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Virtuality and Remembrance in Caribbean Poetry

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2010–2011 Penn Humanities Forum
Undergraduate Mellon Research Fellowship

Petal Samuel

PHF Presentation 2011

“Ee Cassé: Virtuality and Remembrance in Caribbean Poetry”

“of my own rivers of this flesh/who feels it knows it Lord!/my own ash my own alph
my own borders of outcry/how yu mek sing these strange mesongs in a strange
land/so far from music sex and saxophone/& nothing nothing nothing new/all
wreck(ed) all wrack(ed) and falling upward resounding acres from the blue/Iran
Iraq Columbus Ayiti Colombo Beirut Manhattan Afghanistan. And yu”

- Kamau Brathwaite, *Ark: A 9/11 Continuation Poem*

The quote displayed, an excerpt from Barbadian poet, Kamau Brathwaite’s poem *Ark* attempts to establish a set of connections between disparate peoples and places, simultaneously foreign and familiar, “so far” and yet proximate, both external and internal to “yu” (purposely spelled “y-u”, invoking and embracing a Caribbean English spelling and pronunciation of the term). The narration of catastrophe is intimately personal: “my own rivers of this flesh”, “my own ash”, etc.; however there is a distinct reflection on the part of the author that this intimate moment of grief is connected somehow to a strange land. Of the locales cited, we can note a distinct outlier, Manhattan—sandwiched in between a number of spaces that signify very differently across global imaginations. (It is notably not placed at the beginning or the end of the sequence, but rather positioned unremarkably as being a part of a certain uniformity, solidarity, and continuum). The lack of punctuation in the sequence, suggests a fluidity across both space and time. “Yu” and I, as readers, are all made a part of this sequence with the use of the conjunction “and”, and yet made clearly separate and distinct by the full stop. We are both a part of the sequence, and yet positioned to escape it. When we note the full title of the work: *Ark: A 9/11 Continuation Poem* and the use of the keywords “ash”, “outcry”, and

“wreck(ed)” we can begin to infer the ways in which Brathwaite is invoking catastrophe and violence (past, present, and future) as a point of commonality and a current of relation between these locales (one that, as the “continuation” in the title suggests is ongoing); and perhaps invoking a future for the “yu” one day liberated from this cycle.

Slavoj Zizek, in his “Welcome to the Desert of the Real” discusses catastrophe, particularly 9/11, as having symbolic importance as an event that shattered United States virtual constructions and imaginings surrounding a sort of impenetrable barrier against a certainly more perilous outside world. He notes: “Cruel and indifferent as it may sound, we should also, now more than ever, bear in mind that the actual effects of these bombings is much more symbolic than real. The United States just got a taste of what goes on around the world on a daily basis, from Sarajevo to Groznyy, from Rwanda and Congo to Sierra Leone.” Zizek interestingly also notes: “When a New Yorker commented on how, after the bombings, one can no longer walk safely on the city streets, the irony of it was that, well before the bombings, the streets of New York were well-known for their dangers.” This begs the question: whose streets have to be jeopardized in order for a “lack of safety” on the streets to be a point of concern? And whose lives in jeopardy qualify a catastrophic act of terror?

Brathwaite, early on in the poem, alludes to the nation’s particular history of violence toward African-Americans in conjuring the image of the first jet flying over the African Burial Ground National Monument in New York City moments before it collides with the first tower: “his body glowing *the only word* we have for what is

now this glowering around these future towers of his solo masterpiece/rising
himself again in sound towards the silver cross/of an approaching jet. Dissecting in
the blue/the full white mosque and omen of the moon/just afternoons ago. High
over Berkeley Square. Over/Heroes Square. Over Washington Square. Wall
Street/Canal. The graveyards of the negroes. The body body body bod-/ies pour-
/ing from this dark Manhattan strom-/boli into dim catacombs of dis-/appearing
love & grace & pain & smouldering wound” (9) This image of the burial ground,
mentioned merely in passing during a survey of the Manhattan landscape reminds
us of the sorts of violence and subjugation upon which both the United States and
Antilles are built. In a sense, Brathwaite raises the image of the graveyard to
highlight American (and perhaps by proxy, Antillean) slavery as a centuries-long
catastrophic moment in United States history. However, the uniformity of the
SycoraX font (Brathwaite’s trademark font) and its three-line stanzas as it continues
on to describe the scene of massive destruction and chaos after the jet collides with
the first tower suggests again Brathwaite’s interest in the continuity between, and
cyclicity of, these acts of violence. He then goes on to mention various other sites
of catastrophic destruction: “Bhuj, Tajitzkhan, Pelée, Krakatoa, Bosnia, the Sudan,
Chernobyl” (Brathwaite, 14) Brathwaite does not suggest any casual slippage
between any of these specific locales, peoples, or moments, but rather suggests,
again, the possibility of imagining virtual solidarities across catastrophic experience.
Zizek notes: “Either America will persist in...the attitude, ‘Why should this happen to
us? Things like this don’t happen here!’or American will finally risk stepping out
through the fantasmatic screen separating it from the Outside World, accepting its

arrival into the Real World, making the long overdue move from ‘Things like this should not happen here!’ to ‘Things like this should not happen anywhere!’”

Brathwaite employs experimental poetry not only as a way of remembering and archiving the various catastrophic narratives, but using it as a medium to put these moments in productive conversation, perhaps in a motion to move toward the Zizekian “This should not happen anywhere!”

The excerpt shown here has a striking visual aesthetic: its font invoking a moment in our technological past (iconic of typewriters and dot matrix printers), as well as several renditions of an imagined, computerized future (similar to the font used over the course of the Matrix films¹ for example)—remembering not only past cycles of catastrophic violence, but also perhaps eerily projecting violence to come. The use of computer-generated text suggests not so much an artificiality as much as a *simulation*—Brathwaite reinvigorates the horror of the 9/11 attacks through this text, not as a singular instance of terror, but as a participant in a lineage of horror, victims, (perpetrators), and sites of largescale violence. It is no longer simply “the day that *America* stood still²”, but is also placed in conversation with global narratives of terror and catastrophe that have occurred and are occurring worldwide.

This text also does not read as easily as your typical serifed Times New Roman or sans-serif Verdana. It takes longer to read this style of text in part because

1

http://www.wallpaperweb.org/wallpaper/movies/1280x1024/Matrix_Reloaded_14.jpg

2

http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/1407409/the_day_america_stood_still.html?cat=10

of how crudely its edges are shaped (leaving room for various interpretations of how to construct the text from its basic square units). The text itself includes Caribbean English words and sparingly uses punctuation—the font of the text separates itself from those more standard publishing fonts (Ariel, Times New Roman, etc.) In order to allow for a variety of sounds and accents (including Caribbean English and French, for example) to roam freely about the text, he feels it necessary to separate it from standardized fonts that carry a number of presuppositions with regards to sound (for example, times new roman, one of the most widely used fonts in the world, as being rooted in standard British English). Brathwaite wants us to consider continuities of violence across timespace, and its layers of historical signification, and is highly conscious of the ways in which a particular font can not only presuppose the sound of the text, but also its readership and appeal. A font like SycoraX contains the possibility of accommodating numerous alphabets and written/oral linguistic practices.

Brathwaite's font of choice, called the SycoraX video font, is named after the character of Sycorax, in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Caliban's mother and the original inhabitant of the island which Prospero rules for the duration of the play. Sycorax is silent for the duration of the play, and is remembered and invoked only through Caliban or Prospero, the respective antagonist and protagonist of the work. Brathwaite, naming Sycorax his muse, makes reference to the fact that she is never allowed to speak over the course of the work. His style is committed to the merging of oral and written traditions of communicating word, infusing multiple possibilities of voice back into the word within the parameters of a font that he has authored.

Melanie Otto in her *A Creole Experiment* notes: “The ‘video style’ effectively creolizes the technologies of the Western world, here representation by computer and television, and infuses them with a spiritual significance that has its roots in African culture.” Here, Otto suggests that Braithwaite’s text is not simply a new creation, but a purposeful warping of a basic font logic in order to create new possibilities for listening the novel, and creating a democratic space for voices that are often relegated to the bottom of many intra-lingual hierarchies (such as Caribbean English). This style, which leaves room for various arrangements of style and stylistic practice (there’s never one right way to write the letters) works well for Braithwaite’s project of imagining new criteria for solidarities across national boundaries.

In the opening of the poem, Braithwaite draws one of these connections. He speaks of the metaphor of the Twin Towers in relation with the Marassa Jumeaux, a pair of divine twins in the Haitian vodou tradition: “there shd be two murals corresponding in spirit to the marassa of the Twin (*marassa*), the World Trade Towers of the poem’s sound.” (xi) The suggested kinship between the Two Towers and the Marassa Jumeaux does much to offer a blurring of religious, sociopolitical, and colonial boundaries, and offer a comparable Antillean symbol of power (though notably expressed through the sound of the poem). Here, the linkage between the two suggests the possibilities for fluidity between locales like the United States and the Antilles, as political equals.

One of the most powerful moments of the poem is when he narrates an interview with a 9/11 survivor whose husband was lost in the crisis. This is,

arguably, the point in the poem in which the text becomes most sporadic. The text reads:

There is a certain fragility to the font Brathwaite uses to describe the woman's words—suggesting a woman in deep grief, always shakily on the edge of tears. The text of the word “incinerated” explodes from the page to emphasize the horror of the circumstances surrounding her husband's death. The text itself is unstable, broken, and burning, rippling violently in a way the rest of the text does not. In contrast to the “obviously I was not” text, which, while jumping from the page, is characterized by round, smooth, easily read letters, though boldened to emphasize the robustness and openness of her grief. The text of “and makes a wordless Sorry” carries sound in clear distinction to the words preceding it—this is a barely audible utterance, a moment on the edge of breakdown, a moment where the speaker shrinks and retreats into a grief she is not yet ready to speak of openly. Here we can note Brathwaite's use of SycoraX to illustrate a specific sort of affect and sound.

Later on in the poem, Brathwaite expresses a moment of personal loss within the text, making reference to his own sense of loss after the death of his first wife. The text notes: “before those iron worlds of falling clowes/I lose/u/thru slacken broken grates of water graves/I lose/u/these words to sovereign warres/I lose I lose/u/-even in the burn-/ing tower of this saxophone/o let me love you love you love you love you o/to grow great & beautiful again/the seas unwrinkled & the land be grain/the trees our patient ancestors & our prayers bring rain/the histories of all these other people(s) as cruel and brave” (34) This is a moment of great grief and

affective power for Brathwaite, as he links the burning of the towers and the massive casualties to a deep personal hurt.

Ultimately, as Brathwaite approaches the end of the poem his font assumes a markedly hybrid appearance, stating: “in the name of the Lord...let there be peace on the land” (38) Brathwaite’s earnest plea for peace on *the* land is a clear appeal for a universal peace, one that transcends national, political, religious, linguistic, and other barriers. Brathwaite envisions a peace that is preoccupied with and predicated upon peace elsewhere, rather than the Zizekian identification of United States peace being constructed upon turmoil outside its borders. In fact, Brathwaite’s linkage of his own personal loss and the many losses incurred in the 9/11 attacks suggests that this transnational solidarity through catastrophe is only possible if we can imagine catastrophe to be proximate and personal, even as it is often distant and affecting peoples that are different from us. This text does not hesitate to bask in its own hybridity, coloring the page with a diversity of forms and styles bob rhythmically across the page.

What is remarkable about Brathwaite’s work is not simply its experimental form, syntax, and linguistic hybridity, but its attention to uniform font, grammar structure, and language as silent enforcers of these virtual barriers—thus, encouraging and enforcing these separations between nation-states.

Works Cited:

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2. Otto, Melanie. A Creole Experiment: Utopian Space in Kamau Brathwaite's "Video-Style" Works. Trenton: Africa World Press, 2009.
3. Zizek, Slavoj. "Welcome to the Desert of the Real." South Atlantic Quarterly 101:2 (2002): 385-389.