

Postcolonial Text

Vol. 1, n°1 (2004)

The Reality of Brathwaite's Words: A Dialogue Between Genres

For the Geography of a Soul. Emerging perspectives on Kamau Brathwaite

Timothy J. Reiss, ed.

Trenton [NJ USA] / Asmara [Eritrea]: Africa World Press, 2001

501 pages, ISBN 0 86542 605 2 (pb), USD 29.95

(<http://www.nyu.edu/fas/Faculty/ReissTimothy.html>)

Words Need Love Too

Kamau Brathwaite

St. Martin [Caribbean]: House of Nehesi, 2000

70 pages, ISBN 0 913441 47 3, USD 5.00

(<http://www.houseofnehesipublish.com/kamau.html>)

For the Geography of a Soul, edited by Timothy Reiss, is a fitting tribute to celebrate Kamau Brathwaite's seventieth birthday.

As Reiss puts it in his preface, while the 39 contributions roughly fall into three strands (creative work, literary and cultural criticism, and matters historical), these are not "separate areas of practice. They are facets of one overarching practice of cultural creation" (xiii). While poems alternate with critical pieces, most contributors are *both* scholars and creative writers. This can be felt in the edge and poise of practically all 29 prose pieces. Some, like Isis Costa's "Roaring River of Reflection" in which languages alternate and echo, or Opal Palmer Adisa's "Mystic Man: Irations/Jahrations," combine poetry with personal commentary. Others are altogether unique, like M. Nourbese Philip's "Black W/Holes: A History of Brief Time," which explores the position of Africans in Canada and in the "white" world in general. This piece sheds a lateral light on Brathwaite's work and uses subtitles borrowed from Stephen Hawking's best-selling *Brief History of Time*. Unexpected visual techniques are used in Patricia Penn Hilden's "Till Indian Voices Wake Us" — which traces the presence of Native Indians from North America in the Caribbean and stresses the muteness of coloured women in white narration — notably through the inclusion of blurred photographs. Her writing, too, combines and blurs the creative/personal and the scholarly/scientific.

Some contributions are (almost) sober testimonies to personal meetings with Brathwaite; they are often combined with a sense of indebtedness. Other contributions explore what the thinker and poet did for the submerged culture of his people. Most of the essays are explorations of the poet's works. One of the most interesting pieces is Elaine Savory's, where she draws parallels between two artists two centuries apart, William Blake and Kamau Brathwaite, both of whom were misunderstood and largely rejected because of their social and political positions. Enrique Lima contrasts T.S. Eliot's "pair of ragged claws / scuttling across the floors of silent seas" and the historically rooted use of the crab image in Brathwaite's poem "Crab": she notes a suspended gentility in the first versus a sense of violence steeped in

injustice in the other. Rhonda Cobham discusses the diversity of techniques developed by the bereft poet that emerged after the death of his wife and how they contribute to his shaping of a different world.

Reiss includes an exhaustive bibliography and a carefully checked index; he also contributes a comprehensive introduction. Beginning with Brathwaite's attitude to traditional forms in English poetry, such as the pentameter, he explores the poet's language and prosody as instruments in forging a different kind of consciousness. Reiss argues that, in his multi-layered and innovative approach, Brathwaite counters the arrogance of Western culture — which is today all too obvious wherever we turn, and carries with it, in the name of “Enlightened Reason,” or in the name of economic efficiency and global governance, “a virus destructive not just of the European-western-world and its culture, but of all civilizations” (xxvii).

Since the tribute was to be an unexpected present, the poet had not been asked for any unpublished material. However, as if to complement those many critical pieces, a collection of poems by Brathwaite arrived on the same day as Reiss' book.

Words Need Love Too is one of the nicely produced books issued by House of Nehesi Publishers. Brathwaite's lines are neatly printed in pale ink alternating with Angelo Rombley's “digital illustrations.”

In the first of the four sections, “JerryWard & the fragmented spaceship dreamstorie,” Brathwaite sets the collection under the sign of remembrance — re-membrance also in the sense of re-mem-bering, putting together, throwing bridges over ellipses or chasms to restore collapsed or eclipsed or ignored continuities. Indeed, this initial piece, based on a fragmented telephone conversation about a talk the poet gave ten or twenty or four hundred and fifty years ago and of which there was no recording, takes readers through the process of recreating meaning (if not the world) out of scattered elements, which matches the scattering engineered in the Middle Passage. While a sense of communal harmony prevails in most pieces, some include moments of violence and bitterness. “Dread” records a judge's failed attempt at establishing any sort of human communication with the man he is about to sentence. “Bread” is a nightmare where life-giving gestures turn murderous, and communal sharing breaks into a lonely flight. The first poem about Agwèis is red with shed blood, associated as it is with the storm “that liberated Haiti ...obliterated Haiti.” “Esplanade Poem” is an ironic vignette about two fat white “tourisses” walking along “Bayshore as they call it now,” next to four black workers cleaning the beach. It ends on a note of shared compassion: whether they are “walking their walks or sweeping the sand / of the morning,” they are

re-/reading their childhood's last howl. their lost
tropical passages
hiding their hopes where their homes
are. Where the rolling stone of the sea gathers no moss.

Even the poem on Defilée, Dessalines' grieving mistress, who collects the scattered parts of the man's murdered and defiled body, is a soft dirge of hope in hopelessness, so that we almost believe in the skipping, dancing, laughing and loving shape the speaker conjures up at the end.

Two poems stand out and balance each other: “The Namsetoura of CowPastor” involves a pilgrimage to a hidden grave, where the speaker retrieves and pledges his words to an ancient spirit of resistance, and the poem that gives the collection its title and concludes the second section. “Words Need Love Too” is a celebration of life and love, an almost Hopkinsian celebration of the multifarious polysensuous beauty of the world: “fresh light fresh bread / the passage running to the white bright street / bicycle bells st patrick’s angelus.” It ends with the tender gestures that welcome words as a new-born baby:

they need our hands to undercover them
nourish rebel revel & at last reveal them
pour palms on their wet cheeks of future
hold them so soon so vulnerable so soft
after their burn
& born

In the last poem and last section we return to the African/Haitian loa of the sea, to the figure of Agoue, or Agwè, as a source of power, balance and harmony made visible in the centring of the lines. The poem is called “a sequence for / VOICE, CHORAL CHORUS, MUSIC / & VODOUNISTAS.” So it is through a voodoo experience that speaker and readers are taken to “the end of the proof,” a song dream that is also a farewell

ready for vowels of glistance
& resting . resisting
against all these edges . as if for the long
journey . as if from the long journey
as if ravage & ready for pebble & twinkle
& music and stars

Reviewed by Christine Pagnouille, University of Liège

ISSN 1705-9100| Affiliated with