

“Soun de Abeng fi Nanny”: Music and Resistance
in Contemporary Caribbean Women’s Poetry

I want to make words
music
move beyond language
into sound.
(Jean ‘Binta’ Breeze, “The Garden Path”)

By claiming the importance of what he defined “nation language”, the language closely connected to the African experience in the Caribbean, Barbadian poet and critic Edward Kamau Brathwaite individuated its peculiarity in its *sound*: “English it may be in terms of some of its lexical features. But in its contours, its rhythm and timbre, its sound explosions, it is not English”. While he famously affirmed that “the hurricane does not roar in pentameters”, Brathwaite stressed the distinct quality of a Caribbean verse which ignores the pentameter of the imposed British colonial tradition so as to give voice to the sounds of its own cultural experience.¹ Although he lamented that the relation between music and language structures went largely unrecognized, recent theoretical elaborations have paid increasing attention to the interconnections of music and poetry.

The Caribbean has been described in musical terms as ‘fugal’, as a culturally polyphonic society in which the dissonant melodies of loss and exile “are repeated over and over again in different keys and at different intervals”.² Yet, music is obviously much more than a mere metaphor, providing on the contrary a complex methodological approach to the exploration of Caribbean literary imagination. Following Martinican thinker and writer Edouard Glissant’s elaboration of a rhizomatic identity where multiple roots proliferate and intersect, the Caribbean cultural heritage appears as a continuum of languages and histories. In his conceptualization of the Caribbean as an “island which ‘repeats’ itself”, Antonio Benitez-Rojo has associated this unpredictable movement with “the unforeseen relation between a dance movement and the baroque spiral of a colonial railing”.³ However, while the spiral movement suggested by Benitez-Rojo implies the recognition of a moment of origin, the multiple roots of Caribbean culture and identities contradict this assertion by challenging the notion of a supposed authenticity which would produce monolingual and monocultural identities. In this context, far from being the sterile affirmation of sameness, repetition becomes an enriching process following a non linear movement, a *Détour*; to borrow Glissant’s terminology. Looking into the possibility of a *Retour*, the Martinican writer suggests that a *Détour* is a productive strategy only if nourished by a *Retour* which, privileging the “rhizomatous thinking” of multiple origins

¹ Edward Kamau Brathwaite, *History of the Voice. The Development of Nation Language in Anglophone Caribbean Poetry* (London: New Beacon, 1984), 13 and 8.

² Marlene NourbeSe Philip, “Fugues, Fragments and Fissures – A Work in Progress”, *Anthurium* 3.2 (2005), <http://anthurium.miami.edu/volume_3/issue_2/philip-fugues.htm>, 23 July 2009.

³ Antonio Benitez-Rojo, *The Repeating Island* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 4.

and relations, is “not a return to the longing for origins ... but a return to the point of entanglement”.⁴

If Glissant theorizes creolization in terms of diffractions and dispersal, rather than as a centring, Benitez Rojo sees the process of cultural interaction in the Caribbean as a “ray of light within a prism”, involving “phenomena of inflection, refraction, and decomposition”.⁵ In such a landscape, the unpredictability of creolization produced what Glissant theorized as ‘the logic of the trace’, a non-linear process opposed to the false universality of deadly systems of thought.⁶ In this respect, what allowed for the creation of a new, syncretic culture, was the power of memory, the power to *trace back* fragments of African culture and combine them with European and Indian elements. Tracing back the fragments, however, does not result in a simple retrieval of harmony and wholeness. As Derek Walcott has brilliantly illustrated, this reassemblage becomes the figure of an endless translation which, through the Antillean fragments of “epic memory”, has to be assembled, recomposed and performed again and again.⁷

This cultural process can be conceived as the repetition of the same melody through the centuries, each time in a different key, with infinite possible variations disclosing its creative potential. In musical terms, Caribbean identities are thus conceptualized as fugues, as a contrapuntal combination of elements endlessly repeating, recalling and evoking each other while producing unpredictable variations. As Marlene NourbeSe Philip has argued describing herself as “witness, recorder, griot, poet and teller of tales”, her role is “similar to the back up singer, echoing the word, but perhaps glossing it in another way”.⁸ Although NourbeSe Philip’s identification with the back up singer might be a debatable position, the glossing or, more appropriately, the *reverberation* of the word in different tonalities can provide a fitting image to define this peculiar process of repetition. Indeed, by using a number of disparate cultural sources in a sort of cut’n’mix process, Caribbean women poets have *dubbed* those sources in a way which closely resembles dub music’s practice of adding words to a musical accompaniment.

Borrowing Dick Hebdige’s notion of versioning in dance hall reggae, which involves the creation of endless ‘versions’ of a musical text, Evelyn O’Callaghan applies this musical practice to women’s writing. The dynamic process of reinterpreting an original recording and disseminating a number of different versions clearly undermines and subverts the notion of a single, stable, authoritative text, be it musical or literary: in this “*process* of altering, supplementing, breaking, echoing, mocking and playing with that original”, different versions proliferate, creating something which is entirely new despite the persistence of recognizably – albeit modified – ‘original’ elements. O’Callaghan thus suggests a theoretical approach to Caribbean women’s writing which addresses it as

⁴ Edouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, trans. by M. Dash (Charlottesville and London: University of Virginia Press, 1994), 26. In “Des tours de Babel”, Jacques Derrida deconstructs the desire for linguistic uniformity by articulating the act of translation as a necessary *détour*, a deviation towards something other; “Des Tours de Babel”, in J. F. Graham, ed., *Difference in Translation* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1985), 165-248.

⁵ Benitez-Rojo, *The Repeating Island*, 21.

⁶ Edouard Glissant, *Introduction à une poétique du divers* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), 14.

⁷ Derek Walcott, “The Antilles: Fragments of Epic Memory”, in *What the Twilight Says* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998), 69.

⁸ NourbeSe Philip, “Fugues, Fragments and Fissures”, n. p.

⁹ Evelyn O'Callaghan, *Woman Version. Theoretical Approaches to West Indian Fiction by Women* (London: Macmillan, 1993), 11.

¹⁰ Laurence Breiner, *An Introduction to West Indian Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 185. Brathwaite's concern is also testified by the fact that *The Arrivants* was first published and then issued as a set of LPs, leading the way for the audio recordings issued by dub poets.

¹¹ Calypso and steel pan are African-derived musical forms traditionally associated with Carnival in Trinidad. Calypsos are typically played by steel bands accompanying Carnival street dancing. The origin of calypso can be traced back to West African worksongs; the steel pan originates from the African drumming tradition.

¹² The "Caribbean Voices" programme, broadcast between 1943 and 1958, acted as a launching pad for writers such as Derek Walcott, George Lamming, V.S. Naipaul and many others.

¹³ Breiner, *An Introduction*, 186.

¹⁴ Mervin Morris, "On Reading Louise Bennett, Seriously" (1963), in Alison Donnell and Sarah Lawson Welsh, eds., *The Routledge Reader in Caribbean Literature* (London: Routledge, 1996), 194-97.

a kind of remix or dub version which utilizes elements of the 'master trope' of Caribbean literary discourse (combining, stretching, modifying them in new ways); announces a gendered perspective; adds individual styles of 'talk over'; enhances or omits tracks depending on desired effect; and generally alters by recontextualization to create a unique literary entity.⁹

Specifically, this approach proves particularly appropriate for a discussion of women poets as diverse as Lorna Goodison, Grace Nichols, NourbeSe Philip and Jean 'Binta' Breeze. As they reworked musical forms from calypso to the quadrille, from mento to European folk songs, these women poets have articulated music as a form of performative collective memory, as the productive site of the transmission and critical revision of their cultural history and identity.

Sounds with a difference

The publication of Kamau Brathwaite's trilogy, *The Arrivants* (1973), marked an important breakthrough in the way Caribbean poetry was conceived. By bringing into his poetry and performances the rhythms of African and West Indian drumming and of jazz, Brathwaite constituted the major inspiration for younger generations who, following the trail of his performative innovations, shared and developed his concern for "getting poetry off the page – not only of realizing it in a reading, but of conceiving poetry as a form of vocal performance, rather than as a form of inscription".¹⁰ Not only did Brathwaite prove that the 'nation language' was as capable of complex and expressive richness and as worthy of publication as Standard English, but he also explored on the page and, most significantly, *on the stage*, the Caribbean rhythmic and formal resources which constituted a vital and unquestionable contribution to poetic forms, by expanding the poetic possibilities of specifically Caribbean musical performances like calypso and steel pan music.¹¹

In reclaiming the importance of performativity in the construction of Caribbean poetic identities, the crucial role played by the BBC "Caribbean Voices" radio programme should not be underestimated.¹² Laurence Breiner aptly suggests that "much West Indian poetry during the 1950s was heard rather than seen",¹³ tracing to that period the beginning of the exciting new developments of Caribbean poetry stemming from the powerful interplay of voice and print. A fundamental contribution was also given by Jamaican poet Louise Bennett, the first woman to use the sounds and patterns of Caribbean popular music for her poetry performance in the late Forties. Although her use of creole was highly controversial, and despite the fact that she had not been considered a 'proper' poet until the critical recognition of Mervyn Morris in the 1960s, she is now acknowledged for her innovative use of creole.¹⁴ This marks the proximity of Bennett's

poetry to a wide range of oral sources from proverbs to songs which are not simply incorporated in her texts, but constitute the voice through which she speaks and performs her poems. In fact, while she borrows the colloquial tone of social comment and gossip, she powerfully expresses and preserves Caribbean cultural traditions in a way which closely resembles the sharp social and political commentary of calypsonians, as she does in her famous “Colonization in Reverse”, for instance, where she ironically address the ‘back to Africa’ movement. Yet, although she has often been compared to calypsonians like Mighty Sparrow, as De Caires Narain points out, this comparison “elides the difference which gender makes to their use of oral forms, producing very different kinds of poetic/performative identities”.¹⁵ In fact, Bennett appropriates the traditionally male-dominated public sphere by introducing a female voice challenging the misogynist attitude of calypso and its often explicit sexual overtones. Moreover, while calypso performances stage an unquestionably male and often nationalist subjectivity, by contrast Bennett’s performative style produced powerful female subjectivities, celebrating women’s hidden power and resilience.¹⁶

Nonetheless, calypso provided a productive model for later generations of poets who realized the importance of directly addressing current issues for their audience. The emergence of a new generation of Caribbean poets in the black and feminist activist atmosphere of the 70s and 80s England generated a convergence of the investigation of the oral dimension of poetry with an urge to address political and gender issues. Indeed, by borrowing its style and structure, poets like Breeze, NourbeSe Philip and Nichols, among others, developed a new sense of community recuperating the calypso function as social and political commentary from a gender perspective.

The use of creole, political commitment and, in particular, the increasing use of technology signaled a kind of continuity with the calypso audience even in a diasporic context. The exploration of the new possibilities opened up by the use of technology accompanied and contributed to the widespread adaptation of musical forms. In fact, sound amplification and synthesizers did for poetry what the radio did for calypso in the 1930s and 1940s: since the recourse to electronic media provided a way to negotiate the financial and practical constraints of publication, poets could reach a wider audience and popularize their work through the sound systems. Moreover, technology also allowed the re-creation of a community of listeners: poets could thus express a sense of community by restoring through performance the continuum between audience and performer which establishes what Brathwaite defined as the “total expression” of nation language.¹⁷

The combination of speech and music was transposed in ‘dub poetry’, a body of poetry “which is written to be performed to the same kind of musical accompaniment as that used by deejays”.¹⁸ However, as it stemmed

¹⁵ Denise de Caires Narain, *Contemporary Caribbean Women’s Poetry. Making Style* (London: Routledge, 2002), 75.

¹⁶ See for example “Jamaica Oman” “Jamaica oman, cunny, sahl/ Is how them jinnal so ?/ Look how long dem liberated/ An de man dem never know!” [Jamaican women are so clever!/ How is it that they are so cunning?/ Just think how long they’ve been liberated/ And the men didn’t even know!]. Louise Bennett, *Selected Poems* (Kingston: Sangster’s, 1982), 21. Here and afterwards, the working versions in Standard English are mine.

¹⁷ Brathwaite, *History of the Voice*, 18.

¹⁸ Carolyn Cooper and Hubert Devonish, “A Tale of Two States: Language, Lit/orature and the Two Jamaicas”, in Stewart Brown, ed., *The Pressures of the Text. Orality, Texts and the Telling of Tales* (Birmingham: University of Birmingham, 1995), 70.

¹⁹ Jean 'Binta' Breeze, "Can a Dub Poet Be a Woman?", in Donnell and Lawson Welsh, eds., *The Routledge Reader*. For the notion of "domestic dub" see Jenny Sharpe, "Dub and Difference: A Conversation with Jean 'Binta' Breeze", *Callaloo* 26.3 (2003), 612.

from a male musical tradition where both the calypsonian and the deejay performed respectively the role of political commentator and of sound manipulator, dub was essentially a male-dominated field. It is significant that Breeze, the first female dub poet, soon distanced herself from dub, publicly exposing the limits and constraints of its male chauvinism and gender stereotypes. In the outline of what she defined as "women's domestic dub", Breeze combined political commitment and the denunciation of women's social and economic marginalization.¹⁹ While in "Aid Travels with the Bomb" she denounces the ongoing effects of colonialism and sharply contests the economic and cultural aspects of neocolonialism, in "Riddym Ravings" she stages the alienation of a woman who hears the radio "eena her head":

an de D.J. fly up eena mi head
mi hear im a play seh

*Eh, Eh,
no feel no way
town is a play dat ah really kean stay
dem kudda – ribbit mi han
eh – ribbit mi toe
mi waan go a country go look mango.*²⁰

²⁰ Jean 'Binta' Breeze, "Riddym Ravings (The Madwoman's Poem)", *Spring Cleaning* (London: Virago, 1992), 19.

[And the DJ flew up into my head/ I heard him play, say:/ *Eh, Eh/ No feel no way/ town is a place that I really can't stay/ they cut up – bind up my hand/ Eh, bind up my toe/ I want to go to the country, go look at the mango]*

Through a powerful performance conveyed by figurative language, repetitions and skillful paralinguistic features revealing the poet's dramatic skills, the song trapped in the woman's head, sung in a reggae rhythm, punctuates the poem like a refrain. In some recordings the refrain is accompanied by a reggae backing, while the final lines ("Murther/ Pull up Missa Operator") are emphasized by the use of electronic sounds suggesting the electronic shock treatment the woman undergoes. Claiming a different space for women, Breeze reconfigures the public space of poetic performance in a gendered perspective through the empowering tools of technology and language.

²¹ See for instance Grace Nichols, *i is a long memoried woman* (London: Karnak House, 1983) and *The Fat Black Women's Poems* (London: Virago, 1984). In her discussion of the famous calypso "Jean and Dinah", NourbeSe Philip suggests that Mighty Sparrow reasserts his power against the Yankees at the expense of women's bodies.

In keeping with the Carnival tradition of the reversal of power structures and hierarchies, calypsonians as well as female poets adopted double entendre, punning, word play and code-switching, testifying to the subversive potentialities of language. While Nichols used creole to produce powerful female subjectivities, from Caribbean women warriors to diasporic "fat black women" reclaiming their bodies, NourbeSe Philip has equally advocated for a radical reconfiguration and re-possession of female bodies in order to resist the gaps and erasures in their representation.²¹ Although she exposes the limiting misogynist assumptions of traditional calypso, NourbeSe Philip strategically appropriates the genre transforming it into

an empowering space of female intervention. Celebrated for its capacity to resist amnesia and forgetting, calypso becomes one of the many rhythms by which Caribbean women poets remember.

'Versioning' history: music and spirit possessions

The Africans arrived with nothing but their bodies in a space where violent contact between cultures subsequently turned into a creative and unpredictable flux of relation, exchange, and transformation. While the European colonizers had the comfort and arrogance of their weapons, their languages, their cultural identities, the African slaves could not rely on such luxuries. Deprived of anything which could provide a sense of cultural heritage and preserve a sense of identity, the 'naked migrant', as Glissant terms it, had lost his/her culture and language on the slaveship. As NourbeSe Philip has powerfully suggested:

Unlike all other arrivals before or since, when the African comes to the New World, she comes with nothing. But the body. Her body. *The body* – repository and source of everything needed to survive in any but the barest sense. Body memory bodymemory. The African body.²²

If the African arrived in the New World with her body as her only resource, that body becomes the most powerful site of confrontation, the expression of a culture, and the assertion of resistance. The initial condition of absolute deprivation thus turns into a means of radical resistance. While runaway slaves took their bodies completely outside the reach of the white European by hiding on the mountains, the slaves on the plantation used dance to resist and remember:

Finally, when the memory becomes susceptible to time, distance and the imagination, music is one of the 'sign-posts' that allows us to reconstruct our past out of the splintered collections in the recesses of our *minds and bodies*. Because, like the mind, the body also remembers through movement and dance.²³

By contrast, while dance as a syncretic practice combining African and European elements often expressed forms of struggle through the creation of new cultural and musical forms, refusal to dance could similarly mark resistance. Inspired by Isaac Cruikshank's 1792 etching representing the brutal punishment on a slaveship of a young African slave who refused the captain's order to dance, composer Shirley Thompson combines different musical languages to give voice to the woman's resistance. A composition for soprano, spoken word artist, solo cello and orchestra, "The Woman who Refused to Dance" thus articulates the woman's struggle for her right to remain still, claiming the full possession of her body.²⁴

²² Marlene NourbeSe Philip, *A Genealogy of Resistance and Other Essays* (Toronto: The Mercury Press, 1997), 91.

²³ Patricia J. Saunders, "Introduction. Mapping the Roots/Routes of Calypso in Caribbean Literary and Cultural Traditions", in Sandra Pouchet Paquet, Patricia J. Saunders and Stephen Stuenkel, eds., *Music, Memory, Resistance. Calypso and the Caribbean Literary Imagination* (Kingston: Ian Randle, 2007), xx. Emphasis added.

²⁴ Shirley Thompson, "The Woman Who Refused to Dance", *Moving Worlds* 7.2 (2007); an audio file of this piece can be found in the **Multimedia** section. See also <<http://slavetrade.parliament.uk/slavetrade>>, 8 February 2010.



Fig 1: Isaac Cruikshank, *The Abolition of the Slave Trade*, etching, 1792.

²⁵ Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic. Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 1993), 76.

²⁶ Saunders, "Mapping the Roots/Routes of Calypso", xx.

²⁷ Dance was one of the few activities slaves were permitted. In seventeenth-century Jamaica dances like the quadrille were associated with healing rites; as its rhythms were intensified and 'africanized', it helped individuals to be possessed and deliver the messages of the spirits, becoming "part of the mechanism for possession"; John Szwed, *Crossovers: Essays on Race, Music and American Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 153.

²⁸ A local development of the quadrille, the mento was a looser form with elements of European and local folk tunes: see Szwed, *Crossovers*, 156. The cultural implications of this syncretic practice are also explored by Breeze in *The Fifth Figure*, discussed below.

For the slaves music constituted a means of communication and ineffable resistance. The traces of that musical revolt are still visible or, as Gilroy argues, *audible* today: "The irrepressible rhythms of the once forbidden drum are often still audible in their work. Its characteristic syncopations still animate the basic desires – to be free and to be oneself – that are revealed in this counterculture's unique conjunction of body and music".²⁵ Music thus constitutes the productive site of the transmission of knowledge and history while, at the same time, performing a critical revision of Caribbean cultural history. As Saunders has argued, as part of the institutional memory of the Caribbean "music is an invaluable medium for maintaining a critical perspective on society by keeping contributions and controversies alive for future generations to learn from, borrow, and ultimately, even revise".²⁶ What contemporary women poets suggest is that although colonial education and Western historiography have tried to erase and write anew the pre-colonial cultures of the Caribbean, spirits keep coming back through storytelling and music, in a sort of spirit possession where ghosts are revived through voice, rhythm, and dance, remembering and re-inventing history at every performance.²⁷

A significant example of this 'versioning' is that of Nanny, the legendary spiritual, cultural and military leader of the Jamaican Maroons, whose story has been mainly transmitted through oral accounts. Her inspirational figure as brave woman warrior has been haunting the writings of a number of writers, reverberating with every repetition. In the performance of "Soun de Abeng fi Nanny", for instance, Breeze uses a celebratory tone to represent Nanny as a leader and warrior at one with the environment. The syncopated performance of the poem to the rhythm of mento, the first music created on Jamaican soil, is used here to convey the sense of urgency and, at the same time, to celebrate the legendary figure of Nanny of the Maroons.²⁸

Moreover, as Nanny is said to be able to catch the British bullets with her buttocks, her body becomes an instrument of resistance. The past thus comes to be *embodied* in the musical performance in a sort of spirit possession in which the rhythm of mento, the voice of the poet, and the movements of the performance powerfully enact the re-memory of the past, disclosing the subversive potentialities of the combined use of body, word and music.²⁹

Breeze also imagines Nanny following and decoding the sounds of nature in order to hide from her enemies and take them by surprise:

an er yeye roam crass
 ebery mountain pass
 an er yeas well tune to de win'
 an de cricket an de treefrog
 crackle telegram
 an she wet er battam lip fi decode³⁰

[Her eyes roam across/ every mountain pass/ and her ears are well tuned to the wind./ She wets her bottom lip to decode/ the cricket and the treefrog/ crackling telegram.].

The use of sounds as a strategy for resistance and revolt is evident in the very structure of the poem, where every line celebrates the warlike qualities of the cunning warrior, finally urging the audience with the final incitation: “so mek wi soun de abeng/ fi Nanny” [so let’s sound the abeng/ for Nanny]. Quite significantly, the abeng evoked in the poem is an ambiguous musical instrument re-signified by the maroons: although the abeng was the conch shell or animal horn used by slaveholders to call the slaves to the plantation, its blowing also called to revolt, since the instrument had been strategically appropriated by runaway slaves to communicate and organize rebellions.

Through a strategy of resistance where body and sound are inextricably linked, in “Nanny” the Jamaican poet Lorna Goodison revives the woman warrior whose body “ran equal/ to the rhythms of the forest”.³¹ By re-telling the story Goodison performs her role as *griot*, celebrating the collective past and foregrounding a similar path of resistance for future generations: “When your sorrow obscures the skies/ Other women like me will rise”. Goodison lets Nanny speak for herself outlining the figure of a woman warrior who, according to Breiner, appropriates a “boasting style which in the West Indies is traditionally a male prerogative”.³² As she prefigures a genealogy of women warriors like Nanny in the final lines of the poem, Goodison also suggests a reverberation of her poems, since



Fig. 2: Nanny of the Maroons as national icon (the Jamaican 500 dollar bill), 2002.

²⁹ Body and resistance are associated in a number of poems evoking the condition of slave women in the plantations. See for instance “Skin Teeth” by Nichols, underscoring the subversive potential of a smile, and “Inna Calabash” by Goodison, where the calabash – a household utensil and musical instrument – was also used to deceive the overseer of the plantation and simulate pregnancy.

³⁰ Jean ‘Binta’ Breeze, *Riddym Ravings and Other Poems* (London: Race Today, 1988), 45.

³¹ Lorna Goodison, “Nanny”, in *I Am Becoming My Mother* (London: New Beacon, 1995 [1986]), 44.

³² Breiner, *Introduction*, 212.

Nanny's voice resonates again as the inspiring figure of "We are the women". Similarly, Nichols also celebrates "the Ashanti princess/ and giver of charms" in "Nanny", while the final lines of the poem – "is that you, Nanny?" – echo another poem devoted to Nanny, "The return," reverberating through the sound of her abeng:

Is that you Nanny
Is that you Black Priestess
Is that your Abeng voice
echoing its warcry through the valleys?³³

³³ Nichols, "The Return", in
*i is a long memoried
woman*, 65.

The constant dialogue between musical forms and poetry thus discloses the possibility to re-create a forgotten past contrapuntally. While reassembling different oral/musical sources, women poets engaging with history, mythology and memory contribute to the retrieval of collective memory through the performance of a shared past. Nichols brilliantly achieves this performance in her poem "Sunris", a journey where the transformative and subversive spirit of carnival provides the framework for the protagonist's encounter with historical, religious and mythological figures. Inspired by the "wit, wordplay, bravado and gusto" of calypso, Nichols introduces her poem thus:

In my 'sunris' poem, a woman makes a journey towards self-discovery and self-naming, through carnival In this act of reclaiming herself and the various strands of her heritage she engages with history and mythology and like the calypsonian sometimes resorts to verbal self-inflation to make her voice heard, 'I think this time I go make history'.³⁴

³⁴ Grace Nichols, *Sunris*
(London: Virago, 1996), 18;
8.

The pattern of the poem, punctuated by repetitions, steel pan rhythms and satirical comments, conveys a sense of movement deeply informed by calypso and carnival. It is precisely through the subversive rhythms of carnival and calypso that in a journey across Amerindian myths, Caribbean deities and historical figures, the past can be evoked and celebrated in its polyphony. The interconnections of music, body and word are extremely relevant in this context and constitute the possibility to re/assemble the fragments in order to re/member.

Celebrating the potentialities of calypso, NourbeSe Philip has claimed that it forces us to confront reality and calls for a re-collection and remembering of the fragments: challenging the 'fugue' and its impulse towards forgetting and erasure, the rite of the calypso represents a "call to the ancestors", an exercise in collective memory which defies cultural erasure and amnesia.³⁵ For this reason, the process of re-memory includes improvisation and masquerade, following the sounds and rhythms of carnival and of calypso: like the calypsonian who improvises on the fragments of his/her memory, "weaving from a fragment a whole", the

³⁵ NourbeSe Philip,
"Fugues, Fragments and
Fissures".

poet fills in the gaps in memory with her own fictions “masquerading as truth dress up as lies playing ole marse with we minds” [playing old master with our minds].³⁶

³⁶Ibid.

Crossover identities

The production of Caribbean women poets is deeply informed by the multiple sounds and rhythms of Caribbean cultural, literary and linguistic migrations through the centuries on both shores of the Atlantic. In colonial regions knowledge and history have effectively been transmitted and imposed through an educational system focusing on the superiority of the written word and the celebration of the institutional places where colonial knowledge was preserved and transmitted. Yet, while the western archive of knowledge was securely locked into institutional spaces such as schools and libraries, alternative forms of knowledge continued to circulate from mouth to mouth, through proverbs and stories, calypsos and poems, implicitly challenging the Western association of place and archive.³⁷

Drawing from sources ranging from the Bible to popular proverbs, from English literature to calypso songs, Caribbean women poets have radically questioned the superiority of traditional (written) cultural forms suggesting a creative interplay of literacy and oral tradition, critically exposing the library as a space of continuing colonial oppression and cultural erasure. In the creative negotiation of their multiple cultural heritage, they create a sort of a poetic counter-archive, where empowering, alternative sources – both written and oral, European and African – intersect and displace the western division between ‘high’ and ‘low’ cultural forms. Considering music as a form of performative collective memory, what emerges from this “cultural performance” is what Benitez-Rojo has described as a “polyrhythmic ensemble”, a critical reconfiguration of elements which, far from erasing difference, on the contrary allows for the coexistence of various sounds.³⁸

Mento and calypso rhythms are thus assimilated and reworked into contemporary women’s poetry in order to provide a sense of continuity and of dialogue with the past. However, rather than consisting in a mere textual citation of songs, the reference to musical forms reveals a more complex literary project, articulating music both as textual reference and methodological approach. In fact, by incorporating lines from popular Caribbean and/or European songs, women poets consciously locate their poems within a distinctive tradition which critically exposes and challenges cultural or literary hierarchies. The multiplicity of poetic approaches, styles and cultural sources can be accommodated in what has been defined as a ‘theorizing practice’ informing African American and African Caribbean women’s writing and questioning a separation between theoretical elaborations and creative writing.³⁹

³⁷ Jacques Derrida in his *Mal d'archive* has focused on the *place* as constitutive of the archive, thus articulating it as the locus where memory is “consigned”: unified, identified, and classified. *Archive Fever* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 3.

³⁸ Benitez-Rojo, *The Repeating Island*, 28.

³⁹ It is in this perspective that Joan Anim-Addo invokes the African Caribbean woman poet also as a theorist “upon whom we might draw”. *Touching the Body. History, Language and African Caribbean Women’s Writing* (London: Mango Publishing, 2007), 25.

In “She Sings on the Train and Sings Inside”, for instance, Merle Collins describes the extreme loneliness experienced by a Caribbean migrant on the London tube while she journeys across the city, singing snippets of remembered songs to keep her company. Significantly, the poem opens with the reassuring lines of a song testifying to the woman’s need for a familiar cultural landscape:

She sings on the train and sings inside

Las abété mwen, Naporinden

Las abété mwen

Las abété mwen, Naporinden...⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Merle Collins, “She Sits on the Train and Sings Inside”, *Rotten Pomerack* (London: Virago, 1992), 26.

Moreover, by introducing the fragment of the well-known calypso “Jamaica Farewell” (“sad to say I’m on my way”), the poet draws on music as a nostalgic while at the same time comforting element. As she leaves the song unfinished, Collins prompts the reader to finish the line, establishing a communication with her audience and retrieving a sense of community through popular music. Calypso thus functions as an “aide mémoire”, as NourbeSe Philip states in relation to “Congo Man” by Mighty Sparrow, a shard of memory that triggers the recollection of a diasporic cultural identity.⁴¹ However, the evocation of a calypso in the poem is not a simple dislocation of popular musical forms into a literary genre. Accounting for the transcultural experience of migration, this practice also foregrounds a critical reconfiguration of cultural forms: as de Caires Narain suggests, the poet replaces the “familiar narrative of a man leaving behind a loved woman” of popular calypso with the story of a mother leaving her daughter, evoking the equally familiar condition – though not often recorded in calypso – of contemporary migration to England.⁴² While the displacement of popular songs re-signifies them by providing new meanings, calypso lyrics are woven into the poetic lines as a strategy of de-familiarization and subversion, suggesting alternative practices of memory and resistance.

⁴¹ NourbeSe Philip, “Fugues, Fragments and Fissures”.

⁴² de Caires Narain, *Contemporary Caribbean Women’s Poetry*, 131.

Shifting from the chronotope of the road to that of the crossroads to account for “the circulation and mutation of music across the Black Atlantic”, Gilroy provides a useful metaphor for describing the complex transcultural and syncretic evolutions performed by Caribbean women’s poetry in their use of musical forms.⁴³ In a rich web of intercultural relations informing their cultural heritage, women poets often challenge the binary structure that opposes Africa’s authenticity and purity to the uprootedness of the New World by introducing a further element in their musical appropriations. In fact, not only are Caribbean songs incorporated into poems, but European musical traditions are also re-used and re-signified. If dubbing “refers to adding or dubbing words to accompany an instrumental rendering of a

⁴³ Gilroy, *Black Atlantic*, 199.

popular song”,⁴⁴ in a combination of speech and music that will also be used in dub poetry, this musical practice also characterizes the work of several women poets.

In “The Arrival of Brighteye”, written to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Windrush, Breeze has reworked the Scottish folk song “My Bonnie” in order to convey a little girl’s loneliness because of her mother’s departure for England. As the poet appropriates the refrain of “My Bonnie” to voice the experience of Caribbean migration, the song is critically displaced by a language which is inhabited by the sounds and memory of a different crossing:

My mommie gone over de ocean
My mommie gone over the sea
she gawn dere to work for some money
an den she gawn sen back for me

One year
Two year
Three year gawn

Four year
Five year
Six year come.⁴⁵

Similarly, in “The Crossover Griot”, Goodison explores the crossover aspects of music in order to foreground the experience of creolization. The offspring of a new generation born to a “Guinea girl” and an “Irish sailor”, “the first mulatta child” becomes a poet testifying to the creative potentialities that have sprung from the crossing. In the poem, the Irish sailor croons “I am O’Rahilly” – presumably from “Egan O’Reilly”, by Gaelic poet James Stephens (1677-1726) – while the Guinea girl hums an old calypso (“since them/ carry me from Guinea/ me can’t go home”). However, even if they both sing of their roots/homes in different continents, their daughter becomes a griot who chants a different story, one of crossings and new beginnings:

Of crossover griot
they want to ask
how all this come out?
To no known answer

Still they ask her
why you chant so?
And why she turn poet
not even she know.⁴⁶

In the celebration of the powerful figure of the crossover griot, the Caribbean poet occupies an outsider/insider position which allows her to

⁴⁴ Edward Chamberlin, *Come Back to Me My Language. Poetry and the West Indies* (Urbana and Chicago: The University of Illinois Press, 1993), 234-5.

⁴⁵ Jean ‘Binta’ Breeze, “The Arrival of Brighteye”, in *The Arrival of Brighteye and Other Poems* (London: Bloodaxe, 2000), 54.

⁴⁶ Lorna Goodison, “Crossover Griot”, in *Travelling Mercies* (Toronto: McLelland & Stewart, 2001), 74.

produce knowledge and memory in the intersection of cultures: as she inhabits an interstitial space where no stable, fixed, or divine power can claim its authority, with her *crossover* abilities the poet straddles two worlds and reworks her double cultural heritage.

A further example of Goodison's crossover use of sources can be found in her conscious "manipulation", as she terms it, of British culture.⁴⁷ It is precisely through this crafty manipulation that the poet succeeds in interrupting and disturbing the linear narrative of Western culture, stimulating a dialogue in response to centuries of univocal monologues. An illuminating example can be found in her poem "O Africans", inspired by William Butler Yeats's tribute to Irish oral tradition, "Down by the Salley Gardens", included in *The Wanderings of Oisín and Other Poems* (1889). As Yeats explained, "This is an attempt to reconstruct an old song from three lines imperfectly remembered by an old peasant woman in the village of Ballysodare, who often sings them to herself".⁴⁸ While Yeats's poem is constructed through a fragment of a song the poet strives to recall, Goodison works out her poem in the mento style of Jamaica, evoking the rhythm of the quadrille which creatively dialogues with the Irish folk style.

O Africans at quadrille
cutting stately figures
to the lilt of the fiddle
of the fiddle and the bow.

To the melodies of Europe
roll rhythms of the Congo
O Africans imposing bright colors
over the muted tones of Europeans.

Take it all
and turn it around
Slim and Sam for the Salley Gardens
W. B. Yeats for the park downtown.

Add the robust fifth figure
to the stately quadrille
a marriage mixed
but a marriage still.

Sing Africans in white dresses
Cantata Africana
O dark suits sonata, Mento.
Come so now then go so.⁴⁹

In what she calls "a marriage mixed, a marriage still", the poet engages with a weaving of rich intertextual references disturbing the supposedly monolithic poetic voice and opening up the possibility for a critical reconfiguration of her cultural roots.

⁴⁷ Lowell Fiet, "Interview with Lorna Goodison", *Sargasso*, special issue *Concerning Lorna Goodison* (2001), 11.

⁴⁸ William Butler Yeats, *Yeats's Poetry, Drama, and Prose: Authoritative Texts, Contexts, Criticism* (London and New York: W. W. Norton, 2000), 496. The poem was initially titled "An Old Song Re-sung" and its verses were subsequently set to music in 1909.

⁴⁹ Lorna Goodison, "O Africans", in *To Us, All Flowers Are Roses* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 63.

As an unsuspected fruitful relation of the intersections of Caribbean and European musical traditions, the quadrille is also explored by Breeze in *The Fifth Figure*, a long poem mixing poetry and prose. In a peculiar reworking of the quadrille through the mento tradition, *The Fifth Figure* foregrounds the practice of strategic appropriation of cultural forms imposed by the colonizers while producing a rich and powerful narration following the rhythm of an oral account. Significantly, the ‘fifth figure’ of the title refers to the creolized version of the quadrille, a dance in four figures imported by the Europeans and restyled in Jamaica to the rhythm of mento by adding a fifth figure and creating a new music for it using bamboos and sticks.

The poem stages the syncretic evolutions of Caribbean dances as a dynamic and creative process producing hybrid subjectivities: as the narration weaves the stories of five generations of women, music and dance signal the acquisition of a new consciousness:

... I was tempted
by the music playing outside
I couldn't resist mento yard
...
So Sunday was Christian
And white as the snow
Friday and Saturday were sin.⁵⁰

The divided consciousness of the fifth protagonist will finally resolve into the awareness of a freely moving and migrating creolized identity, following the beats of music and yet firmly rooted in Jamaican culture. In striking contrast to her ancestors, the last protagonist eventually comes to terms with her complex identities through the acceptance of her multiple roots.

Borrowing Walcott's image of “the cracked heirlooms whose restoration shows its white scars”,⁵¹ Jamaican women's poetry seems to weave together patches of different musical forms deliberately revealing the fractures and the stitches, just as the different ‘versions’ of a musical track preserve audible traces of the crossover. Like Walcott's white scars, not only do the stitches constitute an interrogation, an interruption of linear history, a reminder of the complex history of the region, but they also suggest a contrapuntal approach disclosing new possibilities for poetic freedom.

⁵⁰ Jean ‘Binta’ Breeze, *The Fifth Figure* (London: Bloodaxe, 2006), 65.

⁵¹ Walcott, “Fragments of Epic Memory”, 69.