

Inhabiting the Page: Visual Experimentation in Caribbean Poetry

by

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I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

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## Abstract

This project explores visually experimental poetry as a particular trend in Caribbean poetry since the 1970's. Although visual experimentation in Caribbean poetry is immediately recognizable – for example, its play with font styles and sizes, its jagged margins, its division of the page into multiple discourse spaces, its use of images – little critical attention has been paid to the visual qualities of Caribbean poetry. Instead, definitions of Caribbean poetry have remained focussed upon oral/aural aesthetics, excluding its use of and contribution to late 20<sup>th</sup> century experimental poetic practice. By focussing on the poetry of Shake Keane, Claire Harris, Marlene Nourbese Philip, Kamau Brathwaite, and LeRoy Clarke, I bring post-colonial literary criticism into discussion with contemporary debates regarding visual poetic practice in North America. In so doing, this project values Caribbean visual poetry both for its expression of Caribbean cultural experience and for its contributions to broader experimental poetry movements. I argue that visual experimentation functions to disrupt traditional linear reading processes, which thereby allows poets to perform the flux of time and space in post-colonial contexts. Furthermore, such disruption of linear reading practices, often manifested by the positioning of multiple discourses on one page, serves to create a polyvocal discourse that resists patriarchal and colonialist power structures. Valuing the visual qualities of Caribbean poetry as signifying elements, this dissertation explores the aesthetic and social implications of inscription and visual design in Caribbean poetry.

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## **Dedication**

I dedicate this project to my Mother, Father, and Brother. Thank you for letting me hang around without ever asking when I'd be done. Without you, no syllable would be complete.

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## **Introduction:**

### **Situating Caribbean Visual Poetry**

In embarking upon this dissertation, I found myself trying to discuss a category of poetry that does not exist: Caribbean visual poetry. This mode of poetry has a material existence; its typographical experimentation is immediately recognizable as out of the ordinary for any reader who encounters such work. Its unjustified margins and chasms in the middle of a poetic line, its fonts that change in size and style, and words sliced in two are all marks of difference. Yet, despite the challenges and interesting discussions they might provoke, the visual qualities of this poetry are largely ignored, excluded from the conversations of Caribbean literary scholarship. Critical discussions have most often centred upon oral and musical elements as the distinctive quality of Caribbean poetry. Unfortunately, such discussions do little to account for the tendency towards typographical experimentation in many recent Caribbean poets. The limiting dichotomy between oral and written forms – not originated by, but so authoritatively elaborated upon by, Walter Ong – has continued its reign, rendering those who conceive of Caribbean poetry as a primarily oral form blind to the innovations taking place in the visual appearance of the Caribbean poem. In fact, when the visual qualities of a Caribbean poem are occasionally noted, they are most often seen as an attempt to infuse the written medium with oral/aural sounds, the writing existing as a score for the intended voiced manifestation of the poem. Of course, this interpretation is often a valid one, but an equation of visual experimentation with the poem's oral nature not only disregards the many other effects this style of poetry can achieve but also perpetuates the limiting view that Caribbean poetry must be based in orality.

I likewise found myself exploring poets – Caribbean visual poets – who do not exist together as a group. Though the poets whom I focus upon share such experiences as a colonial education and a position within the Caribbean diaspora in North America or Britain, there remain few easy links between them. They do not share a common country of origin. Their foray into visual poetry does not feature uniform techniques of typographical experimentation nor do their visual poems always concern the similar themes or express a uniform point of view. They have not congregated together as members of a particular academic institute or poetry centre, nor is their work informed by a collective manifesto. The formation of a distinguishable group of Caribbean visual poets is complicated even further by the fact that many alternate between producing poetry that is conventional in appearance and poetry that is visually experimental. Some poets who mostly publish conventional-looking verse will at times produce visually experimental works. For example, Olive Senior's recent *Over the Roofs of the World* (2005) features many poems with standard left-justified margins, but poems like "The Dance of Cranes" sprinkle words haphazardly around the page, while "Allspice" shapes the poetic lines into an oval in a style reminiscent of concrete poetry. Even Kamau Brathwaite, whose development of the Sycorax video style has motivated practically the only critical attention to the visual qualities of Caribbean verse, is still best known for his earlier poetry, namely *The Arrivants* (1973) trilogy, which featured conventional typography and layout. Furthermore, even though since the late 1980s Brathwaite has produced many visually experimental collections, his most recent books, *Words Need Love Too* (2000) and *Born to Slow Horses* (2005), while offering some visual experimentation, mostly offer more conventional-looking verse.



Its idiosyncratic nature – namely, its producers’ continual foray into and retreat from its production – makes it difficult to discuss Caribbean visual poetry as a distinct category of Caribbean verse. Nevertheless, the amorphousness of its category makes it a poetic form continually engaged in a process of experiment and discovery. By resisting categorization, this poetry and its poets avoid the constraints of conforming to the expectations of a particular style. They need not remain consistent in their approach and may embrace idiosyncrasy; a particular visual quality, for instance, can be used for different ends in different poems. Furthermore, these poets may choose visually experimental forms for some poems and more conventional layouts for other poems, depending upon their needs. Such freedom from categorization motivates an improvisational approach in which poets can continue to experiment with and explore the intricacies of poetic form and not allow their work to become mechanized by adherence to convention.

If we can allow this poetry’s one defining feature – its attention to its appearance on the page – to be an amorphous, penetrable boundary that allows poets easy entry and exit, and if we can thereby foster its happy co-existence, without air of superiority, with other Caribbean poetic forms, we will be able to avoid the problem that led to our critical blindness toward Caribbean visual poetry in the first place. Though attention to the sound of Caribbean poetry was foundational in establishing a tradition of Caribbean poetry freed from the hegemony of colonial literary traditions, what has resulted is the extolling of the virtues of this kind of poetry to the point where “Caribbean poetry” can be thought to equal only orally/aurally-inflected poetry. Consequently, even though oral poetry was once thought to be resistant, it has become accepted and institutionalized to the extent that divergent forms of poetry are excluded from the

category of Caribbean poetry. Such divergent forms are either left undiscussed in total, criticized for questionable literary or social allegiances to Europe or America, or discussed only in terms of their qualities that match the already accepted characterization of Caribbean poetry. While I do suggest that visual experimentation resists colonialist cultural and literary ideals, my approach does not seek to establish Caribbean visual poetry as the only or best means of resistance. Furthermore, though I suggest that visual experimentation is particularly suitable for representing the diasporic experiences of time and space, I do not wish to suggest that other modes of literary expression are inferior. Instead, I seek to explore the special qualities of Caribbean visual poetry all the while acknowledging that poetry in the Caribbean is a complex collection of differing forms.

### **Setting the Scene: Constructions of Caribbean Poetry**

In the early stages of developing a distinctively Caribbean poetry tradition, the need to define its characteristics was strong. The desire to resist colonialist power structures led originally to the need to construct a Caribbean poetry distinct from its European influences. The means of developing this resistant mode was to fashion a poetry that made overt its grounding in the Caribbean oral tradition. In *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967), Frantz Fanon eloquently acknowledged that "To speak a language is to take on a world, a culture" (38). To quote Kamau Brathwaite, "it was in language that the slave was perhaps most successfully imprisoned by his master" (*Folk* 31). Nevertheless, language also becomes the key site for rebellion against racist and colonialist power regimes. As Brathwaite convincingly characterizes the evolution of English into a particularly Caribbean mode of expression, "it was

in [the slave's] misuse of [European languages] that he perhaps most effectively rebelled”  
(*Folk* 31).

The mid-twentieth century's struggle against colonialist literary values also found its most decisive site of rebellion in language use. Although Caribbean English had long been the common spoken language, Standard – or the Queen's – English had remained the sole respected form of literary expression. The arguments generated by the Caribbean Artists Movement were to change this fact decisively. Founded in England by Brathwaite, Andrew Salkey, and John La Rose in 1966, the Caribbean Artists Movement was meant to unify writers and artists from the Anglo-Caribbean. As described by Anne Walmsley, the objectives of the Caribbean Artists Movement (CAM) were multiple:

Their hopes were that CAM would enable Caribbean writers and artists to become better acquainted with each other and each other's work, to explore a Caribbean regional aesthetic, and to make Caribbean arts accessible to a wide audience in Britain and the Caribbean. For Brathwaite at least, one of CAM's main objectives was to counteract what he saw as a tendency towards individualism amongst his fellow Caribbean writers: 'It's each man for himself and to hell with the community.' (101)

The prospect of asserting an aesthetic particular to the Caribbean found its expression in the choice to honour the sounds of Caribbean language. It was in the sound of their language, their so-called 'mis-use' of the European standards, that the Caribbean could assert its distinctness from its colonizer's values and norms.

The characterization of Caribbean poetry as an oral/aural poetry finds its most decisive

and influential treatment in Brathwaite's *History of the Voice: The Development of Nation Language in Anglophone Caribbean Poetry* (1984). In this text, Brathwaite seeks a means of developing a Caribbean poetry free from British literary ideals. According to Brathwaite, a poetry that is homegrown rather than imported from Britain requires attention to the Caribbean oral tradition. He asserts that "The poetry, the culture itself, exists not in a dictionary but in the tradition of the spoken word. It is based as much on sound as it is on song. That is to say, the noise that it makes is part of the meaning, and if you ignore the noise (or what you would *think* of as noise, shall I say) then you lose part of the meaning" (*History* 17). Brathwaite's theorization of Nation Language led towards a newfound acceptance of orally inflected Caribbean verse as a valuable aesthetic form. Brathwaite not only argued that orally inflected verse was not inferior to British models, but also established that it was the key means of resisting the continuing effects of colonialism. As Brathwaite observed the situation, because of colonialism "we haven't got the syllables, the syllabic intelligence, to describe the hurricane, which is our own experience, whereas we can describe the imported alien experience of the snowfall" (*History* 8-9). Exploring the early users of Nation Language such as Claude McKay and Louise Bennett through to his contemporaries such as John Figueroa, Michael Smith, and Oku Onuora, Brathwaite described a distinctively Caribbean model of English that "is influenced very strongly by the African model, the African aspect of our New World/Caribbean heritage. English it may be in terms of some of its lexical features. But in its contours, its rhythms and timbre, its sound explosions, it is not English [. . .]" (*History* 13).

More recently, J. Edward Chamberlin has continued Brathwaite's focus on the negotiation of language as a key characteristic of Caribbean verse. In *Come Back to Me my*

*Language: Poetry and the West Indies*, Chamberlin argues that Caribbean poetry is in part a pursuit of “a return of original power: the power to bring things into being by naming them; and the power to convey their presence to others” (100). Chamberlin frames Caribbean poetry as a means of recovering what slavery took away. In this way, Chamberlin’s argument builds upon Nourbese Philip’s assertion that reclaiming the ability to create, what she calls, ‘i-mages’ is key in resisting the continuing effects of slavery and colonialism. In her essay “The Absence of Writing or How I Almost Became a Spy,” Philip asserts that slavery and colonialism resulted in the ‘i-mages’ of African-Caribbean people being created by outside, dominant/dominating forces. Consequently, resistance to the oppression of slavery and colonialism requires the claiming of the right to form one’s own i-mage. She argues that by recovering the ability to create i-mages, one “succeed[s] in altering the way a society perceives itself and, eventually, its collective consciousness” (12). Chamberlin similarly ascribes to poets the task of “educating our imaginations” (151) by “show[ing] us how to see the world in images drawn from our own lives and our own language” (151).

However, Chamberlin also more fully accepts the influence of European literary ideals on Caribbean poets. According to Chamberlin, West Indian poetry is not a form that can exclude its European heritage, but instead “discloses a unique array of stresses and of challenges, with some of the most moving poetic ‘statements’ existing either in the dramatic tension or in the quiet space *between* languages, local and literary” (112). Although Chamberlin’s seeming equation of “the literary” with Europe can imply that so-called ‘local’ poetry cannot attain the respect and power associated with being named ‘literary,’ his observation is meant to acknowledge the balancing act Caribbean poets must perform between

European and local influences. Colonialism has resulted in the perception that ‘art’ and ‘literature’ come from elsewhere and, hence, Caribbean poets in the early stages of developing a Caribbean literary tradition must negotiate “divided or dual allegiance” (112). Chamberlin writes that “There are many ways of being a West Indian, and many ways of being a poet. The challenge for West Indian poets has been to ensure that neither surrenders to the authority of the other [. . .]” (113). They do this by developing a hybridized form of poetry in which the poets can “cultivate a schizophrenic gift, trying to combine the naturalness of being themselves with the artifice of being a poet” (113).

Chamberlin’s acknowledgement of European influences has been refashioned in a recent tendency towards intertextual approaches to Caribbean poetry. A strategy of criticism developed by Nathaniel Mackey in *Discrepant Engagement: Dissonance, Cross-Culturality, and Experimental Writing* (1993) does not seek to claim one body of literature as an influence on another but rather aims to position multiple bodies of literature in a relationship of comparison. Choosing to discuss black writers from the United States and the Caribbean alongside the Black Mountain Poets, Mackey’s particular aim is to go beyond “black literary lineages and genealogies” (3), and thereby dismiss assumptions that black writers should be seen only in relation to each other. A ‘discrepant engagement’ approach is aware that “correspondence, counterpoint, and relevance to one another exist among authors otherwise separated by ethnic and regional boundaries” (3). This style of approach does not position bodies of literature in a one-way trajectory of influence, but rather seeks to show their reciprocal effect on one another.

Recent texts by Lee M. Jenkins and Tobias Döring forward just such an approach

towards the interconnections of Caribbean and European poetry. Jenkins's *The Language of Caribbean Poetry: Boundaries of Expression* (2004) concentrates on "how West Indian writers respond to their literary inheritances inside and outside the Caribbean region" (1). Discussing the work of six Caribbean poets (Claude McKay, David Dabydeen, Kamau Brathwaite, Una Marson, Lorna Goodison, and Marlene Nourbese Philip), Jenkins explores "the often vexed but also productive relationship of Caribbean poetics to modernism" (1), arguing that Caribbean poetry contributes to the literary tradition of modernism. According to Jenkins, "Positing a relationship between modernism and Caribbean poetry need not involve the absorption of the Little Tradition of the local into the metropolitan Great Tradition. Indeed, a much more dialectical process is at work, where consideration of Caribbean poetic texts in the light of their modernist intertexts revises and extends our concept of the Western canon" (9-10).

Döring's sense of the intertextual relationship between Caribbean and European poetry as "passages" similarly constructs Caribbean and European poetry as reciprocal influences on each other. Nevertheless, his work places more emphasis on the power dynamics of Caribbean and European intertextuality. Setting his work in opposition to approaches that seek to define Caribbean literature as a product of an insular regionalism, Döring's *Caribbean-English Passages: Intertextuality in a Postcolonial Tradition* (2002) "approaches postcolonial Caribbean writing in its engagement with European legacies" (7). In particular, Döring opposes his work to Silvio Torres-Saillant's definition of Caribbean literature as a homogenous category independent of external cultural heritages. In *Caribbean Poetics: Toward an Aesthetic of West Indian Literature* (1997), Torres-Saillant argues that the "Caribbean literary imagination" (77) is unified by the "paradigmatic *topoi*" (77) of language, religion, and history.

Consequently, as Döring notes, Torres-Saillant's approach inappropriately dismisses "English, French, Spanish, Dutch, African, Asian or American affiliations" (5), and instead treats the Caribbean region "as one coherent cultural area whose literary productions bespeak a homogenous identity" (5). Döring instead privileges a model of "passages," using passage as "a figure of connectedness, of transport and traversing" (7). Yet, this model also signifies an awareness that "[t]o follow intertextual traces is a highly charged adventure" (13). Döring notes that just as the figure of "passage" suggests the traumatic historical Middle Passage, an intertextual approach can involve "a field of conflicting forces that involves the politics of reading no less than the history of culture" (13).

### **Passages: The Web of Visual Poetries**

In this environment of scholarly discussion of Caribbean poetry, my work moves the discussion towards experimental poetry that demands readers see Caribbean poetry as an art of not just sound and voice but also inscription and visual design. Although my discussion will not foreground the relationships between poets of the Caribbean and poets from Europe and North America, Caribbean visual poetry is a form that has ties to many poetic movements and traditions regardless of their geographical locations. By acknowledging the ties of Caribbean visual poetry to other visually experimental poetic movements, my project seeks to avoid what Harryette Mullen deems "aesthetic apartheid" (31): the classification of texts into separate canons based upon the author's racial or cultural heritage and the consequent failure to witness the aesthetic connections between separate groups. It is important to keep in mind, however, that although Caribbean visual poetry may have affinities with movements outside of the



Caribbean, such as Euro-American Modernism, Concrete Poetry, the Black Mountain School, the Black Arts Movement, and Language Poetry, the terms ‘genealogy’ and ‘inheritance’ give the wrong impression. Though all of the movements that I outline are interested in the visual presentation of words on a page, whether Caribbean visual poets would claim these movements as influences remains inconclusive. In fact, most often the poets I discuss in this dissertation suggest that their use of visual experimentation was motivated by their own creative process rather than by an outside influence. Claire Harris, for one, notes that the visual elements of her poetry are innate to her process of creativity: “I suppose I have a very visual view of poetry [. . .]. Anyway, when I begin a poem/piece there is a very clear image of what the poem will look like on the page” (qtd. in Dawes 62). Kamau Brathwaite likewise frames the beginning of his interest in visual experimentation as originating in his own creative process; it was a personal discovery. Noting that his visual poetry – what he calls his video style – “comes out of the resources locked within the computer” (qtd. in Perloff, “Logocinéma” n.pag.), he reveals that “When I discover[ed] that the computer cd write in light, [. . .] *I discovered* a whole new way of SEEING things I was SAYING. . . .” (qtd. in Perloff, “Logocinéma” n.pag., emphasis mine).

The link between Caribbean visual poetry and these other movements, therefore, is one not of filial imitation, but rather of coinciding discoveries that the visual appearance of poetry can be put to use. In addressing the web that connects these various poetic movements to one another, I will not offer an exhaustive account of these movements and their connections. Creating a detailed historical account of Caribbean visual poetry and its precursors could form its own book-length project. Regardless, because my project attempts to begin a discussion on Caribbean visual poetry, a form of Caribbean poetic production that has yet to be explored at

length, I find it necessary to use the scholarship growing around other visually experimental poetic movements as a starting point. Consequently, a brief description of these other movements is instructive.

To begin, poetry that features manipulation of its visual form has a long history and, as Dick Higgins asserts in *Pattern Poetry: Guide to an Unknown Literature*, has no single originary moment (3) nor a singular nation to which it belongs. Suggesting that pattern poetry is a precursor to the 20<sup>th</sup> century's various attempts to combine the visual arts and literature – including the international Concrete poetry movement, poesia visiva, and Lettrism – Higgins locates some of the earliest pattern poems in ancient Greek civilization. Pattern poetry is, nevertheless, in no way limited to Western civilization, but has strong roots in the East as well. The earliest surviving pattern poems are believed to be the two located on the “Phaistos Disk” which dates from circa 1700 B.C. Though located in Crete, its exact origin remains unknown. As Higgins discusses this poetry, early instances of pattern poems, along with examples up to 1900, often were meant to serve a social function. For example, some pattern poems were created in particular shapes so that they could appear on sacred objects like crosses or altars. Unfortunately, this type of poetry, thanks to its position somewhere between literary/visual art and mere social functionality, has often been denigrated as a lesser literature. Higgins, though citing many examples of criticism, offers a letter by Petöfi Sándor as the most damning (and quite humorous) critique of visual poetry.<sup>1</sup> Written to the editor of the newspaper *Haza k* which on March 27<sup>th</sup>, 1847 had printed a cross-shaped poem by Bulyovszky Gyula, the letter (in translation) reads: “If possible, for goodness sakes don’t bring out such heaven-shrieking bad stuff as the poems of Bolyovszky and Halha or whoever the author of the poems was.

When I read it I had diarrhea, vomited, and became consumptive. If my life is dear to you, please choose your poems better” (qtd. in Higgins, *Pattern* 15). The tendency of pattern poetry to appear in social venues, such as poems in the shapes of hearts for wedding announcements or in the shapes of crosses for funeral announcements, leads to the belief that such poetry is unsophisticated, akin more to a child’s play with language than to a serious artistic pursuit.

Despite early instances of visually experimental poetry, it is the 20<sup>th</sup> century in which an explosion of poets exploring and valuing the graphic potentialities of the printed page takes place. The late 18<sup>th</sup> century’s and early 19<sup>th</sup> century’s illuminated manuscripts of William Blake marked a return to more Medieval practices of producing books by hand, which subsequently offered a glimpse of the possibilities of combining the literary and visual arts. Nevertheless, it was the proliferation of fine press printing at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that marked the beginning of an increasing number of poets taking an active interest in the appearance of their published poems (McGann, *Black* 5). Arising “as a movement of resistance against this new current of commercial book production” (McGann, *Black* 7), the rise in fine press printing at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century represented at the very least an opportunity to create books whose material presence – type of paper, type of binding, style of font – could be dictated by desired aesthetic results rather than by mere economic frugality. Moreover, this rise in fine press printing offered an opportunity for some poets to play a greater role in the design and production of their own work. Ezra Pound is offered as an example by McGann of one who “kept close contact with the actual design and production of his own writing” (*Black* 79). Pound’s first book of poetry, *Hilda’s Book* (1905-7), was in fact produced by hand and presented to its namesake Hilda Doolittle (H.D.) to celebrate their relationship.

As both Jerome McGann's *Black Riders: The Visible Language of Modernism* and Johanna Drucker's *The Visible Word: Experimental Typography and Modern Art, 1909-1923* develop in great historical detail, the Modernist moment in literature marks a time when the spatial arrangement of poetry on a page began to gain significance. Attention to the visual qualities of poetry is so important to McGann's view of Modernism that he even goes so far as to credit it with Modernism's movement away from traditional meters towards free verse. McGann suggests that free verse at least in part results from earlier poets – namely, “[William] Morris and some of his contemporaries” (*Black* 81) – beginning “to work consciously with the spatial features of the page” (*Black* 81). Breaking conventions regarding poetry's appearance has the corollary effect of opening the page to less conventional metrical structures.

Of course, determining whether visual experimentation led to freer metrical forms or whether freer metrical forms led to visual experimentation is an impossible task. Just as earlier visually conscious poets can be said to motivate the development of free verse, Modernism's valuing of the voice, its timbre and musicality, brings about many developments of visual experimental poetry. Louis Zukofsky becomes a key figure who likened the poetic page to a musical score, wishing that poetry could rise to become music in part through attention to typography and layout. As McGann notes, “[Zukofsky's] interest in the visual field of the page was finally auditional: the formatting of a text as a means for scoring the musical resources of poetry, including the voice” (*Black* 83). Manipulating the text's visual appearance to suggest sound is one of the key qualities that connects Modernism's interests to other poetic movements such as the Black Mountain school, the Black Arts Movement, and Caribbean visual poetry.

Although I do not wish to suggest that experiments with a poem's visual qualities are important solely for their ability to represent oral performance, the fact remains that the ability to represent voice is one function of visual experimentation. Kamau Brathwaite in an interview with Graeme Rigby locates this connection between the oral and the visual in African tradition:

I think that oral traditions do have a very strong visual aspect. In the African tradition, they use sculpture. [. . .].

[. . .] [I]f you look through the imperishable nature of African art, it is there in the Griot, that is the man who does the singing and the history, orally. It is also there in the sculpture. It is a very intimate relationship between what he has to say and what he carves. There is always a visual underpinning. You think of Egypt and the Sphinx and the pyramids and all that. It is a strong oral tradition, which is underpinned by this remarkable visual monument. (qtd. in Rigby 708-9)

This connection between the voice and its visual representation is foundational for Brathwaite who, as Rigby describes it, sees the role of the poet as “both to sing and carve with the same concentration of purpose: the carving focuses the song, and the song shapes the carving” (709). The page becomes the site where Brathwaite can form “word-sculptures” (Brathwaite qtd. in Rigby 708), or in other words ‘carvings’ of the voice.

Caribbean visual poetry likewise shares the features and concerns of the Black Mountain poets' projective verse.<sup>2</sup> As defined by Charles Olson in his 1950 manifesto, projective verse is a style of poetry whose utmost concern is expressing sound through writing. Projective verse demands that “verse will only do in which a poet manages to register both the

acquisitions of his ear *and* the pressures of his breath” (Olson 615). Privileging syllables as “particles of sound,” Olson declares that “[i]t is by their syllables that words juxtapose in beauty” (615), and consequently “[l]istening for the syllables must be so constant and so scrupulous, the exaction must be so complex, that the assurance of the ear is purchased at the highest – 40 hours a day – price” (615). This emphasis on sound does not, however, mean that projective verse writers are not concerned with the written appearance of their poems. On the contrary, projective verse demands that writers meet the challenge of expressing sound through the visual medium of text on a page. For Olson, it is the ability of poets to compose on typewriters – rather than by hand – that gives poets more control over the visual appearance of their work and thereby allows them to express the intended sound of the poem. Olson writes,

It is the advantage of the typewriter that, due to its rigidity and its space precisions, it can, for a poet, indicate exactly the breath, the pauses, the suspensions even of the syllables, the juxtapositions even of parts of phrases, which he intends. For the first time the poet has the stave and the bar a musician has had. For the first time he can, without the convention of rime and meter, record the listening he has done to his own speech and by that one act indicate how he would want any reader, silently or otherwise, to voice his work. (618)

While this injection of sound through visual experimentation is an important tie between projective verse and Caribbean visual poetry, projective verse’s grounding as a means of protest is likewise an important link between these movements. In fact, in one of the few attempts to critically define visually experimental Caribbean poetry, Anthony Kellman – who defines himself as a Caribbean visual poet – names such poetry ‘projective verse,’ interpreting

projective verse as “a mode of socio-linguistic protest” (45).<sup>3</sup> According to Kellman, the major connection between the Black Mountain poets, the American Black Arts poets, and the early Caribbean nationalist poets was an “international spirit of protest” (46); in the 1960s, while the poets associated with the Black Mountain school were protesting against Vietnam, black American poets were protesting against civil rights violations, and Caribbean nationalist poets were calling for freedom from colonial control (45-46). As Kellman expresses it, “[p]rojective verse with its openness, its total expression, its off-the-page immediacy even when read from the page, its resistance to monolithic barricades (suppressive social and political systems and suppressive modes of poetic form and expression) served the writers well in their quest for change” (46).

Whether or not one calls Caribbean visual poetry “projective verse,” the belief that visual experimentation brings a less-structured, hence freer, form of expression is compelling. Many poets, regardless of their position within a particular poetic movement, have expressed just such a belief. Despite the importance of projective verse as an influence on later visually experimental work, it is the Modernist writer e. e. cummings who is often cited as a founding father, so to speak, of visually experimental work. Visually experimental work is in fact often described in terms of cummings; Aldon Lynn Nielsen, for instance, often uses the term “cummings-like” (22) to refer to visual poetry. Cummings’s poetry is seen to assault language, and it is this assault that many poets have taken as their inciting influence. Sonia Sanchez, a writer during the Black Arts Movement, portrays e. e. cummings as offering her an example of how poetry could be an expression of protest. Her poem “To CHucK” reads,

imgonnawritemea  
 pOeM  
     like  
         e.  
 E. cu  
     MmIn  
 gS to  
             day    cuz  
 heknewallabout  
         scr  
             EW  
 ing  
 on    WH  
             ite pa per. (qtd. in Frost 79)

Sanchez’s suggestion that manipulating the appearance of the black marks of text on the white page can be an assertion of her racial identity and a metaphor of, if not means towards, claiming power is not an isolated interpretation. Ed Roberson, another writer of the Black Arts period, similarly names the impulse towards visual experimentation as a physical act of claiming one’s space. Deeming his visual poetry a ‘calligraphic’ poetic method, Roberson characterizes it as an assertion of self through the physical act of making the marks of writing. Roberson elaborates, “It’s also making a stroke, a gesture, a mark in space – a place. It’s not just marking on paper. It’s marking a space that you live in, that you force yourself to be ‘read in’ [. . .]” (qtd. in Crown 198). As a claiming of space, visual experimental writing becomes, in Kathleen Crown’s words, “a powerful act capable of creation, alteration, and injury” (198).

Visual experimentation as a means of drawing attention to the act of writing is also a concern of language poetry. Formed around the short-lived *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* magazine,<sup>4</sup> this mode of poetry is defined as “plac[ing] its attention primarily on language and ways of making meaning” (Bernstein and Andrews ix). Manipulating the appearance of text is



a key means through which language poets sought to draw attention to the building blocks of language – individual letters or syllables, punctuation, and spaces – and, thereby, to explore the power structures inherent in language use. Such foregrounding of language itself – in essence making language and the ways in which we use it the subject of the poem – becomes a key opportunity that visual experimentation affords. In this way, language poetry and Caribbean visual poetry share a desire to critique language as a system that asserts control over individuals, yet also to value language as a means of claiming power.

By linking Caribbean visual poetry to various preceding and contemporaneous poetic modes, I have hoped to establish multiple sources of criticism from which we can begin to learn more about Caribbean visual poetry. Nevertheless, as my discussion of the work of Shake Keane, Claire Harris, M. Nourbese Philip, Kamau Brathwaite, and LeRoy Clarke will prove, it is the poetry itself that can most clearly communicate its aims and possibilities.

### **The Politics of Experimental Form**

What many of the visual poetic modes I've mentioned have in common is their status as experimental or avant-garde. In a Caribbean context, however, choosing to write in an experimental way is a decision with ramifications. Can experimental writing have political efficacy? Does it, as a marginal literature, have the power to continue the struggle to break down colonialist ideals and systems? In the Caribbean, as in many places, choosing to write, especially in a less accessible form, offers little promise of achieving the cultural capital necessary to provoke change. Nourbese Philip calls the choice to call oneself a writer, let alone a writer of experimental work, a risk, since “writing was not and still, to a large degree, is not

recognized as a career, profession or way of being in the Caribbean and even among Caribbean people resident in Canada” (“The Absence of Writing” 11-12). Working in experimental forms is especially risky since finding publishers who are willing and capable of publishing such work can be difficult. Consequently, writers of experimental work risk obscurity.

In cultural situations where resistance against oppression remains an urgency, the use-value of writing may be questioned when other less individual and isolated tasks may seem more necessary. The felt frivolousness of creative writing in the presence of conditions which require direct involvement and physical labour persists in the thoughts of many. In “On Poetry,” Dionne Brand expresses ambivalence regarding her relationship to writing. Calling her poetry “room to live” (“On Poetry” 181), she simultaneously questions its role when other tasks seem like they will achieve more necessary results:

I’ve had moments when the life of my people has been so overwhelming to bear that poetry seemed useless, and I cannot say that there is any moment that I do not think that now. At times it has been more crucial to wield a scythe over high grass in a field in Marigot; at times it has been more important to figure out how a woman without papers in Toronto can have a baby and not be caught and deported; and at times it has been more helpful to organise a demonstration in front of the police station at Bay and College Streets. Often there’s been no reason whatsoever to write poetry. (“On Poetry” 181-82)

Although Brand ultimately affirms the value of writing poetry, both as self-fulfilling and as “something wrestling with how we live, something dangerous, something honest” (“On Poetry”

183), her questioning of the value of poetry in combatting social injustices is common. Such questioning is enhanced even further when the poem's ability to communicate is hindered by an experimental or inaccessible form.

Michael Thelwell's "Modernist Fallacies and the Responsibility of the Black Writer" demonstrates emphatically the prejudices against formally experimental work. Speaking as a Black West Indian (220) but advocating for the "Black World" in general, Thelwell determines formally experimental work is an irresponsible endeavour for Black writers. In Thelwell's opinion, Black writers should ensure that their work is accessible and thereby most apt to effectively communicate messages that can provoke social change. Concerning himself with the modernist movement in particular, Thelwell suggests that writing that foregrounds form is problematic for it represents a withdrawal from the social world into language. Such a withdrawal means that the writer has abandoned the collective in favour of his/her own personal concerns. Poetry, in general, is too selfish an endeavour to Thelwell to even warrant discussion. As a literary mode that makes its form overt, it has "advanced entirely too far into the upper reaches of arbitrary subjectivism, preciosity, and privatist aestheticism to be considered anything other than therapy" (219).

Deeming modernism "a retreat into emptiness" (221), Thelwell asserts that

[. . .] modernism was more characteristically the excuse and justification for a general retreat from the wide-ranging engagement with social and moral questions which had characterized the best of nineteenth-century European literature. In the novel, modernism generally rejected realism and the broad and humane social vision and moral concern that had characterized the great

Russian, French, and English novelists of the previous century, in favor of formalist experimentation for its own sake, a celebration of aestheticism, the cult of the individual consciousness and sensibility, and the internalization of experience and concern. (221)

Thelwell does not seem to believe that the Black writer has the luxury of an interest in formal matters, but instead would better serve his/her community through realism and a transparent writing style that allows the message of the writing to be accessed easily.<sup>5</sup>

Such an attitude merely perpetuates a restrictive assumption that writers from marginal groups must advocate on behalf of their group. They must be social activists rather than literary artists. As George Elliott Clarke notes in “Harris, Philip, Brand: Three Authors in Search of Literate Criticism,” writers of marginalized groups can become trapped in the demands of identity politics. While their work is valued for a representation of a marginal subject position, the work’s formal achievements remain unappreciated, hence, most often, undiscussed. Suggesting that critics often use their study of Claire Harris’s, M. Nourbese Philip’s, and Dionne Brand’s work “to broadcast their own sermons against racism, sexism, imperialism, classism, and homophobia” (164), Clarke observes that such critics “either reduce the writers to the status of sociologists or they bleach their work of aesthetic value” (164).

The belief that an interest in form is selfish, what Thelwell calls a “cannibalizing tendency” (222), of course fails to recognize that formal experimentation is in fact an exploration of language and that language itself plays a key role in the formation of power relations in the social world. Consequently, formally experimental work can do cultural work by exploring the hegemony of language use. Thelwell’s dismissal of the Black writer who

writes out of an “alienated, fevered, individual genius” (330) rather than becoming “ [a] conduit[] through whom the collective force and experience of the people is reflected, shaped maybe, refined a little perhaps, and given back” (330) is consequently shortsighted. Furthermore, in requiring that Black writers put themselves in the service of their community, Thelwell limits Black writers in a way that writers from the socially dominant group are not. Instead of motivating the situation that he wants – one where the group as a whole achieves empowerment – Thelwell instead provokes divisiveness. Labelling those writers who value formal aspects of writing both assimilationist and irresponsible, he excludes them from his desired canon of Black writing. Furthermore, as we will find out in looking at Caribbean visual poetry, Thelwell’s assumption that writing which foregrounds its formal features represents a selfish endeavour is in fact mistaken.

Although we may find Thelwell’s arguments shocking in the limitations he wishes to impose on Black writers, the fact remains that in practice many of these prejudices are felt by Black writers whose work is experimental or breaks with expectations. Despite Edouard Glissant’s call for writers from marginal groups not to concern themselves with making their work accessible to the dominant group – “For the attempt to approach a reality so often hidden from view cannot be organized in terms of a series of clarifications. We demand the right to obscurity” (“Introductions” 2) – there has remained the concern that work that is not easy to comprehend – by the dominant or by the marginal – does not possess the political efficacy necessary for the marginal group to advocate for itself.

Amiri Baraka’s movement away from such avant-garde movements as Beat poetry and the Black Mountain school serves as an interesting example of one poet’s negotiation of the

perceived antithetical relationship between experimental and social activist writing. Nathaniel Mackey describes Baraka as once listing such poets as William Carlos Williams, Ezra Pound, and Charles Olson as influences, positioning himself as part of an experimentalist tradition: “The various ‘schools’ of poetry *we* related to were themselves all linked together by the ingenious” (Baraka qtd. in Mackey, *Discrepant* 22). However, Baraka then dismisses his formally experimental work, condemning it as “a cloud of abstraction and disjointedness, that was just whiteness” (qtd. in Mackey, *Discrepant* 22). Baraka’s condemnation of his earlier experiments with form comes out of what Mackey deems “a trend toward utter directness” (*Discrepant* 48) where Baraka could offer such straightforward assertions as “‘President Johnson / is a mass murderer’” (qtd. in Mackey, *Discrepant* 48) in his poetry. This movement towards direct statements represents an attempt to achieve a direct line of communication with readers.

Although Baraka’s association of formal experimentation with assimilation affected his own choice of poetic forms, on a larger scale this prejudice against experimental work results in a limiting equation of what ‘Black writing’ means. Harryette Mullen in “Poetry and Identity” writes out of her experience as a “‘formally innovative black poet’” (27), noting that her formally experimental work remains left out of anthologies of African-American writing which prefer her more speakerly texts. This exclusion of her experimental work from the canon of African-American writing suggests to Mullen that it is considered “less black” (29), in other words not sufficiently representative of qualities that signify African-American writing. Noting that such a neglect of formally experimental writing by Black writers is a “draining [of] the category ‘black’ or ‘African American’” (30), Mullen describes the effect of this neglect as a

“homogeniz[ation of] the canon” and a “marooning” of “divergent works” and poets (30).

Consequently,

‘Formally innovative minority poets,’ when visible at all, are not likely to be perceived either as typical of a racial/ethnic group or as representative of an aesthetic movement. Their unaccountable existence therefore strains the seams of the critical narratives necessary to make them (individually and collectively) comprehensible and thus teachable and marketable. In each generation the erasure of the anomalous black writer abets the construction of a continuous, internally consistent tradition, and it deprives the idiosyncratic minority artist of a history, compelling her to struggle even harder to construct a cultural context out of her own radical individuality. (Mullen 28)

As Mullen describes it, the tendency to categorize literature by race tends to exclude formally experimental Black writing from discussions of various poetic schools or movements. All the while, formally experimental writing remains excluded from the category of ‘Black writing.’ Formally experimental work by Black writers, thus, exists in a no person’s land.

At the same time as prejudices hinder the development of experimental writing practices in marginalized communities, there exists a tendency to equate ethnicity and formal experimentation. In “Ethnicity and Literary Form,” Wernor Sollors observes that “the innovative aspects of ethnic writing” are “less frequently studied” (240). Yet, he proceeds to explore why, despite this lack of recognition, “[i]n an amazing number of instances, ethnic artists have embraced innovation and modernity in form” (244). Sollors argues that a consideration of the formal aspects of one’s writing is a particular concern for writers of

marginalized ethnicities since to write in the forms of one's oppressors is often criticized as assimilationist. For instance, consider the development of Claude McKay's poetic career. His first two books, *Songs of Jamaica* (1912) and *Constab Ballads* (1912), are often recognized as the earliest examples of Nation language used in poetic expression. Yet his later poetry is labelled assimilationist. Despite the poetry's advocacy for racial equality, his use of the sonnet form, a European form, is often criticized as incongruous with the poetry's message.<sup>6</sup>

The impetus to avoid assimilation can heighten the writer's motivation to seek new forms. Furthermore, as Sollors suggests, this pursuit of new forms likewise results from the ethnic writer's (Sollors's terminology) position at the contact point between two or more cultures. Summarizing Thorstein Veblen's 1919 essay, "The Intellectual Pre-eminence of Jews in Western Europe," Sollors notes that "[. . .] Veblen argued that it is exposure to culture contact and to doubleness that encourages 'pioneering' and '*Unbefangenheit*, release from the dead hand of conventional finality" (243). Sollors takes a similar stance, noting that experimental forms in part come out of the felt need for cultural self-definition in situations where contact between cultural groups threatens the dominance of one by the other. Sollors writes, "[n]ot only the assault on ethnic boundaries but also ethnic boundary construction itself may generate innovation [. . .]" (247). In other words, this pursuit of new forms in part comes out of a desire to construct one's ethnic identity in terms of literary forms which are distinct from those of other groups. Innovative forms, according to Sollors, come out of an ethnic writer's negotiation of the interstitial space between cultures. Neither able to claim admission to the dominant cultural group nor able to claim seamless acceptance in his/her ethnic community, writers use this alienation to motivate formal experimentation: "The intensely



ironic relationship of ethnic authors to in-group and out-group audiences, from both of whom they must have felt alienated at times, could also lead itself to a pioneeringly transcending leap ahead in literary form” (252).

Maria Damon, referring to marginalized writers as “deterritorialized” (vii), likewise casts marginalized writers’ placelessness as a key factor in their tendency toward formal experimentation. Including “women, children, people of color, and members of working classes” (xv) in her conception of marginalized writers, Damon asserts “that the American literary avant-garde comes out of the work of the socially marginalized” (vii). Although her conception of marginalized writers is broader than Sollors’s, she similarly attributes the will to experiment to those who do not find easy acceptance among society’s dominant groups: “Who is better equipped to push literature and sensibility to its limits than the dispossessed, [. . .]” (x).

The preceding discussion has shown that writers from marginalised communities are well-positioned to create experimental forms yet also face dangers in pursuing them. This paradox cannot be solved. Choosing to write in an experimental form offers both hazards and possibilities. The writers that this dissertation focuses upon have chosen to write in visually experimental ways despite the drawbacks of potentially not finding a publisher or not finding a wide audience. A publisher may overlook the fact that experimental poetry is often difficult to comprehend which thereby narrows the potential audience pool (the audience for poetry is of course already limited). But a further consideration must be made: a form that may require non-standard page sizes, uncommon font styles, or the ability to print images is technologically difficult to publish. Graeme Rigby recounts his experience of trying to publish a Brathwaite

poem in *The Page*:

The significance of Brathwaite's adventures with the Apple Mac become apparent when you try to publish them. The introduction to "I Cristobel Colon" was centered and in a standard, Times-ish face: we could enter it into our system and get a strong approximation. The main body of the text was in a face to which we had no access, and even if we had, our host newspaper would not have had copyright permission on the software. It was a typeface we couldn't mimic, yet it was integral to the feel and to the conceit of the poem. All we could do was reduce it and do a scissor-job, pasting it up, so that it could make the transition from printout to centerspread. (711)

The frustration of publishing visual work is experienced both by the publisher who has to go to great effort to do the work justice and by the author who must fight to have his/her work appear as he/she intends. The struggles to publish, however, at times result in a necessity to self-publish. LeRoy Clarke's amalgamation of poetry and drawing in *Taste of Endless Fruit* (1974) required self-publication. As well, although Kamau Brathwaite's visual poetry has been published by various companies, his *Barbajan Poems 1492-1992* (1992) with its 8 ½ by 11" page size, for instance, required the attention of his own press Savacou.

Nevertheless, despite the potential hazards of working in experimental forms, the writers whom I have chosen to discuss are for the most part not marginal writers. For the most part, these poets are not suffering from obscurity, but rather are highly recognized, often award-winning, Caribbean poets. Shake Keane and LeRoy Clarke are better known for their contributions, respectively, to music and visual art, but Keane's *One a Week with Water* won

the Casas de las Américas prize. Marlene Nourbese Philip's *She Tries her Tongue, her Silence Softly Breaks*, in manuscript form, likewise won the Casas de las Américas. Claire Harris's *Fables from the Women's Quarters* won the Commonwealth Prize for Poetry (Americas Region), while her *Drawing Down a Daughter* was nominated for the Governor General's Award in Canada. Kamau Brathwaite's honours are the most vast of this group; they include Casas de las Américas awards for both Poetry and Literary Criticism and most significantly a Neustadt International Award for Literature (which is described as "a precursor to the Nobel Prize" (Webster 661).

### **Pathways**

Despite the attention that most of these poets have enjoyed, the experimental nature of their poetry – its visuality – has gone for the most part undiscussed. This project seeks to correct that silence. While many of the poets included in this study are well-known, I have chosen them not for their popularity, but rather for their contributions to Caribbean visual poetry. There is a growing number of Caribbean poets who employ visual experimentation; flipping through such a journal as *The Caribbean Writer* attests to that fact. Nevertheless, what Shake Keane, Claire Harris, M. Nourbese Philip, Kamau Brathwaite, and LeRoy Clarke offer to Caribbean visual poetry is an extended use of visual experimentation in their poetry. These poets do not just use visual experimentation in the odd poem or two, but instead create book-length examples of visual poetry. Consequently, these poets' commitment to visual poetry provides an excellent starting point for a discussion of Caribbean visual poetry. From their work, insight can be gained that could eventually be brought to bear on the other fine examples of

Caribbean visual poetry by writers who are more sporadic in their use of visual experimentation.

This project puts into relation two key bodies of research: post-colonial cultural and literary theory and the theory of experimental poetics. Having said that, though, this project is one that demanded an eclectic theoretical approach that includes elements of, for example, narrative theory, discourse analysis, and visual rhetoric. Although my project does use and expand on a variety of theoretical discussions, my theorization of the significance of Caribbean visual poetry is grounded in the close reading of sample texts. Beginning with the poetry itself, rather than with a particular theoretical methodology, and observing how the poems make meaning with their visual elements was necessary in part because of Caribbean visual poetry's immense variety. As an experimental poetry and one that does not conform to any particular rules or aims, Caribbean visual poetry is not well-suited to a singular theoretical lens. Its techniques and concerns are too diverse. No one body of research can provide adequate tools for reading the amorphous qualities of Caribbean visual poetry. It instead demands a web of approaches.

When I began this project, I set out to go where the poetry itself led me. Such a text-centred (versus theory-centred) approach is integral especially for an inaugural discussion of a particular poetic mode. At this early stage of critical discussion of Caribbean visual poetry, it is necessary to adopt an exploratory approach that seeks to observe and value the range of possibilities. The texts themselves need to tell us about how they put visual experimentation to use or else our view of Caribbean visual poetry could prove prescriptive, and we will find in it only what we expected to. By closely reading the visual poetry of Keane, Harris, Philip,

Brathwaite, and Clarke, I showcase the diversity of visual poetry's interests and intentions. While I do extrapolate from these examples to suggest particular opportunities visual experimentation allows, I do not seek a static definition. Rather, by emphasizing the eclectic nature of Caribbean visual poetry, I wish to implicitly suggest that the conversation surrounding Caribbean visual poetry needs to continue beyond even the diversity of this project's focus.

This dissertation seeks to balance a need to honour the vastness of Caribbean visual poetry's possible significance with the need to harness the scope of such a project. My work here is structured around two key themes: visual poetry's construction of Caribbean subject positions and visual poetry's exploration of poetic form. The overall structure of this dissertation is meant to show a movement between visual poetry's role in cultural exploration and expression and visual poetry's role in exploring poetic form. Chapters One and Two situate visual poetry in the representations of time and space in a Caribbean context. While discussions of time and space could be held tandem since both concern the development of one's subjectivity, I have separated the discussions so as to offer a more detailed account of each. By starting with the discussion of time, I have privileged the negotiation of the past as foundational in forming both collective and individual subject positions. Chapter One thereby provides the groundwork for Chapter Two's focus on the diaspora's negotiation of multiple homes in that the negotiation of multiple homes is also a negotiation of one's past in one's birth land and one's present in an adopted country. In the movement between cultural and poetic exploration, Chapter Three serves as a turning point. It situates visual experimentation as an evolution of the lyric, yet does so by arguing that the traditional self-centred, socially isolated lyric speaker

is inappropriate in the Caribbean cultural context. Chapter Four's focus on image/word relations represents the culmination of the discussion of the Caribbean visual poetry's exploration of poetic form, yet it too, with the concluding discussion of Brathwaite's use of pictographic icons, moves the discussion back towards visual poetry's representation of Caribbean cultural concerns. In fact, the overall discussion comes full-circle. The dissertation's beginning discussion of the negotiation of the past finds its mate in the concluding discussion of Brathwaite's icons as symbols of the loss of cultural history.

By structuring this dissertation using two main themes, I intend to honour Caribbean visual poetry's roots in cultural exploration and expression, all the while emphasizing that it does more than so-called 'cultural work.' It is important not just for its representation of Caribbean experiences, but also for its aesthetics and development of experimental poetic forms.

The chapters themselves are designed so that each accomplishes this overall goal of valuing the poetry's cultural and poetic explorations. Focussing on Claire Harris's "Seen in Stormlight" and Shake Keane's *One a Week with Water: Rhymes and Notes*, Chapter One discusses visual experimentation as a means of expressing one's negotiation of the passage of time. Situating Harris's and Keane's texts in the context of a post-colonial critique of the construct of time (e.g., the experience of time as painful because of the continuing impact of colonialism), this chapter argues that the non-linearity of the reading paths represents the non-linearity of the continuum between past, present, and future in post-colonial experiences. Although many texts more traditional in appearance may explore the flux of time – in particular the effects of a traumatic or forgotten past – they require readers to proceed through

the text in a manner that contradicts the flux of the experience being represented. A visually experimental page, however, can allow the past to exist side by side with the present, invoking the constant tension of their interplay.

Chapter Two moves the discussion from representations of time to the diasporic experience of space. Just as visually experimental poetry allowed the performance of time in flux, it becomes a particularly rich means of performing the “shock of the ‘doubleness’” (Hall, “Cultural” 396) associated with the diasporic experience. Focussing upon Claire Harris’s *She*, this chapter explores the protagonist’s negotiation of simultaneous, yet complex and traumatic, positions in Trinidad, the home of her birth, and Canada, her adopted home. Using such visual design as side-by-side columns, Harris is able to position the protagonist’s representations of Trinidad and Canada in relation to each other, emphasizing the complexity of her simultaneous dual belongings and exclusions. The protagonist’s traumatic negotiation of her physical homes, in fact, leads her to claim textual space, her visually experimental page, as an inhabitable space. It becomes the only space where she, a woman with multiple personalities, unable to function in either Trinidad or Canada, becomes unified.

Chapter Three explores visual experimentation’s role in refashioning the genre of the lyric. Using M. Nourbese Philip’s “Discourse on the Logic of Language” and Kamau Brathwaite’s *Trench Town Rock* as examples, this chapter argues that the collage-aesthetics of the visually experimental page creates a polyvocal, community-oriented (and activist) lyric discourse. Both Philip and Brathwaite use the visually experimental page to position multiple discourses in relation to one another. In so doing, they are able to perform the power dynamics involved in their interaction, showcasing issues of authority such as who has the power to

speak and/or who has the authority to represent experience. In both Philip's and Brathwaite's texts, visual experimentation is used to make readers active participants in the construction of meaning and, thereby, make them witnesses to and participants in the struggle for change.

The most radical form of Caribbean visual poetry – poetry that employs images – is discussed in Chapter Four. In this chapter, I situate Kamau Brathwaite's use of icons and LeRoy Clarke's *Taste of Endless Fruit* within a discussion of the traditional opposition of image and word. Noting that images are elements of ambiguity that provoke questions and frustrations regarding how to 'read' them, I argue that they meta-critically function to explore how meaning is made. While Clarke's text uses images to show that non-linguistic signifiers (images, but also body movement or sensation) are effective means of communication, Brathwaite's text uses images to showcase the differences between word and image as communicators. Playing with the unreadability of his icons, Brathwaite suggests that the movement from text to image in his work signifies a loss of detail and narrative. This loss comes to signify a decimation of Caribbean cultural history, most specifically the loss of pictographic writing systems.

By focussing on visual poetry's production of multiple reading paths and multiple meanings, this dissertation argues that visual experimentation functions to dispel colonizing reading practices. Reading is traditionally thought to involve continual forward progress towards a goal of understanding. Caribbean visual poetry, however, demands a dawdling across the page, a movement of one's eyes back and forth between multiple discourses. It likewise offers no promise that the significance of its visual elements can produce a determinate interpretation. Instead, it demands play, hypothesis, and exploration. In so doing, it honours the fluidity of meaning and rejoices in an endless process of discovery.



## Chapter One: Temporality and Becoming in Shake Keane's *One a Week with Water* and Claire Harris's "Seen in Stormlight"

It is perfectly true, as philosophers say, that life must be understood backwards. But they forget the other proposition that it must be lived forwards. And if one thinks over that proposition it becomes more and more evident that life can never really be understood in time simply because at no particular moment can I find the necessary resting place from which to understand it – backwards. (Kierkegaard qtd. in Oatley n.pag.)<sup>7</sup>

In the two texts that this chapter will explore, Shake Keane's *One a Week with Water* and Claire Harris's "Seen in Stormlight," the writers use the visual composition of their pages to express characters' attempts to situate themselves within time. A concern with time in post-colonial contexts frequently results from colonialism's erasure of histories. Such erasures can render the experience of time as ruptured and painful. The past, or irrecoverability of the past, can negatively affect the present and future. In *One a Week* and "Seen in Stormlight," the ability of the visually experimental page to feature multiple discourses representing multiple time periods showcases a construction of time that is not stable but rather discontinuous and multidirectional. This representation of time as a shifting terrain allows for a complex performance of identity construction across time, a performance in which the subject or community is shown to be forever becoming and never statically complete.

## **If I Could Save Time in a Bottle**

A consideration of temporality seems to be called for by the name of the category of literary criticism itself in which this project participates – *postcolonial* literary criticism. The temporal deictic ‘post’ announces that this category of literary criticism is founded on a passage of time, the term suggesting that the defining factor of this body of thought is that it occurs *after* the decline of Europe’s colonialist empire. As Keya Ganguly observes, the exploration of temporality in postcolonial studies has focussed on “deciding the status of the prefix ‘post’” (162).<sup>8</sup> The slipperiness of the prefix ‘post’ in ‘postcolonial’ is significant. To begin, one may note that ‘post’ as strictly a signifier of time has made room for other, more political, meanings. In his article “Introducing Postcolonial studies,” Neil Lazarus notes that originally the term postcolonial was meant to represent a particular historical time period – that of the time directly after the achievement of independence by many of Europe’s former colonies. He writes that ‘postcolonial’ was originally “a periodizing term, a historical and not an ideological concept” (2). Yet, the term ‘postcolonial’ has evolved so that it no longer suggests a particular time in history, but instead suggests “a project or a politics” (Lazarus 2). The problem remains that the association of ‘post’ with time can efface the power relations involved in colonialism and its aftermath. The passage of time as a scientific fact can seem to be a construct unaffected by power relations. As Anne McClintock suggests in “The Angel of Progress,” the prefix ‘post’ “shift[s] the binary axis of power (colonizer/colonized) to the binary axis of time, an axis even less productive of political nuance since it does not distinguish between the beneficiaries of colonialism and the casualties of colonialism” (qtd. in Parameswaran xlii).

Furthermore, though ‘post’ may suggest a time after the end of colonialism, and thereby

have a somewhat definitive starting point, the duration suggested by the signifier 'post' is innately ambiguous; it does not intimate an endpoint. The indefiniteness signified by the 'post' suggests a freezing of the study of literature and culture of former colonies into an eternal relationship with the experience of colonialism. The vibrations of the impact of colonialism of course will forever resonate, but the indefiniteness of 'post' identifies colonialism as the ceaselessly enduring characteristic of once-colonized nations, discouraging the acceptance of alternate identities.

The slipperiness of the prefix 'post' serves well to draw attention to the complexity a discussion of time poses in a postcolonial context. In Caribbean literary criticism, the struggle against the Western construction of time as linear and involving steady progress forwards frequently results in an exploration of the means for recovering lost cultural heritage. In the context of forced migration and slavery, one's experience of time is often seen as necessarily affected by one's negotiation of a somewhat problematic connection to his/her cultural history. As Edouard Glissant suggests, as a result of the European assertion of power over its various Caribbean colonies, the concept of history in the Caribbean is "characterized by ruptures" ("The Quarrel" 61). Thanks to these ruptures, one's negotiation of his/her place in time is in fact an attempt to locate oneself within a largely inaccessible past, what Glissant deems the Caribbean tendency towards nonhistory. Glissant explains: "Our historical consciousness could not be deposited gradually and continuously like sediment, as it were, as happened with those who have frequently produced a totalitarian philosophy of history, for instance European peoples, but came together in the context of shock, contraction, painful negation, and explosive forces" ("The Quarrel" 61-62). Consequently, what he describes as a "dislocation of the

continuum” (“The Quarrel” 62) leads to “a painful notion of time” (“The Quarrel” 64), one where it becomes difficult to forge a future because one’s focus obsessively remains on the past, and its discovery and recovery.

Despite the pain and instability that such an experience of time can cause, it remains important to note that while Glissant may wish that the Caribbean could experience a more solidified continuum between the past, present, and future, others would warn that such a linear model of time – and the linear conception of History that it promotes – is not to be desired. Even outside of the Caribbean context, the continuum model of History has been queried and felled by the rise and proliferation of materialist approaches to the representation of history – for instance, Benjamin’s historical materialism and Foucault’s archaeological approach. Furthermore, Glissant’s positioning of the Caribbean and the European experiences of time within a binary opposition needs complicating. Noting that many of the qualities that are associated with postcolonial time are as well a part of European philosophies of time, Keya Ganguly suggests that postcolonial time is not “incommensurable with the normative temporality of clock and calendar associated with Western modernity” (162), and hence, postcolonial and European conceptions of time should not be positioned in a binary. Drawing most extensively on Walter Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” Ganguly argues that “there is no *special* postcolonial theory of time, nor any reason to assume that postcolonial studies has contributed *uniquely* to our understanding of time by virtue of its foci, range of experience, or methodological insights” (163).

Walter Benjamin indeed prefigures the Caribbean tendency to see the passage of time as a broken continuum, one where the present loops back into a hard-to-grasp past and where such

looping renders the future hard to pursue. Much like Stuart Hall warns that an obsession with recovering the past can harm one's ability to construct an identity to meet the future, Benjamin emphasizes the hazards of overvaluing the past. Hall's argument that Caribbean identities should not be rooted in the past but rather oriented towards the future does not support severing connections with the past and devaluing its importance. Rather, his argument seeks to remind that one "cannot go back through the eye of the needle" ("Negotiating" 11), suggesting that the lesson of Negritude, and other such movements which promoted a return to Africa, was that a desire to return to the past, imagined or otherwise, is inherently doomed. One cannot return to the Africa that was left behind – "There is no fifteenth-century Mother waiting there to succour her children" ("Negotiating" 12). As Hall notes, "[. . .] Africa had moved on" ("Negotiating" 11). Arguing that "[i]dentity is not in the past to be found, but in the future to be constructed" ("Negotiating" 14), Hall warns that "identities for the twenty-first century do not lie in taking old identities literally" ("Negotiating" 14). Instead, learning from the movements that sought a return to Africa and for the most part failed because they relied too much on a rediscovery of identities and not enough on producing new identities, Hall constructs his ideal approach to identity construction. According to Hall, the ideal would be an approach that allowed individuals to glance at the past and look to the future, creating their own identities out of what they find in the past and out of what they do not find but have to create for themselves.

This ideal approach would likewise mitigate the chaos that Benjamin warns against. Describing Klee's painting "Angelus Novus" as a representation of the "angel of history" (257), Benjamin's narrative prefigures the threat Hall perceives resulting from a tendency to head towards the future with one's eyes solely on the past.<sup>9</sup> Benjamin writes that the angel's

face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. (257-58)

Despite Benjamin's position within Western philosophical tradition, his narrative could easily describe the relationship between past, present, and future that is taken as characteristic of Caribbean conceptions of the passage of time.<sup>10</sup> The ruptured continuum that Glissant pictures is Benjamin's "catastrophe" and Benjamin's angel's desire to "make whole what has been smashed" (257) is the impulse of many Caribbean scholars and literary writers who have expressed the recovery of a largely inaccessible past as a primary goal.

In addition to collapsing the binary that suggests Western and Caribbean conceptions of time are opposite, one must note that conceptions of postcolonial time are heterogeneous as well. A conception that classifies postcolonial time as solely non-linear, full of ruptures and loops, fails to note that postcolonial time may more correctly be characterized as the innate tension caused by the co-existence of both non-linear and linear experiences of time within the same cultural space. As Ganguly asserts, "[t]he rhetoric of fragments, fractals, and incommensurables ushers in its own totalizations; [. . .]" (167). In "DissemiNATION: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation," Homi Bhabha proposes that citizens within postcolonial communities must be interpreted as experiencing a "double-time" (297). These

individuals must negotiate their dual positions within time: one position in which they are a part of the continuity of history (linear time) and one in which ‘the now’ of their daily lives is foregrounded. Bhabha differentiates these two experiences of time in terms of ‘the pedagogical’ and ‘the performative.’ While ‘the pedagogical’ is associated with linearity – master narratives, for instance – ‘the performative’ is associated with non-linearity – the ruptures and repetitions of daily life. As part of the continuity of history, individuals become “‘objects’” (297) of “‘the continuist, accumulative temporality of the pedagogical’” (297). Conversely, when the focus is on people’s experiences and actions in the present, they are “‘subjects’” (297) who “‘must erase any prior or originary presence’” (297) through “‘the repetitious, recursive strategy of the performative’” (297). As Bhabha’s use of the terms ‘objects’ (concerning ‘the pedagogical’) and ‘subjects’ (concerning ‘the performative’) suggests, his differentiation also suggests a shift in power relations. ‘The pedagogical’ places citizens in a passive position, swept up by the current of the past, whereas ‘the performative’ features citizens actively creating their community identity and own subjectivity through the valuing of the present.

Bhabha does in part characterize postcolonial time as “question[ing] the teleological traditions of past and present” (304), but he does not limit his definition of postcolonial time to just this experience of ruptured continuities. Instead, postcolonial time features “[t]he concurrent circulation of linear, cursive, and monumental time, in the same cultural space, [. . .]” (304). This sense that in postcolonial spaces multiple conceptions of time co-exist is well symbolized by a passage of dialogue from a 1985 movie that Bhabha describes in “DissemiNATION.” Describing *Handsworth Songs*, a film made by the Black Audio

Collective during the 1985 uprisings in Handsworth district, Birmingham, England (Bhabha 306), Bhabha cites a woman's narrative:

I walk with my back to the sea, horizons straight ahead

Wave the sea away and back it comes,

Step and I slip on it.

Crawling in my journey's footsteps

When I stand it fills my bones. (307)

Although Bhabha uses this passage in his discussion of representations of times of change, he does not observe how apt an image it is for the intermingling of linear and cursive embodiments of time.<sup>11</sup> In its representation of multiple directions of movement, the passage, a metaphor likening the uprising to an experience of the sea, nicely symbolizes the multiple experiences of the movement of time in postcolonial, particularly Caribbean, contexts.

This image offers a sense of linear movement – a step by step journey towards (or away from) a destination: the “horizons” that are “straight ahead.” However, this movement towards/away from such a target reveals itself to be, not uncomplicatedly, linear. It is at the same time circular: her journey is a retracing of a prior journey. She is proceeding “*in [her] journey's footsteps*” (307, emphasis added) suggesting that the footsteps were already in-place and she is now repeating previous actions. As well, the sea in this image similarly retraces itself: its movement forwards always culminates in its folding back upon itself. This image places the woman's and the sea's movement forward in tension with their circular, repetitious movements, hinting at the threat that such a combination of movements may pose; when she at last stops and “stand[s]” she may drown from the inside-out, the water “fill[ing] [her] bones”



(307).

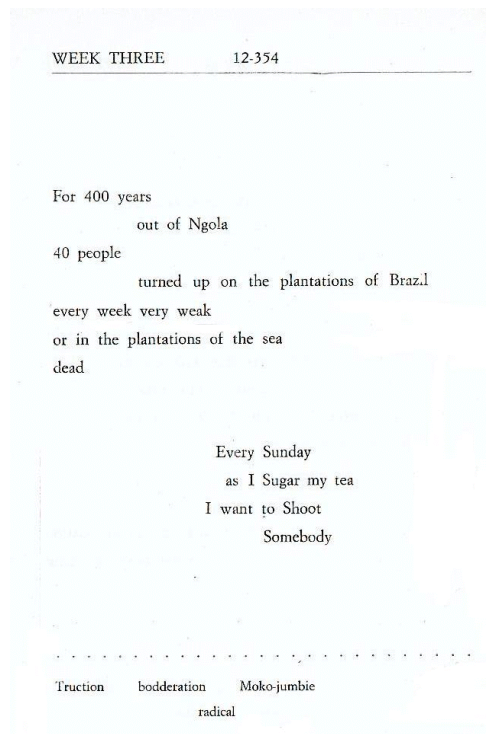
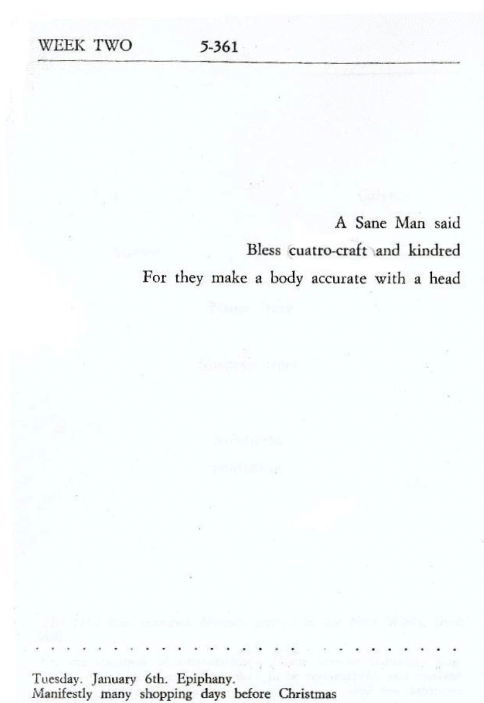
Just as Hall suggests that a constant return to the past hinders one's negotiation of the future, Kamau Brathwaite in his use of the Sisyphus myth warns that circuitous movements through time may lead to stagnation (Reekin par.4). Conceptions of circular time may in fact deconstruct the association of progress with a linear thrust forward from the past to the present, to the future. Yet, if the circular movements lead only to a repetition that forever results in a return to the same place, then such circularity is just as dangerous as a belief that the past flows unveeringly towards the future. What the symbol of the sea consequently offers is an image of repetition with difference.<sup>12</sup> In its continuous thrust forward formed out of its fluid motions back and forth, the sea provides the model for a less constraining movement forwards: one that circles back upon itself, one that repeats itself, but one that still manages to continue forwards. This ebb and flow of the sea is frequently taken as a metaphor of cyclical time, particularly in the context of island-based cultures. In *The Repeating Island*, Antonio Benitez-Rojo casts the Caribbean as a "a sinuous culture where time unfolds irregularly and resists being captured by the cycles of clock and calendar" (11), suggesting that the Caribbean's "aquatic" nature (in contrast to a "terrestrial" nature) serves as an appropriate metaphor for this irregularity. As Benitez-Rojo writes, "[t]he Caribbean is the natural and indispensable realm of marine currents, of waves, of folds and double-folds, of fluidity and sinuosity" (11). The sea as a symbol of time is particularly appropriate thanks to the multidirectionality of its movements; it is a space that can manifest Bhabha's conception of double-time, to repeat, "[t]he concurrent circulation of linear, cursive, and monumental time" (Bhabha 304).

As my discussion of Keane's *One a Week with Water* and Harris's "Seen in Stormlight"

will indicate, the experience of the passage of time impacts one's ability to situate oneself in the present. In Keane's and Harris's texts, the representation of time demonstrates that the construction of one's communal or individual subject position is a continual process occurring in time (and in space, as the next chapter will discuss). The visually experimental page, in performing the tension between continuous (linear) time and ruptured, repetitious (cyclical) time, simultaneously becomes a space in which the process of subject formation is performed. The visually experimental page's ability to hold multiple discourses, representing multiple periods of time can quite literally "make visible the assignment of subject-positions," [Gayatri Spivak] not in the sense of capturing the reality of the objects seen, but of trying to understand the operations of the complex and changing discursive processes by which identities are ascribed, resisted, or embraced" (Scott 33). Representing a community and/or individual across time, the visually experimental page thus emphasizes subject-formation as a continual process, demonstrating that community identity and individual subjectivity is never a non-discursive, stable construct. Instead, as shown by these texts' use of visual experimentation, communities and individual subjects are forever engaged in a process of becoming.

### **Shake Keane's *One a Week with Water***

In Shake Keane's 1979 *One a Week with Water: Rhymes and Notes*, readers encounter a vision of time representative of the complexity and flux of time suggested by such theorists as Bhabha and Benitez-Rojo. Keane's preoccupation with time in this text announces itself in his structuring of each page to represent a given week of the year. For example, consecutive pages appear as follows:



. (14-15)<sup>13</sup>

His use of headings like “WEEK ONE,” “WEEK TWO,” “WEEK THREE,” and so on, suggests the promise of an orderly and predictable flow of time. However, what this text’s page layout reveals is that it is precisely by promising a linear conception of time but then frequently disrupting it that Keane is able to foreground the irregularity and multidirectionality of his representation of time. In this text, the complexity of the movement of time, its flow backwards and forwards, has the effect of constructing a representation of the unsteadiness of Caribbean community-formation. As time does not flow unceasingly towards the future, the formation of a community does not involve unceasing progress towards unity. The unsteadiness of the flow of time in *One a Week with Water* creates a sense of a community endlessly experiencing its own dissolution and redefinition. The visually experimental page in establishing the flow of

time as unpredictable thus becomes the ground upon which a community's formation and reformation can be performed.

Shake Keane's position in this dissertation is as one of the lesser known poets. In fact until Philip Nanton's two recent articles, Keane's work had remained undiscussed in scholarly circles despite the fact that *One a Week with Water* achieved critical acclaim at the time of its publication, winning the Casa de las Américas prize in 1979.<sup>14</sup> Although Keane published five collections of poetry in his lifetime – *L'Oublie* (1950), *Ixion* (1952), *The Volcano Suite* (1979), *One a Week with Water* (1979), and *Palm and Octopus* (1994) – his best known artistic legacy is instead his music. A native of St. Vincent, Keane toured on the European jazz circuits in the 1950s and 1960s as a trumpet and flugelhorn player, becoming “one of the international jazz world's most admired musicians in the 1960s” (Nanton, “Real Keane” par. 1). With two collections published in the 1950s, two collections published in 1979, and not another until 1994, Keane's contribution as a poet perhaps remains difficult to consider in part because his work was published so sporadically and did not remain in print for long. As well, despite its critical success, *One a Week with Water* is such a departure from his other poetry that it is difficult to come to terms with its relation to Keane's other work. Keane's other poetry, which with few exceptions can best “be located in the tradition of Caribbean religious poetry” (Nanton, “Poetic Legacy” n. pag.) or in the category of “more reflective, personal poetry” (Nanton, “Poetic Legacy” n. pag.), does not account for the visual and formal experimentation of *One a Week with Water*. Consequently, since scholarly tastes tend to privilege Caribbean poetry that defies Euro-traditions, anyone encountering Keane's other work may dismiss his whole body of work as not politically-engaged enough to warrant much attention.

However, *One a Week with Water* breaks from his other less defiant poetry and instead comments upon St. Vincentian culture with “gentle satire” (Nanton, “Poetic Legacy” n. pag.). Betraying his frustration and disappointment regarding his 1972 abandonment of his music career to head a national Department of Culture, a Department that was eliminated in two short years thanks to a change in government, *One a Week* pictures a society struggling between “order and chaos” (Nanton, “Poetic Legacy” n. pag.).

Written during 1976 while Keane was working as a secondary school teacher, *One a Week* marks Keane’s return to writing. Nanton reports that Keane claimed “his poetry had ‘dried up’ around 1965” and that during the height of his music career, playing “jazz became the more appropriate medium for what he wanted to express” (“Poetic Legacy” n. pag.). It is, thus, quite suitable that Keane’s return to writing should result in the production of a text inflected with the spontaneity and improvisation of jazz. In a BBC interview with Linton Kwesi Johnson and Mike Garrick (1992), Keane (though not referring directly to *One a Week with Water*) notes:

There are certain kinds of structure, certain habits, that all jazz men seem to have, and if you find a poem that uses what would parallel those habits you might say, for example, that is a jazz poem. For example the riff, the repeated phrase, that happens in jazz a lot. Then you have the sudden juxtaposition of certain elements. Then there is the feeling that the poem is improvised . . . (qtd. in Nanton “Nonsense” 78)

The “sudden juxtaposition of certain elements,” and the feel of improvisation that it creates, marks *One a Week*’s ties with the musical form of jazz. Bringing together multiple plot lines

and various discourse types, this text's week by week structure presents its readers with an unpredictable use of the visual space of each page. With prose sections either broken into short lines or coursing across the page with full-justification and with poetry either presented in the more traditional, left-justified columns or composed to dribble words or whole lines around the page, the text visually suggests that Keane's text brings together multiple types of expression in order to showcase their interaction.

This jazz-like valuing of creative juxtapositions can be further explained by viewing this text as a form of parataxis. *One a Week* features a page layout that divides each page into multiple textual spaces, a space at the top of the page that holds the week's heading, a central part of the page which holds the week's poem, letter, or dialogue, and a section at the bottom of the page that resembles, though does not behave as, a footnote section. With the division of the pages into three distinct textual spaces that most often bear no overt connection to one another, the visual composition of Keane's pages can be described as paratactic. While the term collage could perhaps apply to this page design (Nanton does describe the text as a collage ("Poetic Legacy" n.pag.)), where collage implies that the separate items unite together to form some semblance of a whole, parataxis values the lack of connections between the various parts. A paratactic writing style is characterized by units of words placed together without connectives – "I came. I saw. I conquered" is the common example. A key significance of parataxis is that without connectives all elements remain relatively equal; no element is subordinated to another.<sup>15</sup> In the context of *One a Week*, parataxis' showcasing of disconnection between parts, and the disorientation that this evokes, is key. Bob Perelman notes that in the Language poets' use of parataxis – namely in their development of "the new sentence" – when the connections

between elements are not apparent, attention on the individual parts is heightened. What defined “the new sentence” was not a uniqueness in the structure of the individual sentences; the individual sentences featured relatively traditional structures and grammar. What defines “the new sentence” was instead the juxtapositioning of sentences which bear only “tangential relevance” (Perelman 26) to one another. Perelman writes, “the autonomous meaning of a sentence is heightened, questioned, and changed by the degree of separation or connection that the reader perceives with regard to the surrounding sentences” (26). In Keane’s text, the parataxis created by the page composition similarly draws attention not just to the individual parts of the page but to the significance of their relation, or lack of relation, to one another.

In so drawing one’s attention to the disunity created by the juxtaposition of the three textual spaces of the page, the parataxis of this text in part serves to unsettle notions of time. Though one would expect the headings to function as a naming – hence, limiting of – what occurs in a particular section of writing, here we find that the content of the writing on the central part of the pages frequently contradicts the passage of time indicated by the headings. In particular, in one of the many plotlines we witness the shattering of the conventions of time by intimating that a single conversation between Keane and a former acquaintance lasts for seven weeks. The conversation occurs between Keane and a woman named Faustina upon their first meeting since Keane’s return to St. Vincent from abroad. Occurring during Weeks Twenty-Nine through Thirty-One and Weeks Thirty-Four through Thirty-Seven, this conversation tears at the supposed divisions between the weeks that the headings connote. This conversation flows week to week – one week beginning exactly where the last week left off. Even sentences left unfinished in one week find their completion in the next week: the jump between Weeks

Thirty-One and Thirty-Four features just such a severing of a sentence with Week Thirty-One ending with “Boy, I can’t tell you the last time I went on a *nice*... (but why it raining so today?)” (47) and Week Thirty-Four beginning with “...nice moonlight drive up Argyle” (50).

Since the headings suggest that the discourse-time is much longer than the story-time, Keane’s representation of this conversation as if it lasts seven long weeks is in part a mimetic representation of the situation’s insufferableness. In fact, calling this exchange a conversation is perhaps inexact since Faustina’s voice dominates. The only representation of Keane’s presence at all is in Faustina’s occasional repetition of his one-word answers to her questions: “So 1976 bring you back for good!, 1973? So where you was all this time? Germany? Only the last seven years? ... Well, I does be home all this time looking after my husband, you know; hardly knows the German happenings these days” (46). Despite this manipulation of the page design to humourously comment on Faustina’s verbosity, what remains most important here is that the interaction between the headings and the central part of the page serves to unsettle the signifying process for the reader. The seeming contradiction between the time period the headings connote and what appears on the central part of the page functions to position readers in a space where either their conception of a “week” or their conception of a “conversation” no longer applies. These words can no longer possess their usual meanings: either a “week” must be a much shorter period of time than one would expect or a “conversation” can continue much longer than one would have thought possible.

Keane’s use of the page composition to unsettle the meanings of time’s measurements is coupled with his use of the page composition to query the assumption that time flows linearly forwards. The structure of the text with the week by week headings suggests the



presence of a linear conception of time, an orderly flow continuously forward measured in weekly units. However, the promise of this orderliness serves to foreground Keane's frequent disruption of such expectations. His placing of the weeks out of order, his inclusion of both a "FOLLOWING WEEK" and a "WEEK FIFTY after "WEEK FORTY-NINE," his formation of a year out of fifty-three weeks rather than fifty-two, his inclusion of a "DISCREPANCY DAY (added every 3114 years)," all combine to establish the slipperiness of the flow of time represented by this text. Keane even directly instructs his readers to engage in this exploration of the text's uneven and ruptured view of time: the section at the bottom of Week Fifty demands, "Any night this week, upon the rising of the moon, try to find WEEK FORTY-SEVEN" (67). Sure enough, if the reader had not already noticed the elision, when he/she then travels back in time to find Week Forty-seven, flipping back to pages already read, Week Forty-seven is indeed found to be missing. In fact, in order to find it, the reader must travel forwards into the future since Week Forty-seven at last appears after Week Fifty-three.

Like the conversation between Keane and Faustina, this placement of Week Forty-seven out of chronological order renders the signifiers of time fluid in meaning. The ambiguity regarding time's measurements here occurs as a result of the possible disruption to the chronology of one of the text's many plotlines. Patient Priscilla is introduced in Week Forty-six as an infant, her name listed on a document that one would fill out when seeking medical treatment. In total, her storyline appears in Week Forty-six, Week Forty-nine, Following Week, Week Fifty, and at last in the misplaced Week Forty-seven. With Week Fifty concluding with an announcement of PIMSY's pregnancy (PIMSY being one of the many names Priscilla adopts) and Week Forty-seven featuring PIMSY discussing possible names for the child, the

content of the storyline appears to be offered chronologically despite Week Forty-seven's position out of order. If Week Forty-seven were to be read in-between Weeks Forty-six and Forty-nine, the chronology of the storyline would be disrupted. Furthermore, the syntax of the storyline would be interrupted since Week Forty-six's "Actual name used by schoolmates: PUNKANCE MILLINGTON..." (63) is completed by Week Forty-nine's "... (ratified later by marriage of patient Priscilla's mother to School Headmaster, Fr. Raul Millington. Cert. Ed.)" (65). However, despite the seeming linearity of the content of the storyline, Week Forty-seven's displacement signals a circularity, if not indeterminacy, regarding Priscilla's position within the movement of time. In that Week Forty-seven's displacement encourages readers to look back and explore how the storyline would change if the weeks were properly ordered according to their headings, Week Forty-seven motivates a return to the beginning of the storyline.

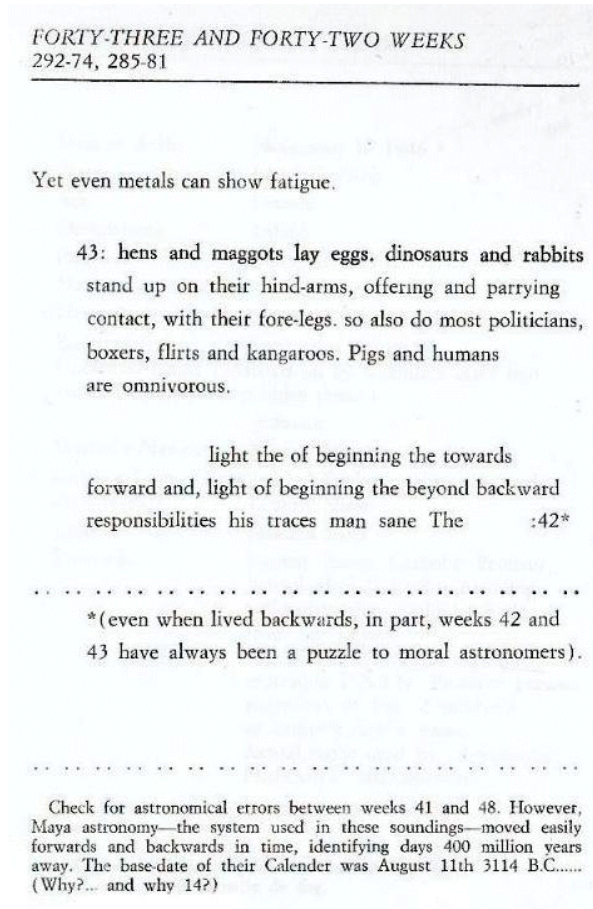
This circularity of the storyline is further established by Patient Priscilla's commentary regarding names for her child. First of all, her selection of "X" as a girl's name harkens back to her own attempt to use that name while doing graduate work; we are told that "McGill [University] refuses to examine her under that name" (66). Her selection of a boy's name signals the circularity of this storyline even more clearly. She announces, "If the child is Male / I will call him / Priscilla Isola" (72) – her own birth name. Neither choice of name merely suggests her desire to name a child after herself; instead, these name choices suggest an ultimate indeterminacy regarding her movement through time, even hinting that the child she will give birth to is herself. Such a reading is rendered possible especially when one considers the other name doubling that occurs throughout the narrative of Priscilla's history. In Week

Forty-six, “Lemmy Shaw” is listed as her father’s name; as indicated in Week Forty-Nine, Priscilla at one point goes by “Lemme-Shaw-You,” a name that has evolved out of her classmates’ tendency to call her “‘Lemme Punkance,’ often followed by the words ‘with you’” (65). In addition to Priscilla sharing a name with her father, her lover is revealed to have a name quite close to her mother’s. In Week Forty-six, “Tricksy Norman” is listed as her mother’s name; in Following Week, readers are told that Priscilla “Falls in love with [. . .] Norman Nance, known in the trade as ‘Tricksy’” (66). With the name doubling suggesting that Priscilla becomes her father, that her lover becomes her mother, and that her child becomes Priscilla herself, the assumed linear progress of genealogy is put in question.

Even the birth date of Priscilla, which could serve to differentiate between her own birth, and that of her child, is rendered suspect. Priscilla’s date of birth is listed as “November 12 1946” (63), but the asterix appearing after it with no definitive meaning functions in part to make the accuracy of the date questionable. Without fulfilling the roles common to an asterix – it does not seem to emphasize the date and it definitely does not function to point the reader towards a footnote – this asterix has no discernable purpose. The confusion caused by this asterix subsequently unsettles one’s confidence in the date; after all, could the asterix be functioning as a question mark, signalling uncertainty? Furthermore, PIMSY is said to be pregnant “1973-1976” (67), implying that her child is born in 1976. Not only does the time frame of her pregnancy, three years, counter traditional conceptions of time and/or of pregnancy, but also the date ‘1976’ easily could be inaccurately written ‘1946.’ Consequently, even the date of birth that could serve to distinguish between Priscilla and her child, positioning them in a linear sense of time, the child coming after Priscilla, establishes only the

indeterminacy of the progression of time.

A similar complication of the week order constructs a multidirectional conception of time. Weeks Forty-two and Forty-three appear on the same page, directly after Week Forty-four:



. (61)

Interestingly, this page is one of the only pages where the distinct textual spaces actually bear some connection to one another. Beginning with the pseudo-note section at the bottom of the page, one notes Keane gesturing towards a precedent for his representation of time flowing backwards and forwards. Keane notes that “[. . .], Maya astronomy – the system used in these soundings – moved easily forwards and backwards in time, identifying days 400 million years away” (61). The wording of this declaration is important; one is “identifying days 400 million

years away” (61), but the word “away” renders ambiguous whether those days are 400 million years in the past or in the future. Either is possible. Moving up the page slightly to a section that does actually hold a footnote, readers witness an assumption that time can be “lived backwards.” We’re told “even when lived backwards, in part, weeks 42 and 43 have always been a puzzle to moral astronomers” (61).

Most importantly, though, Keane is able to perform his conception of the fluidity of time in his manipulation of the visual presence of the words of Week Forty-two. In order for the words to syntactically fit together, this passage must be read backwards, starting at the bottom right and continuing right to left, bottom to top. The passage would read as follows: “42: The sane man traces his responsibilities backward beyond the beginning of light, and forward towards the beginning of the light” (61). The reading process is not one that merely reverses the traditional Western manner of reading by reversing the common left to right movement to a right to left movement. After all the words themselves still appear in their traditional way. Consequently, the process of reading this passage requires a constant looping. One would proceed left to right to read “The,” and then would have to jump right to left to begin the word “sane.” This looping continues until the passage is complete.<sup>16</sup>

This looping required of the reading process not only mimics the motion of the sea’s waves that I earlier discussed as an image of Caribbean time (an overall movement in one direction formed out of movements in various other directions), but also highlights the circularity of the image that this passage offers. The sane man is tracing his responsibilities backwards beyond the beginning of light *and* forwards toward the beginning of light. If the beginning of light is a time/space that he can reach both forwards and backwards, his journey

must be a circular one. This image thus foregrounds the elusiveness of being able to mark the sane man's position within time. The temporal deixis of 'beginning' suggests that the man's journey involves a pursuit, not of a thing, but of a moment in time. Yet, this moment is something which is simultaneously behind and in front of him. Consequently, his position in relation to this moment in time remains ambiguous; whether he exists before or after this beginning is impossible to determine.

Beyond Keane's preoccupation with naming periods of time (for instance, the weekly headings) and his resulting determination that such naming is impossible, Keane's exploration of time culminates in his structuring of the text to be – or to be like – a calendar. In structuring the text as a calendar, Keane is in part showing that the structuring of time plays a key role in a culture's or community's definition of itself. Although the variousness of Keane's many plots and discourse types makes it nearly impossible to determine the text's overall theme or purpose, what one frequently observes in many of the individual narratives is the problematic nature of community formation in a community marked by the frequent departures and returns of its citizens. The role that attention to the dynamics of time can play in this exploration of community formation is, as Keane announces in his text's epigraph, that a nation's, or community's, calendar – its naming of dates that are important to it – is a basic step in its construction of identity. Citing his "great-godmother, addressing a Diet of serpents in Eden – due west of Africa – some time ago" (11), Keane equates the ability to form one's own calendar with the other key markers of a community's identity – its language, flag, and name. The great-godmother advises,

*'... when at last we are all free*

*each of us will have  
her ('is) own language, flag, name  
and Calender [sic]' ... (11)*

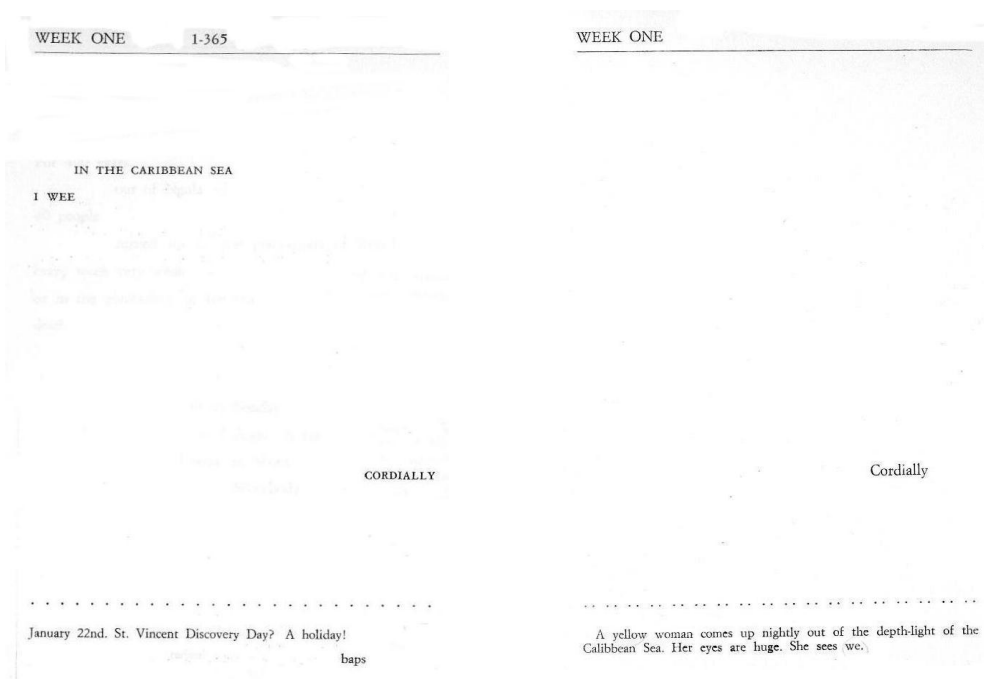
The creation of a calendar is similarly framed as an assertion of community identity by Walter Benjamin. Noting that revolutionaries frequently cite “mak[ing] the continuum of history explode” (261) as their duty, Benjamin observes that “[t]he great revolution introduced a new calendar” (261). To Benjamin, because calendars feature holidays which function as “days of remembrance” (261) of the founding moment(s) of the community, “calendars do not measure time as clocks do; they are monuments of historical consciousness [. . .]” (261-62).

Establishing a calendar, thus, can mark the building of a tradition – the naming of events/people that can be remembered and honoured annually. In this way, Keane’s construction of a calendar becomes the foundation upon which the community, in his case St. Vincent, can build itself.<sup>17</sup>

However, as Philip Nanton observes, Keane’s rupturing of the linear flow of time, and the chaos in general that the text’s improvisational nature enacts, is in part a comment on the precariousness of the process of forging a unified community. Nanton writes, “The author is suggesting that, in the context of St. Vincent’s political independence, achieved in 1980, soon after the collection was written, both calendars and new societies take time to become established” (“Poetic Legacy” n. pag.). Considering that the tradition – hence, cultural identity – that the calendar helps to form concerns standardizing the events of each year so that holidays and such are repeated in each subsequent year, Keane’s construction of a second “WEEK ONE” at the conclusion of his text becomes significant. This second “WEEK ONE” hints that

the cycle of the year has begun again, and yet while the second “WEEK ONE” bears a resemblance to the first “WEEK ONE,” their differences speak to the difficulty in forming the cultural collective “we” that the text desires. Throughout the rest of the text, Keane’s attempt to form a concrete signified to which the signifier “we” can refer is demonstrated through his frequent use of genres associated with direct communication between individuals: for example, the representation of conversations and dialogue, but most importantly for the comparison of the two Week Ones, the genre of letter writing. The central part of the pages of the two Week Ones contain text that is reminiscent of letters, while the bottom section of the pages feature representations of St. Vincent’s formation as a nation, or perhaps more correctly, as a unified people. In so structuring the pages in similar manners, Keane motivates interpretations not just of the interaction between the sections on each individual page but of the interaction between the two pages that serve as the bookends to the overall text.

The two Week Ones appear as follows:



. (13, 74)



To begin with the first Week One, Keane's interest in the formation of "we" announces itself in the juxtaposition of the two sections of the page. The bottom section's announcement that January 22<sup>nd</sup> is "St. Vincent Discovery Day? A holiday!" (13) makes the upper section's "I WEE" (13) resonate with the possibility of signifying the formation of a group – "IN THE CARIBBEAN SEA," I am we or I become part of a we. Of course, the slipperiness of "WEE" resounds with multiple other meanings. As Philip Nanton observes, "I WEE" could suggest the "I" "relieving himself" ("Nonsense" 82) in the Caribbean Sea; hence, an image of "personal release" ("Nonsense" 82). As someone mentioned to me after my presentation at the May 2005 CACLALS conference, such a biological reading of "WEE" also suggests a melding of the individual with the sea – in other words, an attempt to be at one with the sea. Furthermore, as two others suggested after this same presentation, "WEE" can also be read as "small" – so, the person's size is minimized by his/her position in the sea.<sup>18</sup> In any case, these multiple readings all announce the text's interest in representing one's attempt to situate him/herself within the Caribbean geography and culture.<sup>19</sup> However, the ambiguity of "WEE" coupled with the question mark placed after "St. Vincent Discovery Day" in the bottom section of the page hints that the process of identifying who the "we" of St. Vincent is will be fraught with difficulty.

In fact, the rendering of "St. Vincent Discovery Day" with a question mark draws into question the existence of St. Vincent – if it hasn't been discovered, does it exist? Of course, the question mark could also be a critique of the word "Discovery," an implicit assertion that St. Vincent did not need Columbus's discovery of it, nor does it need, given the havoc Columbus's discovery caused, to celebrate its discovery.<sup>20</sup> While the first Week one's bottom section seems to question the existence/discovery of St. Vincent, the bottom section of the second Week One

actually depicts the discovery, and it is not Columbus who performs the discovery. Instead it is a seemingly mythological woman emerging from the sea to affirm the existence of a ‘we’: “A yellow woman comes up nightly out of the depth-light of the Calibbean Sea. Her eyes are huge. She sees we” (74). Playing on the Shakespearean figure of Caliban, this description suggests that it is the emergence out of colonialism that allows for the existence of ‘we.’ Furthermore, comparing the bottom sections of the two Week Ones reveals a movement from uncertainty regarding the possibility for the existence of ‘we’ towards the affirmation that ‘we’ indeed can be defined.

However, the text is not one that values such certainties and the slipperiness of the term ‘we’ is again made apparent when the letter form in the central part of both pages is remembered. In both cases, although Keane does not offer a salutation line nor a concluding signature, the presence of “cordially” at the bottom right of the pages establishes these entries’ connection with the genre of letter writing. ‘Cordially,’ synonym for such sign-offs as ‘sincerely,’ is positioned on the page in a manner that is consistent with Keane’s other, more traditional, use of letters throughout the text.<sup>21</sup> If these pages are interpreted as letters, then the fact that neither of these letters feature either a sender or a receiver becomes significant. With the absence of senders and receivers, and with little – or in the case of the second Week One, nothing – verbally communicated, these letters suggest that the people who would form ‘we’ have dissolved.

Yet this seeming lack of the existence of a ‘we’ is not the final picture Keane offers; in fact there never is a *final* picture. The juxtaposition of the textual spaces of the final Week One confirm the continuing ambiguity regarding the meaning of ‘we.’ The central section’s refusal

of the existence of 'we' – the lack of a sender and receiver – and the bottom section's simultaneous affirmation of the presence of 'we' – "She sees we" (74) – highlights the process of forming a 'we' that is forever in flux. As "Seen in Stormlight" will perform Harris's shifting subjectivity across time, this text demonstrates that 'we' is continually in the process of becoming, changing, growing, withering, and becoming again. The unified 'we' that the text seeks proves to embody what Stuart Hall (and many others of course) cite as the production of identity, a "'production' which is never complete, always in process" ("Cultural" 392). Keane's final description of the discovery of we by the "yellow woman" (74) confirms this continual process of formation. The woman rises "nightly" (74); night after night she must affirm and re-affirm the presence of and possibility for a group that can form, and be described as, 'we.'

### **Claire Harris's "Seen in Stormlight"**

Born in Trinidad in 1937, Harris moved to Canada in 1966 after first completing a Bachelor's degree at the National University of Ireland and a teaching diploma at the University of West Indies (Dawes 61). Settling in Calgary, Alberta, Harris taught high school English and Drama while also developing her literary career as both a writer of poetry collections and an editor and managing editor of two literary journals, respectively *Dandelion* and *blue buffalo* (Dawes 61). Published originally in 1975 in the Nigerian publication *Ódùmá Magazine* without the sections of prose, "Seen in Stormlight" is Harris's first published poem. In its revised form, it later appeared in Harris's first collection of poetry *Fables from the Women's Quarters* (1984), which won the Commonwealth Prize for Poetry. Having now published seven collections of poetry, the latest being *She* in 2000, Harris has

demonstrated a consistent interest in visual experimentation from the time of her first collection.<sup>22</sup> As she notes, poets, “[u]nlike other writers, [. . .] have the gift of the page, which is space and form” (qtd. in Dawes 62), and that gift is, therefore, something to honour and make use of.

Featuring a page layout similar to Keane’s, “Seen in Stormlight” divides the page into multiple discourse spaces. Nearly every page of this poem juxtaposes a section of verse occupying the central field of the page with a section of italicized prose appearing at the bottom of the page. As Keane’s page layout offered a dotted line separating the central and lower regions of the page, Harris’s page layout divides the discourse spaces with a solid line coursing from the left, half-way across the page. Appearing above the dividing line on every page is a section of verse describing Lagos, Nigeria in 1975, shortly before the coup that removed General Gowon from power. Told in the first-person, present tense, the verse section was written by Harris during her year-long stay in Lagos while completing a diploma in mass communication (Dawes 61). The prose section at the bottom of the page represents a voice from almost ten years later. This voice provides a retrospective glance back at Harris’s time spent in Lagos, offering further explanations of the images and situations portrayed in the poem. In its combination of two voices, one describing the events as they happen and one reflecting back on the event, “Seen in Stormlight” uses the page layout to perform Harris’s negotiation of the past. Representing a current self’s discussion with the past, this poem performs what Hall deems a “*production* of identity,” meaning that identity is not “grounded in the archaeology, but in the *re-telling* of the past” (“Cultural” 393).

In choosing to present two discourses on each page, Harris demands that readers assess how each discourse is meant to function in the production of the poem's meaning. Does Harris consider the verse and prose sections to be of equal value, each a vital participant in the creation of meaning? Or do the placement and appearance of the prose sections at the bottom of the page suggest that they are not as vital to the poem's meaning? While in segmenting her pages Harris uses a visual cue common to footnotes – a solid line running half-way across the page – the prose sections are not in fact footnotes. Unlike footnotes which are perceived as extra, “when not wanted, easy to ignore” (Bringhurst 68), the prose sections, though placed below the verse, remain a main, not peripheral, discourse.<sup>23</sup> The status of the prose sections as equal partners with the verse sections is made clear in that there are no symbols such as asterixes or numbers that point from the verse section towards the prose section. In fact, the distinction of the prose sections from footnotes is reinforced by the presence of traditional footnotes. Superscripted numbers in the verse sections point the reader to explanations that appear above the line that separates the verse from the prose and offer definitions of potentially unfamiliar terms such as ‘Ifa Kola’ (45), ‘Oya’ (47) and ‘Sango’ (48). While the prose sections most often do function to explain aspects of the verse sections – for instance, on the page where the poem describes a “child / abandoned in a doorway” (lines 8-9, p.55), the prose section explains that “*Abandoned children are rare in Nigerian society. [ . . . ]*” (55) – these explanations are not inessential or easy to ignore, as footnotes may be. Instead, without the prose sections the meaning of the long poem would be substantially altered for readers would no longer be witness to the interaction between the two distinct voices that inhabit the page and, hence, would no longer be witness to Harris's re-engagement with her past.

The verse and the prose sections do perform different rhetorical functions within the poem as a whole. The verse sections are eyewitness accounts that position the reader within Lagos alongside the narrator. In the opening stanza of the poem, the reader's presence at the time of the storm is implied by his/her inclusion in the narrator's use of 'us': "The world clangs its lid / thunders the flash / that close *us* into chaos" (44, lines 7-9, emphasis added). Furthermore, the narrator's frequent use of imperative verbs position the reader as part of the streets of Lagos, demanding he/she become an active observer of the events being narrated. The reader is commanded to "See there" (50, line 3), to "Look there" (55, line 1), and to "Listen. . ." (57, line 6), becoming a witness to the "huge fragments" that "hang on storm spasms" (50, line 4), or the proverb – "*Nothing happens that is not the will of God*" (55, line 3) – "painted on a wall" (55, line 2).

While the verse sections offer an eyewitness account of Lagos, the prose sections emphasize their distance from the events represented by the verse. The movement between the verse and prose sections is a movement away from offering the particularities of the experience towards offering generalized summations. For example, in one of the sections of verse, the storm that frames the entirety of this long poem is described using concrete images emphasizing that the poetic voice is describing one particular storm:

There in the roar of lightning spilled  
 Lagos ruptures  
 Fragments spin in the stormwind  
 and splinters huge  
 in the white light  
 splinters in the stormlight seen  
 for an instant clearly  
 Lagos its men masks  
 frozen in greed-fear  
 or simply there  
 trapped in the life  
 A city like Ifa Kola<sup>1</sup> flung  
 to await reading ...  
 This montage scorched from the city  
 by lightning  
 by lightning framed  
 by wind wave held  
 in song recorded  
 for the instance ...

. (45)

The prose section, however, offers a summation of the experience of a storm, not just in Lagos, but in Africa, in general: “*An African thunderstrom [sic] is an awesome layered thing. It closes over the earth like a gigantic calabash. We frail humans become seeds to be rattled at will like chac-chacs.*” (45). Similarly, specific images of people – “Colossi in Khaki” with “gray clouds part[ing]” “[a]round their heads” (46, lines 9 and 19) or the boy “abandoned in a doorway” (55, line 9) – become broad-stroked generalizations in the accompanying prose sections, “*Military leaders [ . . . ]*” (46) and “*Abandoned children [ . . . ]*” (55) respectively.

In its elimination of concrete details, the prose section emphasizes the reader’s distance from Lagos. More significantly, the movement towards more generalized statements suggests that Harris is claiming the authority of teaching the reader about the conditions in Lagos in particular, and the experience of Africa in general. The prose sections position the readers as outsiders who require explanations in order to understand and/or appreciate the significance of the images offered in the verse. Subsequently, the prose sections construct Harris’s ethos as

witness, hence her authority to represent Lagos to outsiders. Considering Harris freely admits that she is representing a culture not her own – “*For the first time I found myself in a culture which was almost alien - the more doors opened paradoxically the more closed the society became*” (43) – her ability to construct her presence within Lagos is essential. First-person statements like “*as far as I could see*” (49) and “*it always amazed me*” (54) stress Harris’s own presence in Lagos. Emphasizing the autobiographical nature of the verse sections, the prose sections function to increase the credibility of her descriptions of Lagos. The prose sections are meant to establish that she has seen, heard, and felt the scenes that the verse describes; hence, they assert that the verse section represents a factual account of experience rather than a product of imagination.

While the prose sections seek to establish Harris’s credibility, they more problematically hint at Harris’s assumption of the ethnographer’s role. In this way, the nature of the interaction between the verse and prose sections – in other words, the process through which they are read – becomes significant. Although the reader could find multiple paths throughout this poem (and the experimental page design does encourage such exploration), the path most likely to be followed is the one which reads each page top to bottom, consequently requiring the reader to alternate between verse and prose sections throughout the long poem. Significant, then, is the fact that the verse sections are not a series of individual poems, each self-contained on one page. Instead, the verse sections of “*Seen in Stormlight*” in fact form a continuous poem that flows from page to page to page. The continuous nature of the verse sections is, for one, confirmed by the original 1975 publication of this poem in Nigeria where no prose sections appear, the verse forming a continuous whole. In the later version, though the



start and/or finish of each page's verse section often conforms to stanza breaks in the original poem, this is not always the case. At times, Harris chooses to sever stanzas or individual lines from the original.<sup>24</sup> Even without comparison to the original publication, the continuous nature of the verse sections is readily apparent in the fact that often themes, and even the syntax, begun on one page carry forward onto the next page. For example, the crabs described at the bottom of the verse section on page fifty as "slash[ing] at crab lives / to crawl up barrel sides" (lines 21-22) continue at the top of page fifty-one with their "grip slipping / claws slither / down sliding" (lines 1-3). As well, the sentence-like unit begun on page fifty-five, "There / in the swollen gutters" (lines 21-22) concludes on page fifty-six with "Some pieces of hope are caught / in a clutter of facts" (lines 1-2).

Since the verse sections form a cohesive whole, the prose sections embody an interruption, a breaking-in of another discourse and a halting of the progress of the verse sections. The interruption of the verse by the prose sections suggests that the prose is a colonizing presence, a voice that will not allow the poetry, or the first-hand experience that it represents, to be valuable on its own. The ethnographic tone of the prose sections is of course problematic. It suggests a lack of confidence in the verse section's stand-alone worth, while also suggesting Harris is continuing a problematic tradition of outsider-ethnographers representing foreign cultures to other outsiders. However, rather than condemning the poem for its ethnographic tendencies, I would rather draw attention to the poem's representation of Harris's own journey into the events of her past. As the opening justification of her poem – "*This poem is included here because it is important to me*" (43) – suggests, this poem is not primarily included to benefit the reader; it is there to benefit Harris herself. Furthermore, the

key subject of the poem is not, in fact, Lagos ‘seen in stormlight,’ but instead Harris’s re-engagement with her past. This re-engagement could be read as significant in part because it is a symbolic return to Africa, a revisiting of the time of an actual physical return to Africa. However, Harris does not invest her trip to Africa with the purpose of re-claiming a lost cultural identity. Her assertion of “*the black earth of the West Indies*” (43) as her roots suggests that she makes little demand on Africa to fill a void. As she later states in a 1997 interview with Leslie Sanders and Arun Mukherjee, “I think it’s really important that we know about Africa, but I think the more we find out about Africa, the more there is no way we can pretend any longer that is what we are” (qtd. in Sanders and Mukherjee 34). Though through her trip she is honouring her “*much maligned ancestors*” (43) – “*I wanted to stand where they might have stood. I did*” (43) – she does not view a re-connection with her ancestors as necessary to her well-being or sense of self. Furthermore, while Harris’s depiction of 1975 Lagos with its social chaos shows awareness of, and sensitivity to, the long-term effects of colonialism, Harris’s treatment of Africa is not one that idealizes an irrecoverable pre-slavery past, nor one that overtly laments that loss.

Consequently, in revisiting a poem that represents her time in Africa, Harris is not falling into the trap that Stuart Hall warns against of valuing the past at the expense of the present and future. In fact, in entering into conversation with a poem from nearly ten years earlier, Harris performs what Hall forwards as an effective approach to one’s past, a use of the past, not as a means of recovering identity, but as a means of producing it. Harris is not treating her past as an artefact meant to be placed behind glass, passively digested and valued for its timelessness. Instead, in her poem, the past exists only in one’s representation of it and that

representation can remain in constant flux, changing to meet the demands of future contexts. Stuart Hall writes, “[. . .] identity is not only a story, a narrative which we tell ourselves about ourselves, it is stories which *change* with historical circumstances. And identity shifts with the way in which we think and hear them and experience them” (“Negotiating” 8, emphasis added). In choosing not simply to revise the earlier poem, making her changes invisible to many readers, but instead to insert the prose sections, Harris allows her readers to witness her process of re-writing her representation of the past. Her poem does not just represent two different times, but shows itself to be a document that exists in, and consequently one that changes throughout, time.

Such an overt performance of revision enacts Michael Davidson’s conception of “palimtext” where a text (for Davidson, the text would be a manuscript, complete with its scribbles, scratches, and various other marks of revision) “retains vestiges of prior inscriptions out of which it emerges. Or more accurately, it is the still-visible record of its responses to those earlier writings” (68). In terms of Harris’s text, its palimtextuality reveals not only the constructedness of representations of experience – that experiences can enjoy multiple and various tellings – but more importantly that the malleability of these representations suggests identity construction is perpetual and identities are ever-evolving. Enacting overtly the “autobiographical writing split (or double)” of “the *I* into ‘myself’ and ‘herself’ (or ‘himself’)” (Gilmore 66), the juxtaposition of the verse and prose sections shows Harris engaged in “a ceaseless process of identity formation in which new versions of the past evolve to meet the constantly changing requirements of the self in each successive present” (Eakin 36).

The metamorphosis of self that the juxtaposition of the verse and prose sections

performs does not just show the later Harris assuming the authority to explain Lagos to unfamiliar readers. Rather, it is also a movement towards a more overt critique of both British colonialism and Lagos itself. Now distanced from both the time and place of the events represented in the verse, Harris can offer criticisms more readily. Harris’s verse sections may picture the gross social inequality rampant in Lagos. For instance, asserting that there are steps people climb “to more glorious / eating” (54, lines 3-4), she writes,

they stand  
 meat in their hands  
 and from their mouths  
 the fat drips  
 There trapped  
 by wind and wave  
 and the force of others climbing  
 they must hold to feasting  
 or else  
                   slip down  
                                   to where  
 acres of shacks squat  
 at the bowel ceremony - . (54)

However, in her prose accounts – written, and meant for, an audience outside of the militaristic state of Lagos – Harris can be more damning of the conditions she witnessed. As she admits in one prose entry, in Lagos “*The watchword was caution*” (47) because “*Like all military governments this one was particularly suspicious of the universities*” (47); therefore, an open critique of what she saw at the time, especially since the poem was originally published in Nigeria, could have brought with it grave consequences. However, writing in Canada almost ten years after the fact removes such limitations and Harris is free to denounce not just the military government but the people’s collusion in not fighting against the ills of the society. For instance, although her prose entries are not exclusively negative and she does praise the “*dignity*” of those “[a]ccustomed to the *hopelessness*’ of poverty” (54), her indictment of the

selfishness and greed of others is clear: “*Material ambition for oneself and for the family appears to be a premier virtue as is ruthlessness in the pursuit of such ambition*” (51) and “*Everyone seemed to want to stop ‘corruption’ immediately . . . as soon as he had made his pile . . . Nigerians seemed to really object to those who weren’t satisfied with a few million dollars*” (53).

In addition to showing the evolution of Harris’s critique of Lagos, the performance of multiple subject positions showcases the fact that Harris’s process of subject formation in part represents a claiming of space in Canada, not just for herself, but for Africa. Her insertion of the prose passages highlights the re-contextualization of the original poem into its space within Canada (or North America in general and wherever else its Canadian publisher wishes to circulate it), allowing Harris to position herself as part of what Kwame Dawes calls “the re-inscription of Africa on the Western consciousness” (68). Responding to Dawes in an interview, Harris asserts that despite Canada’s goal of multiculturalism, “[Her] work, like the work of other Dia-African writers, indeed of all writers of color, is perceived here as satellite” (qtd. in Dawes 69). Her goal as a writer, and as a citizen, thus, can be “to inscribe the ‘I’” (qtd. in Dawes 68) in Canada. As Harris states, “I do it by the angle from which I observe, by my choice of topics, my readings, and in talks, panels, etc. By the way I dress, walk, talk. And by my insistence that this too is Canadian ” (68). Harris’s choice not just to include a poem in her collection that depicts Africa, but as well to provide information that makes the experience more accessible to likely unfamiliar readers, demonstrates Harris taking an active role in insisting upon the relevance of Africa to a Canadian/North American audience.

In this poem, Harris uses the interaction of multiple discourses to perform her

negotiation of the past. In so doing, she makes readers witnesses to her evolving subjectivities. Hall writes that “identity is always a question of producing in the future an account of the past” (“Negotiating” 5). The visual qualities of “Seen in Stormlight” enable readers to see such a production in process and come to know that accounts of the past are never, and should never be, static. They change with the ever-changing requirements of the present and future. Just as Keane demonstrated that the formation of a community identity is an on-going process, Harris shows that her own subject-formation involves a complex negotiation and re-figuring of past experiences.

\* \* \*

In looking at “Seen in Stormlight” and *One a Week with Water*, I have explored the use of visual experimentation to perform subjects’ negotiation of the passage of time. Whereas “Seen in Stormlight” presented readers with an individual’s subject formation within a relatively orderly (though not linear) view of time where past and present could be easily distinguished, *One a Week with Water* presented readers with a culture’s pursuit of the formation of ‘we’ amidst a chaotic and ever-shifting passage of time. Visually experimental poetry becomes an especially good medium for exploring such issues because, as Kathleen Fraser writes, it is “a writing practice that foregrounds the *investigation* and *pursuit* of the unnamed” (175, emphasis added). In so emphasizing the process, “[t]he dimensionality of the full page” can be seen as “invit[ing] multiplicity, synchronicity, elasticity” (Fraser 175).<sup>25</sup> The traditional linearity of the act of reading left to right and top to bottom is rendered insufficient by such poetry. Consequently, this “multiplicity, synchronicity, elasticity” allows for the

representation of experiences, memories, and such that do not connect or flow into each other in a linear fashion.

Although many texts more traditional in appearance may explore the flux of time – in particular the effects of a traumatic or forgotten past – they require readers to proceed through the text in a manner that contradicts the flux of the experience being represented. Whereas more conventional narratives and page compositions require that the influence of the past be represented through analepsis, a ceasing of the flow of a storyline in the present for a representation of the past, a visually experimental page can allow the past to exist side by side with the present, invoking the constant tension of their interplay. Although analepsis, in representing an interruption and silencing of the present, may mimetically connote the paralyzing effects of a traumatic past on the present, it can also suggest too easy a division between the two periods. The use of anachronies, defined as “disparity between the temporal order of the story sequence and that of the narrative” (Cohan and Shires 84), presumes as well that the proper chronological sequencing of a story can exist and be apprehended. Consequently, because the telling of the event rather than the event itself is what is seen as disrupting the passage of time, the underlying assumption that one’s experience of time is necessarily linear remains intact.

Visual poetry, however, allows for “the momentum of a linear thrust [to be] broken, since the eye must stop and take note of the shape” (Higgins, *Horizons* 29).<sup>26</sup> While Johanna Drucker warns that claims of “non-linearity” (regarding visual poetry and/or other non-traditional forms) are “severely undermined” because “still at any given time any particular reading by the very nature of the reading process, will be linear” (“Other than Linear” 248),<sup>27</sup>

visual poetry demands the path through the text be unfixed.<sup>28</sup> What this lack of fixity allows is the performance of a multidirectional movement where parts of the page vibrate off of one another, struggle, and dance for the reader's attention. With regards to the representation of time and subject formation, this constant movement that visually experimental poetry allows performs well the unresolvability of the relationship between the past, present, and future. As I move on to the next chapter, I will be expanding this discussion of time to include the other key means of situating oneself in the world – one's claiming of space. As the visually experimental page could hold representations of the concurrency of moments in time, it becomes a particularly rich means of performing the "shock of the 'doubleness'" (Hall, "Cultural" 396) associated with the diasporic experience as one negotiates simultaneous, yet complex, positions in both an adopted country and one's country of birth.



## Chapter Two: Habitable Spaces in Claire Harris's *She*

For me, home is a dictionary word. A hard word I tend to forget. (Yasmin Ladha qtd. in Wah 86-7)

Funny how home is the first place you look for even if you are running from it, you are nevertheless always running toward it, not the same spot but a spot you're sure that you'll know. (Dionne Brand, "Bathurst" 67)

The homeless are not calm; their homelessness is a source of particular pain for as with all travellers, they are asked, 'Where are you from?' and no simple answer is possible: all landscapes are alien. (Paul Theroux, *V.S. Naipaul: An Introduction* 76 qtd in Nixon 29)

Accounts of migrancy are frequently filled with descriptions of place-/space-lessness.<sup>29</sup> While migrancy may broaden the term 'home' to apply to multiple spaces, it simultaneously complicates one's ability to claim a space of belonging. The writers included in this dissertation – most of whom locate themselves as part of the Caribbean diaspora in Europe and/or North America – to greater or lesser degrees attest to feelings of displacement. In fact, their negotiation of place/space often features what Rob Nixon describes as "a double sense of displacement": an experience of "removal" from the Caribbean "superimposed on the earlier uprooting of their captive forebears" from Africa (20). Treated as outsiders in their chosen

European and/or North American destinations and simultaneously feeling alienated from their birth places, these writers find themselves occupying an uncomfortable in-between space where a sense of belonging is rendered difficult. Their re-locations – and the enforced re-locations of their ancestors – have led them through what Dionne Brand describes as the “Door of No Return.” As Brand acknowledges, though one may be able to find the way back to the physical location of this door, “[t]his door is not mere physicality. It is a spiritual location. It is also perhaps a psychic destination” (*Map* n. pag.). Accordingly, “[t]here is as it says no way in; no return” (*Map* n. pag.), and as a result, people of the diaspora become “dwellers of the door” (Brand, *Map* n. pag.), caught in this interstitial space.

Representations of this contentious relationship with the experience of space/place is the focus of this chapter. As visually experimental poetry enacts it, the space of the page becomes an especially productive ground upon which to perform one’s negotiation of the spaces he/she inhabits physically, psychically, and spiritually. Centring upon Claire Harris’s novel-in-poetry *She*, this chapter discusses the protagonist’s pursuit of a welcoming space where she can function as a productive adult. Suffering from multiple personality disorder, the protagonist’s conflicted relationship with the physical space around her is in part a result of her mental illness. However, her mental illness does not alone account for what is described by the back cover of the book as “her maimed relationship with the world” (n. pag.). Her difficulty functioning within the spaces available to her is at the same time a result of her diasporic existence, her inability to claim either Trinidad or Canada as home.

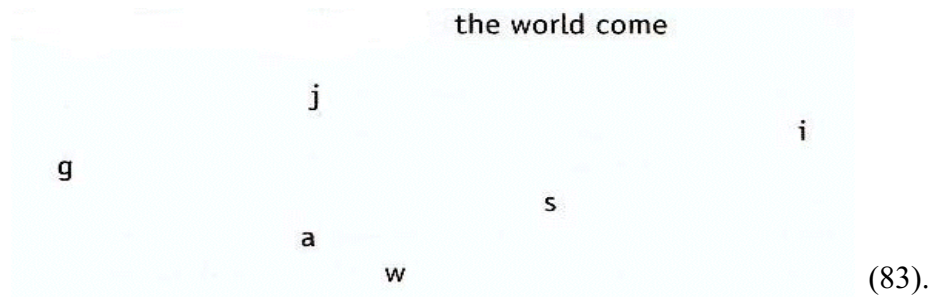
Grounded in postcolonial debates about the experience of space, this chapter demonstrates Harris’s use of visual experimentation both to oppose her protagonist’s

experiences of Trinidad and Canada against one another and to cast both of these spaces as psychically and spiritually debilitating. Expressed in various visual ways – for example, columns of text placed side by side and an oscillation between fully justified blocks of text and a more fragmented scattering of words and letters around the page – the protagonist’s inability to function in her physical environments results in her claiming of the page as a space to inhabit. However, as her fear of blank spaces and simultaneous realization that “[her] edges” are “spill[ing] beyond thick black lines” (70) into “negative space” (71) reveal, this textual space proves just as uninhabitable as the other spaces she has experienced. Regardless of the ultimate failure of her attempt to locate herself in textual space, the page is at the same time the only space in which “She” – the ensemble of her multiple personalities – exists. The space of the page is the closest embodiment of Penelope’s subjectivity that can be realized since neither her mind nor her body can hold the presence of all personalities at once. By treating textual space as an inhabitable (though ultimately debilitating) space, I argue that, though the page may be deemed an abstract, rather than ‘real,’ space, textual space is in fact material space. Its impact is after all material; it does not just contain representations of social dynamics, but rather itself becomes a tool in the acquisition and expression of power.

### **A brief aside: the time-space nexus**

Although a necessity for manageable chapter breaks requires that I address the representation of time and space separately, their indivisibility is attested to by the now common compound “time-space.” In part the fusion of time and space is merely a fact of the laws of physics: a material object must occupy a physical location and a position in time

simultaneously. However, time and space are also bound together in mental processes. This innate linking of time and space in our consciousnesses is in part a function of memory, since memory links moments of time that are “inextricably intertwined” with particular spaces (Gallagher, *Ici-là* xix). Embodying both material and psychological experiences of the world, the nexus of time and space becomes a key site of subject formation. Adrienne Rich writes, “a place on the map is also a place in history” (212) and continues by arguing that she must understand her position in both time (history) and space in order to determine how “[she is] created and trying to create” (212). Despite my focus in the last chapter on the representations of time, I found there, too, a necessity to include a discussion of the impact of space. In particular, in assessing Harris’s “Seen in Stormlight,” I argued that the significance of the interaction between the verse and prose sections was that they not only represented different times of writing but also indicated Harris’s different rhetorical positions in two countries. Likewise in *She*, the innate link between time and space as the field of subject formation is clear. The chaos of Penelope’s mind is demonstrated in her growing inability to perceive both space and time appropriately. For her, this inability is a result of the failure of her memory to distinguish between different moments of time and the places associated with those moments. Her memory is likened to an uncontrollable ride – “we to memory as a toddler to wild rocking horse” (84). In her memory, images of Trinidad and Canada bleed together, resulting in her inability to process reality. As Penelope writes, with her memory rendering “time splintered,”



Her inability to perceive the passage of time renders her experience of space fractured; the day-to-day world which she navigates becomes something to be pieced together like a puzzle.

This brief example is meant to foreground the merging of the experience of time and space in this novel-in-verse. Although my further discussion of *She* will highlight Penelope's negotiation of physical spaces rather than the text's construction of time, I wish to make clear that Penelope's experience of space is inextricably linked with her experience of time. With Trinidad signifying the past and Canada signifying the present, Penelope's attempt to situate herself in space is simultaneously an attempt to situate herself in relation to time, to recall the trauma of her past and thereby establish a more solid ground upon which to build her present and future.

### **Motions that Bind: Here, There, Everywhere**

In terms of a post-colonial context, time and space are also linked by discussions that cast the experience of each as volatile, uncertain, and fraught with conflict. As the sea provides a symbol for a more freeing movement of time – one that circles, but one that continues moving forward – it too is treated as a symbol for the diaspora's experience of space. However, in discussions of Caribbean space the image of the sea becomes rather paradoxical, hailed as an

empowering figure yet simultaneously representing the lack of rootedness that can prove debilitating for the psyches of many members of the diaspora. Interpreted in a positive way, the sea becomes a figure of unity that reclaims the history of migrancy (namely the forced migrancy of the Middle Passage). Brathwaite's assertion that "[t]he unity is sub-marine" (*Contradictory Omens* 64) echoes Paul Gilroy's formulation of the black Atlantic as a trope of unification for the globally dispersed African people. By focussing on the sea and in particular on the image of the slave and cargo ships that linked together such spaces as Europe, Africa, America, and the Caribbean, Gilroy is able to "break the dogmatic focus on discrete *national* dynamics which has characterised so much modern Euro-American cultural thought" (6). In so doing, one moves the attention away from a "nationalistic focus that is antithetical to the rhizomatic, fractal structure of the transcultural, international formation I call the black Atlantic" (Gilroy 4). What the trope of the sea thus supports is a figure of unity through borderlessness.<sup>30</sup>

However, the borderlessness suggested by the figure of the sea does not imply just a freedom of movement but instead also embodies the "oceanic grave for the lost souls of the middle passage" (DeLoughrey 19). While Elizabeth DeLoughrey suggests that "[t]he element of water appeals because of its lack of fixity and rootedness" (22), this rootlessness is frequently a source of great angst for those who carry the legacy of enforced departures and dispersals from Africa. The sea is after all a site just for passing through; it does not support permanent habitation. Appealing to it as a site of unity and as a true site for Afro-Caribbean history (for example, Walcott's assertion "Sea is History" (qtd. in Glissant, *Poetics* n. pag.)) is not necessarily enabling since it does not address the continuing feelings of displacement

experienced by many members of the African diaspora in the places they do inhabit day to day. Mary Gallagher, and others like her, may be right in suggesting that “[t]he Caribbean is held to be unthinkable, then, as a static, demarcated area. Part of the Atlantic continuum, it is first and foremost fluid and, as such, comprises currents, flow, passage, and displacement” (*Soundings* 2), but it must be remembered that “a constant state of displacement” (Gallagher, *Ici-là* xviii) is not a comfortable space to inhabit.

Yet, like the constant overturning of waves, the interpretation of the trope of the sea can again flip towards the positive. Elizabeth DeLoughrey’s assessment of ‘tidalectics’ in Edouard Glissant’s and Antonio Benítez-Rojo’s critical writings and in Edwidge Danticat’s fiction privileges the water as a “shifting,” hence not essentialist, “site of history” (19). In so doing, she asserts that the sea, unlike land in the Caribbean, is a space without material markers of colonialism. DeLoughrey argues,

Similar to the efforts of Caribbeanists to turn away from colonial monuments towards the ‘unmarked’ and unifying Atlantic ocean, the watery surroundings of the Caribbean islands function as a space of uncharted historiography which is not overdetermined by colonial territorialization. In other words, the Caribbean Sea is an element ‘in flux’ which highlights migrancy, but it is also a space which is not materially marked by colonial presence and could unite the region in ways that offer an alternative to colonial fragmentation. (25)

The sea consequently is a site that need not be reclaimed; visible markers of European occupation need not be erased from the sea as they must from the land, because there are none. Because the sea does not bear visible traces of the different European colonizers, the linguistic

and cultural differences that isolate the islands from one another can be at least symbolically overcome. As Glissant writes, the sea “does not impose one culture, it radiates diversity” (qtd. in DeLoughrey 27). Gilroy’s view of the Black Atlantic would further support this association of the sea with diversity since for him the sea’s emphasis on lines of movement is a more accurate reflection of the multiple, diverse, and transnational cultural sources at play in the cultural productions of the African/Caribbean diaspora.

But the wave crests again. Though the sea may not bear *visual* signs of colonialism, it is indeed a space materially marked by the tragedy of colonialism. It contains the unmarked graves of multitudes, both those who did not, or chose not to, survive the Middle Passage and those more recent refugees who did not complete their flights from such countries as Cuba, Haiti, and others. While commenting upon the sea’s lack of colonial markers, DeLoughrey insightfully observes, “the lack of monuments in the sea does not reflect a lack of history” (27). Instead, as DeLoughrey concludes, “[a]lthough one might assume that water cannot be marked or territorialized in the way of land occupation, [. . .] the sea is marked by cultural and economic histories and *literally occupied* by past and present bodies of refugees and slaves” (24, emphasis added).

Even though the sea’s metaphorical significance continues to be contradictory, the key thing that a focus on the sea allows is a privileging of movement as a defining characteristic of the diasporic experience of space. As Marlene Nourbese Philip asserts, “[y]ou cannot talk about space as it relates to Black people – to African people – without talking about movement or moving through space” (“Black W/Holes” 263). The history of slavery precipitates this focus on the movement from one space to another. In the more recent past, the frequent tendency of



individuals to leave the islands to seek education, economic resources, or other forms of fulfilment further suggests the importance of motion in Caribbean experiences of space. Philip suggests that many people of the Caribbean grow up knowing that their lives will lead them away from the islands. In an interview with Kristin Mahlis, she states,

I feel strongly that one of the psychological drawbacks of colonialism and capitalism and how globalization works is that you grow up—certainly in my time, maybe less now—you grow up knowing that you’re going to leave and that completion has to come from somewhere else, and I think that does a lot of psychic damage, knowing that you can’t complete yourself by what’s around you. Some of that has changed to some degree, but it continues in different ways. Because of the economic situation, people have to go abroad to work and the societies are continually saturated with U.S. culture through the television. (688)

However, as Philip further suggests, what this situation does offer, despite the potential psychic damage, is a view outwards that draws attention to the relations that bind spaces together – “you know from the get-go that there’s another world out there” (688).

This necessary focus on the interplay between multiple spaces leads also to the difficulty with tying the term ‘home’ to a singular place. Although as Bina Toledo Freiwald writes “[. . .] a relation to place and space lies at the heart of the experience of selfhood and belonging” (37-8), ‘place’ and/or ‘space,’ in the context of the diaspora, cannot be conceived of as singular entities, but instead are necessarily plural. The belief that one’s sense of self and belonging comes out of ties to one specific place is at odds with the diasporic condition and,

hence, precipitates the conflicted, and at times traumatic, attempt to define 'home' to which the epigraphs of this chapter attest. The diaspora's experience of space necessarily involves a "doubled relationship or dual loyalty" (Lavie and Swedenburg 14). Instead of feeling tied to one space, members of the diaspora have "connections to the space they currently occupy and their continuing involvement with 'back home'" (Lavie and Swedenburg 14). This doubleness, or in some cases pluralness, results in a space that Bhabha and others describe using many different terms, including 'liminal,' 'in-between,' and 'interstitial.' No matter the term used for this space, its defining characteristic is that this space is "not here/there, but both" (De Toro20).

In *She*, this slippage in the boundaries between the seemingly oppositional terms "here" and "there" is to a large extent responsible for Penelope Marie Lancet's traumatic negotiation of her relationship with both Trinidad and Canada. To be in-between two places is to be outside of two places, hence to some extent excluded from both communities. As deictic terms, "here" and "there" are meant to point to concrete locations, at a distance from one another. Normative assumptions would demand that "there" cannot be found within "here" and "here" cannot be found within "there;" they are separate locations. However, as *She* portrays it, for those negotiating multiple homes, "here" and "there" bleed together both in terms of the function of memory and in terms of the material cultural heritages that one brings with him/her into new locations. Although the conflict between 'here' and 'there' spaces is frequently explored in theoretical discussions, a poem by African-Canadian writer Wayne Compton perhaps best illustrates the complexity of negotiating affiliations to multiple homes. Describing his father's emigration from the United States to Canada, Compton constructs 'here' to be an amalgamation of a past home and a present one, but argues that this amalgamation does not

take place without turmoil. In “Legba Landed,” Compton writes,

he crossed the border  
line in a northern corner;  
four cardinal points for  
a better  
over  
there.  
created  
a  
here;  
one  
foot  
in a-  
merica  
one  
foot  
in a  
canada:  
one  
negro,  
liminal, limped a-

[. . .]. (11)<sup>31</sup>

What I find interesting about this visual rendering of liminality is the significance of the arrangement of lines in a curved path down the page. Despite the symbolism of a broken circle that one could read into the positioning of the four curved blocks of text, it is not the fragmentation of a circle that I would here imbue with significance. Rather what is important is how the arrangement of each of these curved blocks of text point the reader towards the other blocks of text on the page.

A reader encountering the curved blocks of text in this passage becomes aware that there is the potential for reading along multiple paths. While one may look to the punctuation to direct one’s reading, the semi-colon and colon present do little to connect the blocks of text

into a definite larger unit of syntax. The visual presence of the blocks of text instead become the means through which the reader's attention is directed. In so doing, the blocks of text assume the task of vectors as described by Kress and van Leeuwen in their taxonomy for reading images. Kress and van Leeuwen establish vectors as visual elements – a finger pointing, a curve of a back, a straight solid line with or without an arrow, and/or the direction of a gaze – that visually tie two or more objects together in a “process of interaction” (40). Upon first looking, one might imagine that the vectors present in this poem suggest that the right-hand side of the page functions as one unit of text while the left hand side functions as another. The curve of “a better / over / there” points towards and connects with the curve of “one / foot / in a- / merica,” while the curve of “created / a / here” points towards and connects with the curve of “one / foot / in a / canada.” However, I would suggest that the vectors formed by the blocks of text combined with our traditional top-to-bottom process of reading results in a separation of the block “created / a / here” from the rest of the blocks. “[A] better / over / there” points the reader towards “one / foot / in a- / merica” which points towards “one / foot / in a / canada,” thereby leaving “created / a / here” out of the progress forward. One could perhaps suggest that our traditional top-to-bottom reading process would naturally lead readers to progress down the page in order, jumping back and forth between the blocks of text despite the awkwardness of this movement. However, the vector leading the reader from “a better / over / there” to “one / foot / in a- / merica” is simply too strong a pull, especially when countered by the harsh veer to the left that is required to catch the word “created” and follow its path. Consequently, if a reader follows the path of this poem's vectors, “created / a / here” is, at least initially, excluded from the reading process. Such isolation subsequently draws attention to the

fact that creating a “here” is a complex, perilous process, one that might too bring its share of alienation.

The rendering of “here” as a potentially volatile fusion of parts is made even clearer by focussing upon the visual relationship of the two ‘one foot’ blocks to one another. The visual provenance of these two blocks of text, their final lines protruding further than the others, suggests legs with feet, the image reminding one of the legs and feet in a ‘stick man’ drawing. While the vector of the block concerning America points toward the block concerning Canada, these blocks are still separated from one another by a band of blank space. Not only does the verbal content of these blocks suggest that the man’s body is divided between America and Canada – he has one foot in each – but also the visual isolation of these two blocks of text from one another depicts this man’s body in pieces. Furthermore, in noting the visual likeness of these blocks to legs and feet, one may also observe that these legs and feet are pointing inwards, a position opposite to what one would expect in a normative body. In fact, what one would interpret as the left leg appears on the right, while the right leg appears on the left. Hence, this image of legs and feet suggests that having one foot in America and one in Canada results in the inability to have these body parts function together as one unit. This is a body at odds with itself; the internal conflict of dual loyalties has exploded the body, causing the “liminal” (11, line 20) man to “limp[] a- / cross clutching a / crutch [. . .]” (11, lines 20-22), “blam[ing] a / strait razorous border. [. . .]” (11-12, lines 31-32).

In Compton’s poem, ‘here’ becomes a treacherous space, fomed out of a confluence of here/Canada and there/America. Mary Gallagher’s assessment of the use of ‘l’ici-là’ as a French Caribbean colloquialism further highlights the difficulty of distinguishing between

‘here’ and ‘there’ in diasporic experiences. Discussing Glissant’s use of ‘l’ici-là’ in *Poétique de la Relation* and its possible translation as “Here-There” (xiv), Gallagher notes that “this slightly paradoxical, hyphenated deitic [. . .] seems to signal an orientational instability” (*Ici-là* xiv). As she notes, this instability is made “all the more striking” because ‘ici-là’ is used in creolized French “as a reinforced synonym for the simple deictic *ici* or ‘here’” (*Ici-là* xiv). In other words, when ‘here’ is signified by ‘ici-là,’ ‘here’ is shown to encompass *both* ‘here’ and ‘there.’ Gallagher writes, “[t]he hesitation and distancing at work in this extremely common Caribbean modulation of the usually immediate and unquestioned relation to the enunciative ‘here and now’ testifies to the complex, unsettled, and dislocated relation to place that characterizes much Caribbean writing” (*Ici-là* xiv).

The presence of the hyphen (or slash) in-between ‘ici-là’ and its English translation ‘here-there’ or ‘here/there’ indicates graphically their simultaneous fusion and division. Just as Mary Gallagher classifies the concepts of ‘here’ and ‘there’ as disconnected, yet simultaneously embodying “a distinct sense of connection and simultaneity between the local and the distant, between here and (over) there” (*Ici-là* xiv-xv), Fred Wah classifies the hyphen itself as a mark that “both binds and divides” (72). Though Wah’s focus on the hyphen involves “a blood quantum point of view” (74) – in other words, the hyphen as it relates to the cultural identity of individuals of mixed race – his interpretation of the hyphen as marking “implicit ambivalence” (73) is relevant for the tension implicit in one’s negotiation of multiple homes. Wah describes the hyphen as “a bridge, a no-man’s land, a nomadic, floating magic carpet, now you see it now you don’t” (73). The hyphen’s appearance and disappearance signifies the volatility of this liminal space where ‘here’ and ‘there’ vibrate off of one another, sometimes gently, and

sometimes in harsh collision.

As well, Wah's infusion of the hyphen with magic conveys the innate surrealism of the space between two homes that we witness in Harris's *She*. However, in *She* it is not the hyphen that serves as the material marker of this volatile liminal space. Rather, it is blank space that becomes the borderland, simultaneously uniting and separating Penelope's experiences of Trinidad and Canada. While the significance of Harris's use of blank space (the whiteness of the page) in *She* can in part suggest a necessary negotiation of racialized white space, Penelope and her various personalities rarely (but do occasionally) cast her traumatic experience of Canada in terms of race. It may be impossible to separate her position in the Caribbean diaspora from her experience of race, but I do not wish to bind the space of writing – the blank, white page – to representing white space, nor to subsequently suggest that the process of writing for Penelope, as a Black woman, is necessarily a journey through white space. Instead, I see Penelope using the blank space of the page as a space to signify movement both in terms of representing her physical, but most importantly her psychic, journey between her Trinidadian and Canadian homes. As my earlier discussion showed, the sea not only represents a physical tie between multiple geographic homes, but also signifies the psychic chaos, the conflict and contradiction, of coming to terms with bonds to multiple homes. In Harris's *She*, it is the blank spaces between areas of text that embody the fluidity of the sea. It is a space that one moves through, rather than staying within, and yet it motivates no fixed pathway. Consequently, as a link between the multiple sections of text on the page, the blank space demands the reader witness the *interaction* of the various discourses that compare, contrast, entwine, and separate her experiences of Trinidad and Canada.

Early in the text, readers witness Penelope’s infusion of blank space with significance in her use of columns of text placed side by side. With one column seeming to depict her present in Calgary and the other seeming to represent Trinidad (this differentiation, however, proves not to be so simple, a point I will address shortly), these columns seem at first to involve an attempt to separate her experiences of Trinidad and Canada. What results, though, is an enactment of their entwinement. She writes,

	in net of bird cries	
		hatched wind
	under my lids	i curve i bend
	the blue rinsed Bow	i shimmy
	the circling gulls	in branching richness of cedars
	small boys hoot	among mango leaves and sibillance
	the blue crowned motmot	i roll to the tamboo bamboo
even so	i am that woman	clenched around deep darkness
	my soles cling to crabgrass	my toes treading
	dark water i heel into worm casts	
	the fruitful invisible life’s faint signals	
		squashed

. (13, lines 1-12)

The motion signified by the blank space between the columns results from the reader encountering the challenge of multiple reading paths. Does one read each column separately? If so, does one follow the vector created by the proximity of “cries” and “hatched” and continue down the right-hand column first? Does the reader then proceed to the left-hand column only when the “i am that woman [. . .]” line bridges the gap between columns and pushes the reader’s attention back towards the left-hand side of the page? Or does the reader read left to right from the beginning, crossing the gap between the columns? The syntax in part supports either a path that reads down the columns one by one or a path that reads across the columns.



Syntactically “under my lids / i curve i bend” works just as well as “under my lids / the blue rinsed Bow.” As well, “small boys” can “hoot / among mango leaves and sibilance” just as well as “among mango leaves and sibilance,” “i” can “roll to the tamboo bamboo.”

The instability of the reading path functions in part to highlight the constant pull that occurs between these two columns. However, even if one chooses the relatively conservative path, reading each column separately starting with the left column and progressing to the right one, the pull between the columns is still manifested. The columns appear in close enough proximity to one another that while reading one column, the reader is ever aware of the other column’s presence; whichever column is not being read continues to call for the reader’s attention.

The significance of the tension and pull that occurs in the space between the columns is realized when it is recognized that, at least at first, these columns delineate experiences of two separate geographical spaces. The column on the left offers images of Calgary – the Bow river, the gulls – while the column on the right offers images of Trinidad – the cedars, the mango leaves, the tamboo bamboo. The pull between the columns performs an uncertainty regarding her ability to separate her experience of Trinidad from her experience of Canada. Although Trinidad is a part of her past, Penelope cannot place her past and present in a linear relation to one another by distinguishing what experience occurred first. Instead, in the juxtaposing of the columns and the subsequent constant pull between them, Penelope is shown to occupy, at least psychically, both spaces at once. An unresolvable simultaneity of her presence in Calgary and her presence in Trinidad is thus portrayed. Furthermore, her experiences of Trinidad and Calgary are shown to be even further enmeshed by the fact that though the columns are at first

set up to distinguish between Calgary and Trinidad, in the end their differentiation is rendered questionable. The inclusion of “blue crowned mot mot” – a bird not native to Canada, but native to Trinidad – in the column that had seemed to represent Calgary demonstrates the entwinement of the two spaces in Penelope’s psyche.

Even if the columns fluctuate between what geographical space they represent, the blank space between the columns continues to manifest a space of liminality. The gap between the columns is a space of transition and metamorphosis since it is within this space that Penelope moves from occupying one space to occupying another.<sup>32</sup> This gap is, therefore, not simply a divisive space, but rather a space that brings Trinidad and Calgary into a pulsing and shifting relationship. In assessing Mary Margaret Sloane’s use of two columns in “Infiltration,” Kathleen Fraser describes the gap as signifying ““energy flung across synapses”” (196).<sup>33</sup> In Harris’s text, too, this space between the columns is a site of energy and movement, but also of conflict. As Penelope reveals just a few lines below the shown passage, her expression of her experience of multiple homes is an expression of “painful whirling falls momentary / absence blankness” (13, lines 16-17). In this way, the gap between the columns also comes to signify a painful well down which she falls, much as Lewis Carroll’s Alice falls down the rabbit hole into a surreal and at many times treacherous world.

Penelope’s fall is not an eternal descent, but instead comes to an abrupt end with a line that bridges the distance between the columns. Significantly, this line describes Penelope’s relationship to her liminality. For her, the liminal space between Trinidad and Canada is a space of deep darkness, and she is “that woman clenched around” it, much as the line itself embraces the two columns that represent her experiences of Canada and Trinidad. This ground

upon which Penelope lands, formed out of this line and its followers, is a ground that confirms her troubled occupation of a liminal space. The image that these lines describe positions Penelope at the edge of water and land. While her soles “cling to crabgrass,” another part of her foot – her toes – “tread[] / dark water” (13, lines 9-10). Although the columns may have suggested an uncomfortable pull between two places, the end of the columns confirms that without allowing for that pull between two places Penelope cannot survive her present life in Canada. When the columns end, “the fruitful” becomes “invisible” and “life’s faint signals” are “squashed” (13, lines 11-12). Without her psychic experience of Trinidad, Penelope’s present is rather unlivable. As Penelope and her other personalities reveal, “She clings / to the glamour of ‘exile’” (13, lines 21-22) because as “an exile” she can still define herself in terms of her relationship with Trinidad; she can “think of ‘home’” (13, line 19), in this case Trinidad, instead of forgetting it. This contemplation of, or even psychic return to, Trinidad allows Penelope freedom to move. While the columns feature Penelope in motion – “i curve i bend / i shimmy / [. . .] / [. . .] / i roll to the tamboo bamboo” (13, lines 3-7) – the ground upon which she lands, where her images of Trinidad conclude, is a space of stasis. She can “clench[] around deep darkness” (13, line 8) and her feet can “cling,” “tread[] / dark water,” or “heel into” the ground, but all of these actions freeze her in one space, barely moving. Consequently, what this passage reveals is that the space between two homes may be somewhat uncomfortable, a space where one is pulled in two opposing directions at once. But for Penelope, the alternative of situating herself solely in her adopted country would prove restrictive, if not destructive.

While in this passage the blank space between the columns proved to be a space of energy and movement despite being simultaneously a space of tension, Harris’s treatment of

blank space throughout the text does not always construct it as a space of enablement. As she hints even in this passage, white space can also be suggestive of “absence blankness” (13, line 17). It is in fact a growing blankness that Penelope combats throughout this novel-in-verse. She “fear[s] first [her] face like lace / then a fading / to negative space” (71, lines 2-4). The presence of blank spaces in her life and in her text becomes tied to her inability to hold onto her cultural heritage, the loss of the stories of her own personal past and that of her ancestors. Penelope writes to her sister Jasmine that “we children slidin through / white space lef’ wit’in between beyon’ / story)” (81, lines 21-22). The significance of the blank space in this context is that without her stories, Penelope too fades; hence, Penelope experiences the need to combat her disappearance by finding a way to gradually fill in the absences.

As Penelope begins to raise the baby she has claimed as her own (whether this child is an imaginary one or one that she has stolen remains unclear), she recognizes that she needs stories of the past in order to prepare her child for life. She begs Jasmin, “help then! send some story i can / use to arm Charla against the gimme gimme lure of things / the frantic thrashing of desire a story to show how you can’t / play sailor if you ‘fraid powder how the whole world it nothing / but one marshy sea & the sea ain’t got no back door . . .” (70, lines 18-22). These stories and other remnants of her cultural past are what she wants to use to fill the growing holes, the growing blankness, that she encounters in her day-to-day world. She intends to “chink the worl’ / with callaloo fried plantain barefoot rice an’ foo- / foo to make a rope wit’ succoyant whine papa / bois bamboo tamboo use tenor pan riff & caiso to / twine the whole we mould” (81, lines 2-6). She wishes to pursue the kind of wholeness that she nostalgically recalls experiencing in Trinidad. Again likening her liminal existence between

here and there to a descent down a hole, Penelope writes,

jahmin quicksand and i old pals

but i remember bruised mangoes in rough-tongued grass pale gecko's  
tloc tloc the lamp's leap and flare as river wind searched our hair blessed  
our skin all this even then gathered held hard while words like steps  
to night's veranda invited and charmed one ancient aunt or another  
drunk on the tale its telling wove rooms cupboards forest trails alleys  
where yellow red blue possibilities glowed shifted greyed while  
mosquitoes sawed their mocking music despite coils citron and we  
clapped slapped punctuation beneath brilliant stars in such deep  
nights in such dense country fusion

here no aunts no stars  
not a one  
as if hubris had put out a million  
million eyes with blade and spoon  
i smell a lear here but  
the gods are just and of our virtues make  
the spear that shakes us

. (70, lines 1-17)

Whereas in the earlier example Penelope's experiences of Trinidad and Canada blurred together, the columns suggesting 'here' and 'there' coexist in her present position in Calgary, in this example, the visual design makes the contrast between her experience of these spaces starker. Her memory of Trinidad visually fills the page. The lines are long and the justification of the margins is full, leaving only small holes, functioning mostly as punctuation, in the block of text. The presence of this block of text thereby visually enacts the "fusion" that she describes having experienced within the nurturing community of aunts and the sounds and sights of the natural world.

This block's visual expression of the connections between friends and family and between people and nature is made all the more apparent when it is contrasted with Penelope's construction of the 'here' of Calgary. Of course, her sense of Trinidad and Canada as

respectively idyllic and alienating does not in the end settle into such a static opposition; she was, after all, ostracized by her family both for her role in the accidental death of her baby sister Thena and her artistic temperament, her “some-timish[ness]” (9). Regardless, in this passage, her ‘here’ is characterized by its lack of aunts and stars. The isolation and persecution she has experienced in her new country is performed in the abrupt growth of blank space thanks to the fracturing of lines into shards that jump across the page, not adhering to any common margin. Not only does the blank space mark Penelope’s feelings of loss, but it also creates the motion that characterizes the felt chaos of her diasporic experience. Readers must pass through blank space, jumping back and forth across the page between the shards of lines. As Penelope explains, the gods fashion “the spear that shakes us,” punning of course on Shakespeare’s name and using him as a metonymic representation of the internal conflict caused by both her colonial education and her immigration to Canada. The visual presence of her text comes to mimetically embody that shaking, signifying the unsteadiness she experiences in Calgary. Furthermore, the movement back and forth from line to line that the emergence of the blank space motivates performs a physical struggle against the growing absence. The shaking precipitated by the motion of reading this passage involves each line in a battering against the surrounding blank space, enacting a physical assault on the holes in memory that have cast Penelope adrift in her new residence, unable to claim either it or Trinidad as home.

At once a marker of absence and loss and a space of necessary and desired transition between Trinidad and Canada, the blank space in this text reveals itself to be a complex and multifaceted space. While the conflict that Penelope feels in struggling to fuse her past and present homes into one inhabitable space can be, and is, expressed verbally, it is through the

encounter with the visual qualities of the page that readers can most clearly witness the conflict and contradiction involved in her struggle. In discussing hybridity, Fred Wah infuses the hyphen between cultural identities (e.g., Chinese-Canadian) with significance, seeking to make the “noise surrounding” it “more audible” (73). In *She*, it is the blank space that is rendered “more audible” and, subsequently, more readable. Its significance, however, is precisely that it cannot hold a static significance. Rather, as the sea suggested a continual fluctuation between uniting and dividing multiple homes, the blank space of this text performs the continually unsettled nature of Penelope’s position between Trinidadian and Canadian cultural experiences. In so doing, the visually experimental page performs the unresolvable flux, what Stuart Hall calls “the shock of the ‘doubleness’” (Hall, “Cultural” 396), of diasporic experience.

#### **An Aside:**

#### **Another Look at Blank Spaces: Marlene Nourbese Philip’s Pursuit of First Statement**

Before moving into the next section of my discussion of Harris’s text, I must pause briefly to offer an alternative construction of blank spaces. While in Harris’s *She*, blank spaces in part came to represent loss and a conflicted linking of Trinidad and Calgary, in Philip’s *Looking For Livingstone: An Odyssey of Silence*, blank space can signify freedom from prior inscriptions, hence, freedom to inscribe one’s space for him/herself. *Looking for Livingstone* charts the journey of a woman searching for the infamous Dr. David Livingstone. Travelling across Africa in her quest, this woman visits with many tribes whose names – for example, SCENILE, ECNELIS, and LENSECI – all prove to be anagrams for ‘silence.’ This woman’s journey engages with the implications of silence, establishing that silence is both to be

cherished and to be experienced as a punishment. Silence at once signifies an idyllic pre-contact African subjectivity – Africa was thought to be “silent” according to European perspectives because it did not function using languages Europe understood – and a sentence handed down by Europe – in enforcing their own language(s) and ways upon Africa, Europeans silenced Africa. In this way, the protagonist of this text feels trapped in the silence imposed by Europe and yet seeks to inhabit the original Silence that comes to stand for a pre-contact Africa.

While this narrative is related mostly through prose, nearly every entry in her travel journal concludes with a poem which most often addresses Silence and Word as a binary. The poem that concludes her time with the LENSECI tribe clearly associates a blank page with pre-contact Africa, yet to be harmed by European dominance. Beginning on a recto and continuing on the verso, the poem reads as follows:



Beyond the beckon in		
	beyond	
the last sea		cartographer
the ultima Thule		mapping contour
where space is		and structure
the page		shape
blank		the serene elevation
ignorance made monstrous		of silence
where meet		to risk the fall in original
Alpha and Omega		with sin
in one beginning		precipitate
	beyond	off the flat-earth edge of
the side of other we call		knowledge
nether		into
and nothing		the very of silence
begins		to find the bang that was
comes the explorer		beginning
	— wanderer	big
	— adventurer	beyond
	— expert	the wait in horizon
certified		the straight line margin
in silence		in circles
in ancient schools		widening
their mysteries		into ever
secrets		from the silence of
sciences		stone
studied		dropped
— their silences —		

. (17-18)

In Philip’s construction the blank page is associated with the beginnings of Africa before the ‘explorer/wanderer/adventurer/expert’ arrived and began filling in that blank page with his own mappings. The final image of the poem likewise suggests the presence of some semblance of a blank page, though its significance remains elusive. On one level the image is of the rings that flow outwards when a stone is dropped in water, but on another level the image is of a margin on a page of paper widening. A margin that widens means there is less and less room for text, and the margin Philip discusses widens “into ever” thus suggesting an evolution of the page into blank space. As I indicated, though, the significance of this growing blank space remains elusive for it can either suggest the imposition of silence at the hands of the European cartographers or suggest a return to the desired blank space before Africa was inscribed by others.

The ambiguity of the meaning of the blank page of course corresponds with the uncertainty of the meaning of silence in Philip's text. If the reader concentrates upon the association of the blank page with pre-European contact, then the blank page comes to represent the desire for a clean slate upon which Africa can build its own representations of itself. Kathleen Fraser suggests that Charles Olson's field poetics emptied the page, freeing it from the straight-edged margins inscribed by patriarchal discourse. In so doing, Olson's poetics allowed women a blank page "on which to scrawl a new language" (177). Similarly, Philip's desire here for a blank page involves freedom from being written and read by others. As I suggested in the introductory chapter, Philip's ideal is to achieve the position of 'first statement' where one no longer needs to react to someone else's construction of his/her identity. If the position of 'first statement' is achieved, one can construct him-/herself for him-/herself. The pursuit of blank space in this poem is an attempt to locate that space of self-determination.

### **Inhabiting the Page**

Returning to the discussion of Harris's *She*, although Penelope often romanticizes her past, Trinidad, after the accidental death of her baby sister, is just as uninhabitable as Calgary proves to be. The isolation and alienation she associates with her experience of Calgary is revealed to be equally characteristic of her childhood in Trinidad. Having lifted baby Thena up to see down a well, a seven-year-old Penelope is held responsible when Thena slips and falls. After the accident but before she has been told that her sister has died, Penelope recognizes that "even / then, i, already separate from the brothers, already in different worlds" (118, lines 13-

14). Frequently finding that “nobody, not / Mother not Dad, wants to say anything to me” (120, lines 21-22), that “nobody wants to touch us. see us” (120, lines 22-23), she more and more isolates herself with reading. Encouraged by her grandmother (who nonetheless is the one person who treats her compassionately) with commands like “[. . .] go in your room, child, and read something” (120, line 31) and “‘don’t you be playing outside the house.’ [. . .]. ‘go inside.’ ‘read a book’” (121, lines 1-2), Penelope learns that books are a retreat when she is excluded from other spaces.

This section of this chapter explores Penelope’s treatment of the page as a material space to inhabit. The treatment of textual space as an inhabitable space is of course not unique to a visually experimental mode of poetry. A journal, for example, no matter its material form (be it a bound book, a collection of loose leaf pages, or an on-line blog), is often interpreted as a welcoming environment for personal expression and, thereby, becomes the space in which one forms his/her subjectivity. As the space of self-expression, a journal can be interpreted as the space in which one’s most honest self resides. Despite other modes of writing also treating textual space as inhabitable, what visually experimental poetry can offer is a valuing of both the content and material form of the written word. Consequently, as Penelope’s use of the page demonstrates, the page is not just inhabitable because it is the grounds upon which she communicates her thoughts and feelings. Instead, it is inhabitable because she equates herself with the marks upon the page. It may not be a quality distinct to visual poetry, but this perception that one can be embodied by the marks on the page is in part made possible by visual poetry’s foregrounding of the physical act of writing. Since visual poetry does not just involve the communication of messages or narratives but instead requires a decision-making

process regarding page layout, this need for conscious choices functions to enhance the fusion of the creator of the marks with the marks themselves. In *She*, Penelope's equation of herself with the marks on a page comes to signify her attempt to fashion the page itself as a space to call 'home' when all her other homes become unliveable. Though the following discussion may not always foreground the significance of the visual qualities of the text, it should be understood that Penelope's casting of herself as the marks on the page requires a visually experimental form. A standardized and unified appearance would fail to embody the disunity of her many personalities.

Whether or not a page can be an inhabitable space is caught up in critical discussions that acknowledge that more metaphorical, hence abstract, models of space are often quite distinct from concrete, physical locations. John Noyes observes,

A certain ambivalence is built into the Western tradition of thinking about space. On the one hand, we are accustomed to speaking of space as something real – something which exists, in which we are situated. On the other hand, theoretical or philosophical models of spatiality imply the ability to place ourselves outside of specific spaces, pretending that there is a place from which the nature of space might be contemplated free of all spatiality. (29)

This ambivalence, however, frequently results in an opposition that treats theoretical constructions of space as inadequate for understanding lived spaces. Alexander Moore's critique of the stated aims for the "Textual Space: Geographies of Modern Literatures in Africa, Asia and the Middle East" conference organized by the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London (September 13-14, 1999) nicely summarizes the implications of

this ambivalence. Moore's argument notes the hypocrisy of the conference announcement which simultaneously indicates a desire to depart from the abstract generalizations that classify space (e.g., centre vs. periphery) and yet privileges abstract textual spaces over physical locations. According to Moore's interpretation, the conference's approach to space sought to focus attention on the space represented within literary texts rather than the space outside of literature. In other words, in a fashion perhaps unintentionally akin to New Criticism, the context, hence exterior space, was to be overlooked in favour of the "interiority" of the text itself (2). Moore's examination of the ambivalence at the heart of this conference's purpose leads him to conduct an argument which compares Bhabha's construction of space to Said's, thereby undertaking a materialist critique of Bhabha in the line of earlier critiques by Benita Parry and Lawrence Phillips.<sup>34</sup> Moore establishes that Bhabha's use of space in his formulation of *third space* "has little to do with space in any sense beyond its metaphorical operation" (9) but instead signifies both time and social identity.

The issue at the heart of Moore's critique of Bhabha is the co-opting of the construct of space to represent something else. Such metaphoric uses of 'space' are abstractions that can distract one from the experience of actual spaces. By extension, the tendency to view text as a space for political and social action is misleading since textual spaces cannot hold the immediacy of an actual lived experience; as an abstraction, textual space distances one from the immediate event and thus does not involve the danger and threat of actually lived-in spaces. Lawrence Phillips, in a materialist critique of Bhabha upon which Moore's builds, asserts that "one cannot escape the conclusion that the horror and sheer injustice in the original, lived experience has been somehow lost in an indefinable, unlocatable abstract textual space" (par.

21). For Phillips, because there remains “an overwhelming need[] for a materialist critique” (par. 24) of lived-in spaces, Bhabha’s “slippage between actual and abstract spaces, especially in relation to colonialism” proves quite “disturbing” (par. 4). Moore concurs, noting that in Bhabha’s use of space merely as a metaphorical representation of subjectivity, “space as location dissolves” (9).

However, whereas Phillips cannot excuse Bhabha’s abstraction of space, Moore does, recalling that even what seems to be an abstraction – in this case, textual space – can have very real material effects. Moore concludes that textual space “becomes a viable critical term if it is understood that representations realise” (21). In other words, textual space, as the space of language, does not just represent the material social world but in fact functions in that material world. A text as a material object may not possess much material impact (except perhaps as a weapon to throw or as fuel for a fire, etc.), but as Jerome McGann argues, “[. . .] a ‘text’ is not a ‘material thing’ but a material event or set of events, a point in time (or a moment in space) where certain communicative interchanges are being practiced” (*Textual* 21). In terms of the history of colonialism, as John Noyes and many others like him observe, language “not only describes, but actually participates in the physical acts of colonization” (12). There is nothing abstract about text in its performative function. As Marlene Nourbese Philip states, “so much of our despair has come about through writing, I mean the laws and regulations about us and our life” (Mahlis n. pag.).

The space of the page may not be physically inhabitable in the way a house, a city sidewalk, or a park is, but as the holder of the words of self-expression, it can become the space inhabited by the psyche. The perception that textual space is inhabitable space is often

expressed by writers, particularly socially marginalized writers. Ed Roberson, an African-American poet of the Black Arts movement, claims to live, not on, but *in* the page. The poem, for Roberson, is a physical event that is “not just marking on paper. It’s marking a space that you live in” (qtd. in Crown 198). For Fred Wah, the mark of the hyphen between cultural subjectivities is a “locatable place” (86). Constructing the hyphen as a “site” (74), Wah establishes it as a “volatile space that is *inhabited* by a wide range of voices” (74, emphasis added). The goal of his project – what he calls “half-bred poetics” – is to recognize and subsequently value those “who *occup[y]* this hyphen” (79, emphasis added). For those who experience physical locations as exclusionary, the page becomes a location where at last there is room enough for them. Similar to Wah, Yasmin Ladha, whose difficulty with the concept of ‘home’ is evidenced in her epigraph to this chapter, casts the hyphen as her true home because it is the space inhabited by her psyche: “[t]he hyphen is an extension of my identity, home” (qtd. in Wah 87). V.S. Naipaul’s well-known dismissal of tying ‘home’ to one geographical or cultural space likewise finds resolution in the naming of textual space as ‘home.’ Although Naipaul is often harshly criticized for turning his back on the Caribbean in favour of embracing a “home is wherever I am” attitude, the complexity of his experience of home is also interpreted as resulting in his fashioning of his books to be his home. As Leon Gottfried concludes, for Naipaul, “‘home’ can never ultimately be more than the books he writes” (qtd. in Nixon 17).

Similar to Roberson’s focus on the act of marking as a claiming of territory, Gottfried proceeds to suggest that Naipaul equates writing with a forming of space for oneself. In Gottfried’s interpretation, Naipaul’s home is not just his books, but “more precisely, the action

of writing them” (qtd. in Nixon 17). For the protagonist of *She*, the act of writing is similarly a carving out of space. Penelope’s writing may be interpreted as “literary,” bizarre, and embarrassing by her sister Jasmine. It may seem like a cure for her psychological instability to her medical caregivers. But what is most important is the significance Penelope invests into her writing for herself.

At one level, her writing is what connects her to Trinidad and her family. As the Preface indicates, all of Penelope’s writings have been sent to her youngest sister Jasmine. Though some of the entries take the form of stories rather than traditional letters, many indeed conform to the genre of letter writing. They even commonly feature a salutation line – “dear jassy,” “dear jahmin,” or “lo mina” – and a signature – for example, “love marie lancet,” “love She,” or “love penny.” The letters also frequently feature Penelope responding directly to statements Jasmine must have made to her. In her letters, Penelope incorporates Jasmine’s voice either quoting her directly – “you write back / ‘silence is not such a bad thing’” (13, lines 17-18) – or implying her voice by scoffing at Jasmine’s demands that she conduct herself more normally – for example, “lo mina / in plain english yuh wan’ trut’?” (65, lines 1-2) or “PS Why can’t i write letters like other people? philistine!” (74, line 4). In so allowing for the presence of Jasmine’s voice, these letters overtly indicate their purpose is to be a direct form of communication. Furthermore, although the only indication that Jasmine is located in Trinidad occurs in the summary on the back cover of the book, it remains clear that Penelope’s letters at least in part are invested with the purpose of forging a re-connection with her Trinidadian heritage. It is through the letters that Penelope is able to beg Jasmine to “team up please” (72, line 15) so that “among our childhood’s rubble” (72, line 16), they will “find a tale” (72, line



19) that will be a “shield” (72, line 19) to protect Penelope’s child, “a small raincoat / for life / size five months” (72, lines 20-22).

Nevertheless, the letters do not just embody Penelope’s pursuit to receive stories representative of her past in Trinidad but in fact become her means of actively constructing the narrative of her personal history. In other words, her letters do not just solicit stories from Jasmine but in fact also culminate in Penelope providing Jasmine with a story that had been erased from their family history. Responding to Jasmine’s tendency to ask for letters that are more traditional in form, letters that offer “plain prose” and “straight story” (104, line 2), Penelope at last constructs the history of the origins of her illness, telling the narrative of baby Thena’s accidental death. In telling this story, Penelope is able to fill in a gap in family history that Jasmine had not even recognized was there. Born a few years after the death of Thena, Jasmine had never been made aware of Thena’s existence since the parents “g[a]ve ‘way all Thena’s things. hid[] all the photographs” (122, line 9). Beyond unburying this family trauma, Penelope’s letters also serve the purpose of filling in the gap of the family’s understanding of her choices and behaviours. As Jasmine’s Preface to the collection of letters reveals, “no one ever thought of [Penelope] as ill” (9). The letters not only construct the history of Thena, but in doing so, communicate the true history of Penelope and her mental illness.

In leading towards self-revelation the letters could be seen to function in the line of a writing cure. Nevertheless, Penelope’s ultimate disintegration shortly after narrating the events of the trauma and its aftermath counters such an interpretation of the purpose of the letters. While Penelope indicates that she does recognize that her writing could be interpreted as cathartic, she likewise treats writing as a mere mask to use to obtain her freedom. During

Penelope's hospital stay, one personality recognizes that "they think She writing away her problem" (16, line 1) and that "the more She take themso serious, do what they want, the quieter we is, is quicker we getting out" (16, lines 2-3). Writing to cure her illness is of course not a desirable goal for Penelope and her personalities since 'a cure' would signify the elimination of the extra personalities. At least while she is in the hospital, writing is merely a way for her to perform her acquiescence to the doctors' and nurses' power. She is thereby able to precipitate their conclusion, "*You're a tough lady, we're all so proud of how well you're doing. In another couple of days you'll be out of here*" (16, lines 31-33).

Portraying herself as a writer likewise frees her to mask her reality as fiction. Her writing process is interpreted by the nurse as the writing of plays and the subsequent acting out of the various roles, complete with "*all the different voices*" (16, line 23). The finished products of her writing, her letters, are likewise interpreted by her family as "highly literary" (9) creations, rather than factual accounts. Similar to the nurse, Penelope's family interprets her letters as representing drama. The letters possess "little scenes" (9); they are "plays" that "sometimes [. . .] were about us" (9). Their belief that her letters were nothing more than "extravagant exaggeration" (9) in the vein of fiction could, to them, be confirmed by the fact that Penelope was able to publish her work. As Jasmine reveals in the opening paragraph of her Preface, a disease like multiple personality disorder "to the uninitiated" (9) itself seems fictional, tied more to the movie screen's narrative of "The Three Faces of Eve" than to one's seemingly "excessively ordinary life" (9). As a result, the bizarreness of Penelope's letters can easily be misinterpreted as the product of a creative and highly literate mind. They do not easily reveal what they truly are: Penelope's autobiographical perceptions of her reality.

As a form of communication, these letters do not just allow Penelope to connect with her sister Jasmine, but as well allow her personalities to converse with one another. Throughout this novel-in-verse, even a letter attributed to just one personality will frequently feature a dialogue amongst many of the personalities. For example, a letter titled “Ms Lancet Performs” features the personalities trying to identify the presence of a new voice:

. . . ms lancet wha wid de rockin’ horse?  
mAri, i ain’t know. we hear her before.  
yuh still don’ tink it could be She?  
but is not those two others? sound like them to me, the  
last little chile. and the first one don’t sound like She either.  
allyou dere? hey, is how yuh doin’? i’m mAri. hellooo? . (84, lines 10-15)

This use of the letters for conversations among the personalities intimates that the space of the page is the one space that all of her personalities can occupy at once. Her body cannot hold all of them comfortably; they are “trapped in the one body in this conflict of memories / and truths” (114, lines 9-10). Her mind cannot hold all of them; the core personality frequently remains unconscious of the others’ emergence. But the page can hold all of the personalities, or at least a record of them. While Penelope cannot always be conscious of the presence of the other personalities, thinking her writing during those blacked-out times to be just a product of “automatic writing” (43), the page holds an unerasable (or at least unerasable) record of the voice of each personality. The pages and the book they form thereby become the container that holds She together, unifying her without requiring the elimination of the many alternate personalities. The pages become the one space where the personalities can assert that “we is no / fragment” (23, lines 3-4), but rather “make it / togedder” (23, lines 29-30). They “spit / on integrashun” (23-24, lines 31, 1) because it represents “swallow-up an’ / buryin” (24, lines 2-3), so it

becomes the page and its accommodation of all of the various personalities that allows them to be what they would like to be: “we own constellashun / a whole distric’ / in orbit” (24, lines 5-7).

Since the page is where Penelope’s personalities can express themselves and exist at one with one another, it is quite appropriate that Penelope treats the page as habitable, equating herself with marks on a page. Just as birds become “black question marks” (11, line 15), Penelope “thin[s] lose[s] dimension” (42, line 1) and becomes something “sketched [. . .] in” (42, line 18). Positioning herself upon the page, she writes,

in truth it’s worse that my edges  
spill beyond thick black lines  
blur into dream  
whirl  
that like a green girl  
or an amoeba  
i slow  
to indifferent directions  
  
i don’t know  
whose child or why but I fear first my face like lace  
then a fading  
to negative space

. (70-71, lines 23-30, 1-4)

Her description of herself as “spill[ing] beyond thick black lines” in part refers to her embodiment as poetic lines on the page. In this way, this passage involves a doubling, or layering, of meanings, the signifiers referring both to the visual presence of the marks on the page and to Penelope’s state of mind. This passage, with its lines cascading down the page with little pattern to their starting and ending points, occurs directly after a block of text that appears in the form of a paragraph, with a left-justified margin. Emerging out of such a block of text,

this passage visually performs Penelope’s “spill beyond thick black lines.” The edges of her being exceed their containers (body, mind, etc.) much as the edges of her text do not join together to form a distinct, straight-edged boundary. Instead, while some lines poke at the outskirts of the page’s margins, others are left to hover in the middle. This unsteady movement back and forth across the page subsequently enacts the “slow[ing] / to indifferent directions” that is characteristic of the psychological haze Penelope experiences (although it should be noted that her haze does vacillate between an experience of stasis and of chaos).

Penelope’s suggestion that she is overflowing “thick black lines” likewise renders her as a picture that has been painted upon the page. The black lines to which she refers become the drawn outline of her features:

one) all here outlined in thick black paints at  
the moment  
two) so are my lineaments through ragged black  
lines  
from nose to mouth

. (71, lines 5-9)

The image that Penelope conceives of herself is like that of a child’s drawing where the child has failed to stay within the lines. This image thus suggests that what has been, or is meant to be, inside has spilled over and now occupies the outside. This spilling outside the lines could imply an escape from containment, but in implying a movement from the inside to the outside it also comes to signify an emptying out of the inside. For Penelope, breaching the borders of inside and outside involves the emergence of her many personalities. Rie, one of Penelope’s personalities, suggests “[. . .] She skin thin / we slide out She pore / is de inside wha leakin out / it ent ha nutten sneakin in” (66, lines 3-6). While the personalities passively existed within the

core personality, Penelope could function, but now that they have emerged, the core personality is left empty and to a large extent disappears. In this image of Penelope “spill[ing] beyond thick black lines,” her face indeed has become like lace, lines present only to show the holes that have been left as a result of this emptying of herself.

Nevertheless, though this “leakin out” itself implies destruction, it is not just emptiness that Penelope dreads, but instead that the lines to divide inside from outside may also disappear, “fading / to negative space” (71, lines 3-4). Once the thick black lines which demarcate Penelope’s core personality are breached, they, she fears, will fade and disappear, leaving her nothing to contain herself/selves within. Without a border separating herself from everything/everyone else, she subsequently will disappear as she does at the conclusion of the novel when both Jasmine’s and Penelope’s own cries for “Penny” are greeted with the absence of text, the silence of a blank page.

In portraying herself as marks on a page – whether those marks be the marks of language or the marks of visual art – Penelope’s use of the page is as a mirror which offers a visual rendering of herself to be viewed. However, the image both the page and the mirror give her is not the self as a whole as in Lacan’s mirror stage. Rather, her view of herself in both spaces is fragmented and she cannot put the pieces together for herself. Unable to see herself in her writings, she sends them unabridged to Jasmin and “if [she] ever work[s] out what they’re about so much the better” (43, line 22). In the same way that she finds herself alienated from her writing, not recognizing herself either in it or as the creator of it, she too is alienated from her appearance in the mirror. Depicting the mirror as an ocean that “swallow[s]” (126, line 6) and herself as drowning, she furthers the image of herself as ephemeral and unable to remain in

the foreground distinguished from the negative space (hence, background space) that surrounds her. As she suggests, she attempts to find herself in the mirror much as one would search for survivors in the sea after a hurricane:

. . . jassy She stares into the mirror  
as one from the rocky coves  
at blanchiseusse  
hurricaned into welter  
might gaze out at the atlantic  
searching for survivors  
just so she seeks in her reflection  
other vague irregular faces  
as if with grave  
exhausted strokes they  
might rise from unfathomed  
depths to greet her

. (127, lines 14-25)

Penelope's earlier association of herself with marks on a page makes 'strokes' resonate with a double meaning: the strokes are both the action of a swimmer resurfacing and the marks made by a pen, pencil, or paintbrush that make an image appear.

Penelope's problems with both her mirror image and her painted/drawn image of herself on paper reveal that visual representations of her experience of selfhood largely fail. They fail because they expect the self to be a singular entity and for it to be represented by one static and stable signifier. The mirror demands that one face stands for Penelope-Marie Lancet, but because she recognizes herself as a collective, she knows that her true face remains "always on the verges" (126, line16), never fully realized by the mirror. Similarly, the thick black outline of the drawing cannot contain her many selves because it suggests the presence of just one outline, not many. Perhaps, though, it is in the variance of her poetry's appearance on the page that her vision of herself can in fact be accommodated. In the freedom to stream words

across the page in unbroken lines or to just sprinkle a word or a letter on the page, Penelope finds a medium that represents her multiplicity. The visual presence of her words on the page offers no illusions of the existence of a single, lyric voice. Rather, in their adherence to no recognizable pattern, the appearance of the words embodies a collage of many pieces. One cannot distinguish between the voices just based on their visual composition and quite often the significance of the visual presence of the words remains unreadable. As a collage of voices, the pages suggest that while allowing the personalities a common ground to inhabit, they likewise allow the personalities to retain their distinctiveness.

Though the page – and the larger categories it forms, the letter, the book – is the only space where her personalities are united yet allowed to be separate from one another, her occupation of this space in the end proves equally as traumatic as her occupation of her physical surroundings. Her association of herself with words on the page in part originates in the trauma that precipitates her mental illness. Thena’s accident proves newsworthy and Penelope is confronted by her name in print. She describes the experience, “afterwards, in the newspapers. the brothers show me my name. naked. staked to a page. the whole world staring” (121, lines 9-10). Now in adulthood, she similarly recognizes herself as positioned upon the page. Nevertheless, while she may no longer see herself “staked” to a page, her “drift[ing] before blank pages” (124, line 9) proves equally debilitating. Her tenuous tie to the page signals her slipping grip on reality and thereby confirms Penelope’s early lament, “i am without ground” (37, line 16).<sup>35</sup> Much as her illness skews her perception of reality to the point where she is no longer a part of the social world around her, her illness makes her grasp on the page tenuous, and what I earlier described as a freedom to place words in any position on the page



becomes at the same time a symptom of her loss of control.

A primary reason why the page proves uninhabitable for her is the fact that it is the space of language. The marks of language are ultimately not an empowering guise for Penelope to occupy since language is inherently a site and sign of colonial domination. As I suggested in the opening of this section, from the moment of her sister's death, Penelope is encouraged to retreat into books. However, her retreat into textual space not does bring power because it renders her uncritical of the colonialist system in which she grows. Tying herself so closely with literature results in an inability to question what she reads. Penelope is thought to "read far too much" which the family thinks "account[s] for her sometimes very English turns of speech" (9). The literature she reads immerses her into the discourse of the colonizer, thereby rendering her uncritical. While some of her personalities mistrust language and are capable of critical reading, the core personality is commonly characterized as "read[ing] too / much understanding nothing" (39, lines 6-7). As one of her personalities criticizes, "pen-e-lope believe anyting anyting she read in buk. she nevah even / tink who write de buk, o' how dey worl' think" (102, lines 17-18).

By burrowing herself into the textual space of the literature she reads, Penelope reduces her ability to construct an understanding of herself, her cultural heritage, and her position within that cultural context. As Marlene Nourbese Philip discusses in "The Absence of Writing of How I Almost Became a Spy," the privileging of England's literature in a colonial education system results in a loss of "power to create, control and even understand their own i-mages" (13). The English literature that Penelope experiences would either exclude a representation of her specific cultural experience or else portray such experiences only from a European point of

view. Her reliance on literature thus quite literally can be seen to participate in the hollowing out and ultimate disappearance of the core personality. After she slashes her thighs, she is not Penelope but King Duncan bleeding after the MacBeths assassinate him. While bleeding, she recites, “‘Who would have thought the old man to have so much blood in / him. . .’ Her school girl voice rising to a shriek, sparking. She waited / for the response. For the North Sea ‘Overdramatizing as usual’ to clip / across the giggling colonial silence” (27, lines 15-18). In a later letter, Penelope becomes Iago: “i am not what i am / says iago / who am i / when i am not i? / says penny-marie lancet” (80, lines 2-6). In assuming these literary identities, Penelope demonstrates how closely her experience of self is tied to what she reads. Yet, these European literary influences have left her to a large extent without an image of herself and her culture, and consequently they have left an absence where her own (hi)stories should appear. As one of her personalities reveals, “is wha all dat euro schoolin’ do she. pen-e-lope ent / got no way to tink bout she own bein’” (107, lines 12-13).

The challenge Penelope encounters in seeking textual space as a space to inhabit proves to be that she can exert little control over that space. The blank space that Marlene Nourbese Philip sought in *Looking for Livingstone* and that Kathleen Fraser suggests women poets discovered in adopting Olson’s field poetics is not available to Penelope. The hegemony of the imperial control of language renders it impossible for Penelope to achieve a clean slate upon which to write herself. Despite all of the writing Penelope does to create a space for herself, she fails to feel in control of her medium. Instead of feeling like she is the creator of the marks she inscribes, she is left wondering, “i am fiction / so who writes me?” (21, lines 5-6). Constructing herself as the marks rather than the creator of the marks – the written instead of the writer –

Penelope reveals that the page ultimately does not offer her the welcoming space she seeks.

\* \* \*

This chapter's focus on *She*'s representation of space/place witnessed the struggle to situate oneself in an unrestrictive space. Penelope writes, "particular life needs particular space" (47, line 4), and this chapter attested to her pursuit of that "space," first in her physical and psychological experience of Trinidad and Canada and then in her experience of textual space. Harris's use of visually experimental poetry to perform this negotiation of space/place allows for the ambivalence of such negotiations to be highlighted.

Visually experimental poetry is a poetic mode that demands attention be paid to the page and its marks. Consequently, the marks of language in visually experimental work do not just point the reader outside of the text, but rather require the reader to focus on the textual space itself. In the case of *She*, textual space is revealed to be a space fraught with contradictions. It is both a space that promises to sustain Penelope's personalities and a space that proves uninhabitable and destructive. Visually experimental work in general may suggest the achievement of freedom from conventions, similar to Kamau Brathwaite's suggestion that "the *conversational mode* can have a corrosive effect on the tyranny of the pentameter" (*History* 32). Breaching the borders of conventional straight-edged margins might offer writers the opportunity to control where their words appear on the page and thereby work to imbue the appearance of their work with meaning. However, in using a set of signs – the various visual features – that form no concrete system of meanings, writers as well surrender some of their control over the meanings their works form. Meanings of words may be fluid, but meanings of visual qualities are quite often unreadable.

Nevertheless, this unreadableness is not necessarily a negative quality for it helps to convey the instability and ambiguity implicit in coming to terms with particular experiences like that of the negotiation of space/place in diasporic communities. As the epigraphs at the start of this chapter attest, concepts like home cannot be settled into one interpretation or definition. Similarly, visually experimental poetry promotes multiplicity of meanings while also pointing towards a sense of the absence or loss of meaning. In so allowing for contradictions and conflict, a visually experimental page accommodates the performance of experiences that likewise cannot be settled into one interpretation or significance, but instead remain in unresolvable flux.

**Chapter Three: “And so I mess with the lyric”:  
M. Nourbese Philip’s and Kamau Brathwaite’s Socially Critical Lyric**

THE TEXT, LIKE ANY OTHER ORGANISM, REJOICES  
IN THE PINBALL GAMES OF TOUCH AND UNCER-  
TAINTY WHICH MULTIPLY THE POSSIBLE ACTIVI-  
TIES FOR ENGAGEMENT WITH AN AUDIENCE  
EXCHANGE OF SATISFYING CONVERSATION  
LAID OUT ON THE TABLE TO SEDUCE THE EYE. (Drucker,  
“Visual/Verbal” 144)

The previous two chapters observed visually experimental poetry in terms of its representation of the experience in a Caribbean context of home and time. This chapter marks a movement away from situating Caribbean visual poetry within a particular context of Caribbean literary studies towards a positioning of Caribbean visual poetry in relation to broader questions in the study of poetry. In particular, this chapter will discuss M. Nourbese Philip’s and Kamau Brathwaite’s engagement with the genre of lyric, focussing upon their use of visual experimentation to refashion the genre of lyric into a polyvocal, community-oriented discourse.

‘Lyric’ has become notoriously difficult to define.<sup>36</sup> With multiple, and multiplying, connotations, including brevity, musicality, and transcendent self-expression, the term ‘lyric’ in

the English-language tradition has continued to evolve so that at present it is a catchall term frequently used interchangeably with the broader category 'poetry.' 'Lyric' has become an "empty set" in which "[a]n abundance of texts can be found that fit the requirements of any definition of lyric, but no such definition satisfactorily includes all the well-known poems considered lyric or lyrical" (Jeffreys, "Ideologies" 203). The postmodernist blurring of genre divides is, of course, partly to blame for this difficulty in marking the boundaries of lyric. As Kevin McGuirk states, "[p]erhaps lyric cannot, or should not, be defined. There is no recovering or producing anew anything like the assumptions of unitary genre identities" (52). In a postmodern environment, lyric cannot function as a stable and unified category because the qualities that traditionally defined opposing poetic forms, namely epic and other narrative modes, have become increasingly incorporated into lyric poetry itself. The awareness that the personal is not separate from the material, political world or from communal interests, and the subsequent recognition that the poem of self and the poem of history are not distinguishable, makes codifying a definition of 'lyric' an impossible task.

My concern here is to explore what visual experimentation in particular offers to the genre of lyric. At present, though Linda Kinnahan's recent *Lyric Interventions* observes some examples of visually experimental lyric, for the most part, the qualities associated with visually experimental poetry – for instance, its tendency towards fragmentation and polyvocality – are interpreted as anti-thetical to lyric.<sup>37</sup> My treatment of lyric will not position it opposite to visually experimental modes of poetry but rather will argue that visually experimental poetry can be a means of creating the 'subjective' yet 'anti-Cartesian' model of lyric that postmodernist ideals require. In other words, the construction of lyric manifested by a visually

expressive mode still can value an individual, self-expressive voice, all the while embodying a polyvocal discourse. The polyvocality of this form of lyric comes from situating the individual voice amidst the voices of others. Consequently, the possibility for self-expression is not completely deconstructed and annihilated, but rather the individual is seen to be formed out of and function within his/her social situation.

As this chapter's focus on Marlene Nourbese Philip's "Discourse on the Logic of Language" and Kamau Brathwaite's *Trench Town Rock* will attest, the visually experimental page allows the page both to hold multiple voices, hence perspectives, and to hold multiple discourse types not necessarily traditionally deemed 'poetic.' As shown by Philip's and Brathwaite's texts, the visually experimental page can perform the interaction of multiple subject positions and discourse types and, thereby, perform the power dynamics involved in such interaction. An exploration of authority – who has the right to speak and/or to speak and be believed and what types of discourses achieve believability – can be performed in such a polyvocal poetic mode. By extension, visually experimental poetry not only allows for the interaction of multiple voices, but also refashions the audience's position in relation to the poetry and its content, requiring the reader to play a more active part in the production of meaning. These key features – the visually experimental lyric's polyvocality, its multiple discourse types, and its positioning of the reader/audience as a present and active contributor to the scene of communication – ensure that lyric is no longer merely an expression of personal epiphany, but rather becomes a site intended for political discussion and critique.

## Polyvocality in Visually Experimental Lyric

As Mark Jeffreys announces, in contemporary poetry “[. . .] two facts remain certain: that ‘lyric’ has continued to be used as such a general term to the present day and that no one is satisfied with it” (“Songs” 125). The dissatisfaction with the term ‘lyric’ in part results from the baggage it carries with it as a result of its association with the Romantic ideals that picture the lyric self as transcendent and universal, separate from and uninterested in the material world. Since, as many have noted, “[t]he radical shift in Western definitions of *human being* [. . .] in the past century may be characterized as a movement away from the concept of an autonomous male individual who transcends history and society to the notion of a decentered subject who is constituted by his or her material conditions” (Nielsen 127), the Romantic mode of lyric, it seems, has become out of date and ethically suspect. In fact, depictions of the lyric as a dying mode frequently, if not always, name its association with Romantic subjectivity as the executioner. Although Marjorie Perloff works to remind others that the Romantic lyric is not as unified a genre nor is it as distinct from current forms as current scholarship portrays it to be, explorations of lyric still tend to assume an ideal, distinguishable Romantic lyric against which current forms can be set.<sup>38</sup>

Nourbese Philip’s overt disagreement with the traditional values of lyric is instructive here. My positioning of Philip’s work within a discussion of lyric poetry could in fact seem problematic since she has often discussed her poetry in terms of an assault on lyric. In “The Habit of: Poetry, Rats and Cats,” Philip reveals that in *She Tries her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks*, she consciously “set out to destroy the lyric voice” (115). More recently, in a 2004 interview, she maintains and reasserts this intention for her poetry: “During the writing of it



[*She Tries*], there were certain things I was conscious of engaging with: I was conscious that I wanted to destroy the lyric” (qtd. in Mahlis 686). Despite Philip’s stance that her work is antithetical to lyric, I agree with, and wish to further develop, Linda Kinnahan’s inclusion of *She Tries* as lyric in her recent book *Lyric Interventions: Feminism, Experimental Poetry, and Contemporary Discourse*. Despite Philip’s oft-cited stance against the lyric, what she rallies against is not lyric in the fullness and variety of what it has come to mean but rather lyric in its metonymic association with monologic and transcendent subjectivity. She sets out to destroy the lyric, but more specifically, “the *singularity* of the lyric voice” (“Habit Of” 115, emphasis added) and “[i]n opposition to the univocal lyric voice” constructs “a multiplicity of voices—the polyvocal” (“Habit of” 115).

Her stance against the lyric thus invokes the general complaint against lyric in light of postmodernist questioning of monologism. As Marjorie Perloff observes, conceptions of lyric frequently stereotype it as embodying Romantic conceptions of self as transcendent, and, consequently, “romantic lyric thus becomes a derogatory term; it connotes inwardness, subjectivity, monovocality, and transparency—all of these politically suspect in the age of multiculturalism” (“A Response” 246). Philip’s mistrust of the lyric’s monologism quite rightly evolves out of an awareness that if lyric can “purport[] to encapsulate the experience of an ‘I,’ it [must] rel[y] on the repression of the ‘not-I’” (Nielsen 130).<sup>39</sup> Locating herself in both a cultural and patriarchal context that has continually witnessed the damage inflicted by such repression, or outright elimination, of otherness, Philip stands against the lyric’s tendency to privilege a singular voice at the expense of silencing others.

In replacing the singularity of the lyric voice with a polyvocal discourse, the visually

experimental lyric functions like many other forms of contemporary lyric where the lyric voice manifests itself as (a) communal voice(s). Though contemporary lyric need not be visually experimental in order to convey multiple subject positions, the disruption to the linearity of the reading path that visual experimentation allows – by dividing the page into multiple discourse spaces, for instance – allows the multiple voices to perform their relationship to one another. In other words, instead of moving linearly through one voice into another, readers of visually experimental work can encounter the contemporaneous existence of multiple voices, thereby having to come to terms with their interaction. M. Nourbese Philip has observed that her poetry in the latter half of *She Tries*, where her work diverges more and more from poetry's traditional single column appearance, “mov[es] from the solo voice to the chorus” (Philip in Mahlis 686). Philip describes her awareness of her movement into a polyvocal poetry as follows:

Much of the poetry in *She Tries*... has become “unreadable,” in the sense of one person getting up before an audience and reading. [. . .]. On one occasion, when asked to read a certain poem (“Universal Grammar”), in desperation I call on a student to assist me—the work immediately becomes a mini-drama. Constantly changing depending on who is reading it. Along with me. The polyvocal. The multiplicity of voices (“Habit Of” 116).

As Philip suggests, the visually experimental page, in insisting on the insufficiency of a single voice for its reading, overtly displays its polyvocality.

Despite her denigration of the monologism of traditional lyric, Philip, too, recognizes the potential power achieved through self-expressive discourses. As she notes, lyric is a genre that bestows authority on its speaker(s):

We seldom think of the lyric voice as one of authority—poetry and authority seem strange bedfellows—but *it is*, with the weight of a tradition behind it, even in its sometimes critical stance against society or the state. The traditional and overwhelming image is of the great man who expresses, in the best possible way, the dreams and aspirations of his people. (“Ignoring” 124, emphasis added)

Her conception of the traditional lyric recognizes the authority granted to the speaker, but counter to traditional conceptions, she also envisions the lyric not as ego-centric but as a space for a “critical stance against society or the state.” Herein lies the paradox at the heart of the postmodernist deconstruction of subjectivity: even though the traditional model of an autonomous and universal subject is rightly suspected as patriarchal, the ability to construct a subject position remains a vital means of achieving agency. Romana Huk observes that the subject “is ‘too often preemptively dismantled or deconstructed’” (qtd. in Kinnahan 19), thereby allowing “[. . .] a new culturally-specific-yet-universalized conception of (non)selfhood’ that ignores (or at least diminishes) the ‘historical functioning of the subject’” (qtd. in Kinnahan 19-20). In communities traditionally marginalized, the ability to construct a subject position from which to speak is vital. Dorothy Nielsen summarizes well the paradoxical debate regarding subject-construction; she writes:

Some strict versions of anti-essentialism advocate complete deconstruction of the subject, on the grounds that any model of a subject falsely freezes identity and therefore lends itself to the static classification on which all kinds of marginalization are based. However, others argue that since those marginalized by racism, classism, sexism, and homophobia need to construct a subject as the

ground for action, they need a sense of self-identity based on similarities with others who are similarly oppressed. Since many groups are only recently beginning to achieve the right to be subjects in law, education, economics, the professions, and the arts, they risk losing the power of agency if the subject is deconstructed. (136)

While Philip values the possibility of the speaker using the authority gained through lyric expression for social critique, what she distrusts is the investment of power in one person (most often a patriarch) to speak for a collective. Recognizing that no one person should assume authority over others, Philip demands “the explosion, or is it implosion, of **my** lyric voice into many and several—needing others to help in the expression” (“Ignoring” 124, Philip’s emphasis). The authority Philip hopes to achieve through her poetry is an authority for a collective. As she writes, “And so I mess with the lyric—subverting my own authority—what authority? Speaking over my own voice, interrupting and disrupting it, refusing to allow the voice, the solo voice, pride of place, centre page, centre stage” (“Ignoring” 124-25). In line with other postmodernist views of lyric, Philip’s model of lyric demands that no one subject speaks of or for a collective but rather portrays the subject speaking within and alongside the other members of the group. In this way, Philip is pursuing a model of lyric that sets the subject in relation with and makes it dependent upon others. She is thereby seeking what Dorothy Nielsen envisions as a model of lyric that can be “both subjective *and* anti-Cartesian” (144, original emphasis).

In *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks*, Philip offers multiple poetic styles. While some poems in the collection are short and offer the ‘I’ speaker familiar to traditional

lyric poetry, other poems feature narrative techniques commonly associated with the long poem tradition. It is the collage aesthetics of the later poems that reflect Philip's deepest engagement with, but metamorphosis of, the lyric genre. Philip crafts "Discourse on the Logic of Language," in particular, to showcase the implications of the interactions between multiple voices, hence to perform the interactions between multiple subject positions. In this poem, readers encounter five distinct discourses: a section recounting the mythological ideal of a mother passing her language on to her newborn daughter, a section more recognizable as verse that announces the speaker's problematic relationship to language, a section of edicts that embody how the control of language was used in the oppression of slaves, a section that describes the biology involved in the production of speech, and a section of multiple choice questions concerning the tongue and its role in speech.<sup>40</sup> Philip uses her collage of these multiple discourses as a means of showcasing the power dynamics involved in the relationships between the speakers while also ensuring that the self-expressive verse section is experienced not as a product of an autonomous individual but rather as a product of specific social conditions.

The visually experimental nature of this text is manifested by Philip's arrangement of the first three discourse types so that they together inhabit both the first and third pages of this four-page poem. On the first and third page, readers encounter the section of verse coursing down the centre of the page, flanked by the mythology section on the left and the edict section on the right. While the verse section is rather traditional in appearance, printed in a common serif font and only occasionally deviating from the traditional left-justification, the mythology section uses all capitals and is printed in vertical, rather than horizontal lines. The edict section,

too, veers from tradition, printed as it is in italics. Its brevity and positioning below the starting points of the other discourses makes it float on the page. This page layout places these divergent discourses into a relationship where each helps to explain the significance of the other.

Philip explains her use of these multiple discourses in the following terms:

In “Discourse...” by cramping the space traditionally given the poem itself, by forcing it to share its space with something else—an extended image about women, words, language and silence; with the edicts that established the parameters of silence for the African in the New World, [. . .], poetry is put in its place— both in terms of it taking a less elevated position: moving from centre stage and page, and putting it back where it belongs in a particular historical sequence of events. (“Habit Of” 117)

While Philip’s tone here, her desire to “put [poetry] in its place,” suggests that she does not believe in the value of poetic expression, it is not lyric expression as a whole that she dislikes, but rather its tendency to efface the conditions of its production. In part, as Brenda Carr asserts, the “graphematic materiality” invoked by Philip’s page design “further activates the social fact of poetry as labour by poet, typesetter, and reader, each of whom is a living social subject implicated in the act of performing this text within a particular arrangement of power relations” (75). This materialist reading, of course, is appropriate,<sup>41</sup> but the conditions of production to which I am referring are more in line with Philip’s stated desire to view the content of the verse section as a product of “a particular historical sequence of events.” The positioning of the edict and the mythology section alongside the section of verses, combined with the fact that the

scientific section of page two interrupts the continuity between the first and third pages, functions to provide the context out of which the poetic self-expression is formed. By surrounding the verse section with the other discourses, Philip provides the historical backdrop for the lyric subject's representation of her experience of language, overtly showing the factors that have led to her trauma.<sup>42</sup>

This polyvocal discourse that Philip offers is, as Naomi Guttman asserts, "a poetic treatise on the tensions between the discourses of the dominating and the dominated" (54). By looking not only at the content of these multiple discourses but also at their visual relationships with one another, one becomes aware that Philip is keenly concerned with the impediments that render language use problematic, and even disempowering, in a (post)colonial context. The form of the verse section, with its progressive repetitions, itself suggests a voice struggling through impediments that block her attempt to communicate. Throughout the section of verse, the voice stutters, repeating words with slight differences, building towards what she wishes to communicate instead of stating it directly from the start. Her experience of language is so traumatic that her ability to even refer to it by name is rendered difficult. While she must first build up to using the term 'language' through the stages of "lan lan lang," as soon as she is able to utter 'language,' it quickly disintegrates, 'language' becoming 'l/anguish,' becoming 'anguish,' becoming 'english,' leading readers into the final, powerful declaration "english / is a foreign anguish" (lines 35-36, page 58).

At other times in the verse section, the speaker's stuttering reveals an exploration of the significance of individual words. Variations of 'mother' is a particular concern. She asks, "What is my mother / tongue / my mammy tongue / my mummy tongue / my momsy tongue /

my modder tongue / my ma tongue?” (lines 16-22, page 56), while later again progressing through many variations of the term mother: “my mother / mammy / mummy / moder / mater / macer / moder / tongue / mothertongue” (lines 16-24, page 58). With many of the variations bringing with them different cultural connotations – ‘momsy’ suggesting ties to the British elite, ‘mater’ being the Latin root of ‘mother,’ and ‘modder’ suggesting Caribbean nation language – the speaker here is seen to explore which term to claim as her own, finding it impossible to pick just one. Her stuttering thus becomes at once a mark of uncertainty, an inability to choose her terms with confidence, yet an acknowledgement that to represent her experience with accuracy she must accept the need for multiplicity. Her post-colonial situation, in that it forces ties both to the Caribbean and to the British empire and its ideals, may make each of the terms appropriate, but not one of them satisfactory on its own. In this way, her inability to claim a single name to signify the language she experiences becomes indicative of her inability to locate a mothertongue not tainted by the history of slavery and colonialism.<sup>43</sup>

In addition to the stuttering witnessed in the section of verse, Philip’s page design casts the discourses into a relationship with one another where certain discourses are revealed to be impediments to the others. As Philip revealed above, her intention in creating the triptychs of myth, verse, and edict involved a desire to “cramp[] the space” of the poem. She indeed accomplishes this goal, particularly in her positioning of the mythology section on the first page in very close proximity to the verse section.<sup>44</sup> The page appears as follows:



Discourse on the Logic of Language

WHEN IT WAS BORN, THE MOTHER HELD HER NEWBORN CHILD CLOSE: SHE BEGAN THEN TO  
LICK IT ALL OVER. THE CHILD WHIMPERED A LITTLE. BUT AS THE MOTHER'S TONGUE  
MOVED FASTER AND STRONGER OVER ITS BODY, IT GREW SILENT – THE MOTHER TURNING  
IT THIS WAY AND THAT UNDER HER TONGUE, UNTIL SHE HAD TONGUED IT CLEAN OF  
THE CREAMY WHITE SUBSTANCE COVERING ITS BODY.

English  
is my mother tongue.  
A mother tongue is not  
not a foreign lan lan lang  
language  
l/anguish  
anguish  
— a foreign anguish.

English is  
my father tongue.  
A father tongue is  
a foreign language,  
therefore English is  
a foreign language  
not a mother tongue.

What is my mother  
tongue  
my mammy tongue  
my mummy tongue  
my momsy tongue  
my modder tongue  
my ma tongue?

I have no mother  
tongue  
no mother to tongue  
no tongue to mother  
to mother  
tongue  
me

I must therefore be tongue  
dumb  
dumb-tongued  
dub-tongued  
damn dumb  
tongue

EDICT I

*Every owner of slaves  
shall, wherever possible,  
ensure that his slaves  
belong to as many ethno-  
linguistic groups as  
possible. If they can-  
not speak to each other,  
they cannot then foment  
rebellion and revolution.*

Much as Harris’s use of columns in *She* set the two columns into a pulsing relationship with one another, the proximity of these two sections renders it difficult to read the verse section without being distracted by the mythology section. The mythology section proves to be a stumbling block for the reading of the section of verse in that one’s tendency when reading is to scan left to right from the edge of the page in. When laying out multiple discourses on one page as in advertising or website design, empty space functions to give the reader cues to how to organize and process the information being offered. Here, as a result of the close proximity of

the mythology section, readers are not offered sufficient blank space between discourses to comfortably separate these two discourses. Their ability to remain focussed on the verse section is hindered since each time the reader reaches the end of line of the verse section, it remains difficult to re-orient him/herself at the beginning of the next line without being drawn to the mythology section first.

Not only does the positioning of the mythology section at the left side of the page, the space where one's eyes fall first, detract attention from the section of verse, but also its appearance in all capitals makes it the most salient feature on the page. Kress and Van Leeuwen define salience as "elements [. . .] [that] are made to attract the viewer's attention to different degrees, as realized by such factors as placement in the foreground or background, relative size, contrasts in tonal value (or colour), differences in sharpness, etc." (183). The capitals of the mythology section make it tonally the darkest section of the page, thereby further attracting attention in its direction. Its positioning vertically rather than horizontally on the page may make the mythology section somewhat more of a visual distraction than a linguistic one, but if the reader complies with the pull towards the mythology section and chooses to proceed with it rather than continuing with the verse section, the required turning of the book sideways marks a literal turning away from the verse section.

This literal turning of the book away from the other discourses on the page has been interpreted as a method for "calling into question the relevance of the other discourses" (Guttman 65), while also serving to emphasize that a woman's perspective requires that one be "prepared to look at the page from another angle, both figuratively and literally" (Fumagalli 173).<sup>45</sup> While this act of turning the book is significant, it tends to ignore the visual relationship

between the discourses of the page, instead treating each discourse as a separate entity.

Attention to the visual connection between the mythology and verse sections, in acknowledging the mythology section as a consistent impediment, or distraction, reveals an important paradox. Although the mythology section, with its rendering in all capitals and its fencing in of the entire verse section, continues to attract attention, paradoxically its content depicts a moment that the section of verse reveals to be absent from its speaker's formation. The intimacy between the mother and daughter that the mythology section relates – the mother cleaning “THE CREAMY WHITE SUBSTANCE COVERING [THE CHILD’S] BODY” (56) and later “BLOWING WORDS” (58) into her child – is exactly what the speaker craves, yet what she must declare lacking: “I have no mother / tongue / no mother to tongue / no tongue to mother / to mother / tongue / me” (lines 23-29, page 56).<sup>46</sup> The physical presence of the mythology section, with its size, darkness, and location, consequently, conversely signals the absence of the event being represented. The presence of the mythology section may be a visual stumbling block that impedes the reader's progress through the section of verse, but the absence of the mythological event from the speaker's experience is the true stumbling block.

The visual qualities of the edict sections similarly function to signify a paradox. The edict sections are physically much smaller than the other discourses. These small blocks of text appear even smaller since they drift surrounded by white space, in an italics font which cramps the letters closer together. However, despite their apparent small stature on the page, the historical impact of the content of the edicts is immeasurable. The rules represented – namely that slave holders were to ensure their slaves belonged to multiple linguistic groups so as to prevent rebellion and that slaves caught speaking their native languages were to have their

tongues removed – and the racist ideals they embody are, like the absence of the mothertongue, key contributing factors resulting in the speaker’s trauma. Just as the largeness and salience of the mythology section paradoxically hinted at an absence, the diminutive presence of the edicts belie their far-reaching and traumatic impact.

While the edicts do not function as visual stumbling blocks – they after all do not distract readers from the verse section – they do visually point the reader towards another discourse that manifests itself as an impediment to the continuity of the section of verse. The scientific discourse of page two is aligned with “Edict I,” both commencing at approximately the same horizontal axis across the pages. As well, similar to the edicts, the scientific discourse, cast adrift in the middle of the page, surrounded by blank space, is made to look diminished in size. These visual connections nicely tie the two sections together, visually equating them just as their content is revealed to evoke similar racist ideologies.

In addition to this visual linking of the edict and scientific sections, one must consider the impact of the scientific section on the verse section. Similar to Harris’s “Seen in Stormlight” in which the prose sections at the bottom of the pages disrupt the continuity of the verse above, the scientific section in “Discourse on the Logic of Language” divides the verse section onto two pages. Whereas neither the two mythology sections nor the two edict sections of the first and third pages unite together to form a single continuous discourse, the verse sections of the two pages are meant to be a unified whole. The “damn dumb / tongue” (lines 34-35, page 56) of the first page is continued by the third page’s opening, “but I have / a dumb tongue” (lines 1-2, page 58). The interruption of the continuity of the verse section that the scientific section enacts thus places it as an impediment to the progress of the self-expressive

discourse, just as the content of the scientific section reveals a key historical impediment to speech in black communities.

This scientific discourse recounts the biological journey of the word as it becomes speech. Describing the work of Dr. Broca and Dr. Wernicke which resulted in parts of the brain being named after them, respectively the left frontal cortex and the left temporal lobe, this discourse charts the journey of the word from its genesis as thought to its physical manifestation as spoken word. What the passage reveals, however, is that the work of these doctors (Dr. Broca is especially singled out) is based in racist ideologies that attempted to prove that “white males of the Caucasian race had larger brains than, and were therefore superior to, women, Blacks and other peoples of colour” (57). Consequently, language recognition and production is constructed as an especially treacherous endeavour for Black individuals in that words must travel through territories of the brain claimed and named by racist ideologies. With the recognition and understanding of language taking place in the Wernicke territory and the Broca area controlling the formation of responses and inciting the response’s movement towards the motor cortex which controls the muscles that produce speech, speech production seems to necessarily involve a passing through of white, racist spaces.

In that both the white space and the scientific discourse of the second page interrupts the continuity of the poem, readers are made witnesses to a performance of this hazardous journey of language production. The poem, and hence its speaker, must pass through the white space of page two and also overcome the impediment of the scientific discourse and the racist ideologies it represents in order to resume the expression of self that had been interrupted.

As the preceding discussion demonstrated, Philip's construction of polyvocality in "Discourse on the Logic of Language" deemed the interaction of the multiple discourses as primary in constructing the poem's significance. By placing the different discourses into visual relationships with one another, Philip performs the dynamics of the power structures that, while entwining the discourses, also render some impeded, or outright endangered, by the others. For Philip, as we will see regarding Brathwaite as well, this establishment of polyvocality as a feature of lyric poetry becomes a means of showcasing the individual's position within, and formation out of, his/her social world.

### **Developing a Socially-aware Genre**

With the radical shift from a Romantic belief in autonomous and transcendent subjectivity to an awareness of self as a fluid, social construction, the recovery of lyric as a means for collective rather than ego-centric self-expression is vital for lyric's survival as a viable medium. As Philip and Brathwaite refashion it, lyric can still be a space in which the 'I' expresses him/herself, but the voice of the 'I' can be witnessed amongst the voices of many others. This shift from a single voice to multiple voices results in a lyric discourse that more readily critically engages with the material world. Linda Kinnahan, for one, argues that "[t]he yielding of authorial control, the encouragement of a multiplicity of voices that undoes the individual lyric voice, is here part of an engagement with public discourses and their histories rather than a retreat from them" (86). Whereas traditionally the lyric was seen as a space for retreat from the material world, visually experimental lyric, in using the page layout to foreground the presence of multiple voices, decentres the lyric subject and in so doing

emphasizes his/her position within the social world.<sup>47</sup>

Investing lyric with a social function is not an entirely new enterprise. Theodore Adorno's 1957 essay "On Lyric Poetry and Society" depicts lyric poetry as important for its representation, not of an individual, but of the individual's social world. He writes that in lyric "we are connected not with the poet as a private person, not with his psychology or his so-called social perspective, but with the poem as a philosophical sundial telling the time of history" (46). Running counter to postmodernist perspectives that condemn lyric based on stereotypes that "the more lyrical a writer seeks to be, the more the writer will try to exclude history" (Jeffreys, "Ideologies" 198), Adorno's Marxist view suggests the lyric's traditional tendency to reject the social world as precisely its means of social engagement. Mark Jeffreys addresses this Marxist interpretation of lyric's social function through his description of the work of Adorno and the later Hugh Grady. As described by Jeffreys, Grady's 1981 "Notes on Marxism and the Lyric" asserts that "the lyric is a kind of subversive protest against the dominant culture because lyric refuses to acknowledge the reality of the cultural situation" ("Ideologies" 199). Despite positioning lyric in association with, rather than separate from, the social world, the irony remains that this Marxist interpretation allows lyric a social function only by assuming lyric is innately an escapist poetic form. Jeffreys notes that while "Adorno's and Grady's views of the lyric as social resistance represent a more affirmative, perhaps even radical, vision of the ideological possibilities of such poetry" ("Ideologies" 199-200), their views necessarily "spring[] from the assumption that lyric is a form of literature that rejects society and historical and economic conditions" ("Ideologies" 200).

Visually experimental lyric poetry like Philip's and Brathwaite's does not subversively

resist by portraying a retreat from society, but rather situates the lyric subject(s) in the midst of volatile social discussions and events. Mark Wallace, in his dismissal of the traditional opposition between the lyric and the ‘poem of history,’ notes that a version of lyric where the subject(s) is/are not seen as autonomous nor transcendent can be a poetry that engages with its social moment. He writes,

In my own work, and that of some others, the ‘subject’ voice of the lyric often makes clear its own partiality, lack of transcendence, and situational, contingent existence. In such a poetry, the ‘voice’ of the poem becomes not a predetermined given but precisely a site of social and material struggle [. . .].

(“On the Lyric” par. 10)

As Wallace suggests, a view that positions subjectivity as socially determined rather than metaphysically acquired goes far towards making, not the individual, but the individual within his/her surroundings, the subject of lyricism.

As I’ve shown, Philip develops the lyric into a discourse suitable for exploring the hegemony of the English language in postcolonial communities. Also seeking a socially critical mode of lyric, Brathwaite treats lyric poetry as suitable for representing, and commenting upon, the violence plaguing his Jamaican community in the early 1990's. Like Philip’s poetry, *Trench Town Rock* may not easily fit into a traditional construction of lyric. Though it does offer a self-expressive autobiographical discourse describing his personal experience of violence, its writing style frequently has more in common with prose than with the short lines and regular metrics of traditional lyric poetry. Furthermore, the book-length construction of this poem seems to run counter to expectations that the lyric is a brief explosion of personal feeling or



insight. Nevertheless, there are aspects of *Trench Town Rock* that are more overtly lyric. The third section of the poem, “Kingston in the kingdom of this world,” for example, with its pastoral and self-focussed opening, announces its connection to the tradition of lyric:

the wind blows on the hillside  
and i suffer the little children  
i remember the lilies of the field  
the fish swim in their shoals of silence  
our flung nets are high wet clouds drifting  
  
with this reed i make music  
with this pen i remember the word  
with these lips i can remember the beginning of the  
world  
  
between these bars is this sudden lock-up  
where there is only the darkness of dog-bark  
where i cannot make windmills of my hands  
where i cannot run down the hill-path of faith  
where i cannot suffer the little children

. (47, lines 1-14)

Picturing himself imprisoned throughout this section with “these chains that strangle my wrists” (48), with “the red whip that circles my head” (48), the refrain becomes “i am reduced / i am reduced / i am reduced” (49). Of course with many other modes of discourse throughout this text, including newspaper articles, a transcript of a radio interview, and a story of “Anansese,” this text’s hybrid nature complicates its fit within the tradition of lyric.

Regardless, what I would suggest Brathwaite’s text does is construct a new lyric form infused by elements of “testimonio,” a mode of self-expressive oral (but recorded and often transcribed) discourse in which the speaker advocates on behalf of his/her oppressed group. The similarities between lyric poetry and testimonio are multiple. Not only are both commonly associated with oral expression (e.g., lyric’s traditional connection to song and testimony’s frequent formation out of interview transcripts), but also both are modes of self-expression.

However, what testimony offers to lyric is a model of self-expression grounded in communal interests. The individual may describe his/her personal experience, but in testimonio the narrator “speaks for, or in the name of, a community or group” (Beverley 27) which is “marked by marginalization, oppression, and struggle” (Beverley 35). Rigoberta Menchú’s opening to the now classic, but vastly controversial, *I, Rigoberta Menchú* (1984) summarizes well the communal scope of testimonio. She states, “My name is Rigoberta Menchú. I’m 23 years old. This is my testimony. I didn’t learn it from a book and I didn’t learn it alone. I’d like to stress that it’s not only my life, it’s also the testimony of my people” (1). As John Beverley further describes it, “testimonio is not so much concerned with the life of a ‘problematic hero’ – the term Lukács used to describe the nature of the hero of the bourgeois novel – as with a problematic collective social situation that the narrator lives with or alongside others. The situation of the narrator in testimonio is one that must be representative of a social class or group [. . .]” (27).

Brathwaite’s text, in its description not only of Brathwaite’s own experience of being held at gun point but also of various other violent events in Jamaica, becomes, in the manner of testimonio, a portrait of a community in turmoil. Even in the section of *Trench Town Rock* that is most recognizably lyric, there is an interesting slippage between a third- and first-person subject. The poem which begins with an ‘i’ narrator shifts to an indefinite ‘he’ for stanzas four and six. The ‘i’ who finds himself in “this sudden lock-up” (47, line 10) “where there is only the darkness of dog-bark / where i cannot make windmills of my hands / where i cannot run down the hill-path of faith / where i cannot suffer the little children” (47, lines 11-14) becomes an anonymous “man”:

a man may have marched with armies  
    he may have crossed the jordan and the red sea  
    he may have stoned down the wells of jericho

here where the frogs creak where there is only the croak  
of starlight

he is reduced  
he is reduced  
he is reduced

to a bundle of rags/a broken  
    stick  
that will never whistle through  
    fingerstops into the music  
    of flutes  
that will never fling nets/white  
    sails crossing

. (47, lines 15-29)

Brathwaite's shift from speaking of himself in the first-person to incorporating himself within an indefinite third-person pronoun enacts a positioning of himself into the broader group of all men in similar situations. He is not just expressing his own experience but the experience of any man facing a similar reality. Significantly, the poem's later refrain of "i am reduced / i am reduced / i am reduced" (49, lines 11-13, 19-21) is here first introduced using 'he' as its pronoun. The repetition with difference of the refrain thereby functions to fuse the generalized 'he' with the specific 'i.' In this way, Brathwaite is at the same time an individual expressing himself and an individual within, and representing, a group.

If Brathwaite's text is so similar to testimonio in its content and narrative position, what makes it still an example of lyric, albeit an unconventional form of lyric? Why is it not strictly testimonio? What reaffirms *Trench Town Rock* as a hybrid form combining testimonio and lyric is the fact that Brathwaite's self-expressive discourse most often takes the form of verse. Consequently, while testimonios are most often transcribed in prose, Brathwaite's use of verse (albeit a style of verse that at times becomes prose-like) to construct his subjectivity

reestablishes his text's connection to lyric poetry. While testimonios, frequently formed out of oral speech, do not always conform to the rules of grammatical prose, their privileging of "sincerity rather than literariness" (Beverley 26) results in a discourse that seeks to limit the supposed artifice of literary techniques like figurative language and rhythm. As Charles Bernstein declares, "artifice" is conventionally perceived as "the contradiction of 'realism'" (3). Demanding a transparent medium so that its readers experience a less mediated, hence supposedly more credible, depiction, testimony privileges prose. Furthermore, a conversational, rather than formal, style of prose can be even more desirable since it can capture the cadence of the speaker's voice and thereby further connect the reader to the speaker. Verse, with its attention to forming, for example, rhythmical and sound effects is deemed less than suitable for documenting material events. Verse's artifice, the attention it attracts to the use of language, establishes it as a medium that foregrounds language rather than just what the language signifies. Consequently, verse can be interpreted as invoking a split between signifier – the word – and signified – the 'real' object/event/concept, rendering its ability to document material reality suspect.

Despite this traditional assumption that prose provides closer connection to real experience, throughout *Trench Town Rock*, Brathwaite establishes that lyrical verse, particularly visually experimental lyric, can convey the emotion of trauma in ways that prose denies. The collage aesthetics of Brathwaite's text, its combination of newspaper articles with Brathwaite's own versified testimony, enacts a comparison that establishes lyric as the more capable medium for representing the experience of violence. Although both the newspaper articles and Brathwaite's descriptions seek to record a violent event, whereas the newspaper

articles are told from an objective point-of-view, effacing the writer’s position as witness, Brathwaite’s depictions assert his own presence at the scene of the event. The comparison between the newspaper accounts and Brathwaite’s own depictions are, consequently, not strictly a comparison between prose and poetry meant to establish the superiority of verse. Rather, the difference that Brathwaite seeks to explore is the difference between discourses like the newspaper articles that efface subjectivity and discourses like his own lyric testimony that foreground it.

For example, the book’s opening depiction of “The Marley Manor Shoot/in” juxtaposes a newspaper report with Brathwaite’s depiction of his first-hand experience of the event. The “Shoot/in” which resulted in the deaths of three men is introduced with Brathwaite as the focalizer of the narrative. He writes:

**L**ass night about 2:45 well well well before  
the little black bell of the walk of my elec-  
tronic clock cd wake me—

### aweakened by gunshatt

—the eyes trying to function open too stunned to work  
out there through the window & into the dark with its  
various glints & glows: mosquito, very distant cock-  
crow, sound system drum, the tumbrel of a passing en-  
gine somewhere some/where in that dark. It must  
have been an ear/ring’s earlier sound that sprawled  
me to the window. but it was

## TWO SHATTS

—silence—

not evening the dogs barking or the trees blazing  
& then a cry we couldn’t see of

*do*

*do*

*do*

*nuh kill me*

. (9)

Positioned in the midst of Brathwaite’s lyrical testimony is a newspaper article from Jamaica’s national newspaper *The Daily Gleaner*:

## **Mystery killings at Apartment complex**

As the latest wave of killings in the Corporate Area continues, three men, including a policeman, were slain at an apartment complex in the Kingston 6 area in the early hours of Sunday morning. Two of them were tied with their hands behind their backs, then shot in the head.

Residents in the area heard shots at about 2:30 a.m, and called the police. When the Police arrived at Marley Manor Apartments off Hope Road, they discovered the body of [but that was later...]

Further investigation revealed the body of the apartment security guard inside his station, with his hands tied.

*The Daily Gleaner* Monday, July 16, 1990, p1

. (14)

The article may be accurate regarding the main details – the shootings did take place at the Marley Manor apartments and three men, including a police man and the apartment security guard, were killed. However, its authority as an accurate portrayal is first of all negated by its misrepresentation of the chronology of the events. Brathwaite’s interjection of “[but that was later...]” (14) renders the article’s credibility in question.<sup>48</sup>

Furthermore, the newspaper report’s lack of visually expressive fonts, combined with a paucity of visual description, functions to deny the presence of embodied subjects as either witnesses or victims. Most often the newspaper articles use a common serif font, appearing in narrow, fully justified columns, centered between the seam and edge of the book. Considering that Brathwaite’s own voicings of events often fill the page, appearing in fonts that change in

size and style with often little pattern, the smallness of the newspaper accounts is frequently quite apparent. This smallness could signify a paradox similar to that of Philip's edict sections in which the small-size contradictorily reveals the authority of the discourse. Though the newspaper articles do have a material effect on the community, inundating them with stories of violence and, thereby, desensitizing them, I do not believe Brathwaite uses the smallness of their appearance to paradoxically comment upon their authority and negative impact. Instead, Brathwaite's visual design of the articles in part mimetically ties them to the actual appearance of newspapers but, more figuratively (and more importantly), emphasizes their disembodied nature. With Brathwaite representing his own voice in a way that suggests little stability, and no standardization, of appearance, changes in font size and style come to suggest emotions and sound of voice, in short the speaker's humanity. For example, the use of large fonts in the opening passage of the text implies not only the sound of the "TWO SHATTS" (9, line 12), but also the desperation of a victim begging for his life: "*do / do / do / nuh kill me*" (9, lines 16-19). The impact of the event on Brathwaite is also conveyed by the large size of "aweakened by gunshatt" (9, line 4). In contrast, the font of the newspaper reports, with its lack of visual expressiveness thus comes to signify an objectivity and absence of humanity that Brathwaite criticizes.<sup>49</sup>

The minimalism of both the appearance and the content of the article describing the shooting at Marley Manor becomes hauntingly disturbing when compared to Brathwaite's first-hand account. The victims in the article become all-but anonymous, designated by the categories into which they fall – they are three *men*, one of whom is a *policeman* and one of whom is a *security guard*. Brathwaite's account, with its detailed descriptions of their

appearances in death, graphically distinguishes them from one another, thereby, constructing them as individuals. The security guard, for example, in the newspaper article, is merely “the body” found “inside his station, with his hands tied” (14). Brathwaite’s account, in contrast, describes the death scene as follows:



es he was dead in there (though second not third found), the door locked in upon him, lights not on—

**now on—**

he crumpled down upon his back upon the narrow  
 cement floor  
 his hands tied up behind his back  
 his feet like under him & also bound  
 the dead eyes staring  
 the face not even twisted by the fatal blow  
 a big red plop and poppy on his chest  
 among the hairs  
 still thick & softly leaking out & leaking out & leaking out  
  
 his chair half-broken with the sudden soundless  
 backward crash



. (14-15)

Brathwaite’s description, too, focuses upon the security guard as a body – his back, his hands, his feet, his eyes and face, his chest. But, whereas the newspaper’s use of “the body” suggests the security guard is merely a material object, Brathwaite’s description portrays the guard as human, still engaged in the process of losing his humanity: the “leaking out & leaking out & leaking out” of his blood. The newspaper report’s effacement of the guard’s humanity is further evidenced in its rendering of “the investigation,” rather than the security guard as the subject. While the newspaper makes the guard the object of what the “investigation revealed,” Brathwaite makes the guard the subject of his descriptions. His repetitive passive constructions



allow the actions of the perpetrators to be foregrounded, while subordinating this focus to the impact of the actions on the victim.

A comparison of these two discourses as well reveals an important difference in the perspective of the two writers. The lack of visual details in the newspaper account positions the writer at a distance from the actual scene, whereas Brathwaite emphasizes his position in the midst of the event. The lyric subject is of course traditionally focused upon his/her own thoughts and feelings, but this self-focus often results in a distancing of self from one's surroundings. In other words, in the tradition of lyric, a retreat from the social world into one's thoughts or emotions is often witnessed. However, Brathwaite's mixing of lyric poetry with testimony results in a form that positions the speaker in the midst of social upheaval, rather than at most philosophically contemplating it. The newspaper accounts invoke a similar distancing from the material events. In the newspaper accounts, unlike traditional lyric, it is not self-focus that distances the writer from the depicted events; in fact conversely, it is the newspaper accounts' pursuit of 'objectivity' that demands that the writer's position within the event be obscured. Even when the newspaper accounts offer the eyewitness reports of others, the tendency to filter voices into anonymous, minimalist sound bites, makes it a medium that fails to represent events accurately because it minimizes emotion and attempts to provide a static depiction of an event characterized by chaos and uncertainty. In contrast, Brathwaite's lyrical testimony becomes the more authoritative version of events because it conveys not just the facts of the event, but its impact.

For Brathwaite, then, the lyric's traditional privileging of 'I' is not a detriment indicating a selfish preoccupation with ego. Instead, the expression of personal emotion and

viewpoint that a subjective position allows is a necessary component in social critique. Although the newspaper accounts all portray the violence endemic to Brathwaite's Jamaican community, their effacement of subjectivity denies the humanity of those it represents. The victims become undifferentiated bodies, disconnected from both the reporter and the reporter's reading public. The reader may be offered an eyewitness account, but his/her connection to that witness is mediated by the reporter's presence. Brathwaite's personal expression, in contrast, functions to provide readers with a direct link to the scene, a window through which the readers, too, become witnesses of the crime. Foregrounding his own position on the scene, Brathwaite becomes the conduit through which the readers experience the events, finding themselves constructed as part of the community and, therefore, equally responsible for it. Even if their position in the midst of the violence is only a vicarious one, the readers' emotional connection to the scene is solidified thanks only to the lyric speaker's subjective response and its distinct ability to focus the readers' attention on the human effects of violence.

### **Activation of the Audience**

As the preceding analysis began to suggest, the lyric can be refashioned into a medium that critically engages the social world by reconstructing the speaker's relationship with his/her audience. Although the medium of print most often necessarily involves a distancing of the speaker and his/her audience – they no longer need be physically co-present, after all – a key use to which Brathwaite and Philip put visual experimentation is the reactivation of the bond between speaker and audience.

The traditional assumption that the lyric subject is separate from the social environment

occurs, I would argue, because of the genre's association with a speaking voice, yet simultaneous tendency to deny the physical presence of that speaker. Dorothy Nielsen, in tracing the traditional "banish[ment of] physicality" (129) in lyric, attributes the development of print media with the lyric subject's seeming exclusion from participation in the social world. She asserts that lyric in its earlier participation "in ancient drama and medieval troubadour song" enjoyed a "literal connection to voice" (129). However, the lyric's evolution as a result of the printing press has resulted in the disappearance of the literal speaker. Nielsen observes, "since the invention of printing and the growth of silent reading, 'voice' and 'song' have become increasingly metaphorical when applied to the genre" (129). With this fading of the lyric subject's physical presence, he/she no longer seems to demand the act of communication as the purpose of his/her speech act. With a movement from lyric as "performed utterance" to lyric as written and read, we witness what Patricia Parker characterizes as "a fall from the plenitude or *communal function*" of spoken/sung lyric (16). Consequently, the movement away from lyric representing a direct act of communication results in the lyric subject's seeming retreat from involvement in the social world.

John Stuart Mill's influential distinction between poetry and eloquence (rhetoric) similarly accounts for the lyric subject's disconnection from his/her material surroundings in terms of the relationship between the lyric subject and its audience. Mill argues that "[e]loquence is heard, poetry is overheard," forwarding the idea that "[e]loquence supposes an audience; the peculiarity of poetry appears to lie in the poet's utter unconsciousness of a listener. Poetry is feeling confessing itself to itself, in moments of solitude" (71). In this conception of lyric, the speaker communicates with the audience only indirectly. The intended

receiver of the poetic message becomes the speaker him/herself rather than others, which thereby positions the speaker at a remove from the social world. Although there is a tradition of apostrophic address in lyric poetry, often the address is directed to an absent other, a dead friend or family member, a lost lover. As Kevin McGuirk writes, “Lyric is supposed to be anti-rhetorical, the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings but really it enacts what McGann calls a ‘displaced rhetoric . . . as if the writer were relatively indifferent to the reader’s presence and intent only on communing with his own soul’” (54).

This assumed distance between lyric speaker and audience is what Philip and Brathwaite seek to narrow. They do this by seeking ways to reactivate lyric’s grounding in oral tradition. Not only does Philip privilege performance as the end form of her work – “always in performance is the completion of poetry. Without it poetry is the sound of one hand clapping” (“Habit Of” 118) – but also Brathwaite seeks a poetry formed out of the communion of a speaker and his/her audience. In *History of the Voice*, Brathwaite opposes written poetry and spoken poetry in terms of their different positioning of their audiences. According to Brathwaite, whereas “[r]eading is an isolated, individualistic expression,” “[t]he oral tradition [. . .] demands not only the griot but the audience to complete the community: the noise and sounds that the maker makes are responded to by the audience and are returned to him” (18-19). The use of oral modes of expression is, of course, a defining characteristic of Caribbean poetry. But Philip’s and Brathwaite’s method for returning their poetry to an oral tradition is not simply to cast an oral performance as lyric’s true end, nor is it to suggest that the page be used merely as an orthographic score of voice. Instead, they accomplish this renewal of the oral tradition by activating their pages through visually experimental means as a space for

performance and social interaction.

Both Philip and Brathwaite theorize the page in terms of an oral dimension. For Philip, whose cry against the silencing of marginalized others is expressed in both her major poetic texts *Looking for Livingstone* and *She Tries her Tongue, her Silence Softly Breaks*, an empty page is indicative of the absence of voices. As *Looking for Livingstone* attests, Philip's view of silence is a complex and paradoxical one in which silence signifies both the racist and colonialist brutality that silences its victims and an idyllic, pre-colonial state in which marginalized others were free to be silent because they were not yet in the position of having to respond to and argue against colonialist ideals. In describing the pages of "Discourse on the Logic of Language" as a space "[w]here words are surrounded by and trying to fill all that white space, negative space, blank space—where the silence is and never was silent" ("Ignoring" 125), Philip crafts her page to function within both the material and socio-political dynamics of voice, hence, of orality.

While Philip does make this connection between the visual qualities of her work and sound/no-sound, Brathwaite, in his formulation of what he deems video poetics, provides an in-depth conceptualization of the links between visually experimental poetry and renewed orality. Although Brathwaite has not published an extended discussion of his conception of video-style poetry, in various interviews he has outlined his intentions. Before actually naming his visually experimental style "video poetry," Brathwaite equates the rise in computer technology with an increased ability to infuse the written with the oral. "[T]echnology makes nation-language easier," Brathwaite states (qtd. in Brown, "'Writin in Light'" 126). Brathwaite expands this argument with the following description of the implications of 'writin in light':

Because the computer does it all for you. You don't have to be able to type, you can make mistakes and correct them or leave them, you can see what you hear.

When I said 'writin' in light,' that is the main thing about it – the miracle of that electronic screen means that the spoken word can become visible in a way that it cannot become visible in the typewriter where you have to erase physically . . .

The computer has moved us away from scripture into some other dimension which is 'writin in light'. It is really nearer to the oral tradition than the typewriter is. The typewriter is an extension of the pen. The computer is getting as close as you can to the spoken word. (qtd. in Brown, "'Writin in Light'" 126)

Much as a speaker can make a statement and then correct it or metamorphosize it until the statement communicates his/her intended meaning, the computer screen becomes a welcoming space for mistakes, mistakes that can either be left as is or easily corrected. Furthermore, the nature of correcting something on the computer – its disappearance without a trace – suggests a parallel to sound's evanescence. Walter Ong describes sound as "exist[ing] only when it is going out of existence. It is not simply perishable but essentially evanescent and it is sensed as evanescent. When I pronounce the word 'permanence', by the time I get to the '-nence', the 'perma-' is gone, and has to be gone" (32).<sup>50</sup> 'Writin in light' enacts, for Brathwaite, a similar ephemerality.

Building upon this interpretation of computer technology as enabling the representation of orality, in 1992 Brathwaite announced his visually experimental work as "Video Style," declaring its basis to be in oral traditions. In a 1992 interview with Graeme Rigby, a poet and the then editor of *The Page* (a literary supplement to *The Northern Echo* in North England),

Brathwaite states, “I think that oral traditions do have a very strong visual aspect. In the African tradition, they use sculpture. Really, what I’m trying to do is create word-sculptures on the page, but word-song for the ear” (Rigby 708). In a 1993 interview with Nathaniel Mackey, which was later published by Brathwaite as the book-length *ConVERSations with Nathaniel Mackey* (1999), Brathwaite explains further. ‘Video style,’ which results out of the graphic possibilities yielded by computer technology, involves an attempt to

make the words themselves live off – away from – the ‘page’, so you can see –  
[. . .] – like see their sound – technology taking us ‘back’, I suppose, to the Urals  
– which is why I continue to think of the MiddleAges [*sic*] – what was  
‘happening’ in Europe, the Mediterranean, the Middle East, the Islamic world of  
the **ILLUMINATED MANUSCRIPTS** when the written word could still *hear*  
*itself speak*, [. . .]. (166-67)

Despite the attention Brathwaite’s perspective places on the spoken word, his formulation of video poetics’ renewal of oral traditions does not stop with the video style’s ability to orthographically represent sound. Instead, the visual qualities also become a way to pass along and preserve history in a way that is more visible, hence more present, in the lives of individuals. Brathwaite links his visually experimental work with both graffiti and with the medium of television, suggesting that “as the poetry gets closer, in this way, to a kind of cinema-painting, it will, thr(u) these senses, become more public in the sense of more shared, more part of the community? –large-scale statements shared at important visible levels by all (many? most?)” (*ConVERSations* 207, Brathwaite’s typography). In pursuing a more public and shared mode of expression, Brathwaite is hoping his visual poetry can function in the mode

of oral cultures – the African griot tradition, for one. Noting that “[o]ral communication unites people in groups” (69), Walter Ong stresses that “[s]poken utterance is addressed by a real, living person to another real, living person or real, living persons, at a specific time in a real setting which includes always much more than mere words” (101). Brathwaite, in associating his video style with graffiti and television, is conceiving of his poetry as a similar public event, meant to fuse the writer and members of the audience together as participants in the act of communication.

This equation of the page as a space for renewed orality is a complicated issue, since, as Johanna Drucker argues, “[t]here are so many aspects of the visual which have no correlation in the verbal” (“Interior” 106). Nevertheless, what this poetry does to reestablish its connection to the oral tradition is redefine the audience’s position in relation to the lyric voice(s). Instead of featuring an indirect connection between speaker(s) and audience, the speakers in Philip’s and Brathwaite’s work are not merely overheard. These speakers are not unaware of nor unconcerned with the audience, but rather frequently foreground their direct address to the audience. As my discussion of Philip’s and Brathwaite’s texts will develop in more depth, visually experimental poetry demands an audience willing to be active in the production of meaning. Consequently, visually experimental poetry can be a medium that re-members the audience – in other words, that foregrounds its presence and participation.

My previous discussion of Brathwaite’s *Trench Town Rock* concluded by arguing that Brathwaite uses his subjective descriptions and interpretations of violent events to position the audience as witnesses to violence. Brathwaite’s activation of the audience is, however, not restricted to positioning them at the site of the violent event. Instead, he likewise calls his



readers to be witnesses to language's role in the social landscape. By inundating readers with the various media accounts of the violence in Jamaica, Brathwaite is motivating readers to actually observe the texts that surround them everyday, and thereby grow more sensitive to the events they portray. It is not surprising in a social world where violence and its representation in media have become daily expectations that many no longer muster the emotional reserves to empathize with those impacted by the violence represented. What Brathwaite seeks to do by overwhelming his readers with the various media accounts of violence and by juxtaposing these accounts with his personal perspective is re-sensitize them to the violence that is daily portrayed to them by various media outlets. By positioning these news discourses in an unexpected space – in a poetry book – Brathwaite makes readers pay closer attention to them, consequently seeking to eliminate the emotional anaesthesia with which many approach similar accounts in their daily lives. In this way, Brathwaite's text again shows its merging of lyric with elements of testimonio. As John Beverley states, “[. . .] testimonio implies a new kind of relation between narrator and reader [. . .]” (30). It does so through its “erasure of authorial presence” in favour of “a different kind of complicity – might we call it fraternal? – between narrator and reader [. . .]” (Beverley 29). The ‘I’ of testimonio, speaking from the site of cultural trauma, “demands to be recognized, [. . .] want[ing] or need[ing] to stake a claim on our attention” (Beverley 28).

In *Trench Town Rock*, Brathwaite's key demand of his audience is to “see see see until yu bline” (67), and he accomplishes this in part by encouraging his readers to become sensitive to the texts surrounding them. He demands that his readers “[s]ee Achebe, see Soyinka, see Biko, see Jackson, see Morislav Holub, see the *Diary of Anne Frank*” (67), suggesting that by

actually seeing, and feeling, the textual accounts, people will become more prepared to do as the epigraph of the book commands them to do: “never turn [one’s] back” (5) on society.

His positioning of the audience as active, however, does not just concern invigorating their sense of social advocacy. He also is engaged in a project similar to Philip’s in that he wishes to make readers active witnesses to the implications of language use. In this way, he exploits the visual qualities of written language to showcase the contentious relationship with English innate to communities impacted by British colonialism. In arguing for the value of Nation Language as a distinctively *Anglo-Caribbean* language form, Brathwaite has sought to counter colonialist assumptions that have traditionally deemed Caribbean English a lesser form of the Queen’s English. Brathwaite declares that because of slavery and colonialism his culture does not possess “the syllables, the syllabic intelligence, to describe the hurricane, which is our own experience” (*History* 8). His investment of the English language as a means of cultural recovery consequently requires a demonstration of resistance at the level of the syllable itself.

Classifying such assaults on language as ‘calibanisms,’ Brathwaite’s “typographical experimentation has always been linked to his sense of the English language’s complicity – perhaps especially the language-as-text’s complicity – in the making of that history [of cultural oppression] which so dominates his imagination and his poetry” (Brown, “Writin in Light” 130). Often changing one or two letters in a word, Brathwaite is able to create in these instances a hybrid language form, one which communicates both the significance of the original word in Standard English and the meaning of the newly formed expression. For example, in Brathwaite’s manipulation of language, Kingston, Jamaica is described as the ‘kingdoom’ (18 and 45). The reader’s recognition of this newly formed term’s basis in, yet

deviation from, 'kingdom' demands that attention be paid to the alteration, to the significance of characterizing Kingston in terms of 'doom.' Brathwaite places many other words in a motion of mutation, demanding readers become witnesses to his manipulation of language. A person is shot not 'in plain broad daylight,' but "in pain broad daylight" (67). The violence in Kingston renders the English colloquialism insufficient since 'daylight' is not 'plain,' but rather full of 'pain.' Similarly, one is not 'awakened' by a gun shot, but "aweakened" (9) by it. In the context of being awoken by the sound of a gun shot, one cannot simply awake and not be affected. Rather, one is necessarily weakened by the presence of violence the shot represents.

As interpreted by Nathaniel Mackey, Brathwaite's manipulation of "the smallest particles of language, syllables and letters" is meant to "assault[] the apparent solidity and integrity of words, destabilizing them (showing them to be intrinsically unstable) by emphasizing the points at which they break, disassembling them and reassembling them" ("Wringing" 736). Mackey continues by arguing, "[t]hese practices remind us, at the graphic level, of the divisibility and the alterability of words, [. . .] their graphic departure from standard, presumably stable procedure, undermines monumental premises" ("Wringing" 736). Thus, by interfering with the spellings of words, Brathwaite is able to disarm the hegemony of the English language and in so doing query other oppressive structures, all of which have roots in the imposition of English language on the Caribbean colonies (education, government, economic). The audience of *Trench Town Rock*, in encountering Brathwaite's alterations of words, is required to produce meaning actively and abandon passive reading strategies. Readers must slow down and view each letter in a word, disregarding conventions like spelling that often give readers a short cut to comprehension. Here, while referents like "aweakened" have a

clear connotation, readers must still undertake a layered reading process that recognizes that the term signifies both a description of a state of being and the action of manipulating language.

Philip's "Discourse on the Logic of Language," similarly demands that readers become active in the production of meaning. As discussed earlier, her positioning of multiple discourses on one page demands that readers actively conceive of the discourses' possible connections. In requiring that readers imagine these connections, Philip positions readers at the scene of the discussion much as Brathwaite positions his readers at the site of violence. Nevertheless, Philip's linking of the writer and reader in the production of meaning is even more explicit in the poem's incorporation of multiple choice questions.<sup>51</sup> The final page of "Discourse" asks readers to answer four multiple choice questions, each having to do with the production of speech. The narrative that these questions produce involves a movement from identifying patriarchy's role in oppression through speech, through a focus on the biological production of speech, culminating in a recognition that cultural conditions, namely slavery, impede the biological processes.<sup>52</sup> Each question requires the reader to complete a sentence using one of four answers. The questions appear as follows:

A tapering, blunt-tipped, muscular, soft and fleshy organ describes

- (a) the penis.
- (b) the tongue.
- (c) neither of the above.
- (d) both of the above.

In man the tongue is

- (a) the principal organ of taste.
- (b) the principal organ of articulate speech.
- (c) the principal organ of oppression and exploitation.
- (d) all of the above.

The tongue

- (a) is an interwoven bundle of striated muscle running in three planes.
- (b) is fixed to the jawbone.
- (c) has an outer covering of a mucous membrane covered with papillae.
- (d) contains ten thousand taste buds, none of which is sensitive to the taste of foreign words.

Air is forced out of the lungs up the throat to the larynx where it causes the vocal cords to vibrate and create sound. The metamorphosis from sound to intelligible word requires

- (a) the lip, tongue and jaw all working together.
- (b) a mother tongue.
- (c) the overseer's whip.
- (d) all of the above or none.

. (59)

What is noticeable amidst these questions is a frequent denial of the possibility of a single answer. While the first question offers separate options of either “neither” or “both” of the above, the fourth question groups “all” and “none” together, demanding that if one wishes to select one of those options, he/she must also accept its opposite. The third question even further refuses the possibility of a singular answer through its offering of four appropriate answers, yet no way of selecting all four as the ‘correct’ answer. Linda Kinnahan evaluates this refusal of singular answers as an assault on knowledge structures that, in demanding one right answer, exclude alternative possibilities and silence discussion. Kinnahan argues that

[. . .], the page visually insists upon multiplicity while verbally refusing the singular answer. Thus the use of a convention of testing knowledge that assumes an organization of knowledge around a singularity of perspective and position undoes itself as the series of questions is followed by answers that comment upon each other rather than displace each other as right or wrong. (125-26)

My reading wishes to expand on this observation by noting that Philip's use of multiple choice questions, along with questioning the hazards of "singularity of perspective," re-imagines the relationship between the lyric speaker/writer and his/her audience. Questions immediately engage the reader in an activity, beckoning him/her to select the answers he/she thinks most appropriate. Questions also imply that the creator of the questions has conceived of the ideal answers. However, these questions are accompanied by no answer key; instead, a reader turning the page in pursuit of answers encounters only a blank page.

By offering no authoritative solution to the questions, and in fact crafting questions that can have no one answer, the creator of these questions demands that the reader become an active and critical participant, thinking through the questions and their implications without relying upon the writer to direct his/her perspectives. The very unanswerability of the questions suggests a pursuit of conversation, for where there can be no single answer, there can often be discussion. From start to finish, "Discourse on the Logic of Language" proves itself interested in both performing and provoking such discussions. While the early collage of multiple discourses positioned the reader as witness of the contentious interaction of historical, mythical, and lyrical discourses regarding language, this final section of the poem provokes the reader to participate in the production of his/her own discourse on language. By ending the

poem with questions that negate the possibility for static, singular answers, Philip ends the poem on a note that suggests that the discourse can, and will, carry on beyond the boundaries of the poem.

\* \* \*

I began this chapter by asserting that lyric is notoriously difficult to define, and this chapter will conclude with it remaining difficult to define. The refashioning of the lyric genre that Philip and Brathwaite accomplish involves a continued belief in the power of self-expression, but a re-conceptualization of the self as dependent upon the people and material conditions surrounding her/him. Although the acceptance that ‘the personal is the political’ is now commonplace, there remain terribly limiting assumptions regarding poetry and its sub-genres that prescribe what subjects are seen as suitable for what poetic form. What this chapter sought to prove was that there can be a poetic form that is lyrical in its self-expression, epic in its socio-historical scope, and formalist in its meta-critical exploration of its own form. While both the lyric and formally experimental poetry have traditionally faced charges of retreating away from the social world into, respectively, the self and language, Philip’s and Brathwaite’s visually experimental lyric poetry demonstrated that such poetry need not involve such a retreat. Instead, their work, through its polyvocality, its use of multiple discourse types, and its activation of the audience, demonstrated its positioning of itself as a socially engaged discourse.

In the end, in both Philip’s “Discourse on the Logic of Language” and Brathwaite’s *Trench Town Rock*, the power of lyric self-expression manifests itself in a re-embodied and, subsequently, re-humanized discourse. Mark Wallace asserts that “it’s important to note that

lyric's concern with the 'emotional' does not have to be understood by definition as a displacement of the objective material conditions of one's circumstances onto an often hysterical subjectivity" ("On the Lyric" par. 11). In both Philip's and Brathwaite's texts, subjective expression is in fact what enables the "material conditions" to be most accurately and completely engaged with, for it allows the human effects to become a part of the depiction. As the preceding discussions have shown, these texts use not only their content but their visual appearance as a means of foregrounding the impact of violence – be it physical or through the silencing of voices – on individuals. In so doing, these texts position their readers at the scene of the action, demanding they become active contributors to the discussion.



#### Chapter Four: The Picturing of Poetry: Image/Text Relations in the Poetry of LeRoy Clarke and Kamau Brathwaite

In my previous chapters, I have explored how the visual qualities of Harris's, Keane's, Brathwaite's, and Philip's poetry contribute to the representation of time/history, diasporic spaces, and lyric subjectivity. In this final chapter, I seek to discuss the significance of this poetry's endeavour to make poetry not just something to be read, but something to be looked at. Although my earlier discussions explored the meaning-making potential of page layout and font styles and sizes, this chapter shifts the focus onto what could be considered the most radical form of Caribbean visual poetry – poetry that employs both words and pictorial images to create meaning. There is a growing body of Caribbean texts that combine paintings and verse, the verse functioning as a mode of art criticism. For example, Cyril Dabydeen's *Turner* comments upon J. M. W. Turner's 1840 painting *Slave Ship* and Laurence Lieberman's *Hour of the Mango Black Moon* responds to paintings by three Caribbean visual artists (Stanley Greaves, Ras Akyem Ramsey, and Ras Ishi Butcher), while Derek Walcott's *Tiepolo's Hound* combines his own poetry and painting to create a narrative about St. Thomas-born Camille Pissarro. Despite this growing body of literature, this chapter focusses on a type of Caribbean poetry in which the division between word and image is less apparent. This chapter instead discusses texts which feature a fusion of word and image in which neither is meant to explain or illustrate the other. In these texts, word and image are not dependent upon each other to create meaning, but instead communicate individually, at times offering seemingly incommensurable messages and at times becoming each other's echo.

This fusion of word and image in Caribbean poetry is in fact rather uncommon. Kamau

Brathwaite's use of what appear to be computer generated clip-art icons in his Sycorax video poetry seems to have little source except for his own claiming of Fred D'Aguiar's "1492" as inspiration. Dividing the sections of D'Aguiar's poem are square blocks in which "engraving-style drawings" (Rigby 709) appear. According to the reprint which appeared in *Wasafiri* 16 (1992), D'Aguiar's poem features three different image blocks: one a landscape displaying a palm tree with mountains in the background, one a portrait representing Christopher Columbus, and one a rendering of a ship sailing.<sup>53</sup> These three images appear repeatedly throughout the poem, functioning, as described by Graeme Rigby, "to indicate the changing perspectives of the narrative voices" and "giv[e] the poem some kind of visual drive that would lead the reader through the concentration requirements of a long poem" (709). While I am not sure readers actually require the pictures to maintain interest in D'Aguiar's verse, Rigby is correct in observing that the images can add meaning to the content of the verse. For example, the dominance and seeming omni-presence of Christopher Columbus is communicated by the repetition of his portrait at the beginning and ending of a small block of verse:



Your shadow is the same as your figure.  
Your answers are the same as your questions.  
Your gifts are what we give.  
Chris, Chris, chrysalis.



. (9)

The repetition of the portrait overpowers the verse, visually enacting the impact of Columbus's devastating presence in the islands.

With D'Aguiar's poem as an influence, Brathwaite develops what he deems the "Sycorax video style." Acknowledging Sycorax, the mother of Caliban, as the "submerge [*sic*] African and woman and *lwa*" (*ConVERSations* 189) of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Brathwaite honours her as "[. . .] a sort of hidden mother. *She is able to feed without credit* [. . .]. **She has the ability to be the most important character on a plantation - (or island. or hospital) without even being present to witness her importance**" (Stu Maria Headley qtd. in *ConVERSations* 191, Brathwaite's typography). As the alternative to Prospero's rule, Sycorax is "celebrate[d] [by Brathwaite] in this way - thru the computer - by saying that she's the spirit/person who creates an(d)/or acts out of the video-style that I workin with She's the *lwa* who, in fact, allows me the space and longitude - groundation and inspiration - the little

inspiration - that I'm at the moment permitted" (*ConVERSations* 189). As the previous chapter described, Brathwaite's Sycorax video style in part seeks to infuse the written word with orality. Brathwaite does use "the *voice* of the fonts from a ole computer" (*ConVERSations* 176, emphasis added), but his Sycorax video style also involves the use of pictographic icons within his verse. Conceived of in various ways, icons are broadly defined as representational images. While historically they are often associated with religious symbology, their most recognizable modern embodiment is in computer interface as small images of isolated objects that represent programs or functions. Appearing to be clip-art images, Brathwaite's icons most often feature an isolated object without a background scene, set adrift in the blank space of the page. Rendered in black and white, the square pixels still apparent, the objects represented can be recognized by their overall shape – their silhouette – but the pixilated appearance prohibits the representation of any detail. The presence of an eye on a girl's profile, for example, may be suggested, but it is formed out of two solid rectangles rather than the realistic contours of an eye and its iris and pupil.

In *Taste of Endless Fruit*, LeRoy Clarke's handwritten verse surrounded by and interwoven with hand-drawn images and designs similarly presents an abstracted, rather than realistic, style of images. However, whereas Brathwaite's icons are simple, isolated from the verse, and overtly mechanically produced, Clarke's images and abstract designs are hand-drawn, ornate to the point of excess, and interwoven with the hand-drawn letters of the verse. Visual art and verse are fused in *Taste of Endless Fruit* not only in the text's inclusion of images but also in the visual design of the verse sections which often feature ornate designs trailing from the individual letters. Clarke's style of visual poetry has no determinate

predecessor. A Trinidadian visual artist and poet, LeRoy Clarke is rarely recognized as a poet. In part because of the small circulation of his poetry and in part because of its conventional nature, his poetry, namely 1974's *Taste of Endless Fruit*, 1981's *Douens*, and most recently 2004's *Eyeing the Word: Love Poem for Etylene*, has yet to receive scholarly attention. In the political climate of postcolonialism and subsequent privileging of socially critical literature, Clarke's tendency towards love poetry has unfortunately rendered his writing neglected. Nevertheless, although the content of *Taste of Endless Fruit* is rather conventional, its hand-written and hand-drawn format marks it as a significant and unique part of Caribbean poetry. It seeks to make poetry into a visual art. As Clarke's *De Poet* series, which includes both poetry and painting, argues, the divide between the verbal and visual arts is not steadfast.

In discussing Clarke's *Taste of Endless Fruit* and Brathwaite's use of visual icons throughout many of his recent texts, this chapter will query the traditionally perceived divide between word and image. Seeking to explore, and argue against, the traditional assumption that images do not communicate as well as words can, this chapter will discuss images as elements of ambiguity within Clarke's and Brathwaite's poetry. As elements of ambiguity, the images are not easily 'read,' but they motivate an acceptance of the possibility of multiple meanings. Images do not in fact perform similar functions in Clarke's and Brathwaite's texts. Clarke's text entwines images and abstract designs with words, allowing them, in Maureen Daly Goggin's terms, to "operate synergetically" (88), demonstrating that they cooperate to create significance "that could not be conveyed by either one alone" (Faigley, George, Palchik, and Selfe 7). Clarke's text trusts in the ability of images to communicate, drawing parallels between images and other non-linguistic forms of meaning-making like the actions and sensations of

one's body. Clarke's text, thus, views human interaction taking place not just through language but through multiple modes of communication. Brathwaite's use of icons conveys less confidence in the ability of pictures to communicate. Nevertheless, as my discussion of Brathwaite's work will show, recognizing the limitations of images does not demean them as insufficient. Rather, an overt performance of their limitations can function as a signifying element suggesting loss and absence.

### **The Twain Shall Meet**

Discussions of the nature of the relationship between image and word have a long history. While Aristotle's *Poetics* equated the sphere of images – the visual arts – with the sphere of text – the verbal arts – in its assertion that all arts are products of imitation, Simonides's assertion that poetry is a speaking picture and painting a mute poem represents the first direct comparison of the verbal and visual arts (McCormick xii).<sup>54</sup> Despite these earlier characterizations of the visual and verbal arts, Horace's *Ars Poetica*, with its still familiar assertion *ut pictura poesis*, is, however, most often credited as the inaugural moment for the discussion of the relationship between the arts. Commonly translated as 'as is painting so is poetry' (Cuddon 733), this phrase acknowledges painting and poetry as arts similar in their aims and qualities. Although, as Edward McCormick notes, Horace's work was not meant as a comprehensive portrait of the relationship between painting and poetry, "his *ut pictura poesis* was snatched out of context and made into the argument par excellence for the homogeneous nature of painting and poetry [. . .]" (xii).

Since Horace's likening of painting and poetry, the relationship between the visual and

verbal arts has long been an ambivalent and turbulent one which at once equates them yet segregates them as incommensurable modes of communication. While interartistic<sup>55</sup> approaches, like that of the tradition of Sister Arts criticism, conduct comparisons across the visual and verbal arts, they do little to dissolve the perceived boundary between the two. Frequently, instead of focussing on their interconnection, in other words on what Dom Sylvester Houédard calls ‘borderblur’ or what Dick Higgins deems ‘intermedia,’ such Sister Arts approaches merely use the visual and verbal arts alongside one another in order to build a more complete picture of broader historical categories of artistic movements. W. J. T. Mitchell observes that “[i]n its ambitious forms ‘interartistic comparison’ has argued for the existence of extended formal analogies across the arts, revealing structural homologies between texts and images united by dominant historical styles such as the baroque, the classical, or the modern” (*Picture* 84). However, in placing the comparison of the visual and verbal arts in the service of the larger concern of defining historical styles, such an approach “reinforces the sense that verbal and visual media are to be seen as distinct, separate, and parallel spheres that converge only at some higher level of abstraction (aesthetic philosophy; the humanities; the dean’s office)” (Mitchell, *Picture* 85).<sup>56</sup>

This traditional construction of the visual and verbal arts as similar yet separate results in their frequent characterization as opposites. Within this binary, the verbal arts are often assumed to belong to a higher intellectual domain (both in terms of production and reception) because they employ language as their medium of communication. Although poetry itself is recognized as borrowing its emphasis on imagery from painting, it is poetry that is frequently portrayed as superior. Lester Faigley observes that “[t]he totemization of alphabetic literacy and

the denial of the materiality of literacy have had the attendant effect of treating images as trivial, transitory, and manipulative” (“Material” 188). Despite what Mitchell deems the ‘pictorial turn’ in contemporary culture – the dominance of visual media in the form of television, advertisements, and websites, for example – it is still often assumed that “images lack the capacity to encourage deep reflection, serious thought” (Faigley, “Material” 185), but “[i]nstead [ . . . ] play on the emotions, encourage stereotypes, and at best merely record reality” (Faigley, “Material” 185). As Mitchell notes, “this fault-line in representation [between the visual and verbal arts] is deeply linked with fundamental ideological divisions” (*Picture* 5). The distinction between the verbal and visual arts is thus impacted by the association of abstractions with intellectual superiority and materiality with intellectual inferiority. Whereas verbal language’s formation out of an arbitrary and highly abstract system of signs makes it a product of a highly intellectually evolved society, images become associated with marginalized others – “the subhuman, the savage, the ‘dumb’ animal, the child, the woman, the masses” (Mitchell, *Picture* 24). The assumption is that a material object, like a painting or sculpture, can be experienced without engaging the mind. Although the images of visual art can of course bear closer, more philosophized readings, they can also be more passively received. They can be observed in passing and/or they can motivate bodily responses, but they need not always be systematically analysed.

The belittling of the visual arts as compared to the verbal arts can be explained by the association of the visual arts with the physical world and the verbal arts with the metaphysical world of ideas. In his chronology of the painting/poetry binary, Edward Allen McCormick notes an assumption in the Italian Renaissance that the visual arts were necessarily limited by



their grounding in the physical world. Citing Luigi Dolce's *Dialogo della Pittura*, McCormick asserts that the visual arts were often treated as a lesser art form because whereas the visual artist "is limited to what his eyes see" (xiv), the poet "is able to represent not only what he sees, but also what is revealed to his spirit" (xiv). Mitchell echoes this assumption in *Iconology* asserting, "Painting sees itself as uniquely fitted for the representation of the visible world, whereas poetry is primarily concerned with the invisible realm of ideas and feelings" (47-48). By extension, even painting's representation of the physical world is limited by its ability to represent only static moments. Summarizing Abbé Jean Baptiste du Bos's *Réflexions Critiques sur la Poésis et la Peinture* (1718), McCormick writes, "[p]ainting represents only a single moment, and its signs are coexistent; poetry on the other hand, produces its effect in a series of instants. Accordingly, the poet may depict a more complex passion than may the painter, who can treat subjects in which effects are due to relatively simple causes [ . . .]" (McCormick xvii). Such perspectives, as McCormick makes clear, are what led to Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's authoritative treatise concerning the boundaries of painting and poetry. In *Laocoön: An Essay upon the Limits of Painting and Poetry* (1766), whose key argument distinguishes painting as a spatial art and poetry as a temporal art, Lessing declares poetry to have "the wider sphere" (qtd. in Mitchell, *Iconology* 107): "'Beauties are within her reach which painting can never attain,' and therefore 'more is allowed to the poet than to the sculptor or the painter'" (Mitchell, *Iconology* 107).

This discussion outlining the traditional opposition of text and image has revealed reasons for the tendency to value text over image as a medium of communication. What these historical interpretations of image and text do not consider, however, is the fact that image and

text are not distinct modes of communication, but rather are often used together as each other's complements. Furthermore, writing itself must be acknowledged as visual communication. Though each letter is put in the service of constructing messages through the system of language, it is first a visual mark, formed out of the lines and shapes that can also serve to produce images. If image and text not only frequently occupy the same space – the billboard of advertising campaigns, the website, the page of a visually experimental poem – but also employ similar building blocks, it becomes necessary to conceive of their relationship with one another, not only to observe their perceived differences.

When used side-by-side, as they are in Brathwaite's and Clarke's texts, how do image and text function in relationship to one another? Roland Barthes formulates a conception of image-text relations in *Image-Music-Text* (1977). However, his depiction characterizes text as a dominating partner, its job being to limit the meaning of the image through its ability to name or describe the image. As Kress and Van Leeuwen summarize Barthes's view, "Barthes argued that the meaning of images (and of other semiotic codes, like dress, food, etc.) is always related to, and in a sense, dependent on, verbal text. By themselves, images are, he thought, too 'polysemous', too open to a variety of possible meanings. To arrive at a definite meaning, language must come to the rescue" (16). Barthes's discomfort with images' lack of fixed meanings may seem contradictory considering Barthes is known to privilege the 'writerly' text in which "meaning [. . .] is never subject to a principle of determination, unless by throwing dice" (*S/Z* 6). Nevertheless, in Barthes's treatment of images, there can be only two types of relationships between words and images, and images cannot communicate effectively alone. Words are required either to "extend" or to "elaborate" the meaning of an image. By extending

the meaning of an image – Kress and Van Leeuwen give the example of word bubbles in comic strips – words function to add meaning to the image. By elaborating the meaning of an image, words are meant merely to echo the meaning of the image by naming it – in other words, describing its content, identifying its significance.

Although Barthes's descriptions of the relationships between text and image provide an adequate starting point, his desire to fix their meaning through alphabetic language fails to acknowledge the possible variety of text/image relations. Foucault's treatment of the relationship between text and image allows for, and in fact values, the lack of closure that Barthes wishes to eliminate by constructing text as image's dominator. While Foucault is similarly aware that text can serve as an image's explicator, he does not limit the relationship between image and text to that function. Exploring "the small space above the words and below the drawings" that "forever serv[e] them as a common frontier" (*This* 28), Foucault does describe this space in terms of tying text and images together into a relationship of naming: "It is there, on these few millimeters of white, the calm sand of the page, that are established all the relations of designation, nomination, description and classification" (*This* 28). However, Foucault also remains aware that images and text may not share such easy bonds. His analysis of Magritte's painting "This is not a Pipe" reveals that words and images, though sharing the same picture plane, may in fact contradict each other rather than explain each other. Foucault writes,

The trap shattered on emptiness: image and text fall each to its own side, of their own weight. No longer do they have a common ground nor a place where they can meet, where words are capable of taking shape and images of entering into

lexical order. The slender, colorless, neutral strip, which [. . .] separates the text and the figure, must be seen as a crevasse—an uncertain, foggy region [. . .].

*(This 28)*

However, although this description suggests a model of image/text relations where image and text remain incommensurable, Foucault does not argue for such a division, but instead simply argues that even though image and text may occupy the same space they may still make meaning independently of each other.

Though they do not refer to Foucault, Kress and Van Leeuwen make a similar point when they criticize Barthes's sense of image/word relations for its inability to accept that "the visual component of a text is an independently organized and structured message – connected with the verbal text, but in no way dependent on it: and similarly the other way around" (17). Though they offer no concrete example, they explain by hypothesizing that advertisements with non-sexist text yet blatantly sexist imagery exist. When encountering such examples, one who assumes the text is the dominant communicator could passively consume the image, failing to acknowledge the inappropriateness of its message. Images do communicate, with or without accompanying text. A failure to acknowledge this fact can prove dangerous. Furthermore, though the consequences may not be as threatening, the privileging of text over image also simply denies the presence of the interesting and complex messages being created by images. Whereas Barthes does not conceive of images as an independent medium of communication, Foucault and Kress and Van Leeuwen all value images for their meaning-making potential. More importantly, they conceive of the relationship of image and text as multifarious. Foucault writes that "the relation of language to painting is an infinite relation. It is not that words are

imperfect or that, when confronted by the visible, they prove insuperably inadequate. Neither can be reduced to the other's terms: it is in vain that we say what we see; what we see never resides in what we say" (*Order 9*).

Although at face value this statement could seem to suggest that Foucault is announcing an incommensurability of word and image, he is instead demanding the relationship between image and word be an open and infinite one. For Foucault, the "incompatibility" of text and image should be treated as a "starting-point for speech [– in other words, discussion –] instead of an obstacle to be avoided" (*Order 9*). Ideally for Foucault, "one must erase" the assumption that text must function to name the image and instead "preserve the infinity of the task" (*Order 10*). W. J. T. Mitchell provides a wonderful interpretation of Foucault's creation of the space between word and image as an infinite space. Arguing that "Foucault performs for us the impossibility of designating, describing, naming, perhaps even classifying this curious region between word and image" (*Picture 70*), Mitchell writes,

One moment it is nearly abstract and geometrical (a 'colorless neutral strip'); the next it is a sublime landscape ('an uncertain foggy region') or the margin of a seashore; the next a pure negation, an 'absence of space.' At other times he will describe it in terms reminiscent of Lessing's account of painting and poetry, as something like a frontier separating two armies: 'between the figure and the text a whole series of intersections—or rather attacks launched by one against the other, arrows shot at the enemy target, enterprises of subversion and destruction, lance blows and wounds, a battle'. (*Picture 70-71*)

It is this open and fluid relationship between image and word that my exploration of

Brathwaite's use of icons and LeRoy Clarke's use of hand-drawings wishes to honour.

### **Blurring the Image/Text Divide in LeRoy Clarke's *Taste of Endless Fruit***

*Taste of Endless Fruit* remains a unique part of this dissertation. Not only is it the earliest example of Caribbean visual poetry that I have been able to locate, but it is also the only work that has not been mass-produced by a publishing company. First self-published in New York in 1974 while Clarke was the artist-in-residence at New York's Studio Museum,<sup>57</sup> *Taste of Endless Fruit* was re-released by Aquarela Galleries in Port of Spain, Trinidad, circa 1992.<sup>58</sup> Although LeRoy Clarke is better known as a visual artist than as a poet, his visual art and poetry are in fact entwined in an extended series entitled *De Poet* that he has been forming since 1969. As described by Margarite Fernández Olmos and Heidi Holder, this series is meant to explore "the neocolonial African" (203). They write:

Through each phase of *De Poet*, Clarke attempts to restore the African (the group Clarke believes has fallen farthest among the neo-colonial peoples) to a state of grace and sovereignty. Each stage of *De Poet* mirrors the African experience in the New World—the journey from Africa, the loss of cultural and spiritual identity, and the eventual hope to regain all that was lost. Clarke attempts to heal the neocolonial African through his art. (203)

Although Veerle Poupeye classifies Clarke's visual art, at least his earlier work, as not directly dealing with racial tensions but rather the "existential dimensions of race and post-colonial identity" (137), by which she means there is little overt political protest evident, Clarke himself frames his work as a means of resisting "the spiritually defunct state that [he] feel[s] still

pervades African people” (qtd. in Olmos and Holder 205). Clarke states, “My own life’s work began by presenting Africa as fallen from the grace of being, a dismantled psyche, flagellated, its pieces splayed here, there, everywhere in incoherence” (qtd. in Olmos and Holder 207). Proclaiming “art” to be “a way of becoming. . . [. . .] a self-creating process” (qtd. in Olmos and Holder 207), Clarke invests “Imagination” with the power to combat the wounds of colonialism: “Imagination has to be our chiefest rule, pushed forward by a strident courage, making every word an utterance of being lifted from under layers of tourists’ spit” (qtd. in Olmos and Holder 207).

Regardless of Clarke’s own claim of political purpose for his overall series of work, *Taste of Endless Fruit* is unreadable in such a context. It in fact does not easily fit within a discourse of protest (nor should it need to), but instead is an extended love poem that entirely isolates its protagonists – the “I” narrator and his woman lover – from social engagement, caught as they are in “[their] private world” (poem 16, line 6) of each other.<sup>59</sup> Nevertheless the absence of political commentary does not put this text’s critical value into question. Although, as my introductory chapter addressed, frequently the literary work of marginalized others is expected to advocate on behalf of the cultural group which it represents, such assumptions often result in such work being valued for merely its sociological content. Without a socially or politically engaged focus, works which innovate in terms of poetic form are overlooked. *Taste of Endless Fruit* is, however, critically significant precisely because of its experimental form that fuses visual art and poetry.

As my discussion will show, the form of this text demands both a macro-level reading that interprets the significance of the processes of creating and reading such a text and a micro-

level reading that interprets the significance of particular image/text combinations. In either case, Clarke uses the form of this text to construct his representation of the complexities of the love between the first person narrator and his woman lover. Although the relationships between words and images change and their significance remains fluid, Clarke's use of images amidst words argues against verbal language as the dominant mode of expression. While verbal language certainly is used as a medium of communication in this poem, the form of Clarke's text emphasizes that verbal language is not, nor should it be thought to be, the *only* mode of communication. Not only are the drawings revealed to expand upon and heighten the significance of the text's verbal content, but also the presence of the drawings – be they a collection of non-representational lines or of abstracted images of people, flowers, birds – reveals and emphasizes the significance of other non-linguistic forms of communication like the actions and sensations of the body. Consequently, verbal language is constructed as a system of communication that functions, not in isolation, but in conjunction with multiple modes of meaning-formation. In *Taste of Endless Fruit*, the image/word relationship is one in which the ability of images to communicate independently of words is confirmed. This foregrounding of image subsequently draws attention to other non-linguistic modes of communication, allowing the text to more fully represent the narrator's experience of love. Though the narrator professes his love through language, his experience of love, both physically and emotionally, does not reside solely in language, but also exists in the movements and sensations of his body.

To begin with the significance of the text's mode of production, this text, originally self-published, implies the presence of the author in a way the other texts in this dissertation do



not. Although I argue that each of the authors in this dissertation is instrumental in designing the visual qualities of his/her poetry, his/her decisions are still mediated by the publishing process. Conversely, Clarke's text, hand-written and -drawn, printed on a creamy-coloured specialty paper (it's likely not handmade paper, but it does have a similar grainy texture), maintains a trace of the author's physical presence in a way the other texts do not. Just as the brushstrokes in a painting are a record of the artist's movements, the hand-drawn letters and designs foreground the physical action of Clarke's creation of this text. While the handwriting suggests Clarke's presence in the process of producing this text, it simultaneously and more significantly functions to convey the intimacy expected from a love poem. Handwriting is the appropriate medium for love poetry not only because handwriting is more personal than the standardized fonts of the computer, but also because it is an expression of the body. Yes, a computer requires one to physically tap the keyboard, but handwriting implies a union of the body with the page, the hand caressing the page as the pen makes its marks.

This suggestion of the body's presence in the act of writing echoes the poem's emphasis, both verbally and visually, on images of the body. As one might expect in a love poem, the male narrator of this poem is frequently concerned with verbal descriptions of the woman's body, at times even seeming to be forming an inventory of her physicality:

dem eyes  
 dem cheeks  

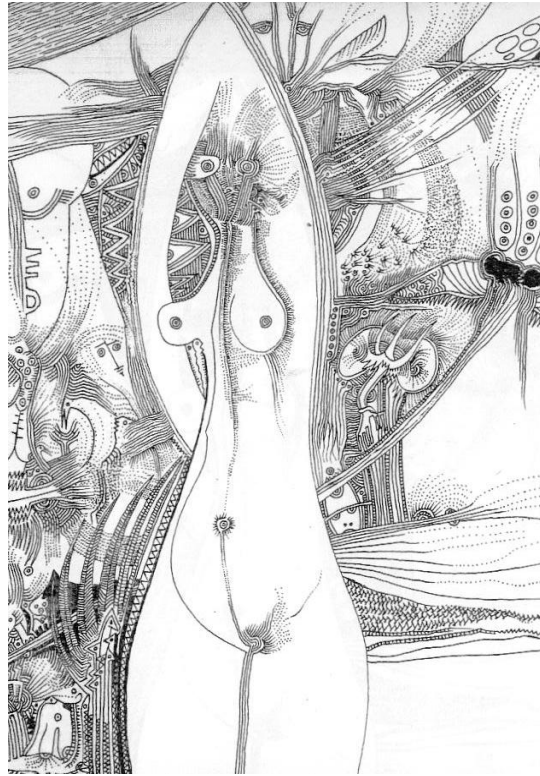
 all dem hips  
 rolin' an' rolling  
 an' dem breasts  
 jumping up  
 an' down  
 thighs like huge smoked ham...  
 talk to me \_\_\_\_\_  

 'bout dem sweet clay-red lips  
 de cat in her sigh \_\_\_\_\_  
 de fever in her armpits...

. (poem 25)

While these descriptions in part just serve to describe the physicality of their relationship, his attention to her body at times becomes problematic in that he positions himself as dominant, her creator, shaper, or discoverer. He “love[s] [her] because [he] ha[s] discovered [her]” (poem 8), “[k]iss[ing] [her] breasts / with lips that were potter’s hands / to reshape / their ancient gold . . .” (poem 2).

The problematic objectification of the woman’s body is not, however, conveyed solely by the poem’s linguistic expression. Before the narrator even begins to speak, the cover illustration of a woman’s naked body signifies the violence of this text’s representation of women. While the woman’s breasts, large hips, and genitalia are portrayed – all markers of her sexuality – her arms and head have disappeared amidst the abstract designs of the background:



. (n. pag.)

While small concentric circles appear in a space where eyes could be, this body appears to have been decapitated, the white space of the neck and body ceasing abruptly with the beginning of multiple lines and dots. This filling in of space with abstract markings where a head and face should appear renders the body headless, the space of the face pulled into, covered over, or melded with the marks of the background. Another interpretation, equally as violent, is that the woman's face has been flayed. The abstract designs thus come to signify the arteries and muscles of a face without skin. Beyond suggesting the absence of a face, the abstract designs where the face should be also function perceptually to insist upon the naked body as the focal point. One's eyes cannot easily process the complexity of the markings where the face should be and instead find it easier to rest and remain focussed upon the open space and simplicity of the woman's breasts through to her thighs. The elimination of the woman's face is not only a

mark of a violent death, but also a signal of her destruction as a speaking subject. The parts of her body most blatantly sexual remain important while the space of her voice and mind can be dissolved into the background. Furthermore, the elimination of the woman's arms contributes to her appearance as a static object on display, important for the appearance and function of her body but unable to speak and severely limited in movement. In this case, the capability of images to represent only a single, static moment has the effect of freezing this woman into being a sexual object, unable even to reach out and participate.

Visually what draws one's attention to the woman's naked body – the emptiness of its surfaces in comparison to the abundance of markings in the picture's background – is also what draws attention to the body's fusion with the pointed oval shape that frames the upper half of the body. Symbolically, the pointed oval is linked with female genitalia. Its presence in this cover drawing thus further establishes that the woman is defined by her sexuality. The continuous line that forms the right side of the body, leg through hip and rib cage, becomes the line that defines the pointed oval shape. The continuity of this line equates the woman with her vagina, the wholeness of her body being formed out of this representation of her genitalia. Encompassed by the symbolic presentation of her sexuality, the individuality of her face and voice obliterated, this woman is metonymically reduced to one body part.

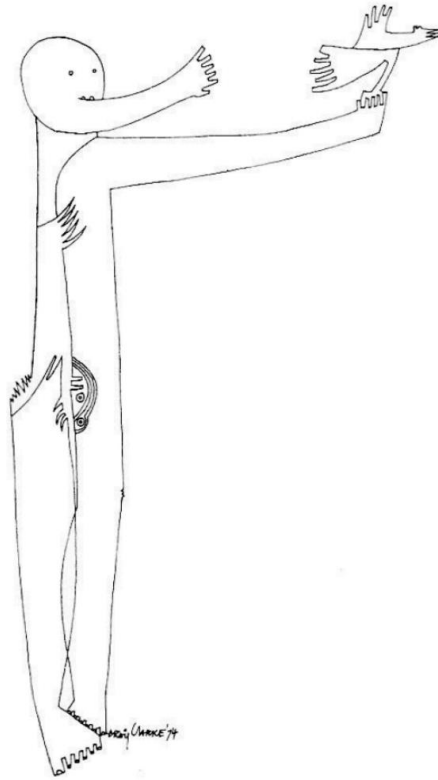
The narrator at least remains aware that his treatment and portrayal of the woman is problematic. Revealing his knowledge of the woman's point of view, he states:

Stop it, dis woman say ah only want she...  
for sex only...  
dis queen among woman is somebody' whore.....  
what have I done to my Black Woman....sh.?

. (poem 25)

Although the woman is demeaned both by the narrator's treatment of her as a sexual object and by his frequent references to her as "little girl" (poem 41) or "little flower" (poem 44), she is also revered. She has power over him and he is dependent upon her. Frequently positioning himself as the child next to her as adult woman, he is "a child" seeking to be "h[e]ld [. . .] to [her] bosom" (poem 43), "a boy in search / of the ripest fruit" (poem 9). This casting of himself as child in part is meant to excuse his heartlessness; as "a little boy" he may "crush[] a butterfly / between his clumsy fingers" (poem 44), but a child's naivety rather than innate cruelty can be blamed. While this positioning of himself as child is in part a means of pardoning his actions, it too constructs the woman as exerting, to some extent, control over the man. She is his means of survival, but their interconnection is revealed to be both a source of mutual nourishment and destruction.

The depiction of the woman and man's dependence upon one other is formed out of the interplay between the words and images of this poem. As I earlier explained, words are traditionally assumed to dominate images. The image is often assumed to illustrate what the words describe but is not assumed to contribute its own meaning. Nevertheless, without words, images still communicate. The following image, though not on its own determinably a representation of the man and woman, communicates a clear narrative of co-dependence:



. (n. pag.)

Literally, this image depicts an attempted release – or an attempted escape – of a bird. Of course, the abstract, rather Cubist, style of the drawing makes many aspects of the drawing somewhat unreadable; for example, does just one person appear or two? With the line extending from between the person's legs through the torso and with the feet pointing unnaturally inwards, it remains difficult to tell. Regardless, other aspects of the drawing are more suggestive. The drawing could perhaps be interpreted as an image of a person merely displaying a bird, his one hand holding the bird while his other hand points towards the bird. However, the fact that the hand and the tail feathers are formed out of the same line pattern suggests that these objects could have once been fused together as the other hand and the bird's talons still are. A visual tension between the hand and tail feathers is created, suggesting that

the bird has already partially pulled away from the man and is about to pull away completely.

Even though the image conveys a narrative without the need of words, its portrayal of a threatened parting becomes symbolic of the man and woman's relationship once the image is viewed in relation to the verbal portion of the poem. In this way, the image becomes, in Barthes's terms, an elaboration of the poem's words.<sup>60</sup> Though not connected to the words on the adjacent page, this image repeats an earlier association of the woman with birds:



. (poem 6)

The parataxis of this passage makes unclear whether her laughter *has caused* the ibises' flight or whether her laughter *is likened* to Spring and the ascent of the flock. Regardless, this verbal association of the woman with ibis symbolically links the bird in the pictorial image with the woman. The later verbal depictions of the woman's threatened and actual departure further solidifies this drawing as a visual embodiment of the couple's relationship. The woman is not just a bird threatening flight, but also a butterfly escaping: "With such abruptness / the quickness of your coloured breath / You are gone / taking the nectar I cherished .... / Leaving

me the dust / of your wings ....” (poem 23).

Nevertheless, despite the verbal descriptions of the woman’s threatened and actual departure(s), this particular image reveals something quite different: the impossibility of her flight. The bird’s talons are fused with the person’s hand, a grip that remains inseparable. The line that forms the fingers of the hand is the same line that forms the talons of the bird; therefore, since the objects share this one line, to sever the two objects would result in the obliteration of one. If the line travels with the bird, the hand is left with a gaping hole; if the line stays with the hand, the bird flees with a gap where talons once were. The separation of the bird and man would result in the wounding of one or the other. This shared line thus comes to signify the paradox of the man and woman’s relationship. While it locks them in an embrace, each requiring the presence of the other for completion, this bond is an uncomfortable and confining one.

Similarly, a subsequent full-page image uses shared lines between multiple figures to communicate the couple’s uncomfortable entwinement:





. (n. pag.)

This image shows what appears to be two people locked in an embrace. In this case, not only do the figures share lines, making it impossible to separate one from the other without destroying one or the other, but also this sharing of lines makes it impossible to tell which body part is possessed by which figure. Similar to Cubist paintings which characteristically presented an object combining multiple viewpoints, this drawing's portrayal of the figures as indistinguishable from one another is in part a result of distorted perspective. The leg that appears at the left-most side of the page is unnaturally twisted, the thigh and calf appearing in profile, while the foot turns impossibly backwards. Furthermore, to which person the centre-most leg belongs remains uncertain. It visually makes sense for the central leg to be linked with either the left-most leg or the right-most leg. Connected with the left-most leg, the centre leg appears to form a kneeling figure; connected with the right-most leg, the centre leg appears to form a figure with legs splayed apart. The ambiguity regarding the centre leg functions to fuse

the figures together, the position of their embrace fluidly changing.

This inseparableness of the two figures culminates in the formation of their faces out of one continuous line. Although the line appears almost broken in spots, seemingly due to inconsistent ink flow, the line that forms what appears to be two different heads is, in fact, the same single line. Beginning (or ending) adjacent to the left figure's eye, the line loops to the right forming the head of the right-hand figure. It then travels upwards to the left, proceeds down and wobbles towards the right, forming the head of the left figure. This interconnection of the two heads functions similarly to the image of the connected hand and talons, communicating the impossibility of their separation and, simultaneously, the constricting nature of their union.

Similarly, the verbal text of this poem constructs the man and woman's bond as complex and paradoxical. In the verbal text of this poem, there exists a tension between the representation of love as nourishment and love as destruction. Frequently the woman is portrayed as a literal source of energy for the man. As fruit, she feeds him. Describing himself as "a boy in search / of the ripest fruit" (poem 9), he begs her to "Make [him] / the only taster ..... / fill [him] with strength....." (poem 51). The "Taste of Endless Fruit" of the title is an endearment directed towards the woman. She is also his habitat, the environment that supports his existence. When he is fish, she is the water in which fish swim: He calls, "Cradle me like anxious fish in your rapids / till, at last / I am the black spirit in a sheltered pond" (poem 52). If he is the land, she is the sun "unveiling" and nourishing the land: "Before you / Yemaha / I am / the land unveiling / in the morning" (poem 7).<sup>61</sup> Regardless, even when the woman is constructed as the man's source of nourishment and means of survival, their relationship,

though at times lovingly intimate, is also paradoxically painful and destructive. Their love may promise growth – “gardens” (poem 35) and “flowering fields” (poem 43) signifying the children that “will emanate the ancestral / Womb / to thrive in the sunshine” (poem 37). But their love also brings forth rot and pain. Explaining that “when [they] had loved,” he and his lover “lay blistered in sweet juices / of fermenting fruit” (poem 20), the narrator verbally connects the experience of love with physical agony, the blistering of skin.

My preceding discussion has read the full-page images primarily in terms of their contribution to the narrative of the man and woman’s romance. In so doing, I have envisioned the relationship between text and image to be one in which “words and images [are used] in combination to present information that could not be conveyed by either one alone” (Faigley, George, Palchik, and Selfe 7). I have been able to read these images as connected to the verbal narrative in part because the images, though abstract, are still recognizable forms – birds, hands, legs, etcetera. However, this text does not always provide recognizable forms, but instead also uses visual marks – straight lines, curved lines, zig zags, and dots, for example – that are not mimetic representations of objects found in the natural world. How does one read such non-representational marks?

Although such non-representational marks are frequently present in the full-page illustrations, my key interest is in their presence on the pages that contain the verbal text. Any number of the pages demonstrate a similar style, but for the purposes of concrete example, I will use the following:

Improvisation

two giant birds  
 tired of circling the wheel  
 came plummeting down the centre  
 talons sharp in the wind still  
 certain to match fire with fire  
 find their spirit alive  
 darting out  
 a fury of burning flesh  
 a flourish of feathers ....

. (poem 31)

As this example reveals, the words of this poem rarely appear without the mark of some letter continuing off to the side to form an abstract design. In this way, the handwriting of this text, often a hybrid of cursive and non-cursive, is quite stylized. In fact, the marks of writing are equated with the marks of visual design; a ‘g’ with its circular tail spotted with a dot, an ‘e’ with its tail wobbling out towards the right margin, or a ‘p’ with its tail zig-zagging down the page, all are not just alphabetic letters but also shapes. Conversely, the marks of visual design – e.g., seemingly abstract doodles – suggest the marks of language. The design at the top right allows a ‘p’ to peak through in the middle, with perhaps an ‘I’ at the start and a ‘w’ or ‘me’ towards the end. Both the use of letters as design and abstract marks as letters suggests a blurring of the boundaries between text and image.

Clarke’s complication of the divide between word and image argues against the perceived dominance of language as a system of expression. As the above example demonstrated, readers witness an unwillingness to let the marks of language dominate the page.

Language is instead a system of expression that functions alongside other non-linguistic modes of expression. The treatment of word and image as equal producers of meaning has the corollary effect of highlighting the fact that language is not the only means of communication. In fact, beyond communicating through images, this poem draws attention to the ability of the body to communicate through its movements and actions. Although the narrator of this love poem expresses his emotions eloquently through language, there are also moments where language has no place in the couple's expression of love. His description of their love-making prohibits verbal expression: "I loved her over and over .... / say no more ...." (poem 26). Yet, the absence of verbal language does not exclude the production of meaning or the possibility of communication. For the man and woman, the movements of their bodies produce meaning, motivating interpretation and/or requiring response. The narrator expresses that "[he] loved her over and over / we traversed a continent / of new meaning ...." (poem 33). The form this "new meaning" takes is a non-linguistic one, but, as Clarke's text establishes, non-linguistic means of communication are just as valuable and expressive as linguistic ones. They just require openness to different 'reading' strategies, be they the interpretation of visual signs, actions, or physical sensations.

### **Brathwaite's Icons as Elements of Ambiguity**

While Clarke's text features words and text blurring together to create meaning, Brathwaite's use of icons does not offer such an easy linking of image and word. In *Taste of Endless Fruit*, though the images are abstract, they still maintain a readable connection to the narrative of the poem. Frequently, distilling the themes or events of the verbal narrative into

one metonymic representation of the lovers' relationship, the images of *Taste of Endless Fruit* become an elaboration of the verbal text while also accepting the verbal narrative as their own elaboration. This reciprocal relationship between image and text results in both image and text serving as equal partners in the creation of the narrative of the lovers' relationship. In Brathwaite's texts, however, images are predominantly elements of ambiguity. Whereas Clarke's images often effectively synthesized the complex verbal narrative, Brathwaite's icons speak to the insufficiency of pictorial representations. The icons Brathwaite selects may often relate to the verbal narrative – for example, a crab will appear at the end of a narrative concerning “Dream Crab” – but the icons appear absent of detail and background and consequently convey a sense of loss and absence. The crab appears alone performing no action; a ship appears without water to float in; an eye appears without the rest of a face. In Brathwaite's texts, the movement from word to image thus represents a severing of the object from its situation and thereby functions to deny the potential of images to communicate narrative.

As my earlier discussion indicated, images are often devalued or overlooked because their ability to communicate is perceived to be suspect. Nevertheless, the ambiguity, and even unreadableness, of images can prove to be a significant meaning-making element. Approaching Brathwaite's work requires an acceptance of the tenuous link between word and image, an acceptance that the space between word and image can be one of contradiction and frustration of meaning.

It can also be a space where confusion is rampant and unanswerable questions reign. How should a visual item be approached? Can it be ‘read’ at all? If it can, what is the icon's,

image's, or abstract design's purpose or significance in relation to the words of the poem? Is there a relation? Can these questions be answered? Should they? If comprehension is often treated as the desired goal of reading, how does one approach the visual qualities of a text that do not communicate in the ways we are used to dealing with when approaching strictly word-based texts? Images, especially the icons used by Brathwaite, do not often offer the prospect of definitive understanding as their goal. Mitchell posits that when approaching images, "[o]ne thing a critical iconology would surely note is the resistance of the icon to the logos" (*Picture* 28). In fact, since images create meanings through multiple connotations rather than offering any particular system of denotation, their mode of communication is likely "not [. . .] fully explicable on the model of textuality" (*Picture* 16). Consequently, images can be interpreted as unreadable, their significance overlooked either because of the traditional devaluation of images or because it remains difficult to discuss what resists traditional reading approaches.

Allowing for opacity while still being able to discuss the significance of unreadable features is a difficult balancing act. Too often 'unreadableness' is a quality that is treated as something that must be overcome, for example through models that seek to moderate cultural differences (e.g., glossaries or other paratextual material that provide information regarding cultural and/or historical contexts) or through models that seek to establish a taxonomy for previously 'unreadable' features or structures (e.g., Kress and Van Leeuwen's pursuit of a "grammar" of visual design). Literary critics are especially guilty of seeking to "construct[] a unified story out of a fragmented text" (Suleiman 24), in other words of seeking ways to make the unreadable more accessible, because most often, if they do not, the unreadable will equal the unread. For example, while Susan Rubin Suleiman seeks to value texts that have been

deemed for whatever reason ‘unreadable,’ she does not wish such texts to remain inaccessible. Instead, she envisions the critic’s job as “attempt[ing] to discover *new* rules of readability” (23). While she recognizes that this approach could result in the text being reduced – an “eras[ure] or repress[ion] [of] those aspects of the text that make it new, other, and subversive” (24) – she argues that an “abandon[ment] [of] the attempt to make sense or to create order” (23) is “a less than satisfactory solution” (23). For Suleiman, even texts that continue to resist reading can be read in terms of “how they thematize the opposition between readable and unreadable, unity and fragmentation, order and transgression” (23). ‘Unreadable’ texts are thus made readable if one reads them according to their “unifying paradigm” (32): their meta-critical discussion of their unreadableness. This need to resolve unreadableness proves reductive, demonstrating a failure to value a process of discovery that cannot end in certain comprehension.

This impulse to disarm the unreadable in part has a practical purpose. How can one discuss that which resists naming? Even Barthes’s distinction between the readerly and writerly text, which clearly privileges the uneasily read text (in his terminology, the writerly), envisions the production of meaning, albeit multiple meanings, as the end result. For Barthes, the writerly is an “ideal text” in which

the networks are many and interact, without any one of them being able to surpass the rest; this text is a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds; it has no being; it is reversible; we gain access to it by several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one; the codes it mobilizes extend *as far as the eye can reach*, they are indeterminable (meaning here is



never subject to a principle of determination, unless by throwing dice); the systems of meaning can take over this absolutely plural text, but their number is never closed, based as it is on the infinity of language. (*S/Z* 5-6)

But despite this praise for the text that evokes ever-multiplying significance, Barthes' model still demands that readers seek and produce meanings. While Suleiman's reading of Barthes runs counter to mine, the above passage reveals that Barthes is not privileging the absence of meaning but rather the proliferation of it. Suleiman writes,

[i]t seems to me that Barthes is theorizing here a kind of reader who makes no attempt to 'make sense' of what he reads—whose ecstasy (*jouissance*) comes, in fact, precisely from his having abandoned the attempt to make sense or to create order, from letting himself go, rudderless (*à la dérive*)—a most expressive French term I find it difficult to translate. (23)

Nevertheless, my reading of Barthes coincides with Steve McCaffery's interpretation which likewise depicts Barthes as concerned with the production of meaning. As McCaffery indicates, Barthes's distinction between readerly and writerly texts is not a distinction between texts that have clear meanings and those that have *no* meanings. Rather, Barthes's distinction is formed from the perspective of the reader, a distinction that constructs readerly texts as those in which the readers can *consume* meaning and writerly texts as those in which readers must *produce* meanings for themselves.

Consequently, what Barthes's approach does not consider is a text, or element of a text, that seeks to remain opaque. Steve McCaffery, by contrast, questions "what alternative approaches are open to the opaque text other than semantic production?" (219), arguing that

“[w]e need to insist, for instance, upon all writing’s *unavoidable* proximity to non-productive values and radically non-utilitarian economies” (219). McCaffery’s contribution to the discussion of unreadableness is a valuing of a text’s impenetrability and his desire to preserve, rather than eliminate, it. He is able to accomplish this by applying Bataille’s conception of “General Economy” to the study of literature. In so doing, McCaffery “[s]eek[s] to detach energy expenditure [i.e., reading] from utility,” thereby “find[ing its] best operation in an economy of *unproductive consumption* – an economy that Bataille has termed *General Economy*” (222). Bataille further describes the general economy as that which “makes apparent that excesses of energy are produced, and that by definition, these excesses cannot be utilized. The excessive energy can only be lost without the slightest aim, consequently without meaning” (qtd. in McCaffery 222). Expanding upon Bataille’s ideas, McCaffery determines that reading can be a process in which energy is expended without seeking the end goal of comprehension.

Although McCaffery’s approach allows for the possibility of meaninglessness in a hermeneutic sense, it does not preclude the possibility that the unreadable text could simultaneously produce multiple, though uncertain and unstable, readings. The unreadable text, in his conception, is thus a hybrid and contradictory form which motivates “an awareness of its radical *double* disposition that simultaneously petitions an active productive engagement and a renunciation of the reduction to utility” (223, emphasis added). This doubleness and contradiction that McCaffery’s approach allows is vital to my own exploration of the pictorial qualities of Brathwaite’s texts. In order to talk about Brathwaite’s icons, I need to hypothesize their significance. A discussion that suggests that they have no significance would be a very

short one. Yet this need to seek their meanings must be balanced with an acknowledgment that they simultaneously frustrate attempts to endow them with significance. Are they, for instance, meant merely as a form of decoration, offering visual stimulation but not meant to add meaning to or alter the meaning of the verbal text? McCaffery's approach is one that honours this ambivalence. Texts with "multiple peaks of ambivalence" can be "*both wastes and potentials, inscriptions and aporias*" (223, emphasis added). Yet, as McCaffery notes, "[t]he challenge to readership is the challenge to develop a capacity to experience ambivalence *as ambivalence* and to resist the utilitarian pressure to rush immediately into solutionary or compensatory strategies" (223, emphasis added).<sup>62</sup> Though viewing the pictorial qualities of Brathwaite's text as capable of communicating, I similarly seek to preserve the ambivalence of their presence. My approach thus must be one that acknowledges the pictorial qualities as simultaneously meaning-full and meaningless. In this way, I can discuss the pictorial qualities as a significant element of these poetic texts while honouring the innate fluidity and uncertainty of their significance.

One's ability to 'read' Brathwaite's icons is frustrated first of all by his own denial of their significance. When asked by Nathaniel Mackey about the connection of his icons to hieroglyphics, Brathwaite responds that the pictures are "purely decorative" and that his "videostyle don't depend on that – on them!" (*ConVERSations* 196). This dismissal of the importance of the icons by the author himself is disappointing, but regardless of Brathwaite's intentions, the effect of his use of icons is often more meaningful than he acknowledges. Nevertheless, throughout Brathwaite's videostyle work the ambivalence about the role the icons play is evident. While at times the icons resist readings that would assign them any more

purpose than a filling in, or decorating, of blank space, at other times the icons, whether Brathwaite means them to or not, resonate with significance.

Indeed, as Brathwaite suggests, there are many instances when the presence of an icon seems to contribute little to the poem's meaning. For instance, the horizontal arrow at the end of the first section of "4<sup>th</sup> Traveller" in *Dreamstories* is a functional, rather than meaning-making, mark. It fills in the space at the bottom of page and points the reader towards the beginning of the second section of the story. With the final word of the first section seemingly interrupted, the arrow has the function of propelling the reader towards the word's conclusion on the next page. The phrase " - that we would go somewhe / re else, find somewhere else at this **who-**" (82) is continued on the next page by "**re**, perhaps a YMCA or a House of Correction or Charity wh- /ere perhaps we might leave what we had" (83). With the hyphen already indicating that the word "**who**" is not complete, the presence of the arrow as an indicator that the reader must move forwards in order for the word and sentence to be completed is rather redundant. The arrow does, however, generate a sense of urgency in the forward progress. Whereas the hyphen merely indicates that the word is incomplete and relies on the reader's desire to know its conclusion to motivate the reader's movement forwards, the arrow exists as an instruction, a demand that the reader follow it.

In other instances the icons become quite 'readable' in that they are put in the service of language, a replacement for a verbal signifier. Intermixed with the syntax of a word grouping, the icon functions rebus-like as part of a pictographic language system that uses images rather than letters to form words. Brathwaite's sense that his images are "literal" (he states, "but those 'pictures' are literal" [*ConVERsations* 196]) rather than suggestive of deeper meanings is

appropriate here in that the icons are crafted to have a literal meaning; they are meant to represent the word that they have replaced. The subtitle for *Dreamstories*' "Dream Chad," a dreamstory in part about Brathwaite's use of a MacIntosh in his creative process, is "a apple story," rendered pictographically as



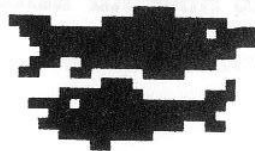
.(46)

Even when not used syntactically within a word grouping, the icons' connection to language is foregrounded by Brathwaite. Chapter six of *ConVERSations with Nathaniel Mackey* begins with



(94),

and concludes with



. (102)

This chapter which reprints and revises a poem from Brathwaite's 1982 *Sun Poem* depicts Brathwaite's family, in particular his mother and father's relationship, during his childhood. "Fish" and the picture of fish become appropriate bookends for this chapter, framing the story which announces that

fish  
is a sign of peace inside our house  
we listen in the dark to how our mother quarrell all night long

like surf

-lines on the other shore

he never anger we cd hear

. (100-1)

Such easy equations of an icon and word, however, are not always possible, and though the icon is used as part of the syntax of a word grouping, its translation into language is not always possible. For example, the Rastafarian frogs that appear in *Trench Town Rock* are positioned among the verbal lines of verse so that one reading the verse must view the frog before proceeding onto the next line of words. Describing the sight of the dead security guard, Brathwaite writes,

his chair half-broken with the sudden soundless  
backward crash



. (15)

The positioning of the frog suggests that it, too, is a line of the verse, yet it achieves no easy verbal translation. It portrays a recognizable gesture. The giving of the finger with its left hand combined with the thumb up of its right hand implies an aggressive motioning for someone to get out. Yet, such a gesture does not easily fit the context of the situation as created by the verbal description. Who would be the performer of this action? Perhaps, the icon as an object to be experienced through the eyes and therefore innately incapable of making sound is representative of the “soundless / backward crash” (15) of the guard’s chair. Nevertheless, considering the focus of the writing has been on the violence of the security guard’s death, the

defeat represented by the fall of his chair contradicts the aggressiveness of the frog's gesture. The guard's death does not signify the defiance embodied by the icon. Yet, a switch to portraying the attitude of the murderers here would be inconsistent with the empathy demonstrated for the victims of violence. Similarly, when the Rastafarian frog appears a few pages later, its significance again remains elusive. Again appearing after a statement describing someone's death – in this case the death by stoning of Mikey Smith – the frog gestures aggressively, but the message is unclear because its speaker and recipient are unidentifiable.

Brathwaite's "The Black Angel" in *Dreamstories* similarly demonstrates the gesture towards endowing an icon with a verbal-function yet simultaneous denial of the possibility of image into word translation. The solid black circle is used as part of the syntax of a sentence as if it has an easily distinguishable verbal meaning, yet it frustrates attempts to translate the image into a specific word. Recounting a dream of a man's struggle against (or against becoming) the Black Angel, literally a black leather jacket but figuratively a symbol of violence and death, this story demands its protagonist negotiate the boundaries of good and evil. After learning of his "Eye and Eyevil = Eshu=singing in my distant ear like a mosquito & what seemed like Mephistopheles where there was no sun or struggle. only this eclipse : Ta Mega and my mother fighting for my light" (30), the protagonist witnesses a fight between two workmates Kappo and elta. Hearing a voice, "my voice of memory, [ elta's] voice in pain" (35), that calls out "You must revoke them then" (35), the protagonist observes,

I thought I saw or rather felt a faint round sound like a  
reward like glowing in the gentle quiet out beyond the  
shadow of the wood: as if a



was out there shining after all

.(35)

The immediate antecedent for the solid circle appears to be the description of the voice as a “faint *round* sound” (35, emphasis added). Could the solid circle be translated into language as “faint round sound,” the “faint round sound” being “out there shining after all”? The impossibility of seeing a sound would not prohibit such an interpretation in this case since Brathwaite has already opened the possibility of synaesthetic perception. The narrator “*saw* or rather *felt*” (35, emphasis added) the sound, experiencing it through predominantly visual means; the sound is “like glowing” (35).

Most easily, however, the content of the verbal passage suggests that the solid circle indicates ‘sun.’ ‘Sun’s’ tendency to be described as ‘shining’ makes the linguistic blank left by the solid circle easily filled in with ‘sun.’ Nevertheless, the circle’s solid black interior problematizes its association with ‘sun,’ since a sun is traditionally linked with lightness rather than darkness. The later description of “some hand [striking] the sun beyond the / dark with hoping” (36) seems to further reinforce the assumption that the solid circle reads ‘sun,’ and yet it still does not solve the contradiction of the sun being rendered as dark rather than light. The earlier description of the protagonist as suffering from an eclipse, the covering up of his

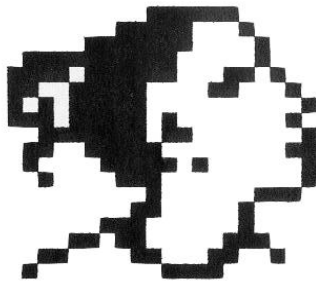


lightness with darkness, suggests that the solid circle could represent an eclipsed sun, but such a reading contradicts the description of the solid circle “shining after all.” A fully eclipsed sun cannot shine. Yet, the next page’s description of the effect of the voice’s message, ““Act by the will, not power; act by the will/ beyond yr will[,]”” (36) seems to confirm a reading of the solid circle as an eclipse. “[A]t the great word / will,” readers learn that “the black moon’s silent sun’s ec- / lipse like cracked a bit - hope struck again” (36). The solid black circle perhaps at last finds its verbal counterpart with the description “black moon’s silent sun’s eclipse,” but even here the meaning of the solid circle can be layered. The solid circle can represent both a ‘black moon’ and a ‘silent sun’s eclipse,’ but regardless, neither object easily fits with the description of it “shining.” Consequently, although the solid circle demands that it be read linguistically as representative of a particular word or concept, its meaning remains elusive.

If icons can promise, yet deny, a verbal correspondent, it is no wonder that the icons that are not used pictographically remain even more difficult to interpret. There is in fact quite often a disjuncture between the verbal text and the use of icon, rendering the purpose for the presence of the icon indeterminable. For example, the dog-like icon in the rewriting of “Dream Haiti” that appears in *ConVERSations with Nathaniel Mackey* is difficult to reconcile with the verbal text of the poem considering there is no mention of a dog. The dog icon in fact is irrelevant to the verbal text. It is in these instances that Brathwaite’s dismissal of the icons as meaningless decoration is most tempting.<sup>63</sup> Nevertheless, it is difficult to accept Brathwaite’s assessment of the icons being meaningless especially when he shows an affinity for believing in the power of non-linguistic marks to convey linguistic narratives. In *The Zea Mexican Diary*, Brathwaite uses the Second K’un of the I Ching as that which “prefaces the whole & omened

all” (12) to define his journey through his wife’s cancer diagnosis and death. Brathwaite’s use of I Ching indicates a belief in the ability of a graphic mark to represent a complex verbal narrative. The solid (Yang) and broken (Yin) lines of each I Ching hexagram represent a story that can be interpreted symbolically, giving insight or guidance about one’s life’s choices. With Brathwaite’s demonstrated embrace of I Ching, a belief system based on the interpretation of graphic marks, his use of icons to construct meaning is not surprising.

Although the connection between the words and icons of Brathwaite’s poems is difficult to decipher and consequently the significance of the icons remains elusive, the disjuncture between the words and images is quite often the source of the icon’s significance. I do not want to perpetuate the bias that pictorial elements communicate ineffectually or more weakly than their verbal counterparts, but the simplicity of Brathwaite’s visual elements functions to foreground the icons’ insufficiencies. However, an insufficiency is not necessarily a weakness, but rather in this case a part of its message. The presence of the icon of the girl/woman at the opening of *The Zea Mexican Diary*, for example, performs an interesting function when seen in relation to both the photograph of Doris Brathwaite that precedes it and the verbal text of Kamau Brathwaite’s diary that follows it. Appearing on the back of the title page, on the page opposite the book’s epigraph, this icon is a profile of a girl/woman’s head, neck, and shoulders:



*New York Feb 93. the Stark version*

. (4)

Although words accompanying an image are frequently assumed to name the image, the words here function not in relation to the image, but in relation to the whole manuscript, recording the date and place of its production. The disjuncture between the words and icon free the icon to perform a similar function as the words; both assume the task of naming the proceeding narrative. In the icon's case, it is a naming of the narrative's subject. Just as the photographic image of Doris Brathwaite on the cover of the text serves as representation of the book's subject, the icon intimates that it is a portrait of the book's subject.

Nevertheless, when viewed in relation to the photographic representation of Doris Brathwaite, this icon overtly communicates a weakening of modality and growth of abstraction. Kress and Van Leeuwen borrow the term modality from linguistics where it "refers to the truth value or credibility of (linguistically realized) statements about the world" (160). In terms of images, modality refers to the closeness of an image's likeness to the object's appearance in material reality. Kress and Van Leeuwen note that "[v]isuals can represent people, places and things as though they are real, as though they actually exist in this way, or as though they do not – as though they are imaginings, fantasies, caricature, etc." (161).<sup>64</sup> The photographic image

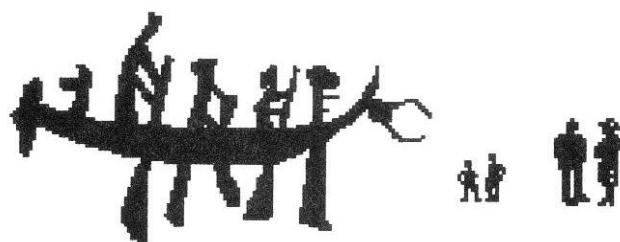
is of course a mere representation, a removal away from the real personage of Doris Brathwaite, and, as a black and white image (though tonally there is also a hint of the greenish-blue that forms the book's title), its modality is weaker than a colour image. Regardless, the movement between the photographic rendering and the computer-generated icon witnesses a loss of detail and, most importantly, a loss of individuality. The icon can represent any woman, capturing none of Doris Brathwaite's unique features.

This movement between the two portraits performs a descent into the abstraction of the text, the photographic likeness metamorphosing into the icon and the icon metamorphosing into the language of the text. Although this text is not meant as a biography of Doris Brathwaite per se, but is rather a diary of Kamau Brathwaite's experience of Doris's illness and death, it does attempt to construct a representation of her as strong and graceful in the months leading towards her death. The text, thus, is also a form of portraiture. The progression from the photographic image, to the icon, to the verbal text ultimately performs the growing disappearance of Doris, mimicking the progress of the narrative which begins with Doris present and battling cancer and then narrates the aftermath of her death. Her death necessitates that she is no longer present as an embodied visual object; after her death, her presence can be manifested only through someone else's words. Doris, the person, fades into Doris, the text, the movement through the images into the text charting this descent and performing the ever-growing distance at which one can experience Doris, the person. She necessarily becomes the abstraction of the verbal text.

The icons' signification of loss is also manifested in Brathwaite's use of the ship icon at the conclusion of *Dreamstories*' version of "Dream Haiti." Although it is in response to

Mackey's question about this particular icon that Brathwaite dismisses the meaning-making potential of his use of pictures, this ship in fact signifies an important negation of narrative. In general, Brathwaite's icons deny the presence of motion and in so doing deny the possibility of narrative.<sup>65</sup> In Clarke's text, in particular the image of the bird's threatened flight away from the man's hand, narrative could still be created through the manipulation of the viewer's gaze. The visual tension between the similar line patterns of the person's hand and the bird's tail feathers suggested the movement of the bird away from the man. Brathwaite's icons, in contrast, demand stasis as their significance. The icons' tendency toward featuring solitary items – a house, an eye, a chain link – isolated adrift blank space prohibit their communication of stories; they represent things, rather than situations. Even when Brathwaite moves towards combining icons in *ConVERSations with Nathaniel Mackey*, his icons resist being put in the service of narrative.

For example, at the conclusion of a passage that describes the impact on his writing of Hurricane Gilbert's destruction of his Irish Town home, the following collection of icons appears:



. (159)

The passage preceding these icons had described Brathwaite's feelings of writer's block after Hurricane Gilbert. Likening his feelings to images found in multiple stories in *Dreamstories*, Brathwaite explains that he

couldn't write anymore - I mean even *physically write* anymore out of the psychis - the fist of my mind with which I should write becomes like a rock like a stone like a tumou(r) like at the very best a crab under the stone of dark/ness - like in '4<sup>th</sup> Traveller' [DS, pp78-92] under the shadow of Mexican like with Garth/Gareth/Garath travelling on that vessel of 'Salvages' [DS, pp134-176 + pp215-216, below]. (*ConVERSations* 158-59)

Although this passage does mention the ship of "Salvages," the icons possess little readable connection to the verbal passage. Even if the icons are in some way meant as a representation of "Salvages," they do not convey the story's plot of Garth/Gareth/Garath's murderous rampage of castrating men and consuming their penises.

This collection of icons may position multiple figures/objects in relation to one another, but the lack of background and subsequent distortion of perspective result in a weakening of modality that compromises the ability of these icons to communicate a story. Though the two groups of standing people are sized to suggest that the two on the right are in the foreground, while the other two recede into the background, the positioning of their feet at practically the same horizontal axis renders ambiguous their position in relation to one another. Despite the size difference, standing at the same horizontal plane, the two groups do not easily separate into occupying a back- and foreground, but instead can appear to occupy the same space. Consequently, unless the smaller figures are to be interpreted as small children, the two groups of people do not settle into an easily determinable relationship. Furthermore, the relationship between the groups of people and the boat to the left of the page is even more elusive.

Although an attempt to group these icons into a narrative might suggest that the groups of

people are waiting on the shore for the arriving boat, the positioning of the boat on a higher horizontal plane frustrates attempts at such a reading. The boat, instead of floating in water, appears to be floating in the air. Without any marks suggesting a background – a sea level, shoreline, pier, or sky – these icons occupy an uncertain space, their ties to each other indeterminate. While I acknowledge the possibility that these icons may still form a surrealistic narrative – perhaps the boat *is* meant to fly – the ambiguity of the icons’ connection to one another persists, and consequently, any attempt to settle these icons into one story is subverted.

This resistance to narrative is echoed by the ship icon at the conclusion of “Dream Haiti” in *Dreamstories*. “Dream Haiti” is a complex narrative that is in part a revisioning of the Middle Passage, in part a retelling of the first Caribbean revolution against imperial dominance,<sup>66</sup> and in part a portrayal of contemporary refugees fleeing Haiti. As described by Gordon Rohlehr,

[t]he image in **Dream Haiti** is of Caribbean people, whose ancestors fought and won the first successful revolution against European imperialism and slavery, drowning in a sea patrolled by the Coast Guard vessel, US Gutter. No lifelines are thrown (or written) to save the drowning refugees - today’s Haitians, yesterday’s leapers from slave ships, *les morts guinéés*. (xv)

In part an exploration of the poet’s responsibility to his/her culture, this story positions the poet protagonist as both a victim drowning and the apathetic observer of the drowning. The poet begins in the sea, the water destroying his body:

The sea was like slate grey of what was left of  
     my body  
     & the white waves  
     I remember  
     they was like very white  
     on what was left of my skin  
 & they kept comin in at this soft swishing diagonal  
     against the  
     bow & wet metal slides of my nerves  
  
 where the US Coast Guard cutter was patrolling all  
 along the borders of the Mexicans & my brothers -  
     the what was called 'the Haitian Refugees'

. (95)

While this description positions the poet in the sea, his position becomes more and more ambiguous until at last, without explanation, he is on board the U.S. Cutter. His description of himself “not goin anywhere although the was movin” (96) does not make clear whether he’s in the water or on board the ship, but then he is “clanging restlessly up & down the studded metal stairs” (96) and wondering “why i was there - how i came to be on board that ship” (97). His role on this ship, however, is a contentious one. As a poet, he questions why he is on board the ship, stating, “not one of us knew what we was doin / there when we shd have been somewhere else writin / poetry [. . .]” (99). The poet, unsure what to do about those who are drowning, looks past the “white life-savers” (97), thinking instead that “there was suppose to be some kind of rope or / chord/ of music or an anthology called life-line” (97) that would save them. In the end, the poet merely watches the drowning:



but i know that they were trying to tell us -  
w/their black eyes filled w/water & the wonder &  
the

whole wide desert of **Atacama**

blowing so bleakly into their faces that they  
couldnt see far less see us anymore - that we  
were their brothers & fellow writers bound to us  
by all kinds of ties & the content of their  
character

as if we didnt remember how they had put on their  
shoes that afternoon - bending down to the blue  
pumps to tie the black faces to take us up to  
Petionville to scroll through the markets of Limbe  
& Limonade & Labasse & Petit-Goave

& see where Hector **Hippolyte** lived -

though of course they said nothing at all but just  
went lobbying by with their heads up & down in the  
corvme of water & their arms still vainly trying to

reach Miami & Judge Thomas & the US Supreme  
Court & their mouths wise  
open drinking dream & seawater like

**La crête-a-pierrot**

all over & over & over again while we stood on the  
soft hard deck of the Coast Guard  
'Impeccable'/watching them poem

New York  
February 1992



. (110-11)

Ending with these images of erasure – the heads disappearing under the water, the voices trying to speak but in the end “sa[y]ing] nothing at all” (110), the sands behind which the ship’s occupants fade – this poem portrays not only a literal event of the loss of life associated with such (Middle) passages, but also signals the fading of this history. The concluding icon, consequently, achieves more than just filling or decorating the blank space of the lower page. Instead, the relationship between the verbal narrative and the concluding pictorial representation demands that the emptiness of the pictured ship becomes haunting. Not only have the victims disappeared but so too have the witnesses. This icon thus speaks to an erasure not only of those who died as a result of colonialism and subsequent cultural upheaval but also of those who could pass on the memory of this history. The empty ship performs both the

trauma of the literal erasure of millions and their subsequent attempted erasure from history. Without the players – those who drowned and those who watched – this ship loses its historical significance; it becomes again just a ship, a neutral object, rather than the vessel of an intensely traumatic history.

In the end, whether Brathwaite realizes it or not, the use of these icons as representative of loss is a particularly appropriate move. As Brathwaite himself notes, hieroglyphic writing – and other forms of using pictures to communicate, like the Guyanese *timehri* paintings – is a mode of communication tied to an unrecoverable pre-colonial past. Timehri refers to rock paintings found in Guyana’s interior. These petroglyphs signify

the first most ‘primitive’ (Williams [Aubrey Williams, a Guyanese painter] prefers ‘primeval’) and sophisticated painting we have in the Americas - similar to what we find also preserved in the caves and high ground of other parts of the dry world; man’s own [*claps hands*] imprint - our own first marks of presence in stone upon the wall: a way of ‘history’ before books.” (Brathwaite, *ConVERSations* 200-201)

Brathwaite’s resistance to admitting that his icons have significance results from his awareness that his own icons cannot achieve the significance that former pictographic language systems commanded. He explains that in order for his icons to speak as effectively as hieroglyphics once did,

one would now have to reach - to return, for the first time - which I have not been able to do yet - tho each new stage of poems gets me closer there, I feel - to the Other. more ?southern [. . .] - and more ?ancient - parts of our heritage - still, for most of us - unexplored, ignored, unknown, INCOGNITA areas of

Caribbean/American experience - the Amerindian - and along with this - the connexion - the Nilotic, Kemitic, Egyptian - where th(e) pictograph is a natural, instinctive functionally expressive - not decorative - inscription - part of that - their - culture. Very few of us have been committed to knowing anything or anything much - anything *enough* - about this, [. . .]. (*ConVERSations* 196-97)

Brathwaite envisions “that at some stage some writer - some Caribbean or other writer - who may well be influence [*sic*] by this ‘return to Origins’, might return to the Amerindian aspect of it and deal with hieroglyph or petroglyph” (*ConVERSations* 199-200). But at present, what he regrets about his own use of images is that they lack communal significance. Brathwaite’s perception that his icons are meaningless, hence unimportant, comes from a perception that they regrettably lack readers and writers united in their ability to use such marks and understand their meaning. Whereas once images could be the marks of communication, such a language has been irrecoverably lost.

Nevertheless, the icons that Brathwaite depicts as meaningless, mere decoration, in fact communicate in many ways. Used variously as functional signs directing the reader’s attention, as language substitutes, and as titles or summaries of the verbal discourse, Brathwaite’s icons constitute an exploration of how meaning is produced pictographically. The icons do, however, frustrate attempts to determine their meaning(s). But they are not meaningless elements; they are elements that insist on the experience of uncertainty. The frustration that one encounters when approaching the opacity of the icons’ meaning is not necessarily a mark of insufficiency or weakness. Instead, the opacity is a signifying element hinting at loss, the loss of the details of Brathwaite’s individual verbal narratives and, more broadly, the loss of a cultural situation in

which pictures could communicate and unite individuals in collective understanding.

\* \* \*

This chapter has sought to explore the significance of image/word relations in texts by LeRoy Clarke and Kamau Brathwaite. Although both Clarke and Brathwaite make rather unique contributions to Caribbean poetry (I have found no other Caribbean poets producing similar work), this style of poetry makes a vital contribution to discussions of Caribbean visual poetry. Performing most overtly visual poetry's construction of itself as a poetry not just to be read but looked at, this style of poetry most distinctly complicates the narrative that Caribbean poetry is an oral poetry. Yet paradoxically, the inclusion of pictographic elements also most distinctly showcases visual poetry's similarity to oral poetry. Just like oral poetry in which meaning is constructed not just through language but also through non-linguistic signifiers like tone of voice and actions of the body, Clarke's and Brathwaite's texts rely upon elements that cannot be read in the same manner with which one would approach alphabetic language. Although historically Lessing opposed word and image by classifying the verbal arts as temporal and the visual arts as spatial, what Clarke's and Brathwaite's poetry does is develop poetry into a spatial art. As a spatial art, this poetry demands a different kind of gaze than non-visually experimental poetry, one that is more akin to the perception of visual art. This gaze is one that dawdles, moving around the page before moving on to something new. It is one that even after moving on to something new will return. As I have discussed at many points throughout this dissertation, non-linear reading patterns that are not concerned with continual forward progress have the benefit of multiplying meanings. As Clarke's and Brathwaite's texts demonstrate, poetry that communicates not just with words but with visual elements, like font

style, page layout, or even image, demands reading strategies that do not fear or attempt to eliminate ambiguity. Rather, ambiguity must be honoured as motivating an unending process of discovery.

## Coda

### Paths Traversed

Many Caribbean poets from the late 1970s and forward have produced visually experimental work, yet there has remained a silence regarding this experimentation. For someone wanting to learn more about the significance of the visual qualities of Caribbean poetry, there are few resources. Although Anthony Kellman, in “Projective Verse as a Mode of Socio-Linguistic Protest,” sees Caribbean poetry in terms of Olson’s manifesto, for the most part he excludes Olson’s attention to typography from his view of Projective Verse. He concentrates instead upon Projective Verse’s emphasis on voice and rhythm. Nathaniel Mackey comes closer to offering insight into Caribbean visual poetry by observing that “[t]he rush to canonize orality as a radical departure from the values of an ‘eye-oriented’ civilization runs the risk of obscuring the attention paid by recent poets to the way the poem appears on the page” (*Discrepant* 122). However, his category of “recent poets” is not restricted to poets of the Caribbean, but rather includes African-American poets as well. Asserting that one’s definition of African-American writing is limited and made exclusionary by “the construction of an idealized orality in opposition to a devalued writing” (19), Aldon Lynn Nielsen similarly argues against the tendency to view Black writing exclusively in relation to the oral tradition. However, his focus is likewise not directed at Caribbean poetry in particular, but rather at African-American writing.

Until this project, the most extensive discussions of Caribbean visual poetry have come in articles or chapters focussing on single authors. Although Nathaniel Mackey has yet to offer an extended discussion of Caribbean visual poetry, he has commented upon Brathwaite’s use of

colons and spaces, suggesting that such visual experimentation “remind[s] us, at the graphic level, of the divisibility and the alterability of words” (“Wringing” 736). Consequently, Brathwaite’s “graphic departure from standard, presumably stable procedure, undermines monumental premises” (“Wringing” 736), namely the hegemony of Standard English. Similar to Mackey’s article, Graeme Rigby’s “Publishing Brathwaite: Adventures in the Video Style” (1994) provides an early discussion of Brathwaite’s developing video style. This article offers a materialist discussion of the difficulties that arise when publishing such work, while also discussing the significance and effect of Brathwaite’s “heretical” (713) style. Amidst a broader discussion of Claire Harris’s poetry, Emily Allen Williams briefly notes Harris’s “spatial artistry” (58), arguing that Harris “layers” (61) her pages with different discourses to make “the page suggestive of the various layers of experience which characterize the African Caribbean experience” (61). More recently, Linda Kinnahan’s *Lyric Interventions: Feminism, Experimental Poetry, and Contemporary Discourse* (2004) explores the visual qualities of M. Nourbese Philip’s *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks* as a means of “mak[ing] the body visible” (127) in terms of race and gender.

These earlier single-author discussions may explore the significance of the visual qualities in particular texts, but they do not situate these texts amidst the growing use of visual experimentation in Caribbean poetry. My project, in contrast, seeks to acknowledge the existence of visual experimentation as a particular poetic mode in contemporary Caribbean literature. As my project has shown, by countering the conventional appearance of poetry, visually experimental poetry becomes a particularly suitable means for representing Caribbean cultural experiences. The positioning of multiple discourses on the page allows for the

representation of experiences common to Caribbean subjects: for example, the tumultuous experiences of the past and of one's relationship with multiple homes. Furthermore, the interaction between the multiple discourses demonstrates relationships, quite often hierarchical or oppressive, between multiple subject-positions. Consequently, as Philip's "Discourse on the Logic of Language" in particular showed, such page layouts can perform the refutation and attempted destruction of colonialist and oppressive discourses.

Although I have suggested that visual experimentation is a mode in which Caribbean cultural experiences are represented, I do not want to suggest that Caribbean visual poetry is completely distinct from other visual poetry. The content of the poems may often feature characters either living in the Caribbean or as part of the Caribbean diaspora, and the language of the poems frequently does take the form of Nation Language. Furthermore, the issues discussed may often derive from a Caribbean cultural context. Regardless, answering the question "What makes this visual poetry *Caribbean* visual poetry?" is a difficult prospect. I would, in fact, argue that defining the Caribbean-ness of this visual poetry would be a limiting gesture that would not value the variety of Caribbean experiences. The poets that I have discussed have all experienced a colonial education system and they have all lived, for greater or lesser periods of time, outside of the Caribbean. Their poetic influences and cultural experiences are vast and hybrid. Not being able to define why their poetry's visual form is distinctively Caribbean is, consequently, not a weakness but rather an acknowledgement of the amorphousness of the category 'Caribbean.' The term 'Caribbean' signifies multiple nations and ethnic groups; it encompasses people who live all over the world. Demanding that the visual experimentation used by Caribbean poets be distinctively 'Caribbean' assumes an



insularity of the category 'Caribbean' that is false.

Furthermore, I do not want to suggest that Caribbean visual poetry solely accomplishes cultural work. I would argue that Caribbean visual poetry is a gesture of resistance, but it does not just speak to themes of cultural resistance but also of resistance to aesthetic norms. For example, the incorporation of non-linguistic marks, such as Brathwaite's icons, can be used to speak to perceptions of cultural loss, but it is also an exploration of the medium of poetry itself. As I mentioned in the Introduction, often poets from marginal groups are placed in the position of sociologists who inform the audience about a particular cultural experience. Such treatment of the poets denies the aesthetic value of their work (Clarke, George Elliott 164). By focussing on the poetry's form rather than just on its content, my work acknowledges that these poets do not just do cultural work with their poetry but also expand the boundaries of poetic form.

As Caribbean visual poets are engaged in both an exploration of culture and an exploration of poetic form, my project both expands the field of Caribbean literary studies and contributes to the study of visually experimental poetic forms. Although critics like Johanna Drucker, Dick Higgins, and W. J. T. Mitchell offer detailed and insightful discussions of the visuality of the written word, the study of visual poetry remains an emergent scholarship. Visual poetry's position between the disciplines of visual art and literature has made it less likely to be discussed. Scholars of literature can feel unprepared to speak about the poetry's visual qualities, while scholars of the visual arts can feel unprepared to assess the poetry's language. Therefore, visual poetry remains largely undiscussed. Nevertheless, projects that focus on visual poetry have much to offer in the current rush to theorize the multi-modality of digital media. The rhetoric that often casts digital media as offering entirely new avenues for

multi-modal forms of expression fails to recognize the history of experimental poetry. Digital poetry may be able to put words into motion; it may be able to combine sound and sight; and it may be able to incorporate colour in ways prohibitively expensive for print media. But it is not the first instance of visual qualities being put to use as signifying elements. A project like mine draws attention to print-based visual poetry and, thereby, asserts such poetry as a form out of which digital poetry emerges. Consequently, the study of print-based visual poetry can contribute to the understanding of digital poetry through an understanding of its sources. In addition, it may also draw attention towards print-based visual poetry and thereby motivate specialists in digital media into a discussion of print-based intermedial forms. Consequently, the number of scholars willing and able to discuss the significance of visually experimental forms will grow and our understanding will continue to deepen.

### **Paths Ahead**

As the inaugural discussion of visual poetry as a mode of Caribbean literature, my project can lead to many further explorations. Most pressingly, more understanding of the history of visual poetry's development in the Caribbean is needed. Though briefly outlining the other visual poetries that influenced the development of Caribbean visual poetry, my project was not concerned with forming a comprehensive literary history of Caribbean visual poetry. Both the Western and African sources for Caribbean visual poetry need to be explored and described in more depth so that a more complete understanding of the genesis of Caribbean visual poetry is formed. Such a historical approach would need to begin by motivating poets to discuss at more length their reasons for experimenting visually. Although both Brathwaite and

Claire Harris have offered brief comments about their use of visual experimentation, full interviews devoted to discussions of visual poetry would allow a deeper understanding of the reasons for and possibilities of visual poetry in a Caribbean context. As part of this project, I had the opportunity of asking Marlene Nourbese Philip about her use of visual experimentation in *She Tries Her Tongue*, but the venue – a question and answer session after her presentation at the University of Guelph’s “Writing Black, Writing Back” panel discussion (2004) – did not allow for a detailed answer.<sup>67</sup> Knowing the poets’ reasons for pursuing visual experimentation and what significance they attribute to it is an important next step in understanding Caribbean visual poetry. Furthermore, engaging poets in a discussion of their connections to other Caribbean poets pursuing visually experimental forms would further reveal qualities and aims that are distinctive to Caribbean visual poetry.

At present my project has treated visual experimentation as a mode distinct from orally-inflected Caribbean verse. In my desire to dispel notions that Caribbean poetry is exclusively concerned with the oral tradition, I have not discussed in much depth how visual experimentation is also used to signify orality. Chapter Three’s discussion of the activation of the audience suggested that visual poetry engages the audience directly in ways similar to oral performance. This discussion could, however, be expanded by a closer examination of how visual qualities are put to use to suggest sound. Such an exploration could begin with Brathwaite’s use of visual cues, like dashes or slashes, to signify puns that are often communicated merely with the tone of one’s voice. As Nathaniel Mackey observes, the graphic qualities of Brathwaite’s work are a means of “exploit[ing] these bridges, the ‘webs of sound’ which connect a word to other words (*shatter* to *chatter*, *empire* to *umpire*), the echoes of other

words and other meanings within a word” (“Wringing” 736). A study of the printed verse of such dub poets as Oku Onuora, Ahdri Zhina Mandiela, Lillian Allen, and Jean Binta Breeze is one avenue for exploring the orthographic use of visual experimentation. Although these poets do not always exploit the visual qualities of their pages, an exploration into their negotiation of ‘printing the performance’ would motivate a deeper understanding of the interplay between sound and the visual qualities of Caribbean verse.<sup>68</sup>

My project has been limited somewhat by the availability of Caribbean texts in North America. While Shake Keane and LeRoy Clarke are by no means mainstream poets, their texts are still accessible to a North American audience through university interlibrary loan systems. The other poets I discussed – Philip, Brathwaite, and Harris – have all been extensively published in North America. Addressing the visual poetry of these more well-known writers has been an important first step in that it more fully develops the discussions that are already in progress regarding their work. While my study of these more well-known poets contributes to existing scholarship, the next step in understanding Caribbean visual poetry will be to observe the contributions of lesser-known poets. I would hope that field work in the Caribbean would yield access to visual texts that due to small circulations are not known to North American audiences. By pursuing such texts, one would be better able to gauge the breadth of the visual poetry trend in the Caribbean. Is it a form primarily used by poets of a certain generation (the poets I have studied were all born between 1927 and 1947)? Is it a form primarily used by poets living outside the Caribbean? Is it a form more widely used in one nation over another? Such questions could be answered, or at least explored in more depth, in a project that is able to include more lesser-known texts.

I did not set out with a plan to limit the scope of my project to one cultural group in the Caribbean, but my wish to select poets who have offered the most extensive collections of visual poetry resulted in a group of African-Caribbean poets. An expanded project that included lesser-known texts would perhaps enable the inclusion of poets from other cultural groups in the Caribbean. Of course, an enhanced understanding of Caribbean visual poetry could be gained if the contributions of other Caribbean cultural groups were noted. However, if the findings of my current project hold true and visual poetry is, in fact, most extensively created by African-Caribbean poets, more research into visual poetry's African sources would be required. Further understanding of why visual poetry is a particularly attractive form for Caribbean poets of African descent would then be gained.

### **Beginnings**

With all the possible research paths this project motivates, there remains much work that can be done. My project has broadened the definition of Caribbean poetry by drawing attention to visually experimental work, while also expanding scholarship on visual poetry which until now has excluded the contribution of Caribbean poets. As I end this current project, I hope that I have generated an appreciation of what Caribbean visual poetry has to offer. Encountering it may be an unsettling endeavour for many readers. How to read such work is not immediately apparent. Nevertheless, with reading paths that rarely settle into one pattern and meanings that remain fluid, expanding and contracting with each new reading, this poetry is one that engages its readers in an enduring process of discovery. Such journeys may be demanding; they may be frustrating; but they also remain endlessly exhilarating.

## Notes

1. See Higgins 14 for a more detailed account of the negative attitudes towards this type of poetry, including references to Ben Jonson's, John Dryden's, and Joseph Addison's critiques of pattern poetry.

2. In *Discrepant Engagement*, Nathaniel Mackey similarly connects Caribbean poets with the Black Mountain school, noting that they, along with the poets of the Black Arts movement, are all members of an "aesthetic margin" (19).

3. Kellman's interest in projective verse also concerns the orality of projective verse. Not only does Kellman express an interest in the presence of music rhythms in the poetry of Amiri Baraka (jazz) and Derek Walcott (calypso), but also his appreciation of projective verse is in part a result of its ability to allow for the "spontaneity of improvisation" (45) that is associated with such musical styles as jazz.

4. The *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* magazine was established by Charles Bernstein and Bruce Andrews. Its first issue appeared in February 1978 and the magazine lasted for four years, with twelve issues and two supplements produced. Its final volume, volume 4, was published via the Canadian journal *Open Letter*.

5. Such depictions of writing as frivolous in comparison to more physical forms of resistance have a long history and occur most intensely in times of cultural crisis. As characterized by Elisabeth Frost, the attitude of Black Power activists towards writers during the civil rights struggles of the 1960s is one manifestation of this prejudice against writing. She writes, "Indeed, poets themselves were put on the defensive by Black Power activists who denigrated 'mere' writing when armed conflict seemed imminent" (83).

6. While his use of Jamaican English is an important milestone in Caribbean poetry, McKay's feelings toward the sounds of the Jamaican language are ambivalent. He writes, "to us who were getting an education in the English schools the Jamaican dialect was considered a vulgar tongue" (qtd. in Hathaway 33-34). Furthermore, his use of dialect in his early poems was not his sole form of poetic expression. Contemporaneously, he was writing using more traditionally British poetic conventions as well, but his friend and patron Walter Jekyll (a white Englishman, writer and folklorist) encouraged McKay's 'dialect' poetry, classifying it as more aesthetically pleasing than McKay's more traditional work which Jekyll deemed repetitive and common (Hathaway 33).

7. Oatley's source is *The Journals of Søren Kierkegaard*. Ed. and Trans. Alexander Dru. Oxford: UP, 1938, p. 127.

8. Ganguly's discussion of time seeks to establish a less superficial analysis of how "time signif[ies] in postcolonial analysis" (162). As my argument will proceed to discuss in more depth shortly, Ganguly desires to complicate the usual assumption that postcolonial time is "incommensurable with the normative temporality of clock and calendar associated with Western modernity" (162) by establishing that the non-linearity and ruptures that are frequently associated with postcolonial conceptions of time in fact also have roots "within the philosophical heritage of European thought" (163).

9. I describe Benjamin's discussion of this painting as a narrative rather than as a description of the painting at hand because Benjamin seems to take great liberties in his relation of this story to Klee's painting. Looking to Klee's painting, one would note that many of the elements of Benjamin's story – the pile of debris, for instance – are not easily

recognizable.

10. Of course, one may note that the similarities between Benjamin's conception of time/history and the Caribbean treatment of time/history may occur, at least in part, because Benjamin is speaking out of his position within a similarly marginalised and persecuted cultural group. "Theses on the Philosophy of History," from which his insights on temporality are most commonly gleaned, was completed in Spring 1940, just months before Benjamin would take his own life so as to escape death in Hitler's concentration camps.

11. Bhabha does note that the woman's words describe "the successive time of instaneity, battenning against the straight horizons and the flow of water" (307), but he does not develop his discussion further.

12. This description borrows from conceptions of African-American literary aesthetics, such as Amiri Baraka's 'changing same' (more fully theorized by Houston A. Baker, Jr. in *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*) and Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s 'signifying' (Gates states that "[t]he relationship that black 'Signification' bears to the English 'signification' is, paradoxically, a relation of difference inscribed within a relation of identity" (45)).

13. In hopes of more truly representing the visual qualities of the poetry, I have quoted them through digital reproduction. However, I would like to note that I have often not been able to remain true to the actual size of the texts.

14. Although Keane's work has not motivated much scholarly discussion, Keane is, as Philip Nanton notes, well known in St. Vincent, his achievements in poetry and music commemorated by a public monument ("Shake Keane's 'Nonsense'" 72). Perhaps this lack of critical attention will change with the recent release of his collected works *The Angel Horn*:



*Collected Poems 1927-1997* (House of Nehesi, 2005).

15. As Bob Perelman relates in “Parataxis and Narrative,” subordination in syntax can perform the power relations of the social world. He writes, “grammatical subordination entails political and moral subordination as well” (24). The subordination that Perelman sees occurring is in part the subordination of the individual parts of a text to the overall narrative. In other words, their subordination to the larger narrative structure could imply the co-option and silencing of multiple voices and view points in favour of the dominating, singular and single-minded narrative voice.

16. One might note as well that reading the heading also requires such a reading process if one wanted the order of the words to conform with the other headings throughout the book.

17. Though Keane frequently uses the bottom section of his pages to name the significance of particular dates (e.g. “October 25<sup>th</sup>. Thanksgiving and Statehood Day. St Vincent.” (60)), this naming of dates is not restricted to dates directly related to St. Vincent. In fact, most of the dates offered concern other nations. To name a few examples, “Friday February 6<sup>th</sup>, is said to be “New Zealand Day” (18), “March 13, 1976” is “YAOU-MUN-NABI—Guyana” (26), and “May 4” is “Cultural and political student uprising. China. 57 years ago” (34). With many of the dates focussing on events outside of St. Vincent, the calendar that is created is not one that sees St. Vincent as a insular and isolated island. Instead, it is one that positions St. Vincent as part of a broader community. Furthermore, it is a calendar that marks St. Vincent’s relations – imagined or real – with other nations. For example, “Saturday April 17<sup>th</sup>. Easter Eve” is marked as the “Time to order YOUR Xmas-trees before the Norwegians sell them OFF behind YOUR back to Grenada” (29). More seriously, St. Vincent’s ties to Africa are

made clear: “Any week this year, second recorded Afrikans arrived in St. Vincent (YouRoumai), 301 year ago, in the sea off Bequia (near Cane Garden), handcuffed, shipwrecked, alive and soforth” (28).

18. Although I don’t know the name of the person who helped elaborate on the biological reading of “WEE,” Susan Gingell (University of Saskatchewan) and Cara DeHaan (University of Waterloo) were the ones who suggested the reading of “WEE” as small or tiny.

19. Although such a reading does not relate to a performance of the formation of ‘we,’ I would also suggest “I WEE” visually bears the trace of ‘1 Week,’ hence a tie in to the page’s existence as “WEEK ONE.”

20. According to the Cultural Profiles Project funded by Citizenship and Immigration Canada, January 22<sup>nd</sup> is a day celebrated in St. Vincent and the Grenadines. Called ‘St. Vincent and the Grenadines Day,’ January 22<sup>nd</sup> corresponds to the Catholic calendar’s celebration of Saint Vincent’s Feast Day (n. pag.). Having gained independence from England in 1979, St. Vincent celebrates its Independence Day on October 27<sup>th</sup> (n. pag.).

21. His selection of “Cordially” here also bears traces of its root word ‘cordial.’ ‘Cordial’ when used as a noun suggests a liqueur or tonic used as medicine. The text’s title *One a Week with Water* similarly suggests a medical discourse, casting the poems themselves as medicine to be taken one a week with water.

22. More than any writer in this dissertation, Harris has consistently produced visually experimental work. Whereas Kamau Brathwaite came to visual experimentation later in his career and whereas Shake Keane, M. Nourbese Philip, and LeRoy Clarke alternate between visual experimentation and more traditional-looking poetry, Harris’s work throughout her

career has remained committed to visual experimentation.

23. Robert Bringhurst notes that “[. . .] the academic habit of relegating notes to the foot of the page or the end of the book is a mirror of Victorian social and domestic practice, in which the kitchen was kept out of sight and the servants were kept below stairs” (68).

24. For instance, in the 1975 publication we find the following lines:

And the ancestors raging  
spear the  
storm heart. Muttering  
the wind coils back to lash the lagoon, (lines 1-4, page 49).

In the 1984 version of “Seen in Stormlight,” the end of the verse section on page 48 reads,

And the ancestors rage  
spear  
the storm heart (lines 16-8),

with page 49 beginning,

Muttering  
the wind coils back to lash the lagoon (lines 1-2),

hence, dividing the original line.

25. Fraser, in fact, writes that in “invit[ing]” this “multiplicity, synchronicity, elasticity” (175) the visually experimental page allows for “the very female subjectivity proposed by Julia Kristeva as linking both cyclical and monumental time” (175).

26. Although Dick Higgins makes some interesting observations about the significance about the visual qualities of poetry, his claim that such poems “are very much in need of classification, with an accepted taxonomy” (*Horizons* 38) problematically seeks to provide a structure that would limit the meanings of this poetry and dismiss the significance of the fluidity of its meanings.

27. Similarly, Ron Silliman notes that “[c]ollage is a false democracy” (16) for despite its rendering of multiplicity, the reading process still requires each item of the collage be read one by one.

28. Despite Drucker’s warning, she too allows for the significance of the lack of fixed path through the text. To her, books “unfold in sequence (*fixed or not*) over time” (“Through Light” 17, emphasis added). Drucker’s suggestion that claims of non-linearity are false seems contradictory considering her perspective is that of a visual poet whose work resists closure. However, it is not visual poetry that she is denouncing, but rather the dichotomy of linearity vs. non-linearity itself, which she feels frequently proves to be gender-biased (see “Other than Linear”).

29. While I value de Certeau’s distinction between place and space, I cannot use one term without the other. Succinctly summarized by Aparajita Sagar and Marcia Stephenson, de Certeau defines place and space as follows: “place is that which is marked by ‘stability’ and ordered by ‘the rule of the proper’: in contrast, ‘space’ is place mobilized, ‘like a word when it is spoken’; it is a ‘*practised place*’ (117)” (3). Although Sagar and Stephenson privilege ‘space’ as the more appropriate term because it is “a vector of material power and history” (3), I cannot always make such a distinction between place and space in this chapter. In a post-colonial context, individuals are struggling both with the construct of place – in that the traditional conception of ‘home’ as a singular entity is desired yet proven inappropriate – and with space – in that one’s negotiation of place is played out in particular material spaces. While most often ‘space’ will suit my discussion because I will be referring to material locations, the more abstract/theoretical statements require an awareness of both the construct ‘place’ and its

material manifestation, 'space.'

30. Although the sea does not figure into Gloria Anzaldúa's specific borderland experience of the U.S. Southwest/Mexican border, she too depicts the sea as empowering in its freedom from boundaries. She writes, "The sea cannot be fenced, / *el mar* does not stop at borders" (25). Consequently, it is the sea that in part offers what she most adamantly argues for – freedom from borders: "To survive the Borderlands / you must live *sin fronteras*" (216-17), 'without borders.'

31. A later version of this poem places the two "one foot" phrases in straight columns side by side each other, with the "one Negro" section appearing below in a block between them. Though both versions show that "here" involves two places, I chose this earlier version because I find the curviness of the line formations better conveys a sense of journey that links the two spaces.

32. Characterizing interstitial spaces as spaces of transition is common. Fernando De Toro casts the third space as "transitory" (20), while Gloria Anzaldúa casts the borderland to be "in a constant state of transition" (25).

33. Sloane's columns have a slightly different visual presence than Harris's. While Sloane's left column is left-justified, her right column is right-justified. The space between her columns, consequently, has jagged edges unlike Harris's straight edged gap between her columns.

34. The articles that I'm referring to are Benita Parry's "Problems in Current Theories of Colonial Discourse" (*Oxford Literary Review* 9-10 (1987-1988): 27-58.) and Lawrence Phillips's "Lost in Space: Siting/Citing the In-Between of Homi Bhabha's *The Location of*

*Culture.*” (*Jouvert 2.2* (1998): 24 pars. 28 July 2005.

<<http://social.chass.ncsu.edu/jouvert/v2i2/phillip.htm>>).

35. The content of this line, that Penelope is “without ground,” is visually enacted by the line’s position at a distance from the lines preceding and following it. Appearing as follows,

a lengthening dante

i am without ground

still the apartment holds  
this voice an answering machine informs a world vanishing  
soft dust sifting the air (37, lines 15-19),

“i am without ground” appears itself to not have a ground.

36. This difficulty has led to ever-changing definitions based on, for example, the utterly ambiguous distinctions between “old” (predominantly, connoting romantic) lyric and “new” lyric (connoting anti-romantic ideals) (See Jeffreys’s *New Definitions of Lyric*, for example). Furthermore, the movement in lyric to include material once thought anti-thetical to lyric projects – for example, an engagement with the social world and/or a communal sense of self – renders the meaning of ‘lyric’ unstable and contentious. The ambiguity surrounding the term ‘lyric’ has led to the easy acceptance of oxymoronic labels to describe it. Douglas Barbour, for example, will discuss contemporary poetic forms as “lyric/anti-lyric,” describing such works in terms of their “anti-lyric lyricism” (12).

37. Even Dorothy Nielsen, whose view of lyric self in terms of its ecological interdependencies asserts the lyric self as community-oriented, differentiates lyric from the multiple voices characterized by drama or collage. Nielsen seeks to “subvert[] the transcendent lyric subject by creating within lyric—*rather than drama or collage*—room for difference”

(137, emphasis added).

38. In “A Response,” which responds to the articles in *New Definitions of Lyric: Theory, Technology, and Culture* (Ed. Mark Jeffreys), Perloff establishes that the Romantic lyric subject’s assumed separation from the social world is a fiction. Using Blake’s “London” as an example, she shows Blake positioning the lyric subject as capable of social critique. Similarly, in “Postmodernism and the Impasse of Lyric,” Perloff explores how the definition of lyric changes across time. Northrop Frye too warns against distinguishing lyric from other, more narrative-based, forms of poetry: “[. . .] we cannot simply identify the lyrical with the subjective. Continuous poetry may also be subjective, like the *Prelude* or *Childe Harold*, and lyrical poetry may be a communal enterprise, like the Old Testament Psalms or the odes of Pindar” (31-32).

39. Nielsen is here discussing Tilottama Rajan’s construction of the lyric in “Romanticism and the Death of Lyric Consciousness.” As Nielsen notes, Rajan suggests that “‘lyric, as a purely subjective form, is marked by the exclusion of the other’ (Rajan 196)” (130).

40. Naomi Guttman defines “Discourse on the Logic of Language” as embodying four distinguishable discourse types. According to Guttman, the discourses present in this poem can be grouped into the following categories: 1. the discourse of law (e.g., the edicts); 2. the discourse of amnesia, hence the purposeful forgetting on the part of the oppressors (e.g., the Dr. Broca and Dr. Wernicke section); 3. the discourse of aphasia, representing the post-colonial subject’s attempt to reclaim language (e.g., the poetic section); and 4. the mythological discourse (e.g., the section recounting the newborn’s birth into language). While Guttman’s

“identifying terms” (55) are for the most part appropriate, they do not acknowledge the presence of the multiple choice questions in their system of categorization. The multiple choice questions do not fit easily into any of Guttman’s categories, a fact that Guttman does not address. In fact, Guttman’s discussion entirely excludes mention of the multiple choice questions. One encountering “Discourse on the Logic of Language” through Guttman’s description of it would not be aware that the multiple choice questions that serve as the poem’s conclusion even exist.

41. Brenda Carr’s discussion does not focus solely on the physical production of the text, but similar to my approach suggests that Philip is engaged in “social mimeticism” (85). Carr in part concludes that, in Philip’s case, “[f]orm, [. . .], becomes a kind of allegory for the fragmentation and disruption of ‘being’ for the African female subject” (85).

42. Philip’s use of multiple discourse types as a means of asserting each discourse’s social function has been noted by others as well. In addition to Brenda Carr’s assertions discussed in the previous footnote, both Sabine Milz and Krishna Sarbadhikary interpret the form of “Discourse” in terms of its positioning of the discourses in their social context. Referring to Philip’s assertion that she seeks to “put the poem, that particular poem, back in its historical context, which is what poetry is not supposed to do” (par. 14), Sabine Milz argues that Philip “thus indicates to her readers how important the aspects of perspective and context are in the production of meaning(s)” (par. 14). Krishna Sarbadhikary extends the discussion by suggesting Philip’s aim is to “break the authority of the historical texts” (109). According to Sarbadhikary, by placing the edicts regarding language use in the time of slavery in relation to her own poetic voice, Philip performs a “resist[ance to] hegemonic cultures and discourses”



(109). My reading likewise sees the form of “Discourse on the Logic of Language” as placing the discourses in their social environment, but moves the discussion forward by focussing on Philip’s attention to the impediments that can make one’s relationship to language contentious.

43. As the section of verse reveals, although the speaker seeks a mothertongue that will be more empowering and less traumatic than the fathertongue has proven to be, the only mothertongue available is English, which, of course, is simultaneously the oppressive fathertongue. In the concluding stanza of the verse section, the speaker calls for the mother to “tongue me / mothertongue me / mother me / touch me / with the tongue of your” (lines 26-30, page 58) language, but this plea for language, like her early descriptions of her father tongue, dissolves into “lan lan lang / language / l/anguish / anguish / english / in a foreign anguish” (lines 31-36, page 58).

44. Although the discourses on the third page of the poem are laid-out following the same pattern as the first page, there is a broader gulf between the mythology and verse sections. The mythology section is positioned closer to the edge of the page, while the section of verse too is shifted slightly towards the inner seam. While I would argue that the mythology section of the third page similarly makes focussing on the section of verse difficult, the closer proximity of the two sections on the first page more clearly cast the mythology section as frustrating one’s ease of reading the verse section.

45. Linda Kinnahan, in her focus on Philip’s representation of the racialized body, interprets the required turning of the book as drawing the reader’s attention to his/her own physical actions. The required turning of the book, thus, makes the reading process literally an embodied one.

46. While I conceive of the connection between mother and daughter represented by the mythology section in terms of intimacy, David Marriott interprets it as violent. He describes the mother's actions as a "violent gift of orality from the maternal unconscious to that of the child's" (78). The mother's actions of "gently forcing" the child's mouth open so that she can blow words into the child's mouth may be uncomfortable for the child, much as the mother's action of licking the baby clean would be. However, this action of blowing words into the child is more akin to an act of resuscitation than of violence. In other words, this image of resuscitation associates the gift of language with the gift of breath; language, thus, like breath, is constructed as necessary for survival.

47. Northrop Frye's exploration of the lyric as resulting from a "blocking" of the subject from everyday experience is one example of the traditional association of lyric with a disengagement with the social world. Frye notes that

the frustrating or block point, the cruel mistress or whatever, becomes a focus for meditation rather than brooding, and thereby seems to be the entrance to another world of experience, 'the fitful tracing of a portal,' as Wallace Stevens calls it. This world is one of magic and mystery, one that we must soon leave if we are to retain our reputations as sober citizens of the ordinary one. (36)

Lyric, thus, becomes a space apart from the material world rather than a space for increased critical engagement with that world.

48. Making overt the potential inaccuracies of journalistic reports is a key theme in this text. Comparing a television news report and a newspaper article regarding the deaths of two siblings, Brathwaite observes:

Last night's tv glimpsed us a picture of the Spanish Town morgue where children's bodies were piled up like at Belsen or Auschwitz. The objects of this particular exercise was to show us the bodies of two children murdered in their home while their mother was at Church last Sunday night (12 Aug 90). Brother & sister, aged 8 and 10 & naked in the picture to the bone, had been stabbed 25 times/each—But no—the newspaper report (17 Aug 90) is much more boggling. The boy, Darian, was actually 18 (not 8) years old & he was stabbed—by ice-pick—not 25 but 70. His sister, Allecia, 140 times..." (18)

This revelation of very different "facts" for the same event in part comments upon the ludicrousness of the paper version. The paper is "boggling" not only in its depiction of the boy as eighteen rather than eight, but also in its drastic increase of the number of stab wounds from twenty-five each to seventy and one hundred forty each. While the accuracy of television's labeling of the brother and sister as eight and ten years old respectively cannot strictly be substantiated, the visualness of the medium of television – its showing of the corpses of the girl and boy – surely prevents an eight year old from being mistaken for an eighteen year old. The more authoritative version of this event is, thereby, granted to the television report because it allows the viewers to become witnesses of the children's dead bodies.

49. Interestingly, the only moments in which Brathwaite veers away from a standardized, unchanging font for the newspaper articles occur when Brathwaite is representing a quotation, hence, the voice, of an eyewitness source. This tendency further links the manipulation of font with a foregrounding of embodied subjectivity. Note in particular the expansion of the font for witness accounts on pages 40-41 and the use of bold in the series of reports that appear between pages 69 and 72.

50. Although Ong's positioning of oral and text-based cultures on a continuum that pits

oral communities as primitive and text-based communities as possessing “heighten[ed] consciousness” (82) is morally problematic, his observations of the characteristics particular to each culture type remain relevant. His casting of oral and text-based cultures as polar opposites has become too simplistic a view, but his specific observations remain appropriate if one remains aware, and critical, of the value judgements that his overall generalized depiction of orality versus literacy imposed.

51. The use of multiple choice questions as a poetic medium results out of a similar impulse as Brathwaite’s use of newspaper reports as a poetic medium: when visual experimentation motivates poetry to no longer have to appear in uniform lines, there is a tendency towards opening up poetry to include traditionally separate genres of discourse.

52. Linda Kinnahan observes a similar purpose for the final question, arguing that it manifests an “analysis in which the biological and the historical are not consecutive to one another, as in the evolutionism of the first sociologists, but are bound together in an increasingly complex fashion in accordance with the development of the modern technologies of power,’ [. . .] (Foucault, qtd. in Philip, “Dis Place” 301)” (126-27).

53. D’Aguiar’s poem originally appeared in *The Page*, an arts supplement of *Northern Echo* (England), in the early 1990’s. I have not been able to access *The Page*, so my descriptions are based on the reprint of “1492” that appeared in *Wasafiri*.

54. Edward Allen McCormick’s “Translator’s Introduction” of Lessing’s *Laocoön* provides a wonderful summary of the historical progression of the visual/verbal arts debate. In summarizing the sources for Lessing’s 1766 text, McCormick begins by discussing the ancients, notes treatments of the debate during the Renaissance, and concludes by outlining the

direct precursors of *Laocoön* in England, France, and Germany.

55. The term ‘interartistic’ is borrowed from W. J. T. Mitchell in *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation*.

56. As this passage suggests, a key concern for Mitchell in this article is the university’s role in the segregation of the arts through its departmental organizational structure. Marguerite Helmers observes, “[t]he boundary separating text from image has always been little more than a convenient way to keep one academy from encroaching too liberally on the specialty of another” (viii). Mitchell addresses disciplinary structures not only in “Beyond Comparison” but in “Interdisciplinarity and Visual Culture” (*Art Bulletin* 70.4 [1995]:540-44.) where he offers the neologism ‘indiscipline’ to represent cross-disciplinarity. As described by Hill and Helmers, “Mitchell locates the ‘indiscipline’ ‘at the inner and outer boundaries of disciplines,’ sites of inquiry characterized by ‘turbulence or incoherence’: ‘If a discipline is a way of insuring the continuity of a set of collective practices (technical, social, professional, etc.), ‘indiscipline’ is a moment of breakage or rupture, when the continuity is broken and the practice comes into question’ (‘Interdisciplinarity’ 541)” (18-19). While the blurring of disciplines is an innate and underlying issue for a project concerning visual poetry, a detailed discussion of the impact of disciplinary boundaries is outside the scope of this project.

57. Studio Museum was founded in 1967 “to promote African diasporal art” (Poupeye 138). Clarke served as a program coordinator and artist-in-residence from 1971-1974.

58. The Aquarela Galleries’s edition offers no publishing information, but according to the Trinidad and Tobago National Bibliography (Cumulated Edition 1992-1995), this edition was published “c1992” ([http://www.nalis.gov.tt/Libraries/Public/national\\_bib.html](http://www.nalis.gov.tt/Libraries/Public/national_bib.html)).

59. Although Clarke's subtitle "Love Poems and Drawings" seems to suggest that he conceives of this book as a collection of individual poems, I would argue that the poems in fact fuse together to form an extended poem. Each page does offer a poem which begins and ends on that one page – the syntax of the poem on one page does not bleed onto the next page – but each poem is tied together into an overarching narrative regarding the narrator's love for one woman.

Please note that because Clarke's text does not offer page numbers or poem titles, I have numbered the poems chronologically for the sake of offering clearer references.

60. I have, however, reversed the relationship between words and image. For Barthes, it is words that are needed to elaborate, hence name, the meaning of the image. I, however, envision a more reciprocal relationship; images can elaborate words, just as words elaborate images.

61. Yemaha is a mother goddess in Yoruba mythology, the patron deity of women, but especially of pregnant women. While Clark's use of "Yemaha" in this poem seems to suggest she's associated with the sun – in the morning, it is the sun that unveils the land, uncovering it from night's darkness – in Yoruba mythology, "Yemaha" (or "Yemaja" or Yemoja") is linked to the water. Associated with the Ogun river which is reputed to "cure infertility" (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yemaja>), Yemaha's name itself ties her to the waters. According to the wikipedia entry "Yemaja," "[h]er name is a contraction of Yoruban words that mean 'Mother whose children are like fishes'" (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yemaja>).

62. Although McCaffery does not refer to Keats, McCaffery's wish to "experience ambivalence as ambivalence" is reminiscent of Keats's formulation of Negative Capability as

an ability to “be[] in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” (Keats qtd. in Abrams 182).

63. Whether decoration can in fact be meaningless remains unanswered.

64. Modality judgements are of course social, as Kress and Van Leeuwen observe, stating that modality is “dependent on what is considered real (or true, or sacred) in the social group for which the representation is primarily intended” (161).

65. In this way Brathwaite’s use of icons runs counter to Fenollosa’s interpretation of the pictographic qualities of Chinese writing. According to Fenollosa’s interpretation, Chinese characters are not just pictures of objects. Rather, they are “shorthand pictures of actions or processes” (9), a “*verbal idea of action*” (9).

66. Haiti holds the distinction of being the first Caribbean island to overturn European control. A slave rebellion in 1791 sparked the Haitian revolution which resulted in Haiti’s declaration of independence from France in 1804.

67. In fact, the brevity of her answer suggested that the visual qualities of her poem are not that important to her. Perhaps my question was unclear or perhaps, in a forum that concerned the effect of race in the publishing industry, my question was out of place. At another time in the question period, she did, however, acknowledge that working with language in a more abstract manner is not what is expected of a black writer and consequently such writing is often not categorized as black.

68. I have borrowed the phrase ‘printing the performance’ from the title of an article by Mervyn Morris. In “Printing the Performance,” Morris discusses the problem of “how to represent [“words in audible motion”] on the page” (22). Unfortunately though, Morris does

not speak to visual experimentation as a mode for representing oral verse. Instead, he argues for a “reader-friendly” printed form that features “the vernacular for the eye accustomed to standard English” (22).



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