; looking into the language of Caribbean poets:

- Standard English and what caused the transformations into creole/nation language.
- Syntax of 'nation language'
- Rap poetry and its cultural derivation.
- Studying reviews on Caribbean poetry and discussing the idea of a Caribbean poetry aesthetic.

I suggest a formation of an International Association of Caribbean Poets/Authors with an established connection with the University of the West Indies, a body which will promote Caribbean poetry/literature in general, maintaining links with educational establishments and other literary organizations world-wide. Included in the tasks of this association would be to organize book fairs, residences, conferences, international academic exchanges, the commissioning of scholars to write educational text books on Caribbean literature.

I strongly believe that poetry/literature has a significant role to play in the fostering of a deeper understanding of our multiplicity of cultures, and in making a contribution to achieving a higher level of consciousness in our world which is virtually shrinking as the result of the advances in digital communication and information technologies.

I look forward to discourses on the question of a Caribbean literary aesthetic as part of an approach to teaching Caribbean poetry/literature.

John Lyons 25 October 2012

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