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Creolizing Elegy: Kamau Brathwaite and the Art of Mourning

Jahan Ramazani

Abstract: After the Barbadian poet Kamau Brathwaite died, admiring poets and critics improvised an online ceremony to mourn his passing by reading forty of his poems over forty nights. Yet in the critical literature, his poems have seldom been interpreted as elegies, a genre perhaps mistakenly thought to be inherently Western, ill-suited to a revolutionary anticolonial poet. But elegy, as he termed the poetry of mourning, grief, and dwelling with the dead, has many counterparts in world literature. His melding of Western elegiac traditions with African Caribbean mortuary practices, rituals, and history can help widen our understanding of the genre's global bearings. Brathwaite is perhaps the Caribbean's most prodigious elegist—a poet who continually renovates and stretches the genre. His rich, multifaceted elegies deserve and reward extended analysis because of his innovative approaches to elegizing the dead, fueled by his original ethnographic-historical research on creolization and on Caribbean mourning ritual.

AFTER KAMAU BRATHWAITE DIED, admiring poets and critics improvised an online ceremony to mourn his passing by reading forty of his poems over forty nights, performing them as elegiac scripts in a collective mortuary ritual. Drawing on Kelly Baker Joseph's Brathwaite-influenced concept of "the digital yard," Tzarina T. Prater describes this memorialization as a "digital diasporic elegy."¹ Several years after this memorial, at a major conference on Black poetry, Kei Miller recited a twelve-part, adynaton-laden elegy for Brathwaite, which culminates in the speaker's books throwing themselves off his shelves and weeping in grief, even his copy of Derek Walcott's *Omeros* (1990).² Yet strangely, in the critical literature, Brathwaite's own poems have seldom been interpreted as elegies, a genre perhaps mistakenly thought to be inherently Western, ill-suited to a revolutionary anticolonial poet.³ But *elegy*, as Brathwaite himself termed the poetry of mourning, grief, and dwelling with the dead, has counterparts in many world traditions of grief poetry, summoned, for example, in Anna Akhmatova's Russian *Requiem*, Kofi Awoonor's Ewe dirges, and Agha Shahid Ali's variations on the Shi'a Muslim *marsiya*. Brathwaite's deft melding of Western elegiac

traditions with African Caribbean mortuary practices, rituals, and history can help widen our understanding of the genre's global bearings. Despite elegy's underrecognized importance in his work, Brathwaite is perhaps the region's most prodigious elegist—a poet who continually renovates and stretches the genre.

Elegguas (2010) is Brathwaite's most explicitly elegiac collection of poems. Printed in lowercase as *elegguas*, the title creolizes "elegies" with "Eleggua," name of the Yoruba god of the threshold, doorway, and crossroad, transported by the enslaved across the Atlantic. The book gathers snippets from Brathwaite's unvarnished prose memoir of his first wife's death and dying of cancer, *The Zea Mexican Diary* (1993), interspersed among elegies of various kinds for dead relatives, jazz musicians, an assassinated Jamaican leader, a fellow Caribbean poet, and loved ones lost by friends and family.⁴ Of abiding importance to him, elegies span Brathwaite's entire career dating back to 1951, the era of his student days at Cambridge University, in a sequence originally entitled simply "Elegies":

Those whom I hold most dear
Are always dead.
They become more than fixed
In song or stone or album
Mixed with my being
They stand with me in the world.⁵

As revised decades later for "Mesongs" in *Elegguas*, this poem begins and ends: "Those who I hold most dear / are nvr dead // . . . they walk in me with the world."⁶ Both versions echo psychoanalytic interiorization, even as they instantiate a regional ontology. According to Maarit Forde's anthropological synopsis, in the Caribbean, "the realm of the dead is not clearly distinct from that of the living; there is no ontological rupture between the conditions of being and no longer being."⁷ Caribbean literature is replete with elegiac poetry, as I explore elsewhere, but Brathwaite's rich, multifaceted elegies deserve and reward extended analysis because of his innovative approaches to elegizing the dead, fueled by his original ethnographic-historical research on creolization and on Caribbean mourning ritual.⁸

I. Braithwaite's Creolization

Brathwaite's poetry plays a major role in elegy's *creolization*, theorized in his work as creative adaptation to new cultures and environments.⁹

How can Brathwaite's insights into creolization illuminate his elegies, and how can his elegies illuminate creolization? To address these questions, it's worth pausing over his thinking about creolization, a concept that has been important in Caribbeanist scholarship but much less so in critical work on elegy and on poetics. For Brathwaite, creolization entwines the long-running cultural skeins of discrepant cultures, particularly those violently brought into contact by enslavement and its aftermath. Participating in a genre with a long memory of itself and drawing on deep-rooted mortuary traditions, his elegies exemplify and bring into focus various spiritual, linguistic, and formal creolizations. Haunted by the ancestral dead, they vivify creolization's postmemorial energies.¹⁰

The idea of creolization has spurred much recent debate. Largely ignoring Brathwaite's pioneering contributions, Richard Price complains that poets, novelists, and "the cultural studies crowd," including Édouard Glissant, Stuart Hall, James Clifford, and Paul Gilroy, have applied the term too broadly, evacuating its specificity.¹¹ An ethnographic historian, Price anchors it, as Brathwaite partly did before him, in "the process by which enslaved and self-liberated Africans, against all odds, created new institutions (languages, religions, legal systems, and more)."¹² Dichotomizing views of creolization by "poets and novelists" as against "anthropologists and historians," Price overlooks a key poet-historian who unravels the distinction and exemplifies historical creolization's ongoing-ness in the arts.¹³ The anthropologist Aisha Khan also condemns the "abstractions" of creolization as belonging to "the realm of the theoretical and the poetic"; she goes so far as to argue that creolization is altogether "dispensable" in Caribbeanist scholarship favoring "the empirical and the quotidian."¹⁴

Pace such critiques, Brathwaite's writing about creolization is both historically grounded and conceptually expansive. He uses it neither in its highly restrictive sense, as in Price, nor in the diffuse sense of all global mixture and movement, as in Ulf Hannerz.¹⁵ His nuanced thinking about creolization suggests a way beyond the current divide and toward a revitalization of the concept. Moreover, it confounds a similar split in poetics scholarship between the historicist championing of poetry's material specificity while disparaging abstraction, and the formalist understanding of poetry as ritualistic and iterative while skirting historicization.¹⁶ Yet like the institutions, languages, and religions studied by scholars of creolization, poems are historically and culturally embedded, even as they ramify beyond the circumstances that originate them.

In a groundbreaking historical study, *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica, 1770–1820* (1971), Brathwaite explores how European colonizers and enslaved Africans had "to adapt themselves to a new environment

and to each other" (DC 307). He argues that the "friction" between the two cultures was "cruel, but it was also creative," extending across a "socio-cultural continuum" of "infinite possibilities . . . and many ways of asserting identity" (DC 307, 310). Among the West African traditions that Black "folk" culture creatively adapted were dirges, praise-songs, and songs at the conclusion of the forty-day mourning period (DC 215-16). In contrast, Black adaptations of European traditions were less "whole-hearted or complete" and sometimes even involved rebellious "(mis)use," as of the master's language (DC 231, 237). Though long suppressed by white and Black elites, many aspects of creolized Black folk culture, Brathwaite asserts, can still serve as "a basis for creative reconstruction" (DC 311). Though sympathetic to Brathwaite, Aaron Kamugisha criticizes his and other discourses of creolization because, "while ostensibly discourses about society and culture," they "are also very prominently discourses of race."¹⁷ But as indicated by Brathwaite's analysis of creolization, long colonial histories of racialization welded social power and culture to race in Caribbean societies.

In a subsequent, more theoretical study, *Contradictory Omens: Cultural Diversity and Integration in the Caribbean* (1974), Brathwaite elaborates on how African Caribbeans have resumed creolization despite white power's impediments to "the intercultural process."¹⁸ After emancipation "a strong Afro-creole element continued to persist," as expressed sequentially in Africanized Christianity, myalism, Garveyism, the Rastafari movement, and Black Power, as well as in creole dialect, obeah, Kumina, and other indications that Black Caribbean folk culture is "as living and adaptable as any, and capable of the greatest potential for transformation."¹⁹ While the plantation as site of interaction between Europeans and Africans is for Brathwaite the crucible of creolization in the Caribbean, he extends the term beyond the enslavement era, and he also applies it, albeit briefly, to Amerindian, East and South Asian, Arab, and other populations.²⁰ Meanwhile, in essays on the arts, Brathwaite comments on jazz as "played in an Africanized manner on European instruments," and West Indian literature as "both European and African at the same time."²¹ He explains that a Caribbean schoolgirl writes "the snow was falling on the cane fields" because she is "trying to have both cultures at the same time" (H 264). In all these cases, as he states of the schoolgirl, "that is creolization" (H 264).

The concept functions for Brathwaite at multiple levels. Creolization is *descriptive*, the historical process of transformative sociocultural interaction between previously distinct groups across the racialized power divide, from plantation to today. (His elegies can be seen as late developments in this long, complex history.) It is *analytical*, a conceptual tool that helps

elucidate such transformative intercultural dynamics. (His poetry itself benefits from such analysis.) And it is *normative*, a process that elites have historically impeded or interrupted but that once-subordinated groups, especially in the African diaspora, should resume as a basis for cultural reconstruction. (His elegies and his other creative and scholarly works ardently advance this aim.) For Brathwaite, “the intercultural process we call creolization” is “multiform” along a “continuum” that “allows for and contains the ambiguous.”²² It involves varying degrees and kinds of cross-cultural interaction, including *acculturation* (imitation), *interculturalization* (reciprocal intermixture), *indigenization* (native creation), and potentially even *marronage* (resistant endurance)—all visible as entwined threads in his elegies and other poems.²³

Although the concept of creolization is sometimes criticized for its optimism, Brathwaite knows that his poetic creolizations of elegy, as of other poetic genres, are entangled with the long history of enslavement and the Middle Passage.²⁴ Drawing on Brathwaite, Stuart Hall argues that such creolizations are “indigenization[s],” “translations,” and “re-shapings” of cultural materials, and, as Hall emphasizes, they come out of an experience of “trauma, rupture and catastrophe.”²⁵ Mourning recent deaths as is customary in elegy, Brathwaite creolizes the genre increasingly across his career with African Caribbean song, spirituality, aesthetics, orature, and funeral rites—traditions that evoke the deeper, older, postmemorial griefs and losses of enslavement. His work sheds light on the complex intercultural dynamics and layered grief of postcolonial elegies, particularly in the Caribbean—a region largely neglected in elegy scholarship.²⁶ Mourning African Caribbean subjects, his elegies claim grievability for lives largely excluded from literary recognition.²⁷ I focus on just a few of his elegies, from the early, middle, and late phases of his career, to tease out their intricate, shifting, multipronged creolization of the genre.

II. “Ogun”: Creolized Elegy and Ars Poetica

Long before the oft-noted personal turn of works such as *Zea Mexican Diary* and *Barabajan Poems* (1994), Brathwaite is already publishing intimate elegies amid the multivocal performances of his epic trilogy *The Arrivants* (1973). One of his finest early lyrics, written in the mid-1950s and first published in the 1960s, “Ogun” is an elegy for his great-uncle Robert “Bobby” O’Neale, nicknamed Bob’ob because of his limp, brother-in-law of his paternal grandfather.²⁸ In annotated versions of the poem in *The Poet and His Place in Barbadian Culture* (1987) and *Barabajan Poems*,

Brathwaite avows that his great-uncle “plays an important part in my poetry.”²⁹ The elegy both embodies creolization, negotiating among and adapting distinct cultural and spiritual sources, and maps its varieties, tracing a trajectory in the great-uncle’s woodworking from Eurocentric acculturation back through the Middle Passage to the repossession of African sources. Brathwaite thus intertwines elegy with *ars poetica*, grief-work with self-definition, reflecting, like other poets, on his work in the mirror of the grieved other. The carpenter in “Ogun” may at first seem conventional like his brother-in-law, Brathwaite’s grandfather, mourned and ironized in the adjacent, Lowellesque elegy, “Ancestors” (1969), as a “black English country gentleman.”³⁰ But we learn that there is much more to Bob’ob’s work than it initially seems. Like the grandmother admiringly mourned in “Ancestors,” he provides access to distinctively African inheritances in the Caribbean.

My uncle made chairs, tables, balanced doors on, dug out
coffins, smoothing the white wood out

with plane and quick sandpaper until
it shone like his short-sighted glasses.³¹

The balance, whiteness, and short-sightedness here may suggest the Eurocentric confinements of the great-uncle’s work, but even so, the wood and glasses shine with energy. In *Contradictory Omens* Brathwaite, complicating a distinction of Sylvia Wynter’s, writes of what he sees as “an inescapable aspect of the creolization process which is both imitation (acculturation) and native creation (‘indigenization’);” seeming “imitation” involves “creativity,” just as “creativity” involves “imitation.”³² Like Bob’ob’s work, this elegy, acculturated to Western tradition yet indigenizing it, manifests the cross-cutting vectors of creolization.

Brathwaite spiritually creolizes Western elegy with, to recall his own terms, the subordinated culture of the “(ex-)slaves” as “a basis for creative reconstruction” (DC 311). He associates his great-uncle with a deity akin to Eleggua, the limping god Legba—deity of the doorway, crossroads, mediator between this world and the spirit world—and also with the god of the title, “the avatar of iron & carpenters & creativity” (TP 55; BP 152). Whereas Percy Bysshe Shelley names his elegy for the godlike John Keats *Adonais* (1821), fusing the Greek Adonis with the Hebrew “Adonai” (Lord), Brathwaite reterritorializes this strategy by titling his poem after a West African god transported to the West Indies. Albeit located in the African Caribbean basin, his great-uncle gathers a global array of divine forces. As a carpenter, “in touch, through his wood,

with Nature, with Super Nature,” Bob’ob would also have been akin to Jesus, “a powerfully spiritual person, one who dealt, as the Vikings said of their woodgod Wodin or Oudin, in magic or wode” (*BP* 155; see also *TP* 55). Although much of Bob’ob’s work, crafted in the long shadow of the institutionalized racial terror, was what Brathwaite calls “**plantation’ carpentry**,” necessary to make a living, he is a threshold figure, with one of his discrepantly sized feet (compare Legba) in the Eurocentric world of geometric conventionality, his other in the African realm of spirits, with Christian and Viking analogues (*BP* 155; see also *TP* 55). The wall of Bob’ob’s shop was for the young Brathwaite, in its photographic display, a portal from an isolated rural area to a global-ity untaught in school, including revolutions (the Russian Revolution and the Irish Easter Rising) and heroic Black men—Haile Selassie, Marcus Garvey, Father Divine, and world heavyweight champion Joe Louis. Bob’ob, comments Brathwaite, “taught us, subliminally as it were, about other wheres, other wares, other cultures—something of Egypt & Ethiopia & modern Babylon, for instance” (*BP* 155; see also *TP* 55).³³ His elegy demonstrates how these “other wheres” and “wares” enmesh in Caribbean spirituality and aesthetics.

The god Ogun, sometimes depicted like Thor with a hammer, lurks behind Brathwaite’s description of Bob’ob’s force. But as a mortal laboring in the wake of colonialism and enslavement, the great-uncle is both hammersmith and hammered, as emphasized by the word-splitting enjambments and bunched stresses:

The knuckles of his hands were sil-
vered knobs of nails hit, hurt and flat-

tened out with blast of heavy hammer. He was knock-knee’d, flat-
footed and his clip clop sandals slapped across the concrete (O 242)

Despite being beaten down and awkward, he is boundlessly skillful, “creative” despite the “cruel” circumstances, as Brathwaite said of the creolizing ancestors. So too, the poem, shaping words in place of wood, enacts alchemical transmutation of hardship into the sonic play of onomatopoeia (“clip clop,” “rat tat tat”) and alliteration (“hit, hurt,” “heavy hammer”; “knock-knee’d”; “flat- / footed,” “flooring,” “fleet”; “sandals slapped”) (O 242).

There was no shock of wood, no beam
of light mahogany his saw teeth couldn’t handle. (O 242)

Forceful and dexterous, the woodworker also brings scrupulous attention, “key hole / care,” to minute details, a focused energy that is transformative, as conveyed in the intricately intertwined alliterations: “Cold / world of wood caught fire as he whittled” (O 242, emphasis added). In the most richly detailed reading of the poem, Gordon Rohlehr claims that the carpenter, “imprisoned in the mathematical rigidity of Western forms,” shows “an obsession with key holes,” and ultimately “sees little.”³⁴ He is unable to peer beyond

rectangle

window frames, the intersecting x of fold-
ing chairs, triangle

trellises, the donkey
box-cart in its squeaking square. (O 242)

But even within these constraints, the great-uncle’s work also evidences creative power and vitality.

Carving visual as well as sonic form, Brathwaite, in *Barabajan Poems*, resets the poem in Sycorax Video Style, his late, typographically experimental and anticolonial mode—named for the postcolonial hero Caliban’s witch mother—that rejects print standardization for a more protean, improvisatory layout. With this typographic flexibility, he places a prominent, boldface, enjambed and capitalized **X** inside Bob’ob’s forms—a letter that, long before its adoption by the platform formerly called Twitter, assumes an almost mystical significance in his work, evocative as it is of the illiterate signature of the oppressed, the militancy and self-naming of Malcolm X, and the cultural intersections of creolization. With an “**X**” occupying the middle of a page, the re-lineated elegy assumes an x-like, hourglass shape (Fig. 1) (*BP* 157). The “**X**” condenses all the crisscrossing energies that Brathwaite associates with Legba and the crossroads—between the living and the dead, the human and the spiritual, the Western and the African. The carpenter works at the center of the vortex, the “intersecting x,” remaking the geometric structures, just as Brathwaite reinvents Ezra Pound’s vorticist image of whirling, intensifying energy, “a radiant node or cluster . . . , from which, and through which, and into which, ideas are constantly rushing.”³⁵ Brathwaite creolizes the modernist vortex into an emblem of creolization.

In its graphic and sonic patterning, the poem’s first section demonstrates that the great-uncle’s craft, like the poet’s, adapts, without being

flooring of his little shop where cane-field mulemen and a
 fleet
 of Bedford lorry drivers dropped in to scratch themselves
 and talk

There was no shock of wood, no beam
 of light mahogany his saw teeth couldn't handle

when shaping squares for locks, a key hole
 care tapped rat tat tat upon the handle

of his humpbacked chisel. Cold
 world of wood caught fire as he whittled: rec-

tangle window frames, the intersec-

ting **X**

of fold-
 ing chairs, tri-

angle trellises, the donkey box-
 cart in its squeak-
 ing square

But he was poor and most days he was hungry
 imported cabinets with mirrors, formica table
 tops, spine-curving chairs made up of tubes, with hollow
 steel-like bird-bones that sat on rubber ploughs,

thin beds, stretched not on boards, but blue high-
 tensioned cables,
 were what the world preferred

Fig. 1. Kamau Brathwaite, "Ogun," *Barabajan Poems* (New York: Savacou, 1993), 157. Reproduced by permission from Beverley Brathwaite.

imprisoned in, Western forms. Visually, the poem's distich form could perhaps be construed as akin to a rectangle, but Brathwaite unboxes its boxiness by syntactically straddling stanzas. Sonically, the word-breaking enjambments—"sil- / vered," "flat- // tened"—emphasize how sound resonates across distichs in rhymes and repetitions (*until/sil-; flat-/flat*), just as meaning spills over the enjambments (O 242). The rhyme is unpredictable, variable, often alternating, if insistent in the first of the poem's three sections, which crisscross imperfect rhymes (*the handle/rectangle/triangle*) with perfect (*hold/cold/fold*) (O 242).

But the music of the poem's end rhymes fades in its brief second part, amid the din of the industrial products of mechanized labor that estrange the maker from the made (the distichs end *hungry/table, hollow/ploughs, cables/preferred*) (O 242). Driving the great-uncle into poverty, this prefabricated, mass-manufactured commercial furniture is unsusceptible to indigenization—mirrored cabinets, Formica tops, and beds on "high-tensioned cables" (O 243). Even as he champions creative creolization, Brathwaite also acknowledges its limits in the face of neocolonial capital.

Yet, in the elegy's third part, focused on the great-uncle's secret sculptural craft, Brathwaite vaunts the reconnective power of creolization, expanding the poem's temporal and spatial horizons. Introducing the poem in *Barabajan Poems*, he associates his great-uncle's art with that of the major Intuitive or "(folk) wood-sculptor" known as Kapo (Mallica Reynolds, or in Brathwaite's spelling, Mallacai [1911-1989]), an artist and leader of the Zion Revivalist movement, a Caribbean folk religion that grafts Christianity onto African stock, which earned Kapo accusations of obeah and necromancy (*BP* 155).³⁶ After Bob'ob died and his shop fell into ruin, Zion Revivalist worship took place where it had stood, and Brathwaite said it was overhearing the singing worshippers that first helped him realize the strong connection between Barbados and West Africa (MP). Breaking into boldfaced poetry in *The Poet and His Place in Barbadian Culture*, he writes that, when hearing the worshippers in their Africa-bearing "**space/time capsule,**" "**I must have / been possessed myself—through the ancestral presence of Bob'ob/Ogoun // & my conneXion with him**" (*TP* 60). In a brief essay on Kapo (1970), Brathwaite celebrates the sculptor's art as "imbued with the spirit and forms—and the spiritual forms—of Afro-Caribbean religion and mythology."³⁷ These remarks also apply to a wooden object that Bob'ob made, apparently unbeknownst to anyone, that Brathwaite discovered in the ruins of the shop after he returned years later (MP). He calls it "**a local carving of an African image & a nommo/name (mkissi)**" or "**zemi**" (*BP* 155)³⁸—that is, an object inhabited by a spirit: "In the world today, the most vital 'primitive' art comes out of Africa: mask[,] fetish object,

carved doorway, wooden sculpture.”³⁹ Brathwaite said he wrote the elegy before traveling to and living in West Africa, as if unconsciously following Bob’ob’s reconnective trajectory (MP). Working in wood and in words generations apart, poet and craftsman, nephew and great-uncle, creolize their art by infusing it with the animism of the ancestors.

As the elegy tells it, on Sundays, Bob’ob hand-carved a block of wood into an image utterly unlike the spiritually desiccated, mass-produced furniture. He

explored its knotted hurts, cutting his way
along its yellow whorls until his hands could feel

how it had swelled and shivered, breathing air,
its weathered green burning to rings of time,

its contoured grain still tuned to roots and water. (O 243)

In the artist’s hands, the piece of wood seems to spring to life again (“swelled,” “shivered,” “breathing,” “green”), though it is forever inscribed by history (“hurts,” “weathered,” “rings of time”). The sculptor works with the wood’s inner contours to feel and traverse the deep past’s injuries, reconnecting with the block’s forest origins and animist force. “There is an inseparability of person, thing and spirit,” Brathwaite writes of African art, hailing what he calls “the polyanimatedness of things.”⁴⁰ As Rohlehr observes of “Ogun,” the spiraling rings and whorls displace the earlier squares, rectangles, and triangles, as the sculptor rediscovers unity of being in work that reconciles the four elements (“air,” “water,” fire in “burning,” earth in “roots”) and four senses (O 243).⁴¹ The nesting of the syntax intimates this interconnectedness, and the language swarms with verbs. His senses revitalized, the sculptor repossesses the deep, ancestral past, the secret spiritual life force, or what Brathwaite calls “*nam*”:⁴²

And as he cut, he heard the creak of forests:

green lizard faces gulped, grey memories with moth
eyes watched him from their shadows, soft

liquid tendrils leaked among the flowers
and a black rigid thunder he had never heard within his hammer

came stomping up the trunks. (O 243)

Animals, insects, and plants, ecologically bound to the tree, come alive again. Set against the delicate tendrils and flowers, the blast of the “black rigid thunder,” suggestive of Ogun as the god of lightning, is more astonishing for the propulsive phrase, “came stomping up the trunks” (O 243). Discussing creolization in the autobiographical essay “Timehri” (1970), Brathwaite concludes that an artist’s “journey into the past and hinterland”—in “Ogun,” both the cultural and the ecological past—is “a movement of possession” by which “we become ourselves, truly our own creators.”⁴³

But if polyanimated, the carved figure isn’t transcendental. As Mimi Sheller writes of creolization, having cited Brathwaite and Rex Nettleford, it “is not simply about moving and mixing elements, but is more precisely about processes of cultural ‘regrounding’ following experiences of violent uprooting from one’s culture of origin. It is deeply embedded in situations of coerced transport, racial terror, and subaltern survival.”⁴⁴ In the wake of the Middle Passage violence by which African animism was forcibly transplanted, Brathwaite’s great-uncle regrounds his craft in that animism. Bob’ob intuitively reconnects with an ancient, African art, but the elegy’s final passage suggests his sculpture is deeply marked by the scars of time, history, and enslavement:

And as he worked within his shattered
Sunday shop, the wood took shape: dry shuttered

eyes, slack anciently everted lips, flat
ruined face, eaten by pox, ravaged by rat

and woodworm, dry cistern mouth, cracked
gullet crying for the desert, the heavy black

enduring jaw; lost pain, lost iron;
emerging woodwork image of his anger. (O 243)

As in the sonic skewing of the slant rhyme “shattered”/“shuttered,” this African Caribbean art is twisted by the violent history through which it has been birthed. Although the Middle Passage is unmentioned, the description of the face as “ruined,” “eaten by pox, ravaged by rat,” suggests the horrific conditions of the enslavers’ ships, as does the “dry cistern mouth,” akin to Walcott’s “filth-ridden gut of the slave ship.”⁴⁵

Even so, instancing the resilient creolization that makes possible this artwork and this elegy, the jaw is “enduring,” its inspiration having survived brutalization. The “lost pain, lost iron” recalls not only Ogun as the god of iron but also the iron chains of bondage (O 243). In lost-wax

casting, even as iron or another metal is “lost,” the form—forged by means of molten heat—lasts, effectively remembering the extreme process out of which it was made. Enslavement’s iron chains are imprinted on African Caribbean postmemory. To creolize elegy in a way that’s true to this collective historical experience, this poem and the great-uncle’s craft that it mirrors must include the grim alongside the inspiring, the “cruel” alongside the “creative.” While recovering a vitalizing, spiritual force, the sculptor is also releasing an image of the history of a people’s suffering, as well as—in the potent final word—the “anger” (O 243).⁴⁶ The hammering constraints and bitterness can be heard in the clattering couplets (*flat/rat; cracked/black*). Mourning his great-uncle, Brathwaite also mourns the history of dispossession, dehumanization, and enslavement through which Bob’ob’s intuited spiritual artistry was transmitted, as well as, implicitly, the sources of his own repossessive, creolizing poetry. Just as Bob’ob displays the spectrum of creolization’s overlapping orientations—acculturation to white norms in his “**plantation’ carpentry**,” interculturalism in his code-switching between geometric and organic animist forms, indigenization in his African Caribbean woodcarving, and marronage in his secret repossession of ancestral knowledge—so too does Brathwaite, in writing an elegy in standardized English (acculturation), mixing Western elegiac tradition with Caribbean ontology (interculturalism), Caribbeanizing the modernist vortex (indigenization), and reconnecting with African animism (marronage). Like the great-uncle’s work, the elegy demonstrates that, far from being a unitary process of cultural mixing, creolization is, in Brathwaite’s terms, “multiform” along a “continuum.”⁴⁷ Ultimately, both the poet’s and carpenter’s “creative,” multifaceted creolizations are inseparable from the “cruel” terror and collective grief that their art remembers, remourns, and works through.

III. “Stone”: Caribbeanizing *Tombeau*, Political Elegy, and the Death Poem

Another elegy that grapples with a specific Black death as shadowed by a much longer history of Black loss, and that places the power and significance of poetry even more clearly at its center, is the mid-career poem “Stone” (1985), written “for Mikey Smith 1954–1983 / stoned to death on Stony Hill, Kingston,” stirringly read by Kei Miller as part of Brathwaite’s digital wake.⁴⁸ Some facts of Smith’s killing remain in dispute, but Brathwaite held the widespread view that Smith was murdered for voicing political opposition.⁴⁹ Prizing the poem, Brathwaite revised and republished it in multiple venues.⁵⁰

Although criticizing as “morbid” Brathwaite’s mid-career elegiac obsession with death and martyrdom, J. Michael Dash singled out “Stone” in a review as “moving” in its evocation of a dying poet’s “fading vision . . . , the terrible silence of the tongue gone dumb,” linked to Caribbean writers’ sense of urgency around using “language as a weapon to combat silence” and “oblivion.”⁵¹ On this view, Susan Stewart’s general claim about poetry may have a particular resonance for the Caribbean: “the cultural, or form-giving, work of poetry is to counter the oblivion of darkness. . . , a force against effacement.”⁵² If so, Brathwaite recenters in Jamaica’s Kingston a perennial poetic struggle.

“Stone” Caribbeanizes several distinct strands of elegy. Most obviously, the poem is what Lawrence Lipking terms, after Stéphane Mallarmé, a *tombeau*, an elegy for a dead poet—a long tradition going back through the French symbolists to antiquity.⁵³ As poetry became increasingly professionalized, many prominent poets such as John Berryman, Seamus Heaney, and, notably in the Caribbean, Walcott, wrote elegies for fellow poets—Walcott’s including the rhetorically ornate “Eulogy to W. H. Auden” (1983), whom he apostrophized as “Master,” and the laconic “Elegy” (2010) for Aimé Césaire, apostrophized as “*maître*.”⁵⁴ Elegies for poets are typically encomiastic, as in Walcott’s funerary praise poems, occasionally antagonistic, as in Berryman’s combative Dream Song 37 for Robert Frost, but always a negotiation between the living poet and the dead.⁵⁵ The stakes are high, as the living poet must pay tribute to the dead, but if that tribute were to collapse into the honored other, it would fail its poetic obligation to do something fresh and distinctive. Walcott, who scolded Brathwaite without naming him for his elegiac poetry of “phonetic pain, the groan of suffering,” creolizes genres such as epic and forms such as terza rima but largely adheres to the European model of the *tombeau*.⁵⁶ Brathwaite more intensively creolizes elegies for poets with Caribbean language, forms, topography, and history. Not that the subgenre of elegies for dead poets, which exists in many languages, should be seen as inherently European. In the 1960s, the eminent Nigerian poet Christopher Okigbo helped bring *oriki*, or Yoruba praise poetry, into English in “Lament of the Masks” (1965), his elegy for W. B. Yeats.⁵⁷

Like many *tombeaux*, such as Walcott’s for Auden and Auden’s and Okigbo’s for Yeats, Brathwaite’s “Stone” pays homage to Smith by incorporating aspects of his poetry, without, however, tipping into imitation. As Daniel Albright observes of elegies for dead poets, often “there is behind the text no clear division of elegist and subject but instead a splayed hybrid thing, indeterminate between living and dead.”⁵⁸ Although much of the poem is in standardized English, Brathwaite also

code-stitches into its verbal texture Mikey Smith's Jamaican Creole (e.g., uninflected verbs) and dread talk, or Rastafari usage (e.g., the first person pronoun substituted for the possessive adjective as a way of refusing subordination—"i head," "i belly," "i chest").⁵⁹ More heavily creolizing the diction, grammar, and phonology of elegy than in "Ogun," Brathwaite pays tribute to Smith in partly Smith-like language,

Directly echoing Smith's poems, Brathwaite adopts his perspective, oral techniques, and at least partly his Jamaican voice. Most obviously, he reproduces Smith's phonetically extended exclamations, "lawwwwwww-wwwwd" (lengthened further in the poem and in subsequent revisions), which he had earlier compared in *History of the Voice* (1984) to the "noise" of a Japanese motorbike, and "murdererrrrrrrr" (changed in other versions of the poem to an even more distended version of "murder") (S 134, *H* 301).⁶⁰ Brathwaite amps up the sheer sonic excess of his own poetry. In his essay about the Caribbean-ness of Caribbean poetry, the examples of literary creolization range again across a continuum, from an acculturated poet like Claude McKay, whose pronunciations "subtly erode" pentameter, to Smith, "such an intransigent sound poet that he's not concerned with written script at all": he focuses on live performance and recordings like other sound poets who "use the same 'riddims', the same voice spreads, syllable clusters, blue notes, ostinato, syncopation, and pauses, along with, in Smith's case, a quite remarkable voice and breath control," including noise that "becomes part of the sound structure and therefore meaning of the poem" (*H* 277, 300-01). A thinker often in dialogue with Brathwaite, Glissant similarly emphasizes the verbal noise, sonic excess, and meaningful nonsense of creole, which he sees as rooted in the verbal tricksterism and subterfuge of the enslaved.⁶¹ Brathwaite refers to onomatopoeia as part of this sound structure (*H* 302n49), instanced in the elegy by the gunlike sounds of the stones cracking Smith's skull, "loud *boodoooooongs*" (a word further extended in revision, though the letter *n* is elided) (S 133),⁶² and the sounds of his heart and pulse as he nears death,

the heavy flux of the blood in my veins silver tambourines
closer & closer . st joseph band crashing &
closer & bom sicai sica boom ship bell &
closer & bom sicai sica boom ship bell &
when the saints . . . (S 134, ellipsis in original)

Like the phonetic spelling of "Lord," this passage in "Stone" echoes Smith's poem "Me Cyaan Believe It" (1982), in which the phrase "bap si kaisico," as Carolyn Cooper observes without reference to Brathwaite, reflects Smith's "adaptation of the nonsense words and rhythms of

children's verbal play": it recalls "bap si kaisico pinda shell" in a Caribbean ring song, with *pinda*, Kongo for "peanut," an African survival of the Middle Passage.⁶³ Quoting Smith's ring-song phrase (*H* 303), Brathwaite stresses that Smith "uses ring-game refrain and proverb as reverb/eration" (*H* 301). Examples of refrain in "Stone" include "When the stone fall that morning" (*S* 133, 135), the anaphora of phrases such as "as if" and "and it" (*S* 133-35), and the lexical repetitions, most powerfully deployed in the description of Smith's surreal hallucination of his horrified mother in a later version of the poem: "& my mother like she up . like she up . // like she up. side down up a tree like she was scream. / like she was scream. like she was scream. in no & no. / body i could hear could hear a word i say. in ." ⁶⁴ Suggestive of a stutter of shock and anguish, the repetitions end in the twist of chiasitic interlacement ("i . . . could hear could hear . . . i"), reflecting Smith's frustration at the closed loop of his unheard speech. Brathwaite vernacularizes the repetition and reverb that are also key features of elegy, connected to the cyclical pangs of grief and the choral, call-and-response structure of ritual lament—and, indeed, in performance, Smith often riffed on African Caribbean call-and-response patterning.

Yet for all this appreciative replication of aspects of Smith's poetics, there is little danger that one would take "Stone," "a splayed hybrid thing,"⁶⁵ to be a poem by Mikey Smith. Unlike Smith, Brathwaite attends carefully to the visual layout of his poetry on the page. In his repeated revisions, he shifts the poem from the initial long-lined blocks of print with few strophic breaks to text chunked mostly into quintains at the start in *Jah Music* (1986), quatrains in *Middle Passages* (1992), followed by shorter stanzaic units. This visual design is further varied in *Elegguas* by being at first right-justified, then centered and separated on one page between stone-like bullets (or bullet-like stones), before ending with left-justified and centered verses. Much of Smith's poetry hadn't made its way into print at the time of his death, and Mervyn Morris was working with him to craft a visual form suited to his poetry, ultimately issuing in the posthumous *It a Come* (1989).⁶⁶ Brathwaite's elegy for Smith, though nourished by Caribbean oral, musical, and ritual traditions, also melds them with the visual and typographic possibilities of the printed page.

Seeking to mimic the rush of consciousness in distress, Brathwaite deploys language that is not only more visually crafted but also more meditative, figurative, and self-consciously literary than Smith's more orally grounded patois. Linguistically, the elegy exemplifies Brathwaite's multiform creolization as both indigenization (its patois), à la Smith, and acculturation (its high art lyricism), both interculturalization (orality and typography) and marronage (Rastafari speech). Brathwaite was an

electrifying performer of his work, but Smith, trained at the Jamaica School of Drama, was even more devoted to vocal performance, preparing for hours his pacing and rhythmic variations.⁶⁷ In the elegy, when Brathwaite highlights the key instrument of Smith's performance poetry, now useless against his stone-broken teeth, he has Smith think about "my tuff gong tongue that used to press against them & parade pronunciation [*sic*]" (S 133); the word *parade* marks a difference from Smith. Even as he evokes Smith's consciousness, Brathwaite's writerly lyricism also sets his poetry apart from Smith's, though Smith's language, too, has a range, drawing on the Bible, proverbs, popular songs, children's songs, rural and urban speech, contemporary political discourse, and Rastafari usage. Still, Smith's poetry has no lines as traditionally lyrical as Brathwaite's figurative evocations of Smith's mortality: "and it was like a wave on Stony Hill caught in a crust of sunlight," "and it was like the blue of peace was filling up the heavens with its thunder," "the sunlit morning washed the coral limestone harsh against the soft volcanic ash" (S 134). "Stone" is a fraternal compromise, negotiated across the two poets' stylistic differences. In his linguistically creolized elegy, Brathwaite spans an especially wide range of registers in the creole continuum, from basilect to acrolect. Although the English elegy's mixing of modes and subgenres can be traced back at least to John Milton's "Lycidas," Brathwaite infuses the elegy with an exceptional variety of Englishes.

A second elegiac strand Brathwaite creolizes is the political elegy, a poem for a political figure or for one or more people killed for political reasons, as reinvigorated in the twentieth century by poets such as Yeats, Akhmatova, Okigbo, and Amiri Baraka. The leader whom Smith is thought to have heckled, and whose thugs were reported to have stoned him in retribution, was a conservative, a representative of the Jamaica Labour Party. Coming from a working-class background, Smith gave voice to poor and oppressed Black Jamaicans in revolutionary tones, even though in a poem such as "Say, Natty-Natty" (1982), he also, borrowing Louise Bennett's ironic strategy, mocked pseudo-radicals who turn "revolution" into a "touris attraction."⁶⁸ In later versions of "Stone," in a reference to "every politrician tongue," Brathwaite plays on Smith's use of the barbed Rastafari pun on "politricks," implying that, as Julie Pearn remarks, "the system is shored up by corruption and deception."⁶⁹ Brathwaite alludes to the divisive class topography of Stony Hill in Kingston, with its not accidentally "white houses higher up the hill," protected by barking dogs (S 133).⁷⁰ By virtue of the reference to "Marcus Garvey rising from his coin . stepping towards his people," Brathwaite places Smith's championing of underprivileged Black people and his oratorical skills in the lineage of Jamaican political activist leadership

(S 134). He maps Smith's poetry in relation to Jamaican politics, class division, and history.

To convey the verve, energy, and imaginative dazzle of Smith's intellect and politically charged performances, Brathwaite vernacularizes a third elegiac subgenre—the death poem. Poets such as Keats, Emily Dickinson, Yeats, Langston Hughes, Auden, and Sylvia Plath wrote elegies for themselves, sometimes anticipating death as a horizon that intensifies lyric consciousness, at other times writing about their lives in a *voix d'outre tombe*. Although Brathwaite isn't elegizing himself, his elegy is an interior monologue that evokes an enlarged, intensified, luminous poetic consciousness in the last moments before death. It stylistically fuses the orality of Smith's and other Caribbean performance poetry with Western lyricism and with the long, fragmented, hectic lines pioneered by Beat poets such as Allen Ginsberg and Black Arts poets such as Baraka.

The elegy sets its vitalizing formal energies against death and against the stony immobility of class-divided Stony Hill. Rushing and tumbling forward, nearly everything in the poem is paratactically connected, in Elizabeth Bishop's phrase, by "'and' and 'and,'" sometimes in the form of ampersands.⁷¹ The elegy gives the impression of ongoing, continuous, present motion in the poet's mind: "there were so many poems left and the tape was switched on & running" (S 133). Its energy builds by the abundant use of participles, sometimes with repetitions, such as "clapping & clapping & / clapping," "happening happening," "slipping past me," "slipping past me," "slipping past me" (S 133, 134). The radiant figurative language conveys the intensity of an ecstatic, visionary state, set against the coming darkness, especially in the tender parallel similes ("and it was like a wave on Stony Hill caught in a crust of sunlight," etc.). As indicated by Dash's review, this use of "language as a weapon to combat silence" and "oblivion" is particularly relevant to the struggles of the poet in the Caribbean.⁷²

But Brathwaite isn't, of course, trying to provide a literal transcription of the kinds of thoughts that would have raced through Smith's mind when attacked and dying. Rather, the poem takes death as an occasion to suggest the imaginative richness, daring, and extravagance of a poet's mind, Smith's above all, but also by implication the minds of other Caribbean poets, including the elegist's. From the beginning, the speaker looks back in the past tense (the first verb, "fall," in Jamaican Creole's uninflected past tense), as if Smith could reflect on his experience of dying:

When the stone fall that morning out of the johncrow sky
it was not dark at first . that opening on to the red sea sky

but something in my mouth like feathers . blue like bubbles and light
 carrying signals & planets & the sliding curve of the world like a water
 picture
 in a raindrop when the pressure drop⁷³ (S 133)

The scene is set in an immediate space-time of the first stone thrown in the morning as experienced by a Jamaican (localized by the verb and the place-specific term for turkey buzzard, an omen of death). The poem also opens outward onto an experience of the worldhood of the world, its curvature, its place in an interplanetary system, as also seen in a raindrop. The rest of this polyspatial elegy continues to straddle the local and global, the poet both hyper-situated in the hour of his death and joined to vast and minute realms by his metaphorical brilliance and imaginative leaps. Place is visualized in its singularity, yet Stony Hill is also magnified, connecting with places elsewhere. Repeated use of the toponym Stony Hill grounds the poem, as does exact topographical description ("round the bend by the churchyard on the way to the // post office") (S 133). So too does the local geology of a previously volcanic island layered with limestone ("the sunlit morning washed the coral limestone harsh against the soft volcanic ash") and the appearance of Marcus Garvey (S 134). At the hour of Smith's death, the locality is a human void, "not a soul on Stony Hill to even say amen" (S 133). But the sound of acclamation resounds from the European cities that Smith toured: "they was standing up everywhere in London / & Amsterdam & UNESCO in Paris & in West Berlin & clapping & clapping & / clapping" (S 133).⁷⁴ Smith's consciousness joins these worlds, a geographic dovetailing that parallels the elegy's linguistic and generic creolizations. References to Joseph the Patriarch and to the evil power prophesied in Revelation, Ogog (after Gog and Magog), with wordplay on *dogs* ("the ogogs bark / ing all teeth & furnace"), draw on the King James Bible's worldwide reach and its local importance, in its subversive indigenization by the Rastafari (S 133).

Like space, time is also both immediate and layered. Polytemporal, the elegy intertwines different moments, including the now of Smith's death and the violent history of displacement and enslavement. As in "Ogun," the deaths and mass trauma of slavery and the Middle Passage still echo, including in Smith's violent killing. Brathwaite alludes to the punishments of torture and hanging during enslavement:

and my throat like dem tie like dem tie a tight tie around it . twist
 ing my neck quick crick quick crick and a never wear neck
 tie yet (S 134)

The recursions of phrases (“like dem tie like dem tie,” “quick crick quick crick”) enact the twisting around the neck as if by a noose, as does the twist of a word broken across the enjambment, “twist / ing.” The figuration of Smith’s tongue not only recalls the extraordinary range of sounds he could voice in performance, his “tuff gong tongue that used to press against” his teeth, but also inverts the confinements and torments inflicted on the mouths of the enslaved, such as the iron bit, or gag, and Derby’s dump (S 133). So too Brathwaite’s multivalent simile for this extinguished poetic light, “like a black wick in i head,” inverts the so-called black tongue that resulted from nutritional deficiencies (S 134). Brathwaite invokes the most ubiquitous tool for punishing the enslaved when he writes that Smith feels that “every tongue in town was lashing me with spit & cutrass wit & ivy whip,” and he refers to a tool used by enslaved cane cutters and their masters, in his punning combination of *cutlass* and *rass* (buttocks or angry exclamation) (S 134). A simile that evokes Smith’s former verbal speed and his silencing also brings into the poem one of the commonest sea vessels in the slave trade, as well as injuries to the enslaved body: “it was like a broken schooner into harbour muffled in the silence of its wound” (S 134). Smith’s dying is a singular, unrepeatable moment, experienced within a singular, inimitable stream of consciousness; yet in Brathwaite’s elegy, it also rhymes with the violent fate of countless diasporic Africans in the New World.

IV. “Kumina”: Child Loss Elegy and African Caribbean Ritual

Whereas “Stone” creolizes elegy with Caribbean nation language, dub poetry, sonic excess, ring songs, place-names, and historical memory, Brathwaite’s “Kumina” (2005), named after a Caribbean spiritual practice, creolizes the child loss elegy with Caribbean religion and ritual. Making inventive use as in “Stone” of interior monologue and again summoning African Caribbean historical grief, Brathwaite writes “Kumina” largely in the voice of Brathwaite’s second wife and muse, the Jamaican Beverley Reid, called in the poem *DreamChad*—a reference, as Jenny Sharpe notes, to “the Saharan oasis he identifies as ‘the soul / of the world.’”⁷⁵ The elegy reenacts her twenty-one days of intense mourning of her son Mark, age twenty-nine, in 2001, when struck on his bicycle by a car in Kingston. Although the poem has received scant critical attention, Brathwaite read from it at length in 2006 when he won the Griffin Poetry Prize for *Born to Slow Horses* (2005).⁷⁶ Like the global array of poets who’ve elegized children—in medieval Japan, Persia, and Britain,

in early modern Poland and nineteenth-century Germany and France, and in modern India, Italy, Russia, the US, and elsewhere—Brathwaite infuses his poem with local grief practices and poetic traditions.⁷⁷ This is Brathwaite's elegy that most explicitly delves into Caribbean mourning ritual; it's even prefaced with excerpts from a 1976 *Jamaica Journal* article on Kumina, a largely underground, "folk" religion.⁷⁸ Because of its closeness to ritual, it both exemplifies and puts to the test the critical association of lyric with ritual by critics from Andrew Welsh and Roland Greene to Hugh Hodges and—in perhaps the most influential recent theorization of lyric—Jonathan Culler.⁷⁹

Kumina, grouped by Brathwaite's *Contradictory Omens* with forms of marronage, fascinated this poet of African reconnection: it is "the most African of the [cultural expressions] to be found in Jamaica, with negligible European or Christian influence."⁸⁰ Just two years later, Brathwaite published a seldom-noted article of his own on the African Caribbean practice in *Jamaica Journal*. There he calls Kumina "the living fragment of an African (mainly Kongo) religion in the Caribbean/Jamaica. It is a fragment because the slave/plantation system did not allow more than fragments, . . . [P]ublicly expressed ritual, link and memory, were destroyed."⁸¹ Kumina exemplifies how "African culture in the slave world . . . , to survive, . . . had to submerge itself" (KS 46)—a claim that parallels religious creolization with linguistic, as it is echoed in his nearly contemporaneous discussion of "the submerged language that the slaves had brought" in the formation of "nation language" (H 262). In a note, Brathwaite reluctantly acknowledges an alternative scholarly view—now predominant—that Kumina arrived in Jamaica after slavery, brought by indentured Africans (KS 52n.a). But as the anthropologist Dianne M. Stewart has argued, even if Kumina arrived in the mid-nineteenth century after emancipation, many of the indentured workers were recaptive Africans, who had endured "torture and unsanitary conditions on slave ships" of nations still importing slaves.⁸² Comparing "indentured labor to slave labor," Kumina practitioners have kept alive "the historical struggles of the Ancestors who withstood centuries of brutal violence."⁸³

Kumina adherents employ ritual for significant life events, including births, weddings, and illnesses, but according to the anonymous *Jamaica Journal* article that Brathwaite excerpts, "Kumina ceremonies are usually associated with wakes, entombments or memorial services," some extending, Brathwaite adds, "as in this poem, to *twenty-one days*" ("K" 6; K 71). Vicariously inhabiting his Jamaican wife's grief, Brathwaite imbues this elegy with Jamaica's most African mortuary ritual, tilting its creolization toward marronage. Elegy has long drawn on Greco-Roman, Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, and other rituals and myths, but Brathwaite is the first poet to bring Kumina into this array.⁸⁴

Yet as we've seen in Brathwaite's absorptions of Caribbean orality, divinity, language, and even space-time, these Caribbean elements are changed in the multiform, adaptive processes of poetic creolization. Even as Brathwaite, like other elegists, "partakes of the mode of ritual," in the words of Edward Baugh, he also develops a specifically poetic, idiosyncratic, and original version of it, as in the visual form of the poem, its extravagant wordplay, and its intensely personal focus on the subjective experience of the grieving mother.⁸⁵ Writing about Brathwaite's earlier poetry, Baugh observes that "to say that the work draws on ritual or speaks to ritual is one thing; it is another thing to say that the work *is* ritual, and that we should read it as we read ritual."⁸⁶ Despite the emphasis by lyric theorists and Brathwaite himself on poetry's rootedness in ritual, his poetry, as Baugh states, "inhabits simultaneously or variously the mode of the discursive and the mode of ritual"; like a sermon in relation to the rest of a church service, a poem's "individual utterance," its "original creation of meaning," may "catch us with any fine surprise," even as its ritualism enacts "a meaning already known, already given."⁸⁷ Like a sermon and a service, a poem and a ritual may be intertwined, but at least in the modern world, they "encode meaning differently" and "signify differently."⁸⁸ "Ritual" can be a useful term for the most repetitive, familiar features of poetry, but Caribbean poems in an elegiac key stray from the funeral rites they're indebted to. They play on but freely adapt, individualize, and improvise upon the characteristics that anthropologist Catherine Bell attributes to "ritual-like" activities: "formalism, traditionalism, disciplined invariance, rule-governance, sacral symbolism, and performance."⁸⁹ Considering elegy clearly "ritualistic," Culler insistently twins lyric with ritual to highlight its "iterative and iterable," nonmimetic elements such as "metrical schemes, rhymes and sound patterns, elaborate figuration, and lyric address."⁹⁰ While these connections are important, even a strongly ritualistic poem such as "Kumina" also has extra-ritualistic qualities, idiosyncrasies, and imaginative twists that violate ritualistic norms. Ritual is a resource for poetry but shouldn't be equated with it.

Two ritualistic sources of Kumina's inspiration for Brathwaite's elegy are "*possession*" by the dead and "the counter-beats or polyrhythms" of performance (K 71).⁹¹ Regarding rhythm, it's impossible, strictly speaking, for a printed poem to fully incorporate the polyrhythmic beats and counter-beats of Kumina's orally, musically, and physically performed drumming, songs, dances, and utterances. Brathwaite simulates something like the polyrhythmic complexity of Kumina and the vagaries of grief in the constantly shifting, creolized typefaces and fonts of the poem's Sycorax Video Style.⁹² After the informational preface in a standard font, he encodes the calamitous "unXpecting disaster / & its unutterable grief" in boldfaced, large-lettered, centered lines, set in a spookily jagged typeface (K 73; see Fig. 2).⁹³

●

The cosmology of sudden unXpecting disaster
& its unutterable grief unvomiting the world

i seem to be becoming lightning rod
for like this wreck of Time

Fig. 2. "Kumina," *Born to Slow Horses*, 73 © 2005 by Kamau Brathwaite. Published by Wesleyan University press. Used by permission.

The catalogue of the twenty-one days shifts from standard titular markings to centered lines in small, lowercase, gothicized font for the first nine days of DreamChad's tumultuous grief. After these dense lyric spasms of grief, the poem switches into colloquial narrative addressed to the dead son, set in a left-justified, seemingly hand-scripted but more regularized typeface: "i haffe go down to the Station today to find out / what they doin about yr det. about the 'accident' / dem call it" (K 77). The mother's efforts thwarted, the font shifts back, for melancholy contemplation, to a gothicized typeface. Font and typeface continue to change with her mood, as does the visual structuring of the verse on the page, from centered to left- to right-justified margins and back again. On day eighteen, "this slow daze of grease," when she is lost in memories and having difficulty focusing on her husband's birthday, a squat, boldfaced typeface congeals as a block in the middle of the page (K 83; see Fig. 3):

[day 18]

**Sometime in the miggles of the morn-
in of the night i remember that this
day is the day when my urban barn
some undread toussann years ago <<<
an as the custom/as the kind. ness is.
yu muss xpec re. spec. the day shd be
acknowledge/celebrated/be re. mem
bered. don't? But in the miggles of this
grief. all this slow daze of grease. th-
ese sleep. less nights. this fear now e-
very sound each startle shadow nigh
(t) it might be him/my love impale <<<
w/in his pain impassion wounds - why me
why me. wha mek me fraid es frighten es? - all I cd do is walk
across the moon an kiss-im pun im
broken cheek my eyes elsewhe & >>>>
hissin not for him today. mi like me
cyaan help whe me travellin-mi-trav-
ellin an wish im Appy Birtday**

Fig. 3. "Kumina," from *Born to Slow Horses*, 83 © 2005 by Kamau Brathwaite. Published by Wesleyan University press. Used by permission.

Brathwaite's speeding up and clotting of print, his many-angled shifting of type to left, right, and center, his oscillations among typefaces and fonts, suggest the psychic movements of grief and their stylized performance in ritual. But the polyrhythmic patterns in dance and music cannot be performed on a page. Brathwaite improvises freely, in a different medium, with wildly oscillating typefaces that signify on ritual enactment, minutely exploring a mourner's first-person, singular subjective experience—a visual and lyric poetics irreducible to communal participatory structures.

As with polyrhythm, Kumina-like ritualistic possession takes place in the poem, but not quite. Seemingly possessed by his grieving wife, Brathwaite adapts Kumina's permeable view of personhood, though neither he nor his wife is, as in Kumina, dead or divine. In the elegy's narrative or worldly time—a structural element often contrastively interwoven with ritual recursiveness in poetic sequences, according to Greene—Brathwaite begins a ventriloquized chronicle of DreamChad's twenty-one days with her shock and bewilderment: on day 1, she is “trying to unravel Time”; on day 2, she breaks bread reminiscent of her son's “Firstborn flesh”; on day 3, she covers the mirror with a cloth; and so forth, through the tumultuous turns of fresh grief (K 75).⁹⁴ On the fifteenth day, she imagines the horrible details of her son lying “in the street / that midnight widdout light. skull crack. neck broken. trauma. red red red,” and even his shoes and socks have been stolen (K 80). By the seventeenth day, grief seems to have penetrated the foundations of the house and her relationship with Kamau: they are “clingin to each others bodies. holdin hands. and climb / —in to our souls. feelin the grief like an electric wire” (K 81). While demonstrating something like Kumina possession, the poem's detailed narrative temporality and subjectivism veer away from the social interplay of mourning voices, survivors, and officiants who encompass the individual mourner's grief in their own and in the recursive, ritual structure that orders it. Brathwaite's effort to subordinate his voice to DreamChad's reflects the gender structure of Kumina, in which the leaders have usually been women. But in that he is, finally, the creolizing officiant of a textual ceremony, orchestrated with his unmistakable punning and wordplay, his code-switching of fonts, sounds, and visual patterning, the poem “Kumina” as a singular aesthetic achievement also overleaps Kumina ritual.

If husband is possessed by wife, mother is also possessed by son, in perhaps closer accord with the Kumina idea of spirit possession, but even here, there is again a departure: the possessing spirit isn't, as usual, a revered Ancestor but the grieving mother's son. Moreover, in an elegy relentlessly focused on the mother's personal experience of grief, the mother is also struggling to possess the son—an introjection

or incorporation of the deceased that accords with the melancholia of psychoanalysis and with the Caribbean's blurred ontologies of the dead and the living.⁹⁵ Increasingly, DreamChad describes her sun/son as being within her body, "the broken body wringing in my belly like a ghost my baby like a bell // of bone" (K 82). The bell-(w)ringing bilabial stops sound the pulsing presence of her son's ghostly being in her belly. In the climactic twenty-first day, when "SpaceTime stann still," printed in thickets of small-font words, she hears Mark calling her, and her calling Mark, "So she can hold him now w/in her arms again Protect that neck that nvr shd be broken. That head that nvr shd be crush" (K 85). In this concluding episode, even as Brathwaite is delving deeply into DreamChad's searing grief, he also pulls back from ritualistic possession, partly returning to the third person of the poem's start and so splicing a semi-outsider's perspective with moments of DreamChad's frantic first-person cries. Desperate to perform her maternal duty and safeguard her son, DreamChad speaks in prose that shifts briefly to right-justified poetry, saying she wants to "bring him back / back to the world up / —inside down. down inside black / to the world" (K 85). Nkuuyu, spirit messenger of the Ancestors in Kumina, associated by Brathwaite with Elegua/Legba, god of the threshold, doorway, and crossroad, and thus straddling the realms of the living and the dead, the mortal and divine, is searching for the mother's son. As DreamChad approaches, she is "almost there—door corridor crossroad gateway threshold—the light becoming stronger" (K 86). This moment recalls the climactic ritual stage of what the *Jamaica Journal* essay calls "full myal possession in the head of the [transforming] individual" (K 71).⁹⁶

To embody something like ritualistic possession in aesthetic form, Brathwaite makes dexterous use of printed poetry's visual and sonic capacities. The prose poetry becomes a dense, splintered series of syntactic units, separated first by abrupt periods, then dashes, in which mother and son meld. She confronts with horrific directness her son's broken, torn body, as if peering in a mirror, "the soundless horror of his wounds like the wild white of my eyes first seeing it. then something in side" (K 86). The boy seems to be crossing over into her being, like a departed spirit in Kumina, even as he reexperiences the trauma all over again, his "neck break. rebroeken" (K 86). In this Caribbeanized elegiac repetition, the poet reenters and recapitulates the sharp pain of loss in the interplay among the poem's narrative, visual, sonic, and imagistic elements. In the climactic passage, amid a howling sound, mother and son's beings come together,

Like all his blood is floating down her cistern of his wounds are blessed rain
 this sound w/in her falling . . . the death that will be him becoming bourne
 & being born now in this nommonation of these bowls so near . . . and some-
 where deep inside her bowels now the sleepin rock, im cradle her familiar
 spirit arms—the womb of his death now safely wounded in her—sun become
 father—genitor—an almost newborn born & burn, ing in her. . .

—learning himself again to live w/in her wounds (K 86–87)

As anthropologist Elizabeth Pigou writes of African Jamaican ritual, spirits of the dead are “greatly respected” yet potentially dangerous, even capable of “the infliction of death.”⁹⁷ In Brathwaite’s possession scene, the tumult is extreme, but the blending of two beings averts total dissolution and makes way for mutual rebirth.

Paronomasia is a key poetic tool here. The language plays on the heteronyms “wound” (harm) and “wound” (past participle of “to wind,” as in their two beings are wound together). It also obsessively returns to homonyms of forms of “to bear” and “to be born,” synchronizing several strands of meaning: the ritual idea of the dead “mounting” (i.e., possessing) a dancer” who must then bear it, as Brathwaite quotes from *Jamaica Journal* (K 71; “K” 7); the psychological difficulty of “bearing” the “unbearable to bear” grief (K 87); and the spiritual idea that in being borne within her being, the dead child is paradoxically born of his mother, living again in the grief she bears for him. As Yanique Hulme writes of Jamaican death rites, quoting Victor Turner on ritual liminality, there is a stage of “ambiguity and paradox, a confusion of all customary categories.”⁹⁸ Brathwaite’s poetic ceremony corresponds with aspects of the spirit possession and liminality in Kumina ritual, but he creolizes ritual with poetics, converting the physical dance, performativity, and ontological in-betweenness into his elegy’s kaleidoscopic typography and orthography, its polyvalent wordplay of puns, paradoxes, ironies, and chiasmus. Brathwaite energetically activates the *opsis* and *melos* that Culler considers “crucial to the ritualistic dimension of lyric.”⁹⁹ But in the push-and-pull between ritualism and poetics, the elegy’s visual and musical ingenuities and oddities also trope on, leap ahead of, and aestheticize ritual.

While “Kumina” is deeply invested in the singular, subjective experience of one mother’s grief, it also, like the other elegies we’ve examined, resounds with the traumatic losses of Africa by enslaved people. Its earliest reference to the manner of Mark’s death, “hit off his latenight midnight bi- / cycle middlepassage ship,” places it in this ancestral context, in words that echo in sound (assonance), metaphor (the bicycle as ship),

and visual structure (the stanzaic shape of a ship) the spiraling out of the traumatic voyage from the Door of No Return (K 73; see fig. 4). The vessel that carries him to his death recalls the enslavers' ships that bore millions of Africans. At the same time, Brathwaite creolizes Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard" (1751), naming the various kinds of people who lie in the all-encompassing, "unceremonial graveyard" of the Caribbean, ranging from artists and writers to Rastas, robber barons, and, recalling his and Smith's puns, "eee- / lectric politricks & politicians," in addition to the deep accumulation of "Caribbean // slaves" (K 74).

ello! . . . ello! . . . Mummy! . . . This is Ingrid. . .

*Kamau & DreamChad coil in each others blood. she
tying the discomfort his tears for her dead son
while she bleeds as her sun keels from its mangle wheel .*

*hit off his latenight midnight bi-
cycle middlepassage ship*

Fig. 4. "Kumina," *Born to Slow Horses*, 73 © 2005 by Kamau Brathwaite. Published by Wesleyan University press. Used by permission.

If the elegy's opening frame is the Middle Passage, the coda, unannotated and obscure to many readers without the help of Brathwaite's essay on *Kumina*, is a ritual lament for a mid-twentieth-century *Kumina* queen, which is also a lament for Africa, and at the same time, by virtue of being written in a creolized Kongo, an example of African survival and adaptation in the Caribbean. The nearest the poem comes to ritual, the refrain, incorporated in parts of Brathwaite's live performance of the poem, is "kongó yerri / yerri kongó" (K 89), translatable as "Congo / our lost Congo," or "Kongo, / alas, alas Kongo."¹⁰⁰ The middle stanzas call for rebuilding (*rikkita*), but also lament the loss of the children (*mwona*) of our tribe (*ovili*).¹⁰¹ The loss of DreamChad's child repeats a long, catastrophic history of parental losses of children and the primal loss of the African motherland. Although DreamChad's twenty-one days of mourning end with a clip-art image of the sun (son), Brathwaite is careful to mute elegiac or ritual redemption, as he brings his *Kumina*-creolized elegy to a vexed, paradoxical conclusion, cramming together the words *bearing* and *unbearable*, *possibl* and *impossibl* and *not possibl*. In the absence of ritualistic release, the mourner moves forward with grief but not beyond it, the dead child "forever w/in / her. bearing down" (K 87).

* * *

Brathwaite remakes elegy by creolizing it with African Caribbean ontology and landscape, rituals, songs, and orature, adapting various subgenres and modes—child loss elegy, *tombeau*, political elegy, death poem, interior monologue—so that the poetry of mourning can encompass personal grief yet also collective, postmemorial trauma. Individual deaths are grieved as painful, yet the rupture of death doesn't preclude continuity between the living and the dead. Brathwaite understood creolization as a two-way process, and indeed, even as he is changing the genre, it opens his poetry to new affective and visionary possibilities. Through elegy he demonstrates, as he vowed early and late in his career, "Those who I hold most dear / are nvr dead // . . . they walk in me with the world."¹⁰²

To adapt Christina Sharpe, his elegies are written *in the wake* in multiple senses of the term.¹⁰³ They enact a Caribbeanized wake work for those the poet holds most dear. They creolize anglophone elegy with African-rooted ontology, animism, diction, and grief ritual, a-wake to the ancestral undercurrents in the African Caribbean experience. And they think back through, remember, and re-mourn contemporary losses in the wake of the enslavers' ships that forcibly transported the ancestors and their grief across the Blackened Atlantic. These elegies never forget the "cruelty" at the base of creolization, even as they exemplify its promise of "creative reconstruction." Although creolization has been too neatly split into historical and poetic modes, Brathwaite, as a poet-historian, reveals their interfusion. He writes elegies that remember and show creolization to be a centuries-long, multifaceted historical process issuing from the saga of Caribbean enslavement and the Middle Passage. His elegies embody creolization in their multiform, interdiscursive blend of visual and oral poetics, ritual communalism and self-reflexive *ars poetica*, collective postmourning and personal griefwork. Brathwaite demonstrates that we needn't, indeed shouldn't choose between the creolizations of the historian and the poet, which vividly intersect in this poet-historian's elegies for a great-uncle, a poet, a stepson, and the myriad ancestors who haunt these losses.

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NOTES

1 Kelly Baker Josephs, "Digital Yards: Caribbean Narrative on Social Media and Other Digital Platforms," in *Caribbean Literature in Transition*, vol. 3, 1970–2020, ed. Ronald Cummings and Alison Donnell (Cambridge University Press, 2020), 219–34, and Tzarina T. Prater, "Always Together: A Digital Diasporic Elegy," *Archipelagos* 5 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.7916/archipelagos-m2fg-gv81>.

- 2 The Worlds of Black Poetry conference, Furious Flower Poetry Center, September 21, 2024.
- 3 Two exceptions are Elaine Savory's review "Elegguas," *Review: Literature and Arts of the Americas* 44, no. 1 (2011): 161–62, and her memorial tribute, "The Questions Kamau Asked of Us," *Small Axe* 26, no. 1 (2022): 145–54.
- 4 See Savory, "Elegguas."
- 5 Kamau [published as L. E.] Brathwaite, "Elegies," *Bim* 5, no. 17 (1952): 73.
- 6 Kamau Brathwaite, "mesongs," in *Elegguas* (Wesleyan University Press, 2010), 27.
- 7 Maarit Forde, introduction to *Passages and Afterworlds: Anthropological Perspectives on Death in the Caribbean*, ed. Forde and Yanique Hulme (Duke University Press, 2018), 18.
- 8 See Jahan Ramazani, "A Poetics of Postmourning: Elegy and the Caribbean," *Small Axe* 28, no. 3 (2024): 1–16.
- 9 Edward [Kamau] Brathwaite, *The Development of Creole Society in Jamaica, 1770–1820* (Clarendon Press, 1971), 307 (hereafter cited as *DC*).
- 10 On postmemory as the mediated aftereffects of transgenerational trauma, see Marianne Hirsch, *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (Columbia University Press, 2012), 3–4, 5.
- 11 Richard Price, "Créolisation, Creolization, and Créolité," *Small Axe* 21, no. 1 (2017): 211–19. For the reference to cultural studies, see 217.
- 12 Price, "Créolisation, Creolization, and Créolité," 214. For an excellent overview of the debate between particularist and maximalist uses of the concept of creolization, see Ben Etherington, "Creolization," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Literary Theory*, ed. John Frow (Oxford University Press, 2022), 189–206, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.013.1054>.
- 13 Price, "Créolisation, Creolization, and Créolité," 219.
- 14 Aisha Khan, "Journey to the Center of the Earth: The Caribbean as Master Symbol," *Cultural Anthropology* 16, no. 3 (2001): 282, 293.
- 15 Ulf Hannerz, "The World in Creolisation," *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 57, no. 4 (1987): 547–59.
- 16 Exemplary texts are Virginia Jackson, *Dickinson's Misery: A Theory of Lyric Reading* (Princeton University Press, 2005) and Jonathan Culler, *Theory of the Lyric* (Harvard University Press, 2015).
- 17 Aaron Kamugisha, *Beyond Coloniality: Citizenship and Freedom in the Caribbean Intellectual Tradition* (Indiana University Press, 2019), 79–80; on Brathwaite's creolization, see 81–85. See also Jacob Edmond, "Points of Reference: Citing Kamau Brathwaite Decolonizing Citation," *Diacritics* 48, no. 3 (2020): 10–39.
- 18 Brathwaite, *Contradictory Omens: Cultural Diversity and Integration in the Caribbean* (Savacou Publications, 1974), 55.
- 19 Brathwaite, *Contradictory Omens*, 31, 43.
- 20 See Brathwaite's *Contradictory Omens* and his essay "Timehri," *Savacou* 2 (1970): 35–44. For an overview of critiques of Brathwaite's and related models that are insufficiently inclusive and differential, see Najnin Islam, "Creolization," *Global South Studies: A Collective Publication with The Global South*, January 4, 2023, <https://globalsouthstudies.as.virginia.edu/key-concepts/creolization>.
- 21 Brathwaite, "Jazz and the West Indian Novel" (1968) and *History of the Voice* (1984), both in Brathwaite, *Roots* (University of Michigan Press, 1993), 61, 62–63, 266. *History of the Voice* is hereafter cited as *H*.
- 22 Brathwaite, "Caribbean Man in Space and Time," *Savacou* 11/12 (1975): 7.
- 23 See especially Brathwaite's *Contradictory Omens*: acculturation (11, 16, 55); interculturation (11, 17, 19, 22, 55, 58, 62, 77n3a); indigenization (15–16, 62); marronage (31, 62, 63, 64, 66n2, 68n13), a concept seemingly "outside" creolization (66n2), yet also part of it because it involves not complete independence but "partial/ambiguous separateness" (62).

- 24 See, for example, Khan, who complains of the concept's "teleological optimism," in "Good to Think? Creolization, Optimism, and Agency," *Current Anthropology* 48, no. 5 (2007): 653–66.
- 25 Stuart Hall, "Creolité and the Process of Creolization" (2003), in *Creolizing Europe: Legacies and Transformations*, ed. Encarnación Gutiérrez Rodríguez and Shirley Anne Tate (Liverpool University Press, 2015), 15, 21, 19.
- 26 As somewhat of a departure, however, see *Revisiting the Elegy in the Black Lives Matter Era*, ed. Tiffany Austin, Sequoia Maner, Emily Ruth Rutter, and darlene anita scott (Routledge, 2020).
- 27 On grievability, see Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (Verso, 2004).
- 28 Reading and discussing the poem, Brathwaite recalls having written it before he went to Africa (in 1955), though it wasn't published until 1968 (see his "Gods," *Critical Quarterly* 10, no. 4 [1968], 366–71, and *Islands* [Oxford University Press, 1969], 85–86); he also connects the nickname to the limp. See Brathwaite, "My Poetry," recorded in Washington, D.C., December 6, 1996, posted July 30, 2015, by Cultura América Latina y el Caribe, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pDFQOGSgSPw> (hereafter cited as MP). Genealogical records indicate O'Neale (sometimes spelled O'Neal) was born around 1866. Brathwaite's sister Mary E. Morgan remembers him and provides a photograph of him in her article "Highway to Vision: This Sea Our Nexus," *World Literature Today* 68, no.4 (1994): 666–67, 670.
- 29 Brathwaite, *The Poet and His Place in Barbadian Culture* (Central Bank of Barbados, Bridgetown, 1987), 55 (hereafter cited as *TP*), and Brathwaite, *Barabajan Poems* (Savacou Publications, 1994), 152 (hereafter cited as *BP*).
- 30 Brathwaite, "Ancestors," in *The Arrivants: A New World Trilogy* (Oxford University Press, 1973), 239.
- 31 Brathwaite, "Ogun," in *The Arrivants*, 242 (hereafter cited as O).
- 32 Brathwaite, *Contradictory Omens*, 16. Although it can be argued that the term "indigenization" should be reserved for the cultures of Carib, Taino, Arawak, and other First Peoples, Brathwaite, Sylvia Wynter, Stuart Hall, Rex Nettleford, and others also use it with various shades of meaning for Indigenous African cultures transplanted, colonized, and reasserted in the Caribbean; on this vexed issue, see Dashiell Moore, "Indigenization and Post-Independence Caribbean Literature," chap. 3 in *The Literary Mirroring of Aboriginal Australia and the Caribbean* (Oxford University Press, 2024), 95–152.
- 33 On Bob'ob's Africa-centered storytelling, see also Morgan, "Highway to Vision," 666.
- 34 Gordon Rohlehr, *Pathfinder: Black Awakening in "The Arrivants" of Edward Kamau Brathwaite* (Gordon Rohlehr, 1981), 287.
- 35 Ezra Pound, "Vorticism," *The Fortnightly Review*, September 1, 1914, 461–71, <https://fortnightlyreview.co.uk/vorticism/>. Compare also the symbol of intersecting gyres, as diagrammed in W. B. Yeats's *A Vision* (Macmillan, 1937), 67–79.
- 36 See Emanuela Guano, "Revival Zion: An Afro-Christian Religion in Jamaica," *Anthropos* 89, nos. 4/6 (1994): 517–28, and Nathaniel Samuel Murrell, *Afro-Caribbean Religions: An Introduction to Their Historical, Cultural, and Sacred Traditions* (Temple University Press, 2009), 270–85.
- 37 Brathwaite, "Art and Society: Kapo, a Context," in *Jamaican Folk Art*, ed. Olive Lewin (Institute of Jamaica, 1971), 5.
- 38 Echoing *TP* 55, and "Art and Society," 5. He uses the term "zemi" in MP.
- 39 Brathwaite, "Art and Society," 5.
- 40 Brathwaite, "Art and Society," 5.
- 41 Rohlehr, *Pathfinder*, 290–91.
- 42 Brathwaite, *Barabajan Poems*, 135; Brathwaite, *Sun Poem* (Oxford University Press, 1982), 104.

43 Brathwaite, "Timehri," 44.

44 Mimi Sheller, *Consuming the Caribbean: From Arawaks to Zombies* (Routledge, 2003), 189.

45 Derek Walcott, "The Muse of History," in *What the Twilight Says: Essays* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1978), 64.

46 In another version, the last word reads "lover"; in a later revision, "hunger." See Brathwaite, "Ogun," in *Jamaica Journal* 6 (1968): 50, and Brathwaite, *Barabajan Poems*, 158.

47 Brathwaite, "Caribbean Man in Space and Time," 7.

48 Brathwaite, "Stone," in *Middle Passages* (New Directions, 1993), 57; for the online reading, see "Night 38: Kei Miller reads Kamau Brathwaite's Stone (for Mikey Smith)," posted June 17, 2020, by Kamau Brathwaite Remix Engine, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ruQxfXibbc>.

49 For Brathwaite's account, see David Streitfeld, "Saying It in Caribbean," Book Report, *Washington Post*, March 23, 1997, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/entertainment/books/1997/03/23/book-report/9566e8c5-a83d-4726-be0d-0e315470a770/>.

50 "Stone" was first published in the recently revived Caribbean (Guyanese) journal *Kyk-Over-Al* (1985) before the editor E. A. Markham included it, with corrected line breaks and runovers, in the British journal *Artrage* (1986) and his anthology *Hinterland: Caribbean Poetry from the West Indies and Britain* (1989). Brathwaite divided the poem into shorter stanzas in *Jah Music* (1986), expanded it in *Middle Passages* (1992, 1993), and reset it in Sycorax Video Style in *Elegguas* (2010). I focus on the early, widely known version in *Hinterland* but touch on the later variations.

51 J. Michael Dash, review of Brathwaite's *The Visibility Trigger* and *Jah Music* in *Journal of West Indian Literature* 1, no. 2 (1987): 88, 89, 87.

52 Susan Stewart, *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses* (University of Chicago Press, 2002), 1–2.

53 Canonical examples in anglophone poetry include Ben Jonson's elegy for William Shakespeare, John Milton's for Edward King ("Lycidas" [1638]), Shelley's for Keats ("Adonais" [1821]), and W. H. Auden's for Yeats ("In Memory of W. B. Yeats" [1940]). See Lawrence Lipking, *The Life of the Poet: Beginning and Ending Poetic Careers* (University of Chicago Press, 1981), 138–79, Daniel Albright, *Lyricality in English Literature* (University of Nebraska Press, 1985), 184–201, Sally Connolly, *Grief and Meter: Elegies for Poets after Auden* (University of Virginia Press, 2016), and *Tombeaux poétiques et artistiques: Fortunes d'un genre*, ed. Marik Froidefond and Delphine Rumeau (Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2020).

54 Walcott, "Eulogy to W. H. Auden," in *The Arkansas Testament* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1987), 63, and "Elegy," in *White Egrets: Poems* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2010), 84.

55 John Berryman, "Dream Song 37: Three around an Old Gentleman," in *The Dream Songs* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1959), 41. In an unpublished, largely prose, epistolary eulogy for Walcott, Brathwaite seems predictably ambivalent, addressing his counterpart as an "amigo" but emphasizing watching TV as an outsider to the seemingly over-the-top opulence of Walcott's state funeral and its church setting: Brathwaite, "The State Funeral Service at the Basilica of the Immaculate Conception in Castries, St Lucia for DEREK WALCOTT 25 March 2017," in a letter to Edward Baugh, archives of University of West Indies, Cave Hill. My thanks to Jordan Burke for this text.

56 Walcott, "Muse of History," 38–39.

57 See Nathan Suhr-Sytsma, *Poetry, Print, and the Making of Postcolonial Literature* (Cambridge University Press, 2017), 1–6.

58 Albright, *Lyricality in English Literature*, 195. I explore such negotiation in a reading of Auden's "In Memory of W. B. Yeats" in my *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney* (University of Chicago Press, 1994), 181–91.

59 Brathwaite, "Stone," in *Hinterland: Caribbean Poetry from the West Indies and Britain*, ed. E. A. Markham (Bloodaxe Books, 1989), 134 (hereafter cited as S). There is also "i dreadlocks" in the original version ("Stone," *Kyk-Over-Al* 31[1985]: 14), seemingly misprinted with a capital "I" in *Artrage* 12 (1986): 40, and *Hinterland*, 133.

- 60 For Smith's "Lawwwwwwwd," see, for example, Michael Smith, "Me Cyaan Believe It" and "Roots," in *It a Come: Poems* (City Lights, 1989), 15, 53–56. For "murderer," see, for example, his "Yout Out Deh," in *It a Come*, 18.
- 61 Édouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, trans. J. Michael Dash (University Press of Virginia, 1989), 20–21, 123–25.
- 62 For the longest version of the word, see Brathwaite, "Ogun," in *Jah Music* (Savacou, 1986), 24.
- 63 Carolyn Cooper, *Noises in the Blood: Orality, Gender and the 'Vulgar' Body of Jamaican Popular Culture* (Duke University Press, 1995), 69–70, 85n6.
- 64 Brathwaite, "Stone," in *Middle Passages*, 60.
- 65 Albright, *Lyricality in English Literature*, 195.
- 66 Mervyn Morris, "Editor's Notes," in Smith, *It a Come*, 10–11.
- 67 See Morris, citing Honor Ford-Smith, in "Editor's Notes," 10. See also Ford-Smith, "The Ghost of Mikey Smith: Space, Performance and Justice," *Caribbean Quarterly* 63, nos. 2/3 (2017): 271–90.
- 68 Smith, "Say, Natty-Natty," in *It a Come*, 52.
- 69 Smith, "Me Cyaan Believe It," in *It a Come*, 13; Brathwaite, "Stone," *Middle Passages*, 63. See Julie Pearn, "Poetry as a Performing Art in the English-Speaking Caribbean," PhD diss., (University of Sheffield, 1985), 152, <https://etheses.whiterose.ac.uk/1796/1/DX185871.pdf>.
- 70 On this aspect of Smith's work, see Ford-Smith, "The Ghost of Mikey Smith: Space, Performance and Justice."
- 71 Elizabeth Bishop, "Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance," in *The Complete Poems, 1927–1979* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1983), 58.
- 72 J. Michael Dash, review of Brathwaite's *The Visibility Trigger* and *Jah Music*, 87.
- 73 In the *Elegguas* version, punctuation accentuates the last word: "when the pressure . drop." See Brathwaite, *Elegguas*, 68. Cf. the Maytals' 1969 reggae song "Pressure Drop."
- 74 In comments to a journalist, Brathwaite similarly contrasts Smith's "extraordinarily warm" global reception with his local murder; see Streifeld, "Saying It in Caribbean."
- 75 Jenny Sharpe, *Immaterial Archives: An African Diaspora Poetics of Loss* (Northwestern University Press, 2020), 139.
- 76 For video, see Brathwaite, "Poet Kamau Brathwaite reads from Born to Slow Horses," posted March 6, 2023, by Griffin Prize Poetry, YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pgriQK9_QEs. On the elegy, see Savory, "The Questions Kamau Asked of Us," 150–51.
- 77 See Ramazani, "A Global Web of Elegies," *Journal of World Literature* 8 (2023): 145–76.
- 78 It was published in a special issue devoted to traditional Jamaican forms of music and dance; see Anon., "Kumina," *Jamaica Journal* 10, no. 1 (1976): 6–7 (hereafter cited as "K"), <https://dloc.com/UF00090030/00029/images/1>.
- 79 See Andrew Welsh, *Roots of Lyric: Primitive and Modern Poetics* (Princeton University Press, 1978); Roland Greene, *Post-Petrarchism: Origins and Innovations of the Western Lyric Sequence* (Princeton University Press, 1991); Hugh Hodges, *Soon Come: Jamaican Spirituality, Jamaican Poetics* (University of Virginia Press, 2008); and Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*.
- 80 Brathwaite, *Contradictory Omens*, 31, and Brathwaite, "Kumina," in *Born to Slow Horses* (Wesleyan University Press, 2005), 71 (hereafter cited as K). Brathwaite substitutes the bracketed phrase for "cults" in the original ("K" 6).
- 81 Brathwaite, "Kumina—The Spirit of African Survival in Jamaica," *Jamaica Journal* 12, no. 42 (1978): 46 (hereafter cited as KS).
- 82 Dianne M. Stewart, *Three Eyes for the Journey: African Dimensions of the Jamaican Religious Experience* (Oxford University Press, 2005), 149.
- 83 Stewart, *Three Eyes for the Journey*, 150.

- 84 Consider the Islamic roots of Sa'di's elegy for his son, Buddhist of Yamanoue no Okura's elegy for his son, Christian and classical of Milton's elegy for Lycidas, or Jewish of Ginsberg's "Kaddish" (1961) for his mother.
- 85 Edward Baugh, "Poetry as Ritual: Reading Kamau Brathwaite," *Journal of West Indian Literature* 8, no. 1 (1998): 6.
- 86 Baugh, "Poetry as Ritual," 6.
- 87 Baugh, "Poetry as Ritual," 7.
- 88 Baugh, "Poetry as Ritual," 7.
- 89 Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (Oxford University Press, 1997), 164, 138.
- 90 Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, 227, 226, 264. Forms of the word "ritualistic" appear dozens of times across the book.
- 91 See also "K" 7.
- 92 As Jacob Edmond argues, Brathwaite's interest in oral and visual means of recording are consonant; see Edmond, *Make It the Same: Poetry in the Age of Global Media* (Columbia University Press, 2019), 20–61.
- 93 On Brathwaite's use of fonts and typefaces, see Matthew Kirschenbaum, *Bitstreams: The Future of Digital Literary Heritage* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2021), 60–73; and, from a Deleuzian perspective, Geoff Bouvier, "The Immanence of Collective Expression: Achievements of the Minor in Kamau Brathwaite's Oral and Written Poetry," *Philological Quarterly* 99, no. 4 (2020): 399–417.
- 94 Greene, *Post-Petrarchism*, 5–12.
- 95 Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917), in *On the History of the Psychoanalytic Movement: Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works*, vol. 14 of *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey (Hogarth Press, 1963), 237–58.
- 96 See also "K" 7.
- 97 Elizabeth Pigou, "A Note on Afro-Jamaican Beliefs and Rituals," *Jamaica Journal* 20, no. 2 (1987): 24.
- 98 Victor Turner, *Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Cornell University Press, 1967), 97, qtd. in Hulme, "Death and the Construction of Social Space: Land, Kinship, and Identity in the Jamaican Mortuary Cycle," in Forde and Hulme, eds., *Passages and Afterworlds*, 123.
- 99 Culler, *Theory of the Lyric*, 252.
- 100 Brathwaite attributes the first translation to a scholar of Central African philosophy, Fu-Kiau K. Kia Bunseki-Lumanisa, whom he cites in KS 59; the second is from Monica Schuler, "Alas, Alas, Kongo": *A Social History of Indentured African Immigration into Jamaica, 1841–1865* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), 74.
- 101 As translated in KS 59.
- 102 Brathwaite, "mesongs," 27.
- 103 Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Duke University Press, 2016).