



TEACHING CARIBBEAN POETRY

Edited by Beverley Bryan and Morag Styles



Teaching Caribbean Poetry

Teaching Caribbean Poetry will inform and inspire readers with a love for, and understanding of, the dynamic world of Caribbean poetry. This unique volume sets out to enable secondary English teachers and their students to engage with a wide range of poetry, past and present; to understand how histories of the Caribbean underpin the poetry and relate to its interpretation; and to explore how Caribbean poetry connects with environmental issues.

Written by literary experts with extensive classroom experience, this lively and accessible book is immersed in classroom practice, and examines:

- popular aspects of Caribbean poetry, such as performance poetry;
- different forms of Caribbean language;
- the relationship between music and poetry;
- new voices, as well as well-known and distinguished poets, including John Agard (winner of the Queen's Medal for Poetry, 2012), Kamau Brathwaite, Lorna Goodison, Olive Senior and Derek Walcott;
- the crucial themes within Caribbean poetry such as inequality, injustice, racism, 'othering', hybridity, diaspora and migration;
- the place of Caribbean poetry on the GCSE/CSEC and CAPE syllabi, covering appropriate themes, poetic forms and poets for exam purposes.

Throughout this absorbing book, the authors aim to combat the widespread 'fear' of teaching poetry, enabling teachers to teach it with confidence and enthusiasm and helping students to experience the rewards of listening to, reading, interpreting, performing and writing Caribbean poetry.

Beverley Bryan is Professor of Language Education at the University of the West Indies' Mona School of Education, Jamaica, and a past Head of Department and Director of the School of Education.

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The National Association for the Teaching of English (NATE), founded in 1963, is the professional body for all teachers of English from primary to post-16. Through its regions, committees and conferences, the association draws on the work of classroom practitioners, advisers, consultants, teacher trainers, academics and researchers to promote dynamic and progressive approaches to the subject by means of debate, training and publications. NATE is a charity reliant on membership subscriptions. If you teach English in any capacity, please visit www.nate.org.uk and consider joining NATE, so the association can continue its work and give teachers of English and the subject a strong voice nationally.

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Preface

Teachers and students reading literature from a region of which they have no experience will often call for help. *Teaching Caribbean Poetry* belongs with the first responders.

This helpful book discusses a number of poems by Caribbean authors (writing from home or in the diaspora), and offers useful information about cultural contexts and the changing features of what Kamau Brathwaite called ‘the tentative cultural norm . . . not whole or hard . . . but cracked, fragmented, ambivalent, not certain of itself, subject to shifting lights and pressures’ (Brathwaite, 1974: 6). The brief contributions here—and they identify fuller treatments of anglophone Caribbean poetry—will be of assistance not only to educators from outside the Caribbean, negotiating the particularities of West Indian literature, but also to many West Indians, who often know little about Caribbean territories other than their own.

The product of extensive collaboration, the book shares teaching strategies developed in the West Indies and the United Kingdom and it reports on the responses in varying situations. Resistance to poetry dwindles in the face of well-planned activity in the classroom or creative workshop. Facts not previously known may be bridges to understanding. Maps, photographs, films and material available on the internet, may bring the reader closer to what initially seems foreign. Hearing accents that reflect a poem’s regional origin can engage and clarify. The project has made ‘the oral, aural and performative aspects of Caribbean poetry—the *sound* of it—as central as the written word’ (Introduction, p. 2). *Poetry Archive*, with poets reading their work, is an invaluable resource.

When the teaching has gone well, there should be deeper, subtler, more accurate appreciation of the poems, a closer focus on their language; and recognition, emphasised in the project, that ‘Caribbean poetry is not just about the vernacular but involves the full range of linguistic devices available in the region, as well as a startling range of voices’ (Introduction, p. 3).

Mervyn Morris

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Acknowledgements

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In addition, some notable poets have contributed to our project and inspired us to write this book. Special mention must be made of those teaching and performing on our courses in the Caribbean and UK on which the book is based—John Agard, Anthony Joseph, Mark McWatt, Kei Miller, Mervyn Morris, Philip Nanton, Grace Nichols, Esther Phillips and Dorothea Smartt. Working with teachers from many different territories in the Eastern Caribbean would not have been possible without the help of Dr. Didacus Jules, Registrar of CXC, Dr. Jennifer Obidah, Director of the School of Education, Cave Hill, Barbados and the relevant Ministries of Education; it was master-minded by Sandra Robinson, working with her colleague at Cave Hill, Samuel Soyer, and supported by research assistants Karen Thomas and Gina Burnham.

We would like to thank both our universities for enabling us to work on this exciting project—the University of Cambridge Centre for Commonwealth Education at the Faculty of Education and the University of the West Indies at Mona, Cave Hill and St Augustine campuses. We are also grateful to Mike Younger, who made the project possible in the first place and has facilitated it ever since, to Bryony Horsley-Heather, who administers the project and who proofread and presented the final manuscript, and to Sally Roach and Ruth Kühn at the Centre for Commonwealth Education, Cambridge. We are also grateful to members of our advisory panel, including Bea Colley, Ally Smith and Helen Taylor.

Finally, we would like to thank Richard Carrington on behalf of the Poetry Archive and Jeremy Poynting of Peepal Tree Press, both of whom are partners in this project. We are grateful for the generosity of Peepal Tree Press for permission to quote ‘Love Overgrows a Rock’ by Eric Roach in its entirety.

This book would not have been possible without our sponsors, the Commonwealth Education Trust, and we are particularly grateful to Judy Curry and John Picknett for their unfailing enthusiasm and support.

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Introduction

Why Caribbean poetry?

Beverley Bryan and Morag Styles

In writing a book on this subject, we have to consider: why Caribbean poetry? Why has a programme of this scope been put together to promote a particular educational and creative enterprise above all others? There must be some special reason for it and indeed there is. We cannot cover all the features of Caribbean poetry but our book will introduce some of what we see as the defining characteristics of this body of work that we want to make available to more people—especially the young in schools. They will be our ultimate audience and by default, the teachers who must engage them.

Caribbean poetry is a relatively new area of literature, which has developed its specific features over the last hundred years. Perhaps, it is the newness that gives it a certain vibrancy and joy, what Brown and McWatt (2005: xvii) call ‘the most life-affirming and spiritually uplifting body of poetry’. They are suggesting that this is poetry that will enrich the spirit as the reader engages.

An ocean apart—a shared vision

This book is the natural outcome of a course on Teaching Caribbean Poetry (TCP), which has been developed by lecturers in English and Education at the University of Cambridge Faculty of Education and the University of the West Indies (UWI). This initiative is part of a bigger Caribbean Poetry Project (CPP) that has been underway since 2010 to promote and enhance the teaching of Caribbean poetry in schools in the Caribbean and the UK. The course itself covers the range of Caribbean poetry we think it is important for students to know about. The ‘we’ refers to the CPP team consisting of four members from UWI, Jamaica (Mona), one from UWI, Barbados (Cave Hill), one from UWI, Trinidad (St Augustine), and four from the University of Cambridge. In addition, we are working with distinguished poets, Mervyn Morris, Mark McWatt and others as one commitment of the project is to include poets as teachers. So far, the TCP course has been taught as a full programme in Jamaica and Cambridge, UK, and as a series of workshops in Antigua and Barbuda, Barbados, Dominica, St Kitts and Nevis, Grenada, Guyana, London, UK, St Lucia, Montserrat and Anguilla, St Vincent and the Grenadines and Trinidad and Tobago. One of the aims of our project was to increase the exposure of Caribbean poets on the online Poetry Archive (www.poetryarchive.co.uk) and we have made a good start in that direction. There are many references to poets and poems on the Archive in this book.

Although separated by an ocean, one of the joys of this project was discovering how much was shared by like-minded colleagues in the Caribbean and the UK. We quickly found that what united us was our love of poetry, our passion for teaching it, and our shared regret that in both parts of the world poetry struggles to be taught confidently by teachers and enjoyed

and understood by pupils. Our joint mission, therefore, was to devise a poetry course that appreciated the difficulties under which teachers are working, the various constraints on the curriculum and the need to find ways to make it accessible to the young without losing its challenge. We put poets working with teachers and pupils at the heart of our project making the oral, aural and performative aspects of Caribbean poetry—the *sound* of it—as central as the written word. Other factors, like exam syllabi in both parts of the world, were taken into account and we also decided that although our concern was Caribbean poetry, this book would offer insights into teaching poetry generally. Finally, appreciating the demands on teachers and knowing how hard it can be to motivate young people, we have tried to provide both the background to the poetry and ways of teaching it successfully. The final chapters of this book are devoted to the latter.

Histories of Caribbean poetry

In considering Caribbean poetry, we are dealing with a body of work that is not just stirring and heartening, dynamic and amusing, musical and linguistically varied—though it is all those things. Some of the poetry is tough because Caribbean poetry deals with powerful and potent content. Most consistent and evocative is the attention it devotes to the politics and history of the region, which covers a troubling yet compelling canvas. In [Chapter 4](#) we consider the roots *and routes* of some of these traumatic events, challenging the familiar Eurocentric perspective. The poetry moves us from the visceral experience of slavery, to colonial government, to independence, and to the post-colonial questioning of what that history means and how it has positioned Caribbean people in a globalised world. Our discussion of the poetry suggests that because of that history, many Caribbean people (including poets, of course) have been drawn to a metropolitan exile in America, Canada, Britain and other places and, for some, they only become truly Caribbean in exile, missing what they have lost. The poetry reflects the unsettling nature of identity for many Caribbean people, some of whom live far away from their roots, and champions the experience of the marginalised, questioning the status quo (see especially [Chapters 4](#) and [6](#)). This is true of poets as varied as Derek Walcott, Kamau Brathwaite, Linton Kwesi Johnson, Louise Bennet and Bob Marley, names that will become familiar to readers of this book. At the same time, Caribbean people seek through the migration experience to ‘mek life’ in Lorna Goodison’s words or, as Grace Nichols puts it, ‘To tell you de truth / I don’t know really where I belong’ but ‘Anywhere I hang me knickers is home’ (2010). New generations of poets, such as Kei Miller, are keen to fashion something beautiful *and* authentic from the vicissitudes of history.

Nation language

Apart from the sense of history that pervades Caribbean poetry, another important feature is the presence of the vernacular, the indigenous language spoken in the Caribbean, referred to by Brathwaite as *nation language*. This is the political and cultural term used to describe the Creoles of the region, illustrated by a variety of voices with different accents, registers and dialects. In a slim but seminal text, *History of the Voice*, Brathwaite testifies to the privileging of the voice and the oral tradition by reference to well-known *sound* poets in the region. *Voiceprint* (Brown et al., 1989) was a major departure in poetry anthologies in its attempt to capture the voice in its manifold