Introduction

Caribbean Poetry - An Overview

George Lamming, in The Pleasures of Exile, asserts that two crucial events in the history of the Caribbean are the discovery of the islands by the colonisers and the abolition of slavery. Though the islands of the Caribbean share a common history of colonialism and plantation slavery, the specific experiences of that period vary from region to region. Underlying the disparity in individual histories is the collective past of brutal colonisation and indentured slavery and its cumulative effect on the cultural and literary history of the place. Literary development in the different islands followed a similar trajectory, the origins of which lay in the absence of an indigenous literary tradition.

Until the sixteenth century the only semblance of any kind of literary activity consisted of rock-carvings or oral traditions that did not survive European colonisation. The mass exodus of slaves from Africa to the newly colonised islands bought with it a whole new cultural tradition, but again one that remained primarily oral due in part to its native African origins but also a product of forced illiteracy under the colonising powers. Therefore in the newly independent Caribbean countries the form and content of the written expression remained even till the latter half of the twentieth century, a culturally hegemonised imitation of the dominant European (colonising) mode of expression. This particular history, fraught as it is with multiple displacements, policies of strategic illiteracy and epic repression, provides the Caribbean writer with an immensely complex emotional, educational and political baggage that must be negotiated in order to represent a Caribbean written
tradition cognisant of its past, but not subservient, once again, to it.

Thus the Caribbean's only literary heritage till the late nineteenth century was that of its colonisers. Among the earliest writers from the region is the Jamaican journalist Thomas Henry MacDermot who wrote under the pen name Tom Redcam. He was the editor of the Jamaica Times and a member of the Poetry League of Jamaica. After his death in 1933, the League named him the Poet Laureate of Jamaica. MacDermot, along with J.E. Clare McFarlane, was influential in developing and fostering autochthonous talent in Jamaica. His contribution to Jamaican literature consists chiefly of his encouragement of local poets like Claude McKay. McKay, originally from Clarendon in Jamaica, immigrated to New York and was intimately associated with Harlem Renaissance Movement. His poetic corpus included two volumes of dialect verse: Songs of Jamaica and Constab Ballads published in 1912. He also is representative of the pattern of immigration that was to emerge among writers from the Caribbean.

According to William Walsh, literature in the West Indies is "primarily the creation of the twentieth century" (46). Several historical factors play an important role in the development of the Caribbean literature and literary aesthetic. The completion of the Panama Canal in 1912 and the outbreak of World War I in 1914 altered not only the regional balance of power but also forged new alliances among world powers. The end of the Second World War provided further impetus to an already changing political and social scenario. The demand for labour in the West fuelled immigration from the Caribbean islands and at the same time intellectuals from the Caribbean also made home in the newly emerging literary and cultural capitals: New York and Paris. This immigration made
available to the immigrant scholar previously unavailable resources, exposure and a wider perspective besides sparking off new literary and cultural movements both in their homeland and their country of residence.

Among the most influential literary and cultural movements, with respect to the development of poetry in the Caribbean, are the Harlem Renaissance, Indigenism, Afrocubanism or the Negriista Movement, and Negritude. As a movement the Harlem Renaissance had its origins in New York. The poet Langston Hughes was among its foremost proponents and the movement extolled the African heritage of Black Americans. Its influence extended to the development of the yet nascent Haitian literature and found an ardent supporter in the person of Jacques Roumain, one of the founders of the Indigenist Movement in Haiti. Indigenism emphasised the apposite self-sufficiency of Haitian literature and its inherent synchronicity, and sought to sever its cultural and literary dependence on France, the colonising power.

Afrocubanism was native to Cuba, a country peculiar in the Caribbean region for its large white population. The Black and Amerindian populace provided the Movement with its literary drive. The dynamics of their condition within the locus of a postcolonial Cuba and its racial demographics, and their role in the construction of a uniquely Cuban identity lie at the core of the thematic concerns of Afrocubanism. It shared with Indigenism an uncompromisingly critical appraisal of its colonisers and was "precipitated" not only "by the Caribbean’s dawning awareness of its uneasiness with things European, but also by the more disconcerting spectacle of Europe’s revulsion at its own image" (Breiner 38). Its importance within the context of the Caribbean derives from the fact that it served
as a “foil” to Negritude, which was vastly influential in the Caribbean.

Negritude was a literary movement that began in Paris in the 1930s. Its founders and leading figures included Léopold Senghor, the first elected President of the Republic of Senegal, Léon Damas and Aimé Césaire. Negritude called for the reappraisal of the African cultural heritage, with its strong grounding in myth and the abundance of its traditions, against what to them was the apparent bankruptcy of Western cultural values. African writers were asked to delve into their cultural past for the choice of subject matter and to construct an idiom that, while arousing a desire for political and social freedom, would best reflect the dignity of their people. Breiner argues that Negritude helped establish the “first dependable contact between the Caribbean and Africa as it actually was” (46). Though the movement itself did not have as lasting and influential a consequence in the Caribbean as it did in parts of Africa, its explicit articulation of a Black cultural and literary aesthetic had myriad literary ramifications in the region. Césaire’s classic, Cahiers d’un retour au pays natal, selections of which appeared in the journal Volontés in 1939 and which was finally published by Penguin as late as 1969, had an immense impact on an entire generation of Caribbean poets, including Brathwaite.

In the absence of a strong indigenous literary tradition, literary magazines and journals were very influential in both establishing a readership and opening up various means of artistic expression. The first Jamaican journal of repute was called Focus. The first issue of Focus was published in 1943 and “introduced a new Jamaican poetry of protest and social consciousness” (Breiner 66). In Trinidad and Tobago it was the The Beacon, spearheaded by C.L.R. James and Alfred Mendes that
Introduced the work of a number of poets, including Mendes himself and Albert Gomes, but “unlike the later Jamaican Focus, The Beacon routinely mixed poetry and politics” and had Marxist leanings (Breiner 71). In 1945, Guyana had its own literary journal with the publication of Kyk-Over-Al. Laurence Breiner states that “Kyk is remarkable for the high quality of its poetry from the very beginning” (Breiner 78). It counts among its contributors such literary stalwarts as Derek Walcott and A.J. Seymour.

Among the poets who chose to stay in their native land was Frank Collymore, a native of Barbados. He along with E.L. Cozier and W. Theorold Barnes founded the influential literary Journal Bim in 1942. Collymore as its editor exercised immense influence and Breiner goes as far as to call him the “greatest enabler of West Indian Literature” with his likeliest successor being Edward Kamau Brathwaite (84). According to the critic William Walsh, it was men like Collymore who “helped to prepare a favourable context for literature” in the Caribbean (49). George Lamming, A.L. Hendricks, Derek Walcott, Harry Simmons and A.J. Seymour were among the writers who found a forum in Bim. More recent literary journals include Caribbean Quarterly and Savacou.

In a two-volume anthology of poetry called Caribbean Voices, published in 1970, editor John Figueroa made available to the reading public a new generation of Caribbean poets that included Eric Roach, George Campbell and the editor himself. Other contemporary Caribbean poets include Mervyn Morris and the Noble Prize laureate Derek Walcott. Walcott’s dominance as the “most” important Caribbean poet can be gauged from William Walsh’s loaded assertion that in West Indian poetry “there is one significant poet, Derek Walcott”, the “finest, the most complete, of the West Indian poets” (60-65). Following in the
footsteps of his literary ancestor, Claude McKay, and representative of his generation, Walcott soon immigrated to the West.

Within the matrix of McKay’s and Walcott’s immigration and on perhaps a vastly cursory level, contemporary Caribbean writing may be divided into two distinct schools. The first school consists of writers such as Derek Walcott, V. S. Naipaul, Paule Marshall and Michelle Cliff who are from the Caribbean, though displaced in the Caribbean from different locales such as India and Africa. These writers are twice removed as they write as Caribbean immigrants in the First World – Britain, U.S.A. etc. though they maintain their allegiance to their Caribbean origins by deploying not only a Caribbean landscape in their writing but also a sense of identity, culture, spirituality and language that remains firmly rooted in the Caribbean experience. The other school would then include writers and poets such as Edward Kamau Brathwaite, George Lamming, and Nathaniel Mackey who though as adept in standardised English as their counterparts remain committed to an indigenous articulation of the Caribbean aesthetic – the enunciation of which requires not just a rooting of subject matter or landscape in the Caribbean, but demands instead a revolutionary re-thinking (re-speaking) of the very elements of poetic expression. The use of patios and the rejection of a canonical language metre or rhyme form the inveterate ideological backbone of this school, whose foremost proponent is the poet Edward Kamau Brathwaite.

Brathwaite: A Postcolonial Perspective
Edward Kamau Brathwaite belongs to the Caribbean Island of Barbados, which is unique in the region for being created by coral and not volcanic activity. A vast majority of its population is of African descent. From the seventeenth century
onwards Britain was the sole colonial power till Barbados gained independence in 1966. Hence Britain plays a very important role in its socio-cultural milieu. Breiner writes that till very recently, nationalism in Barbados was “expressed as pride in the country’s role in the Empire” (82).

Brathwaite was born in Barbados in 1930. Originally called Lawson Edward Brathwaite, he later adopted the name Kamau as a conscious avowal of his African ancestry. He was a regular contributor to *Bim*, where his poetry was first published under the editorial guidance of Collymore, before leaving for Pembroke College, Cambridge, to pursue higher studies, in 1950, where he obtained a B.A. in 1953 and a Cert. Ed. in 1954. He later did postgraduate work at the University of Sussex and was awarded a D.Phil. in 1968. Brathwaite encountered the misery of estrangement, restlessness, frustration and racial prejudice that is generally an immigrant’s lot in Britain and in an interview with Erika Smilowitz, he states that he “felt very much as an outsider” in Britain (1). After university Brathwaite left to work for the Education Ministry of Ghana, where he lived for the next eight years before returning to the Caribbean in 1962. On his way back home from Ghana, Brathwaite spent a year in St. Lucia. In the interview to Smilowitz, Brathwaite stresses the important role this stopover played in his literary career:

I was with the Extra-Mural Department there for a year. That was important because St Lucia is very much a folk-oriented society and was small enough for me to relate to. So that is where I got the sense that I had not yet left Africa, of Africa as an extension into the Caribbean ... That I think was important for my work because it strengthened my notion of Africa as an extension into the Caribbean. (1-2)

Throughout Brathwaite’s literary corpus, in both poetry and prose, run the shared thematic strands of History and Language. They are envisaged as the pivotal concerns of a postcolonial writer. As the poet’s writing has evolved over the years, there has been a marked tendency to innovate, both thematically and structurally; the core issues, though, remain essentially the same. Brathwaite strives to re-interpret received notions of History and Language in an attempt to strenuously re-imagine his individual and communal past. His vision of literary creation seeks a radical rethinking of the role of Africa in the Caribbean as well as the diversity of the Caribbean’s cultural inheritance. The linguistic and cultural discourse of the coloniser is appropriated to advocate a privileging of the autochthonous in a self-
conscious effort to resurrect an indigenous identity that, both structures and is structured by, an alternative, native cultural and literary tradition. The eclecticism inherent in the poet’s choice varied genres spans the breadth of his intellectual interests while the interdisciplinary nature of his writings is indicative of his belief in the restorative power of the written word.

His sojourn in Africa gave Brathwaite a very strong sense of community, something that was later to become the cornerstone of his poetics. Brathwaite returned to Britain in the mid-sixties to pursue his doctorate, and it was there that he formed the Caribbean Artists Movement (CAM) in 1966. The Movement, whose first conference was held at the University of Kent, brought together Caribbean artists, writers and critics in exile. "The idea", says Brathwaite, "was not only to speak among ourselves but have dialogue with the audience". On his return to the Caribbean, Brathwaite founded the influential literary journal Savacou. It was, in Brathwaite’s words, his "effort to keep the spirit of the Caribbean Artists Movement alive" (Smilowitz 2-3). As Breiner writes, “the activities and concerns of CAM led directly to the debates at ACLALS a few years later” (99).

The Conference of the Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies (ACLALS) was organised at the University of the West Indies in Jamaica in 1971. The debates at this conference were to have a seminal effect on the trajectory and future of literature in the Caribbean. Breiner contends that the “ACLALS Conference was the first comprehensive presentation of West Indian literature by West Indians that included fully articulated critical positions” (3). To understand the revolutionary impetus of the conference it is important to situate it within its proper historical context,
which fostered the rapidly mutating political and cultural scenario. This includes the expulsion of Walter Rodney, a lecturer in the University of the West Indies (UWI), in 1968 and the student take-over in the same campus in 1970. In 1969 UWI established a course in West Indian Literature, a subject whose very existence was contested. These academic and political events set the stage for several landmark debates under the aegis of the ACLALS Conference at the opening session of which Kamau Brathwaite delivered the keynote address (Breiner 1).

Brathwaite was part of the panel, which also included V.S. Naipaul, which took up the issue of "The Function of the Writer in Society". In his keynote address Brathwaite argued that the integrating factor in a community as diverse as the Caribbean was the culture of the masses, what he referred to as the "Little Tradition" (Breiner 1). The aim was to situate the writer in the midst of his/her society, for the writer to be made an integral part of that community. By grounding their literary effort in the lived reality of their community, Caribbean poets sought to distance themselves from their fellow novelists (Breiner 9). According to Brathwaite, the Caribbean writer must plumb his African past and "articulate the people’s culture in its historical depth" (qtd. in Breiner 2). "Brathwaite's speech initiated a first attempt at the programmatic formulation of a distinctive West Indian aesthetic, and the nature of the occasion immeasurably increased the impact of his words" (Breiner 3).

Drawing upon an anonymous ‘Statement of position to the Commonwealth Literature & Language Conference - Mona, January,
Breiner delineates the position of the poet and the nature of poetic conception, as articulated in the paper and variously reflected in the position of other participants like Brathwaite:

the task is to recognise the actual state of poetry in the region, and to cultivate it, most especially through acknowledging and increasing the intercourse between high culture and folk culture. This is to be accomplished, first, by turning attention to "the basis and terms of the folk artistic sensibility, the African influences and continuities as the subject of new literary explorations, the employment of new modes of literary expression through oral resources embedded in the language," and, secondly, by taking advantage of "the press, radio in particular and TV in the dissemination of literature and art." (qtd. in Breiner 10)

Poetry in the Caribbean was profoundly affected by the debates in the Conference as the views expressed by the participants met with widespread grassroots acceptance. The casual spontaneity of traditional forms of oral literature, the mobile phrasing of folk music and the expressive boldness of autochthonous dialects were soon explicitly articulated in the work of young poets like Kamau Brathwaite. This was accompanied by a paradigm shift in the poetic diction of many Caribbean poets, who moved away from the stultifying borrowed rhythms of their colonial rulers to a more consolidated native diction with which they felt more at ease. Poets emulated Brathwaite's capitulation to a truly indigenous form of poetry that made emphatic use of elements of popular culture and

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Nation Language to carve a poetic idiom of surprising aesthetic integrity, sophistication, linguistic suppleness and stylistic vigour. The Caribbean’s African ancestry, its history of colonisation and plantation slavery and the resourcefulness of its native dialects became the pivotal thematic concerns of Brathwaite’s poetry. The distinct expression of local experience in all its complexity in an expressly traditional literary matrix reflected Brathwaite’s commitment to the development of an autochthonous poetic tradition.

In a literary landscape influenced by the phenomenon of creolization, the poetry of Edward Kamau Brathwaite stands at an unusual juncture in the cultural discourse of the Caribbean. He articulated the notion of “creolization” as the basis of an “authentic” West Indian Literature. The point of departure of Brathwaite’s poetry, from canonical British colonial and post-colonial writing, has been the effort to write history from his own perspective, thereby constructing a subject position for the dispossessed Caribbean post-colonial. While talking about the subject, in this context, one needs to clarify that it refers not to an all-encompassing category, but to a position from which one is capable of refuting as well as constructing history without being elided by it.

Brathwaite’s thematic concerns find resonance in the key preoccupations of postcolonial theory and its treatment of History and Language as it attempts to unsettle the centrality of canonical literature and thought. Postcolonial theory attempts to decode the role and importance of colonial literature in the imperial enterprise by questioning its exclusionary, monolithic models. The heterogeneity of colonised cultures and the vitality of their indigenous traditions are marginalised by the preclusive, totalising
paradigms of imperial literature. Postcolonial literature and criticism, thus, seek to question the nexus between literature and power, and to examine afresh the choice of language, subject and construction of narrative.

In the Introduction to the section on History, the editors of The Post-Colonial Studies Reader locate the significance of history as a subject for interrogation, in the origins of the discipline itself. The emergence of history as an academic discipline coincided with the ascent of colonialism in the modern era. Colonialism “found in history a prominent, if not the prominent, instrument for the control of subject peoples.” In the context of postcolonial writing it is important to accent the role of history in the construction of identity: “Clearly, what it means to have a history is the same as what it means to have a legitimate existence: history and legitimation go hand in hand; history legitimates ‘us’ and not others” (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 355). Thus the use and construction of history and its attendant narratives takes on an added dimension in the work of a postcolonial writer like Brathwaite, who has to constantly negotiate the convergence of history with reality and its role in structuring reality. Commenting on the interplay between postcolonial writing and the construction of history, Elleke Boehmer maintains that:

Postcolonial fiction therefore gives structure to, as well as being structured by, history. Here we come to the idea of historical narrative - indeed of narrative in general - as a process of form-giving. The space-time framework and patterns of causality in a narrative work not only impart coherence to a fragmented history, but also help organize and clarify foundational moments in the anti-imperial movement: the initial emergence of
political self-consciousness, say, or the explosion of resistance. (198)

Boehmer’s insistent belief in the innate capacity of postcolonial writing to make explicit the complicity of Western literature in its expansionist missions, and anti-imperial struggles against such missions, is taken further by Dipesh Chakrabarty in his essay ‘Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for Indian Pasts’, to include the historical narrative that “deliberately makes visible, within the very structure of its narrative forms, its own repressive strategies and practices.” Chakrabarty enlarges the field of interrogation to encompass a model of history writing that embraces the “ambivalences, contradictions, the use of force, and the tragedies and the ironies that attend” such a history (242-3). In her essay ‘Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism’, Gayatri Spivak exploits the metaphor provided by Shakespeare’s Caliban to caution against an uncritical, nostalgic yearning for an idyllic origin:

If, however, we are driven by a nostalgia for lost origins, we too run the risk of effacing the ‘native’ and stepping forth as “the real Caliban”, of forgetting that he is a name in a play, an inaccessible blankness circumscribed by an impenetrable text... (264)

The emphasis, thus, is on a more nuanced version of historical narrativity while rejecting a facile return to nativist histories. The postcolonial writer’s engagement with history thus serves to appropriate the coloniser’s discourse and realign it to according to his vision.

Derek Walcott, too, seeks a means of writing history that goes beyond a particular mode of New World literature, which,
because it “serves historical truth”, “yellows into polemic or evaporates in pathos” (371). In suggesting a radically different approach to postcolonial history, Walcott introduces the need for a new Adam and a new Eden, beyond the perfunctory dialectic of recriminations and apology. This paradigm shift in the notion of history serves to invigorate the postcolonial author by providing him with a theoretical and historical framework that is not merely a reworking of a given formula, but instead the very search for an indigenous perspective towards, and appreciation of, particularities that are endemic to postcolonial history and literature.

While the exclusionary thrust of history provided the colonisers with a conquistadorial tool to subjugate and marginalize the colonised, the control over language, too, is indissociable from imperial oppression. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin go as far as positing language as the locus of the colonising mission and hence “a fundamental site of struggle”:

The control over language by the imperial centre - whether achieved by displacing native languages, by installing itself as a ‘standard’ against other variants which are constituted as ‘impurities’, or by planting the language of empire in anew place - remains the most potent instrument of cultural control. Language provides the terms by which reality may be constituted; it provides the names by which the world may be ‘known’. Its system of values - its suppositions, its geography, its concept of history, of difference, its myriad gradations of distinction - becomes the system upon which social, economic and political discourses are grounded. (Post-Colonial Studies Reader 283)
Postcolonial critics have identified language, or signs, as they are termed in Saussurean linguistics, as the site of complex ideological interaction. Literary texts, which are a combination of words, demonstrate an elaborate expanse of such a dialectical relationship of words, both with each other and with the reader. Postcolonial theory, thus, posits language as an agency through which a systematically structured hierarchy of power is perpetuated. The particularity of the choice of language signifies the dynamics of the relationship between the coloniser and the colonised, within which the inscription of power and authority is to be coded. In ‘Diaspora Culture and the Dialogic Imagination’, Kobena Mercer contends:

Across a whole range of cultural forms there is a ‘syncretic’ dynamic which critically appropriates elements from the master-codes of the dominant culture and ‘creolises’ them, disarticulating given signs and rearticulating their symbolic meaning. The subversive force of this hybridising tendency is most apparent at the level of language itself where creoles, patois and black English decentre, destabilise and carnivalise the linguistic domination of ‘English’ – the nation-language of master-discourse – through strategic inflections, reaccentuations and other performative moves in semantic, syntactic and lexical codes (57).

Therefore postcolonial writers like Edward Kamau Brathwaite, make use of an indigenously inflected idiom to destabilize the “discourse conventions of the so-called ‘centre’”, and inscribe “post-colonial language variants from the ‘margin’ or ‘the periphery’ in the text” (Zabus, ‘Language’ 34). Commenting on the radical transformative potential of such a linguistic strategy, critic Chantal Zabus contends:
Such variants result from the transformation of language through local use, itself the result of social change. Yet the inscription of variants within a text often goes beyond the mere recording of such a transformation. The writer then no longer imitates what is happening as a result of social change but uses language variance as an alibi to convey ideological variance. (34)

In the Caribbean, slaves were sold as “mixed lots” and forbidden to speak in their native language to prevent any type of anti-colonial mobilization. The adoption of the coloniser’s language resulted in a complex linguistic alienation, which was manifested later in the inability of Caribbean writers to convey, with any degree of authenticity, their lived experience. The construction of their land’s geographic and topographic narratives displays a profound psychic fissure. The disjunctive streak between intent and its implementation results from the writer’s inability to reconcile his or her lived experience within the linguistic structures of the imposed colonial language.

Central to this subject is Brathwaite’s vision of Caribbean culture. This thesis will look at his use of the term “culture” and, related to this, his understanding and use of history. I will discuss the interaction between the poet and the historian and their merging in a cultural and artistic vision. From this basis I will explore the ways in which this theoretical work is used within his poetry and his vision as an artist. Therefore the type of interpretation of Brathwaite’s poetry that I propose in my thesis can be more satisfactorily grasped as the rewriting of the literary text in such a way that the latter may itself be seen as the rewriting or restructuring of a prior historical or ideological subtext.
This thesis will focus on Brathwaite’s fictive rendition of the Caribbean’s history while seeking to underscore the dynamics of such a complex imaginary. The underpinnings of Brathwaite’s poetics are his novel use of the Caribbean’s African heritage and its polyglot linguistic inheritance. It is in this context that I will investigate Brathwaite’s work as he endeavours to accentuate the aporias of imperialist representation as its homogenous discourse precludes any agency on the native’s behalf. History enters the poet’s work not as the vestigial remnant of colonialism, but as a conscious attempt at opening new spaces in the discourse of the Caribbean.

This thesis will examine Brathwaite’s effort to interrogate Western configurations of Caribbean history and culture. The convergence of historical and linguistic themes under the rubric of poetry is worth accenting in the context of a colonial discourse that sought to marginalize the indigenous to the extent of erasure. Brathwaite’s creative ingenuity, both thematically and stylistically, signals an epochal paradigm shift in the history of Caribbean poetics. His key preoccupations, namely History and Language, anticipate the concerns of postcolonial theorists who seek to contest the privileged centre. Brathwaite’s work embodies the autochthonous, most significantly manifest in the scope of his indigenous resources, whether it may be the sound patterning of his poems or the mythic structure of his trilogies. A base of relentless questioning and renewal underlies the poet’s project; this coupled with his incessant desire to innovate form the core of my inquiry.

Chapter I deals with Brathwaite’s theoretical work on the topic of Nation Language which forms an integral part of his
poetics. The (mis)use of the English language plays an integral part in the poetry of the new generation of Caribbean poets. The complex heritage of the poets belonging to the West Indies and the incorporation of the "vernacular" in their poetry has resulted in great verbal flair in their literary work besides an outstanding fusion of the oral tradition and the "standard English tradition". The hybrid language(s) of the West Indies gives the poetry an enormous range of nuance and vigour of expression and a vocabulary which, though predominantly English, includes words from African languages, Spanish, Portuguese, French and Dutch. This thesis will also examine how the inscription of social power within language can be traced through lexical, syntactic and grammatical structures in Brathwaite's poetry.

The views expressed by Brathwaite, in defence of an autochthonous dialect-language are similar to those espoused by writers like Dante and Ngugi who have advocated the use of the vernacular as the medium of artistic expression. In all three cases the writers are responding to the brutal history of colonialism, through the use of different narrative devices and through their individuated ocularity. In his essay 'Language, Orality, and Literature,' Chantal Zabus contends that the "erection of a spoken vernacular as a national language with its canon of written literature has always been a goal of liberation movements" (38). Brathwaite quotes Dante Aligheri's De Vulgari Eloquentia in his book The History of the Voice to support his claim for establishing a canon of nation language. He describes it as the kind of English spoken by the people who were brought to the Caribbean. It is the language of the slaves and the labourers brought in by the colonisers; in other words, the language of the enslaved people. This model of an autochthonous language is strongly influenced by the African culture and heritage of the
Caribbean and enables the poet to break free from the “tyranny” of the pentametre – the poetic device of the colonisers that has prevailed in English poetry from the time of Chaucer. It enables Brathwaite to achieve an unprecedented degree of cultural coherence and inclusiveness, while at the same time giving him the opportunity to subvert the hegemonic ideology of the colonisers.

In Brathwaite’s poetry, language is often used as the structuring principle. It informs both the theme and the configuration of his narrative. Chapter II deals with the poet’s experimentation in linguistic style and structure as he continues to expand the boundaries of creative expression. This chapter discusses both the literary and political import of Brathwaite’s digitally orchestrated audio-visual innovations; the computer is used as both a tool and muse, and christened Sycorax. In his essay ‘Publishing Brathwaite: Adventures in the Video Style’, Graeme Rigby states that the “role of the poet, for Brathwaite, is both to sing and carve with the same concentration of purpose: the carving focuses the song, and the song shapes the carving” (709). The poet’s “magic realism” or “surrealism” incorporates a unique treatment of the printed word, as it appears on the page. The written word contours not only its own appearance but also the thematic drive of the poem. The peculiarities of a word’s visual representation communicate its structural importance while simultaneously embedding in it a unique ideological position.

Stewart Brown asserts, in the same vein, that Brathwaite’s poetry demonstrates “an ever-présent concern” with the orthography of the English language, “as if the very technology of print were loaded against the enunciation” of the same (Review of Middle Passage 57). The subject of
Brathwaite’s poetry, his choice of language and its ocular representation in print, cohere to constitute a profoundly inter-referential assemblage that exists outside the existing rubrics of poetic expression.

Brathwaite’s first major work, the “big breakthrough” as he admits in an interview with Erika Smilowitz, was Rights of Passage published by Oxford University Press in 1967. This was followed by the publication of Masks (1968) and Islands (1969), all three of which were subsequently published together as a trilogy, The Arrivants. In the trilogy Brathwaite, who, contends William Walsh, is “the poet as prophet, missionary, propagandist”, “attempts to dramatize not just the pain but the wound to being and the damage to human nature, caused by the deracination of the Negro soul” (63). In Brathwaite’s trilogy the history of the Caribbean masquerades as fiction, but at the same time the relevance of the particular history with which he deals is not suppressed. In his poetry history is being fictionalised while at the same time it is being construed in terms of an ideological production. History enters Brathwaite’s poetry as ideology; as a presence determined and distorted by its measurable absences.

It is within this context that Chapter III explores Brathwaite’s intuitive rendition of the Caribbean’s African history to effect both cultural and literary reparation. His interpretation of history plays against the foundationalist histories of the colonisers and seeks to re-inscribe the relegated history of his communal past. Brathwaite rewrites the history of the Caribbean, but it is his distinct interpretation of the past, and not History, that is being reproduced in his poetry. By this imperfect replication of the
past, Brathwaite succeeds in opening up spaces for the colonised to subvert the master discourse.

Chapter IV examines Brathwaite’s second trilogy, *Ancestors*, which extends the treatment of the Caribbean’s past to include the poet’s personal history within that communal context. *Ancestors* details the experiences of a writer in a postcolonial society while at the same time underscoring the problematics of writing such an historical account in an era of neo-colonial exploitation. It displays Brathwaite’s ability to delineate the slippages that occur in drawing binary distinctions between the personal and the larger political framework, even as it maintains its commitment to giving a voice to the biographical experience. It is a testament to the fact that though History as an epistemological concept may be constructed through treaties and policies of States and other such governing entities, it is written on and through the bodies and lives of the people, and it is here that we find the sanctioned narratives of historical events breaking down.

In the second trilogy, since the history that the poet recounts is more personal and autobiographical, there appears to be less of a sustained narrative than in *The Arrivants*. There also seems to be less presentation of a determinate scene or location; more shifting and fragmentation. In the first trilogy the narrative is much clearer because it is History that Brathwaite talks about - history of the Caribbean land and its people. But when it comes to the personal trilogy the form is more prismatic and fragmented. This is because the poet cannot objectivise his own experience. It is a process of self-discovery. It is also a statement about the ways in which the universalising grand narratives of History rewrite and write over the experiences of those not privileged. This
is why Brathwaite is able to present an uncontested, though evolving notion of history while talking about the Caribbean. It is when Brathwaite, the poet, is decentred by his personal narratives of self and family that he is forced to face the notion of history as a perpetually fragmented discourse.

This thesis, then, will be an attempt to interrogate Brathwaite's attempts to give definition to a historical void, and to impose a cohesive meaning in the surrounding flux of post-colonial Caribbean narratives as he charts the coordinates of the evolution of West Indian writing from dispossession/fragmentation to Creolization/wholeness.