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Divided to the Vein: Defining a West Indian Self

Tess Hokin

This article explores the development of West Indian cultural identity through its expression in poetry from and about the West Indies. Early forms of cultural expression from the Anglophone Caribbean were frequently realised through mimicry of British poetic forms, themes, and language. Later post-Independence poetry frequently denounced such reverence and aimed to identify the West Indian poetic voice with a conception of 'Africa' as an alternative parent culture. Ultimately however, neither Africa nor Britain provides a suitable comparison for the fragmented and diverse West Indies. Rather, the most apt expressions of West Indian cultural identity are found in poetry which focuses on racial hybridity, West Indian landscapes, and local dialects.

I who am poisoned with the blood of both,
Where shall I turn, divided to the vein?
I who have cursed
The drunken officer of British rule, how choose
Between this Africa and the English tongue I love?

Derek Walcott, 'A Far Cry From Africa'.¹

What makes a poem distinctly 'West Indian'? Furthermore, what makes a *person* West Indian? These questions of identity, of a unique 'voice', are a pervasive concern of contemporary West Indian verse.² No one race, language, tradition, or location fully encapsulates the fluid diversity of the Caribbean archipelago, and its colonial past isolates its citizens from the history of their ancestors. Poetry from the West Indies thus frequently concerns itself with the articulation of an 'authentic' West Indian cultural identity, yet disparate cultural origins and a tumultuous history have made defining

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¹ D. Walcott, 'A Far Cry From Africa', *Selected Poems*, (London: Faber: 2007), 6, lines 26-30.

² L. A. Breiner, *An Introduction to West Indian Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), x.

what constitutes 'authenticity' an arduous task. This piece explores the development of West Indian poetic identity from its earliest origins in mimicry of European forms through to contemporary assertions of hybridity and creolisation. I examine some of the techniques employed by West Indian authors to solidify a unique poetic voice, which include re-imaginings of colonial historical narratives, identification with parent cultures, the use of dialect verse, and an emphasis on what Kamau Brathwaite terms the 'Little Tradition', or the everyday lives of working people.³

Laurence Breiner highlights in his *Introduction to West Indian Poetry* that while the 'West Indies' and the 'Antilles' are often used as synonyms for the polyglot Caribbean Archipelago, 'Antilles' is often 'defined politically, so that its precise meaning depends on the nationality of the speaker'.⁴ By contrast, the 'West Indies' is now widely used to refer to the English-speaking islands of the Caribbean.⁵ As such, I define West Indian poetry as poetry from authors in or from the Anglophone Caribbean.

While individual islands are steadily gaining endemic poetic identities it is useful for this discussion to speak of a broader West Indian literary tradition.⁶ This is not least due to Bruce King's claim that 'no one country has yet had a sufficient number of major authors to be able to speak of a literature of its own'.⁷ As such, in this context it is currently more fruitful to recognise the similarities between authors from different islands than the differences. Furthermore, trans-nationalism is a common thread among contemporary West Indian poets; Christian Campbell is of the Bahamas and Trinidad and Tobago, while Lasana Sekou was born in Guyana and raised on St. Maarten, to cite just two of many examples. Attempting to sketch out island-specific literatures thus becomes a muddled and ineffective process if any conclusions about poetic expression of cultural identity are to be reached.

As Breiner identifies, 'the territories of the Anglophone Caribbean share with the rest of the region approximately the same historical circumstances and experience the same intellectual trajectory'.⁸ This in turn produces shared aspects of a cultural identity.

³ K. Brathwaite, *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica* (Oxford : Clarendon Press, 1971), 309.

⁴ Breiner, *An Introduction to West Indian Poetry*, xv.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., 102.

⁷ Bruce King, 'Introduction', *West Indian Literature*, ed. Bruce King, (London: Macmillan, 1979), 1-8.

⁸ Breiner, *An Introduction to West Indian Poetry*, 59.

Correspondingly, I identify significant overlaps in the expressions of that identity in poetry between the English speaking islands. While other Caribbean islands such as Haiti and Cuba enjoyed long-standing traditions of local literary activity and readership, no such activity existed in the West Indies until the twentieth century.⁹

King claims that for the early West Indian writer, 'local society offered few opportunities for artists and emigration usually followed'.¹⁰ A lack in both printing facilities and local demand for poetry meant that West Indian poets who could afford to do so frequently moved abroad or travelled to and from the islands. While poets such as Claude McKay found platforms for their poetry through the Harlem Renaissance movement in New York, a more significant number of West Indian poets converged around the BBC's *Caribbean Voices* radio program in London.

Anne Spry Rush highlights the crucial role that *Caribbean Voices* played in both promoting West Indian Literature to British and Caribbean audiences (thus increasing writers' economic prospects) and in articulating the 'the complicated mixture of loyalties and identity' present in the West Indian literary community.¹¹ Although the program was recorded in London, 'it presented poetry and prose exclusively written by West Indians about their homes, their experiences, and their ideas'.¹² West Indian poetry is thus essentially diasporic in nature, and in speaking of West Indian poets, I refer to both poets writing in the West Indies and poets from the West Indies writing abroad. The fact that West Indian poetic voice first found a large and loyal audience abroad is illustrative and symptomatic of the complex relations between the colonising country and the colonised.

THE FILTER OF ENGLISH EYES

Colonialism has had a profound influence on the formation of West Indian poetic identity. As Paula Burnett notes, the physical displacement, trauma, deculturation, and lack of black political or economic agency brought on by slavery has had resounding impacts on West Indians long after its abolition, and for a long time resulted in a

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ King, 'Introduction', *West Indian Literature*, 2

¹¹ A. S. Rush, *Bonds of Empire: West Indians and Britishness from Victoria to Decolonization* (Oxford : Oxford, 2011), 196.

¹² Ibid., 199

‘common assumption that... Caribbean people ‘lived inarticulate and destitute in a political, social, and cultural void’.¹³ That the cultural heritage of Africa had survived and transformed through expressions in slave song and folklore was of little consequence to early West Indian writers, for whom ‘culture’ and ‘literature’ were organised on strictly European terms. The Martinician Franz Fanon articulates the issue thus:

Every colonized people- in other words every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created- finds itself face to face with the language of the civilizing nation; that is with the culture of the mother country. The colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country's cultural standards.¹⁴

The mimicry of European form and language seen in much early West Indian poetry can thus be seen as a direct product of colonialism. To assert a literary identity for a largely black population who, in the eyes of the coloniser, would ‘never surpass the most limited intellectual circle’,¹⁵ meant that West Indians had first to prove their ability to match the most prestigious European writers. Such was the endeavour of Cambridge-educated free black Francis Williams, who composed a masterful Latin ode in honour of every new governor in Jamaica in the mid-eighteenth century.¹⁶ Laurence Breiner writes of his only surviving text, ‘in that his poem is imitative, and problematic as to both language and audience, Williams is emblematic of any pioneer West Indian poet’.¹⁷ As a political and social gesture in the dawn of West Indian literary history, Williams’ poem is not a representation of any particular aspect of West Indian cultural identity, but an assertion to the coloniser that such an identity is *possible*.

¹³ P. Burnett, Introduction, *The Penguin Book of Caribbean Verse in English* ed. Paula Burnett, (London: Penguin, 1986), xxix.

¹⁴ F. Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann, (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1967), 18.

¹⁵ “La variété melaniennne... ne sortira jamais du cercle intellectuel le plus restreint.” My translation. From A. compte de Gobineau, ‘Essai Sur l’Inégalité des Races Humaines’ (Paris : Firmin Didot Frères, 1853-1855), 339

¹⁶ Breiner, *An Introduction to West Indian Poetry*, 105.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, 106.

Mimicry of European form and language remained the expressive mechanism of the Empire Poetry League of Jamaica founded in 1923.¹⁸ Unlike Williams, however, the League's poets were neither political nor masterful. Derek Walcott denounced their output as a 'mausoleum' filled with 'the mummies of the Miltonic, Wordsworthian, Keatsian, and the Robert Bridges-ian'.¹⁹ H. Gillies Clerk's 'Ode to the Jamaican Mocking Bird' exhibits the imitative and patriotic pitfalls of the League's poetry.

Hail Seraph of Jamaica! Hail, sweet bird!
Sweet when throughout the day,
The joyful roundelay,
Pouring through all the lattice-leaved trees is heard;
Or when pimento branches glist'ning play
Fragrant accompaniments to thy wondrous song:
Perched on thy dry twig rostrum,
Throne of thy wide-spread kingdom,
Whence thou dost rule the world with thy melodious song²⁰

As Breiner notes of this poem, 'a pseudo-Keatsian ode is not entirely appropriate for this subject, if only because so serious a form seems at odds with the connotations of "mocking"'.²¹ Moreover, later lines abandon the description of Jamaican landscape touched upon by the 'pimento branches' in favour of distinctly English 'leas, glens, dells, and wildwood' and references to Greek mythology.²² Here the subject matter of West Indian nature seems incompatible with the English poetic form, a discord since immortalised in Kamau Brathwaite's famous phrase, 'the hurricane does not roar in pentameters'.²³ Clerk's evocation of a 'throne' and 'wide-spread kingdom' (as well as the League's own eponym) indicates a misplaced reverie for an Empire responsible for slavery in Jamaica. If such devotion to Britain could be tenuously attributed to the spirit of English Romanticism, Clerk's poem is again misguided, as Wordsworth expresses his aim in 'Preface to the Lyrical Ballads' as 'fitting to metrical arrangement a selection of

¹⁸ Ibid, 107.

¹⁹ D. Walcott, 'Some Jamaican Poets', (03 Aug. 1957) *Public Opinion*, 7.

²⁰ H. Gillies Clerk, 'Ode to the Jamaican Mocking Bird', in *Voices from Summerland*, ed. J. E. C. McFarlane (London: Fowler Wright, 1929), 62-67 (62), lines 1-9.

²¹ Breiner, *An Introduction to West Indian Poetry*, 110.

²² Ibid.

²³ K. Brathwaite, *History of the Voice: The Development of Nation Language in Anglophone Caribbean Poetry* (London: New Beacon, 1984), 10.

the real language of men'.²⁴ ²⁵ Rather than achieving this aim, Clerk engages in a ventriloquism of a tradition, landscape and language that bears little connection to his reality. A West Indian poetic identity is represented here, if at all, as an awkward and distant subsidiary of an already expired English poetic identity, distinguishable only by infrequent references to local nature.

As Burnett notes, however, poems like Clerk's 'had a symbolic importance that transcended their weaknesses'.²⁶ The incongruity between European form and West Indian reality exhibited in poems like Clerk's gave rise in the literary community to an awareness of what Trinidadian poet Wayne Brown terms 'the filter of English eyes'.²⁷ In other words, a realisation grew among West Indian poets that their perception of their surroundings was mediated by the gaze of the mother-country.²⁸

Such awareness, argues Breiner, was fostered in a 'context of increasing personal and national self-consciousness'.²⁹ Economic difficulties imposed by England during the 1930's and the Second World War led to widespread movements for Independence, resulting in the formation of the Federation of the West Indies in 1958.³⁰ While the Federation collapsed shortly afterwards, 'a will for nationhood among British West Indians' remained,³¹ and a host of politically charged literary journals like *Kyk-Over-Al*, *Bim*, and *Caribbean Quarterly* emerged,³² solidifying the relationship between political independence, a unified national identity, and Literature in the West Indies.

Poets began to assert West Indian *difference* in their work, expressed through the metaphor of Caribbean nature. Daniel Williams' 'We who do not know the snow'

²⁴ W. Wordsworth, 'Preface to the Lyrical Ballads' in *Wordsworth's Preface to Lyrical Ballads* ed. W. J. B Owen, (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1957), 112-133.

²⁵ As an interesting sidenote, Saeko Yoshikawa has written a book crediting the legacy of Wordsworth's work with the invention of tourism in the Lake District in the nineteenth century, suggesting links between a poetic romanticisation of landscape and tourism discourse. (S. Yoshikawa, *William Wordsworth and the Invention of Tourism, 1820-1900*, (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2014).

²⁶ Burnett, 'Introduction', *Caribbean Verse in English*, liv.

²⁷ W. Brown, 'The Poetry of the Forties, Part II', *Trinidad Guardian*, Sept. 20, 1970), 11

²⁸ Breiner, *An Introduction to West Indian Poetry*, 110.

²⁹ *Ibid*, 112.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 120.

³¹ E. Wallace, 'The West Indies Federation: Decline and Fall', (1962) 17:2 *International Journal*, 269-288.

³² Breiner, *An Introduction to West Indian Poetry*, 95.

contests that West Indians ‘still know the light bright cotton cushioning the breeze; / Not cold but warm in the drowsy pillow’,³³ while H. D. Carberry’s ‘Nature’ begins

We have neither Summer nor Winter,
... We have instead the days
When gold sun shines on the lush green canefields³⁴

Here, the persistent use of words like ‘but’ and ‘instead’ upholds British nature as the norm from which Caribbean nature diverges, even as the poems herald the value of their deviations from that norm. This kind of ‘defensive rhetoric’ is a common feature of early West Indian nature poetry.³⁵ It represents the struggle to remove the ‘filter of English eyes’ and assert cultural difference from the Empire. This struggle is complicated however, by the spectre of colonial rule which exists in European names for West Indian locales, flora, and fauna.

The empire of naming colonised even the trees,
referred our leaves to their originals;
This was the blight on our minds, a speckled disease³⁶

Walcott’s lines from *Tiepolo’s Hound* bring to mind fruits like the ‘star apple’ and ‘sea grape’, or Jamaica’s counties of ‘Surrey’ and ‘Cornwall’, each defined by their relation to a universalised European norm. For the West Indian poet, nature becomes ‘profoundly historicised and politicised...landscape often registers histories that have been occluded by the official record’.³⁷ Post-independence West Indian nature poetry thus uses local landscape as a site through which places can be renamed, territories remapped, and dominant historical narratives re-written in assertion of an indigenous cultural identity. Nature is never neutral for the West Indian poet.

³³ D. Williams, ‘We who do not know the snow’ in *Caribbean Voices*, ed. John Figueroa (London: Evans Brothers, 1971), 29, lines 1-8.

³⁴ H.D. Carberry, ‘Nature’ in *Caribbean Voices*, ed. John Figueroa (London: Evans Brothers, 1971), 25, lines 1-5.

³⁵ Breiner, p. *An Introduction to West Indian Poetry*, 123.

³⁶ D. Walcott, *Tiepolo’s Hound* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2000), 92.

³⁷ S. P. Casteel, ‘The Language of Landscape’ in *The Routledge Companion to Anglophone Caribbean Literature*, ed. M. A. Bucknor and A. Donnell (Oxon: Routledge, 2011), 480-489; 483.

BACK TO AFRICA, MISS MATTIE?

So far we have seen the development of a West Indian poetic tradition as distinct from the English tradition, its direct links to the cultivation of a national and cultural identity, and the use of Caribbean nature as a politicised metaphor for history. As desire grew for a national identity defined independently of Europe, many West Indians aligned themselves with Trinidadian essayist C.L.R. James' view that 'the road to West Indian national identity lay through Africa'.³⁸ Factors such as African independence and global Black Power movements contributed to a wider awareness of African culture, 'transforming the middle passage from a degraded point of origin to a traumatic but finite episode'.³⁹ Symbolically, 'Africa' as a concept in the West Indian imagination (as opposed a geographical location) allowed for a shift in racial attitudes and situated Afro-Caribbeans within a larger cultural diaspora with a rich and sophisticated history. With specific regards to poetry, however, Breiner determines that most writers viewed African literary heritage as 'a polished body of lore passed on by a neutral process of transmission that discourages modification'.⁴⁰ With the notable exception of Kamau Brathwaite, use of African poetic forms is rare, and African culture is frequently oversimplified and idealised. Basil Smith's 'Tom Tom' is one illustrative example.

...make my blood boil
to the temperature of the Sahara!
Teach me to dance
the way my grandmother
has forgotten
...
Then,
and only then,
shall I be a *man*.⁴¹

It is clear that Smith's poem has little to do with geographical Africa, which includes such culturally diverse countries as Morocco and Botswana. Rather, Smith engages with

³⁸ C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins* (New York: Vintage, 1963), 402.

³⁹ Breiner, *An Introduction to West Indian Poetry*, 141.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 142.

⁴¹ B. Smith, 'Tom Tom' in *Breaklight*, ed. Andrew Salkey (New York: Anchor Books, 1973), 73, lines 8-18.

tropes of dance, drum, and African deities common to the idea of 'Negro Africa...a sort of emotional ancestral home'⁴² through which the poet (and on a larger scale, society) can fully realise his black diasporic identity.

'Africa' in Rastafarian chants and reggae songs (which, as we will see, constitute viable branches of the West Indian poetic tradition) appears as 'a world of peace, polygamy, and handsome elephants at a safe distance...as transcendent heaven or as earth-bound utopia'.⁴³

West Indian notions of 'Africa' have been most important to poetry, however, for what they legitimize, asserts Laurence Breiner.⁴⁴ Firstly, if oratory expression constituted poetry in a now idealised 'Africa', then West Indian slave songs, Rastafarian chants, and performed monologues could reasonably be viewed in the same light. This opens up an immense reservoir of material for use for the West Indian poet which had hitherto been disregarded as 'popular' or 'folk' culture. Moreover, the discovery of the links between African languages and West Indian dialect gave rise to Brathwaite's notion of 'nation language', a term which allowed for valorisation of local speech because unlike 'dialect', 'it does not have any connotations of debasement or inferiority or colonialism'.⁴⁵ Finally, and most crucially for this discussion, the focus on 'Africa' made possible Braithwaite's theory of the 'Little Tradition', in which West Indian poets could articulate the experiences of the everyday lives of working people, and thus express an authentic West Indian identity.

ROOTS IN ROOTLESSNESS: TOWARDS CREOLISATION

Louise Bennett's 'Back to Africa' provides a synthesis of the points brought about by the influence of 'Africa' and the movement towards creolisation in the development of West Indian poetic identity.

Back to Africa, Miss Mattie?
You no know wha you da seh?

⁴² Anonymous article, "'Africa" in West Indian Poetry', (1955) 4:1 *Caribbean Quarterly*, 5-13.

⁴³ Breiner, *An Introduction to West Indian Poetry*, 159.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 143.

⁴⁵ K. Brathwaite, 'Caribbean Writing Today', (1978) 2:3 *NAM Speaks*, 32.

You haf fe come from somewhe fus
Before you go back deh!

Me know say dat you great great great
Granma was African
But Mattie, doan you great great great
Granpa was Englishman?

Den you great granmader fader
By your fader side was Jew?

....

Go a foreign, seek you fortune,
But no tell nobody say
You dah go fe seek you homelan,
For a right deh so you deh!⁴⁶

Bennett provides a humorous yet astute social commentary, exposing the flaws in an idealisation of 'Africa' as a 'homelan' in the creole West Indian society. Instead, Bennett urges 'Miss Mattie' to see her home and identity as culturally and geographically rooted in the West Indies, 'for a right deh so you deh!'.⁴⁷

Mervyn Morris' 1967 essay, 'On Reading Louise Bennett, Seriously' transformed Bennett from 'local joke'⁴⁸ to internationally acclaimed poet.⁴⁹ Quoting Robert Verity, Morris asserts 'Louise Bennett, by the *authenticity* of her *dialect* verse, has given sensitive and penetrating *artistic expression* to our *National Character*...' (my emphasis).⁵⁰ Bennett, according to Morris, should be considered a poet because her work expresses an authentic cultural identity, achieved through oral verse that focuses on the 'popular':⁵¹

⁴⁶ L. Bennett, 'Back to Africa' in *Caribbean Verse* ed. Paula Burnett, (London: Penguin, 1986), 31-32, lines 1-36.

⁴⁷ I have not provided a 'translation' of poems written in 'nation language' as, in my view, to do so detracts from the original work. For the unfamiliar reader however, Bennett's final phrase conveys the notion that Miss Mattie's homeland has been under her nose all along.

⁴⁸ M. Morris, 'On Reading Louise Bennett, Seriously', (1967) *Jamaica Journal*, 69-74.

⁴⁹ Burnett, 'Introduction', *Caribbean Verse*, xxxix.

⁵⁰ R. Verity, quoted in Morris, 'On Reading Louise Bennett, Seriously', 70.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

the dialect language and everyday lives of working people. It is important to note that Standard English 'has come to be recognised as a component of nation language...habitual code-switching along the creole continuum has become a feature characteristic of West Indian speech'.⁵² Authentic West Indian cultural identity need not be expressed exclusively in 'nation language', Standard English, or even, for that matter, English; its credibility is marked by its plurality. Having thus defined the mode of expression for authentic West Indian identity, a definition of its 'popular' subject matter is necessary through a summary of Kamau Brathwaite's concepts of the 'Great Tradition' and the 'Little Tradition'.

Brathwaite identifies the 'Great Tradition', the powerful minority that control a society, in contrast to the 'Little Tradition', the working population or the 'folk'. These are cultural rather than literary categorisations. For the West Indies, the 'Great Tradition' is located in Europe with the white coloniser, while the 'Little Tradition' originates in the African-Caribbean slave culture of the plantation.⁵³ The artist or writer acts as a mediator between the two traditions, with Brathwaite and others moving to re-value the 'Little Tradition'. Barbadian novelist George Lamming's *The Pleasures of Exile* laid important groundwork for this theory. Lamming writes,

For the first time the West Indian peasant became other than a cheap source of labour. He became, through the novelist's eye, a living existence...it is the West Indian novel that has restored the West Indian peasant to his true and original personality⁵⁴

Lamming's claim creates a powerful and essentially causal link between West Indian Literature and the cultural identity of the peasant, wherein the full subjectivity of the peasant or slave is restored exclusively through literature. It thus confers a kind of *duty* on to the writer to articulate the everyday experience of the 'folk', with the expression of that experience becoming the ultimate assertion of authentic West Indian identity. Rather than exclusively ascribing the 'Little Tradition' to the experience of the 'peasant' or 'slave', however, I take Breiner's view that in a contemporary context, Brathwaite's

⁵² Breiner, *An Introduction to West Indian Poetry*, 180.

⁵³ C. Campbell, 'Folking Up the Criticism' in *The Routledge Companion* ed. M. A. Bucknor and A. Donnell (Oxford: Routledge, 2011), 384.

⁵⁴ G. Lamming, *The Pleasures of Exile*, (1960; Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1991), 39.

'folk' refers simply to the everyday lives of working people, as exhibited in Bennet's poem.⁵⁵

'Africa' played an integral role in aiding the removal of the 'filter of English eyes', and remains a fundamental cultural and symbolic resource for West Indian poets. Ultimately, however, like 'Europe', 'Africa' comprises just one element of the hybrid, creolised West Indian cultural identity. Shabine from Walcott's 'The Schooner *Flight*' personifies such West Indian creolisation forty years after 'A Far Cry from Africa', seeming to answer the author's earlier question of 'where shall I turn, divided to the vein?'

I'm just a red nigger who love the sea
I had a sound colonial education
I have Dutch, nigger, and English in me,
and either I'm nobody, or I'm a nation.⁵⁶

Walcott facilitates an emotional connection between his black body and the West Indian landscape via the sea in the first line. Spoken in creole grammar, this line gives way to an acknowledgement of his colonial education, expressed in Standard English. Summarising both his linguistic and racial hybridity, Walcott allows Shabine to speak for an empowered West Indian nation. Through a rather meandering and agonised trajectory, we have seen that authentic West Indian cultural identity has come to be expressed in poetry via perhaps the most obvious markers: its people, language, and place.

⁵⁵ Breiner, *An Introduction to West Indian Poetry*, 1.

⁵⁶ D. Walcott, 'The Schooner *Flight*' in *Selected Poems* (London: Faber: 2007), 114, lines. 40-44.

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