"Have You No Language of your Own?": History of the Voice and Brathwaite’s Theory of Nation Language

History of the Voice: The Development of Nation Language In Anglophone Caribbean Poetry was originally delivered as an “oral essay lecture” by Edward Kamau Brathwaite to students at Harvard University in 1973. It was compiled in book form (with some additions) in 1984.

This chapter is concerned primarily in delineating the particular methodology and import of Brathwaite’s theoretical contribution on the issue of Language. The earliest version of the debate into which this essay by Brathwaite is an intervention centred around the viability of dialect as a medium for poetry. One set of poets and critics held that the use of Creole dialects, which were marked as the language of the semi-literate, continued the colonial parody of speech and further entrenched the social ostracism of those who spoke them. The opposing set of critics simply held Creole dialects to be another language, neither superior nor inferior. Both these formulations ignore the tactic of deploying the Creole dialect as a resistant strain of language, and a more inclusive medium of expression.

The aim of this chapter is not to affirm or disavow Brathwaite’s theory, rather it is an elaboration of Brathwaite’s theoretical formulation of poetry, which offers a new perspective on legitimising poets like him in the framework of the vernacular tradition.

Although the essay is forty-six pages in length, it has a thirty-seven page Bibliography and sixty-three footnotes (many of which are extensive and detailed in nature). Brathwaite employs the detailed Bibliography and the extensive footnoting as a strategic tool. Compressed in a modest 87 pages of footnotes, essay and Bibliography is an entire model for a new
linguistic entity and its literature. In a note to the Bibliography, Brathwaite writes that since there are no “Established Authorities”, he has been “urged” by his publishers to give a Bibliography of the materials he used in writing his essay. He then goes on to “classify” his reading and listening resources in the “hope that the very act of classification in itself will help add shape and shadow to the project” - the project, of course, being one of establishing and documenting the history and corpus of Nation Language literature. The complexity of the essay goes beyond the mere forty-seven pages of text. The text of the book is not so much conclusion as it is a beginning; Brathwaite offers his History of the Voice as a new way of looking at the question of language, though it leads to more queries than answers. At the end of the text, Brathwaite offers a listing of further elaborations on the Caribbean literature’s complex colonial heritage as an example:

Language
Literature
Caliban/Browning Studies
History
Education
Oral Tradition/Caribbean
Shango Train Music
Nation Language/Music
Nation Language/Performances

These are some of the headings under which Brathwaite classifies his resources. They are indicative of the complex nature of his project and of the vital nature of secondary sources needed to explicate and ground his theory of Nation Language.
The History and Theoretical Background of Nation Language

The title *History of the Voice* indicates not just a linguistic facility for communication (language) but also a means of expression and most importantly, a venue for representation (VOICE) of the people of the Caribbean. *History of the Voice* lays the theoretical foundation of what Brathwaite calls Nation Language as it serves also to detail, and thus establish, a canon of Nation Language literature.

The islands of Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, Guyana, Barbados, St Lucia and other small islands make up the West Indies. They are host to a multiplicity of peoples and cultures, a fact that is often subsumed by the somewhat misleading title of the West Indies that makes them out to be one nation with a uniform cultural and racial identity. The British colonisers, in fact, often referred to the islands as the West Indies, a singular entity. These islands in the Caribbean were subjected to repeated and brutal colonization by several European nations.

To comprehend the *History of the Voice* it is vital to first understand the history and nature of European colonization in the Caribbean. The dynamics of the imposed cultures, their histories and linguistic differences are inextricably linked to the conception and formulation of Nation Language. The theory and practice of Nation Language derives from the multifarious linguistic practices of the colonizing nations and the encounter between them and the slaves they brought from Africa.

Following Columbus' "discovery" of the Caribbean in 1492 came the colonizing powers of Europe. These included the Dutch, the French, the English and the Spanish. Colonization led to the imposition of the languages of the colonisers on the people of...
the Caribbean. The invading colonisers killed a vast number of the original inhabitants and in the case of the Amerindians, their entire population was nearly wiped out. This resulted in the Amerindian language becoming almost extinct. There exist in the Caribbean, writes Brathwaite, a "plurality" of languages. People of Indian descent speak Hindi and people of Chinese descent have their own languages – including Mandarin and Cantonese. A medley of African Languages also still endures the onslaught of colonialism.

The destruction of the native people led to the importation of slave labour from the West Coast of Africa. The slaves brought with them their own languages endemic to the Ashanti, Congo and Yoruba cultures. According to Brathwaite this led to the arrival of a "new language structure" in the Caribbean. "It consisted of many languages but basically they had a common semantic and stylistic form" (History 7).

The colonisers insisted that the language of "public discourse and conversation" was their own language. The slaves were not allowed to speak in their native tongues, not even among themselves, as the colonisers did not want to hear them speak in Ashanti or any other native African language. The colonisers realized that language was the locus of multiple layers of culture and a vital factor in binding people together. Also, most colonisers did not understand the African languages, and the imposition of a colonial language on the slaves would render them visible and comprehensible versus the opacity of their native tongue. The slaves were forced to communicate in languages that were foreign to them, essentially in the language of their colonisers, and their native tongues were thought of as inferior (as were the slaves themselves).¹ The languages of the slaves thus became

¹ "...Western Europeans, especially the English, have long used linguistic deviation as a means for proclaiming cultural deficiencies, constructing a stereotype by which they have engineered and rationalized domination. We
marginalized and peripheral and those of the colonisers were privileged.

Brathwaite writes that Europe "nationalized itself into Spanish, French, English and Dutch so that people had to start speaking (and thinking) four metropolitan languages rather than possibly a single native language" (History 6-7). There was a "submergence" of the language/s of the African slaves. This "submergence served an interesting interculturative purpose" because though the slaves were forced to speak in English (Brathwaite takes the case of British colonies) it was in an English that was influenced by the "submerged" language that the slaves had brought with them. Hence, the English spoken by the slaves was now constantly being influenced by the native languages of the slaves and was incessantly being transformed into new forms. At the same time the "underground" language of the slaves, the "submerged" language was also undergoing a transformation. It, too, was being transfigured by the "cultural imperatives" of the language of the colonisers.

It was changing from a purely African form to one that was perpetually adapting to its new environment; an environment that dictated change and facilitated it (Brathwaite, History 7). Roger D. Abrahams mentions that it has been argued that the "principle" of the formation of these creoles (Nation Language as Brathwaite would call it) is a "relexification," a switching only on the level of vocabulary from that used in

can see this stereotype operating in the numerous journals and travel accounts written by whites about plantation life, especially in the West-Indies. As the movement toward emancipation developed, these visitors or part-time residents were actively seeking evidence as to whether Afro-Americans were human, with special focus on the presence or absence of black culture. Consequently, there was a good deal of note taken of the manners and the social ways of the slaves, including a number of reports concerning Afro-American attitudes toward words and word usage." Roger D. Abrahams. The Man Of Words. 28-29.
the African milieus to that supplied by the culture of the enslavers" (26).

The language of the colonisers took on the flavour of the language/s of the slaves, and vice versa. It was a complex process, the effects of which are manifested in the way English is spoken in the Caribbean today and in what Brathwaite calls Nation Language. It is shaped, paradoxically, by its relationship with and in reaction to English, the language of the British colonisers.

Brathwaite’s conception of Nation Language entails knowledge of the working of the educational system in the Caribbean. Nation Language and its canon is partly derived in response to that system and its ideological underpinnings. The academic discipline was developed by the colonisers to justify their imperial attitudes, their moral and cultural superiority and as a means of advancing their propaganda. The colonisers (for the purpose of our discussion the British) described themselves as the civilized race of people and the slaves and people of Caribbean origin were appropriated as “savages” and “brutes”. These “savages” in turn justified Britain’s colonising efforts as they needed to be civilized. In her essay ‘The Beginnings of English Literary Study in British India’, Gauri Viswanathan makes a vigorous argument relating the growth of the British Empire to the “institutionalisation” of English literary study. With reference to India she writes:

> British colonial administrators, provoked by missionaries on the one hand and fears of native insubordination on the other, discovered an ally in English literature to support them in maintaining control of the natives under the guise of a liberal education. (17)

The educational system of the postcolonial Caribbean did not acknowledge the language native to the Caribbean. It, instead,
insisted on the language of the coloniser, which in the case of the anglophone Caribbean, was English. Thus English became the medium for instruction and along with it came not only the language of England but also the notion of “Englishness” as conveyed through social mores, literary and often moral values and the privileging of this “Englishness” as the norm for life and individuals in the Caribbean.

The question of language becomes very important in the context of former colonies and their drive towards self-determination and self regulation as they try to forge an identity for themselves; an identity that is uniquely theirs and not in any way derived from the colonial rulers. Brathwaite’s views on language are similar to those espoused by Ngugi in his book Decolonising The Mind. Ngugi writes that the “choice of language and the use to which language is put is central to a people’s definition of themselves in relation to their natural and social environment” (4).

Brathwaite tries to make this very important point when he argues for a language that can express the local experiences of a people. People in the anglophone Caribbean were schooled in the language and the literary tradition of their colonial rulers; in this case the British. Hence the tools and models of literary expression available to the people were all derived from those of the British. Brathwaite records in Rights of Passage:

> Once when we went to Europe, a rich old lady asked:
> Have you no language of your own
> no way of doing things
> did you spend all those holidays
> at England’s apron strings? (Arrivants 55).

Writers in the Caribbean writing in Standard English could therefore be counterproductive in their efforts at literary
emancipation. The language of the British colonisers, Standard English, often steadily and stealthily works to undermine the culture and the history of the Caribbean people and their land. The lack of an indigenous literary tradition greatly impedes the ability of the Caribbean writer to achieve creative fulfilment. The appeal of a native language with its allusions and connotations is its ability to most effectively communicate with the people of the land. The cultural heritage, social mores, customs, and attitudes of a people are most effectively deduced in their language. They can easily identify with the concepts that are put to them and relate them to real world experiences. This fact does not hold true for literature written in the coloniser’s language.

By making a case for an educational system that is based on an indigenous language and literary tradition, Brathwaite is also invoking the notion of an audience, an audience that both understands and participates in the entire literary experience. This audience stands to learn and gain from the literary experience they partake in. The language of a literary work is linked to the audience it addresses and the audience it interests.

For a generation of Caribbean poets raised on the British prototype of education their perception of the literary models and tools was shaped by the system they grew up with. All their “perceptual models” and literary concepts were influenced by British literature and had very little relevance to their immediate environment. Brathwaite argues that the literary and social concepts like those of Robin Hood and Sherwood forest and the chronicles of the heroics of English Queens and Kings worked to undermine the importance and relevance of indigenous national heroes. Students in the Caribbean were not taught to appreciate the pertinence of the people of the Caribbean who actually helped shape the history of the islands. He goes on to give the example of the “Nanny
of the Maroons”, a name that was relatively unknown to inhabitants of the Caribbean even though she was one of the greatest of the Jamaican freedom fighters. She, along with other escaped African slaves, helped set up autonomous societies by rebelling against the colonial powers in remote areas. But students in schools were taught the exploits of the British monarchy and its literary heroes (History 8). In Other Exiles, Brathwaite writes:

he went to the wrong schools;
was friendly with black faces
like his own, but was told their tales

were wrong; saw those who taught
him songs of what he ought to, what he ought
not do, take off their hats to the white...

but all his thoughts were chained
which should have sparked and hammered in his brain
but that the teachers taught him not to think
of things not on curriculum (3-4)

It is the lack of the indigenous “perceptual models” that make it hard for the writers in the Caribbean to fully explain their experiences in their native land and in a sense led to an erosion of their cultural and historical identity. Though writers can describe “alien” experiences like that of the snow falling (which is alien to the climate of the Caribbean and native to Britain) they have not got the “syllabic intelligence”, according to Brathwaite, to describe a hurricane, an experience that is native to the Caribbean islands (History 8).

Edward Said writes that imperialism is intrinsically an act of “geographical violence through which virtually every space in
the world is explored and charted, and finally brought under control" (Culture and Imperialism 271). As a result of this, the geographic identity of the colonised land is appropriated by the colonisers and warped to suit their interests. One of the strategies used by post-colonial writers to reclaim the original identity of their native land is to re-formulate its origins and history through their imagination. Imperative to this process is the use of a vocabulary that can enable one to effectively re-imagine a history and homeland to recuperate from the effects of colonialism:

I
must be given words to shape my name

to the syllables of trees

I
must be given words to refashion futures
like a healer’s hand
I
must be given words so that the bees
in my blood’s buzzing brain of memory

will make flowers, will make flocks of birds,
will make sky, will make heaven,
the heaven open to the thunder-stone and the volcano and
the un-folding land.

It is not
it is not
it is not enough

to be pause, to be hole
to be void, to be silent
to be semicolon, to be semicolon;

fling me the stone
that will confound the void

33
find me the rage
and I will raze the colony
fill me with words
and I will blind your God. (Brathwaite, Arrivants 223-224)

Caribbean writers inherited the pentametre as a model from British literature. Brathwaite writes that though over the ages there have been attempts to disrupt the usage of the pentametre by poets like Walt Whitman and e.e. cummings, it remained the metre of choice for earlier Caribbean poets. The use of the pentametre in Caribbean poetry resulted in a lack of authenticity. The use of the pentametre carries with it "a certain kind of experience" writes Brathwaite and it is not the "experience of a hurricane". Thus it was not possible to write in the pentametre and still be able to effectively "get a rhythm which approximates the natural experience, the environmental experience" (History 10). It was not until the seventies that Caribbean poets tried to write about their own experiences reflected in the climate, the season, and the rhythms of their own native land. An example of this can be found in Brathwaite's description of drought in Islands:

the eagle's crook neck,
the vulture's talons clutching tight
as a blind baby's fist, still knows
the beat of the root blood
up through the rocks, up through the torn

hummingbird trees, guitar strings, eyrie;
the buffaloes' boom through the dust plains,
the antelope's sniff at the water, eland's sudden hurl
through the hurdle of fire, runnels upwards to them
through the hoof of the world...........
eyes without bait, snout
without words, teeth with nothing to kill......

The gods have been forgotten or hidden.
A prayer poured on the ground with water,

with rum, will not bid them come
back. (Arrivants 163-164)

The emphasis here is not just on a stylised description of the phenomenon of drought, but the particularized version of the experience that is familiar to the Caribbean. The quality of rain, and the lack of it, the desperation for fresh water, and the enormous harmful quantities of it—the contradictions and the "native" understanding of these events is Brathwaite's aim. Therefore one of the objectives of Nation language and poetry in Nation Language is to break out of the "entire pentametric model in the Caribbean and to move into a system which more closely and intimately approaches" the experience of the Caribbean (History 12).

Brathwaite argues that Language plays a vital role in shaping the living and material reality of a community, and at the same time it mediates between its present and its past. The sense of belonging, identity and community are all inextricably bound to language - serving as a carrier of culture. Here Brathwaite’s views are very similar to those expressed by Ngugi in his book Decolonising The Mind. Ngugi writes:

Culture embodies those moral, ethical and aesthetic values, the set of spiritual eyeglasses, through which they come to view themselves and their place in the universe. Values are the basis of a people's identity, their sense of particularity as members of the human race. All this is carried by language. Language as
culture is the collective memory bank of a people’s experience in history. Culture is almost indistinguishable from language that makes possible its genesis, growth, banking, articulation and indeed its transmission from generation to the next. (14-15)

He further states that another aspect of language as culture is its “image-forming agent in the mind of a child”. To quote Ngugi:

Our whole conception of ourselves as a people, individually and collectively, is based on those pictures and images which may or may not correctly correspond to the actual reality of the struggles with nature and nurture which produced them in the first place. But our capacity to confront the world creatively is dependent on how those images correspond or not to that reality, how they distort the reality of our struggles. Language as culture is thus mediating between me and my own self; between my own self and other selves; between me and nature. Language is mediating in my very being. (15)

History of the Voice starts with an explanation of what Nation Language, according to Brathwaite, is and how it is different from English and the other languages and dialects in the Caribbean. Nation Language, Brathwaite writes, is the language indigenous to the people of the Caribbean. It is a form of English but at the same time it is quite different from what the author refers to as “Standard English”. Nation Language is an amalgamation of the modern and ancient flavours of English and there are times that it does not seem like English at all (5). It is influenced by the African aspect of the heritage of the people in the Caribbean though it has some of the same lexical features as English. “But in its contours, its rhythm and timbre, its sound explosions, it is not
Brathwaite argues that the English spoken in the Caribbean does not have a linguistic framework grounded in the language itself. He posits English as a cultural experience that may have European linguistic roots but in the hands and history of postcolonial peoples it becomes more a means of identification and mass communication (in order to effect “revolution”) rather than just a linguistic signifier of origin.

Brathwaite writes that language plays a big part in making a change in the Caribbean, a change in the way people identify themselves and their historical origins. Nation Language, according to Brathwaite, influences the perception of the contemporary Caribbean people. Brathwaite stresses the difference between the term “Nation Language” and the term “dialect”. Dialect, he contends, is a derogatory term that denies a specific language legitimacy by positing it as an ineffectual variant of another “legitimate” language. Dialect is considered to be an inferior variant of a language and in turn effectively warps and distorts the perception of a people and their cultural history. “Nation Language, on the other hand, is the submerged area of that dialect which is more closely allied to the African aspect of experience in the Caribbean” (History 13).

Brathwaite then goes on to make a very important point about the absence of a canon of Nation language Literature and its historical aspects; the absence of an “Establishment”. This brings to the fore a vital component of the Essay; the formation of a canon of Nation Language Literature. “One of our urgent tasks now is to try to create our own Authorities” writes Brathwaite (History 14).
As mentioned earlier, *History of the Voice* is not only an attempt at laying the critical and theoretical foundations of Nation Language but is also an endeavour to write a history of the language of the natives of the Caribbean and documenting the various stages in its history and all the influences, both literary and cultural, that helped shape it. Such an exercise would help establish the validity and legitimacy of Nation Language literature and help it forge its identity. The creation of a canon of Caribbean literature would ensure that the indigenous literatures of the Caribbean would no longer be relegated to being marginal and secondary. According to Brathwaite, Dante was a pioneering figure in the movement to recognize “vernacular” language as the “nation language to replace Latin as the most natural, complete and accessible means of verbal expression” (*History* 14).

Stylistically eclectic, Brathwaite and Dante’s books have remarkable similarities. Both are works of literary criticism written by poets, and both exemplify a poet’s conviction and passion in his beliefs. Marianne Shapiro, in her book *De Vulgaria Eloquentia: Dante’s Book Of Exile*, writes that as “an affirmation of the autonomy and the potential dignity of a national vernacular,” Dante’s *De Vulgari Eloquentia* is “the antecedent of all ‘defenses and illustrations’ of national languages” (ix). Like Brathwaite’s *History of the Voice*, Dante’s book is short in length but vast in its scope. Though it fundamentally purports to counter the dominance of Latin by evolving a theory and system of vernacular language, the book also works to “elevate” the status of the native Italian languages. Also evident in Dante’s book is an emphasis on the “orality” of a culture. The similarity in his and Brathwaite’s views is apparent:

...I will proceed immediately to define the vernacular as the language which children gather from those around them when they first begin to articulate words; or more
briefly, that which we learn without any rules at all by 
imitating our nurses. From this we have another, 
secondary language which the Romans called grammar. This 
secondary language is also possessed by the Greeks and 
others, but not by all; and indeed few attain it because 
it is only in the course of time and by assiduous study 
that we become schooled in its rules and art.

Now of the two the nobler is the vernacular: first 
because it is the first language ever spoken by mankind; 
second because the whole world uses it though in diverse 
pronunciations and forms; finally because it is natural 
to us while the other is more the product of art. 
(Shapiro 47-48)

Dante’s concept of a “nobler” language is akin to Brathwaite’s 
postulation of Nation Language within the linguistic specificities of the Caribbean. Both Dante and Brathwaite 
attempt to restore the primacy of the spoken word and one’s 
“mother tongue”.

Though Dante wrote in the context of the Italian regional 
conflict and division, another writer who addressed similar 
questions in his work in a colonial context was James Joyce. 
Writing in the language of the coloniser, and yet a uniquely 
complex polyglot idiom, Joyce struggled with the issue of 
language even as he adapted the language of the coloniser to 
express his version.

The language we are speaking is his before it is mine. 
How different are the words home, Christ, ale, master, on 
his lips and on mine! I cannot speak or write these words 
without unrest of spirit. His language, so familiar and 
so foreign, will always be for me an acquired speech. I 
have not made or accepted its words. My voice holds them
Similarly, according to Brathwaite there was hostility to the concept of the Caribbean dialect being considered a language in its own right. Most of the hostility came not from the writers themselves but from critics and intellectuals who deemed the literature of Nation Language inferior. Even when work was done on Nation Language it was often on its linguistic details like syntax and structure but not on how this language was reflected in the literature of the Caribbean.

Brathwaite writes that an exception has to be made in the case of Roger D. Abrahams who has done some pioneering work on Caribbean (and New World) speech drama (History 15). In his book *The Man-of-Words in the West Indies: Performance and the Emergence of Creole Culture*, Abrahams writes about the historical process of creolization and the role of gossip, ritual, festival and performance in the culture of the African slaves in the West Indies and its effect on community. It is a wide-ranging socio-linguistic study of the centrality of oral literature, in its myriad forms, in West-Indian culture. According to him, European scholars were antagonistic towards the idea of an oral literature. The plethora of written text available to the colonial master and the privileging of the written text in Enlightenment thought led to a wide-ranging antipathy towards oral literature. By denigrating and destroying the centrality of the oral tradition, colonialism was able to substitute its own version of written culture more easily.

Books concerning the West Indies published in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries usually contained a discussion on the use of language by the slaves. "Most commonly noted were the ‘noisy’ aspects of Afro-Americans in public, their tendency
toward overdramatization, and their trait of talking to themselves” (Abrahams 29). One of the major mistakes made by the European commentators was to evaluate behavioural, linguistic and cultural patterns using Western norms and benchmarks. Abrahams’ study rightly emphasizes the nature of the oral culture of the West-Indies and places its relationship to society in the appropriate context.

Brathwaite also praises an essay written by Edouard Glissant called ‘Free and Forced Poetics’. Glissant’s article, though dealing mainly with the Creole of Martinique, makes a pioneering effort to describe the nature and form of Nation language. Glissant identifies Nation Language, or Creole as he calls it, as the language of the people who were enslaved by the colonisers. Earlier, literary historians claimed that Creole was created by the colonisers to help them communicate with the slaves. Glissant argues that Creole was an original creation of the African slave “who, faced with the limited linguistic implements imposed on him, chose to limit it further, to warp it, to untune it in order to make it into an idiom of his own” (95).

The use of Nation Language by the slaves was a strategic move that helped them retain their culture and at the same time disguise their personality, though at all times it clearly bore the “stamp of coercion”. It was an effective means of disguising oneself but at the same time retaining the elements that made a person who and what he was. Glissant calls this process a “forced poetics” because he thought of it as a prison language (Brathwaite, History 16). He goes on to posit “forced poetics” as “the consciousness of the opposition between an idiom which is used and a language which is needed” (Glissant 96).

In the article ‘Jazz and the West Indian novel’ Brathwaite highlights the role and importance of musical structures in
Nation Language while at the same time emphasizing their similarities (History 16). By positing Jazz as the music of "protest" he attempts to frame a literary aesthetic that mirrors its inventiveness and liberating ideals. Both Jazz and Nation Language are based on the same foundational models. Jazz is an amalgam of late nineteenth century New Orleans musical culture with several musical influences all superimposed on native African rhythms and African-American blues musical scale (Brathwaite, 'Jazz' 56). Though it draws upon various European influences and is played using European instruments, it retains the blues idiom and is primarily a mode of "New World Negro cultural expression" and is based on an African inheritance. Similarly, though nation language is based on a "superstructure" of European languages it is inherently African in nature.

Brathwaite's attempt to link language with music is apparent when he writes:

The West Indian writer is just beginning to enter his own cultural New Orleans. He is expressing in his work of words that joy, that protest, that paradox of community and aloneness, that controlled mixture of chaos and order, hope and disillusionment, based on his New World experience, which is at the heart of jazz.

Words, then, are the notes of this New Orleans music. The «personal urge for words», the West Indian writer's trumpet. ('Jazz' 63-65)

Though jazz and nation language are different modes of cultural expression, the similarity lies in their inherent nature, that of dissent and difference. Jazz, in fact, serves as the archetype of New World creative protest (Brathwaite, 'Jazz' 62). Both appropriate essentially European modes to meet ends specific to the needs of the African people. They
are an assertion of the creative potential of the African mind which seeks to forge an aesthetic that is uniquely its own, and one which best suits the needs of its diverse cultural heritage.

The Evolution and Development of Nation Language Literature

Sections four to seven of *History of the Voice* detail the history and development of Nation Language literature. Brathwaite examines in detail the works of a few representative Caribbean poets, and he maps the evolution of Nation Language literature and in turn the growth of the language itself through the critical examination of their poetry. Thus this strategy serves the dual purpose of establishing a canon of Nation Language literature and at the same time it helps Brathwaite explicate his theory of the language. By rendering the history of Nation Language poetry through a critical examination of what the author considers to be its seminal writers, Brathwaite helps bring to light how Nation Language is deployed by these writers and how these authors helped, in turn to shape the course and future of the language.

The first poet that Brathwaite talks of is Claude McKay, who is thought by many to be an American. He was, in fact born in the West Indian Island of Jamaica where he worked as a constable before emigrating to the United States of America. The first two collections of McKay’s poetry were written in Jamaica and Brathwaite writes that their uniqueness lay in the fact they were the first collections of “all-dialect” poetry written by an anglophone Caribbean poet. Brathwaite goes on to argue that although McKay’s collections of poetry were written in dialect, this dialect was distinct from what he refers to as Nation Language. Though McKay’s poetry was in dialect it was a dialect “imprisoned in the pentameter”. In other words, his poetry did not, and could not, establish a rhythm and
structure of its own. Though written in a Caribbean dialect, which was distinct from Standard English, it still had the rhythm and pattern of British poetry written in the pentametre. McKay also inherited the legacy of literary colonialism and examples of this can be found in his poetry:

I’ve a longin’ in me dept’s of heart dat I can conquer not,
’Tis a wish dat I’ve been havin’ from since I could form a t’o’t.....

Just to view de homeland England, in de streets of London walk,
An’ to see de famous sights dem ’bouten which dere’s so much talk... (qtd. in Brathwaite, History 20)

Brathwaite gives the example of ‘St. Isaac’s Church, Petrograd’ written by McKay as a poem that could be read as one written by any English or European poet in the post-Victorian era:

Bow down my soul in worship very low
And in the holy silences be lost
Bow down before the Marble man of Woe,
Bow down before the singing angel host...(qtd. in Brathwaite, History 22)

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2 To some extent, mentions Brathwaite, this could also be due to the circumstances of that particular era and the prevailing social and literary environment.

Brathwaite: "...this raises the question of critical relativity: could McKay, in the Jamaica of 1912, have done it any differently, with a svengali like Walter Jekyll, for instance, plus his Dan-is-the-man-in-the-van schoolteacher brother.”
Brathwaite asserts that though the content and the form of the poem are closely associated with European models, what makes the poem unique is the voiced and tonal inflection of the author as he reads it. According to him it is McKay’s tone that identifies him with Nation Language poets. McKay’s reading of his own poetry, more than the subject matter or style, is overwhelmingly European. Brathwaite points out that in his reading of the poem McKay has “trouble” with the pronunciation of his syllables. “His Clarendon vowels are very evident and he didn’t always say ‘the’, but sometimes ‘de’. And these elisions, the sound of them, subtly erode, somewhat, the classical pentametric of the sonnet....” (History 22). This brings into focus the role that sound, voice and inflection play in Caribbean poetry and how often meaning is structured around them and by them.

Vocal inflection and speech modulation play a vital role in Caribbean poetry. In an oral tradition it is the speaker’s, or poet’s, voice that helps organize the meaning of the poem rather than the semantic structure of the poem itself. According to Glissant, it was when Creole was created as a means of communication between the master and the slaves that the “peculiar syntax of the shout took hold.” “Noise is a speech”, he writes, and “Din is a discourse” (96). Glissant goes on to detail the role of the “shout” as employed by the slaves:

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3 Brathwaite plays the recording of McKay reading his poem ‘St. Isaac’s Church, Petrograd’ at this juncture. We have to keep in mind that this essay is a lecture that Brathwaite delivered to students at Harvard.

4 Brathwaite: “The concept of noise (‘sonority contrasts’) as part of the music of oral tradition has prevailed...this presentation. Noise is that decorative energy that invests the nation performance. Unnecessary but without which not enough. Whistles, gratter, scraper, shak-shak, shekesheke, wood block, gong gong, the cheng-cheng of the steel band, the buzz of the banjo or cymbal.....the long roll of the drum until it becomes thunder, Coltrane’s sheets of sound...” Footnote 59 on page 46 of History.
Slaves understood each other by means of a subtle noise system in which the master, however skilfully he spoke 'basic creole,' was totally lost. The caste of masters, the Béké, never managed Creole at the top of their lungs. The slaves, because speech was forbidden, camouflaged their speech as shouts, correctly assuming that no master could translate what was, to him, an evidently paroxysmic provocation, the call of the beasts of the jungle without any meaning at all. Thus did the dispossessed man organize his speech, weaving it into the apparently meaningless warp of noise. From then on a peculiar syntax developed, the syntax of shouting.

Continuing, to comment on the strategic use of vocal inflection, Glissant writes:

Creole organizes sentences on the mode of machinegun bursts....This introduces a new factor in Creole sentences: speed....Another feature is also the fast unrolling of a sentence into a single indivisible word. The sound is the signifier, its noise-level is the signified. Similarly, the staccato or unrolling rate of the sounds often organizes the meaning of the discourse. (96-97)

Thus it is McKay's voice, not the form and content of his writing, that structures the meanings of his poems. His linguistic peculiarities invoke a strong native flavour that belies the form and content of his poetry. In America his poetry was published mainly in anthologies of Black Writing and he became a leading figure of the movement known as the Harlem Renaissance. Though McKay was identified with the Black Movement, according to Brathwaite, he was “rather ambivalent about his negritude”. He wanted to be known as a poet and not as a Black poet. This according to McKay would signify his “universality”. In order to achieve this “universality” McKay abandoned his use of the dialect and the mode of his early
writings. Instead he adopted the sonnet as his paragon and patterned his writings on it.

This desire to be "universal", and to be universally recognized, is the "first stage" of Nation Language literature, contends Brathwaite. Caribbean poets writing in the fifties often wrote in dialect in the first editions of their poems but then went on to revise them "upward" in later editions by doing away with the dialect. This was done in order to be more universally accepted by writing in the prevailing metre and style of English poets. An interesting example of this can be found in the two versions of ‘Cn return from a foreign land’ by N.R. Millington in the 1954 edition of his book titled Lingering thoughts (Brathwaite, History 20). The Standard English version of the poem read:

Oh, what a rare delight
To see you once again!
Your kindly, strong, familiar face
Comes easily to my remembrance.
Our last meeting was on Roebuck Street
Which used to be so rutty.
The mule-drawn car is gone;
Gone, too, the railway;
Running on the tarmac
Are the fussy buses.
Small estates are combining into large . . . (qtd. in Brathwaite, History 40)

Compare this too the version written in dialect, which the poet places in quotes to indicate its conversational mode:

5 Earlier writings of Claude McKay, though replete with examples of his colonial heritage, retained the essence of Nation Language in his use of the dialect.
6 Brathwaite mentions that subsequent editions of N.R. Millington’s book did away completely with the dialect.
Who you and whay you come from?
Yuh voice soun’ Bajan
An’ yuh face familiuh.
Las’ time I see yuh was ‘pon Roebuck Street,
Dat use’ to be suh full o’holes.
But now uh hear dat all de roads been tar
De tramcars gone, de tarin gone too
An’ buses runnin’ everywhay
At any owuh o’ de day.
De little estates all shut down,
An’ everybody rush to town... (qtd. in Brathwaite, History 40)

Juxtaposing the two variants gives us an idea of the prevailing literary conventions and narrative strategies, both saturated in the British literary tradition. The poet’s subsequent revision is a distillation of his ideological convictions, his desire for “universal” recognition instead of a desire to forge a unique identity for himself.

Next, Erathwaite takes up the Jamaican poet George Campbell who was involved in Jamaica’s struggle for self-government and a new independent constitution. When Britain finally granted these rights to the Jamaican people in 1945, Campbell was inspired enough to write a poem on the events:

On this momentous night O God help us.
With faith we now challenge our destiny.
Tonight masses of men will shape, will hope,
Will dream with us; so many years hang on
Acceptance. Who is that knocking against
The door?.....is it you
Looking for a destiny, or is it
Noise of the storm? (qtd. in Brathwaite, History 67)
It is apparent that Campbell is aware of his newly found nationhood and the poem is in part a celebration of that fact. Ironically though, the poem is based on a Miltonic ode, a trait that Campbell inherited as part of his colonial education. Brathwaite asserts that Campbell might have used this style deliberately in order to give his “greatest” poem a sense of “nobility” and Miltonic greatness. At this juncture, to drive home his point, Brathwaite plays a recording of the poem being read by George Lamming (whom Brathwaite refers to as the “Milton of the Caribbean”) followed by the opening of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony. This is a carefully crafted ploy on Brathwaite’s part. On the one hand there is Campbell’s poem about Jamaica’s newly found independence from England after years of brutal colonialism and on the other hand in stark contrast, and bitter irony, is its style: Miltonic and canonical English, the British style of writing.

Lamming’s very “English” rendition of the poem and its setting to Beethoven help to highlight its lack of authenticity. There are no Caribbean elements in the poem, nothing that a Caribbean native could easily identify with; its flavour is distinctly English. The thematic content of the poem is undermined by its lack of contextualisation and its inability to ground itself in the literary tradition of Jamaica and the Caribbean. Next, in stark contrast to Lamming reading Campbell’s poem, Brathwaite plays Big Yout’s sound poem, ‘Salaman Agunday’ which is set to reggae music. This contrast effectively works to accentuate the variance in the two poetic modes, one influenced by the British model (and set to Beethoven’s music) and the other a folk inspired indigenous rendition of Nation Language poetry.

The Caribbean also has the calypso, or kaiso, with all its unique features and peculiarities, which is very well suited to the nature and form of Nation language poetry and its performance. The calypsos convey a sense of dissent, satire
and folk wisdom through a range of themes and styles that “capture a delicate balance between the plainest and the most metaphorical speech” (Rohlehr, ‘The Shape’ 187). In ‘The Shape of that Hurt: An Introduction to Voiceprint’, Gordon Rohlehr contends that though calypsos were always strong in sexual metaphor, in the period after 1970 they further expanded their scope exhibiting remarkable control over imagery and ideology (185).

Brathwaite stresses the role of the kaiso in the Caribbean; in fact according to him it marked “the first major change in consciousness” among the West Indian people (History 24). Slinger Francisco, or the Mighty sparrow as he is often referred to, was among the first exponents of calypso and he used it to criticize the educational system of the Caribbean just as Brathwaite does:

(Solo) According to de education you get when you small
You(11) grow up wi(th) true ambition an respec for one
an all
But in my days in school they teach me like a fool
THE THINGS THEY TEACH ME A
SHOULDA BEEN A BLOCK-HEADED
MULE
(Chorus) Pussy has finish his work long ago
An now he restin an ting
Solomon Agundy was born on a MunDEE
DE ASS IN DE LION SKIN..... (qtd. in Brathwaite, History 24-25)

The Mighty Sparrow’s rendition of the poem makes apparent his use of dialect, but this dialect is used in tandem with the calypso form. Informed by the use of the calypso the sound-poem takes on a potent anti-colonial tone, whereas in the case of Campbell’s poem, its rendition by Lamming in the style of “English orature” and being set to Beethoven’s music effaces
both its nationalistic zeal and its portentous tone. Sparrow creates "a counterpoint between voice and orchestra, between individual and community, within the formal notion of 'call and response', which becomes typical of our nation in the revolution" comments Brathwaite. He is alluding to the plantation era when the colonial masters insisted on breaking up families to prevent organizing around ties of kinship. Family members were separated while working in the fields. They located and kept track of each other through the system of "call and response". Sparrow succeeds in recreating this participatory tradition and hence re-establishing kinship and belonging within the community.

Brathwaite appeals for a poetic and linguistic form that does not only highlight the colonial heritage of the Caribbean people but also presents alternatives to it. With respect to the colonial literary precedents inherited by writers in the Caribbean, Brathwaite seeks a model that helps in "transcending" that flawed inheritance. Sparrow’s sound poem is a pragmatic example of Nation Language literature. On the one hand it highlights the imperial heritage of education in the Caribbean and on the other hand it provides an effective example of resistance to it, in terms of its form content and setting. The use of Nation Language (dialect), no-nonsense straight forward hard hitting lyrics and setting it to a traditional musical form, Sparrow appeals to the masses instead of the elite. He is, in a sense, a folk poet; a folk poet expressing the concerns of the ordinary people and partaking in their shared experiences, and in turn bonding with them on a deeper socio-cultural level.

Louise Bennett more than achieves Sparrow’s success and in terms of sheer linguistic creativity she far exceeds him. She wrote all her poetry in Nation Language and it is for that reason that she had been ignored till recently by most critics. Her fidelity to the Jamaican native language and her
use of folk elements led to her being marginalized in the literary community of the Caribbean till the seventies (Brathwaite, History 26-27). Jamaica’s largest and most respected newspaper, The Gleaner, refused to publish her poetry because she opted to write in the language that she did and unlike Claude McKay did not have a white sponsor. In her own words, she had been “set apart by other creative writers a long time ago because of the language” she spoke and used in her work (qtd. in Brathwaite, History 28). To be a more accepted poet she was expected to “graduate” from her use of Nation Language and start writing in standard English. 

Her poetry was a landmark in the history of Nation language literature. In her we have the example of a Caribbean poet who persevered in her belief and her art in the face of grave opposition. She remained true to her Caribbean roots and her linguistic identity. To quote an example of her poetry:

De price o’ bread gan up so high
Dat we haffle agree,
Fe cut we y’eye pon bread an all
Tun dumplin refugee!
An all dem mawga smaddy weh
Dah-gwan like fat is sin,
All dem deh weh dah-fas’wid me,
Ah lef dem to dumplin!

Sun a-shine an pot a-bwile, but
Ting noh bright, bickle noh nuff!

7At the ACLALS (Association of Commonwealth Literature and Language Societies) conference held at the UWI, Mona, Jamaica, in January 1971, V.S. Naipaul said that writers (writing in dialect) should “graduate out of these things”. The implication, obviously, being, that writers using dialect or nation language in their works should change to using standard English; this being a sign of a writer’s accomplishment and maturity.
Rain a-fall, river dah-flood, but
Wata scare an dutty tuff! (qtd. in Brathwaite, History 30)

Although the "tyranny" of the pentametre can be seen in Bennett’s poetry, her language and poetic voice "erode" the effect of the pentametre. "Its riddim sets up a counterpoint against the pentametre" (qtd. in Brathwaite, History 30). Bennett’s use of “Africanisms’” like “koo de”, “galang” and her use of imagery that has both a standard English interpretation and a meaning rooted in folk culture help establish her as a nation language poet. Her poetry reflects a complex interaction between narrative conventions and distinct ideological convictions, in which her beliefs inform and structure her poetry rather than be structured by it. The centrality of her culture clearly registers in her poetry and her ideological persuasions set her apart from poets like McKay.

It is in this ideological and literary matrix, rooted in native folk culture, its rhythms and its structures, according to Brathwaite, that the origins and future of Nation Language poetry and literature lie. Louise Bennett’s poetry signalled a “stage” in the history and development of Nation Language literature. How other mainstream anglophone Caribbean poets approach this stage forms the next part of Brathwaite’s essay (History 30).

The single most important influence, according to Brathwaite, on mainstream anglophone Caribbean poets was that of T.S. Eliot. Eliot’s influence did not come in the shape of ideological belief, style or structure, but instead in the form of his notion of the conversational tone. It was Eliot’s rendition of ‘The Waste Land’, ‘Four Quartets’, ‘Preludes’ and ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’ in his own voice that helped spur poets in the Caribbean. According to Eliot, the
value of the poem’s recordings in the author’s voice lay in the fact that they served as a guide to the rhythms of his poetry, and it was these rhythms and a deadpan and expressionless style of delivery that influenced poets like H.A. Vaughan8 (History 30-31).

Brathwaite plays a reading of one of Vaughan’s poems called ‘For certain Demogogues’ read by the poet himself. It is a sonnet written in standard English for the most part except for a passage in which he talks about blackbirds:

... 
Like blackbirds in their shiny coats  
Prinking and lifting spry, proud feet,  
Bickering and picking sodden oats  
From horses’ offal in the street. (qtd. in Brathwaite, History 32)

Though the above poem does not make use of nation language as such, what sets it apart is its description of the Caribbean environment, in this case the description of the sound and movements of the blackbirds. This “imitation” of the poet’s environment in his poetry, reflected more in the reading aloud of the poem, referred to as “mimesis” by Brathwaite, is one of the early markers/features of nation language (History 31).

Frank Collymore, too, does not write in Nation Language, but what sets him apart from mainstream anglophone Caribbean

8 “Another influence must have been the voice of John Arlott, the BBC test cricket commentator, who stunned, amazed, and transported us with his natural, riddmic and image-laden tropes, in its revolutionary Hampshire burr, at a time when BBC meant Empire and Loyal Models and Our Masters Voice: and cricket, especially against England, was the national war-game, our colonial occasion for communal catharsis. Not only was Arlott ‘good’ (all our mimics tried to imitate him) but he subverted the Establishment with the was and where he spoke: like Eliot, like jazz...” Brathwaite. Footnote 41 on page 31 of History.
poetry is his “conversational mode”. The tone and style of Collymore’s rendition of his poetry works to diffuse the effect of the pentametre. Nearly a decade later, Derek Walcott’s poetry, writes Brathwaite, gives “form” to Collymore’s conversational style. In his poem called ‘Blues’, Walcott draws upon a wealth of Caribbean and American influences ranging from Langston Hughes to Sonia Sanchez and Miles Davis. Though it does not have the structure and rhythm of a “blues” piece, the “blues” are there in Walcott’s voice, states Brathwaite. All these factors work together to “further erode” the effect of the pentametre.

I remembered a few watchers waved loudly, and one kid’s mother shouting like ‘Jackie’ or ‘Terry’, ‘Now that’s enough!’ It’s nothing really. They don’t get enough love.

You know they wouldn’t kill you. Just playing rough like young America will. Still, it taught me something about love. If it’s so tough, forget it. (qtd. in Brathwaite, History 41-42)

The publication of Brathwaite’s Rights of Passage was a landmark in the history of Nation Language poetry. The use of “dialect” in mainstream poetry was explicitly exhibited as was the use of Caribbean and African folk elements. Brathwaite combined the use of all these features in his poetry and used them to address “serious” subjects like colonialism, history and culture. Brathwaite also demonstrated the use, and importance, of rhythm and tone in poetry. Caribbean reggae and dub poets like Michael Smith and Oku Onuora successfully extended this aspect of Nation Language poetry.
Michael Smith, to whom Brathwaite dedicates the book/essay, was another of the radical sound poets. Smith was born in Kingston, Jamaica and died on August 17, 1983 - "Stoned to death on Stony Hill". He did not write poetry in the conventional notion of the word, instead he read out his poems to an audience. In explaining the creative process of writing poetry, Michael Smith centralizes the role of rhythm. In Smith's crafting of poetry the lyric line is directly connected to rhythm — and by this Smith is talking not so much about the percussive move of music but rather a particular tonal lilt and inflection in language as exemplified by the Afro-Caribbean speech and the Afro-American blues line.

Or sometimes a rhythm come to me first. You know, is a rhythm, and me she, 'Dah rhythm-ya feel nice, you know, feel nice.' And me then try remember the rhythm... and then I build under that, build up under that. Build under that and catch me breaks and the bridges. Just like how a musician a work out. (qtd. in Morris, It A Come 9-10)

Michael (Mikey) Smith's rhythms, as evident in his poetry follow the structure and patterning of musical rhythms while taking into account the everyday "...rhetoric of preachers and politicians, the cries of pedlars, allusion to proverbs, nursery rhymes, the Bible...Rasta talk..." (It A Come 10). In this list of influences Rasta talk stands out as the most consciously formulated pattern of speech and thought that is most closely aligned to Smith's own convictions of writing against the acceptable grain and rhythm:

- It a come
- fire a go bun
- blood a go run

*Edward Kamau Brathwaite, in his dedication to History of the Voice.*
it goin to teck you
it goin to teck you

Some goin go call it awareness
an we goin to celebrate it wid firmness
Odders goin to call it revolution
but I prefer liberation

Fi de oppressed an de dispossessed
who has been restless
a full time dem get some rest

for it a come
fire a go bun
blood a go run
it goin go teck you
it goin go teck you

Not only fi I
but fi you too  (It A Come 20)

The Rastafarian movement in Jamaica was responsible for restructuring language to meet specific political ends. The Rastafarians attempt to “deconstruct” what they see as power structures of English grammar, structures in themselves metonymic of the hegemonic controls exercised by the British on Black peoples throughout Caribbean and African history – controls no less present today, though they make take different forms. While the language remains as it is, there is no hope of genuine “freedom”, and consequently the Rastafarians have adopted various strategies by which language might be “liberated” from within (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 48).

The Rastafarian poet Bongo Jerry’s influence on mainstream anglophone Caribbean poets cannot be under-estimated. He made
significant contributions to the journals Bongo-Man and Abeng published towards the end of the sixties and was intellectually and socially active. His "mis/use of Babylonian English", writes Brathwaite was "practically apocalyptic". It helped show a generation of new upcoming Caribbean poets how Standard English could be appropriated to meet subversive and liberating exigencies:

MOSTOFHTESTRAIGHTENINGISINTHE TONGUE-so....
Save the YOUNG
from the language that MEN teach,
the doctrine Pope preach
skin bleach....

MAN must use MEN language
to carry dis message:

SILENCE BABEL TONGUES: recall and recollect BLACK SPEECH (qtd. in Brathwaite, History 37)

Syntax, style, structure and sound converge in a dynamic reordering of the existing literary and cultural paradigms to forge an independent poetic entity. The resulting poetic work demonstrates an awareness of its colonial history while attempting to re-write the same in an effort to forge a narrative independence that can then be offered as a means of resistance.

The writings of radical Nation Language poets like Brathwaite and Bongo Jerry influenced several mainstream anglophone Caribbean poets like John Figueroa. Figueroa made a very conscious effort to write in Nation Language, but it was "a nation still sticky and wet with the interposition of dialect"

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10 Here, Babylon signifies modern day capitalism and "the establishment".
but nation nonetheless. Figueroa’s poetry makes no effort to hide his political and literary affiliation but it hasn’t evolved enough to present a distinct literary marker of its own. “Dialect”, his version of early Nation Language, provides him with new artistic and stylistic structures, and gives him an alternative moral and artistic framework. He puts all of this to use in the critique of the pentametre in his poem ‘Problems of a writer who does not Quite.../For: Derek Walcott, his brother Roddy, his mother Alix and After reading Helen Vendler’s Review of Walcott in “The New York Review of Books”:

Roddy brother, teacher Alix son,
Bwoy, you no hear was de lady say?
Watch dis pentemeter ting, man.
Dat is white people play!

Wha de hell yu read Homer-
A so him name?-fa!
Yu his from the horal tradition
And must deal wid calypso and reggae na!

Mek I hadvise yu boy
If you trouble white people toy
(Especially as yu win big prize an t’ing)
Yu arse goin swing

Like metronome, yu’d say,
But a black bwoy should play
Widout dem mechanical aids
Full of rydhm like all true spades.

(Eh eh a since when yu tun black?
Yu note-book does say yu never did notice
Whedr the sore was black or white dat wear de poultice,
But de lady slap ‘black experience’ in yu back!)
See what dat pentameter an’ ESSAY do
To yu bwoy! Long time I school yu
To break
up yu
Lines
Lines
Lines
Like dat black writer Poe, black like his raven
Bruck it
up
Man
Bruck it up man
Bruck it
up
man an’ wid de drums
       de drums
De tints
nab u
la
tion of de dums, de drums
Black bwoy black bwoy
       black
Bwoy...... (qtd. in Brathwaite, History 39-40)

By Figueroa’s time, in the late sixties, nation language poetry by mainstream poets had evolved significantly though it still had several shortcomings. In Figueroa’s case it was the extensive use of English in his poetry, what Brathwaite refers to as the “Prosperian element”. Nation language, though present, only featured in the margins of the narrative and associated with such characters as the house slave or the domestic helper. On the other hand in the case of “native” poets (“cultural gorillas” as Brathwaite calls them), or poets
who wrote nation language, their poetry was shaped and informed by their choice of language (History 38). In other words, the thematic, structural and stylistic elements of their poetry were appropriated by their linguistic choice. These "native" poets form the other end of the poetic spectrum.

For these inheritors of the revolution, nation-language is no longer anything to argue about or experiment with; it is their classical norm and comes out of the same experience as the music of contemporary popular song: using the same riddims, the same voice-spreads, syllable clusters, blue notes, ostinado, syncopation and pauses; with...a quite remarkable voice and breath control,...which after a time becomes part of the sound-structure and meaning of the poem (Brathwaite, History 45-46).

Imogene Elizabeth Kennedy, or Miss Queenie as she was known, is one such nation language poet (Brathwaite, History 43). Her brand of performance poetry epitomizes the role of nation language poetry in the oral tradition of the Caribbean. Not only her words, but her voice, tone and inflection deconstruct structures of colonial power inherent in the use of English. It is an assertion of linguistic independence that goes beyond mere difference, in terms of asserting an alternative to a hegemonic notion of language. It re-envisions the Caribbean social and cultural milieu and presents a forum to voice dissent against its colonial legacy.

The Politics of Nation Language and Caribbean Poetics

According to Brathwaite, nation language is firmly entrenched in the creative consciousness of writers in the present day Caribbean. From being an exception it has now become the rule (History 49). A poet’s ability to communicate with his audience is a priority for any poet, more so for a modern
Caribbean poet. By endowing people with an alternative means of self-representation such poetry can effectively help remedy the havoc wreaked by the colonial system of education. These poets writing in nation language are utilizing the resources that their culture provides them, resources which existed earlier, but which had been denied to them (History 42).

Brathwaite is of the opinion that what Caribbean poetry needs is a "re-orientation of criticism, an aesthetic, that will help us to re-define" the prevailing "pseudo-classical notions of literature" (History 49). It should be an aesthetic that acknowledges both the European and the African inheritance of Caribbean literature. Written texts should not be privileged over oral poetry and at the same time "orature" should not be postulated as the only Caribbean heritage. Critics need to understand the notion of language or speech in the Caribbean as a "continuum". It is the complex fusion of different languages and "dialects", all merging in a unique idiom that posits the mutable nature of speech as the norm. In doing so it also encompasses the wide range and variety of poetic expression that such a fluid idiom presents to the author.

At the heart of Brathwaite’s essay lies an effort to establish the base for a Caribbean identity, an identity that is unique and not derivative. It is an attempt by a Caribbean writer to find not just a voice of his own but also to recover a history and a literary tradition in which to place his voice. Brathwaite stresses the role of language in the restructuring of history and culture. "Language variance" is used by the Caribbean author “as an alibi to convey ideological variance” (Zabus, ‘Language’ 34). It enables the Caribbean writer to gain possession of his culture and to restore it to its deserved place. An awareness of the past will provide the Caribbean writer with the tools to fashion a present and a future in his or her own mould. It does not have to be tailored to suit the provisions of an imperial culture that
demands subjugation and asserts a cultural and moral superiority. This re-constructed indigenous culture forms a basis for a new Caribbean identity. The role played by nation language in restoring national identity and forging a national consciousness is detailed by Edward Said:

One of the first tasks of the culture of resistance was to reclaim, rename, and reinhabit the land. And with that came a whole set of further assertions, recoveries, and identifications, all of them quite literally grounded on this poetically projected base. The search for authenticity, for a more congenial national origin than that provided by colonial history, for a new pantheon of heroes and (occasionally) heroines, myths, and religions - these too are made possible by a sense of the land reappropriated by its people. And along with these nationalistic adumbrations of the decolonized identity, there always goes an almost magically inspired, quasi-alchemical redevelopment of the native language. (Culture and Imperialism 273)

Implicit in the restitutive ability of language is the implication that it is also the locus of power in the literary politics of post-colonial era. Brathwaite exhorts the Caribbean writer to seize that power and transfigure the colonial legacy of his land and its literature. "However", argues Chantal Zabus, "the universalizing thrust of the 'nation language' ideology seems to ignore the fact that the various patois of the islands are often mutually unintelligible" ('Language' 40). According to Zabus, in postulating nation language as the national language of the Caribbean (at least that of Jamaica) Brathwaite is guilty of relegating to the background other languages spoken on the islands.
Though Brathwaite may be read as marginalizing other West Indian languages, one must be aware of the fact that Brathwaite does not propose a theory for the entire Caribbean. He formulates a theory taking specifics from one part of the Caribbean while keeping in mind the larger history of the West Indies. Brathwaite presents a model for such restructuring/rereading of poetry - he opens up a discourse, he does not stultify it. The sum of the whole, in this case, is worth more than what may be lacking in its parts. Commenting on the influence of Brathwaite’s first trilogy on the language of Caribbean poetry, Breiner writes:

It offers the foundational compendium of the resources of what Dante calls the “volgare illustre” - the literary idiom of the vernacular. Suddenly, West Indian pets were in possession of a wide-ranging primer for nation language poetry, not only for the syntax and diction of its speech registers, but for its rhythms and, perhaps most innovative, for its form. (178)

Brathwaite’s theory as well as his poetry, as he so aptly puts it “is a matter of hope . of keep hope alive . to continue the dream / cause we able . about our rightful place at the table” (Middle Passages 27). Brathwaite’s essay is an explication of the “rightful” place of his and other poets’ linguistic and cultural experience. It is necessary to understand that Brathwaite’s essay is as much a legitimising of his poetics, as his poetry is a versification of his theoretical convictions.