

December 2003

From the "Crossroads of Space" to the (dis)Koumforts of Home: Radio and the Poet as Transmuter of the Word in Kamau Brathwaite's "Meridian" and Ancestors

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Recommended Citation

Collins, Loretta (2003) "From the "Crossroads of Space" to the (dis)Koumforts of Home: Radio and the Poet as Transmuter of the Word in Kamau Brathwaite's "Meridian" and Ancestors," *Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 1 , Article 3.

Available at: <http://scholarlyrepository.miami.edu/anthurium/vol1/iss1/3>

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I
Must be given words to refashion futures
Like a healer's hand.
Kamau Brathwaite--"Negus," The Arrivants

What sorts of solutions to twentieth-century world crises can emerge from the
ghostland or dreamland of the wireless imagination?
Adalaide Morris--"Sound Technologies and the Modernist Epic: H.D. on the Air"

Adalaide Morris, in "Sound Technologies and the Modernist Epic: H.D. on the Air," argues that "when an audience submits to the spell of a speech, a broadcast, a sermon, or for that matter, a sound-saturated epic poem, the effect is not a spectacle but a resonance within, a kind of possession" (50). In this conceptualization, the immanence and timbres of the voice in the embodied appeal, the intimate but disembodied radio transmission, or the multi-vocal, noise-charged modernist epic poem enters and speaks through the engaged listener like a vodun loa. Glossing references to Caribbean spirituality in The Arrivants, Barbadian poet Kamau Brathwaite describes the "moment of possession:" "The celebrant's body acts as a kind of lightning conductor for the god. . . . the divine electrical charge becomes *grounded*" (271). In "The African Presence in Caribbean Literature, 1970/ 1973," Brathwaite claims that Caribbean nation language as a poetic medium is "controlled by a *groundation* tendency, in which image/spirit is electrically conducted to earth like lightning or the *loa*." (Roots 243). The orator and auditor create a circuit that allows for the conductivity of what Brathwaite--transposing again from vodun ceremony--has called in Barabajan Poems the poet "craftperson['s]" "word/sound/meanings" that are "caught out of the mind of moment's sky and etched into the ground and underdrone of the poet's/ artist's culture" (21). The "submerged underdrones--ghosts, spirits, sky-juices, ancestors, immemorial memories" (21) are heard by and channeled through the culturally attuned poet who serves as amanuensis for Caribbean societies currently experiencing the "Age of Dis:" "Dis.tress Dis.pair & Dis.respect. Dis./trust. Dis.rupt. Dis.truction" (Ancestors 351).¹

Radio, as sound and disembodied voices received through a wireless transmission of electromagnetic waves, might be thought of as somehow analogous to Brathwaite's definition of how the ancestral resonances and voices emerge from his work. I am imagining the radio antenna as a kind of center-pole from vodun ceremony.² As a technology that broadcasts voices across vibrational space and time into the poet's night bedroom, the radio provides an intimate, invasive, infiltrating, and mediated "bridge of sound" (Arrivants162) that relays in "differing accents, timbres, tunes" ("Meridian" 61) the stories of pain and ancestor loss/reconnection that inspire both despair and hope for change and healing in the postcolonial era.³ As night-time insomniac

listener, conduit, chaneller, word-lover, ventriloquist, transcriber, and transmuter, the poet records, preserves, analyzes, re-invents, and relays the "ghost-voices" of radio discourse⁴ Calling the radio a "hot medium," Marshall McLuhan notes that when the voice is taken out of the body and transmitted to a listener, "words suddenly acquire new meanings and different textures" (qtd. in Connor, "Radio Free Joyce" 29). The sonic textures of the intimate radio voice, potentially disrupted by electromagnetic forces or the mishearings of the listener, also provide another model for Brathwaite's experimentations with scribal and oral inscription.

Yet, as Brathwaite warns in the poem "Eating the Dead" from *Islands*, the third book of *The Arrivants* (219-221), radio, as part of the mass media/mass culture machine, can also be as powerful as armed coercion in the control of subjugated people when it is co-opted by the avaricious cultural, political, and mercantile voices of authority. In the first part of this ritual poem, the poet calls on Ananse, Ogun, and Damballa to assist him in devouring Caribbean society's poverty and plunder so that they will resound explosively in his songs. Meanwhile, the masses feed like infants on the "milk of transistors/ all day long" (*Arrivants* 220). As Morris notes, "acoustical technologies" have served as disseminators of "seductive group-mind ideologies," promulgating "indoctrination, intimidation, and infantilization" (50). To return to Morris's quotation with which I began this essay, obviously radio and other forms of mass media reportage can either make a spectacle of the personal catastrophes it covers, or they can lead the listener into a state of possession, or poetic relationship with the submerged voices of the society.

Brathwaite has reclaimed and transmitted the "Word," using as sources his memories, historical documents, African, Caribbean, and African-American orature and music, printed poems and interviews, LPs, field recordings, taped and live radio broadcasts, and more recently in the Sycorax video-style texts, letters, newspaper articles, and television broadcasts. In this essay, I focus on his engagement with radio, in particular his method of contextualizing and engrafting the transcriptions, summaries, and reinventions of women's voices and stories filtered from BBC and Bajan Diffusion/ Star Radio broadcasts that appear in the dreamstory "**Meridian**" published in *Kunapi* in 1989, and the two new poems, "Pixie" and "Heartbreak Hotel," inserted into *Ancestors*, Brathwaite's revised second trilogy (2001). Elaine Savory has noted that Brathwaite's "central symbolism of cultural politics" has been moving away from "male-orientated to female-orientated images of decolonization" (221). Although, as Gordon Rohlehr has argued, a "varied kaleidoscope of female experience" and voiceprints emerge in Brathwaite's earlier poetry ("Brathwaite with a Dash of Brown" 209), this shift to a more intimate connection to female characters, voices, stories, and images—female characters that go beyond iconic representations of the ancestral mother, the religious shepherd, the wrecked and abandoned wife, the rebel woman, the first love, the muse, the fallen daughter, or prostitute—is readily apparent to me while intertextually reading *Barabajan Poems*, *Ancestors*, and *Words Need Love Too*. In both "**Meridian**" and "Heartbreak Hotel," Brathwaite channels the compelling women's voices from the radio and transforms them into video texts that interlink tidalectically or "tide-electrically" with his other writings.

However, Brathwaite does not smooth over or erase the difficulties generated by his actions as transcriber. In "A Post-Cautionary Tale of the Helen of Our Wars," Brathwaite argues that "we have to begin the great work of plan/tation psychocultural reconstruction by first knowing as clearly & carefully as we can wh/ere we each of us COMING from & the nature & complicity—often complicity of the BROKEN dis/possessed sometimes alienated GROUND on which we at 'first' find ourselves" (75). For the poet, this has meant at least five necessary stages in incorporating other people's stories into his texts. First, in the poem "The New Ships" from Masks in The Arrivants the *Omwale* asks the question, "Whose ancestor am I?" (125). Brathwaite has become increasingly concerned with answering that question as an "Elder." Second, Brathwaite has been a careful listener. In the poem "Fever" in Ancestors, Brathwaite uses an analogy to the radio to suggest the vibrational energy channeled from the crossroads of space to the living earth: "the thin antennae of stems receive the whisper of planets" (29). In the essay "Wringing the Word," Nathaniel Mackey notes Brathwaite's recourse to "images of hyperaudition" (738). The poet's training, as listener to his own language innovations and word transformations prepare him for the role of hyperauditor to cultural soundings, as well. Third, the poet demonstrates willingness to journey deeper into his own personal catastrophes and "psychic apocalyptic abyss" in the dreamstories, many public lectures, and ConVERSations with Nathaniel Mackey.⁵ Fourth, he makes a continual commitment to seeking out and receiving well the submerged voices of those who might be said to be "on the threshold" or at Legba's crossroads of enlightenment or destruction, especially those who are impacted by social dereliction, lovelessness, nihilism, or brutal violence. The phrases "and all these words here need love" and "words need love too," which appear in ConVERSations with Nathaniel Mackey, the poems "Pixie" and "Heartbreak Hotel" in Ancestors, and the collection Words Need Love Too, point to the importance of loving and heeding the very words, no matter how horrific, that tell of cultural and personal atrocity. Fifth, the poet launches an on-going vociferous critique of personal, communal, and global instances of complicity with forces of destruction. Mass media is especially suspect in Brathwaite's critique because of its ability to deform and ravage the images and reports that it broadcasts internationally.

In the lecture poems "From Newstead to Neudstadt" and "New Gods of the Middle Passages," Brathwaite describes with disgust the predatory gaze of the television cameras in Rwanda, the "film crew cameras already closing in like buzz like buzz like buzzards" ("Rwanda" 129) on scenes of a woman, a loa, an icon he calls "Oya" in "Ancestries:"

(re)'born' our of the legba/limbo stick sh/(e)'s carrying/walking towards yr camera from the long journ->ney of dying of hunger of destitution & the mass murders that are symbolically her body & her native land/ our native land & so much else & elsewhere in the world/ dying of the lack of home & salt & love & comfort... her heart almost hopeless but still hopefull—that's the point still movingly tidalectic even as she reaches the eye of the desert of yr camera, her violated body to be shown to imperial millions all over CNN & the internet like garbage but still also coming back travelling towards & into

the(e) lake Chad of our spirit/ our spirits, the oshun waters of her birth & our be.ginning.
("New Gods" 70).⁶

Brathwaite's concern here is with receiving the image of Oya in a way that is regenerative and loving by weaving her image into the "wordweft" of his other writings. He condemns the sensational and careless manner in which she is framed and defaced by a mass media and a mass culture that will do nothing to alleviate her suffering. In both "**Meridian**" and the "Pixie"/ "Heartbreak Hotel" cycle in *Ancestors*, Brathwaite uses the textual arrangements of the Sycorax video style to interrogate the way that the women's voices and stories are framed and filtered by the media. He memorializes the women's narratives so that they are not lost or neglected when transmitted by the ephemeral communications of radio or the barrage of newsprint. Yet, he also highly mediates their voice texts in an effort to consider how, in an age of mass media, mass culture, alienation, and violence, he may love their words as he conducts the subjugated and psychologically distressed individuals into the comforting *hounfort* or *koumfort* constructed by his poetry. In "Poetry as Ritual: Reading Kamau Brathwaite," Edward Baugh transcribes from video Brathwaite's explanation of *hounfort*: "It is the Haitian term for a place of worship and spiritual concentration. It is what happens when you concentrate as a spiritual community, and create [and here he raised his right arm, as if suggesting a center-pole] from which the gods can create a crossroad[s]. So any time that we form a community, I use the word *hounfort*, rather than anything else now" (2).⁷ In *Ancestors* the term has shifted to the comforting *koumfort*.

In the dreamstory "**Meridian**," Brathwaite mocks the censorship and state control of the cultural standards of BBC, the station upon which the program *Meridian* airs, by using a bold face, enlarged Old English font for "Voice of **Authority**" and "**Broadcasting house**."⁸ The interview voice of a "Brittanico-indian actress" that Brathwaite summarizes and quotes in third person form had already been heavily mediated when the program censors rendered her spoken words into scribal form. They "had read it in manuscript, in typescript, had checked it out in their editor's rooms with [M]rs. Thatcher's mandates pinned to the breasts of their green baize wall" (61). The title of the program suggests the global centrality of its messages, since the word meridian refers to the semicircular cartography lines that pass through the north and south poles of the globe. The meridian of Greenwich, England is represented on maps as the baseline of 0 degrees longitude. Signs of BBC as bastion of British Empire and its monological voice are decentered, however, by several factors in the dreamstory, including the listener's location at Harvard, a clock's large digital readouts, the poet's insomniac mishearings and misspellings, juxtaposed radio segments covering an Italian director's presentation of Macbeth at the Edinboro Festival, New Orleans jazz, and "some Indian music no not by Ravi Shankar but by a name beginning like Shif" (71).⁹ The poet is also distracted from the broadcast by his excited but stupor-like night-sky meditations on twin lights seen hurtling through space. Manifesting what N. Katherine Hayles has called "the instabilities produced when voices are taken out of bodies and bodies find themselves out of voices," the poem streams language as it etches poet's consciousness and submerged mental processes (75).

The poet performs a decentering of Britain and Europe (and media) by juxtaposing radio references to the Bridge of Firth, a marvel of the industrial revolution, Shakespeare's Scotland, and various world musics with extraterrestrial travelers, locations within the BBC's General Overseas Service broadcast range, and moon visibility in Europe and the British Commonwealth, mentioning specifically Italy, the Caribbean, India, Bangladesh, and Australia. The sight of the moon through his bedroom window triggers for the poet a memory of a television weather forecaster who did not predict comets, but "A Big Bermuda High & Full Moon Tonight etc etc" ("Meridian" 70). This "brown skin" (possibly Caribbean) weatherman is memorable because of his Calibanic retort to another newscaster's ignorant joke: "the day Fergie's daughter was born & the Americans as usual had gone ga-ga:"

they had pronounced her name—Mary Elizabeth Beatrice Alexandria—a whole long dynasty of forbearers & how after all that she would probably be known as B & this clown was saying that if she was a good little girl & become granny's pet she might become/ Queen B/ Get it?" In response, the weatherman quips, "only a wasp could say/ something like that." ("Meridian" 69-70).

By retelling this anecdote in his dreamstate, the poet not only parodies the US fascination with British royalty, but also frames a moment when the newsman deploys a phrase that may have multiple meanings—referring to empire building, of course. The weatherman's quick association of bee societal structure with WASP, or White Anglo-Saxon Protestant, also performs a stinging critique of WASP imperialism.

Against this hierarchical construction of knowledge and society represented by British royalty, empire, authority, and BBC, the poet continually traces his shifting perceptions, rendering as improvisational any field of knowledge. Rohlehr's appraisal of aspects of Sun Poem could very well apply to "**Meridian**:" "Beyond the question of gender and perspective exists the notion of the arbitrariness of how the consciousness interprets what it apprehends" ("Brathwaite with a Dash of Brown" 243). The poet's attention is divided between sound and sight, mundane and cosmic, the "radio or radar of [his] head" and the "raw" experience of what "was happening outside in the sky" ("Meridian" 71). He realizes that the "gemini stars," which he had been perceiving as comet, UFO, star, meteor, planes, or "star war.... star-weary meters of light," are actually lights glinting off of a Harvard flagpole, where the US flag hangs "next to the doll of a small naked legba or girl that some lampooning lamposting student had guillotined there on that crossroads of space" ("Meridian" 73). While this image of student pranks carnivalizes the US flag and patriotism with a mock lynching, it also suggests the imbalanced relations between men and women, ominously implying violence against women. In the morning, he sees no doll, however. His insomniac consciousness is a continually shifting ground that no meridian line can measure. To borrow Brathwaite's description of the re-centering work of Wilson Harris, Aimé Césaire, and Derek Walcott, this poem reads like a "plasmic[] document at/ from the very redge of space>" (Barabajan Poems, back inside cover).

The emotional core of the dreamstory, however, is the dreamer's reaction to metropolitan Mora Singh's voice "(didn't catch her name right)" (60). She passionately mentions Bob Marley and her recent opportunities to play a variety of roles, including Victorian British, India-- "Of course"-- and Caribbean: "(I think she referred to a New York performance of a play by Caryl Phillips)" (60). Her words suggest multiple meanings, the interchangeability of Indian and Caribbean types according to casting managers, the diasporic movement of expressive arts, but also her own sense of an open, cross-cultural "poetics of relation," to borrow Édouard Glissant's term. When her mother falls mortally ill during a tour of Mora's theater group, the crisis becomes a "visibility trigger" for the actress who finally begins to see her mother as "not the pale passive sari-wrapped stereotype failed immigrant" (60).¹⁰ Although Brathwaite cites the interview in the third person, he interjects fragments of her own language, one word "goulp" from group or troupe to suggest either a trace of an accent or the poets's double hearings. He also includes emotive sections so that the poignancy of her feelings for her mother's true ancestry and her own memories of "shame" as a child in British schoolyards are felt: "the shock of it, holding feeling & suddenly *knowing* that this frail woman . . ." ("Meridian" 60). Only at the moment of the most painful memory does Brathwaite shift into nation language ventriloquism, a sign that he, as listener is identifying most compassionately with Mora and respecting the mother's strength and defiance. To fight off white school bullies, Mora's mother "take her hand & farward to the playground one time to face dem down" ("Meridian" 61). In this "hopeful" section of the dreamstory, Mora reconnects with her ancestors. The poet remarks, "all this our own story, told & heard year after year, generation after generation . . . in differing accents, timbres, tunes of the Third World's ios" ("Meridian" 61). Thus, her words have been "loved" by the amanuensis ("Meridian" 61).¹¹

"Pixie" and "Heartbreak Hotel," new poems in Ancestors, depict a much more desperate estrangement between mother and daughter. Consisting of a prologue, a Sycoraxian description of a newspaper photograph, two reinvented Barbadian newspaper articles from the Weekend Investigator (29 August, 1997) and The Sunday Advocate (31 August, 1997), and refrains. "Pixie" recounts the disappearance from home and return four weeks later of a thirteen year-old girl, Stephanie, or "Pixie." The mother, a widow disabled by a stroke, subject to seizures, and burdened by her impoverished living conditions, cries out for help to the reporters. "Heartbreak Hotel," Brathwaite tells the reader, is his transcription of "one long lostletter forom Pixie iout here in the dark" that was read over the air by a male radio host (68). Although time will not allow for a detailed reading of these two complex poems, I will try to at least mention some of Brathwaite's palimpsestic techniques of embedding these poems in the already existing structure and references of Mother Poem, and the trilogy overall.

First of all, in the poem "Sam Lord" and "Bell," where the bell sound is poured out into the Vèvè and the ritual context and connection to Mother Culture is established, Brathwaite shifts the verb tenses from the past tense of the original publication to present tense (Mother Poem, 1977: 8-9, 10-15 and Ancestors, 2001: 20-21, 22-27). He does this not only as a means of

moving closer to nation language, I would argue, but to make Mother Poem a ritual poem that can embrace the contemporary daughter in distress, Pixie. In the prologue of "Pixie," Stephanie, the runaway girl is linked to the Stephanie of the now decades old poem "Horse Weebles," or as the title may be alternatively read, "Whores We Bless" ("Woo/Dove" (Mother Poem, 1977: 41-44: and Ancestors, 2001: 55-58). Brathwaite changes the age of Stephanie in the first poem from fourteen to thirteen, "Pixie's age." He also adds the lines "pickin up sticks" to the catalogue of labor that Stephanie engages in to try to survive. This not only refers to the way that the Stephanie in "Pixie" picks up men, but also the childhood game. The game requires that the players carefully remove one long, pointed stick at a time without disturbing the others, and has as its message, one might argue, the interdependency of those in a community and survival strategies. Through intertextual weavings, Pixie and her mother are drawn into the "koumfort" and community of Brathwaite's ancestories. In "Woo/Dove" Stephanie's father disappears to "Canada Dry," and subsequently, she is lured into "*de man wann to me/ wann to mee/ de man want to meet yu too much*" dancehall scene of prostitution (Ancestors, 2001: 58). The exponentially increased state of social violence and risk for the contemporary Stephanie is clear, in that her father, Brathwaite interjects, was beaten to death.

The prologue of "Pixie" also twins Pixie's mother with the African ancestral mother, the island of Barbados (transposing her name from Carol to Coral Gardens), and Legba in multiple allusions.¹² Pixie is her protection against "this stark & tricky needle/ in she crosstich life" (60). Pixie is similarly twinned with Sycorax, the ancestral African-Caribbean mother of the poem that follows "Heartbreak Hotel" in Ancestors, "Hex." Pixie is also twinned with Esse, Adam's first love in the poem "The Return of the Sun" in Sun Poem(Ancestors, 2001: 309-339), and what Brathwaite in Barabajan Poems calls the "Igbo Damballah wom[a]n" featured in the Ancestors poem "Angel/engine" the poem "Angel/engine" (Barabajan Poems 317). Later in the poem, Pixie is paired with both Ariel and Sister Stark, from Brathwaite's reconceptualization of Shakespeare's The Tempest. The opening lines of "Pixie" show Pixie's return home: "stands maybe Pixie at her cripple mother's door" (59). Posed here at the Legba crossroads, Pixie could move forward into the koumfort of the home or to her self-destruction. She remembers, "Switches, witches brooms. Bread w/out sheets. Streets/ stripped even of her sweat & sweet & sleep & sorrow" (59). Hearing the sibilance and allusions emerging in his lines, the poet comments: "so many serpent esses in this silence where he waits" (59). The Esses spelled "e-s-s-e-s," of course, refers to the "s" sounds repeated in the lines, but also to Damballah, the snake, Shango, who is praised in "Angel/ Engine," (Ancestors 131-138) the Shango train sound, the "issper," "essssper," and "lisper" of the Sycoraxian mother in "Nam(e)tracks" (Ancestors 86-95) who teaches the speaker to resist O'Grady's dominating word games, and the lispng language of Adam's first love, Esse, who is positioned as an Eve-like innocent temptress in a fruit tree in "Return of the Sun." (Ancestors 309-339).¹³ The sound of the dry shak shak pods, which Stephanie hears on the approach to her home, is the sound of the dry shak shaks, the Woman's Tongue heard in the Sycorax poem "Hex," and the corrupted version of the sweet music of the shak shak breeze that Adam hears in Esse's presence. Indeed, Brathwaite adapts and repeats in

both “Pixie” and “Heartbreak Hotel” the refrain “How can we know the dancer from the dance?” from William Butler Yeats’ poem “Among School Children,” a poem in which the sixty year old poet walks among the school children and meditates on modes of schooling children, as he simultaneously remembers his first childhood love, Maud Gonne.¹⁴ By twinning features of poems devoted to Esse and Pixie, and by alluding to Yeats’s poem, Brathwaite similarly positions himself as the elderly poet who both studies the failings of the school system for some contemporary children of the Caribbean and envisions the innocent country forwardness of Esse against the seriously endangered and alienated Pixie.

Brathwaite uses dramatic headline-style fonts and boxes in “Pixie” that resemble newspaper columns or inserts to demonstrate how the reporters both draw attention to the plight of the family and make a spectacle out of their pain. In the prologue, he reworks images of the harmattan and drought seasons of the Caribbean that originate in Africa to introduce the mother. The extreme heat is a “heat she call hottentot” (Ancestors 60). This reference serves the multiple function of alluding to the mother’s Africanness, her connection to Sycorax, and the family’s display by the media, since Saarijie Bartman, also known as the Hottentot Venus, was an African woman put on display in Britain and dissected after her death—her preserved genitalia displayed in a museum. The newspaper articles from Weekend Investigator and The Sunday Advocate, as reinvented by Brathwaite, suggest Stephanie’s premature sexual exploits and “saucy” attire. The newspaper also displays a black and white studio photo of Stephanie, which the poet describes, both introducing the idea of attempting to judge the photo for signs of Stephanie’s “tigerish” wildness, and frustrating that mode of framing her. Her face is like a mask, with Afro, Benin eye lids and a “slash” for a mouth. The word slash evokes the kind of violence that occurs in Sun Poem’s “Dis,” in which someone has assaulted a woman literary editor by forcing a carving knife between her teeth (Ancestors 352). Yet the speaker perceives “no hint or bloom of any fash or passion” in her enigmatic expression (“Pixie,” Ancestors 61). This contemporary newspaper photograph of Stephanie is mirrored in a poem later in the collection, Sun Poem’s “Indigone,” likening Stephanie with a long line of Bajan beauties (Ancestors 355-363). In the contemporary pose, Stephanie stands in white dress, with hand “on the huge ‘Chinese’ flowergarden vessel. pot / or zemi. guardian urn” (Ancestors 61). In “Indigone,” the walls of the grandfather’s room displays “its photographs of daughters in which organdie/ hands touch gently the artificial vase of flowers in white pixie socks” (Ancestors 357). Yet, the contemporary Pixie returns the viewer’s gaze. Brathwaite suggests that she has carefully diagnosed the hypocrisy, lovelessness, and ills of society: “her little watching lights . . . pin. / pointing in the concertina camera’s eyes” (Ancestors 61). Brathwaite also manipulates the rhetoric of the newspaper article to demonstrate how reporters use both strategies of spectacle-making and the discourse of sociology, with sub-headlines such as “home situation” and “The Father” to further dissect the causes of Stephanie’s maroonage and rebellion. Pixie’s mother and Jennifer, her beleaguered sister, voice their lamentations in the news stories, recounting their fears for Stephanie and their dire situation—the need to “go down to the graveyard to get water” and the state of the pit toilet that “want

servicing" (Ancestors 67). However, Pixie's own account is not heard until we get to the radio poem "Heartbreak Hotel."

In "Heartbreak Hotel," the author reports that the "poem" has transcribed Pixie's longlost letter" from "a real bajan radio programme" called "Heartbreak Hotel" (Ancestors 68). However, the writer of the letter is clearly not the same thirteen year-old girl from the newspaper accounts in the poem "Pixie." Her account of her mother's behavior and her suggestion that she is an only-child do not match the biographical details of the first poem. Nonetheless, the narrative, voice, and pleas of the girl read as if they certainly could be Pixie's words. This transcription from radio gains its powerful agency through several elements. The voice is clearly highly mediated, since it supposedly arises from a letter sent to the radio station and read by the male program host, which is then, at the midnight hour, transcribed by Brathwaite and altered by its resonances with passages of the trilogy. Moreover, the poet alternates between nation language that forces the reader to enact, or subvocalize and hear Pixie's terminal and love-starved Bajan voice and engraftings that remind the reader that the radio transmission is a performance of the letter, such as shifts between lower and uppercase letters and abbreviations that a girl might use. "A-t-t," "Att" for "attention," for example. Simultaneously, the "att" recalls both the e-mail address symbol and the "att" from the poem "Negus" in The Arrivants,

Att
 Att
 Attibon
 Attibon Legba
 Attibon Legba
 Ouvri bayi pou' moi (224)

This marks Pixie's letter, as transmitted by radio and *trance-scribed* by Brathwaite as a crossroads moment for the endangered girl, and a prayer for Legba to open a channel (or link) so that her plea for help be heard by society.

In Barabajan Poems, Brathwaite describes his childhood "idyllic star-crossed love" affair with Esse, saying that her letters were in "the first nation-language I wd ever read -a verbal you cd FEEL, the passion 'crude' and clear, confessional, symbolic, very vivid & concise - the lack of CENSORSHIP or rather freedom from it & rooted in her WORLD" (314). Strikingly, Pixie's letter could be similarly described, even if her letter tells of catastrophe. In "Heartbreak Hotel" Pixie explains her knife-carrying and disruptive behavior at school, her daily sexual encounters with strange men, and brutal sexual experiences. She says, "*Some of the men is brutal . . . I will never forget when this taxi man stop me & > force his cyar key - keys - because they were more than one inside of me. It hurt so bad*" (Ancestors 70). This horrific story evokes Esse's seduction of Adam in Sun Poem's "The Return of the Sun," as Esse playfully, in a calypsonian-like manner, uses the extended metaphor of driving a lorry to entice and set limits on Adam: "*no/body int drive thith lil lorry yet / . . . an nO body inn getting nO chance to rit neida /*

unleth they kin show me thuh lithunse" (Ancestors 327). The literal forced insertion of car keys into Pixie's genitalia destroys the innocence of the metaphor.¹⁵

Describing another brutalizing incident, Pixie recounts being nearly drowned by a police officer who took her out too far into the ocean, verbally threatened her, and sexually used her:

The sea was rough because the > rain fall. He shout at me & say awful things to me that had me shock. He slap me in > my face & then let me go. i feel myself goin down into the water. i couldn't breathe. It was so dark & scary. . . . He put his penis inside me & have sex w/ me then he take me back to the shore (Ancestors 70)

This scene resonates with the historical images of drowning and the nightmarish underwater depths of the psyche in "Salvages" from Dreamstories: "dead/ arawaks drowned sailors drowned/ steersmen my brother drowned fishermen/ drowned Dahomean slaves" (171). However, it also interweaves with the description of Brown's Beach and the drowning of the island itself in Sun Poem and glossed in Barabajan Poems:

if you went out in a boat on the sun
set side of the island & looked
back:
you would see how slowly the houses were drowned
how the light of the beaches went out
how the land that you loved like you mother
seemed to sink under dark choppy water
that was ringing you all around like a wall
(Barabajan Poems 97-98)

Brathwaite acknowledges the immanence and discomfoting power of Pixie's words, which arrive with gale-force, requiring a new kind of poem, fresh words, and new forms of poetry from the world-weary poet:

*o homeless daughters needing love yr utterances erupting interrupting
in/to this place w/in this poem. trampelling the mothers you becoming battering yr
wooden pailings down & tumbelling
these imaging enjambments scraggeling across the yard across the sands
unto the very edges of this poem*
(Ancestors 72)

Pixie's "plasmic document" reinvented in Ancestors provokes Brathwaite's plasmic poem structure. Following the poet's midnight transcription of the radio reading of Pixie's letter, he adds a post-script prayer and praisesong for Pixie, "*o howling city needing love*" (71), and New World African poets who have loved the word. Like Cornell West in Race Matters (22-23) and bell hooks in "Love as the Practice of Freedom" (Outlaw Culture 248), Brathwaite has identified

“lovelessness” and the societal factors that engender feelings and actions of lovelessness as the prime characteristics that threaten current and future generations. With his act of receiving the tran(ce)mission of Pixie’s words, he realizes that the “terminality” of the modern age that he had previously associated with such men as the one depicted in the poem “Springblade,” now claims women as its agents of destruction and self-destruction, as well.¹⁶ He starts the poetic epilogue with the Egyptian hieroglyph for woman. Pixie’s missive becomes a warning to love and heed Pixie’s words and love women--and the societal Anima. Of Adam’s childhood love, Brathwaite muses in Barabajan Poems, “Esse, could become, as she matured, one of these Warners” (137). Certainly, Pixie is the Warner woman for a society crushed under the wheels of modernity.¹⁷ Brathwaite invokes the Shango train, no redemption train this time, to convey the driving energy and momentum of a society determined to self-destruct:

*the wheels the monstrous passengers
the raped the dead . the leprous scavengers
the metals that you monster pollutions minister in all this*

words
(Ancestors 71)

Often in Brathwaite’s writings, the rhythm and energy of the Shango train/ songs generate not destruction alone but a “spirit/ual possession,” which has its own psycho/illogical – and psycho-social reverberation into confidence & knowledge & skills of self & communal survival and how we cope with the persistent legacies of the plantation” (Barabajan Poems 184). However, in this epilogue, the poet offers his simple request that we move towards community-making and secular/ spiritual survival by first loving “words.”¹⁸

Although William Wordsworth paid tribute to the common man in his poems—“*words /-worth vanishing upon the bridge of imitations*” (Ancestors 72), the worn language of his poetry no longer speaks to modern crises, to “*lives so broken*” (72). Brathwaite invokes and honors those New World African poets, novelists, and lyricists who have revered the word and used it as their medium to remake the word and world, including Claude McKay, H.A. Vaughan, Mighty Sparrow, Nicolás Guillén, Sapphire, Rita Dove, Martin Carter, and Toni Morrison. William Butler Yeats’s question is recast into nation language: “*how can we tell/ these dancers from they dance?*” (Ancestors 72). As wordcrafters—the dancers, New World African poets have nourished and “undercover[ed]” the word—the dance, so that it may “rebel revel and at last reveal them” (Words Need Love Too 27). “Heartbreak Hotel” lacks the religious dimensions of other clearly ritualized Mother Culture poems by Brathwaite, Mother Poem’s “Sam Lord” and “Bell,” for instance (Ancestors 20-21, 22-27). Yet, Pixie’s voice arrives through electrical loa conduits, through radio trance-mission. Her narrative is intertwined with the allusions and narratives of Mother Poem, while her words enter the flowing dance of the new World African literary ancestors. The epilogue praisesong of “Heartbreak Hotel” ends, or perhaps ends and begins, with an enlarged @ sign, the one we use to send our e-mail messages as we interlink in

hyperspace. Visually and metaphorically, it serves as a Vèvè, a call to Attibon Legba to open the gateway, so that we may receive Pixie's words transmuted from radio and the crossroads of space. It also opens the gateway so that the endangered Pixie may be received into the koumfort of Brathwaite's Mother Poem. Brathwaite takes on his angst and responsibility as Pixie's ancestor. The attention given to Pixie's radio broadcast demands that society lovingly and responsibly answer the question that the Omowale poses in Brathwaite's poem "The New Ships" from Masks, "whose ancestor am I?" (Ancestors 125).

In Barabajan Poems and other works, Brathwaite discusses his attempts to transmit Jazz on Radio Distribution/ Rediffusion while he was a student at Harrison College (32-33, 36). As Curwen Best notes, Brathwaite has also praised Jeanette Layne-Clarke's radio programs for popularizing nation language in Barbados.¹⁹ In St. Lucia, he composed an article on the role that radio should play in national development.²⁰ On many occasions, he has referred to the impact of BBC's radio program Caribbean Voices and Henry Swanzy on the development of Caribbean literature and publishing opportunities for West Indians (see Barabajan Poems 63). He also has commented upon "one of our finest radio programmes," New World of the Caribbean, written by George Lamming and Wilson Harris and broadcast on Radio Guyana, 1955-56 (History of the Voice 23, n. 26). He often refers to his personal archives of audiotapes from radio broadcasts as valuable Caribbean resources. Although critics have extensively studied Brathwaite's interest in orality and nation language, as well as his conceptualization and use of computer technology in his postmodern Sycorax video-style poetry, they have not investigated Brathwaite's references to radio nor his own reception and rediffusion of radio 'trance'-missions, which appear not only in "Meridian" and Ancestors, but also in Conversations with Nathaniel Mackey, "The Time of Salt" (Kamau Monograph, CQ), Barabajan Poems, and MR/ Magical Realism. As Vodun initiates are possessed by loas, similarly, radio voices are channeled by the poet. Brathwaite recognizes transmitted testimonials, especially these by women, as "visibility triggers" that connect contemporary personal experience and expression with "ancestories" and words that must be listened to, re-imagined, cleansed, loved, and recast for future societal healing.

ghost-wind ghost-voice upon the short-wave radio
the memory that eludes. & leads
you
io can become the visibility trigger of an earlier x

-pedition
he itches images inside you like yr shadow

yr io's trigger will become a chigga

nation language is when you seek these things
so you can speak these things

. . . Crossroads are where the poems start
Kamau Brathwaite
"The Time of Salt"

Notes

¹See also Kamau Brathwaite, Trench Town Rock (196). As Adalaide Morris notes in “Sound technologies and the Modernist Epic,” modernist writers such as Ezra Pound and H.D. conceptualized their work by drawing upon technological references: “For Pound, artists were ‘the antennae of the race’” (42). For H.D. artists “had ‘the right sort of brains’ to act as ‘receiving station[s]’ and ‘telegraphic centre[s]’ relaying ‘flashes of electric power’ across ‘the world of dead, murky thought’” (citing Pound’s Literary Essays and ABC of Reading, and H.D.’s Notes on Thought and Vision and the Wise Sappho in Sound States, 42). What distinguishes Brathwaite from these modernist epic composers is his inclusion of African and Caribbean cosmology in the relational field of space/time/ancestral dimensions/electricity/loa/ground/sound and poem crafting.

²In MR/2 Magical Realism Brathwaite discusses radio/ “future radio” as an instrument of time-space travel and re-diffusion of spirit/ loa, noting that in Alejo Carpentier’s El reino de este mundo, Mackandal’s flying spirit is transmitted electrically to “the black waves of the sea of slaves” [translation used by Brathwaite]: “ondas” [waves] “a/c to my **Dictionary**= not just *water waves* but- *yes-radio waves*...” (460). Brathwaite also uses “radio” as a means of discussing cultural conductivity of African spirit into Spanish literary works: “Is this transistor quality result of Moor(s)/ or did the Iberian radio attract the African?”(MR, 471). Significantly, a “DJ AVATAR” radio broadcaster brings Brathwaite and the community of New York, reasonings and music as the Twin Towers burn into “two urns of ash.” The deejay’s voice, at one point, “becomes possessed w/ the voice & syllables of Aretha, PRONOUNCING like her/ w/her & behind her is the ANCESTOR MLK] *words... cannot always express exactly what one feels...*” (MR, 542).

³The vodun initiate’s head is ridden by the loa (which suggests spiritual and physical merging); similarly, the radio signal is received as “corporeal sensation” (sound waves and vibration upon the ear drum) and perception (Kahn, “Histories of Sound Once Removed” 21).

⁴Insomnia has multiple resonances in Brathwaite’s work, referring to both the submerged historical and personal angst that causes sleeplessness and the midnight-hour mental state, which generates the literary effect of automatism in his Sycorax video style dreamstories. See Brathwaite, ConVERSations with Nathaniel Mackey, p. 210: “...because to get the full insomnia of it, you’ve got to *see* it as much as *hear* it—that’s why it’s ‘video’, okay?”; see also Cynthia James, ‘Caliban in Y 2K?—Hypertext and New Pathways,’ p. 360.

⁵See ConVERSations 199. According to Charles Grivel, sound technology such as the phonograph [or radio] was seen as a new means of bringing “the unconscious into speech,” a means of reaching “the inner voice, deep and personal,” and a way of drawing forth that which had been repressed or deemed inappropriate (45). In both ‘Meridian’ and “Heartbreak Hotel,’

Brathwaite tunes into the deeply personal voices of the actress and Pixie. At the same time, he travels into his own night-time state of consciousness.

⁶In MR/2 Magical Realism Brathwaite finds the link between the emergence of the iconic Oya in his more recent writings with figures manifesting in earlier dreamstories, including “Meridian”: “i now begin to recognize her earlier disguises (i realize this now) from my first ‘gli/immering’ (s) of MR.... (Mac/Harvard HotSummer88) w/ the dreamstories ‘Merid-/ian’ (unpub) & ‘DreamChad’ (DS <1994>pp46-72)” (MR 653).

⁷In MR/2 Magical Realism Brathwaite defines “oumfô” thus: “the heaviest word/sound of this txt.center, circl(e), capsule, continuum, centre of kinesis, earth-/ly engine of the sacred, home/hoom of the *lwa*, or way they meet/ visit (landing-point/space station-/(n)/ centre/ fulcrum of crossroad(s)) w/’receptor/(s)/. Macondo Mariella Virgin or Vertigo of < Space/Time Liza ?Anita . nam. mc2” (MR 652).

⁸In The History of the Voice, Brathwaite refers to the time when “BBC meant Empire and Loyal Models and Our Masters [sic] voice” (31, n.41).

⁹Elsewhere Brathwaite depicts radio as a force of dissemination of both North American and European news, music, and cultural values in the Caribbean—from center to margins. Yet even as he refers to the impact of the societal disruptions and devastations of WWII, he also marks a moment of re-centering when the African American Joe Louis scores a (national victory) against the Germans in the sports arena. In “Midlife” in Mother Poem, the men of Brathwaite’s family gathered around a radio hooked up to his uncle’s car battery: “& when the radio is lit and humming/ boston cinninnati bbc/ we heard herr hitler hither goebbels/ winston churchill joe/ louis the fourteenth fourteenth half/killin the germans/ & the lucky strike hit parade” (Ancestors 142).

¹⁰For definitions of the term “visibility trigger,” see, for instance, Kamau Brathwaite, Le détonateur de visibilité/ the Visibility Trigger, MiddlePassages; XSelf and “The Time of Salt.”

¹¹It is interesting to note that he selects “ios,” the last three letters of “radios” instead of “loas,” a usage that appears in other Brathwaite texts, such as “The Time of Salt.”

¹²For a Jamaican reader, “Coral Gardens” might evoke the 1963 “Coral Gardens incident,” when police and Rastafari clashed on the north side of the island. See Laura Tanna, “The Even-handed Judge,” Jamaica Gleaner (Wednesday, March 1, 2000) at http://www.rism.org/isg/dlp/ganja/news/gj_jg_20000301_1.html.

¹³Of Sycorax’s lispng speech in the poem “Nametracks,” Gordon Rohlehr writes, “Sycorax lispers (i.e. lisps and purrs) because of the Anansi nature of what she is about to communicate. Anansi is always depicted in Jamaica folklore (e.g. Louise Bennett’s performance of folk tales) as having a lisp. Black Sycorax as sorceress is about to speak with the ambiguity or the obscurity

common to magical speech anywhere” (“Black Sycorax, My Mother’: Brathwaite’s Reconstruction of The Tempest” 287-88).

¹⁴See, for instance, Helen Vendler’s reading of Yeat’s poem “Among School Children,” <http://athome.harvard.edu/programs/vendler/video/pages/segment4.html>, consulted 2002.

¹⁵At the second Caribbean Culture conference held at UWI, Mona in January 2002, in honor of Brathwaite, Maureen Warner-Lewis referred to Carolyn Cooper’s interpretation of the “lyrical gun” of the dancehall deejay as a metaphor. She emphatically stated that during these times of excessive killings, the gun for her was “not a metaphor.” Similarly, the extreme assault of Pixie is set off against the metaphorical play of the innocent Esse.

¹⁶See “Springblade” in Kamau Brathwaite, Black + Blues. 2nd Edition. New York: New Directions, 1995. For a discussion of “terminal society,” see Gordon Rohlehr, “Folk Research: Fossil or Living Bone?” The Massachusetts Review 35. 3 & 4 (Autumn-Winter 1994): 383-394.

¹⁷Brathwaite pays tribute to the Warner woman, who warned against the destructive potential of modernity and technology. Radio, in the following quotation, is portrayed as an instrument of progress/ destruction, used by “The Man Who Possesses Us All”: “we/these/ Calibans were suppose to be/ or be/ come agents of ‘progress’ & ‘change’; they/ (we) after all, had the whips,/ knew/ how to tune in the radios,/ drove the great big internal/ combustible engines/.... & it was these women—the/ mothers &/ godmothers/ grandmothers of/ tradition, the protectors of *naml*/ who warned against this,/ against them, against him” (BP 134-35). Calibans replaced the colonizer in their own hunger for technology and progress. Brathwaite does add a qualifying statement to acknowledge the possible gender essentialisms in this observation.

¹⁸Although Rastafari often refer to the biblical passage of Genesis that begins creation with “the word,” which is then “made flesh,” a Rastafari brethren originally from St. Kitts but living then in Jamaica once expressed the idea of the vibrational power of the word very beautifully to me, saying : “we all are just words with flesh around them” (2002).

¹⁹See Curwen Best, “Oral Dynamics: Jeanette Layne-Clark: Education, Visibility/ Invisibility,” Roots to Popular Culture: Barbadian Aesthetics: Kamau Brathwaite to Hardcore Styles.

²⁰See “The Use of Radio in a Developing Society,” The Voice of St. Lucia, 9 March 1963: 2.”

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