

Kamau Brathwaite and Natasha Sajé

KB in Utah

**Interviewed by Natasha Sajé and some of her students
Westminster College. Salt Lake City. Utah**

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wish thank Natasha for visualizing this eVent & making it possible . emerging
these wonderful protean Qs and for so diligently preserving this txt & giving me
the opp to xchange w/her students who were deeply & perceptively -
sympathetically but critically – reeding some of my work

this moment is livicated to Natasha and her students



NS: I'd like to know about your beginnings as an artist. When you first began to read and write, were you drawn to poetry?

KB: i think always words, words were the poem¹. Trying to create images, and not just images but i was aware that i needed to create a native image. i stress this word *native* because of the destruction of the sense of nativity and birth, the whole thing about a slave woman not being able to give birth to a free child

¹My first book of Caribbean poetry, Frankly Collymore's **Flotsam** (1948) begins 'WORDS - words are the poem,/The incalculable flotsam. . ./p7

i was born on the seashore so i was aware of the movement of the water and i saw the ocean. That must have done something. But i wanted to write even at the age of twelve. i wanted to say '*how was the genesis of the Caribbean.*' i wanted to do what was done in the Bible, about how God created the earth. But it had to be done as a Caribbean, as a Barbadian person. And that was my challenge: how to find a way to do that. That's really what i'm still tryin to do

When i tried to do that big one, about how God created the Caribbean, the origin of the waves, and thing (s) like that, i became aware that words were not enough. It was riddim & song as well. Seismology. Because i sensed the sound of waves breaking on the shore, so i knew that sense of natural song was important and the variation of the wave-heights << gave me, like the Pacific Islanders, a sense of undulation, also a sense of horizon, that unlimited <<<< spherence that the line of the horizon make; at the

same time that defined/indefinable liminal feel; that tidalectic, curvilinear fling -

And then how to write 'wave'. How to *write* 'wave', not just how to *say* 'wave,' but how to write 'wave', how to create words that meant 'wave' w/out saying 'wave'. My 'nemesis' was John Keats because his poems, his thing about the star, "O Star", as though *i were something as thou art* - that pure star there. . . And i transferred 'star' to 'pool', because of the beach-pools of my wave-shore, and i had to say *'Pool, i am as lonely as thou art'* - though i was realizing that this kind of imitation is a danger, and that there was an intervention in my imagination there coming from 'elsewhere', from 'outside'

Student: Do you find that imitation is an impediment, or is it part of nation-language?

KB: *Imitation* - really *apprenticeship* - is part of human/animal learning, but it becomes more & more an 'impediment' the more it is mediated from 'outside'

We are speaking of colonial situations here, where imitation, if you not careful, leads you more & more away from your own 'native', since that's the project of colonialism - to encourage you into the loyal subaltern imitation of the Other/the Master/Prospero. **nation-language** is the rebellion against this kind of criminal colonial initiation. So let me try to say what i'm trying to say here in terms of nation-language

As soon as i begin to understand that my Bajan 'pool' is my Bajan pool and not John Keats' 'star', i'm moving from imitation to apprenticeship to nation-language - i.e. nativist - culture of understand(d)ing even interstanding and i'm going to begin to try to *write* wave and feel/know that wave w/in the context of my own geography, history, culture

- literary tradition - based upon yr own sensibility and *sensé*. And these senses have a lot to do with *sound*

In other words - to use the language of nation-language discourse - there's going to be a change from imitation to 'reality' as you move from John Keats' 'star' to Caribbean beach-pool w/its context/reality of wave-child, sound, space, beauty, hurricane - where you dealing not w/'Ariel' but w/Caliban, and you're dealing w/**sycoraX** and w/alteration and w/magic & sacred realism and surrealism. And because the Caribbean is fragmented and the site of original & ongoing catastrophe, you cannot hold a mirror up to Nature. You have to hold a *broeken* mirror up to *broeken* Nature. That's the only way you can see the paradoxical whole. . .

In other words if i hold a mirror up to Nature i will see fragments and if i'm unable or unwilling to write fragments, we'll just be talking about nothing. So i have to really look at *my* Nature thru a

prism, which might be 'easier' than using a mirror, so that you get a filtering of these lights and histories/herstories. . .

So let me show you what happened to me after the 'period' of the John Keats 'Pool'. The first poem i really write was native, was on that same << beach in Barbados, tryin to get to this sense of *origin* which i'm speakin about

You know that we all, especially the males, whenever you see a body of water, you tend to take up a pebble and skid it on the water. Don't ask me why! Sheets of water seem to do that to us. And it be-<< comes a thing, who skids the smooth stone better/moro

We have this great seashore in Barbados, and you look for the right shape night-pebble, the smooth, as i say, pebble, and you skid it. And you count maybe fifteen skids ... And is that skidding stone

that make me recognize that if God was to create the Caribbean, God would perhaps have taken a stone from the Origen and skidded it on the face < of the water, and each skid of the stone becomes a sound of island. which is quite different, you see, from how Keats' Star or Milton's Pandemonium, or Beethoven's Eroica wd have 'done' it

The Caribbean 'basin' (check your Maps!) has a curve, which a skidding stone follows because when you skid the stone it does not go in a straight line forever. It starts in the skipping straight but as inertia begins to set in, it begins to make a curve either left or right

So from the yawn of Yucatan & tip of Florida thru Cuba, Hispaniola, Borinquen, round down thru to the butterfly of Guadeloupe, the Windwards to Trinidad and into Venezuela, the Guianas, you have a chain of islands in the form of a skidding stone. That's how i realized it. And then Xah had

to create the islands no only w/a stone, but with sun. But every time i tried to get a sun, it was Beethoven - **búm-búm-búm-buumm** - *opening the 5th Symphony* - something dramatic like that. It was not until the day that i recognized that this skidding stone was nothing to do w/symphony, but with *calypso* - **kaiso** - which is our own native music - *the skidding stone in fact is a calypso* - so that the native music is the native metaphor which is the native history which is the truth and splendour of our native sound

Therefore drums became important, the steel pan, the invention of the Trinidadians in the mid-twentieth century using US Navy oil drums² to create a (steel) drum - a miracle which was taking place even as i was creating this poem -

²During World War II (1939-45) the US estab strategic air & naval bases in the British colony of Trinidad, leaving great quantities of material behind at war's end - inc the large steel drums that wd become the basis of Tdad pan-man creativity

The stone had skidded arc'd & bloomed into islands
Cuba an San Domingo
Jamaica an Puerto Rico
Grenada Guadeloup Bonaire

curve(ed) stone hiss(ed) into reef
wave teeth fang(ed) into clay
white splash flash(ed) into spray
Bathsheba Montego Bay

bloom of the arcing summers...

NS: You just answered one of my questions about music and black experience.

KB: *All* music becomes important. Not only in & < for the Black Xperience, though my work significantly xpresses this aspect of the music

Like all poets before & since me, i found that poetry & song & sound are connected. sound is sung. its rhythm is part of the poem. the sycoraX style is a way of trying to visualize sound. That's what i'm trying for. to write music on the page. *The syco-*

raX video style (SVS) as musical notes as in this x-tract from **Dream Haiti** -

the economy of level playingfields of light at the end
of the tunnel

etc etc etc

and departed all the villagers of our shorne hill-
side to the deck of the ship where we was now passin Sun
Bryan and looking out for Mexican and

The Haitian Refugees

tho nothin had happen as i have been tellin you for what
sheem like a long long time and we had started to relax
under the tall grey pool of the ship when someone
shouted the way

Sancho Panzo

must have shouted³

³KB, **Dream Haiti** (SavacouNorth 1995), p33

NS: Do you play an instrument?

KB: No. i can barely play the radio. That's << why i have to do it in poems

NS: No visual artistic talent?

KB: Not at all, none at all. or perhaps you can say that it's gone into the way of the writing



Student: Not that most poets have an audience in mind when they create a work, but I was wondering if you did. If you wrote any poems specifically for a certain audience?

KB: That's a great question. One wonders all the < time. Because in the process of writing, the immediate thing for me in writing the poem is my relati-

onship w/the xperience that i'm trying to get at. <<
That *xperience*. not an audience. not a face

But the *selection of metaphor*, the selection of similes, the selection of xamples, the style of *reference*, has a lot to do w/a person or persons or complex persona i might be thinking of at the time. For instance if i was to write a poem about Utah i wd have to << try to think that i'm writing the poem so that you wd 'reed' it. And try to find the way of words that i think you wd relate to. The larger project is that i'm also concerned w/writing the psycho-history of << why/how people came to the Caribbean and the << conseQuences of that, and that the people of the << Caribbean shd in turn respond to what i'm sayin < w/their (our) own noun & mother poem. . .

What i mean is that the poem as it is written is not the end of it. There should always be a response to it. . .

In Cuba, especially when Guillén was alive, there used to be a lot of readings where there would always be feedback. The next day they would have seminars where people would respond to the poem. i think that is important that the writer or the artist isn't too isolated. The process of writing demands isolation in the first place, but the product of it should not be left in the refrigerator. There should be some area for the poems to be broadcast, read aloud and discussed, because something happens between those two processes. . .

To 'answer' your Question then. . . my ultimate audience is always - more or less - the Caribbean, but the Caribbean as my part of humanity. i can't really conceive of writing when i'm writing for an Estonian audience because i've never been there. i write where the landscape is familiar to me. When i was in England, i tried to write poems which were related to England and i get criticized for that. "*How come you're trying to write English poems?*" But they

weren't 'English' poems, they were poems which were relating to the English environment, like the falling of snow. . .

In all the books we read at school in the Caribbean - say, **A Christmas Carol** by Dickens - in everything we read in school, snow is somewhere falling, but we had assumed that snow fall like the sound of rain on our rusty galvanized Caribbean roofs. It was the only thing that we knew fall from the sky < and therefore snow would have made that kind of noise

So when i first see snow and it was silent, i was astoun(d)ed. it turn me around. i see this soff come down and disappear, come down and disappear, then finally it started to accumulate white-ness. which for me was magical. how it created colour w/silence rather than sound. . . which i accomplish in this my first 'English' poem - thru the << word *touch* - *touch* here being the silence of its sound

**The day the first snow fall I floated to my birth
of feathers falling by my window. touched**

**[touch] earth and melted, touched [touch]
again and left a little touch**

**of light
and everywhere we touched [touch]
till earth was white**

III

Student: What role do you see Christianity playing within the islands? And how is that reflected in your poetry?

KB: The Caribbean, our islands, like all territories in the Americas, started with their indigenous cultures which were destroyed within thirty years of the arrival of Columbus. So there is this gap, a void, in the native culture which was filled by European Christianity: Catholicism through Spain and Portugal, and then the various forms of

Protestantism w/England and the Dutch; and the French also brought in Catholicism. And they all established their sense of Christianity on the Plantation

But a very peculiar thing happened to Europe, >> generally, as they crossed the Atlantic to create the Plantation. . .

You know what it's like w/space travel, when spaceships reach their apogee above the earth and have to re-enter the atmosphere, they need an alteration of orbit, so that the thickest part of the space capsule - *the base* - faces the earth. In order to not burn up, it needs this *density* in what is now its *front* - w/ all this ambiguity/alteration of word-meaning & < orientation involved. . . ⁴

⁴In Magical Realism (see **MR/MR** <2002>) we go further and speak of this *loop* - alteration of orbit/consciousness - as **limbo**

Same thing seems to happen to Europe. The Renaissance, which was the great glory of Europe, goes through an **alter-Renaissance**, an alteration of orbit-consciousness-culture, as it enters the thick atmosphere of the Américas Plantations

And so Christianity, as is practiced in Europe, becomes a very debased form ('from') of Christianity. It is a Christianity which now accepts slavery and dehumanization, which accepts bribery and corruption; so that the principles that Aquinas, who established the Western Christian Catholic principles - and Calvin, who had done it for the Protestants - were stymied, were put into a catta-corner, > in a sense. So that a *religion of convenience & hypocrisy* is established in the Americas. A 'Christianity' based on *mammon*, on materialism and on profit. > People were 'Christian' because that was their cultural inheritance, but there was no *praXis*

First of all, the native base had been destroyed/>>> made dysfunctional. And then Christianity entered the hemisphere in corrupt form. And then the > Europeans import the massive (alter-)culture of Africa: 50 million of our people in 300 years. And African culture also goes through this alteration of orbit/consciousness: a kind of defensive reVision/ revaluation of Self under the conditions of slavery; the slave masters also contributing to the alteration by saying that if you are a slave, you can't be a human being. You can't (publicly) worship 'God' etc. You can't have any sense of aesthetics or ethical & ethnic memory. They (the Slave Masters [SMs]) consciously dehumanize their slaves, forbid them (certainly, as i say, publicly and esp in the Protestant Br Caribbean - and Protestant N America) to practice their religion and in-> deed refuse them the practice even of the 'Christianity' forms that were present on the Plantation

So that for about 200 years there's a void - an *apparent* void - of religion/culture among the majority of the

people who are the African/black people of especially the Protestant Caribbean/Americas⁵

It is an *apparent* lack & star of religion/culture because, in fact, we Africans continue to practice - live by - our own religious concepts as far and as long > as this was possible. i mean every human being has to relate to creators, or origen. So that after about 200 years (indeed long before that) you have this *interculturation* taking place between the European forms of Christianity and the African forms of whatever religions we brought ova: *kongó, yoruba, santería, cumfa, kumina, wintí*, etc

But what the Africans did - had to do - mainly in the (e) Hispanic Caribbean and Brazil - was mask African forms w/Catholic forms - the fundamentals being similar anyway. Ogoun appeared to be St < Peter and Erzulie Dantô (Haiti), Oshun (Cuba, Bra-

⁵In the Catholic Caribbean, there's a significant difference - Hispanic & Portuguese Africanity miXing w//relating w/African Africanity to create the *presence magical* of esp the Hispanic & Brazilian Plantation

zil), for xample, wd be the Virgin Mary or Santa < Barbara Africana, and so on. (in the Protestant Caribbean /Americas the cultural masking is more 'difficult', perhaps more ?complex, certainly more submerged)

After a time the SMs accepted this form of 'hybrid' religion because it seemed as if people were accept ing Christianity, when in fact they were not. There was no way that the average imported African wd 'accept' Christianity. First, it was a foreign con-> cept. Secondly, it was debased in its transAtlantic menifestation [sic]. And thirdly, it was being forced > upon them. So what you have in the Caribbean/> Americas is a lip-service to Christianity, which in many cases, as people became independent politic- ally, this *lip-service Christianity is being accepted as the state religion*, so that people are *suppose* to be Christ- ians, but in fact, in practice, they continue to have either an 'ambiguous' attitude to Christianity, or they continue to relate to religion in an Africanist < sense - often a ?modified Africanist sense, since we don't now have that free African base to work from

So you have this very strange, prismatic concept of religion that's not really Christianity at all. It's 'Christianity' in legal documents and it's Christianity' in terms of ritual - *apparent ritual* - but under that ritual you'll find the African forms still very >> much persisting

What's even more intriguing is that in Brazil, Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Dominican Republic, the Catholic-Spanish (Portuguese in the case of Brazil) Américas forms are, because of intercultural osmosis and the comparatively greater dynamic power and density of the African populations there, these Plantation cultures have become as much - in some cases >> more - African in their belief/praxis as European. > Fernando Ortiz, in his book **Cuban Counterpoint**⁶, goes into that. *transculturation*, he calls it. Herskovits writes a lot about that too⁷. And is now pretty<< well accepted as part of the discourse of the Ameri-

⁶ **Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y el azúcar** (Havana 1940)

⁷For a discussion Américas culturation/Caribbean p/v, see my Intro/M J Herskovits, **Life in a Haitian Valley** (1971) and **Contradictory Omens** (Savacou 1974)

cas, tho of course there are countervailing influences such as *mestizaje* (cultural miXing and some say/claim /hopefully?!) and its deAfricanizing effect(!!); and of course colonialism and its missionary & westernizing and native-eradicating educational 'tools' . . .

Of course we cd go even further and point out that Christianity itself has an African base & origin << (which some people prefer to call 'Middle East') and whenever Africans in the New World recognized this, < they were able to 'accept it' (Christianity) on these >> terms

But to sum up, we can say that the word/concept 'Christianity' (and its Euro-culture) in the Americas, whatever the definitions & permutations & reifications, has undergone a sea-change, as Shakespeare recognized, into something rich and strange. . .

but w/one persisting aesthetic & sycoraXian problem of stumble & control for & upon non-Europeans:- that since the Christian God and ijs Angels > were/are (xcept in vodoun/santería maroon y rastafari) white & European - such was the dictated iconography - there was no way that non-whites, even if Christian, cd ascend & assume to the Supreme Privilege - and hence a justification, in fact, of the continuing apartheid > Plantation

IV

NS: You're both a scholar and a poet -

KB: Poet and conseQuent respectful pilgrim scholar -

NS: And you've been an academic most of your life. How do other academics treat you? Do the scholars disregard the poetry and the poets disregard the scholarship?

KB: You are very perceptive!. Just like Christianity and Africanity. But things are changing now. Your class here is an example of the fact that academics, like yourself, have realized - that creativity is a very important part of the ultimate destination of the discourse. [KB not knowing, at this stage, that Natasha is herself also a v/fine published poet⁸] And poets and writers have always recognized that it was necessary to do research to confirm their intuitions. So there's a << slow meeting of those forces now. i've survived. It's gotten a little better. But for most of my life i was ostracize(d). i was always in the 'History' department (because i 'did' my degree & dissertation in 'History') rather than in the 'Poetry' workshops or Creative << Arts. And the 'Literature' department people don't want me because i don't have a 'lit degree'! And yet my colleagues in the History department at << Mona hardly speak to me because i was a 'poet'! << The history stuff that i research & wrote, they re-

⁸see her **Red under the skin** (1994); **Bend** (2004)

garded as apocryphal - at best! - and i've had very << little of it published and it is only in recent years, now that i've left the University of the West Indies, that some of my work has been taken up by some of the students there - rather than by the professors; and that student interest has created a move among (some of) the professors to say, 'Hey, perhaps we'd better have a look at this guy again, ee?'

And its been no different, really, since i come to >> NYU. 'History' here didn't want me, 'Literature' > wdn't have me, 'Creative Writing' it seems nvr >>> heard of me! - and still haven't! - and in 'Comp Lit' where i am, hardly anybody - like in History at Mona - bothers to speak to mwe, engage me in any projects, and regard my course in Magical Realism⁹ as be-yonn the palim

But you need to have the two, because the ideal Renaissance, which we were speaking about a while <

⁹see n7, below

ago, was that miXture, the balance, before the dis-
sociation of sensibility



Student: I wondered about the 'greater than' (>) an
(d) 'less than' (<) signs that appear in a lot of your
poems [and passim this text]. Do they have a significant
meaning, or are they line breaks?

KB: They are decorations yes & no They are line
breaks yes & no. My *sycoraX video style* strives, for
some reason, to *kern* - fill all space in line and there-
fore will break a word into arbitrary, as you will <
have noticed, to achieve this. It begins, really, as a
sign of rebellion ► publishers' fixed line-length on
the page. It also allows me to celebrate dissonance,
syncopation and fragmentation - a modern jazz <<
aesthetic¹⁰ Above all, as you've surmised, it all- ows

¹⁰See also Kb5's 'Jazz and the West Indian novel' [1957] in **Roots** (1993), pp55-110

me to make symbolic/emotional markers - the >>>> 'greater' (>) sign is usually for what the poem's >> culture 'disapproves' of - like missilic attitudes¹¹; and the 'lesser' (<) sign - as you call it! - for the 'greater' more 'privileged' values of sycoraXian and maroon submergence. two conflicting converging << forges¹²

NS: Do your readers get that?

KB: My students do! And it makes sense because, you see, those symbols are pretty eternal, they're pretty abstract, and they apply to all sorts of human desires, concepts, attitudes. So as you reed th(e) poem or txt, you will find that your response to those symbols makes good sense as long as you are *reeding* the poem

¹¹for moro on this, see **Missile & Capsule** (SavacouNorth 2004 from Bremen 1983)

¹²See the detailed discussion of these aesthetic orientations in Missile & Capsule (SavacouNorth 2004) and **MR/MR/CaribbeanAméricas Magical Realism**, 2 vols (SavacouNorth 2002) These txts - none (so far) published by Mainstream - support Brathwaite's point about the >> neglect - the askance - of/towards his work esp by the Academy

Student: I wanted to ask you about your choice of typeface and font throughout your work.

KB: Now if you had seen the original three books that now compose **Ancestors**¹³, you would see that i am using straightforward Caxtonian font - like >> what your textbook & novels are still printed in

Those first books – my first & second trilogies¹⁴ - were written on a typewriter. They took such a long time to see print, that there was the technological revolution of the computer and i myself had undergroan another strange alteration of consciousness - the first being the result of my living in Ghana/

¹³New York: New Directions 2001

¹⁴KB's first long-poems trilogy **Rights of Passage** (1967), **Masks** (1968), **Islands** (1969) - appear as **The Arrivants** (London: Oxford Univ Press 1973). His second trilogy - **Mother Poem** (1977), **Sun Poem** (1982), **X/Self** (1987) - also OUP, does not appear - as **Ancestors** - until 2001 - a significant 14-year gap, partly because Oxford University Press decided to discontinue its fine poetry tradition in c1988, just when **X/Self** appeared, and Brathwaite took a long time to find another publisher - New Directions in New York. And since by < this time (see txt above) his sycoraX video style had emerged, New Directions had a great > deal of trouble accepting it and coping w/it

West Africa for my first 10 years after graduation from colonial Britishness

In the 1980s, i went through this terrible period wh ich i call the **Time of Salt**. i did not know that i wd surVive that period. Let me say it was on the one side of my writing career i thought i had reach ed a happy plateau. i thought i had 'arrived' . . . i thought i was getting to where i wanted to get and was becoming independent - which is what a writer yearns to do and be

We - my wife Zea Mexican and i - had been living in Jamaica, 3000 feet up, in the coffee belt of the spectacular Blue Mountains. We had decided that we wd buy/build this house up in the mountains. We wd use the coffee as a source of income, resign from th (e) University of the West Indies and set up our < own Maroon community. (a Maroon community is similar to what you wd call a *lesser image* (<) and i wd see as *privileged*, in my SVS)

The Maroons are those enslaved Africans who successfully escaped from the Plantation and set up their own independent self-contained *quilombos* and *palenques* in areas inaccessible to the Plantation. In the case of Jamaica, high up in the Blue Mountains (w/Blue Mt Peak at almost 7,500ft) They had to re/acquire, re/activate, &/or revitalize their sense/knowledge/memory of ancestral culture. In other words they had to somehow recover what they had lost. And they did this in many cases in collaboration w/Amerindian people - those remnants who had << formed alliances w/runaway slaves since the first > Spanish invasions in the 16th century

These Maroon communities existed all over Plantation America: Palmares (Brazil), the Black Mountains (Haiti), the Njukka & others in riverain Surinam, the Seminole in Florida etc. They were the << one set of people who retained their alternative culture - alter/native to Europe. And in Jamaica, there's a very strong sense of maroon because of the

Blue Mountains and the history of the resistance (1655-1795)¹⁵ their presence engendered, running right along the centre of the island for some 275 continuous miles - the greatest mountain range in the Caribbean

Many Jamaican slaves were able to escape from the lowland plantations and get into the mountains and join or establish these maroon communities, the chief one of which is called Accompong, which is also the name of a town in Ghana - so you can see the connection

¹⁶The Jamaica Maroons fought the British to a Treaty in 1740 and again went to war (1795-96) during the period of the Haitian Revolution (itself a Maroon-based conflict) because they were not satisfied w/how the Treaty was working out. The Maroons were defeated in this second war and deported to Nova Scotia (1796) and from there, in fact, won their way back to Africa. Not all the Maroons, however, were deported (all did not fight in the war of 1795-96) and significant Maroon communities still 'independently' exist in Jamaica today. Their presence helps maintain the very strong spirit of marronage that persists today in Jamaica: see Paul Bogle, see Alexander Bedward, see Marcus Garvey, hear Miss Lou, Bob Marley, aka Rastafari. GrandeeNanny, QueenMother of the Maroons, is now a Jamaica National Sheroe

So we decided that we, too, would follow that path and try to become independent of the university, which I saw, for all its positives, as an aspect of the Plantation

Within a couple of years of establishing the Blue Mt (Irish Town) house and **hoom** as i call it - our *oumfô* - my wife, who had developed this terrible cough and was being easily tired, went to see the doctor who told her - or rather me - since they tried to hide it from > her - that she had just three months to live. Cancer spread into the lungs. 1986

Two years after this - 1988 - the *oumfô* itself is destroyed in a hurricane and i had to climb forty feet down to get to the door of my house, which was blocked w/a 10-ton boulder, the whole place covered with mud & stone from the mountain it lay in the shadow of

And two years after that (1990), 'cotchin' in a *parterre* back in Kingston, back now onto the urban Plantation, three robbery gunmen of the apocalypse break into my apartment one midnight of thunder & lightning and shoot me through the back of the head of my imagination

These are the three incidents that take place w/in a traumatic two four six years of my mid-career: **The Time of Salt**¹⁶

As a result, i find that i could no longer write. i << used to write longhand, that kind of way, and then drafts onto a typewriter. My writing (right) hand became like granate[sic]. closed into a fist of stone. mirror - even mirrow¹⁷ - of the petrification of my mind

¹⁶See Kb's **The Zea Mexican Diary** (1993 for 1986), **Shar: Hurricane Poem** (1990 for 1988), **Trench Town Rook [TTR]** (1994 for 1990)

¹⁷for translation from mirror to mirrow, see **MR/MR**

Until one day, pickin, w/my left hand, at my dead wife's computer, i see this little thing in the left-<< hand corner of the screen, the cursor, and i trie to < find some way to bring it to the center of my scream

Having achieved that by xperimental accident, because i knew nothing about computers (and these were the v/early days of computers. Zea MeXican had worked on a K-Pro), i soon discovered, by some accident, that if i typed an '¶' for instance, i cd enlarge it like infinitely, opening the eyes of my mind in the process

And this was important for me since i had been reduced, like the cursor, to a *speck* in the corner of th (e) world and i was now using the computer screen to *big myself up* again

And these 'xperiments', using font size and shape-shift to inch me back from my obsidian voice, i begin to call my **sycoraX video style** - sycoraX being

the African magic-woman you find in *The Tempest*, as witch - as Shakespeare & the colonizers call her - the submerged, invisible volcanic mother of Caliban and Sister Shark, tho these dark women nvr in fact 'appear' in *The Tempest* - our first Plantation txt

i see *sycoraX* as the underground, submerge force that influences Caribbean culture. The sub/south gravitation force that bends the rigid axis of the Euro-space And what we are trying to do - what i starat to do as i come back to life after **The Time of Salt** - is lissen to *sycoraX* . try to hear (unlike Caliban) and decipher < her vegetable & spiritual language of darkness & sound. So that *sycoraX video style* is an alternative to Prospero Books; a way of xpressing the seeing of sound.

So that when i begin to write after **The Time of Salt** - that is, since 1990 - you will find my work, xpressed especially in the night-journeyings i undergro (w) - i call them *dreamstories* - appearing in this **SVS**. And so the revision of the second trilogy which i sub->>

mitted (!) to New Directions as **Ancestors** . become (s) counter-Caxton. a (re)Africanization of Euro-America

NS: Have publishers tried to talk to you about this?

KB: Not really. i find most publishers (and editors) firmly conservative and committed to their Caxton/Guttenburg, their page-size fixed to - for sycoraX - the far too small 4/5-5.5 page width. This does not allow sycoraX to breathe. Compare, for instance,

how 'Dream Haiti' looks in the pocket-book >>> Longman (1994) version with *it/self* in full SVS in SavacouNorth [see p11, above]

Publishers, i fear, are Defenders of the Faith¹⁸, and have forgotten what was happening before the dev-

¹⁸better let's say 'Establishment' Publishers. In the ole days of the first Industrial Revolution, things were different and people were prepared to print **Ulysses** and the Surrealists

elopment of block printing - in the days of the oral & mural tradition of the hieroglyphic, the illuminated manuscript & Chinese pictographic script

But things are getting a little better, even tho most publishers & editors still anxiously say *'i hope th at's not in **sycorax**!!* - as yrs will probably do, Natasha!!

But New Directions eventually came up w/a lovely **Ancestors** and a quite good looking **DS(2)**; and << Wesleyan wonderfully welcomed & honoured sycoraX w/the large page-space they accorded **Born to slow horses** (2005) which went on to win the Griffin International Poetry Prize in Toronto in May 2006

VI

NS: Let's go back to the period you call *The Time of Salt* and your being shot by *Gunmen of the Apocalypse*.

KB: Well, the Apocalypse. . .the four horsemen of *Revelations*. . . These were real people who came in and eventually i'm shot through the back of my >> head - here [indicating the place]

They did everything. They tie me up. They ram[sic] -sack the apartment, taking all they wanted - wh ich took them from about three a.m to juss before < bird wife wake. This is 'traditional' scarenario in Kingston these days¹⁸. You get better of a person/victim and you *enjoy* yourself at their xpense. Midnight/middlenight. There was a thunderstorm. i was sleeping

These guys come through the fragile ghost & glass of the door at the back of the place (top flat of a two-storie building so they had to *climb*). i hear a noise that wake me up. Went out from the bedroom into the sitting <<

¹⁸See **TTR**. Of course Kingston/Ja has no monopoly on crime & violence. but in 2005, Ja had the highest per capita murder rate in the world - **1674** - 58/100,000 and in 2008, the 1611 was the third highest per capita statistic

room, not knowing there was a power-cut from the storm. feel this dark blow at the back of my head from i suppose a gun. then dem tek my *telephone >> wire* and tie me up. hands bound at the back *xecution style*. tro me face down on the bed. *Keep yu head down*. stuff mi mout w/dirty linen so i don't shout fe **HELP**. But all the worl sleepin. An so they spin >>> their time goin thorough the apartment, takin all they wanted, including, at the end of the dark almost daylight, my cyar (*'are these the keys?'*) and Zea Mexican's ring from off my wedding finger (*'is this gole, bwoy?'*)

An then juss before they left - they had been tryin the old night to commit murder that their blood seem to thirst for - i remember the guy sitting on my back w/the hard small round mouth of i suppose his gun at the back of my skull, just where it parts at the nape to the shallow gutter down the neck, an sayin, "*Mi na kill na body this week yet*"²⁰ - as if he was lickin syrup

²⁰Even as he was saying this. even into this xtreme moment. i cd also hear the echo - tidalectics - of Robin Dobru's poem - Dobru the great Surinamese poet of our Cultural Revolution - 'I

He had this gun at the back of my head, tryin to > get me to say just the one word - or rather *make me make the **one sound*** - since i was gagged *wordless*- that would allow him to shoot. like a kind of orgasm And when i >> didn't respond in any way that he cd understand, he finally make that fatal *click* of the trigger and > the bullet went through, i assume, the whole dark world of my life and my imagination. So that even today i don't kno if is me dead an you livvin, or me livvin an yu dead. . .²⁰

VII

Student [after a long pause]: I'd like to ask about a couple of poems: 'Pixie' in **Ancestors** and 'Donna' in <<< **Born to Slow Horses**, two women who prostitute

want to hate somebody today/I feel it in my bones/I feel it in the sun/I must hate somebody today/it has got to rain/heaven should cool this/or I will murder somebody today. . .' <<< Flowers must not grow today (Paramarimbo 1973), p14

²⁰See KB's **Trench Town Rock** (Providence, RI: Lost Roads 1994 & 2007) for details of this incident and the contxt of postcolonial violence [sic] in which it occurred

themselves. [It takes me some time, at the interview, and great effort, i remember, to make the shift back to this other 'reality']

KB: Donna and PiXie are two very special young women in my work and i hope yr reading didn't give the stereotype impression that all - most - 'sub-altern' women have seXual & promiscual problems If you think this you don't know yr own society and you've not read **Mother Poem** and **Sun Poem** nor indeed **Words need love too** and **Slow Horses**

[See, also, for instance, 'Rosita', 'Francina', 'Esse Emancipada', 'Dream Chad', 'ZeaMexican' 'Namsetoura', 'Windperson Poem' and the lyrics surrounding my Mother in **Mother Poem**]

But the poetry is constantly encountering the poverty, the horizonlessness, the violence[sic], the rebellion strategies (often sexual, since so many other outlets are >>> blockaided) that our people - male & female - have to undergo - in addition of course to our surViVal & creative achievements - in a post-traumatic slave/colonial syndrom Plantati-> on society

'Donna' and 'PiXie' are ecstatic xamples of the pre - dation of this syndrome And indeed I'd like to hear

far more from you about yr response to these wo-< men then my 'defence' of them...

You cannot really say that PiXie is a 'bad' child. She is a child of the society that she herself describes. a society that increasingly is losing sense of human humane responsibility. a society that >> has allowed things, already fragmented, to frag->> ment further out of control. This has become almost a norm now. see **Trench Town Rock**. But > see also Palestine. see the long-poem **Ark** - to name the most recent & catastrophic in other & inter-related parts of the world - a society where the <<< young, poor & vulnerable, as in 'PiXie', are not << protected, not lissenn to²¹

In 'Donna', in fact, it's the drive-in guy who's the prostitute. . .

²¹The diff bet Donna & PiXie, however, is that Donna is poor & self-working class. PiXie is well-off, neglected & spoiled

'PiXie' in great detail, is an xample of that tattered shredded consciousness that cannot find any<< heave or heaven or harbour w/in her own people. < And any 'xternal imput/aid' that the Caribbean >> gets/asks for, is automatically contaminated by th (e) 'alterRenaissance' - theirs + ours. All 'aid' (physical economic intellectual/cultural - from Kristopherer to Keats) that has come into the Caribbean has been xploit-> ed by donors *and* menagement-receivers in one way or other. This has not changed from the time - i repeat - of Columbus Cortez the IMF the WTO NAF-TA the EPA. whoever comes in, they are not interested in nativist contours. They are interested in imposing a solution - not soulution! - that has been already agreed-on somewhere on Madison Avenue or Wall Street or Paris or the G8 at Davos or Geneva or in the Br Museum. They want us to accept blueprints. *their* blue- prints. *their* 'xperts' who come are people who know/care v/little about our society. They find it v/difficult to employ *local people* even as UNES- CO or UNICEF 'xperts'

An 'xpert' must always be someone from 'away' who does not know the culture. the more 'away' the better. reed Jamaica Kincaid's **Small Island**. watch the film/dvd *Life & Debt* . like me & John Keats & > the pool all over again. Therefore there has been no solution to the fragmentation of the Caribbean, rooted in our geo-psychic history

And then you have the *tidalectic* relation between the society and its artists/intellectuals - more 'artists' than 'intellectuals' because although we may sometimes be encouraged to *feel* (*dont feget the whip/lash*) we nvr encourage to think - and think native or maroon -
out of the Plantation paraBox

indeed colonials - no doubt because of this - are assumed
not to be able to think!

But the artists - especially - are the ones who are try-
in to keep the society together. And when i say <<
'artists' i mean people w/*vision*, not only those who
'write' or 'paint'. those who try by their activity, <<

by their xpression of consciousness, their native-ness, try heal the society. But as you can imagine, it's a sisyphean situation. Most people who have 'consciousness' are swept to the margin like the >> cursor of the computer i started to negotiate with. .

'Pixie' is a terrible parable of the rootless artist/intellectual. She holds that broeken mirror up to our broeken nature

Student: We see a lot of the women in your poetry in oppressive situations, or caught up in this fragmentation of society that you're speaking of. How did you come to gain this understanding?

KB: The poem begins with my mother. And from my mother, everything flowed: what i know that she suffered, what i can see of her relatives, her <<< narratives. . .the permutations from her influence, xperience. Hers, if i may say so myself, is a herstory of women in the Caribbean. And if you go back

in terms of actual history, **the slave woman** is that very creature. Mary Prince and her mother are persons who are *without*. When a slave woman has to bear children, that's the whole human process. And yet the child you bear is not yours; it belongs to the Plantation. Where then do you begin, you know? You have to go back to **Beloved**, Toni Morrison's story where she has to kill her children rather than have them born again into that tonality of oppression

It's this *being* and *being w/out* that i see/feel so acutely in the life of my mothers and how they nonetheless survive prevail and are *beautiful*, that i'm trying to write about

Here's Mary Prince and her Mother at the uttar >> Auction Block/Auction Black, Hamble Town, Bermuda 1805 -

The black morning at length came: it came too soon for my poor mother and us. Whilst she was putting on us the new osnaburghs in which we were to be sold, she said, in a sorrowful voice, (I shall never forget it) 'See, I am shrouding my poor children; what a task for a mother!' - She then called Miss Betsey to take leave of us. 'I am going to carry my little chickens to market,' (these were [my mother's] very words) 'take your last look at them; may be you will see them no more.' 'Oh, my poor slaves! my own slaves!' said dear Miss Betsey, 'you belong to me; and it grieves my heart to part with you.' - Miss Betsey kissed us all, and, when she left us, my mother called the rest of the slaves to bid us goodbye. <<< One of them, a woman named Moll, came >>> with her [own] infant in her arms. 'Ay!' said my mother, seeing her turn away and look at her child with tears in her eyes, 'your turn will come next.' - The slaves could say nothing to comfort us; they could only weep and lament with us. When I left my dear little brothers and the house in which I had been brought up, I thought my heart would burst

Our mother, weeping as she went, called me away with the children Hannah and Dinah, and we took the road that led to Hamble Tow

(n), which we reached about four o'clock in the (e) afternoon. We followed my mother to the market-place, where she placed us in a row against a large house, with our backs to the wall and our arms folded across our breasts. I, as the eldest, stood first, Hannah next to me, then Dinah; and our mother stood beside, crying over us. My heart throbbed with grief and terror so violently, that I pressed my hands quite tightly across my breast, but I could not keep it still, and it continued to leap as though it would burst out of my body. But who cared for that? Did one of the many bystanders, who were looking at us so carelessly, think of the pain that wrung the hearts of the negro woman and her young ones? No, no! They were not all bad, I dare say, but slavery hardens white people's hearts towards the blacks; and many of them were not slow to make their remarks upon us aloud, without regard to our grief - though their light words fell like cayenne on the fresh wounds of our hearts. Oh those white people have small hearts who can only feel for themselves.

At length the vendue master, who was to offer us for sale like sheep or cattle, arrived, and asked my mother which was the eldest. She said nothing, but pointed to me. He took me by the hand, and led me out into the middle of the street, and, turning me slowly round,

exposed me to the view of those who attended the vendue. I was soon surrounded by strange >> men, who handled me in the same manner >> that a calf or a lamb he was about to purchase (e), and who talked about my shape and size in like words - as if I could no more understand their meaning than the dumb beasts. I was then put up for sale. The bidding commenced at a few pounds, and gradually rose to fifty-seven, when I was knocked down to the highest bidder; and the people who stood by said that I had fetched a great sum for so <<< young a slave.

I then saw my sisters led forth, and sold to different owners; so that we had not the sad satisfaction of being partners in bondage. When the sale was over, my mother hugged and kissed us, and mourned over us, begging us to keep up a good heart, and do our duty to our new master(s). It was a sad parting; one went one way, one another, and our poor mammy went home with nothing²².

NS: There's a great sympathy for women and a << willingness to tell their stories, which is not the case always with male authors.

²²**The History of Mary Prince** (1831); 1997 ed, pp61-63

KB: i'm aware of that, yes. It's just how i see things Had its major start w/**Mother Poem**, written specifically for & about my Mother and radiating outwards from that **nam** to include the women's stories that i'm aware of and my sense of Caribbean history. Mind you, some feminists have said that i have no clue. . .!²³

NS: That reminds me of a question I had. What < made you write a 9/11 poem? Are there limits for whom the poet can speak? What gives you the ability/right to speak about a certain topic or from a certain point of view?

KB: About 9/11. . . i had to speak how i felt. . . We thought at first it was snow falling outside our

²³There's a crossroad of critical danger right here, which i-man work na tread. For one, i can't really go along w/Natasha's implication that i'm rare among male writers ref women, trying in my response to deal w/my own contribution and its origen. In the mid 80s my **Mother Poem & Sun Poem** came under surprising attack from some feminists 'Down Under' and there was Gordon Rohler's deep response in **The shape of that hurt** (1992) Since then, i'm glad to say, we seem to have put that kind of polarity behind us, tho wo critics still tend, on the whole, it seems to me, to too priv wo writers in their reviews & critical apparatus. . .

Manhattan window that morning - until we hear the radio & switch on the tv and when we rush into the Park, the Towers had gone and there we were running towards the disaster w/people passing us in the opposite direction white w/the dust of the holocaust. And as we run towards Ground Zero, DreamChad, i remember, was weeping as we run. . not only for the future present of what was taking place out there - the dust the smoke the fire the people falling from the sky - but for the ever present past of her own sun of 29 . knock down off his bicycle & crush to death that midnight only a few months >> before by a speeding cyar near Papine Market and for all those disasters in the world so vulnerable & raw. now accumulating round that coming moment of marassa And in the long-poem **Ark** i write. i am juss sayin that the world has suffered all these catastrophes of human suffering and out of these dark fires there's always some curl of music radiance << some flutter flute of future spirit home. . .and there

was a burning human consolation in the terror i
had witness . . .there. . .and w/in our lives. . .

VIII

NS: What was it like in England and then in
Ghana?

KB: When i get to Cambridge university in Eng-
land in 1950 on a Barbados Scholarship, the stud-
ents there did not seem to know about black peo-
ple, altho the great tide of Caribbean migration in
to Britain had already started (since 1948). I was *shock*
that people - undergraduates & graduates & Fellows - that lev-
el of education - were so ignorant

i had no concept of the why of this, coming from
the Caribbean, where although there is racism, peo-
ple still live 'comfortably' with each other - a quiet
apartheid, taken for granted and therefore hardly
noticed. **an agreed denial**. So that when i reach

Cambridge, one of the most terrible things to happen to a black colonial freshman from 'the islands' was to come into the lecture-room, huge cave or ark-light space/time continuum(s) w/long curved lines of benches/'desks' and a big sharp tickless black&-white clock upon the wall

You come in early out of the freeze and you sit in the cold silent front row to be close to the voice of the professor so as not to miss a word of wisdom; and you discover that no one else sits on that long curved row which wd normally seat some 25 students per block. And you're sitting there wondering *what is going on!* is there something wrong with me? You feel so shame and isolated, you can't even > hear/remember what the professor sayin. . .

That went on for about two terms before i found << people i cd 'relate' to. it was v/difficult. esp. since the only people then who were 'relating' to me were missionary types who thought/assumed that i was

a nomChristian²⁵ cannibal and needed to be **saved**. They wd not invite me to coffee or a dance or anything like that, but to *go to church*

Then when i get to church the pastor or whoever it was towards the end of the long service, wd call people up to the front to **confess** & be **saved**, you kno the thing. . .and my new friends wd be kneelin there on either side of me, lookin at me thru their >> preying fingers, watching for me to suddenly sh-> out out *hallelujah i'm a bum* and walk weeping up > the aisle to the waiting Saviour by the Cross. . .

And this only stopp the afternoon on the Cam [the river of Cambridge that lazies thru the 'backs' of several Colleges] when one of my missionary friends, who had me all to himself at last in this canoe - up-river & beyond the reach of punts - capsized, in his enthusiasm, out of it, and since he couldn't swim, shouted **“Save me! Save me!”** to me - and his name, i remember, was 'Cross' -

²⁵sic. That's how KB said it. A *calibanism* - 'nom' rather than 'non' to suggest *de/nomination* - *de/nommonation*

which i turn the tables on, as it were, jumped in, and did

Later on i begin to meet more ?normal people and in the end found the Cambridge circle of writers - Thom Gunn, Ted Hughes, Peter Green, Peter Redgrove, Alistair Aston, Tony Dyson & Brian Cox - these last two later started the *Critical Quarterly* and Gunn & Hughes went on to become legends. . .

But not before i almost committed suicide

It got to a stage where i felt so utterly isolated that every evening i would return from the dining hall where one (then white of course) South African graduate student wanted to know, if like my 'brothers' in his country, *i had a tail* -

and i would look out the window like John Keats (again!) from his metaphorical garret. i lived in a cold lonely ivy-covered tower in Pembroke, thirty-

nine worn chill concrete steps up weeping w/damp
(where were the hallowed oak-panelled rooms we dream of in the Caribbean?) and every evening as i look down at the green Thomas Gray garden below, it came closer & closer. But on the evening when i was about to make >> that step out my six-flights-up window on to England's green & pleasant lawn, somebody - an undergrad from Yorkshire w/this burly Barnsley amazingly < Bajan-like accent w/the voice of my young father - as if he had known me all his life, the way he was! - knocks on my door as if the Angel of the Lord tell im what was < happenin and senn im an im say mwe, w/out even < an Introduction! - **'Hey mate, let's go out get a beer'**. And we did that. Another *alteration of consciousness*

IX

Ghana was going back home, confirming home. In Barbados we'd been told that we didn't have villages, that we didn't have a culture. In Ghana i see my uncle, my brothers, my sisters, evvabody << from home & country and *confident* in the street. <<

i'm so thirsty to learn about this new ancient certain of myself that i spend the whole time there << just learnin about myself thru this new ancient <<< family

i was fortunate also to be able to use much/most of my time there as an Education Officer for primary schools - in the villages rather than in Accra, the capital, and therefore i learn a lot about the rituals and the culture and the way&why our people do < things - tho of course i was in Accra also. w/Efua Sutherland's Folk Theatre and at the university at Legon w/Professor Kwabena Nketia. My long-poem **Masks** (1968), now part two of **The Arrivants** (1972) trilogy, is my Caribbean M'Daase Ghana...²⁵

²⁵ cf our other sections, i find this GHANA too abbreviated for justice. Let's hope that someone - before is too late! - will do what all these years has not yet been done - undertake a full-length interv of Kb5 in alteration Ghana. . .

X

NS: Is 'CowPastor' in Barbados where you grew up?

KB: Yes. CP is a place i 'discovered' some years ago now (late 90s), was able to buy, is part of 'Cow-Pasture' - a virtual Serengetti²⁶ - that i'm trying to live on. make my new (post-Irish Town) hoom. The government of Barbados wants me to give it up for them to make a golf course or some such for the airport. tho they've not - yet - come out & said so. offering instead a whole slew of red herrings. . .

With CP, i'm trying to ?replace that Time of Salt when the first *oumfô*, in Jamaica is destroyed; and is a more ?perfect 'replacement,' in a way - if that's possible - since both are sacred spaces - because Barbados

²⁶CowPasture, until its still unXplained seizure by the Govt of the Barbados and the removal in 2000 of all the cattle-people there, was one of the most beautiful places in Barbados, w/the herds of moving & grazing cattle & black-belly sheep (Bajan goats) making it a Serengetti. Since 2000, the pasture has turned to bleak & rab & wilderness but is still a sacred site to which Kb5 longs to return - see the appearance of the slave-woman Namsetoura in 1999 (fn27, below). Kb5 had planned to build his Library of aleXandria and Bussa Institute on his portion of this land

is my home-land - itself now being destroyed by > the greed & hurricane of government policy²⁷.

NS: In Barbados, do people recognize you?

KB: Oh yes. We are a small (24x12 mi: 250,000 population) island. And especially people who admire like Jimmy Cliff, might call out. The guys on the motor-bikes & on the bicycles - i don't know how - know certainly know of - my work and how it connects w/them. . . perhaps from their Caribbean school textbooks - tho there isn't much there - &/or recognize it from what appears from time to < time on TV or on the radio. But they know my work and say they appreciate what i doin, what i 'defend' and they know why the government has this antithetical attitude towards me, denying me, indeed, not only home but employment/loveliness, really, in the island. Though i must also say that > until 'CowPastor', 'even' the Govt, for a period, was Quite supportive and i was (even?!) asked to write a

²⁷For details, see The Namsetoura Papers (*Hambone* 17/2004 and *SavacouNorth* 2005)

poem for our first National Heroes Day. and even before this, was made a Companion of Honour of < Barbados...

There's also close rapport - and work together when we >> can - w/most of the younger writers on the island. . .

XI

NS: Tell us about teaching, what do you like about it?

KB: Teaching is a poem. Every time i teach it is another poem i'm writing, but it often stops me from *writing* the poem because i'm teaching it! The courses i teach increasingly mirror regions of poems < that i'm in. My students - xcept the ole harrcore - enjoy it in the sense that it's an coherent organic >> thing though they might not be sure until towards the end of the poem's semester, why it's like that

It's also 'unstructured' in that people ask me for a syllabus and i can't say 'Well, a poem doesn't have a syllabus,' so i have to make excuses and say << 'That will come later,' or something like 'Go read its poem'. Then the person either comes back very enthusiastically (*the blessing*) or i nvr hear from them again (*the wound*)

In this country especially you are very bogged even bogged down w/certain formalities like syllabi and correctness of 'structure'. i thought that the United States 'system' wd have much more 'freewheeling'. i thought it was a jazz culture. But i've since discovered that jazz is (now) a v/marginal and 'antiquated' forum. something to be 'sampled'. museum music And nothing 'new' since John Coltrane

XII

Student: You asked us to see the film **The Harder They Come** and I was wondering about your res-

ponse versus our response. The movie really opened up our eyes to the struggles in Jamaica. I was shocked by the violence, but I'm sure your response was different than ours.

KB: There's a book of mine, which i've already referred to, called **Trench Town Rock** (the name also of a Bob Marley lyric) which describes the moment of my own shooting, described above. But it also describes the sociology of Jamaica during this **The harder they come** period

In the islands from the period of Independence - the (e) sixties - into the 70s - there was a cultural revolution²⁸. We were saying that we shd become more >> native, more ourselves, time to stop imitating Hollywood and *smile orange*²⁹; time to stop imitating the billboards that had Marilyn or Britney Spears

²⁸for this and the entire background context of the Caribbean cultural revolution, see KB's still forthcoming (Leeds: Peepal Tree Press), **The love axe/I** [L/X]

²⁹Trevor Rhone play, *Smile Orange* (1971) is one result of the Revolution (see L/X, forthcoming PTP) as is the reggae artist, Burning Spear. The proud Ja national colours - black << green & gold (orange) = Garvey, Rasta & Blk/Af Liberation

- someone white & foreign (no matter how 'familiar/famil. liar) - sell-
in toothpaste or paradise on them, an put like <<<
Burnin Spear & Kidjo up there instead

As we were sayin this, two things happen. Michael
Manley came to power in Jamaica as our first soci-
alist prime minister and the first person willing to
use & promote & promise *nation-language* and to <<
use the concept of **nation & native & rebel lion**

And there was a movement among Caribbean in-
tellectuals and artists to focus upon Caribbean im-
ages & provenance & contxt (Haiti, Cuba, Maroon, Rasta-
fari, reggae, kaiso, NL) - all this part of the global cultu-
ral & civil/human rights upsurge - but we weren't
getting very far because we didn't have enough <<
material - not even a publishing house of our own³¹

³¹ Independant Haiti and Cuba of course always had their publishing houses - aspect of
Independence and indeed, in the case of Cuba, predating it. In the Br Caribbean (inc Guy-
ana) before our CR/Cultural Revolution - from the late preIndependence period - there was
small but significant small-scale self-publishing, mainly poetry (Redcam, McFarlane, Casimir,
Collymore, AJ Seymour, Walcott, Shake Keane. . .), some po anthologies (esp in Ja & Guyana)
and cultural, political ideas/discourse from esp Norman Cameron in Guyana and Albert
Gomes & CLR James in Trinidad. But is the CR of the 70s that provokes the now estab

The Harder They Come is the first Jamaican film<< written by a Jamaican produced by a Jamaican in Jamaica acted by Jamaicans to all-Jamaican composed & rendered music. the aesopian story of *how you can succeed if you really try&try*. and if you don't, there's always marronage

But is much more symbolic than that. The after-<< noon the flim[sic] premiered everyone wanted to see it, the 'premier' people (the big-ups always invited to these marquee events) and the 'regular' people - the 'Sufferers - soon 'Strugglers' - who by custom & Plantation protocol had to wait until after the Gala to see it - but who, on this **native** occasion, also wanted - and *intended* - to

local pub houses like Ian Randle & The Press of the UWI, both in Jamaica. Our significantly nativist popular music recording/pub business esp in Trinidad and spectacularly in Ja, emerges as aspect of preIndependence nationalism

The flim was schedule to show at 4pm in the Carib Cinema, downtown Kingston and the 'People' be-
gin gatherin by 2'clock in the large cyarPark in <
front the movie-house & entertainment centre, so
that when at 4pm, the Big Wigs roll up in dem >>>
Rolls & Benz an ting, there was no where fe dem de
park, far less get *in/to* the cinema

For the first time at last, you see, there was a sym-
bolic socio-cultural even political & symbiotic shi-
ft in the nation's structure

So the Cinema seh OKAY if the invited Boss Men
& their Ladies cyaan get-in, nun-a-yu *Sufferers* (a
popular nomen of the time. see Fanon's **Damnés de la terre**) cyaaan
come-in neetha. *We shuttin the cinema down*. So dem
slide across the steel grilles so common to protec >
business palaces & places; but the People so *press* a-
gainst the gates w/their intention that, as the news
papers report nx day, the very *steel* of the barriers

melted - like at Jericho An de People **surge** into the cinema free of charge and - they felt - *free and at large at last!* - such was the effect/attraction of this first native flim

So OKAY the Menagement[sic] seh - yu might be in but we nat out. we na go show de flim

Whereupon th People proceed to mash-up de place

So dem hads was to show de flim - *The harder they come* - the first time that a film of native craftsmanship is shown to the people of it. For the firss time at lass we was seein an hearin ourselves! - and *at & as a << premier event*. a complete change-around of the then aXis of precedence. a break-out *of* - and *inta!* - the Plantation BOX

Student: In the example of the film's premiere, it seems like the aggression has a purpose. But the < people who robbed you, that aggression seems >>>

mindless. Do you think that there is a distinction between the types of aggression?

KB: It's all sadly the same. a sense of hopeless injustice - *fixed structural have and have-not* - and what to do > about it and who to take it out on. . . In the film, th (e) 'Syrian' guy in charge of givin you a break to get yr one-track record cut, he couldn't care less >> who you are/whats yr need. He will steal yr work - recognizing but hiding its value - and say, 'Here's five >> dollars.' And almost like throw it on the ground like the scraps it is - as you see its meaning & >>>> meanness in the flim. And it's all part of the strange almost impartial violence from all sides which has developed in Jamaica since the sixties when local political parties come to power for the first time. These politicians - blighting the serengetti! - decide > that they wd import guns into the communities in dis/order to confirm & maintain their 'control'. >> Their gunmen-'Dons' become privilege, w/mag->>

num power in the society, sponsored & supported by the politicians who in turn now depend on them

Nowadays there are elaborate gunman/donman/>> man/don-gorgan funerals³² which the politicians > feel obrigado to attend and all this is xplained a-> way in our popular academic discourse . *dancehall stylee* . . .

Once the gun of law/less gets into the hands of the people of the poor, they become increasingly aggressive, answering the greedy & privilege(d) aggression of the 'rich' - those who feel it is or was their unthinking *right* until **The harder they come** to drive up the cinema for a premier while the 'blacks' juss stann aside & look ■ ■ until they begin to recognise that in a rigidly uneQual multiplying Plantation, the gun is perhaps the quick (!)est sQuare-> route to 'suc(k)cess'

³² See eg Annie Paul "No grave cannot hold my body down": rituals of death and burial in postcolonial Jamaica.' *Small Axe* 23, June 2007, pp142-162

if Rhygin the increasingly frustrated & angry
Jimmy Cliff 'cowboy' character of
The harder they come
had escape the police bullets on Lime Cay
on that last bright forthright tropical day,
he mighta head straight for my apartment
. . .that midnight at Marley Manor. . .

**THE CONTINUING PLANTATION... THE
CONTINUING SALT**

KB interv w/Natasha Sajé, Westminster College, Salt Lake City, Utah, 10 Nov 2006; transcribed & edit
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