Conclusion

Brathwaite resuscitates and refigures the history and African heritage of the Caribbean. It is on the reconstruction of the history of the Caribbean that the future of his land depends. The poet feels the need to salvage and then build upon the past of his people. A mythic framework needs to be established and a unique cultural identity of the Caribbean people developed because the Caribbean did not automatically re-acquire an indigenous culture after independence, as was perhaps the case with many formerly colonised territories.

Brathwaite’s poetic and critical oeuvre can thus be seen as a sustained drive to find a voice for his people. He vigorously endorses the vitality of the autochthonous against the historical backdrop of exploitation and destruction. His work situates the communal identity of the Caribbean within the matrix of a shared African ancestry, hence establishing the enduring validity of his people’s culture. The poet questions, at various levels, the legitimacy of his colonial legacy and on finding it lacking in veracity, propounds his notion of an indigenised historiography.

In The Arrivants, his first trilogy, Brathwaite questions the Caribbean’s cultural heritage and its failure to protect his people against the onslaught of colonialism before positing the similarities of their history as a means of forging a unity of spirit and ideas. As Robert Young writes in his book White Mythologies: "Only an understanding that recognizes that an irresolvable tension works within the historical schema itself will be in a position to make its contradictory claims productive" (83). The result is a sophisticated reconstruction of the Caribbean’s history with an emphasis on traditional African culture. Using a subtle blend of erudition and folk
wisdom, Brathwaite successfully manipulates received notions of colonial historiography to enhance the validity of his ideological stance with a strong accent on the indigenous.

In his book, *An Introduction to West Indian Poetry*, Laurence A. Breiner contends that the publication of *The Arrivants* trilogy in 1967 “is the single most consequential event in the history of West Indian poetry to date” (177). In the trilogy Brathwaite interrogates the sanctioned historical narratives of the colonisers through a strategic intervention in the understanding of Caribbean history. Since the “object of history is the human subject itself” the intervention is both public and personal, each working concurrently to dismantle the machinery of colonialism (Ricoeur 40). The poet fashions a radically unsettling parable to disrupt the prejudiced narrativity of colonial historiography.

In his essay ‘Representing the Colonized: Anthropology's Interlocutors’, Edward Said argues that “Exile, immigration, and the crossing of boundaries are experiences that can...provide us with new narrative forms or...with other ways of telling” (225). Personal exile is used by Brathwaite as the overarching trope to reconcile his role as a postcolonial writer with that of a Black Caribbean male. The idea of exile, both personal and communal, contextualises his broadly fictive rendition of Caribbean history within the broad framework of the collective history of the African diaspora.

*The Arrivants* is a reconstruction of the exploitation and suffering of the Caribbean people, and a meditation on the very personal themes of alienation and identity. But unlike *The Arrivants*, in which Brathwaite looks at the experiences of the Black diaspora and its links of geographic and cultural displacement to the New World, the second trilogy, *Ancestors*,
is an attempt to document his native island through individual experiences. It displays Brathwaite’s ability to delineate the slippages that occur in drawing binary distinctions between the personal and the political framework, even as it maintains its commitment to a voice of the biographical experience. It is a testament to the fact that though History as an epistemological concept may be constructed through treaties and policies of States and other such governing entities, it is written on and through the bodies and lives of the people, and it is here that we find the sanctioned narratives of historical events breaking down.

Ancestors furthers the theme of historical renewal to include the reconstruction of the poet’s postcolonial persona. The vast mythic structure of the trilogy is multi-layered and spans across both the literal and the metaphorical; the human and the geophysical. On the level of autobiography, the trilogy is about the poet’s life and his family; his mother, father, childhood, adulthood. On another, communal level, the scope of the trilogy expands to incorporate the mutually inclusive personal histories of the poet’s people. The Mother Poem, then, enlarges to embrace the narratives of the women of the island, and further still to include their collective Mother, the island, Barabados, itself. Similarly the Sun Poem considers the male genealogy of the poet’s land while simultaneously charting the development of a singular male persona. X/Self, the last part of the Ancestors trilogy, contests any notion of a singularly unified linear history by pitting it against the fragmentation inherent in the historical consciousness of a postcolonial writer. Brathwaite’s “Calibanized” version of history seeks to re-inscribe the postcolonial’s eroded identity into mainstream Caribbean discourse.
The Ancestors does not confirm to any fixed typology, constantly weaving between fact and fiction to explore all potentialities of fictional representation. Brathwaite’s fictional trilogies consistently ground themselves in the immutability of the Caribbean’s African past and the continuity of its indigenous narrative structures, for, in the words of Michel Foucault, “it is possible to make fiction work inside of truth” (qtd. in Allan Megill 235). Using his “magic realist” style the poet seeks to dismantle the constellation of Western historiography and attempt the recovery of an “authentic” Caribbean past. Brathwaite’s use of culture-specific motifs, radically unsettling spatial and temporal shifts, and the imaginative recreation of historical events and personae effectuate the re-conceptualisation of fictional creativity.

Central to the poet’s conception of discursive literary construction is the “mis-use” of language. Not only does he make extensive use of Nation Language in his poetics, his book History Of The Voice lays down its theoretical framework and historical background. Though it had been used before in the Caribbean, Brathwaite’s treatise on the subject and his resolute commitment to its use in his poetics has helped establish Nation Language as a more inclusive mode of literary expression. With the publication of The Arrivants, Kamau Brathwaite’s pioneering use of Nation Language in a major poetic work heralded a new era in Caribbean poetry. The critic Laurence Breiner asserts that “The Arrivants is for its time and place a functional equivalent to the work of Dante or Chaucer” (178).

Under the aegis of Nation Language, numerous forms of indigenous dialects are imbued with respectability and acceptance. Nation Language is construed by Brathwaite to be
more than a medium of expression; it is also envisaged as the repository of his culture. The poet’s formulation of Nation Language derives from the multi-linguistic inheritance of the Caribbean. Embedded in this complex linguistic paradigm are cultural and historical artefacts that lend Nation Language literature immediacy, authenticity, and resilience. Used extensively in his poetry, Brathwaite’s concept of an indigenised version of Standard English stresses the syntactical and semantic rhythms innate to Caribbean culture. Brathwaite’s idiom is more than an alternate orthography; it is a highly stylised transcreation of English that reflects the imperatives of a worldview rooted in native traditions.

The use of Nation Language, folk rhythms, and indigenous perceptual models demands an attendant change in poetic style and structure. Brathwaite breaks through artistic limitations far more personally and overtly than most Caribbean poets including the Nobel laureate, Derek Walcott. All received notions and concepts of originality and inventiveness undergo a transformation in the poetry of Edward Kamau Brathwaite. His work displays an amazing cognitive strength combined with inventiveness, always challenging the limits of the poetic genre and often transfiguring it. The use of a new idiom that the poet calls “Sycorax Video” suggests an unmitigated belief in the resuscitative ability of words and the “visual effects function...as a metaphor for orality” (Breiner 193). Stylistic, structural and thematic ingenuity is employed by the poet to present a comprehensive alternative to stultifying colonial paradigms. The poet’s linguistic play and stylistic dissidence disrupt canonical poetics to underscore the marginalisation of vernacular literature, while, concurrently, marginalising the contested centre.
Edward Kamau Brathwaite’s influence on Caribbean poets and intellectuals has been considerable. The critic Laurence Breiner contends: “Brathwaite’s poems provoked and in many ways transformed the writers of his own generation” (180). He was the first major poet to exploit the African heritage of the Caribbean. By envisioning Africa as a literary and cultural tradition that can be put to creative use, Brathwaite has facilitated “addressing distinct but related subjects, such as race, color, and the experience of slavery.” “West Indian notions of ‘Africa’” have helped “legitimise the development of poetry in indigenous rather than metropolitan Standard English” and “the exploration of ‘orature’, an oral aesthetic for written poetry” (Breiner 143).

Brathwaite’s use of Nation Language has been inclusive and comprehensive, fostering a wide-ranging development in its application in Caribbean poetry. Commenting on the seminal nature of Brathwaite’s contribution in this regard, Breiner writes:

A new era is staked out for West Indian writing when poets following Brathwaite’s lead demonstrate that nation language can provide not only linguistic objects to be enshrined in a poem, or the means to create a poem of characters, but the material of the poem itself, its own voice, its logos. (182)

Brathwaite’s use of the “magic realist” style, his incorporation of technological advances in the field of publishing, the avowal of the “Sycorax Video” idiom, the explicit use of autochthonous rhythms and syncopations and his notion of performance poetry have set the pace for further innovations in the poetics of the Caribbean. His personal charisma, both as creative and performance artist, has only
helped his cause. Breiner writes: "Brathwaite offers his fellow poets not only a body of poetry, inspiration and personal support, but a newly trained audience, primed by his work and the rewards of adjusting to it on its own terms" (186). Brathwaite's influence has ranged, among others, from the deconstruction of the power structures of English grammar by reggae and dub poets like Michael Smith and Oku Onuora to the explicit allusion to the indigenous, in both thematic and linguistic structures, in the work of David Dabydeen, John Figueroa and John Agard. Brathwaite's critical and poetic work has not only helped redefine the aesthetic of Caribbean poetry but also fundamentally altered the very modes of creative representation.