

Making History Happen

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Caribbean Poetry in America

By

Derrilyn E. Morrison

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PREFACE

THE WOMB OF LANGUAGE

Derrilyn Morrison's *Making History Happen: Caribbean Poetry in America*, takes us on a fascinating journey through the poetry of three Jamaican transnational women based in the United States. In their poetry written at the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first century Lorna Goodison (1947-), Claudia Rankine (1963-), and Shara McCallum (1972-) expand the borders of a Caribbean literature not limited to the confines of the West Indies (supposing the West Indies could ever be confined), but located in multiple U.S. and transnational sites. Morrison identifies their poetic power strongly inscribed in the expectant woman's body in what could be called a womb of language.

More than a critic, Morrison is a poet in her own right, whose arguments embrace, in elegant and creative writing, the poems with which she engages, instead of simply projecting an interpretation onto them. Along with Goodison, McCallum, and Rankine, she is a language coiner, a creator, who provides an intimate and language-based understanding of tropes and experiences such as exile, motherhood, cannibalism, which are created anew by the women poets.

In *Making History Happen*, the commonly used term "black diaspora" becomes a fluid notion based on "'Africa' and 'slavery'" as mobile tropes of Home and Exile," as Morrison astutely demonstrates. This fluidity is based on the poets' use of orality as a unifying structure that allows for a "continuous flow of socio-cultural exchange and interchange" (2). Morrison's "shifting poetics" has a lot to do with Edouard Glissant's philosophy of Relation and with Kamau Brathwaite's poetics in movement. However, the critic reframes and reshapes the respectively Martinican and Barbadian philosophers and poets' theory by infusing it with the womblike process of creativity. Relation is not simply a theoretical notion (Glissant), nor solely expressed in the landscape or the rhythmic body (Brathwaite), but is deeply rooted in the materiality of women's body, and particularly in their simultaneous gestational, healing, and poetic properties. The language of care and soothing inhabits Morrison's book in, for instance, her evocation of Lorna Goodison's

“rehabilitative poetry” (13), of her practice of an African-derived “tradition of African praise poetry” or of her poems as “source of nourishment” in which the mango tree and its fruit “become a metaphor of Caribbean poetry spreading far and wide.”

The writers’ “shifting poetics” also provides, if not a solution, at least a balm to the fragmented and wounded experience of the black diaspora. The poets under analysis share St. Lucian poet Derek Walcott’s notion that the love poured into the re-assembly of broken fragments of the Antilles contain more historical and sacred significance than the intact original object. “This gathering of broken pieces,” Walcott claims, “is the care and pain of the Antilles, and if the pieces are disparate, ill-fitting, they contain more pain than their original sculpture...” (Walcott, “The Antilles: Fragment of Epic Memory”). Like Walcott, Goodison, McCallum, and Rankine reorganize these bits and pieces into new shapes. However, to Walcott’s act of reconstruction situated in the universal Caribbean poet’s agency, the transnational Jamaican poets re-organize the broken body through gestures radically grounded in a feminized and motherly body. Through cannibalistic acts of poetry, whereby the mother devours the “odd body of her child” misshaped by slavery, exploitation, violence, and animalistic representations, they regurgitate their poetic children in a new shape that bears the signature of motherly agency.

In what is perhaps the most striking claim of the book, Morrison argues for a maternal cannibalistic and creative agency that is not destructive but creative. Her discussion of Claudia Rankine’s *Plot* reveals that the poetpersona’s rearranging of body parts “construct a conventional countertype that offers an extension of the larger prevailing discourse of poetic identity.” Instead of the proverbial cannibalistic cruel mother of fairytales and folktales, the mother devouring of her own children does not amount to self-nourishing or destruction of the devoured object, but rather, to a nurturing rearrangement of the child’s mismatched, suffering, and tortured body, which Rankine calls a “freakish anatomy” (66). This creative act of cannibalism has nothing to do with the offensive figure of the “New World” cannibal portrayed in Western representations, whether Tupinamba or African. It also differs from New World literary and artistic cannibalism as practiced by Oswald de Andrade (Brazil), Suzanne Césaire (Martinique) and Maryse Condé (Guadeloupe) and theorized by Kristen Guest, Eugenio Matibag, Zita Nunes, or myself, among others, in that it recreates a “discursive morphology” towards which the pregnant womb, the devouring mouth, the mind, and the poetic matrix of language all work.

Morrison's book could be seen as a study of the "re-." It is a story of re-gurgitation, re-creation, re-gathering, re-folding, re-telling, or re-memory, in Toni Morrison's sense. While the abundant repetition of the prefix may seem superfluous in another study, Derrilyn Morrison convincingly shows how these Caribbean women poets occupy that space of repetition, reoccurrence, renewal, not only as a secondary space but as vital. Like the migrant hermit crab, they invest the old shells of dead animals anew with life, survival, and meaning in a shape-shifting exile. Like the proverbial hermit crab, Shara McCallum in *The Water Between Us*, not only rehashes African folktales and the Brothers Grimm's tales as an accessory, but rather, as vital homes. Re-memory, in a complex reinvention of time, becomes pre-memory, a "feminine memory time," which, Morrison argues, "is often displaced," with a past becoming also the future since, as Rankine says, "expecting was also remembering" (61). The site of this complex temporality and new landscape is the pregnant womb operating with or even as the mind.

Morrison's own upbringing in Jamaica provides us with an intimate access to the authors' biography, digging deep into politics of identity shaped not only by nationality and race, but also class, rural status, land ownership, family name, and stories of the poets' ancestor such as Goodison's paternal grandfather who was "one of the few Englishmen in his time to legally marry a black Jamaican woman" (19). Morrison also subtly identifies the passages of "Jamaican Creole as it is spoken there" (21) in the multilayered fabric of the poetpersona's English. Morrison's ear also illuminates the written text through her perception of the Jamaican pronunciation inhabiting it.

Morrison's book, while relying mostly upon three poets, provides a new critical language and matrix of interpretation that could illuminate the transnational world of Caribbean poets (and non-Caribbean poets as well) for whom the house of poetry is strongly inscribed in the female body. *Making History Happen*, provides appropriate technique-poetic tools to enhance our frequenting of, among others, Dionne Brand, Lucille Clifton, Audre Lorde, Grace Nichols, M. NourbeSe Philip, Patricia Smith, Alison Townsend, or Donna Weir-Soley.

—Valérie Loichot, Emory University

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INTRODUCTION

MIGRATION, RELATION, LOCATION: MOBILIZING HISTORY THROUGH THE POETIC IMAGINATION

Caribbean literature produced by writers on the external frontiers, that is to say, those living in host societies, increasingly reflects resistance to the traditional notion of exile as a trope of identity. This concept of exile which has dominated Caribbean writing for decades is now largely recognized as ambiguous, whether apprehended as a cultural or linguistic definition. Shifts in the meaning and usage of “exile” are created by the passing of time and the expansion of space allowed by migration and its attendant questioning of identity. For instance, in an interview with Kwame Dawes a little over a decade ago, Edward “Kamau” Brathwaite, while acknowledging the difference that being “immigrants” creates, uses the term “second exiles” to define their identity.¹ However, his contemporary, Colin Channer, expresses the view that some present-day Caribbeanists, himself included, are “not in exile” because their experience of distance is different, “in kind and in degree,” from those “early exiles” of the forties and fifties.² This ideological difference in conceptualizing Caribbean identity has recognizably contributed to the variety of poetic works which has been transforming the American literary landscape.

Mary Chamberlain’s *Caribbean Migration: Globalized Identities* uses the term “transnationals” to describe those who “traffic freely in and through the culture of the Caribbean.”³ Describing the process that occurs in this transnational space, her analysis effectively creates a conceptual shifting of grounds that speaks to Édouard Glissant’s theory of Relation in *Poetics of Relation*,⁴ a theory that is engaged in the postcolonial project of questioning traditional concepts of cultural authority and identity. In his reading of Caribbean poetry, Glissant privileges the differences that are created in the crossing of cultures, and the nodes of resistance to establishment. Reading contemporary Caribbean poetry emerging from these communities as Relational, in the sense that Glissant would use it,

suggests the need to look at internal differences and changes. It also leads the way to expressing the “open totality”⁵ of the dynamics of black cultural experience. This approach would allow for an assembling of the “cluster of narratives”⁶ found within the black diaspora, without seeking to erase that difference. Of course, it is important to bear in mind the caution that Francois Lionnet gives in this regard, that “difference,” can become the “reason for exoticizing, “othering,”⁷ an approach that would amount to mirroring the early master discourses of Western poetics.

The discourse created by Glissant and Chamberlain call attention to the cultural communities of the black diaspora and their social counterparts in host societies, pointing to a process of change and exchange among them that is infinite in its capacity to generate new ideas, new cultural concepts. Much described and defined by contemporary cultural critics, such as David Scott, the black diaspora is generally recognized as a “discursive community/tradition” that is constituted in and through its relation to “Africa” and “Slavery.”⁸ My own use of the term “black diaspora” in this book is shifting grounds a bit, as it reconfigures the concepts of Africa and Slavery as mobile tropes of Home and Exile. The effects of trans/migration has created a shift in the discourse on Africa and Exile in poetic works produced by writers on the Caribbean external frontiers, reflecting their sense of being at ease, or not, within the larger communal body. The term “black diaspora” is useful in this discussion of Caribbean identity, since the experience of journey through migration shifts the national perspective onto the transnational, an important aspect of this discourse focusing on the Relation between subjectivity and location.

Using Brathwaite’s “Rights of Passage” as touchstone, the book seeks to shift the Caribbean discourse of identity by examining the continuous flow of socio-cultural exchange and interchange released in a careful reading of poetry collections by contemporary poets. An examination of poems in an early collection by Brathwaite reveals that the poet had been leading the way in re-thinking Caribbean praxis. Interested in the effect of slavery and exile on the human psyche, Brathwaite explored the idea in his “Rights of Passage”⁹ collection (*The Arrivants* 1973), wherein he shows the fragmented sense of self that is created by geographical and cultural dislocation. Drawing on the early experiences of dislocation caused by slavery and later postwar migration, the poet’s autobiographical persona in “Rights of Passage” traverses and reclaims Western geographical spaces. The poems perform a rereading of conventional historical accounts of black migration through the poetic device of *re-memory*, privileging communal memory of these events as it recounts the journey. Brathwaite’s work is used as touchstone to introduce a younger generation of

contemporary poets whose works shift the discourse of Caribbean identity from the male domain into an exploration of female subjectivity.

Rights of Passage: Language Relations and History

Brathwaite's *The Arrivants* (1973) forms a trilogy of poems written between 1964 and 1969. As a collection, the book reflects the poet's enthusiasm for jazz which he began to cultivate as early as high school. His later journey to Africa also influenced the shape of his poems. Brathwaite had spent time in Africa, working as an Education Officer for the Ministry of Education in Ghana over a period of seven years. Gordon Rohlehr's *Pathfinder*, a seminal text outlining the ethos of *The Arrivants* collection, points to the poet's time in Africa as a period that marks his "initial encounter with the details of Caribbean history."¹⁰ *The Arrivants* creates a sense of the growing feeling of "placelessness" that writers abroad were experiencing and marked the need to move from place to place as a search for identity. At this time, Caribbean poets and writers such as Walcott and Lamming had already begun exploring the possibility of creating a sense of the black tradition in their works, as a way of re-defining cultural value systems and re-shaping black identity. In *Rights of Passage* (1967), which forms the first part of *The Arrivants*, Brathwaite foregrounds the question of language and history as cultural markers of black identity, reflecting the afro-centric positioning that the discourse of black diaspora poetics had begun to assume, the twin idea of Africa and exile dominating the creative imagination of Caribbean writers back then. Rohlehr's reading of Brathwaite's poetry within the context of the poet's own historical journey to Africa places importance on the interrelationship between personal experience and the collective or communal history, a theme that forms the basis for *Rights of Passage*. More recently, in *Come Back to me My Language*, J. Edward Chamberlin also speaks to the importance of Brathwaite's *Rights of Passage* as a frame of reference for examining ways in which Caribbean poetry transforms history through its conscious deliberation on language.¹¹

Divided into four chapters, *Rights of Passage* opens chapter 1, "Work Song and Blues," as well as chapter 2, "The Spades," with a section entitled "Prelude" as if to indicate the jazz quality of the poem which depends on a sense of repetition, the doubling that marks the history and consciousness of the people. Furthermore, the use of repetition and ambivalence becomes a structural strategy of the "Prelude" as it does the rest of the poem. The poem opens with the people travelling through the African desert, a journey marked by decay and desolation. There is no

fixed originary point of departure; the poet begins in *medias res*, although he is at the beginning of the narrative. One journey ends and another begins and the rituals of existence call for a rebuilding of the nation people again and again: “Build now / the new villages / ... / so build build / again the new / villages” (p. 4-6). Chapter 3, “Islands and Exiles,” and Chapter 4, “The Return,” examine the meaning and effects of colonial “discovery” and migration, evoking the sadness of loss.

Chapter 1, “Work Song and Blues,” is divided into four sections that work together to create a picture of the African diaspora. It shows the slaves, forcibly transported to the New World, and locked in the dialectics of time and place, history and identity. The loss of homeland is captured in the tone of resignation carried by the narrator:

It will be a long time before we see
this land again, these trees
again, drifting inland... (p. 10)

The loss of self-identity is presented in the contrast between the African people and the white invaders and the narrator projects his mind into the future when a mix of the two groups will take place and: “create new soils, new souls, new / ancestors...” in the “new worlds, new waters, new / harbours” (p. 10). In sections 3-5 of “Work Song and Blues” the communal voice of the narrator changes and becomes the plaintive voice of Uncle Tom, the dispossessed African whose children, first generation born in the islands, reject and despise all that he stands for. Mourning the colossal loss he is experiencing Tom tries to retrieve the past only to feel the futility of it: “Yes, I remember.../ but what good / is recollection now” (p. 17).

“The Spades” – chapter 2 of *Rights of Passage* – opens with another “Prelude,” but the voice and tone are completely different from the earlier one. Tom’s descendants are strident in their assessment of their situation and in their rejection of whatever sense of history he tried to give them. With one voice they chant: “To hell / with Af- / rica / to hell / with Eu- / rope too... (p. 28). Rejecting history and identity, the people are presented as being rootless, fated to journey from one place to another without possession or home. Tom laments the fact that they are “poor / land- / less, harbor / less” black souls travelling always in search of home (p. 33). The fragmentation of words, so typical of this poem, images the fragmentation of self that the people experience, even as it marks their poverty, so that to say they are “less harbour” speaks of the lack of a homeland and “less spade” their poverty, not the least of which is a lack of self- possession.

Through the collection of poems in *Rights of Passage*, the poet negotiates a new identity for the African diaspora, creating a voice for them that can be described as “double-tongued,” a device that allows the speaker to say one thing but always with a sense of meaning something more or something else, similar perhaps to speaking tongue-in-cheek. The ever present musical trope in the poem, foregrounds the “principle of repetition and difference” that operates the poetic drama and reflects the “practice of intertextuality,” a practice Henry Louis Gates Jr. relates to the “black vernacular forms of Signifyin(g).”¹² In harmony with this, Rohlehr’s discussion of Brathwaite’s use of jazz and the blues in *Rights of Passage* mentions the “tribal masks, flutes and drums...the complex improvisations of jazz saxophones and trumpets” and of the “tonality of the Blues” constituent in the collection. According to Rohlehr, these “widely scattered but generically inter-related art forms”¹³ become a heuristic blue print for the poems.

In Brathwaite’s collection of poetry, there is always a sense of doubling, which creates a collage effect that can be likened to the effect of “jazz *satura*”¹⁴ as defined by Michael Jarrett. Jarrett’s use of the term *satura* seeks to describe the mix of musical generic forms that constitute the origins of jazz, a combining of what has come before to create an art form that is new and exciting. According to him, *satura* is “the figure of mixing” which is “the founding image of jazz.”¹⁵ Interestingly, the word *satura* holds echoes of the word “saturation,” used by Stephen Henderson in his discussion of African American poetry. Here, “saturation”¹⁶ is describing the insistence with which the work communicates a quality of blackness, through its use of black cultural forms - music, speech, dance, and art. For example, in Rohlehr’s extensive discussion of Brathwaite’s work he points out that in *Rights of Passage*, the subtitle of Chapter 1, “Work Song and Blues” openly invokes two basic forms of African American music, so that an examination of the poems reveals a mix of various musical forms: “jazz tunes, forms or dances which have evolved from the sacred/secular continuum of spirituals, Blues and jazz.”¹⁷ Section II of this chapter, “New World A-Comin’,” (9) is “the name of a 1943 composition by Duke Ellington,”¹⁸ reflecting on the historical collision between black Africa and white Europe even as it celebrates the cultural achievements of the black diaspora. This musical reading can be sustained throughout the collection, showing that the poems imagine language as a mixture of music and speech, the one dependent on the other in the process of producing the particular poem.

In *Rights of Passage*, the black musical form has a definite structural effect on the verbal language of the poem and the language exerts its own

pressure on the musical form. It is important, therefore, to notice that the poem's language is a composite of English and vernacular lexical items, and the structural rhythm is strongly Afro-centric. In addition, the poems are seen to operate on the principles of allusion, repetition, and improvisation, principles which govern the technique of the jazz musician. Discussing these very contexts in *Come Back to me my Language*, Chamberlin speaks of the development of an "extraordinary rich tradition of imaginative expression drawing deeply on African inheritances, especially in such conditions of relative discontinuity and incoherence"¹⁹ which marks the experiences of the black diaspora. He points out that the historical Colombian journey, in Western imagination, became the process through which black identity was assaulted by "images of disdain and difference, images that for five hundred years have conditioned [black peoples'] need to determine for themselves who they are and where they belong" (28). He states also that the history of loss and dispossession that haunts the individual is "transformed into migration and exile to Europe and North America for many West Indians, as they reverse Columbus's voyages of discovery and invention, in a quest for a place called home" (28).

In Brathwaite's *Rights of Passage*, the revised journey becomes a process of reclaiming collective identity, as Tom makes the epic move from Africa, through the Middle Passage of slavery to the New World of America and the islands of the Caribbean and later, through his descendants, to Europe. *Rights of Passage* is empowered by a psychological representation of the communal journey toward self-identity. In Chapter 2, Section III, Part 1, "The Journeys" (35-40), the poet gives a summary of all the journeys African peoples have undertaken from Africa to the New World. Moving from Africa the presentation of the black diaspora highlights sections of America, Europe, and the Caribbean, that become historically significant. The poetic eye moves from "Little Rock, Dallas, New Orleans, Santiago De Cuba, the miles of unfortunate islands" to "Detroit, Chicago, and Denver" and then lingers on "New York ... Brooklyn and Harlem" before going on to "Cape Town and Rio...Paris" (35-36). Each city signals a history that is significant: Detroit, where large numbers of Blacks were able to find employment (1914) for the first time since the outbreak of the War had stopped the flow of migrants to Europe; Chicago, a reminder of the bloody race riots of 1919; Brooklyn and Harlem, the cities of the Black renaissance, and receptors of the largest waves of migrants in the twentieth century. The poem presents Brathwaite's reassessment of the journeys undertaken by the black diaspora, represented by Tom and his descendants, the names of the cities becoming a litany, reconstructing

through the physical landscape the presence of the individual. In this way personal and collective history become relational, as the poem examines various constructions of identity; identity that is imposed and self-made, and worn as masks by the individual as he moves from one region to another.

Part 2 of “The Journeys” (37) is a good example of Brathwaite’s exploration of identity during the postwar era. The poem creates a vignette of the African in Paris, a city where the cultural energy of its people was influenced by the “discovery of Africa” in the West, during the surge of Modernism. Cultural historical records show that black musicians took Paris by storm from WWI through to WWII, a period when the influence of African music and art was reflected on modern art in France. The picture in the poem is that of a black man making his way through society, his dignified presence emphasized by the poet’s crafty use of language, and in the spaces between the visual and the verbal, we hear the self-mocking voice of the persona. Always there is a sense of doubling, for as the poem describes the poetpersona standing at a distance describing the black man, it creates, equally, a kind of out-of-body experience in which the black man also stands aloof critically assessing himself. At the same time, the slow movement of the lines becomes a caricature of the man’s walk along the city’s boulevard and ultimately of his progress, (or as an ironic reading shows, his lack of progress) within Parisian society.

Brathwaite’s poem operates here as a jazz and blues musical composition, each statement of which can be read as a musical movement. The line breaks in the poem are guided by the jazz principles of syncopation and variation which create the poem’s tempo, while the spirit of the blues guides its tone. This “spirit of the blues” is created by Brathwaite’s use of folk art forms of the Negro Blues to create the poem’s impulse, propelling it towards an exploration of black experientialism. In the spirit of the blues, the poetpersona describes the black man’s attempt to maneuver into a subject position within a society that regards him as object. His use of the French “*exterieur*” in describing the man emphasizes the fact that he is a “foreigner” in both the sense that he can never truly be a part of this crowd, and that his behavior is unnatural, placing the man in an “exterior” position in relation to himself.

The tension between the musical tempo and the speech rhythm employed in this poem can be read as a poetic device that emphasizes the ironic distance between appearance and reality and marks the man’s self-deception (subconscious or otherwise). Both narrative voice and musical tone suggest that the black man’s effort to make an entry into Parisian bourgeois society is unsuccessful. The blues quality of the poem serves to

highlight the man's painful awareness of the difficulty he encounters as he struggles to create his own identity and is also the poet's attempt to dignify the struggle. This is underscored by the French root of "nonchalance" (from *chaloir* – to be concerned); this immediately suspects the man's studied "indifference," or "nonchalance," as he walks the boulevard, showing it as a mask of his inner, or subconscious, state of anxiety.²⁰ In essence, the black man's studied indifference which complements his slow walk is an attempt to create a sense of "dignity," or dignified manhood, in the face of social rejection.

The poet's use of language and music in this poem is directly related to the making of the man's identity, the poetic eye serving as a "correcting mirror" for what Frantz Fanon describes as the "myth of the Negro," a mythology shared by white society, that sets him apart as being inferior to them (Fanon 202-204). In the face of this historical positioning of the black man, the poem speaks of his refusal to remain a "prisoner of history" and of the experience of "endlessly creating [himself]" (229). This self-positioning is and can be used to explain the behavior of the black man in Brathwaite's poem. The man's "clowning" and "boot / black smile" belongs to the minstrel tradition wherein the "gigolo" finds pleasure in gratifying the sexual desires of the white world and the "black baboon" is the mirror white society hands him (37). All form a complex picture that is part of a larger animal imagery at work in this poem, and serve as a replay of the white society's construction of a black mythology. The persona's use of "the rich-lipped generous ewe," fourteen lines later, alludes to the "black ram," of Shakespeare's *Othello* and serves to evoke the traditional European and American perception of the Negro as a sexual abnormality. Yet, it also reminds us of Shakespeare's projection of the diseased mind of the two principal actors (Iago the white, and Othello the black soldier) to depict the neurotic imagination of society as a whole.

The main thrust of Brathwaite's poem is to describe the way the black man's identity is created by and through the impulse of the white society's mythology. The society is consistently implicated throughout as a significant agent of desire and impulse in the black man's construction of his identity. The poem presents him in parts as deceiving himself, but reading the man's behavior within Fanon's historico-racial schema presents white constructions of black identity as a force exerting its own pressure in the development of the man's self-identity. Furthermore, the poetic construction of the relation between battle and play in the poem, as well as speech and music, highlights the irony of the situation and suggests that the black man needs to maintain a strong sense of his cultural heritage

in order to survive the struggle on the cross cultural battlefield in which self-identity is inscribed.

In the fifth movement of the poem, the poetpersona is at pains to emphasize that the black man's position remains hopeless as long as his self-deception continues. In playing the game of deception the man is "losing himself," and his "man- / oeuvres" are nothing short of a betrayal of true manhood (38). The French word "manoeuvres" here is a reminder that there is a history, as it speaks to the "oeuvre of a man," perhaps the work of a lifetime. We note that Brathwaite's use of the word is split, and "oeuvres" is carried over to a new line, a poetic device that creates historical and psychological leap. This split in the French word allows the poet to invoke collective history, as it links the man's individual experience, by a leap of the imagination, to the collective and historical experience of the black man's search for identity. Bearing in mind that the black man as descendant of Tom is a representative figure, the word "oeuvres," conveys the idea that the man's present behavior forms part of a personal (and communal) history of movement or action.

The poet's use of French in this poem, borders on mimicry. Homi Bhabha's discussion in *The Location of Culture*, speaks of mimicry as "a camouflage... a form of resemblance that differs from or defends presence by displaying it in part, metonymically."²¹ If mimicry is camouflage, the presence of French-looking words in the poem does not indicate the black man's assimilation into French culture in its entirety. Rather, the poet's use of the French language becomes a sort of camouflage that, in the black tradition of Signifyin(g), signifies on black manhood in the making. This is highlighted in the way the Negro's use of the French language in speech makes it part of his personal armory. The poet's use of italics in the poem serves more than as a formal recognition of a different language lexicon in writing; it is mimetic of the man's speech as he pulls out his knowledge of French, using it as arsenal in the battle for acceptance and recognition. The poem suggests that language is his weapon and he uses it to create room for maneuver in his negotiation of self-identity.

Through the poetic eye, the reader sees this linguistic maneuver as ironically bordering on imitation, the kind of imitation that, to use Glissant's words, wreaks a "kind of insidious violence."²² Fanon's engagement with this issue of imitation in "The Fact of Blackness," where he deliberates on the ambivalence attached to black identity in the French Caribbean islands, helps the reader to see how self-violence works its way subtly into the very essence of black manhood. Having described the black man as one who perceives himself, and who is perceived as "an object in the midst of other objects," Fanon articulates the dilemma further by

explaining that, “not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man.”²³ That means negotiation of black identity takes place within the limits/ limitations prescribed by white society since, as Bhabha points out, “mimicry rearticulates presence in terms of its ‘otherness’.”²⁴ Brathwaite’s poem shows that, in the grip of a society that helps to degrade him, the black man’s psychological condition is a desperate struggle; he being as constrained to conform to society as he is to reject its projection of his image.

Despite the dark undertones, “The Journeys”: Part 2, ends in song, with the sound of the blues, for Tom sings the blues as he mourns the pain of living through his epic revision of black identity. In *The World of Jazz*, Rodney Dale describes the early blues form as an eight-bar form, and he also explains that “the blues has to be sung to take on its poetry and beauty of feeling and rhythm and rhyme.”²⁵ The final verse of the poem under discussion recognizes the traditional eight-bar blues line verse of early blues into a poetic verse form containing four-bar lines, each line of which performs a musical time lag as the final two bars of the line are completed by its musical counterpart. This poetic device of breaking up the blues line is further complicated by an unnatural break in the words making up each line, which serves to exaggerate the syncopated sound of the blues rhythm. Note the effect in the doubling of the phrasal “less” in the use of “path / less harbour- / less spade” which closes the poem (40). In a sing/speak reading of the poem, we hear the verbal rhythm stretching and sliding from one line to the next, but also pacing itself behind the musical notes, so that the poem becomes an authentic blues rendition. The music rises to the surface and, in effect, it becomes an extension of the human voice lamenting the history of poverty and negativity that plagues the black diaspora.

Overview of Chapters

In the context of the foregoing analysis, we may read Brathwaite’s *Rights of Passage* as a movement in itself, the poetic maneuver to reclaim and transform black identity. Brathwaite’s critical analysis of the social and behavioral contexts that shape the evolution of the black man’s identity, as performed by the poem, is a poetic strategy. It is the poet’s call for responsible action, for the conscious reshaping of black identity by transforming history. His poetry set the pattern for other Caribbean poets of the black diaspora in its deliberate use of nation language to challenge mainstream discourses of identity. His work can be used to lay the groundwork for a discussion on poetry produced by writers who, like

Brathwaite, traverse the transnational spaces of the Caribbean and North America.

The 1970s was a watershed decade for Caribbean writers and poets. In both North American and Caribbean regions, the literary camp became divided into colonialists/traditionalists and postcolonialists/modernists, the former arguing the need to stick to European literary forms, the latter arguing the case for establishing and maintaining a new poetics to reflect the voices and lived experiences of black people. Another exciting exchange that marked the latter part of the 1970s on into the 1980s is reflected in the opening up of the predominantly male literary world to women writers whose works up to this time had been overlooked. Creative changes were revolutionary during this decade; the emphasis was on black and Rastafarian thinking and musical rhythms, and on people speech. Yet, even as the poetry of the times reflected the prevailing ideologies, it was contributing simultaneously to the disintegration of these very ideologies, shaping and being shaped by them.

The poetic discourse of identity emerging from works written by Caribbean women of the black diaspora in the United States calls for a renewed exploration of how we hear as much as of how we see, reflecting on the creative rupture that allows the escape of meaning. The readings of their poetry collections offered in the following chapters aim to demonstrate ways in which the particular experiences of the individual are brought into crisis with the subjective experiences of the society in which they live. Poetry written by transnationals, those living at once inside and outside of the geographical spaces of America and the Caribbean, reflect a deliberate shifting of emphasis in the discourse on Caribbean identity. In the normal flow of exchange between these spaces Caribbean women poets began using tropes of mobility to create cultural and ethnic identity and re-form their awareness of self as individuals belonging to a communal network. Contemporary criticism of their work has drawn attention to the importance of not overlooking differences even as these works are read together as “Caribbean” collections.

In *Changing Our Own Words: Essays on Criticism, Theory and Writing by Black Women*, American critic Cheryl Wall makes the case for Relational reading of diaspora literature, written by women, reflecting on the significance of the connection between “what Gayatri Spivak calls the verbal text and the social text.”²⁶ She emphasizes the need to read the verbal text carefully as part of and, at the same time, apart from its social context. Recognizing the significance of the verbal technique at work is especially useful as we read poetry from the diaspora, since such written work usually carries strong oral under/overtones. The importance of

seeing language as a strategy in the poetic construction of identity within these works cannot be more emphasized. The language of identity is constructed upon the basis of cultural and historical associations shared by the individual and community; and the black diaspora is shown to create an escape from traditional Western metaphysics, problematizing, to use Gilroy's words, the "cultural and historical mechanics of belonging" to which the term identity appeals. In his work, Gilroy points out the way diaspora study usefully "contributes to the analysis of intercultural and transcultural processes and forms" and "identifies a relational network, characteristically produced by forced dispersal and reluctant scattering."²⁷ Engaging with this discourse, this book nevertheless looks beyond the "forced dispersal and reluctant scattering" to address the concerns of a diaspora that is created even by choice or will.

The offerings in this book focus on a reading of poetry collections written by three women poets of the Caribbean: Lorna Goodison's *Turn Thanks* (1999), McCallum's *The Water between Us* (1999), Claudia Rankine's *Plot* (2001), as well as *Don't Let Me Be Lonely* (2004). These works are presented as part of the enterprise to examine the complex processes by which personal identity gets constructed, and issues of language become foregrounded as the marker of self-identity in contemporary poetic works arising out of the transnational space of North America and the Caribbean. Their poetry collections are used to demonstrate that the project of re-writing individual self-identity in light of the individual's expanding consciousness or awareness of the "other" is urgent, and more demandingly realistic, than ever before. The readings reflect on ways that transnational women poets of the black diaspora are using tropes of mobility to create a renewed sense of identity and a sense of belonging to a communal network.

The book appeals to the needs of the reading public in general, as well as college students who must grapple with the mechanics of reading and analyzing contemporary American poetry written by Caribbean nationals. Highlighting the ways cultural concepts are constructed within poetry collections produced by such transnational poets, it takes a cultural studies approach, performing literary analysis alongside some close reading of individual poems that become exemplary of the diversity within black diaspora writing. As the following chapters will show, Lorna Goodison, Shara McCallum, and Claudia Rankine, despite the attendant diversity of their poetic offerings, are among those of a later generation of transnational/transmigrant poets whose works are recognizably Caribbean and, when read together, they signal the development of a body of poetry that becomes a transformative force in the American literary landscape.

Each Chapter of this book examines the way contemporary transnational poets of the black diaspora have been transforming the Caribbean discourse of identity by extending it to include the experiences of black women poets who inhabit transnational spaces. They emphasize that Caribbean women writers, as part of the larger black diaspora, are entering the poetic discourse of identity by positioning themselves as transnationals whose boundary crossings are reflected in the rhetorical and structural strategies they undertake in creating their poetic works. Their poems stand in contrast to earlier collections of poetry written by male Caribbean writers in that the creative reinterpretation of self-identity in which these women poets are engaged is worked out on the level of the personal and the individual, rather than the national. If Brathwaite's work examines the collective fragmented sense of self that is created by geographical and cultural dislocation, the poetic collections of contemporary Caribbean women writers show another side to the picture. These poets become active participants, writing as well as consciously performing in their own works as they reposition the discourse within the geocultural framework.

Lorna Goodison's *Turn Thanks* (1999), is a collection of lyrical poetry that creates a panorama of Caribbean heritage folding, and refolding, through cycles of generations brought together in a collapse of time. The poet examines her family history and gives thanks for this heritage. The poetpersona rejects the traditional presentation of Caribbean identity generated by decades old male centered, western ideology, as one forged through disinheritance and loss, reclaiming as its rightful possession all the parts that constitute one's identity. Goodison's is rehabilitative poetry that transforms images of dispossession making them over into tropes of wealthy heritage. Her *Turn Thanks* collection of poems serves to gather together the fragments of identity hidden in family history that is as public as it is private. The little every day details of living are used in the poems to create a counter discourse that transforms the Caribbean landscape. Woven within this larger Caribbean tapestry are poems that reflect directly on the poetpersona's experiences of dislocation and alienation within the wider American social spaces. Altogether the poems facilitate an examination of the way the network of Relations, created through accepting and adapting to multiple social and geographical dimensions, speaks to the urgency of negotiating identity as an act of personal empowerment.

The Caribbean landscape also haunts the autobiographical speaker in Shara McCallum's *The Water Between Us* (1999), one whose identity has been transplanted in the American soil. As in Goodison's case, this

transnational identity becomes a manifestation of relations that occur in and through the cross cultural processes of being. Using her family history, McCallum weaves a network of personal and communal experiences that insist on being heard. Within this personal framework, the poetpersona weaves a mythological assemblage of Western and Caribbean fairytales and folktales, giving a new spin, to create a poetic narrative that indicts the selfishness and greed which has historically enabled those with power to violate the rights of others. Combined in this way, McCallum's poetic re-memory of time and place reflects the disturbed consciousness of the young persona, who must disentangle herself from the web of deceit that generates her fractured sense of self-identity.

The narrative begins at home, in the context of the family structure, the most basic political unit of society. The collection encompasses a "womanist discourse" which re-writes history so that it becomes, to use Alice Walker's discourse, "a history arranged the way tale-telling women tell it,"²⁸ Critic Aoi Mori, in her discussion of Toni Morrison's narratives, points out the differences between womanist discourse and feminist discourse asserting that, "womanist criticism [is] a reconstruction of feminism [used to] establish subjectivities for all women which will liberate them from patriarchal limits and promote an understanding among them which can overcome differences."²⁹ Speaking from within this discourse, McCallum's *The Water Between Us* points a finger at the original violence at the heart of the master discourse of identity created by Western patriarchal systems.

Claudia Rankine's poetry collections are used to close the discourse in this book for they both make and answer the call for poetic transformation. An intriguing crossing of genres, their structural use of time and space reflects the stylistic inventiveness that has become a hallmark of transnational poets of the black diaspora. *Plot* performs a dramatic exploration of the origin of identity, demonstrating the process through which the subject "I" becomes a shifting signifier. In *Plot* the parturient body of the woman becomes a "Signifyin(g)" body, speaking to the poet's compulsion to give birth to a new form of poetry that has been growing within her. In its transformation of language, and of images that remain open-ended in their meanings, *Plot* introduces the poetic strategies that shape the poet's discourse in *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, Rankine's latest collection. An infusion of poetry, dialogue, and prose, combined with images from the television and other forms of communication media, Rankine's latest collection openly challenges Western conventions and ideologies. Creating what Rankine herself calls "micro moments" the poetpersona confronts the subtle aggression of the television and questions

the way communication media control and dictate our responses to events that arise out of moments of cultural tensions or conflicts.

All four poetry collections mentioned above serve to demonstrate that the question of language and identity in transnational poetic works, emerging from within the black diaspora, is understandably complicated not just by issues of gender (already inscribed within the discourse of race) but the experience itself of migration. As a body, these collections enable readers to reflect on some important ways that transnational women poets of the black diaspora are using tropes of mobility to create a renewed sense of identity, and a sense of belonging to a communal network. In these collective works, re-memory becomes a significant poetic strategy that transforms history, transmuting time and place in the process.

CHAPTER ONE

RE-MEMBERING THE JOURNEY: HISTORY AND MEMORY IN LORNA GOODISON'S *TURN THANKS*

My mother's journeys re-define space She lives in the Caribbean; she lives in the United States; she lives in America.

—Carole Boyce Davies

In the excerpt from Boyce Davies that forms the epigraph to this paper, women's journeys speak to the right to travel, re-arranging one's personal effects in the process so that home can become the place where one is. A discussion of the right to re-define home appropriately enables a discussion of women's right to re-gather personal and family history, remembering them and imbuing them with renewed meaning. In *Black Women, Writing and Identity*, Boyce Davies foregrounds the importance of "re-membering and reconnection" for women who find themselves living in two or more places at once.¹ Pointing to the way women's migratory journeys enable the re-negotiation of personal identity for them, Davies refracts the journey motif through the lens of personal, familial history. Using such history as sociological authority in her text, she examines the process through which journey and memory evolve as a performance "strategy," whereby "the question of identities" is concretized (2). Boyce Davies's reflections on "re-membering" and "re-connection" speak of "crossing the boundaries of space, time, history, place, language;" so that, firstly, we consider "re-membering" as a poetic device. In "re-membering" the poet makes use of the function of memory, and goes beyond it, to engage in the task of "bringing all the parts back together" (17). A necessary function of these works is the bringing together of oral histories which are subsequently refracted to complete or extend the body of Western canonical writings, from the perspective of the black community.

This chapter on “History and Memory” examines Lorna Goodison’s *Turn Thanks* (1999),² a collection of narrative and lyrical poetry that creates a panorama of Caribbean heritage folding, and refolding, through cycles of generations now brought together in a collapse of time. This collection of poems enables us to reflect on some of the ways that black women poets are using tropes of mobility to create and maintain a renewed sense of identity, a sense of belonging to a communal network. Through the process of re-membling that is empowered by the poetic performance of re-memory, the poet re-gathers the events and experiences of history in a new way, challenging traditional conventions and stereotypes. The poetics of re-memory at work through this medium enables the poet to uncover the “repressed” past,³ bringing together the experiences of peoples of the black diaspora. Such experiences are contained in oral histories, narratives, and myths that have been passed down from one generation of women to the next by word of mouth. As other studies have shown, women poets of the black diaspora are using their personal experiences to direct attention to what Paul Gilroy describes as “social, familial, historical, and cultural factors that bear upon the formation and social reproduction of masculinity and femininity.”⁴

Goodison’s collections of poetry emerge from within the black diaspora, a transnational space defined by “the convergence of multiple places and cultures” (3); a space which demands that individuals come to terms with their lived experiences in the in-between spaces of their multiple homes. According to Boyce Davies, this cultural convergence becomes a process, through which the individual “negotiates and re-negotiates” self-identity.⁵ As Boyce Davies’s discussion shows, within contemporary identity discourse unconventional forms of history are recognizably an important component of the literary journey toward the construction of self-identity, particularly for poets of the black diaspora. Goodison’s *Turn Thanks* collection, viewed as poetry of re-membling, allows us to examine the poet’s intentional use of language as the poems bring to the fore gaps in memory which the writing of conventional history dismisses.

The mosaic of memorialized events within the body of Goodison’s poetry marks the poet’s attempt to re-gather events in the process of writing/righting history, or as Mori explains it, “re-writing a history written by mainstream historians.”⁶ The gaps in memory highlighted by the poems function as signifiers for moments of subjective repression in women’s history which the poet is compelled to fill in, and in the larger cultural context of the black diaspora the gaps also represent the erasure of black oral cultures. Energizing the poems are moments when the literal act