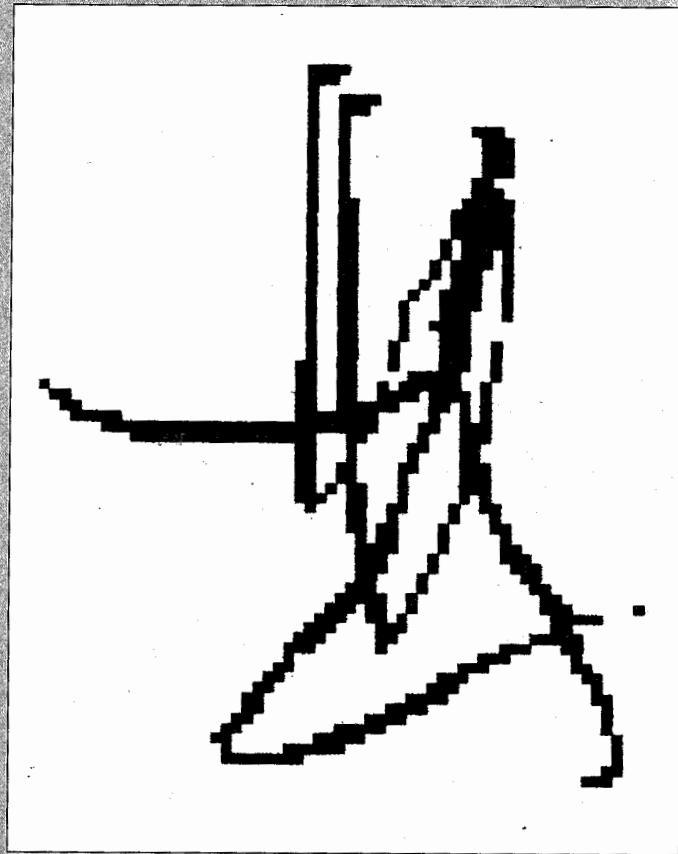


CONVERSATIONS

with Nathaniel Mackey

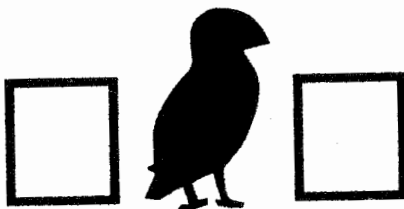


Kamau Brathwaite

SYCORAX FORMAT
COURIER 1.25 1.25//2.5 2.5
36,000/39,000 words
7/7/97

postChad rev start Emancipation Day 1 aug 97 at Cowpastor
thank Marcia Jull, UWI Lib/CH for help w/dates of pub; running off again (finally?/despite some LAKES - but
that's how i want it) Cowpastor 29 aug 97

angloCaribb Af slaves were granted their freedom by Br legislation 1834 to become fully effectiv (e) 1 aug 1838 but w/ few Caribb territories felt it 'politic'/politics to officially observe/mark th is occasion/day; even the militant Jamaica allowed it to fall into 'disuse', replacing it, as did mo st other anglophoCaribbs, w/ an unexplained 'August Bank Holiday' and finally, in the case of Jam aica, w/Independence Day 6 Aug [1962].
However, again, inexplicably, midway into 1997, Barbados & Jamaica (Bdos for the first time ever since Emancipation decided to estab/ re-estab 1 aug as Emancipation Day



2

will help you to define what you're doing is often absent (t). Because we suffer there from competition for scarce resources. So that I, a writer, am seen - even by fellow writers themselves - in some kind of competition with other equally involve counterparts, and with those whose experience we share. So that I suppose the tendency to disallow - to elbow the other person/'competitor' out of the (e) way, is very very strong. Therefore one's voice isn't (t) always given - allowed - the resonance, shall we say, which sometimes you think it deserves

●

Now I been writing since a born, kind a thing . on the beach in Barbados, where I'm brought up. My poetry slowly develops (I'm here thinking of the hinterland(s) of Rights of Passag

(e), to be 'specific') the notion of *What is Caribbean/the Caribbean?*
What is this - this archipelago, these beautiful islands - yes - which are contrasted in
their beauty with extreme poverty and a sense - a memory - of catastrophe What is the
origin of this . . . this paradoxical and pluraradial situation?

The image that gives me the 'answer', the on-going
 answer . . . is. . .

one day. . . one day on the north coast of Jamaica, we
 staying in a house on a cliff overlooking the ocean and
 this is a sandy situation. . .

The yard where we staying. . . it's a humble
— is not a Jamaica North Coast bikini situatio
(n) that you would go to tomorrow or at Thank
sgiving. This is not the North Coast of the great
hotels, James Bond, 'GoldenEye' and tourism.

This is a ole yard, okay? and this old woman is sweeping, sweeping the sand of her yard away from her house. Traditional early morning old woman of Caribbean history. She's going on like this every morning, sweeping this sand - of all things! - away from. . . sand from sand, seen? . . . And I say Now what 's she doing? What's this labour involve with? Why's she labouring in this way? all this way? all this time? Because I get the understandin (g) that she somehow believes that if she don't do this, the household - that 'poverty-stricken' household of which she's part - probably head of - would have somehow collapse

In 1950, Derek Walcott pub the classic Sisyphian statement - 'The testament of poverty' - about this condition

Walcott

It is little I can do for those;
 Politics and prose
 Do equally; my heart
 Is soiled by their hurt,
 Applause turns anger to sport,
 And time judges the technique,
 Not the continual knock
 In the blood's moon-wrecked tides. . .
 I myself lived among them,
 And in the brittle papered room,
 I saw the wild candle
 Of arson in her eyes, and the angel
 Of flame in her head;
 Her shame wants to burn
 The paper house her sons earn,
 But she died like a stone in her bed. . .
 . . . So for the have-nots
 In brown villages with dry nets
 There is no hope falls
 In martyr drops from a dry wound,
 Only the common sound
 Of blind love stumbling on walls.
 Hate kicking over chairs,
 And the curse on flesh from the blind. . .
 DW, from 'The testament of poverty' (*DM* 12 (19-50), 292

Sisyphus is a term I use for the negative tra-
 (d) in Caribb esp anglopho Caribb lit - esp
 Patterson, Naipaul & the early Walcott/as here
 in contrast to the *dorado* (el dorado) trad (Harr-
 is & most of the hispanic Caribb & LA writers in
 what becomes known as *Magical Realism*) See KB,
 MR (forthcoming 1998) and a shorter earlier 'pre-cos-
 mo' version in *Annals of Scholarship* (July 97)

In this po, DW's Wo considers futility's arson > her poverty's unending future (see KB's TT (R) (1994)) for one poss dev out of this); w/Walcott's Wo's children sisyphying in this same tradition

And her sons return with the dawn
Cursing the catch, no adventure
In the absurd economy.
Her daughter hates her indenture
To sand gardens and hovel, her animal
Spirit broken. . . [DW, *ibid*]

*So she's in fact performing a
very important ritual which I
couldn't fully understand but
which I'm tirelessly tryin to.*

. . .

*And then one morning I see her
body silhouetting against the
sparkling light that hits the
Caribbean at that early dawn*

and it seems as if her feet,
which all along I thought were
walking on the sand. . . were
really. . . walking on the wa-
ter. . . and she was tra-
velling across that middlepass-
age, constantly coming from wh-
ere she had come from - in her
case Africa - to this spot in
North Coast Jamaica where she
now lives. . .

That was the 'answer' to my quest/ion. The 'meaning' of
the Caribbean was in that humble repetitive ritual actio-
(n) which this peasant woman was performing. And she was
always on this journey, walking on the steps of sunlit
water, coming out of a continent which we didn't fully

know how to understand, to a set of islands which we only now barely coming to respect, cherish and understand

And so my poem startle to ask the question, *What is the origin of the Caribbean? How do we come from? Where do we come from? And why are we as we are? Why are we so leaderless, so fragmented, so perpetually caught up with the notion of hope and still at the same time Sisyphean? Why is our psychology not dialectical - successfully dialectical - in the way that Western philosophy has assumed people's lives should be, but tidalectic, like our grandmother's - our nanna's - action, like the movement of the ocean she's walking on, coming from one continent/continuum, touching another, and then receding ('reading') from the island(s) into the perhaps creative chaos of the e(ir) future. . .*

These are the things that I begin to think about and at the same time I'm involve with another model of metaphor which had liberated me from the School and school-book-imposed pentameter - worse the quadrameter - 'the boy/stood on/the bur/ning deck' (we talkin bout COLONIALISM & COLONIAL DEADICATION) - pentameter - 'the cur/few tolls/the knell/of part /ing day' - which didn't - couldn't - gift me my nanna's moment and movemant and grace and terror walking on the wa ter

'They' - these imposted meters - couldn't allow me to write the sunlight under her feet - she walk on water and in light, the sand between her toes, the ritual discourse of her morning broom. But by this time I'm listening to Miles [Davis, jazz trumpeter] - that muse/ical who was himself creating a spine of coral sound along our archipelago. Miles is singing the shadows of the clouds that move acr

loss our landscape [hear, for xample, Miles' remarkable lyrical period 1957-62, w/Gil E
 vans: Miles Ahead, Porgy & Bess, Sketches of Spain, Quiet Nights; w/Porgy & Bess the most 'Bajan',
 esp where the Bajan landscape & even something like Bajan (language) or rather the spirit Bajan com
 es alive in 'Bess, you is my woman now' & parts of 'Bazzard Song' and 'Gone']; his music
 saying it so that i begin to see it - 'Bess' becoming -

if he cd fly
 he wd be
 an eagle

he wd see
 how the land
 lies softly
 in contours
 how the fields
 lie striped

how the houses fit into the valleys

he wd see cloud
 lying on water

moving like the hulls of great ships over the land
 [KB, "Miles', Jah Music (Savacou 1986; rev 1997)]

So it is that i begin to write a poetry of a new, more native way, corresponding also to my adult return to the Caribbean after a ten-year growing-up absence in Cambridge and Ghana; seeing our things and trying to express that way of seeing - the movement, the glitter, the *kin-esis* of it. . . because what I describe to you - despite the pioneers of Caribbean poetry - had not yet been dealt with in the Caribbean in this way. . .

We in the Caribbean have basically conceived of our cosmos as coming out of a plantation; a migration out of a plantation and moving from countryside into the city and soon/later metropole [the cl

classic expression of this is in the progression of Samuel Selvon's work [Selvon (?1923-1994 b [dad, live UK, Canada] from **A brighter sun** (1952) thru 'The cane is bitter' *Nov 13 Dec 1950*) to **The lonely Londoners** (1956) for a study of the theme, see KB, 'Sir Galahad & the islands' [**Roots** (1986, 1993)]. Even in some most 'recent' novels (e.g Edwidge Danticat (1994, 1996) the theme continues - since the 'reality' continues):

a per
petual tide of migration
- of migration in many
cases, from 'native' to
Other, and (therefore) not
giving ourselves a histo
ry that is original and
new and ancient - that
understands the meadow
of ancestor and ancestor
(y)

●

In my formulation, our history starts far far beyond [before] Columbus. Far even beyond the West African sources we suppose to come from. Because I'm concern with Africans *themselves* nigratin out of the heart of our continent, out of the deserts of the Sahara, Saheel and far far farward into Nile and Nubia, and being transferred into the similar - no - *famil*

iar - forests and desert
 (s) and valleys - of Sri
 Lanka, South-East Asia,
 Fiji, Papua New Guinea,
 the Australasias, the Am
 ericas and the Caribbean
 - our *nanna* brooming the
 sand with her dawn and
 walking on the water

which I attempt in this first poem, **Rights of Passage**
 - the first poem of **The Arrivants** trilogy - far too simple to
 say it like this - but here is the originating vision and
 intention - the skid of the genesis stone on the waters
 of the Caribbean - [singing kaiso] *'The stone had skidded arc'd and*
bloomed into islands • Cuba and San Domingo . Jamaica and Puerto

Rico • Grenada Guadeloupe Bonaire' [KB, 'Calypso', ROP/The Arrivant
(s) (1973), p48]

Then I start work on the second trilogy – still unmaned
[now [Mayune97] **Ancestors**] which started, as Nate tells you,
with **Mother Poem**, 'about' my mother's Barbados; **Sun Po**
em, 'about' my father's Barbados, and **X/Self** – which

is the 'break' – ?my  – junction/disjuncture –

the unexpected 'left angle', as it were – and we really
talkin as much if not more subtext as 'text' here – that yu ask
in me bout. . .

blink



Now **Mother Poem** and **Sun Poem** had to be written (to put it this way) because having created a skeleton of archipelago in **The Arrivants**; a string of song celebrating the movement of our people into these ilianas, I had to inhabit them with ancestors, with ghosts, with spirits, with *lwa*; trying for a total cosmos. I mean I know this, I have to do it. at least try for it. And at the same time it has to be also a poetry of familiar projects periods and *familial* people. I have to celebrate my mother and my father and the caliban people old and new i grow up with, I know and get to know. For the first time in our poetry - the novelists had of course been doing this all along - **we admit** - i can't describe to you the terrible limbo/lembe effect of this word - and i cyaan find no other in or for this context - which means metaphorically - for some of you it might seem 'anachronistically' - the word/discoveries that we continually make - as if force(d) - and i don't mean 'coerced' - out to the surface of like a fruit or wound or sometimes the dome or

doom of the volcano - as a result of the downpressure of the colonial experience - that continues to amaze me (the surprise and power of the word/experience) - thru which we - mwe - as i say, 'admit' = *discover* - **family**

Now I don't know what this sounds like to you - it's such an obvious and yet devious thing. But in the Caribbean (n) to celebrate one's parents, sisters, godparents, aunts, sons, uncles, santería - *one's own muses*, loves and lovers - was almost - for poetry - in/conceivable - and therefore im/possible - or at least practically impossible - because - again - we had no native precient - pre-ancient - prescient - model

To look into the mirror of your thoughts, to look into the mirror of your metaphor, to look

4

into the mirror of your *self* , w-
as not to see your/self in the
Caribbean but - well - *else-*
where - on a *false*-literary a-
nd imagined - *migrain* - *mig-*
rained - landscape on which
you have been 'nurtured' -
on which you have been
force-fee'd - on which - reall-
(y), you have been *smurther*
ed...

To look into our mirror then &
there was to see the face - or
what we think was the face - of Charles
Dickens or John Keats, Thack

Colette or Salvatore de Ma-
dariaga And to look into the
mirror or minor of your sister is
not to see your sibling but to
see, at the extreme, Anna Ka-
renina or Emma or Brooke Sh-
ields or Twiggy without the
boney 'style' or some Holly-
wood actress star without the
hope of any such what we c-
all 'looks' or locks or wealth
or fame or *femme* or 'glam' -
we being the opposite, the
out-print negatives of the ve-
ry foreign ikons we hold dear
and not yet 'even' Mary Wa-

ges Mary Wiggins Mary Princ-
 (e) Mary Seacole Mary Braff-
 it from the Round House Bay
 Street whe we born an eat sa
 It bread/sweet bread on Sun-
 dee afternoons

So that our mothers and fath-
 ers, the people who really m-
 atter, are not - could not be! - the
 subject-matter - the *smatters*, even -
 of our poetry, because they
 had not been written about
elsewhere, where, as Sam S e
 lvon's calypsonian put it, real

mothers and fathers and poets come from

[see Sam Selvon, 'The Calypsonian', *Bim* 17 (1952); & in sev ss colls inc Modern Caribb short stories, ed Satoru Tsuchiya (Tokyo 1977)]

Since these days of the COLONIAL IKON, we've come like a long way, baby - tho not in my view, yet long enough. Our watershed is mark by the arr of the Ja reggae flim, *The harder they come* (1972) w/ Jimmy Cliff & a host of real-life Ja ikons. This + the pres of Bob Marley, the Wailers, the I-Trees, Michael Manley, Walter Rodney, Ca rifesta Guyana, Black Power & the resurgence of Rastafari - to nam (e)/Identify a few stela - all in the 70s - leads to an alterNative iconography w/partial but significantly positive - or rather positively TI DALECTICAL nativist 'results': the nativisation of most of our public bilboards, the widening acceptance of nation-language [see KB, *History of the voice* (1984); despite continuing Estab resistance; on public radio, the pub (1995) of Richard Allsopp's **(Oxford) Dict of Caribb Eng u sage**, the declaration > 'bastardy' by the govt of Guyana in the 70s, the declaration - at last - by Ja & Bdos in 1997 that the **1st of August** will once again be observe as **(Slave) Emancipation Day**, follow in (g) (In Bdos) the re-acceptance, since the 80s, of the CropOver Festival - the one in a sense leading to the other, tho the day after the Bdos Prime Minister declares Emancipation Day, he announces the 'Shiprider' agreement w/the US under which US security ('anti-drug') forces are given permission (*in the orij formulation the US assumed its RIGHT*) to intervene & interdict in Caribbean waters & on Caribbean territory in the 'war' on drugs - another contradictory neo-colonial 'mask' - whatever it finds necessary to intervene &/or interdict against

a note on colonialism/neo-colonialism

it was Fanon, I think, echoed by Tsetsi Dangarembga (1988) [Af female writer] who speaks of colonialism as a 'nervous condition'

this *Conversations* is really my first (& unexpected, unintentioned) effort to deal w/my personal relationship to this

the first stage of colonialism - in our case coming out of Plantation Slavery - which means that we begin our colonial period already colonized - but there is or shd be

(1) native resistance

(2) acquiescence/accommodation ('strategic' sometimes often practical/empirical). during this period there is effort by colonizer (CLONE or COLON/iser) to impose controlling versions of his/her culture on the colonized; with esp the elite of the colonized taking this up in xchange for share in the new dispensation

(3) return of nativisation (NAM): protest, often rebellion, sometimes prolonged (as Basque, IRA Irish etc)

(4) if rebellion is successful, there is eventual political independence from colonialism (eg the Am Rev); tho cultural independence, nativisation etc remains (more) problematic, w/the postcolonial elite usually hanging on to their priv colonial position

(5) cultural Rev usually xpressed as grassroots or ethnic (eg Black Power [c1967-c1980] in the Caribb) rebellion; with the postcolonial elite taking increasing paradigmatic energy from this movement in order to retain their position

(6) at this stage [now Aug 97] (this is the reality of late 20th cent dev) there occurs vary- ing degrees of RECOLONIZATION as result of SuperPower military, political & certainly econ (neomercantilist) needs/pressures/priorities/greeds This introduces new contradiction/conflicts in(to) the situation, often accompanied by ABASSA/SESE SEKOU/ Pinochet-like seizures of Power (in alliance w/one or other of the superPower/mercantilists) at the xpence of nativism ('freedom', 'emancipation', 'independence' etc etc etc) Cf Eric Williams' political manifesto

Massa day done (Port of Spain, Tdad 1961) w/**The Mighty Gabby's Crop-over prize-winning**
('monarch') calypso of the same name (Btown, Bdos Aug 1997)

For much of this see, for details, KB. **The Love axe/I** - forthcoming since the mid-70s but 'delayed' by Estab pub strategies and now forthcoming hopefully 1998/99 - but again under pressure - the txt lost sev times - the author increasingly weakened w/age & other commitments etc etc etc

W/regard to my sisters, they now have Imani & Naomi Campbell to see themselves at + an increasing number of poets, singers, authors leaders & *Iwa* (Oya, Oshun, Yemanja etc) - tho she still/Mayun (e) 97 don't yet have a film star ikon of her own, despite the real-life 'Mary' ikons i invoke above . These Marys appear in detail in my NYU Comp Lit classes in Caribb cosmology/iconography

And so **Mother Poem** is at last a poem about my mother and increasingly the social world that she created - slowly slowly ever so slowly - like the polyp - and at the same time ?therefore, a poem about the island, the coral limestone colour from which she comes

Mother Poem