
Editorial Preface: Engaging Kamau Brathwaite

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For the past seven years, I have been stewarding the Kamau Brathwaite Bibliography project, begun as the focus of a collaborative researchathon to open the first Caribbean Digital conference in 2014. The bibliography, housed as a group library on Zotero, builds on earlier print bibliographies of Brathwaite’s works but—due to the looser space limitations for digital bibliographies—is more capacious and ambitious than previous collections of his work. And unlike the print versions, it exists as a living document, forever subject to additions, merges, deletions, and other edits.¹ In addition to the first group of collaborators that initiated the project, I have also worked with other scholars and students to edit the entries, publish a static PDF version, and add new entries over time. For many of us, the bibliography has come to live as a kind of finding aid for an uncollected archive of Brathwaite’s work.

This is, perhaps, a carelessly creative use of the word *archive*—especially in relation to Brathwaite, who was so careful about collecting, preserving, and documenting his own and others’ work. There exists, as of this writing, no official Kamau Brathwaite archive, no place to which we scholars can go to pore over his papers and manuscripts.² Given his stature as a canonical Caribbean writer and his contributions to Caribbean letters, this is sad; but given his complicated relationship to archiving and the materiality of his work, it is not unexpected. In the absence of a centrally collected and officially named Brathwaite archive, scholars must rely on what may be called *alternative archives*, such as the Kamau Brathwaite Bibliography; on what Jarad Zimbler describes as “archives adjacent to Brathwaite’s own” (see Zimbler in this issue), such as the Caribbean Artists Movement (CAM) archive at the George Padmore Institute; and on bits of Brathwaite ephemera to be found in unexpected places.

This special issue of the *Journal of West Indian Literature (JWIL)* presents the opportunity to add to the Brathwaite alternative archive, which has grown significantly since his passing in early 2020. And I take the space offered in this guest-editor preface also to weave in some Brathwaite ephemera by sharing two letters I received from Jack Healy when he learned of my editing this issue. Brathwaite wrote to Healy in 1970 (fig. 1) and 1971 (fig. 2), when they were organizing the now infamous Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies (ACLALS) conference of 1971. In his accompanying letter to me, Healy writes that he believes the second letter (26 Mar. 1971) is especially “important: it captures the atmosphere, the predicament, some of the players, and the strength of Kamau

Brathwaite at that contested moment of time.” Healy closes his letter to me by revealing, “Brathwaite influenced me in ways familiar to many of us who remain in his debt” (Letter to the author, 3 Mar. 2021).

Beverley Brathwaite has kindly granted me permission to reproduce these letters in full with this issue. The letters provide us a glimpse of the ways Brathwaite was invested in Caribbean literary studies and in building a collaborative community that honoured not only the visible work but also the behind-the-scenes labour and generosity that made the visible possible. As Healy points out, the second of the two letters might be the one that readers find more valuable, with its responses to the drama of the ACLALS conference. But the brief first letter is the one that resonates and reveals more for me. Brathwaite’s championing of Andrew Salkey—“I would be prepared to give up my paper to him if it would make things easier to have him. No one has done more, over the years, for Commonwealth literature”—and his closing “Message from Paule Marshall” together demonstrate his generosity and his continued work to open spaces for other Caribbean writers (as he had done collaboratively via CAM while in England). His scribbled postscript—“Please don’t think I’m making invidious comparisons. I’m just trying to let you see how the thing can be viewed. I know we can’t have EVERYBODY”—extends this spirit of generous collaboration to Healy himself and gives some indication of the self-reflective humour (and manipulation of upper-case letters) to come in some of his later work.

Each sentence deserves more attention than I can or do give them here, so I include a scan of each letter for you to read and appreciate and perhaps engage in later work (figs. 1 and 2).

Building an Alternate Archive

With special issues such as this, we build alternative archives for ourselves and future Brathwaite scholars. Prior to Brathwaite’s death in February 2020, which led to a proliferation of feting of various kinds, there were precious few special issues of journals dedicated to his work, though these were augmented by at least as many edited volumes of critical essays on the range of Brathwaite’s oeuvre. These alternate archives extend access to—and make relevant anew—Brathwaite’s theoretical and creative work. A few of these collections often referenced (and which I myself return to regularly) include the following:

- *Kamau Brathwaite: 1994 Neustadt International Prize for Literature*, special issue of *World Literature Today*, vol. 68, no. 4, fall 1994.
- Stewart Brown, editor. *The Art of Kamau Brathwaite*. Seren, 1996.
- Verene Shepherd and Glen Richards, editors. *KONVERSATIONS in KREOLE. The Creole Society Model Revisited: Essays in Honour of Kamau Brathwaite*, special issue of *Caribbean Quarterly*, Mar.–June 1998, vol. 44, nos. 1–2, 1998.³

UWI, Mona, Kingston 7

11 December 1970

Dear Jack Healy,

Thank you for your letters of Sept 23 and Oct 14. I shall be speaking on The West Indian Writer and his Society: my perception of that society and my relationship to it. Don't much like the advert. title: The Function of the Writer. Nuff to put people off. The man I should like to see on my panel is not Naipaul but Andrew Salkey. I don't seem to have been in on all the Mona discussions, but I did make the point more than once (once after you left) that Salkey and John La Rose should certainly be present. If Wilson Harris was specially asked and if Cliff Lashley has been invited, so should Salkey be and La Rose.* In Salkey's case, I would be prepared to give up my paper to him if it would make things easier to have him. No one has done more, over the years, for Commonwealth literature. Nobody can go through London without him. And he has continued to write. Please let me know quickly what can and is being done about these two.

Message from Faule Marshall. She got your wire and will be coming; but she doesn't have yr address so can't reply. Will send her that for you now.

As ever,

Edward

* Please don't think I'm making ridiculous comparisons. I'm just trying to let you see how the thing can be done. I know we can't do EVERYBODY.

Fig. 1. (Edward) Kamau Brathwaite's letter to Jack Healy, 11 Dec. 1970. Reproduced with permission from Beverley Brathwaite.

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26 March 1971

OUR REFERENCE

Dear Jack,

Thank you very much for your letter. It and the very perceptive (Irish?) things you had to say in those few minutes after Seaga's party mean a lot to me esp. here now in the post-Conf. winter of our discontent. All the newspaper hacks came out against me in one way or another - though none of them bothered to attend even a single lecture of the Conference. John Hearne also used his Sunday column; he called his piece 'by the Waters of Babylon', which got an immediate (but delayed) reply from your Rasta friend who was at my house. An amazing piece of literature in that one couldn't make head or tail of what he was saying, except that Naipaul was supporting Britain's sale of arms to S. Africa! Which didn't help matters. And then Ken Ramchand got himself a public lecture: 'Blacker than me: reflections on the C'wealth Lit. and Lang. Conf': in which he spent all his time in a rather sad attack on me and my work, concluding that I was anti-West Indian. The audience took it all rather glumly, I'm afraid; and to make it worse, Ram couldn't even define the terms (West Indian, plural culture, function of critic) which were basic to his talk. A very sad event really. But it all had to happen. The first stage - the first public stage - of our cultural revolution. I hope that on reflection, some more of the delegates will recognize what was going on. I really very sorry that so many of them went off disgruntled and claiming that we were rude and 'excluded' them. If they had realized what enormous pressures of growth and inertia are operating on us at the moment; and that this was the first time that West Indian writers had been gathered together to talk in the West Indies; and that, for the first time, there is an aware public - people struggling at last to a vision of the authentic - they might perhaps forgive us. Had they been present a few weeks later when at the National Stadium, at the Santos-Brazil-Pele match, the riot police and an inspector of police, beat a school boy almost to death because he ran out on the field to congratulate the Brazilians for scoring a goal against Chelsea, they ~~xxx~~ might have begun to understand. We are in the death throes of birth and I'm not even sure that we'll make it. As a matter of fact, I have received a few other letters... They stand guard over the greater silence, over Professor Conron and over the cuts and scorns here...

I'm glad you're going ahead with the publication of the Conf. material. Your asking me for permission and my giving it is a formality only. There would be no question of my withholding it. I look forward to seeing the transcript and re-shaping it for publication.

As we, Edward.

Fig. 2. (Edward) Kamau Brathwaite's letter to Jack Healy, 26 Mar. 1971. Reproduced with permission from Beverley Brathwaite.

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- Timothy J. Reiss, editor. *For the Geography of a Soul: Emerging Perspectives on Kamau Brathwaite*. Africa World Press, 2001.
 - Kamau Brathwaite special issue of *Anthurium*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2003.
 - Annie Paul, editor. *Caribbean Culture: Soundings on Kamau Brathwaite*. U of West Indies P, 2007.
 - Kelly Baker Josephs, editor. *The Brathwaite Effect*, *sx salon* 27, Feb. 2018.

Since Brathwaite's passing, there have been calls for tributes and essays to be gathered for special issues and collections. I want to note two of those here: the 2021 *Diasporic Rhythms* special issue of *The Caribbean Writer*, which is central to Kim Evelyn's essay included in this issue, and the republication and discussion of Brathwaite's foundational Caribbean studies essay, "Caribbean Man in Space and Time," in the November 2021 issue of *Small Axe*. Across the decades, such collections have archived different aspects of Brathwaite's work, and they continue to offer us a variety of ways to approach his creative concepts and contributions to Caribbean letters.

When putting together the call for submissions for this 2022 special issue of *JWIL*, I wished this contribution to the alternative archive to sketch as much of the Brathwaitean web of influence and influences as possible. I titled it *Engaging Kamau Brathwaite* to allow for a broad variety of potential essays. Brathwaite and his work span the canons of Caribbean, African, American, African American, and postcolonial literatures, and at least as many academic disciplines. With significant ties to Barbados, Jamaica, England, and Ghana, Brathwaite represents a truly transnational intellectual, though it may be argued that the Caribbean region was always the centre—the foundation—of his thought processes. He has made major contributions across several fields and disciplines with his creative and critical writings, as well as his organizational, pedagogical, and editorial work. Thus, Brathwaite and his work may be engaged on/from multiple dimensions as relevant to contemporary conversations about race, region, rhythm, and representation. With this special issue, we sought to present that range of Brathwaite's relevance to scholarship, service, and teaching today, a half-century after his first major publication.

The issue begins with the kind of memorialization and mourning that Brathwaite himself often enacted in his writing. In their essay on the kamau brathwaite remix engine Twitter account and their 40 Nights of the Voice undertaking, Ronald Cummings, Kaie Kellough, and Nalini Mohabir—the team behind @KamauRemix—reflect on how their digital wake for Brathwaite offered the language, shared sentiment, and communal space many of us needed during the turbulence and uncertainty of May/June 2020. The following four articles push our readings of Brathwaite's writings beyond, and before, the popular citations. Jarad Zimbler argues for a (re)reading of Brathwaite's early poetry, while Andrew Rippeon focuses our attention on the images in Brathwaite's later poetry collection. Dashiell

Moore and Elaine Savory read thematically across swathes of Brathwaite's writings, with Moore threading together Brathwaite's shifting "entanglements" with Amerindian cultures and Savory tracing his long-standing, though often-overlooked, ecological concerns.

We close the issue with three essays on teaching Brathwaite to today's undergraduate students, particularly those learning in North American classrooms (real and virtual). Rachel Mordecai discusses the openings Brathwaite's writings offer for complex discussions of gender in a contemporary classroom; Kim Evelyn reflects on her turn to Brathwaite to cohere and animate students in an online course during the COVID-19 pandemic; and Bedour Alagraa situates the "bridges" and "breaks" of Brathwaite's critical theory as foundational to a course on Caribbean thought. These three essays offer not only approaches to teaching poetry and essays by Brathwaite but also approaches to Brathwaite *as* teacher, an integral facet of his identity for several decades.

There are visible overlaps between these essays. As you read, you will encounter oft-cited Brathwaite lines, from both his poetry and prose. You will become familiar with the women who haunt his works: Zea Mexican, Dream Chad, Namsetoura. And, of course, you will see repeated references to the repetition, return, and revision that are keystones of Brathwaite's oeuvre. But there are also overlaps in the invisible work involved in the peer review and production of these essays. Brathwaite is forever a challenge for copy editors, and we thank Carla DeSantis for her care and flexibility as she worked to bring our essays as much into line with each other, with *JWIL* house style, and with the academic requirements of citation as is possible, given Brathwaite's resistance to (sometimes outright refusal of) imposed traditions. The conversations we had and choices we made about typography, naming, references, and more could form the basis of a future essay on how Brathwaite continues to push us to question how we engage his work and his teachings, especially within academic str(u/i)ctures.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

- ¹ For more information about the beginnings and further curation of the Kamau Brathwaite Bibliography, see Josephs and Reid, “After the Collaboration” and “Kamau Brathwaite Bibliography”; and Josephs, “A Report on the Kamau Brathwaite Researchathon.”
- ² Beverley Brathwaite, Kamau Brathwaite’s widow, has indicated that she is currently working on preparing his papers for archiving.
- ³ In 1980, *Caribbean Quarterly* also ran a split special issue on Kamau Brathwaite and Derek Walcott. See *Caribbean Quarterly*, vol. 26, nos. 1–2, Mar.–June 1980.

Works Cited

- Josephs, Kelly Baker. “A Report on the Kamau Brathwaite Researchathon.” *Caribbean Vistas*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2015.
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- . “The Kamau Brathwaite Bibliography: A Collaboration in Progress.” *sx salon*, no. 27, Feb. 2018, smallaxe.net/sxsalon/discussions/kamau-brathwaite-bibliography.