Brathwaite, the poet, is a composite of Brathwaite the Historian and Brathwaite the critic. His oeuvre extends from the lyrical free verse of The Arrivants trilogy to the discursive poetics of Conversations, a book based on the transcript of his public discussion with Nathaniel Mackey. Brathwaite’s creative edifice is structured around an insistent desire to innovate; thematically, structurally and semantically. The poet derives vigour and creative inspiration from the diversity of his interests and the fluidity of his medium of expression. Breaking with institutionalised, canonical assumptions of poetic creativity, Brathwaite seeks the medium most suited to his thematic concerns and infuses it with all the creative virtuosity of an accomplished poet. In Conversations, Brathwaite states:

"But the very concept of writing has alter, and it’s as if I’m gone back to the Middle Ages, in a way, and I’m tryin to create those things that they did - what-do-you-call-them? Scrolls? that kind of tone. And the computer gives me that oppurtunity. To release the pen from the fist of my broeken hand and begin what I call my ‘video-style’, in which i tr(y) make the words themselves live off - away from - the ‘page’...like see their sound - technology taking us ‘back’, I suppose, to the ...Islamic world of the ILLUMINATED MANUSCRIPTS when the written word could still hear itself speak, as it were And beyond that, even to the possibility of..."
...It involves a process of video-thinking and a presentation— a representation— of illuminated scrolls which the present concept of the \(4\frac{1}{2} \times 7\frac{1}{2}\) margin book with a certain uniform face, won't interest and therefore can't/won't/won't entertain... (166-167)

His ingenious and relentless innovations are informed by a politics of literary creation, one that situates the author/poet in the midst of his, or her, culture. At the heart of his poetic enterprise lies a strong belief in the creation of a unique Caribbean identity. As already discussed in the previous chapter on Nation Language, Brathwaite stresses the role of Language in re-structuring Caribbean History and Culture. Concomitant to his belief in the expressive potential of Nation Language, is a belief in the creative promise of a unique, new idiom he calls "Sycorax Video" style. Sycorax is the name given to his computer by Brathwaite, as he explains in Conversations:

Computer is call Sycorax because one of the main concerns in my teaching and in the way I see things, is in the use of Shakespeare's - the people out of Shakespeare's Tempest is my conviction that Shakespeare spends two important 'missing' years in the Caribbean and writes The Tempest out of this experience. Is the most amazing accurate protean and applicable description of colonialism and slavery and their consequences that we have. Is a blueprint, a report on something that is coming into being. and the people that Shakespeare produces in that dream, in that poem: Prospero, the plantatio(n) owner; Miranda, his motherless daughter, possible or shall we say potentially involve with incest if the behaviour of white maroons or rather the white
maroon’d (‘redlegs’ etc) in the Americas is anything to go by (177-178)

He continues:

Sycorax being the submerge African and woman and lwa of the pla(y), Caliban mother...And therefore I celebrate her in this way - thru the computer - by saying that she’s the spirit/person who creates an(d)/or acts out of the video-style that I working with She’s the lwa who, in fact, allows me the space and longitude - groundation and inspiration (189)

In the poem titled ‘Letter Sycorax’, which was later expanded, revised and published as ‘X/Self xth letter from the thirteenth provinces’ in Ancestors, the poet lays the theoretical foundation for his “Video” style. While in The Tempest, Caliban’s eventual empowerment is associated with his ability to speak Prospero’s language and to curse him in it, Brathwaite enlarges the idea to embrace the possibility of Caliban “returning home, linguistically and therefore spiritually, to his mother, Sycorax”. Brathwaite points out “there is more freedom for Caliban in turning to his mother’s language” than in cursing Prospero in his (Savory 211):

if yu cyan beat prospero
Whistle?

no mamma! (Middle Passage 77)

Brathwaite does not propose a simple reworking of perceived notions, instead he seeks a more strategic use of the
capitalists’ implements; a more creative alternative that sustains the vigour of his decolonising efforts: “not fe dem/ not fe dem/ de way caliban/ done/ but few we/ fe-a-we” (Ancestors 449). The poetic persona of the poet is appropriating the tool of the colonizer and using it against him just like the white colonizing powers learned about gunpowder from the Chinese and then used it effectively, and brutally, to colonize and plunder:

Dear mumma
uh writin yu dis letter
wha?

guess what! pun a computer O
kay?

like a jine de mercantilists?

well not quit!

uh mean de same way dem tief/in gun
-power from sheena & taken we blues &
gone (Ancestors 444)

The poet’s goal is to break free of his perpetual enslavement by learning to beat his captors at their own game. The arena of contest is now the world of ideas and the poet intends to fight it out in his oppressor’s domain. He refuses to accept the trappings of his enslaver’s world, instead adopting a stratagem that aims at composing the discordant elements of the wounded psyche into a harmonious whole. According to Nathaniel Mackey:
Brathwaite’s linguistic play, underscores the centrality of slavery, the plantation system and colonialism to the history and the predicaments of the region. The verbal disruptions to which he resorts, together with his thematization of the word, address the cultural domination which accompanied and helped implement and sustain British imperialism. They not only address but also move to redress that domination. (‘Wringing the Word’ 134)

Brathwaite’s fusion of different forms of discourse and genre entails a breaking of the boundary between artistic and intellectual expression. He uses the interplay of form and content to highlight the marginalized while, concurrently, marginalizing the contested centre. This chapter examines Brathwaite’s use of the “Video-Sycorax” style as incorporated in two of his most innovative texts - Trench Town Rock and The Zea Mexican Diary. It will also investigate how the inscription of social power within language can be traced through lexical, syntactic and grammatical structures in Brathwaite’s poetry. The dissidence of his poetics and its literary and political import form the subject of this chapter.

The Zea Mexican Diary
The Zea Mexican Diary: 7 Sept 1926 - 7 Sept 1986 is Brathwaite’s tribute to his wife Doris Brathwaite. The expiatory narrative poem was published in 1993, seven years after her death. Part obituary, part lament, its pivotal theme is love; the love of a husband for his wife and the love of an artist for his muse. The narrative includes nine extracts from a diary started by the poet on learning about his wife’s terminal illness, nine extracts from letters he wrote to his sister Mary Morgan, words that he wrote on the eve of her
death (later read by Edward Baugh at the Thanksgiving service for Doris) and a letter written by Aya. Interwoven into the resulting text are Brathwaite’s observations on various facets of the diary, both personal and artistic. Prefacing this novel amalgam of narratives, is ‘The Second K’un’ from the Chinese book of divination the I Ching, whose philosophical wisdom regarding the nature and consequences of one’s actions and the imperative centrality of change in human life seem to inform the core of Brathwaite’s own narrative. By prefacing the preface, as it were, with a pop song composed by David Gaites called ‘Everything I own’, the poet discreetly merges the profound with the mundane and implies that love encompasses the entire spectrum that lies within.

The first section, named ‘Irish Town’, begins with an entry dated 30th May 1986, three days after the poet learned of his wife’s ailment, but of which she is unaware. The poet, in bold typeface, begins the narrative; the pressing urgency of his venture and its attendant grief are brought to the fore from the very start. According to Silvio Torres-Saillant, the “text exudes a sense of troubled serenity in proportion with the narrator’s repressed grief before Doris dies” (7). The typography corresponds to the intimate nature of Brathwaite’s predicament and the aggrandized emotions that it brings to bear on his creative persona. Brathwaite’s lament and the profundity of his grief are brought to stark relief when he changes the font to voice the doctor’s apology: ‘I’m very sorry I’m really very sorry’. It resonates not only the doctor’s helplessness but also sets the stage for the poet’s acceptance of his lapses (Zea 20). According to the I Ching, ‘If he do repent of former errors, there will be good fortune in his going forward’, and it is repentance that forms an integral theme of the book (Zea 14).
The poet’s repentance is manifest in his abject desire to abandon the selfish, all intrusive role of the author as a creative artist. Far from being the narrative of the author, projecting his vision, dreams and desires, The Zea Mexican Diary gives precedence to his wife, Doris. Successive entries in the diary serve to highlight Doris’ multi-faceted personality. Her morality, generosity and courage are unequivocally brought out by the poet’s narrative, which seeks to identify her, in death, with the “osun” bird in Yo-uba myth (25). The intensely personal nature of the narrative is rendered within the autochthonous imperatives of the Caribbean experience. The feelings never seem contrived and the emotion never forced. She becomes the subject of his project, the one overarching theme. The poet does not aim to circumvent the inclusion of other thematic concerns, but instead binds contradictory experiences by laying a common foundation. Therefore, at another level, The Zea Mexican Diary becomes not only the story of one man’s love for his wife, but also a testament of the Caribbean male’s relationship with women.

The first section of The Zea Mexican Diary demonstrates the poet’s effort at maintaining order and calm in his personal life amidst all the chaos. Thus the opening section lays down a bold, confident typeface in neat orderly paragraphs. Emotion is seldom betrayed and if betrayed then always controlled. According to Silvio Torres-Saillant, the “stridency of the visual effects on the page seeks to conjure a sense of balance” (7). The enlarging of typeface for the expression of apology, though rare, rips the fabric of enforced textual calm as does the smaller italicised font for the doctor’s verdict: “kill her was the word he actually used …... (did he speak out these terribles)” (Zea 20). But these transgressions are rare in the first section; there is just an overwhelming sense of grief and disbelief. Interspersed within the lines of the journal
entries, and lending them an unprecedented emotional depth, is the voice of the poet as the husband: “Like yesterday when I turned back to write her name on the Dedication to X/Self: for Mexican With all my love. Like I was letting farewell in...”. But the poet, like the husband, can find no answers, only questions that haunt him: “Lord, why do we love? Why do we break our hearts?...When she eventually looks at me with that knowledge...What then?” (Zea 27). Poetry blends with memoir as the elegiac mood of the narrative establishes a sombre stage. “Rain” is juxtaposed with Doris’s “steady cough/ing” as the calming serenity of the former’s rhythm seems to accentuate the painful cadences of the latter to create a sense of bewilderment, of nature wronged, of faith belied (Zea 29).

Another entry in his diary dated Sunday, 8 June seeks to frame the very intimate nature of the poet’s loss within the context of larger global tragedies like the Chernobyl nuclear disaster and floods in Jamaica (Zea 30-31). The inclusion of journalistic reportage impresses upon the reader the actuality of the poet’s predicament, its agonizing veracity. In an attempt to comprehend the perplexity of his dilemma and diminish his pain, Brathwaite shores his grief against the loss of human life on a far greater scale. At the same time it is also a measure of the artist as a caring global citizen whose perception of loss and pain only serves to accentuate his empathy for human tragedy.

As the second section opens, the poet seeks to reconcile his feelings of grief and perplexity: “You can say that my mind is slowly coming to accept it” (Zea 39). But acceptance is not easily found and questions still resound in the anguished void of the poet’s mind: “But why why why should it be her???” (Zea 41). The insistent repetitiveness of the “why” coupled
with three questions marks exacerbate the rupture that Doris’s ailment has caused in the poet’s life as he turns to his poetry for answers:

...I wd bring that throbbing nebula into the very centre of my head my heart my hurt & hold off...it seemed...whatever was going on wrong in there in there in there....I came to reach far out far out in space into the very wound & darkness of our/selves out there/ far out/ deep down in/side...out there...And it seemed as I might win...was winning..if only I cd find the strength ...the certitude.that power of the miracle...ice cold heat...lava of icicle..pure freedom of my very breath/ our breathing origins...

But for the miracle to
Be...it must be...
Beyond contamination (Zea 43-44)

The poet seeks the miraculous healing powers of words as a means to resolve his predicament. As a poet he is well aware of the power of words and their resuscitative abilities and according to him this potential can only be fully realized if his poetic technique is pure and true to its origins. Brathwaite’s quest for authenticity and autochthonous forms of literary representation has formed the cornerstone of his creative output. In The Zea Mexican Diary, the poet explores the versatility of the genre of personal memoir to exploit his aesthetic capabilities. Sandra Pouchet Paquet argues that in The Zea Mexican Diary Brathwaite “privileges private expression of grief in a public forum” (xi). The genre affords him a great amount of narrative and structural freedom.
as he weaves his way through poetry and prose using nation language and his trademark Sycorax Video style.

The picture of an open eye prefaces the section in which Brathwaite finally tells Doris about her cancer, alluding to Doris' newfound awareness. The font changes to a larger more insistent and emphatic variant. It is underlined at the end of the section to underscore the gravity of Doris' condition and its all-encompassing irreversibility. Brathwaite's desperation reaches a fever pitch and his voice becomes erratic, both in texture and tone, only to revert to its former control when Doris decides to go see her doctor without saying a word to him. Her tranquillity imposes order onto the imploding narrative. The poet's attempt to deal with his wife's terminal illness takes on the guise of self-examination, in an effort to force coherence onto circumstances beyond his control:

Tonight when I came into bed, she already under the blanket, I put my help/less arms around her & her body was like a candle gently burning Not her face But the body It sent a strange sensation deep into my bowels and into my kidneys, like rejection And I remember now how months before I had sensed this alien in her & quarrelled quarrelled quarrelled at her & realize now that it was like I was a dog barking at some strange new presence/ some endangering intrusion (Zea 52)

As the poet's thoughts course into each other it forms a seamless stream of intuitive responses. The absence of full stops results in a steady progression of the unbroken reverie. The three commas underscore its staccato nature as the poet subtly morphs his wife's sickness to make it resemble an alien presence.
The third section of the book contains entries made by the poet on the day that his wife died. It also happened to be her birthday. By inserting the entries in square brackets the poet manages to accentuate his feelings of powerlessness and stultifying captivity. There is nothing he can do to fight the onset of his wife's cancer; he is merely a helpless spectator. Seeing her fragile condition and the agony she is put through, erode his faith and hope, and as hope wanes the font is reduced, the voice weakened:

\[\text{I suppose miracles take place like this - from this kind of moment - but we who love look on w/out sufficient faith & understanding & so the hope gets less the dream gets tarnished & heaven weaker weaker weaker (Zea 61)}\]

Amidst the agony of his dismay, Brathwaite seeks to re-assert his love for Doris by a repetitive intonation of care and affection:

\[\text{...my arms so heavy so heavy so heavy & i so helpless & happy happy happy to have her here in my arms & i cd hold her for ever & ever & ever & ever (Zea 62)}\]

Brathwaite's persona, both as artist and husband, is effaced, the "i" is no longer capital, and the insistency of his feelings seeks to focus on his love for Doris.

The third section also demonstrates Brathwaite's dismay and anger at their friends. According to the poet, his having faith in miracles and not abandoning hope was construed by their friends as 'him not learning to accept things as they were, and thus making it harder for both himself and his wife. The outrageousness of their suggestion is brought to the fore by the sudden magnification of the font size as it screams in disbelief:
Acceptance of the terminal nature of his wife's illness and her impending death, in their view would prepare both of them for the terrible event. His agonized response to that makes clear that, for him, acceptance does not necessarily mean abandoning hope, that one could always have hope and yet be reconciled to one's fate. Here The Zea Mexican Diary becomes more than a memoir, it also serves as a social commentary on the nature of a Black male's existence in the Caribbean. In the poet's opinion the men have become marginalized to such an extent that "we don't even know how to comfort them except perhaps as lovers or children" (174). Hence the inability of his friends to provide any measure of solace and comfort. According to the poet, Caribbean culture does not provide the men with the necessary emotional and psychological tools to cope with loss. There exists no template for emotional recovery, no model to provide any measure of consolation as the poet describes later to his sister, Mary Morgan:

But the widows? the widower? in a-we-culture? Depending on his age/condition he's either useless cock or hot new unexpeected 'property'/ the newly 'eligible "bachelor"'. In either/neither case

NO/BODY bizness wid im grief & dislocation. im is suppose to cope
The explicit use of Nation Language, the fractured rhythms of the blank verse and the radical reassignment of fonts only serves to highlight the severity of the fissures in the Caribbean male’s psyche. This premise has striking similarities with the theme he pursues in Ancestors. The Caribbean’s history of rupture and dislocation has completely fractured the Black Male—his deficiencies starkly visible in his relationships with the women in his life. The poet is not immune to the predicament of the Caribbean male and he himself struggles to make sense of his feelings. Brathwaite’s pleas for help went unacknowledged; they just seemed to make people angry (Zea 67). Even in the midst of a grave personal crisis the poet makes an effort to understand the impasse he is confronted with. He needs, wants and demands consolation but none is to be found, so in the midst of his personal crisis he sets upon himself the task of enumerating the reasons for his quandary. The poet becomes a detached, if not somewhat dispassionate, observer as his grief is channelled into a critique of society. As the section draws to a close the husband re-surfaces with poetry as lament; critical reasoning gives way to overwhelming grief and guilt:

How God has come to punish me not cherishing enough: the long nights I sometimes/too too often surely/ was away/ the smell of other muses on my breath/the tales she must have heard the agonies of doubt/selfdoubt her love might well have tried to justify xplain/xplain away forgive & must have caused her generosity to hide & harbour like a pearl inside her heart/her hurt until it built itself into this tumour and how I feel Olurun/God has now withdrawn from me because I did not preciate ijs gifts of
Thus Brathwaite makes the leap from an objective appraisal of Caribbean culture in prose to some of his most tender poetry in the short span of a few pages. At the heart of *The Zea Mexican Diary* lies a multi-faceted, many-voiced narrator whose intellectual oeuvre is as eclectic as it is vast. His different viewpoints act concomitantly to intercede on each other’s behalf; personal grief underscoring the shortcomings of a culture, the personal space of the diary for public comment and the plight of a poet as both husband and artist. Characteristically, the poet brings the third section to an abrupt close with the publication of Doris’ death certificate. Death is concretised in the stark medical terms of Doris’ cancer; the poet’s loss is now far from abstract to the reader, its malignant presence haunts the page.

Section IV is titled ‘Middle Passage’. It records Doris’ death and its immediate aftermath. The poet is away, working on Doris’ bibliography for him, when his wife breathes her last. On his arrival he is informed by his sister, Mary, that Doris is no more. The resulting panic in his mind and sense of shock are put to paper in varying fonts, mirroring the disarray of the poet’s mind. The typographic alterations are now more pronounced and erratic, moving from the brutal intensity of the “*What’s happening*” and “*She’s gone*”, when...
Brathwaite is informed of her death, to the recording of his seemingly inconsequential rambling response of “there are no words for this” (Zea 91). The ostensibly arbitrary rendition of fonts manifests the chaotic nature of the poet’s thoughts as they run the entire gamut of emotions. Order, however marginal, only seems to be restored when Brathwaite reads out a prayer. Reflecting the calm that the poet is trying to enforce on his troubled self, the font exudes serenity; it is bold and confident.

Section V is titled ‘Letter to Zea Mexican’ and consists of a letter written by Brathwaite on the night she died and later read by Edward Baugh at the Thanksgiving service for Doris. Making extensive use of his Sycorax Video style, the letter begins with a small, regular font and makes use of only the right half of the page. The font is small, the lines small and the poet’s voice a mere whisper. The iterative structuring of his reminiscences locates the specificity of his incommensurable grief in the fragments of the sentences that crowd the margins of the text. The poet’s sadness is, for the time being, peripheral, as love takes centre-stage. In the absence of physical intimacy, the poet cries out his love for his wife in a torrent of questions. Her opinion is the only thing that matters now:

And you, my love? Can you see me? Hear me?
Sorry? Puzzled? Lonely?
so how? Do I affect you?
Do you affect me? Are
you okay? Are you ha-
ppy or still suffering? (Zea 114)

This questioning does not take on the form of his muted reminiscing, but instead a more aggressive tone that politely, but insistently, demands answers. The poet's inability to comprehend his wife's predicament torments him, and his interrogative posturing resonates this perplexity.

Recalling their courting days, in a graphic departure from his earlier style, the poet cultivates a ceremonial font. The intrinsic beauty of its slants and curves epitomizes the blissful nature of their courtship. In accenting the serenity and beauty of falling in love with his wife, the poet manages to underscore the measure of his loss. Brathwaite structures the end of the letter with a celebratory evocation of selfless love, gratitude and appreciation that reaches a crescendo in the rapidly increasing font size:

yes yes yes
yes yes yes

Yes
She is the
one is the
one is the
wonderful/
my lady of
the gold of
the gold of
the golden
warakuna
skin: my tê
my tê my
Tete- 
mexti- 
canl (Zea 123)

The section containing Ayama’s letter is interwoven with the poet’s observations on the letter, and his life and career as a poet. This section becomes a collage of intersecting commentaries, each illuminating the other by interceding on each other’s behalf. Mirroring the utter confusion that grief has caused, the poet’s thoughts run the entire gamut of guilt, failure, elation, love, loss and loneliness. Ayama’s letter is printed in a strong, bold typeface, always reminding the poet and the reader about the incident that has occasioned his own writings. Thus reflecting the peripheral nature of his own thoughts, the poet “brackets” them within square braces. They are part of his “other” life, that of an academic and a poet. He talks about his inability to find a publisher for his poetry, of him not being taken seriously as a poet (a vice chancellor of his university refers to it as a “hobby”) and of not being able to fit in with his peers.

As the poet’s mind rummages through a wide spectrum of issues, the erratic nature of his thoughts is mirrored by the sudden line breaks and inconsistent font variations. Slippages in memory are not excused; instead they are exposed in their incomplete barrenness. Mature thoughts have the ritual coherence of a poet’s deft touch, and those yet nascent are shored up by wisdom from his past:
[But] words are not working right now. Did not come inside. With the general gathering, Kamau, sat out here and shared with you. The preacher [Philip Potter] is preaching now. He is finish now. Silence. Who is coming next? A woman’s [Mary’s] voice Sounds like a prayer [reading from Islands]

So on this ground

write

within the sound

of this white limestone veve

talk

of the empty roads

vessels of your head

claypots shards ruins (Zea 132-133)

The voice reading the words might not be his, but the poet finds comfort in the wisdom of his poetry. They exude an intimacy that has been missing since his wife’s death. They instil a sense of integrity and stability that has been eroded by his self-doubts and guilt after Doris’ death. To solidify his sense of assurance, the poet increases the font of the interwoven poem and ends the section by quoting extensively from it: “the word becomes/ again a god” (Zea 141).

It is not only his own poetry that offers Brathwaite solace, peace and comfort. They are also to be found in the condolences of friends, but there “are too few of these” as the poet writes (Zea 78). Brathwaite writes:

The “Friends”, I know, accused her of nourishing this 'dubiou talent': of too much giving in to 'Eddie' as I sure that you yrself have heard/ have said As if this
made her less, as if indeed it made her sick - perhaps it even killed her. YES THE POET KILL IM WIFE An ole Story
How she Sacrifice sheSelf....She was more You than She etc etc etc this was part of the DotDot/DotDash burden & I think I have heard you w/ it too...
But she was my wife/the perfect poet's wife - I mean the perfect wife of/for the poet. She made it possible. (Zea 152)

The poet lashes out at all his detractors who have perpetuated his feelings of guilt. They had accused him of being a selfish and self-centred person whose career as a poet took precedence over everything else. They were of the opinion that in his pursuit for creative fame he had ignored his relationship with his wife who became little more than a stepping-stone. Brathwaite opens up the intensely personal space of the diary to refute all their contentions. The diary now becomes a forum for public self-expression, a critique of social disaffection. The idiosyncratic nature of the formatting of this section hints not at the poet’s state of mind but instead alerts the reader to the intrinsic prejudice of his critics' comments. The disorderly and turbulent typography becomes a signifier of exclusionary and bigoted politicking.

The poet's grudge against the biased treatment extends to his sister to whom he writes letters to explain his indignation. These letters were written during the time Doris died to the time of the “tree planting”, more than a month later, in an attempt to explicate the dilemma of his situation. He feels that his sister has abandoned him after Doris’s death and she was his only emotional anchor after Doris and their mother's death. The author introduces hyphens to signal the disjuncture in their relationship. The fragmentary spacing between his words indicates not only the void that has come to be between
them but also exemplifies the magnitude of his resentment and hurt:

You - at this time of crisis - of
Xtremis - of the wilderness - ha -
ve condemned & drowned me to
this letter to these litters to help
less long long-distance telephone
(s) to gusts of grief & questions...

Is it that God perhaps thru you
& the silence of the "Friends" (wh-
o when they - seldom - see me, don’t
even call her name) is testing test-
ing testing perhaps pushing per
haps punishing yr brother? To
take our Mother in one year &
in the neXt my Wife - the very
marrows/ narrows of my life & lo
ve choked out w/sulphur - my
future - what that’s worth - en -
trusted too much to the mercy &
‘kindness of Strangers’? Who
judges who? And how? (Zea 180-181)

The semantic rupture on the page embodies the dysfunctional
and tenuous nature of their relationship and the integrity of
the narrative is constantly challenged by the spatial
arrangements of the hyphenated breaks. The staccato rhythm
that the spacing and the breaks establish echoes the
dissonance and discord of the poet’s mind. While indicting his
sister for neglect the poet is also reaching out across the
fissure in their relationship to make amends, to break status quo. He needs family:

Everyone, I feel, shd have - need (s) - a Holy Family & a Circle of Friends - matter how few - a - round which all is centred. (Zea 179)

And despite all that has come to be between them, Brathwaite is willing to forgive and forget, to move ahead:

seeking the still waters w/ the knowledge
deepest sister, that whatever else or what
- I love you -
...
and so I hope that perhaps long after I have written this... & ridden these events...you will be walking back across this broken ground towards me... (Zea 184-185)

The Zea Mexican Diary draws to an end with the ‘Epigraph’ written by Brathwaite just before the Mona Chapel Service for his wife and read by Edward Baugh at the Service. The ‘Epigraph’ is a loving obituary written by the poet for Doris in which he celebrates the many achievements of her life and thanks her for everything she gave him, emotionally, physically and artistically. The “tree planting” ceremony, an exculpatory rite facilitating absolution, follows the ‘Epigraph’. The Diary seems to have come a full circle as the ceremony enacts the last of the philosophical tenets of the I Ching mentioned in the Preface: “If he do repent of former errors, there will be good fortune in going forward” (14). As the tree planting ceremony draws to a close the words on the page become sparse as the poet sheds the dead weight of guilt and grief that has burdened him. Mr. Reid singing takes on the
form of ritual atonement as the poet makes the transition from an enervating sense of culpability and self-reproach to acceptance and self-confidence. The iterative rendition of Mr. Reid’s song opens up an intervening arena in which Brathwaite successfully achieves a calmness of spirit, a deliberative tranquillity:

Rest now

alright

...is alright now...

Watch...I & you

Watch....between I and you

....

for a little while longer the

of the song of his voice in the Irish Tn light
a clear day coming up a blue day
a quiet quiet quiet morning & the brief thousand rising suns in the
mahogany tree’s dark halfway down the slope (205-206)

In the essay ‘Her stem singing: Kamau Brathwaite’s Zea Mexcian Diary’, Anne Walmsley writes:

The poem’s “video style” seems itself an apt memorial to Kamau Brathwaite’s Zea Mexican, who, he tells, continued to work on her Kaypro computer in her illness, kept it with her until the very end. Its effect of making the words sing echoes the vibrations of the Tulip Tree, “her
"stem / singing" (207), and is confirmed by Mary Morgan: "Doris loved to sing." (3)

The phonic alterations of words, their spatial re-arrangement, their rhetoric of repetition, and sudden disjunctive breaks give way to a semantic serenity in an attempt to harmonize the discordant elements of the poet’s troubled consciousness, his guilty conscience. By the end of the narrative, called "Anyaneanyane - The Awakening", reconciliation has been attained. Concurrently, mirroring the thematic resolution at various stages, "Typographic ornaments are placed at strategic points within the text", opines Anne Walmsley. She contends that "a small black square, familiar as an indication that a piece of writing is complete, appears after Doris’s death; a star-stem appears after the planting of the tree, a large Heart-ease flower-star after the final section" ('Her Stem Singing' 3).

The abstract causality of loss and guilt is tempered with the irreversible contingency of change and movement. The performative articulation of the poet’s diary suggests the actuality of such praxis, while reconstituting the paradigms of public and private grief. By mediating on the textual nature of poetic expression and its polyvalent potential, the poet attempts to instantiate a visual poetics that stresses not only material of poetic composition but also its ocular representation. This alternative mode of representation seeks to challenge the dogmatic perusal of Western modes of articulation, the application of which to native subject matter is often reductive and constricting.

_Trench Town Rock_

The title of Brathwaite’s long poem is derived from the name of a town in Jamaica, called Trench Town. It is famous for
being the birthplace of Bob Marley, reggae’s greatest exponent. In fact, Marley had an album by the same name as that of Brathwaite’s book. Far from reggae’s message of peace and love, the poem is Brathwaite’s attempt to document the “increasing brutalisation” in Caribbean society (Conversations 257). In trademark Brathwaite fashion, Trench Town Rock displays a wide variety of poetic modes, rendered in his “Sycorax Video” style. The poem includes prose, journalistic reportage, transcribed conversation and conventional poetry. The different genres coalesce to form a hard-hitting indictment of the rapidly increasing criminalisation of the Caribbean. In the words of Nathaniel Mackey:

Trench Town Rock, Kamau Brathwaite’s long documentarian song, affords insistent ‘nansic spin – a splay of clips, massed facts and faces, rare synaesthetic call and cry rolled into brash typographic distraint. Jimmied lines and real and would-be headlines lament the collapse of postcolonial promise into ongoing predation. The book says “see see see until yu bline.” (Trench rear cover)

The poem was inspired by a break-in at the poet’s residence, when three armed intruders burgled his house while he was held at gunpoint, bound and gagged. According to the author the fractured psyche of the Caribbean needs a literature of “catastrophe”, which mirrors the ruptured collective consciousness of the Caribbean people. The poem is composed of six sections. The first three depict the general crime ridden environment and the failure of society, at all levels, to combat the increase in crime while stressing its complicity. In the words of Silvio Torres-Saillant:

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1 See ‘Metaphor for Underdevelopment’. Art of Kamau Brathwaite.
Profoundly personal, "Trench Town Rock" is also deeply social. Indeed, before getting to the individual catastrophe, the text amply evokes, via typographic variations, interviews, news reports, and other discourse combinations, the omnipresence of violent crime in Kingston. The story of his own travail comes in a section entitled "My Turn," suggesting that for anyone in the society to become a victim is just a matter of waiting a turn. (7)

The fourth section details the break-in at the poet’s home, followed by a section listing several violent crimes and the plight of their victims. The book ends with the quotation of a poem originally by Neville Dawes.

The first section of the poem titled 'The Marley Manor Shoot/in', details the killings at Marley Manor, the residential complex where Brathwaite lived, about three months before the attack on Brathwaite. Signalling a break from all traditional poetic constraints, the start of the poem is heralded by a detective novel like suspenseful opening scene. It also sets the tone for the rest of the book, in which violence is predominant. In an effort to realistically depict the endemic nature of crime in the Caribbean, the poet resorts to his "Sycorax Video" style. Armed men break into the apartment complex on the night/early morning of 16th July 1990. The poet is:

Aweakened by gunshatt
...;
TWO SHATTS
-silence-
not evening the dogs barking or the trees blazing
& then a cry we couldn't see of
do
do
do
nuh kill me (Trench 9)

The exclusionary thrust of the large typeface underscores the potential violence of the confrontation between the victimizer and the victim. The iterative structuring of the helpless plea reinforces the plight of the victim, while simultaneously hinting at the tragic inevitability of the one-sided conflict. This is followed by gunfire, and ten minutes “later - longer” the arrival of the police. Even after the flight of the perpetrators, and the arrival of the police, the context remains irretrievably grim and forbidding. It is made clear by the poet, even at this early stage that his critique of violence extends beyond the analysis of crime and criminals, to encompass every facet of society and its structures. The arrival of the police cars is compared to a gathering of ants, “Xcept that ants are never late as these now were too late” (Trench 11).

The attack of the intruders leaves three people dead. The poet is aware of the extent of dehumanisation in Caribbean society in the face of repeated violence: “the seven bullet holes that walked us from our sleep all bleeding in the early morning light” (Trench 13). He personalizes the loss of life in an attempt to sensitise the people to the catastrophe of brutal crime. The continuity of one of the dead victim’s plight, known as “Early Bird”, is established through his identification with the living he left behind. Human life is placed within the web of relationships, entanglements and
dependencies it fosters. To characterize the contrapuntal immediacy of his perspective, the poet forsakes the resigned comfort of a regular typeface and resorts to the use of a more emphatic typography, as prose melts into poetry:

his body now without its bones or muscleature.
Without its meat without its clutch & nomen of a face/ familiar creatures/ that someone somewhere somehow knew/ that someone/ somewhere loved & because the man himself had fled out through these leaking holes, his locks had whirled around him as the bullets made him dance his death & wrapped themselves around him as he fell. (Trench 13)

Bird is survived by mother, Sunshine, nine children, six brothers, three sisters and a host of other relatives (Trench 21).

The extent of society’s neglect is grimly emphasised in Brathwaite’s juxtaposition of a creative rendition of the events with the starkly factual journalistic report detailing the nature of the crime and the number of the dead. The deaths of this particular shoot-out are framed within the larger context of a violent society as the poet incorporates grim statistics from newspaper and television reports. The crimes are brutal and the violence senseless, the viciousness of most crimes heightened by the trivial nature of their causes: “for more spending money during the approaching independence holiday season” (Trench 19).
This theme of passive disinterestedness is extended in the poet’s recollection of the events leading up to, and following, the discovery of the body beneath his car. That event, as the poet is asked by the police to move his car in order for them to recover the body, is turned by an insensitive, irresponsible media into a spectacle for public consumption. The exigencies of the media industry demand a crude reductionism that, more often than not, overlooks the facts. Its doctrine of profitability at any cost has resulted in a loss of credibility, but its potential to inflict damage is largely unchecked and thus perilous for a culpable audience:

And by the two o’clock midday TV news my poor blue cyar……was on ‘the sir’ as if it/self had carried out the crime & all day long there was this trek of visits to ‘the scene’
Click/click
Gape/gossip (Trench 16-17)

According to Brathwaite, since this event was witnessed by a large crowd and “live tv cameras”, he was afraid “that certain people watchin this on television might get the impression that I’m somehow involve in all this” (Conversations 254). He feared for his reputation. The free flowing spatial arrangement with its inordinately large font enumeration resonates the use of the media as a propaganda machine while simultaneously questioning it through a linguistic dialectic.
In an attempt to make sense of present conditions, the poet reaches within to tap his historical consciousness. The long-term consequences of indentured slavery, brutality of colonization, poverty and uneven economic growth find an echo in the poet’s conception of the present’s dilemma. His words resonate the symptomatic synchronicity of two different epochs as the poet’s lyric sets up a rhythm of despair:

So that these crimes we all embrace
The victim & the violate
The duppy & the gunman
So close on these plantations still
So intimate
The dead/undead (Trench 22)

The second section, titled ‘Straight Talk’ and dated 19th July 1990, is transcribed from a tape recording of a radio interview. The host of the radio show is talking to a “JLP Councillor & Caretaker”, McKenzie about the rise in crime and the attendant increase in police and military brutality. Their conversation is anything but “Straight” talk as each attempts to justify his position in a blatant effort to garner publicity and credit. Brathwaite enacts the transcription in a novel, inventive manner that highlights the absurdity and egocentricity of the positions taken by the interlocutors and his host as they strive to demean the other while praising their own policies. The poet’s comments are interwoven into the conversation in a much smaller font and are enclosed within square braces. Typographically, they remain peripheral to the main text; thematically they play an integral role in undermining the veracity of the interlocutors’ comments while exposing their fraudulent interests.
Following the title page of the section is a page with the word “tort”. Webster’s dictionary describes “tort”, in law, as a “wrongful act...resulting in an injury, loss or damage, for which the injured party can bring civil action.” In the poem, “tort” alludes to the injustices meted out to the people in the Caribbean by their own soldiers and politicians. A major theme of this section is to present a forum through which the travails of the people can be voiced. Brathwaite’s commentary exposes not only the biases of the politicians, as they seek public sympathy, but also undercuts the egocentric prejudices of the liberal media.

The transcription of a radio conversation offers the poet a stylistic device that can be readily adapted for social critique. The host voices many of the opinions held by the liberal, peace-loving section of the citizenry. The politician he is interviewing represents the typical, self-serving polity.

Brathwaite prefaces the transcription with the question:

**When last did you see your Father?** (Trench 28)

This apparently simple question has several layers of signification. The italicised slant of the font implies a subtle distancing from the mundane, the overtly signified. It is not a lapse into obscurantism but rather a break from the normative. The poet is addressing the people of his homeland and asking them to look into their personal histories for an answer to their present dilemma. Did the lack of a father figure result in a misguided youth and adulthood? The absence
of the father in the Caribbean household and its traumatic results are a frequent theme of the poet’s work. The men in the Caribbean are not equipped for fatherhood, neither emotionally nor psychologically. The asymmetry of the traditional household is manifested in the further rupture of the Caribbean male psyche. Lacking strong role models, the male youth have taken to violence as a means of escape. They try to fill their emotional void with the acquisition of money and power. The poet’s question seeks to unite different strata of society by reminding them of their shared predicament. For the disinterested and disaffected, the poet’s question seeks to reinforce the immediacy of the consequences of crime. By leaving the question hanging on the page, the poet hints that the next victim could be anyone of them. Its sole presence on the page points to the centrality of its implication; no longer is the theme relegated to the margins of social discourse.

The “Councillor” rails against the excessive use of force by the Military. He says that he is not against the searches and the curfew but against the humiliation of citizens by the soldiers. Perkins, the host, proclaims that he is sceptical about stories of brutality by soldiers; stories similar to the one that McKenzie narrates. Here, Brathwaite is deft in bringing out the irony in Perkins’ observation, by punning on the word “re-told”. Perkins “had in fact retailed a similar story just before McKenzie phoned” (Trench 33). The coarse, self-serving, profit driven motives of the news media are in direct conflict with their ability to deliver a fair, unprejudiced, factual version of events devoid of hype.

Upon being reminded by the host that similar stories surfaced during the reign of another political party, and that nothing
was done about it, the righteous indignation of McKenzie’s response is mocked by the poet’s phonetic rendition:

\[
\text{McK: Mr. Perkins, Mr. Perkins, I doan call} \\
\text{You all de way from Kingston [KLAS, re} \\
\text{Member, originates in Mandeville] to score} \\
\text{Cheap political points; that is not what} \\
\text{I call you about} \quad (Trench 33)
\]

Caribbean patois is no longer employed to signify autochthonous honesty; instead it underscores the extent and character of political betrayal. Repeated denials are used to consolidate the rhetoric of altruism, which Brathwaite in turn exposes by re-structuring the narrative. As the section draws to a close the two men are jostling for sound bites while raising the pitch of the dialogue. McKenzie’s exaggeratedly aggrieved sensibility has to make way for Perkin’s political doctrine as the poet continuously modifies the size of the font to represent their acrimonious exchange:

\[
\text{P: BUT HOLE ON!} \\
\text{McK: But Mr Perkins –} \\
\text{P: YOU HOLE ON A –} \\
\text{McK: Mr Perkins –} \\
\text{Perkins: [louder and louder]} \\
\text{Mr McKenzie, you} \\
\text{lissen to me!} \\
\text{McK: Mr Perkins, dat sort a –} \\
\text{Perkins: Mr McKenzie, you} \\
\text{lissen to me!} \\
\text{McK: If/if in my office –} \\
\text{P: [sucking his teeth and pretty close to apoplexy}
\]
0 lissen to
me or/or we
stop this
conversation! (Trench 37-38)

The mutating graphic on the page exemplifies the discordant viewpoints of the participants. The graphic’s mutability ruptures the semantic integrity of the spoken word making it permeable and insecure, and the poet succeeds in opening up spaces in the narrative and making it amenable to alternative analysis. The structural thematization emphasises the impasse that confronts both the individual and society where one’s politics seem to appropriate the other’s. In order to make one’s voice heard, the other has to be shouted down. The resulting frenzy mirrors the social turmoil in the Caribbean.

The third section of Trench Town Rock is a poetic cry of despair and despondency. The preceding chaos in prose finds expression in a poetic lament for the attendant collapse of law and order. Instead of using existing structures and giving them a less emphatic character, the poet employs a more conventional poetics to express his interpretation of historical change:

with this reed I make music
with this pen I remember the word
with these lips I can remember the beginning of the world

between these bars is this sudden lock-up
where there is only the darkness of dog-bark
where I cannot make windmills of my hands
where I cannot run down the hill-path of faith
where I cannot suffer the little children (47)

The poet’s lyric transcends the temporal immediacy of the previous sections by harking to an idyllic past. The poem’s patterning is conventional with a smaller, regular font in an attempt to establish a lull before proceeding to the trauma of the next section. The first person perspective of this section is shored against a collective historical consciousness to reinforce the poet’s view of the artist working within a communal tradition. The fundamental correspondence between African and Caribbean culture is used to dynamically create a vision of harmony and unity:

my authority was sunlight: the man who arose from
the dead called me saviour
his eyes had known moons
older than jupiters
my authority was windmills, choirs singing of the
flowers of rivers

The apparent serenity of this section is juxtaposed with discordant anger of a repressed society to craft a rhythmic exploration of an individual’s suffering:

your authority is these chains that strangle my wrists
your authority is the red whip that circles my head
your authority is the white eye of interrogator’s terror. siren price fix the law of undarkness
the dreadness of the avalanches of unjudgement

... 
i would call out by my lost children
The structural design of the section also gives the poet an opportunity to recoup his creative energy for the traumatic unfolding of events in the next section titled 'My Turn'. It is dated October 24 1990, the day Brathwaite was attacked in his apartment. Writing in Conversations, the poet states that although the previous break-ins at his apartment complex should have been reason enough to move, he "had nowhere else to go, having already lost" his "way" at Irish Town: "...and I like it where I am at the Marley - good name! Clean, bright, open, breezy. A full-of-activity place, with pop soul artistes like Maxi Priest..." (247).

This section is, thus, an expansive elaboration of the events following the break-in. The absurdity of the event, the casual violence it entailed and its sheer injustice is signified by the rapidly, almost chaotically changing font size and ambivalent structural stylistics.

"Two-gunman break-in" to the poet’s Marley Manor apartment in the early hours of Wednesday morning, 24th October 1990:

about 4:30 - MM killing time - hear something wake me
with a sense of like a door been open in the sitting room
and like a

ANAMAL

was sniffing round. (Trench 57)

The poet refers to his attackers as "ANAMALS", echoing a sense of their primal, savage nature. Concomitantly, it is a refusal to acknowledge them as human beings and accord them any human qualities and privileges. It is also Brathwaite's refusal to acknowledge the criminals as members of his community. The
poet’s humanity is revealed through his willing blindness, in this instant, to the presence of malevolent as well as benevolent impulses in his brethren. The poet here moves from an exterior commentator to an intimate participant in expressing the need to establish distance between him and the perpetrators of the crime.

They tied up his hand and foot with the extension cord of his telephone. As they put a gun to his head to ask him “whe de money deh; and later, dese yu cyar keys?”, the poet is suddenly confronted by the malevolent potential of firearms:

POWA

In dat gun (Trench 58)

This sudden realization bursts onto the page with an impetuous urgency. The scribal configuration of the word “POWA” reverberates the complete physical dominance of the intruders’ armed presence. The poet’s observation establishes the gunmen’s voice as “MIDDLECLASS not ghetto stereotype” shattering the complacency of the middle class for whom most, if not all criminals, belong to the most deprived segment of society.

The burglars made off with a number of Brathwaite’s personal possessions, including the wedding ring given to him by his wife thirty years ago: “her wedding ring from off my coward finger (the gunman whispered is dis GOLE?)” (Trench 53). Among the stolen possessions were his car, two colour televisions, telephone and money. The entire section’s stylistic arrangement presents a story of loss and violation:
**ENTIRE little submarine is**

**CHURNED up by**

the gunmen lookin

money whe deh money bwoy,

Gimme de money bwoy} (Trench 54)

Its fragmentation and seemingly arbitrary dissonance expound a visual schema of senseless hostility; a sense of being adrift in un-chartered waters. The poet draws on the ambivalence of stylised visual representation to illustrate the pervading disharmony. The centrally positioned, enlarged typography signifies the poet’s distress and makes an evocative assertion of his sense of helplessness:

**If**

They had SHOOT me as one of them

Had wisp me kess waaan

Kill smaddy twnite. It sweet me shoott

You bwoy I wd have

Bleed to death

Upon that bed...( Trench 57)

This section thus functions as a video documentary of a crime, replete with flashbacks and voice-overs. It becomes in Brathwaite’s words a “clip” from a movie. According to the poet:

And as the poetry gets closer, in this way, to a kind of cinema-painting, it will, thr(u) these senses, become
The fifth, and penultimate, section of Trench Town Rock titled ‘Short History of Dis or Middle Passages Today’ alludes to the brutal history of the African slaves’ journey across the Atlantic Ocean to the New World. This section chronicles the violent happenings of the present “Age of Dis. Distress Dispair & Disrespect. Distrust Disrupt Distraction” (73). The poet through the use of newspaper reports interspersed with personal observations insistently summons violence. In the “profane cremation of the silence that surrounds that loss that no one hardly notices” 68), the poet’s explicit purpose is to make one “see see see until yu bline” (67). His scrupulous attention to the minutiae of news reports accentuates the random absurdity of the crimes. The nature of the crimes and their human toll are reported in gruesome detail by the media, but its subsequent erasure from the collective consciousness of the Caribbean people evokes memories of the slaves’ Middle Passage: “And like the victims of our first (that 18th century) Middle Pass. no memory of no mourning for this passage” (68).

By an ingenuous repetition of detail, one personal and the other public, the poet manages, in the fourth and fifth sections, to underscore the catastrophic consequences of a brutalized, crime-ridden society. While newspaper reports help ground the historical accuracy of his narrative, Brathwaite’s personalized account of the violent break-in underscores the human toll endemic crime entails. No longer is crime confined to the headlines, instead it is a litany of a violent presence that pervades the poet’s community. Brathwaite aims to move from reportage to an actual experience of the event.
poet's inclusion of newspaper headlines, his emphasis on the details of what happened, his own experience, serve to highlight the distance that exists between the clinical list of "happenings" in newspapers and the visceral presence of violation, of violence, that his story, his people's story is all about.

Chopping off
Peoples Dreams

These lines appear towards the end of the section, ostensibly as the headlines for a report on a woman whose arm was severed and her bracelets stolen. The bold font is a reminder of the increasing "boldness" of the act, and also a staccato representation of the crime. The chopping is a decisive move, and the bolded and enlarged font remind the reader that a community's dreams, a people's hope, have been shattered. The insertion of Dreams for belongings, for valuables, pulls the reader from the location of the crime to the dislocation of Peoples.

The book ends with a lyric poem written by Neville Dawes titled 'The Last Enchantment'. It is the narrative of a boy who continues to lose his belongings to various strangers till he is left with nothing but the Blues. This poem appears in an italicised version, lending it fluidity and form, and is a child's poem in Patois.

Beginning like a fairy tale, "Once when Ananse was a likkle bwoy...", the poem belies the slave experience that was anything but "enchanted" (Trench 77). It continues to narrate the little boy's wandering through lands and through his meeting with people, focusing on the loss of his innocence, his belongings. The little boy then stands in as a lyrical
(fairy-like) representation of the poet’s loss of his sense of security. The poem, in its italicised lyrical structure, provides the poet with a removed stylised “dream” version of his experience—indicating his peoples’ ability to fashion music, song, and poetry from their base of violence, displacement, and disenfranchisement.

The last line of the poem reads, “...but tek dis blue...” (Trench 78) – the “blue” is the ocean where many slaves chose to drown themselves rather than face a life of slavery; it is the “blue” of the sky where the Africans looked for their gods to descend; it is the indigo “blue” of the skin, of the dye, they were skilled in making; it is colour of their dreams; it is the name of their music and their poetry—their fierce resistance to losing beauty; it is, in the end, the signifier of their lives and their loss.