Wringing the Word

By NATHANIEL MACKEY

Islands, the third book of Edward Kamau Brathwaite's first trilogy, *The Arrivants*, marks both an arrival and an embarkation. Following the diasporic panorama of *Rights of Passage* and the African focus of *Masks*, *Islands* initiates a return to the Caribbean, the undertaking of a groundedness long denied the "land- / less, harbour- / less spade."[1] The ground in question is literal (and, as the title of one of the book's poems reminds us, littoral), the Caribbean landscape and its characteristic features—shoreline, sand, coral, and so forth. The grounding undertaken is figural, a poetic investment in the specifics of place, a linguistic embrace and embarkation which asks the West Indies, "where is your kingdom of the Word?" (*A*, 222). Culture, the collective *poesis* which endows the habitation of a ground with meaning, is interrogated, meditated upon, and contributed to by a thematization of the word which *Islands* inaugurates. Accompanying this thematization is a tendency toward linguistic play and experimentation, a foregrounding of language which becomes even more prominent in the trilogy which begins with *Mother Poem*. *Chatter* rendered *shatter*, *umpire* rendered *empire*, and the lines "children // summer- / saulting in the park" (*A*, 190, 202, 181) are among the few instances in *Islands* of a practice which escalates quantumwise in the second trilogy. In this essay, looking at *Islands* and *Mother Poem* in particular, I will be discussing that escalation, the movement from landscape to wordscape, language thematized and acted upon.

The *chatter/shatter* and *umpire/empire* renderings are in fact a good place to begin. The former is one of many instances of an accent which falls on fragmentation from *Islands* on. Brathwaite writes in *Mother Poem* that "the child / is born to splinters // broken islands / broken homes,"[2] echoing an insistence we find in *Islands*: not only "cracked note," "cracked mother," "cracked ground," and "broken tongue," but also "history . . . / . . . stripped and torn" (*A*, 162, 180, 187, 210, 216). Brathwaite grounds this insistence in the fragmentariness of insular topography, the islands' lack of the relative coherence possessed by larger land masses. As though the very ground, geography itself, underwrote and underscored such accent, he again and again, in the second trilogy, broods upon "this tilted cracked fragmented landscape" (*M*, 41) in writing which amounts to a fractured wordscape, poems typified by idiosyncratic line breaks and syllabications.

> but can you ever guess how i
> who have wracked
>
> you wrong
> long too to be black
>
> be
> come part of that hool that shrinks us all to stars
>
> how i
> with all these loco
>
> motives in me
> would like to straighten
>
> strangle eye/self out
>
> grow a beard wear dark glasses
> driving the pack straight far
>
> ward into indigo and vi
> olet and on into ice like a miss
>
> ile[3]

The *chatter/shatter* rendering anticipates this later manner of speaking, both a broken mode and a breaking mode, as if to chatter were indeed to shatter. Broken speech, breaking speech, partakes of the ground, as announced in the invocation which concludes the next-to-last poem in *Islands*: "So on this ground, / write; / . . . // on this ground / on this broken ground" (*A*, 265–66). It fulfills the announcement of "some- / thing torn // and new" with which the book concludes (*A*, 270).

The phrase "broken ground," as the lines "history . . . / . . . stripped and torn" indicate, has historical as well as topographic meaning, referring to social divisions and social conflicts which have plagued the Caribbean since the advent of European expansion in the late fifteenth century. The *umpire/empire* rendering, as does much of 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 imple-

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NATHANIEL MACKEY teaches literature at the University of California, Santa Cruz. He is the author of two books and three chapbooks of poetry, including *Eroding Witness* (1985) and *School of Udhra* (1992), and of the ongoing prose composition *From a Broken Bottle Traces of Perfume Still Emanate*, two volumes of which have appeared: *Bedouin Hornbook* (1986) and *Djbot Baghostus's Run* (1993). He has also published a book of critical essays, *Discrepant Engagement: Dissonance, Cross-Culturality, and Experimental Writing* (1993), and is the editor of the literary magazine *Hambone*.

ment and sustain British imperialism. They not only address but also move to redress that domination. "I / must be given words to refashion futures / like a healer's hand," he writes in "Negus." And, further on in the same poem:

> fling me the stone
> that will confound the void
> find me the rage
> and I will raze the colony
> fill me with words
> and I will blind your God. (*A*, 224)

This aspiration gives a sense of prospect and promise to work which is otherwise a tally of deprivations. Broken speech, seeking to break new ground, brings a further sense of "broken ground" into play—the prospect and promise of a new beginning. (The fifth and final section of *Islands* is called "Beginning.") A sense of the emergence of an alternative cultural order, of being present at the inception of a new dispensation, pervades *Islands* and the second trilogy. Language, the cornerstone of cultural order, is accordingly prioritized. "My tongue is heavy with new language," the poet announces in the "Rebellion" section of *Islands* (*A*, 221).

Brathwaite's work both announces the emergence of a new language and acknowledges the impediments to its emergence, going so far as to advance impediment as a constituent of the language's newness. This is one of the most distinctive features of the writing which *Islands* announces and inaugurates. The sense of an initiation into new orders of speech is in part what Brathwaite's repeated references to pebbles imply, calling to mind the practice of speaking with pebbles in the mouth to improve pronunciation. One of the poems in *Islands* is called "Pebbles," and in "Eating the Dead" he writes, "I will return to the pebble" (*A*, 196, 219). It is in this latter poem that he says his tongue is "heavy with new language," going on immediately, however, to add: "but I cannot give birth speech. // Pebbles surround me." The pebble is a multivalent figure whose meaning cuts more than one way. A figure for the resistances active in the encounter between conflicting orders of speech, the pebble simultaneously signifies promise and impediment. Even in the practice referred to above it functions antithetically, improving speech by impeding speech. Brathwaite's recourse to it carries even greater antithetic resonance, as he calls into question the very notion of proper speech, the elocutionary norm to which such improvement aspires. In the Caribbean, of course, the notion of linguistic propriety is marked by colonialism and cultural domination, rooted in imposed, metropolitan models and canons which obstruct and delegitimate alternate modes of speech, the very modes Brathwaite is committed to advancing. The pebble signifies the diminishment and denigration of those alternate modes by a colonizing norm, by the biases intrinsic to imperial notions of propriety and improvement. It also signifies a resistance to so-called proper speech, a resistance which in Brathwaite's case is not, as in the conventional model of improvement, to be overcome, but rather encouraged, cultivated, carried farther. Hence the positive valence the figure carries as a symbol of linguistic and cultural self-determination. It comes to signify the vocalities and linguistic practices of Afro-Caribbean folk culture, tonalities and retentions Brathwaite tends especially to associate with women in a mothering role. "All that I have of her is voices," he writes of his grandmother in *Islands*, "And in the night, I listened to her singing / in a Vicks and Vapour Rub-like voice what you would call the blues" (*A*, 240). Depth and resonance accrue to the figure by the time we get to *Sun Poem*: "mothers were *loa* were stone crabs were fish traps of no / they were pebbles of sound down the floor of a well" (*S*, 77).

The pebble is characterized in part by what it's up against, larger figures in stone which impede its emergence. In *Sun Poem* Brathwaite coins a term to refer to one of the forms of material inscription whereby imperial authority sanctifies itself, statues monumentalizing the agents of colonial rule. As have other West Indian writers (Ismith Khan, for example, on the Woodford statue in *The Jumbie Bird*), he reflects critically upon the role of such statuary, its alienating impact upon the colonial subject. These monuments he calls "stammaments," a neologism which names a predicament while exemplifying the innovation which seeks to overcome it, the taking of linguistic liberties aimed at decolonizing the word.

> and yet there are those stammaments in stone
> that smile
>
> are fat or romanesque, athletic like good traffic
> cops
>
> piercing or blind to the world but never look
> ing like us (*S*, 62)

Combining *monument* and *stammer*, *stammament* says that such material inscriptions obstruct autochthonous culture, impede the emergence of postcolonial speech. It also says that postcolonial speech begins in a stammer, as in one of the poems in *Islands*, "Negus."

> It
> it
> it
> it is not
>
> it
> it
> it
> it is not

it is not
it is not
it is not enough
it is not enough to be free
of the red white and blue
of the drag, of the dragon

it is not
it is not
it is not enough
it is not enough to be free
of the whips, principalities and powers
where is your kingdom of the Word? (*A*, 222)

A further component of the coinage *stammament*, the word *stamen* we see suggestions of, implies that obstruction and the stutter it occasions are germinal, generative. Brathwaite, at the end of *Sun Poem*, speaks of "beating . . . genesis // out of the stammering world" (*S*, 97).

The difference between the pebble and the statue is not simply one of size. The statue is representational. It appropriates the solidity and the durability of stone to give a look of permanence, unalterability, to what is merely a regime. Size matters, however, in that the scale of monumental statuary not only magnifies and bestows grandeur but also suggests a coherence, a totalization, of which the smallness and the dispersion of pebbles imply the opposite. The statue is integrative, the pebble particulate. The statue is symbolic, the pebble semiotic. In accenting the pebble, Brathwaite counters the apparent solidity, impermeability, and permanence of the social relations monumental statuary is meant to reinforce. His insistence upon the pebble is an insistence upon particles and provisionality, upon the gaps, fissures, and volatility masked by monumental appearance. His "return to the pebble" primarily alerts us to the monumentality of language itself, the role played by notions of a stable, standard English in the maintenance of metropolitan norms. Returning to the smallest particles of language, syllables and letters, he assaults the apparent solidity and integrity of words, destabilizing them (showing them to be intrinsically unstable) by emphasizing the points at which they break, disassembling them and reassembling them in alternate spellings and neologistic coinages.

The second poem in *Islands*, "Ananse," invokes its namesake trickster-creator as a "dry stony world-maker, word-breaker" (*A*, 167). In *Mother Poem* Brathwaite identifies the mother figure with Ananse, saying that "spiders make patterns in her mind" and having her say, "i is spiders weavin / away" (*M*, 25, 99). Both are word-breakers: "me mudda // brek / de word" (*M*, 59). Both are figures for an activity which increasingly takes place in Brathwaite's poems. Line breaks which occur in the midst of a word are the most persistent instance of such activity, occurring regularly throughout *The Arrivants* and continuing in more idiosyncratic fashion in the second trilogy. In *The Arrivants* and in *Mother Poem* such breaks are hyphenated.

spark eye
crackle o' bone-

juice an de whole sing-
in forest on fire: whisp-

erin whips on de shiv-
erin stone o de kitch-

en where she turns
alone to the o-

ven burn-
in burn-

in world
without

world with-
out world

without
end (*M*, 92–93)

Beginning in *Sun Poem*, however, the hyphens are frequently dropped, making the breaks more emphatic, as in this passage from *X/Self*:

chad sinks

sa
hara wakes out slowly

the dry snake of the harm
attan the harmattan reaches into our wells into our smiles in

to our cook
ing pot oil in

to the water re
flecting our walls in

to the bone
of the mutton in

to our dry
gully eyes[4]

Words are broken not only by line breaks but also by punctuation marks inserted between syllables and even between letters within the same syllable. *Mother Poem* introduces a use of the slash, which we see in *Sun Poem* and *X/Self* as well.

hear the pen/nies drop/in
lissen while they fall
ev/ry one for jee/sus
he shall have them all

drop/in drop/in drop/in drop/in
hear those pen/nies fall
ev/ry one for jee/sus
he shall have them all (*M*, 11)

Colons are also employed in this way. We find "i:ron" and "us:ed" in *Mother Poem* (*M*, 45, 97), "us:ed" in *Sun Poem* as well (*S*, 93), "immobil:e" in *X/Self* (*X*, 31). *Sun Poem* introduces the use of spac-

ing to break words: "*we're going to a wonderful place / we're going to a won der ful place / over the hills and far away / we're going to a wonder full place*" (*S*, 40). *X/Self* takes this farther, employing spacing and punctuation—a period—at the same time.

> for if the laws be crook. ed
> if pathways to the palace where/in
> justice/es are not made strait
>
> there will be
> buildings rushing upwards on a scream of sand
> (*X*, 20)

These practices remind us, at the graphic level, of the divisibility and the alterability of words, their permeability to alternate arrangement, variability, change. The visibility these practices accord variation, their graphic departure from standard, presumably stable procedure, undermines monumental premises. Again, landscape and wordscape correspond, the permeability of words recalling that of the poet's native ground. "This poem," Brathwaite writes of *Mother Poem*, "is about porous limestone: my mother, Barbados" (*M*, ix). The permeability of words, their susceptibility to alternate arrangement, is also made evident in the second trilogy by a recourse to anagrammatic rearrangement, a permutability which also leads to idiosyncratic spellings, puns, and "sound-word" coinages. In *Mother Poem*, *mane* anagrammatically alters *name* and *mean*, *nan* plays upon *ann*, *nam* upon *man*, and so forth (*M*, 55, 74–75). Likewise, *glided* is rendered *gilded* in *Sun Poem*, where we also find *lion* and *loin* played upon each other and the neologism *godderal* derived from *doggerel* (*S*, 13, 49), while in *X/Self* we see *for/nicalia* derived from *california*, and so on (*X*, 88).

Rearrangements of the particles—the pebbles—of language advance phonic and semantic as well as orthographic alterations. In "Ananse" Brathwaite says that the spider, the "word-breaker," "squats on the tips // of our language," going on to speak of it spinning "webs of sound" and "revealing . . . shadows of meaning" (*A*, 165–66). His recourse to punning, the suggestion of *stairs* in the lines "he stumps up the stares / of our windows" (*A*, 165), exemplifies the Anansean tactic the poem announces. Already in "Jah," the first poem in *Islands*, Brathwaite has referred to "bridges of sound" (*A*, 162). He increasingly exploits these bridges, the "webs of sound" which connect a word to other words (*shatter* to *chatter*, *empire* to *umpire*), the echoes of other words and other meanings within a word. Words are reopened, broken open, their semantic integrity unsealed by "shadows of meaning" which are played upon and thereby shown to permeate "the Word."

Throughout the second trilogy the meanings activated through wordplay do tend to be "shadowy," accentuating the negative, "dark," dysfunctional character of the status quo. Early in *Mother Poem*, in "Bell," a warehouse is called a "wear- // house," underscoring the damage done to the speaker's husband, who worked in it.

> i never did know when he start comin home
> wid a wheeze: wid a cough: wid a stone in e chess
> so he cud hardly breed, c'dear
>
> when de duss dat e ketch in dat sun-
> dayless wear-
>
> house
> brek e up like a stick (*M*, 13)

In "Pig mornin" thirty-five cents becomes "dirty-five cents" (*M*, 30). Likewise, a shamrock is called a "shame- / rock," weekly pay is called "weakly pay," and the ill effects of being unable to read and write are orthographically highlighted in "Miss Own": "for the shoe is a safe cottage to the illiterate peasant / needing light, running water, the indestructible plastic of the soft ill / lit/erate present" (*M*, 35–36). Farther on in the book, the merchant/owner doesn't simply sit in the great house; we're told that he "shits in the great house" (*M*, 54). Farther still, grass, rather than growing, is said to be "growling along the hillside," panes of glass are called "pains of glass," steps that go no farther are said to "go no father," daily bread is "dearly bread," a kingdom is a "king/doom," and so on (*M*, 77–79, 83, 85). This tendency continues in *Sun Poem* and *X/Self*.

The phonic and semantic slippages Brathwaite cultivates resonate with reminders of injury and deprivation, wounds which run deep in the social fabric. These resonances are dissonances, reminders of discord, disharmony, disaster. In *Mother Poem* he coins a term, *skeletone*, which names and is an instance of this (*M*, 17, 40). The term recalls his announcement in *Islands*: "I will sing songs of the skeleton" (*A*, 219). His work, that is, will disinter the dead and recall the injustices they were done, resound with the ringing of bones, the "skeletonality" evoked in "Cherries": "she will bend forward with the hoe: *huh* / and the gravel will answer her: *so* // she will swing upward with the hoe: *huh* / and the bones of the plantation will come ringing to meet her: *so*" (*M*, 77–78). The ringing of bones redefines resonance, takes it in a direction contrary to expectation. It is a ringing which can only be imagined, a ringing which is difficult to imagine. Hearing the dull thud of bone as resonance epitomizes and offers an apt figure for Brathwaite's antithetic, oppositional poetics. Rooted in social disaffection and critique, "skeletonality" submits the ground to a qualitative audit, accenting the toll taken by the plantation past and its continuing repercussions.

In *Mother Poem* bones ring in contrast and opposition to bells whose conventional resonance represents dominance and regimentation, the ruling order: "quick step/chip step / as punctual as cat'olic

bells" (*M*, 15). The bells are those of school as well as church, the teacher Chalkstick's bicycle bells (*M*, 19, 22) and "the sound of schoolbells / squares: triangles: hookey hockey matches // desks: gas chambers: forward march" (*M*, 24). Brathwaite makes the intent of "skeletonality" clear very early: "bell that i will break and pour its sound in the vèvè" (*M*, 8). His writing, emulating the symbolic chalk designs which are drawn on the ground as part of *vodoun* ritual, will alter sound to mark the African presence in the West Indies. Through the figures of bell and bone he offers a thematization of sound which is concomitant with his work's phonic dislocations. Bone is an alternate bell, an antithetic bell suggesting not only victimization but also revolt, a movement toward liberation ("let freedom ring"). The deployment of these figures in *Mother Poem* recalls a conflation of corpse and bell at one point in *Islands*, where the hanged body of Paul Bogle, leader of a nineteenth-century revolt, is called a "dead bell": "chapel bells bringing freedom's / dark clash, bayonet's clangour of iron / on chain, Bogle's legs swinging steep from their steeple of pain, / dead clapper, dead leader, dead bell, / leaden tongue, the snapped neck / slacker and slacker" (*A*, 233). This "dead clapper, . . . / leaden tongue" is an earlier version of "skeletone."

"Skeletonality" indicts and rebels against English, takes revenge on the language of empire, implicating English and its presumed norms in the subjugation of colonized people. Brathwaite, as have many colonial/postcolonial writers, critiques the role of the schools, disseminators of "the Word," in the maintenance of metropolitan dominance. In *Islands* he writes:

> they go to school to the head-
> master's cries,
>
> read a black-
> board of words, angles,
>
> lies;
> they fall
>
> over their examinations.
> It is a fence that surrounds them. (*A*, 174–75)

He also speaks of the "cottonfields of Oxford" (*A*, 168). In *Mother Poem* the equation of colonial/neocolonial education with mystification and miseducation continues: "how can there be a carved trail / when schools teach their children blasphemies: / the blasphemy that the word is law when spoken by an english engineer / that our teaching must reflect these verities" (*M*, 31). He speaks of "children locked up into their cell // blocks of school" (*M*, 25). His calling a student "another black hostage / of verbs" (*M*, 24) indicates the crucial, synecdochic relationship of language to the regimentation the schools impose. Liberties taken with language are thus acts of defiance. They curse and condemn the language from whose norms they diverge. Brathwaite writes of the mother figure in *Mother Poem*, the word-breaker: "she crumples words into curses" (*M*, 47). He has already, on the same page, called her "black sycorax my mother," identifying the speaker in the poem with Shakespeare's anagrammatic invention, Caliban. Her "curses" thus recall Caliban's lines in *The Tempest*, spoken to Prospero: "You taught me language, and my profit on't / Is, I know how to curse."

Brathwaite notes in *X/Self* that "Caliban has become an anti-colonial/Third World symbol of cultural and linguistic revolt" (*X*, 116).[5] An identification of the second trilogy's linguistic license with Caliban's "profit" is explicitly made in the notes to *Sun Poem*, where Brathwaite dubs the coinages to which he increasingly resorts "calibanisms." The term *cavicle*, for example, he defines as a " 'calibanism' for clavicle; the cave between neck and collarbone" (*S*, 100). Brathwaite has argued that language was the area in which enslaved Africans most successfully rebelled against their masters, refusing to speak as they were taught but instead using—and abusing—English in ways which made it their own. He makes this argument in *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica 1770–1820*, in a chapter entitled "The 'Folk' Culture of the Slaves." As his use of the Ananse figure makes clear, in his linguistic experimentation he takes his cue from West Indian folk culture, the vernacular recasting of English he calls nation-language. His ability to sound and see *cave* in *clavicle* to fashion *cavicle* recalls a nation-language term such as *likkle*, which manages to sound a suggestion of *lick* and *trickle* one might otherwise not hear in the word *little*. The troubling accent he brings to bear upon English, the shadows of sound and meaning he brings out in a word, emulates the qualitative audit to which *down* seems to have been put to become *dung* in folk pronunciation.

It is not surprising, then, that nation-language itself assumes a much more prominent, pervasive role in the second trilogy than in the first. In *The Arrivants* nation-language tends to be isolated, reserved for individual poems such as "The Dust," "Rites," and "Cane" (*A*, 62–69, 197–203, 225–29) rather than dispersed and disseminated throughout the work as in *Mother Poem*, *Sun Poem*, and *X/Self*. In the second trilogy Brathwaite addresses the challenge he spoke of in an interview conducted by Stewart Brown in 1989: "I think the real challenge for the artist who knows his English and mediates between the two languages is to develop an English which increasingly reflects the nature of nation-language."[6] His "calibanisms" do this, inventing a third lexicon which is neither English nor nation-language in work which, while continuing to use English, makes greater use of nation-language, of its particu-

lar syntax and grammar as well as individual words. English is shown to be subject to alternate arrangement at the phrasal and sentence levels as well as at the lexical level. Nation-language grammar and syntax do with words and parts of speech what anagrammatic rearrangements do with letters: "an to know that he hads was to walk down de noon / down dat long windin day / to we home" (*M*, 15). Inspired by nation-language, Brathwaite increasingly takes grammatic and syntactic liberties with English, as when in *Sun Poem* he writes of the fishermen "walking out of the night down the street ahead of the sun and under the leaves of the seagrape and cordia trees whose flowers were fast fading stars in the touching them softly light" (*S*, 25). The adjectival placement of *touching them softly* reorders accepted usage, "the light which was touching them softly."

In addition to nation-language, Brathwaite has taken Afro-Caribbean religious and musical practices as models of cultural self-definition, examples of Calibanic resistance and a creative response to social dislocation. In *Islands* the poem "Caliban" evokes two such practices, steel-band music and limbo, thematizing "silence" as a limbo stick which must be gone under, a "long dark night" to be undergone. This thematization continues the emphasis put on nonspeech in "Shepherd," the poem which precedes it, a poem in which the African pantheon is "dumb," awaiting and eventually, through music, achieving "speech" (*A*, 185–90). The second section of "Caliban" ends:

Ban
Ban
Cal-
iban
like to play
pan
at the Car-
nival;
dip-
ping down
and the black
gods call-
ing, back
he falls
through the water's
cries
down
down
down
where the music hides
him
down
down
down
where the si-
lence lies. (*A*, 193)

The third section ends:

out of the dark
and the dumb gods are raising me

up
up
up

and the music is saving me

hot
slow
step

on the burning ground. (*A*, 195)

The play on dumbness, playing dumb, and the double meaning of "the si- / lence lies" are tokens of a bifurcation between two types of telling, what is said and what is said through not being said. The dumb gods are not really dumb, and to go down is to come back up. The silence lies in more ways than one.

Silence, as John Cage, Pierre Macherey, and others have pointed out, is unacknowledged sound. The Calibanic gesture is one of sounding silence, plumbing sounds which would otherwise not be heard. Brathwaite's thematization of silence is part and parcel of his thematization of the word, for silence is meaning and sound suppressed by a linguistico-cultural regime calling itself "the Word." We find his recourse to the figure of silence accompanied by images of hyperaudition, another aspect of qualitative audit. These images report a heightened auditory perception of the natural environment, implicitly critiquing the constricted hearing regulated by "the Word," an order of relative silence in which "men make noises / louder than the sea's / voices" (*A*, 205). These images project sounds and acts of hearing we would otherwise not imagine. In *Islands* "clinks / of dew in the grass," "the polyp's thunder," "the boom / of the mango bursting its sweetness," and "the creak of forests" in a carved block of wood are all said to have been heard (*A*, 178, 232–33, 243). In *Mother Poem* grass is heard "growling" (*M*, 77). In *Sun Poem* we read of "a sun that he [Adam] heard in his ears" and are later told that "the sand always tinkled when he dived near the shore" (*S*, 6, 25). When, in *Islands*, we read of waves "lap- // ping these shores with their silence" (*A*, 238), having already been told of human sounds outshouting "the sea's / voices," we know that *silence* is a relative term, referring to repressed articulacies whose mouthpiece the poet aims to become: "and I see you, my wound- / ed gift giver of sea / spoken syllables: words salt on your lips / on my lips" (*A*, 238). Repressed articulacy is also emergent energy and anger, an apocalyptic return of the repressed whose harbinger silence becomes in the poem "Anvil," "dark, defeated silence" become "a destroying silence" (*A*, 249–50).

The sea whose "lap- // ping . . . silence" Brathwaite invokes he calls "my mother / of water" (*A*,

238). In the final poem in *Mother Poem*, "Driftword," he returns to this conjunction of mother, sea, and silence, writing of "her silent gutters of word-fall" and "the breaking of her flesh with foam" in the concluding lines of the book (*M*, 117)—giving silence, as it were, the last word. Tobago-born Marlene Nourbese Philip writes of silence in ways which are relevant here. In the introduction to her book of poetry *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks* she writes of "the anguish that is english in colonial societies." She argues that the acquisition of English by Africans brought to the West Indies was as much deprivation as acquisition. To speak English was to acquiesce to the subordinate position—"the non-being of the African"—it meted out, to silence one's Africanity, self-image, and experience: "The paradox at the heart of the acquisition of this language is that the African learned both to speak and to be dumb at the same time, to give voice to the experience and i-mage, yet remain silent. That silence has had profound effect upon the English-speaking African Caribbean artist working in the medium of words."[7] In a more recent work, *Looking for Livingstone: An Odyssey of Silence*, Philip gives silence a more positive, regenerative value, having the protagonist, identified only as The Traveller, reflect at one point: "in finding my own Silence I was finding my own power—of transformation." This reflection occurs following a conversation in which The Traveller is advised to weave "something new," composed of "word *and* silence."

> ". . . neither word alone, nor silence alone, but word and silence—weave, patch, sew together and remember it is *your* silence—all yours, untouched and uncorrupted. The word does not belong to you—it was owned and whored by others long, long before you set out on your travels—whore words." Then she laughed. "But to use your silence, you have to use the word."
>
> "Whore words?" I asked.
>
> "Yes, and there's the rub, my dear," she said, and gently drew me close and held me—"there's the rub—you need the word—whore words—to weave your silence."[8]

She is given this advice during her stay in the "land of needlewomen and weavers," the NEECLIS, a people whose name, like those of all the others with whom she stays during her travels, is an anagram of *silence*.

As Philip's Traveller moves from the land of the ECNELIS to the land of the LENSECI and from there to that of the SCENILE and so forth, the anagrammatic play induces a sense less of movement than of stasis, a sense of being stuck within orthographic permutations whose parameters are all too clearly defined. The book's liberatory assertions notwithstanding, we sense the limits imposed by verbal discourse, a sense of limits which makes its thematization of silence all the more understandable and compelling. This brings to mind a comment on Samuel Beckett's work made by Ihab Hassan in *The Literature of Silence*.

> In a certain sense, all his works may be thought of as a parody of Ludwig Wittgenstein's notion that language is a set of games, akin to the arithmetic of primitive tribes. Beckett's parodies, which are full of self-spite, reveal a general tendency in anti-literature, one that Hugh Kenner describes brilliantly: "the dominant intellectual analogy of the present age is drawn not from biology, not from psychology (though these are sciences we are knowing about), but from general number theory." Art in a closed field thus becomes an absurd game of permutations, like Molloy sucking stones at the beach; and "the retreat from the word"—the phrase is George Steiner's—reduces language to pure ratio.[9]

Molloy sucking stones at the beach is not unrelated to Brathwaite's Caliban surrounded by pebbles—an absurdist kinship confirmed by a reference to the myth of Sisyphus, the founding myth of Albert Camus's absurdism, on the back cover of Brathwaite's recent book of poetry, *Middle Passages*: "It marks a Sisyphean stage of Third World history in which things fall apart and everyone's achievements come tumbling back down upon their heads and into their hearts, like the great stone which King Sisyphus was condemned to keep heaving back up the same hill in hell."[10] The Sisyphean strain, however, is nothing new. It has been a feature of Brathwaite's work at least since *Rights of Passage*, whose opening poem, "Prelude," exhorts, "Build now / the new / villages," and again, two pages later, "So build build / again the new / villages," only to announce at the end, "Flame burns the village down" (*A*, 4–8). We find it again in the epigraph to *Islands*, taken from James Baldwin's *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone*, a passage in which a sense of long-awaited achievement is dispelled by the announcement "that it was all to be done again" (*A*, 160).

It would be a mistake to read Brathwaite's work as a simple, triumphalist vindication of nation-language, a simple act of Calibanic restitution. The accent put upon silence at the end of *Mother Poem*—"so she lies / mutter of echoes, folded to silence" (*M*, 114)—issues a caveat regarding linguistic projects, a warning which applies to both conformity and revolt. This recourse to metaphoric silence, to a thematization of silence, is the Sisyphean strain brought to bear upon language. It problematizes not only English but language in general, revealing that Brathwaite's Calibanic play is not a positivist pursuit of an ultimate adequation afforded by a new, presumably unproblematic language. The all but fiendish delight Brathwaite takes in the slippage to which words are prone raises doubts as to whether such erosion could ever be curtailed. Hence the parodic tendency in the work, a tendency which appears to have turned on the

work itself when we get to a parody of Calibanic revolt such as the following:

> and we marched upon the palace
> declaring that the governor was black
> and that his concubines would go abroad in naturelles or afro
>
> wigs
>
> we entered the holy carbolic echoing church
> cool clean heel heil
> and the madonna was made over in the image of my sister
>
> *hale mary full of grease*
> *the lard is with thee* (*M*, 106–7)

Likewise, the lisp with which Esse speaks in *Sun Poem* (*S*, 73–83) further dislocates an English already dislocated by nation-language, as if to suggest that language, all language, is irremediable drift—a suggestion already made by the title of the final poem in *Mother Poem*, "Driftword."

Woven into Brathwaite's linguistic liberties is a wish for what lies beyond language and sound. This is one of the further implications of "skeletonality." The "bell that i will break and pour its sound in the vèvè" signals not only a breaking of sound but a breaking away from sound, breaking away into synesthetic translation. In a note regarding this line, Brathwaite points out that in the Barbadian church "the bell is used as censer" (*M*, 120). The bell, chiming "with a sound like breaking glass," is swung from side to side as though wafting scent—a synesthetic swing into a silence of sorts, sound as incense. It is a swing which recalls the silent-synesthetic trajectories in *Islands*, where "the eye screams" but is admitted to be "dumb," an anesthetic-synesthetic order of "the closed eye / broken eardrum" (*A*, 186, 256, 211). Images of silence and sensory deprivation conspire with images of hyperaudition, suggesting an appetite for meaning and sensation large enough to squeeze the last drop of sound and sense from the world and from words. "Skeletonality," the bell whose chime we can't quite hear, like Wilson Harris's "Well of Silence,"[11] wrings the word.

University of California, Santa Cruz

[1] Edward Brathwaite, *The Arrivants: A New World Trilogy*, Oxford (Eng.), Oxford University Press, 1973, p. 34. Hereafter cited as *A* in the text of the essay.

[2] Edward Kamau Brathwaite, *Mother Poem*, Oxford (Eng.), Oxford University Press, 1977, p. 108. Hereafter cited as *M* in the text of the essay.

[3] Edward Kamau Brathwaite, *Sun Poem*, Oxford (Eng.), Oxford University Press, 1982, pp. 3–4. Hereafter cited as *S* in the text of the essay.

[4] Edward Kamau Brathwaite, *X/Self*, Oxford (Eng.), Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 32. Hereafter cited as *X* in the text of the essay.

[5] For a discussion of such use of Caliban by West Indian and African writers, see Rob Nixon, "Caribbean and African Appropriations of *The Tempest*," in *Politics and Poetic Value*, ed. Robert von Hallberg, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1987, pp. 185–206.

[6] Stewart Brown, "Interview with Edward Kamau Brathwaite," *Kyk-over-al*, 40 (December 1989), p. 85.

[7] Marlene Nourbese Philip, *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks*, Charlottetown, Prince Edward Island, Ragweed, 1989, p. 16.

[8] Marlene Nourbese Philip, *Looking for Livingstone: An Odyssey of Silence*, Stratford, Ont., Mercury, 1991, pp. 52–53.

[9] Ihab Hassan, *The Literature of Silence: Henry Miller and Samuel Beckett*, New York, Knopf, 1967, p. 9.

[10] Kamau Brathwaite, *Middle Passages*, Newcastle upon Tyne (Eng.), Bloodaxe, 1992, back cover.

[11] Wilson Harris, *The Eye of the Scarecrow*, London, Faber & Faber, 1965, p. 95.