

X is for *X/self* (1987), by [Edward] Kamau Brathwaite (republished in *Ancestors*, 2001, 373-468)



X is something of a magic letter for Brathwaite. It is both an erasure and an assertion. X is the unknown element in an equation, the cross drawn as a signature by illiterate people, but it also suggests the cross-fertilizing of cultures, and it stands for the proud statement of one's identity as distinct from the name imposed by slave owners, so as a token of resistance to oppression. This is the connotation we find with the choice of Malcolm X when he joined the Nation of Islam, and to some extent it is echoed in Brathwaite's own change of first name in 1971, from Edward Lawson, as he was baptized, to Kamau, his chosen African name.

Brathwaite (1930-2020) was born and died on the small island of Barbados. He studied history at Cambridge (UK) and got a PhD from the University of Sussex, taught for a while in Ghana (before and after independence), and was professor of history at the University of the West Indies, Mona (Jamaica) for over 25 years. After the death of his wife Doris, the devastation of his home and archives by hurricane Gilbert and his being mugged in Kingston, that harrowing period which he called his "salt years", he moved to New York City where he

was Professor of Comparative literature at NYU for about twenty years. He later married Beverley Reid, who was a constant source of inspiration over the last decades of his life.

There was a definite turning point in his writing towards the end of the 1980s. So far he had published an impressive number of works in various genres, among which the landmark essay *History of the Voice: The Development of Nation Language in Anglophone Caribbean Poetry* (1984). Yet one could still easily distinguish between poems and scholarly pieces. His comment on the notes to *X/Self* (“which I provide with great reluctance”, 113) suggests how aware he was of the friction between “bookish” explanations and the “dub riddim and nation language and calibanisms” in the poems. This kind of boundary completely disappears in his later writings, with *Barabajan Poems* (1994) as a convincing illustration of his merging disparate genres. As further evidence we can contrast *The Arrivants. A New World Trilogy* (1973), which brings together the three collections (*Rights of Passage, Masks and Islands*) without any significant change, and *Ancestors* (2001), published with New Directions, in which we find the three parts of his second trilogy (*Mother Poem* 1977, *Sun Poem* 1982 and *X/Self* 1987) though with major changes: most strikingly in the layout (see below), but also in a more extensive use of nation language (patois) and even in the subtraction or addition of lines or indeed of whole poems, particularly in *X/Self*.

While the first two collections include directly personal aspects (childhood memories, references to his parents) as well as descriptions of actual places in Barbados and of people he used to know, *X/Self* (in spite of what could be read as an autobiographical reference in the title) is concerned with the nature of imperial oppression and forms of resistance. The staring face on the cover is Columbus’, as painted by Jamaican artist Carl Abrahams, with wind-swept hair which can be seen as horns of that devil man who initiated European colonization in the Americas. As he does all through his works, Brathwaite shows in each and every poem his full-hearted commitment to decolonial emancipation.

As Kelly Josephs also notes, layering is “emblematic of Brathwaite’s work”: he combines “aspects of different cultures”, different kinds of discourses and merges and conflates different periods and thus entirely different contexts (as in the name Julia, referring both to a Roman imperial figure and to a TV show, or the Caesarean figure of Nix(on)). This often results in intentionally amusing effects in otherwise overwhelmingly tragic contexts as when Brathwaite describes trendy Westernized women who “pour their palmwine into harrods crystal / their steatopygia from calabash & yabba / into versace jeans” (“Phalos”), or, in “Aachen”, the “dialect of the tribes” “sparing us back” “to ga to gar to derek walcotts pitcher of clear metaphor”.

The two lines “Rome burns / & our slavery begins” recur at several points in the collection and are to be understood in the light of the explanations Brathwaite gives for modern day colonization in the essay “Metaphors of Underdevelopment”: “[The Roman] imperial achievement had created an equilibrium of materia and spirit, of metropole and province, of law and chaos. . . . With the decline and fall of Rome, flux appeared . . . And then money (MAMMON) became the centre of this shattered universe . . . No prayer, but purse; no custom anymore but customhouse and curse.” (35-36).

The one poem in the collection in which we hear “X/Self”’s voice is “X/Self’s X letter from the Thirteen Provinces”, a letter addressed to his mother in patois, in which he tries to explain his use of the white man’s technique as a tool of liberation and empowerment, which will, almost incidentally, curse the oppressor. Brathwaite called this creative use of word

processing (lay-out, typeface, size and style of fonts) his “Sycorax video style”, and used it extensively in his subsequent publications, including the reprinting of former poems.

“Dies Irie” exactly captures the rhythm of the 13th century hymn and transposes the words so as to turn it into a revolutionary anthem, laced with references to massacres perpetrated by white Western oppressors (“my lai sharpeville wounded knee”) and more numerous references to leaders of resistance movements, or to the movements themselves (“ho chi marti makandal”, “fedon fatah sun yat sen”, “nanny mahdi accompong”, “rodney robeson ras makonnen”, “biko martin Baptist shepherd”). A recurring mention of those with influence moves through subtle transformations, from “the priests & shamans” in verse 1, to “the priests & pundits” in verse 6 and “the priests & showmen” in verse 20. In the title, the Latin genitive of wrath (ira) is replaced by the rasta word for what is high, right, just, correctly balanced.

Though the last poems are different in the two versions of the collection, resistance has the last word in both. In the 1987 version “Xango” celebrates, in centred, short and well-spaced stanzas and with words full of soft tenderness, the long expected homecoming of the “Pan African god of thunder, lightning, electricity and its energy, sound systems, the locomotive engine and its music” (note p. 130). In the 2001 version the last poem entitled “Carab” (crab and Carib) is infused with the same sense of quiet survival after and through the violence of overcome obstacles, of a retrieved gentle unity with the surrounding world, natural and made by humans (the rocking chair on the verandah and the birds, the grass which is flesh which is memory and the vertiginous “steep stars”).

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