

Sara Borga / MA Literary Studies / Goldsmiths, University of London

Date submitted: 02/03/2020

Word count: 5625

The Griot's Drum: Representing the Diasporic Subject in

Kamau Brathwaite's The Arrivants and Marlon James' A Brief History of Seven Killings

modalities and trace its continuities, not only do they reinscribe the diasporic subject in history, but rather expand on inherited traditions and devise new epistemologies. This relocation results in a surfacing of the cumulative meanings found within the representation of the diasporic subject.

See?

She saw

the sea

come

up go down

school children

summer-

saulting in the park.¹⁶

The allusion to the seesaw, as it moves up and down, and its conflation with the sea, in its tidal ebb and flow, hypothesise the expanded dialectical forces that Brathwaite brings to light as he disrupts the hegemonic legacy of the iambic pentameter and explores instead what Florian Gargaillo calls ‘the rhythmic possibilities of verse’.¹⁷ Moreover, cadence and alliteration are carefully considered as a gesture towards the leaps and instability the poet sees inherent to Caribbean identity and aesthetics.¹⁸ The criss-cross within language relocates the poet’s persona

¹⁶ Brathwaite, pp. 181-182.

¹⁷ Florian Gargaillo, ‘Kamau Brathwaite’s Rhythms of Migration’, *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, Vol. 53(1) (2016), p. 157.

¹⁸ Rohlehr, p. 12.

to African soil, as ‘she’ (the Mother) mourns the loss of the continent’s children and the violation of ‘the sea’s balanced / treaty’.¹⁹

As Brathwaite steers the reader on this now unsettled sea, the strategies he employs constitute what Elizabeth DeLoughrey calls, in citing Brathwaite, a set of “‘alter/native” epistemologies to Western colonialism and its linear and materialist biases”.²⁰ In so doing, Brathwaite commits to the construction of a distinct cultural dialectic within an Afro-Caribbean context, through both the considered crafting of his poetry and adjacently by the historical and theoretical framework it generates. The poet elaborates on his methodology as he complicates the forces at play by bringing together past with present, and Africa with the Caribbean. Furthermore, Brathwaite goes so far as to define a new type of dialectics: one that counters the rigidity of Hegelian discourse, and instead incorporates the cyclical rhythms of the sea, in a ‘tidalectic’ reasoning. He defines it as:

Dialectics with my difference. In other words, instead of the notion of one-two-three, Hegelian, I am now more interested in the movement of the water backwards and forwards as a kind of cyclic, I suppose, motion, rather than linear.²¹

With this in mind, and in observing the receding and returning motions enunciated in images such as the drum, the see-saw, and in *The Arrivants*’ leaping temporality, the concept of tidalectics not only aids in demystifying the colonial consciousness of the sea — ‘[w]e wished

¹⁹ Brathwaite, p. 184.

²⁰ Elizabeth M. DeLoughrey, *Routes and Roots: Navigating Caribbean and Pacific Island Literatures* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2007), p. 2.

²¹ Kamau Brathwaite, Nathaniel Mackey and Chris Funkhouser, *Conversations with Nathaniel Mackey*, (Staten Island, NY: Mineeapolis, MN : Xcp: Cross-Cultural Poetics: We Press, 1999), p.14.

the sea as it should be: [...] | quiet at sundown, restless at noon, | land and sea balanced by sky'²² — but also that of Caribbean and diasporic cultural production, thus providing for an illuminating model with which to approach the ‘complex and shifting entanglement between [...] diaspora and indigeneity’.²³ Ultimately, for Brathwaite, the processes of creolisation, of highlighting the interconnectedness of past and present experiences in Africa and the Caribbean, are seen as a dynamic construct which represents and is in itself tidal and aqueous. Moreover, it upholds the nature of an identity which celebrates the ruptures and discontinuities inherent to itself and thereby weaponising a continuity from its ancestral rootedness. As ancestral rites and traditions cross-fertilise literature at the intersection of space and time, creolisation and cross-disciplinarity are the themes, form and theoretical grounds from which the representation of a diasporic subjectivity emerges, celebrates itself, and resists the strategies of Western hegemonic literary and cultural assimilation.

²² Brathwaite, pp. 183-184.

²³ DeLoughrey, p. 2.

II. A Bardic retelling

Listen. Dead people never stop talking.

[...]

But the dead never stop talking and sometimes the living hear.

[...]

Dead people never stop talking and sometimes the living hear.

- Marlon James, *A Brief History of Seven Killings*

One of the most noticeable features in the first pages of Marlon James's *A Brief History of Seven Killings* is an extensive list of sixty-six characters and their particular historical context, spanning from late 1950's Jamaica through to the United States in the early 1990's. From this cast, twelve stand out as first person narrators and jointly contribute to a polyvocal narration of the fictional events surrounding and unfolding from the nonfictional attempted murder of Bob Marley in December of 1976. The novel is then divided into five chapters; five specific days over a timespan of twenty-years, which results in a complex webbing of accounts of the Jamaican political and social landscape in the second half of the twentieth century. Furthermore, this multitude of narrators contributes to a dense entanglement of historical accounts which complicates a sense of linear progression. This temporal disarranging conveys what Michael A. Bucknor and Kezia Page, in the 2018 issue of the *Journal of West Indian Literature* dedicated to

James, consider the ‘psychic disruption’ associated with this particularly violent period in the history of the country in its postcolonial existence.²⁴

As a guide through the unsettled narrative structure, James provides the recurring voice of a deceased former politician, Sir Arthur Jennings. In the character’s opening words which act as a prologue to the novel, the use of the imperative ‘*Listen*’ and the emphasis James suggests in using italics promptly positions the reader at the receiving end of a pressing story which is about to be told. As the ghostly character contemplates his condition, the recurring variations of his initial statement build up tension and evidence an insight which foreshadows the proceeding stories of violence and death. Moreover, Caryn Mae Adams articulates that this repetitive enunciation of premonitory contours enlists Sir Arthur as ‘a one-man chorus of a Greek tragedy’.²⁵ However, Sir Arthur’s clairvoyance within a Jamaican situatedness can be more accurately considered to be in relation to a particularly West-African tradition and therefore outside of Europe’s cultural hegemony. In *Bridging the Narrative Gap: The Ghost Narrator in Marlon James’s A Brief History of Seven Killings*, Anna Maria Tomczak assigns to the spectre of the politician the role of the ‘African (and Caribbean) bard known as a griot’.²⁶

Tomczak cites Thomas A. Hale’s definition of the griot as “a highly visible cultural voice”, whose profession “maintain[s] genealogies, sing[s] praises, compose[s] songs, play[s] instruments, narrate[s] history and serve[s] as [a] spokesperson”.²⁷ As Sir Arthur contemplates

²⁴ Michael A. Bucknor and Kezia Pagee, ‘Authorial Self-fashioning, Political Denials and Artistic Distinctiveness: The Queer Poetics of Marlon James’, *Journal of West Indian Literature* (2018), p. 15.

(https://www.jwilonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/JWIL_Nov_2018.pdf) [accessed 04/01/2020]

²⁵ Caryn Mae Adams, ‘Uncomfortable Truths: Lifewriting, Trauma and Survivance in Marlon James’ *A Brief History of Seven Killings*, *Journal of West Indian Literature* (2018), p. 96. (https://www.jwilonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/JWIL_Nov_2018.pdf) [accessed 04/01/2020]

²⁶ Anna Maria Tomczak, ‘Bridging the Narrative Gap: The Ghost Narrator in Marlon James’ *A Brief History of Seven Killings*, *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies*, Vol. 25(1), (2019), p. 119.

(https://search.proquest.com/docview/2299754145?accountid=11149&rfr_id=info%3Axri%2Fsid%3Aprimo) [accessed 15/01/2020].

²⁷ Tomczak, p. 119.

the socio-political instability of 1970's Jamaica, and prophesies 'a story of several killings, of boys who meant nothing to a world still spinning',²⁸ he performs the functions specific to the Afro-bardic role of the griot by introducing the stories and fortunes of the listed characters. In this way, Tomczak's reconfigured reading allows for an understanding and positioning of James' novel as pertaining to a distinct Caribbean and diasporic literary tradition.

Sir Arthur's eerie prologue instigates a journey through time and space, suffused with the echoes of a cautionary tale. The first chapter sees Sir Arthur's voice followed by a series of diaristic entries for December 2nd, 1976, from a numerous cast of characters such as a young gang member, gang enforcers and leaders, a CIA agent, a woman who will be seen to take on three other aliases, and a journalist from *The Rolling Stone*. By this account, the interspersed voices presented by James contribute to a seemingly disorderly account of linear time. The rhythm ensued by the sequence of differing experiences allows for an elastic reading of time in which its perception is both stretched and accelerated. As it spans the course of one single day, it similarly expands to accommodate the complexity of each narrator's psychological state. Moreover, James' distancing as authorial voice foregrounds the novel's epistolary form, thus granting not only time, but also a platform for the myriad subjectivities which come to inhabit it. In this manner, the strict measure of a day becomes malleable to a narrative subjectivity; bending to and accommodating individual experience .

It is in the context of this protean narrative and 'literary cacophony'²⁹ that Emma Crawley examines the polyvocality of *A Brief History of Seven Killings* as relational to the

²⁸ Marlon James, *A Brief History of Seven Killings* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2015), p. 3.

²⁹ Emma Crawley, "'So Many Incredible Gehennas': Musicality and (the Poetics of) 'Relation' in the Novels of Marlon James", *Journal of West Indian Literature* (2018), p. 43. (https://www.jwilonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/JWIL_Nov_2018.pdf) [accessed 04/01/2020]

usefulness of music in articulating postcolonial and emancipation politics.³⁰ In establishing an insightful parallel between the musical and the literary, Crowley highlights the role of reggae within the novel by way of James' casting of Bob Marley as 'The Singer'. In so doing, Crowley proposes an 'intermedial' reading through which the writer can be seen to resurface 'aural, oral and performative cultural modalities that are recognizably Jamaican'.³¹ In focusing on the sonic realm of word and song as such cultural modalities, Crowley similarly highlights James' critique of the efficacy of these modes in maintaining a 'positive value' as 'markers of "authenticity"' in a neocolonial context.³² This intermedial approach that Crowley elucidates, in turn reveals a rift amongst perceptions of authenticity.

One such instance of this tension can be found within Nina Burgess's second entry in the first chapter. Nina's initial casting as a 'former receptionist, presently unemployed' fails to anticipate the narrative of particularly gendered violence,³³ which she navigates by often assuming a defiant, yet nonetheless incisive, stance. Upon her encounter with the American journalist Alex Pierce, who claims to know the 'real Jamaica', Nina retorts: "' — Good for you. I've lived here all my life and haven't found the real Jamaica yet.'" ³⁴ Nina's contempt attests to Crowley's debate around ideas of Jamaicanness and authenticity, which is similarly present in the narration of gang leader Josey Wales, as he impatiently waits for his young gang members: '[e]very Jamaican man is a man searching for father and if one don't come with the package he's going to find another one.'³⁵ By this account, as identity and kinship are either uncertain or complicated in most Jamaican narrators, they are paradoxically taken for granted by the white

³⁰ Crowley, p. 35.

³¹ Crowley, p. 36

³² Ibid, p. 36.

³³ For a focused analysis of gender construction in James' work, please see Lauren Shoemaker's 'Femme Finale: Gender, Violence and Nation in Marlon James' Novels'.

³⁴ James, p. 51.

³⁵ James, p. 42.

American characters such as Alex Pierce, or CIA chief Barry DiFlorio: ‘[r]acism here is sour and sticky, but it goes down so smooth that you’re tempted to be racist with a Jamaican just to see if they would even get it’.³⁶ In this way, the questionings and disconcerting assumptions here voiced seem to epitomise an inventory of what Crawley considers to be the ‘multiple iterations of the Jamaican and non-Jamaican self’,³⁷ as they grapple with notions of truth and representation.

Departing from Crawley’s reading and the reflections by James’s narrators of the cumulative meanings within Jamaican identity and its projection beyond national borders, a discussion entailing Caribbean and diasporic subjectivity can be seen to take shape. So as to better understand its contemporary implications in the context of *A Brief History of Seven Killings*, it is pertinent to draw attention to Édouard Glissant’s *Poetics of Relation*, as it provides a useful framework through which to read James’s plurivocal narrative. Glissant takes on Deleuze and Guattari’s use of the rhizome as metonymic tool for the construction of cultural identity³⁸ and enlarges upon its potential for understanding the processes of identity formation in the Caribbean, explaining: ‘[r]hizomatic thought is behind what I call the Poetics of Relation, in which each and every identity is extended through a relationship with the Other’.³⁹ For Glissant, the identification through Other is paramount to the development of a poetics which aims to counter Western processes of identity formation. As he envisions the Western conquerors as one ‘moving, transient root of their people’,⁴⁰ Glissant quickly dismisses the root as insufficient in conveying a fully formed sense of identity for the conquered peoples, and focuses instead on its pairing with the notion of rhizome. In it, the philosopher finds a dialogic model that better

³⁶ Ibid, p. 143.

³⁷ Crawley, p. 47.

³⁸ G. Deleuze, F. Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London: Continuum, 2008).

³⁹ Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1997) p. 11.

⁴⁰ Glissant, p. 14.

represents the growths of a relational subjectivity. One in which the subject is ‘linked not to a creation of the world but to the conscious and contradictory experience of contacts among cultures’,⁴¹ and in doing so activates a field of oppositional forces.

It is in the rippling effects of such forces that an expanded reading of James’ novel can be pursued, as his Jamaican narrators grapple with notions of rootedness and kinship in the encounter with problematic postcolonial expectations. In this way, as James chronicles the oppositional tendrils of a rhizomatic network of accounts, *A Brief History of Seven Killings* can be read as a record of experiences and subjectivities which come together in unison, so as to inhabit a representational diasporic continuum where a multiplicity of aggregated meanings reside.

⁴¹ Ibid, p. 143.

III.

In considering the intersections between *The Arrivants* and *A Brief History of Seven Killings*, the potential which both Kamau Brathwaite and Marlon James anticipated in historically relocating their narratives requires deeper examination. The points in history to which they chose to do so shed light on what may be perceived to be the different stages of a process of becoming of a Caribbean and diasporic subject. In *The Arrivants*, that relocation is seen to engage the inherited memories of and connections to a remote past, as it carries the poet's persona back to an edenic African motherland. In doing so, Brathwaite seeks to ground the Caribbean subject and retroactively inscribe him in the records of an ancestral past.

In 'Kamau Brathwaite and the Poetics of (Re)Possession', John Glenn analyses the Barbadian poet's urgency in embracing an African heritage:

Brathwaite's poetic figures attempt to repossess a culturally sound identity in the Caribbean. It is of necessity that this identity subsumes the "African" side of West Indian existence.⁴²

Glenn elaborates on a theory of repossession which he sees as taking shape in Brathwaite's engagement with an African experience inasmuch as it reinserts afrocentricity within a Caribbean and diasporic identity, thus reinforcing the ties to an originary centre. Moreover, Brathwaite's method of repossession extends beyond his poetic imaginings and expands to his literary criticism, as he searches for a similar 'culturally sound identity' in the literary production

⁴² John Glenn, 'Kamau Brathwaite and the Poetics of (Re)Possession' in *Journal of Caribbean Literatures*, Vol. 6(1) (2009), pp. 65.

of his contemporaries.⁴³

In the context of *A Brief History of Seven Killings*, James can be seen to similarly gesture towards a repossessing of his own, one of a much more recent past, as it encounters the Caribbean subjects in the second half of the twentieth century. While Brathwaite's initial concern lies in conjuring a foundational moment of geographical and spiritual unity from within which a diasporic continuity can be traced, James alternatively presents the reader with myriad subjectivities deeply imbricated in both local and global dimensions. As Emma Crawley explains in her attempt to 'capture the enmeshing of the [...] Caribbean and the elsewhere' in James' work:

James' novels [...] seek to locate new forms of Afro-Caribbean selfhood in which a poetics of rupture and discordancy is key to representing the violence inherent to the post-postcolonial condition.⁴⁴

Following from this account, the polyvocality of the novel delivered by multiple Jamaican and non-Jamaican utterances of ganglords, young gang members, CIA agents and dead politicians foregrounds the oppositional and dissonant forces within diasporic discourse in a contemporary sphere of postnational power dynamics. Furthermore, this embedded polyvocality further unsettles notions of gendered violence and expectations as seen in Nina Burgess's familial relationships or in the constructions of masculinity amongst gang members.⁴⁵

⁴³ Edward Kamau Brathwaite, 'The African Presence in Caribbean Literature', *Daedalus*, Vol.103(2) (1974), pp. 73-109. (https://www.jstor.org/stable/20024205?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents) [accessed 28/01/2020]

⁴⁴ Crawley, p.37.

⁴⁵ Shoemaker, p. 18-33.

Despite the gesturing in these motions towards what can be perceived as a radical dispersion of the diasporic subject, the ruptures as portrayed by James are such insofar as they aim to reformulate ideas of authenticity beyond the restrictions of national identity. James' desire to write a novel 'driven only by voice'⁴⁶ manifests the growing concern with a centered interiority. As Crowley points out when analysing character construction in *A Brief History of Seven Killings*, 'the auditory cadences of conversational speech allow for a textual register of individuation through orality'.⁴⁷ Expanding Crowley's focus on sonority, this register can similarly be equated to a desire in James to refashion an Afro-Caribbean tradition of storytelling, thereby becoming the vehicle for refocusing the experiences of each narrator.

In this instance, it is relevant to read Crowley's claim against Brathwaite's own literary criticism, more specifically in *History of the Voice*, as he studies the language used by writers of the Caribbean and African diaspora. Focusing mainly on the anglophone Caribbean, Brathwaite crafts a concept of 'nation language',⁴⁸ at the center of which lies the encounter between the imposed languages of the conquering peoples and the imported languages of the enslaved. Brathwaite goes on to describe its characteristics as cultural production:

The poetry, the culture itself, exists not in a dictionary but in the tradition of the *spoken word*. It is based as much on *sound* as it is on *song*.⁴⁹ (emphasis mine)

⁴⁶ James, p. 687.

⁴⁷ Crowley, p. 43.

⁴⁸ Brathwaite, Kamau, *The History of the Voice: The Development of Nation Language in Anglophone Caribbean Poetry* (London: New Beacon Books, 1984), p???

⁴⁹ Brathwaite, p. 17.

Following from this, it may be argued that Brathwaite's upholding of a non-scribal tradition of cultural production, as demonstrated by the deployment of the drum, elucidates the movement through which James' narrators are conceded an 'individuation through orality' and consequently assert their subjectivity. Moreover, the authenticity of their experiences is legitimised and upheld by the rhetoric and moral authority assigned to Sir Arthur Jennings as West African griot. In this way, *The Arrivants* and *A Brief History of Seven Killings* share a structure that enables a uniquely diasporic voice to resonate from a non-scribal polyphonous style of literature.

Brathwaite's reworkings of a remote past and James' insertion in real events of recent popular culture unsettle a Western sense of linear time and history, and are seen to engage with poetic methodologies that more adequately communicate the expanded dialectical forces within the construction of a Caribbean and diasporic subjectivity. In considering the Hegelian model of dialectics as insufficient, Brathwaite takes on a theoretical framework of his own, as he devises an 'alter/native' methodological tool based on the cyclical movements of the sea, and thereby defines a theory of tidalectics. Only in doing so can the poet envision and revisit an ancestral originary centre in which to reinscribe the Caribbean and diasporic subject. In a similar choreography, James' multiplicity of narrators and accounts signals towards Édouard Glissant's deployment of the rhizome in refashioning a tale of origins owing not solely to the notion of a unitarian root, but instead to a consciousness of relatedness. The rhizome, therefore, accommodates the increased tensions and experiences between a myriad oppositional forces, and thereby deeply embedding them in a historical continuity.

IV.

In conclusion, the path through which the representation of the diasporic subject is realised in *The Arrivants* and *A Brief History of Seven Killings* has revealed itself to hold four main concerns: spatio-temporal relocation, surfacing inherited traditions, revising literary structures and devising alternative epistemologies.

For Brathwaite, the relocation carries the Caribbean subject to an ancestral African past, as the poet conveys the need in pinning down an originary centre. As Gordon Rohlehr has noted, in tracing the early migratory flows and diasporic patterns of African peoples across the continent, Brathwaite's process of relocation has been observed by its disruption of linear notions of time. Within James' writing, a similar temporal and spatial disarranging is achieved by producing a multivocal account of five days in the history of post-independence Jamaica. In both texts, a totalised version of history is unsettled, thus allowing for inscribing the Caribbean and diasporic subject in the unrecorded but remembered records of history, and relocating it in the archives of a contemporary factual past.

Secondly, the processes of relocation for both authors have been seen to engage with West African oral and performative traditions. The employment of the drum as metonymic tool for the ceremonial rites that will initiate Brathwaite's subject into an edenic African existence simultaneously yields the voice that had been submerged upon the encounter with slavery. Following from this, and guided by Anna Maria Tomczak, a reading of James' character of Sir Arthur Jennings as the spectral archetype of the African and Caribbean griot has illuminated the potential in surfacing inherited traditions of storytelling for articulating such marginalised histories.

Moreover, both drum and griot present Brathwaite and James with formal possibilities through which to reconfigure the Western literary canon. As Brathwaite surveys the work of his contemporaries and delineates a Caribbean literary establishment, he presents the movements which he sees most effective in poetically accommodating the Caribbean and diasporic experience. In *The Arrivants*, these are introduced by the rhythms of the drum, as it breaks the iambic pentameter and conjures ‘alter/native’ motions. In *A Brief History of Seven Killings*, Sir Arthur as griot announces and conducts a polyphonic choir of Jamaican and non-Jamaican voices, which in their multiplicity have been seen to contribute to an elastic perception of narrative time. Furthermore, as the novel’s diaristic structure generates a ‘literary cacophony’, it conversely locates and accommodates the individual experiences of each narrator, unsettling notions of kinship and authenticity particularly amongst the Jamaican narrators. On this account, both writings articulate the potential in reconfiguring poetic and novelistic structures so as to thwart the Western literary canon, and thus amplify the voice of a distinct diasporic subjectivity.

Finally, from the preoccupation both authors convey with the pursuit for literary modes that better represent the Caribbean and diasporic experience, new theoretical methodologies have been seen to arise. The leaping temporality within *The Arrivants*, along with the ebb and flow of the images it conjures, evidences Brathwaite’s perception of a tidal dialectic marked by the cyclical movements of the sea. *A Brief History of Seven Killings* in turn discloses the diasporic subject as deeply imbricated in a global sphere of neocolonial politics. In this manner, the novel attests to Édouard Glissant’s dialogic model of the rhizome, whereby the Martiniquan philosopher upholds the oppositional forces of a relational subjectivity.

In examining the representation of the diasporic subject in *The Arrivant’s* and *A Brief History of Seven Killings*, a common site of resistance is found in the condition by which this

subjectivity escapes the linearity of Western hegemonic discourses. As the percussive ripples of Brathwaite's drum summon a tale of ancestral origins for the diasporic subjectivity, James' Afro-Caribbean bard conducts the choir who will intimate its contemporary reverberations.

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