Persons Divided Against Themselves: The Rebirthing of a Unified Identity in Lorna Goodison’s and Kamau Brathwaite’s Poetry

The relationship between one’s identity and the rewriting of a forgotten and misremembered history is central to Caribbean literature. Jamaican poet Lorna Goodison and Barbadian poet and historian Kamau Brathwaite struggle with reconciling their individual identities with a cultural history that has been stolen, slaughtered, and misappropriated by European colonizers. Goodison and Brathwaite draw on their diverse cultural backgrounds and language to unify a shattered identity while simultaneously giving birth to a new one.

Lorna Goodison does not write to a specific culture, country, or time period, but instead addresses humans both as a whole population and as individuals. Goodison revels in her cultural hybridity of being Scottish, African, and Jamaican as she writes in a cross of Standard and Creole English, but her writing is motivated by fundamental and universal human emotion that still stays true to and acts as a voice for her wide-spread roots: “I want to first of all write in a language that accurately represents the people I write about. I have a great fear of writing as if I’m from middle earth. I want to write stories and poems that resonate with anyone who is human, anyone who loves and who has known loss, anyone.”[1][2] Goodison speaks through central characters in her poems and uses them as a soundboard to reinforce and amplify her cry of mourning and a call for solidarity. Additionally, she places these characters in specific environments and settings that speak to their natures and forces as beings. Goodison’s poems are portraits that encourage readers to step into a fragmented identity.

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[1] Kamau Brathwaite. *The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry,* Vol. 2 ed. Jahan Ramazani, et al., 864.

[2] Michela Calderaro, “An Interview with Lorna Goodison,” *Calabash: A Journal of Caribbean Arts and Letters* 4, no. 1 (Spring-Summer 2006): 3.

Kamau Brathwaite blends both African and Caribbean influences in his poetry to harmonize the two cultures as opposed to distinguish between them. Brathwaite coined the term "nation language," which he defines as "an English that is not the standard, imported, educated English, but that of the submerged, surrealist experience and sensibility… Nation language is the submerged area of that dialect that is much more closely allied to the African aspect of experience in the Caribbean. It may be in English, but often it is an English which is like a howl, or a shout, or a machine-gun, or the wind, or a wave. It is also like the blues. And sometimes it is English and African at the same time."[3] Brathwaite identifies a new form of the English language that has been written off as a "dialect" and ignored because it was the language spoken by slaves and laborers, those that went unheard and unseen. Brathwaite converts the shame associated with the Caribbean having African influences to pride by interweaving elements of both cultures throughout his poetry.

In Goodison's "On Becoming a Mermaid," her use of alliteration complements the character's marine setting and gradual transformation from a human to a mermaid. The assonance of the "o" sound is reminiscent of an opening of some sort, a release: "your hair floats out straightened by the water / your legs close together fuse all the length down / your feet now one broad foot / the toes spread into / a fish-tail, fan-like."[4] Words such as "floats," "close," "broad foot," and "toes" all require readers to open their mouths when speaking, giving the poem a liberating ring. However, this tone is juxtaposed by words that indicate a closing-off or termination such as "drowning," "locked," "sealed," "close-mouthed," "sea floor," and "under," which is repeated four separate times in this twenty-one-line poem. While both the alliteration and format serve to create a fluid cadence throughout the poem, the deeper the reader sinks into it, the darker, more oppressing, and suffocating the language grows. If the first half of the poem can be described as an opening up of the spirit, the second half of the poem is a recession, a closing in on oneself as a safety mechanism to defend her reborn identity.

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[3] Kamau Brathwaite, "History of the Voice" 1979 p. 266.
[4] Lorna Goodison, "On Becoming a Mermaid," in *The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry* ed. Jahan Ramazani, et al., (New York: Norton, 2003), 865.

Goodison's use of periphrasis emphasizes this notion of a floating and spreading outwards, a relinquishing of one's body to the tides of nature. Goodison writes: "your legs close together fuse all the length down / your feet now one broad foot / the toes spread into / a fish-tail, fan-like" instead of directly saying that the character has transformed into a mermaid.[5] This expansion of language releases the tension of the thought of drowning with which the poem begins. As the alliteration allows the reader to quickly move through the words of the poem, the periphrasis has the effect of slowing the action down, zooming in on the nuances of this physical alteration and forcing the reader to pay closer attention through Goodison's vivid imagery. However, once again, as the reader works their way down the poem, the language gets murkier: "you're a nixie now, a mermaid / a green-tinged fish/fleshed woman/thing."[6] Although many words are used to describe who and what the character has turned into, it becomes more ambiguous and convoluted for the reader; this epithet blurs the boundaries of the character's identity, which was once more distinct with the earlier description of the character's fishtail.

Brathwaite's poem, "Ogun," follows a similar pattern in which the identity of the character gradually grows more questionable. Brathwaite uses couplets to outline this gradation and pairs them with metaphors and pathetic fallacies that obscure the nature of the character. The first lines of the poem describe a woodworking uncle, but by the third stanza, the reader is called to imagine the uncle's physicality: "The knuckles of his hands were sil- / vered knobs of nails hit, hurt and flat- / tened out with blast of heavy hammer."[7] Instead of saying the uncle's hands were hardened and callused from his work, his hands metaphorically transform into the tools of his craft; the uncle himself becomes what he is trying to build. The enjambment of words using hyphens create a crude and unrefined feel that mimics the messiness of woodworking.

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[5] Ibid.
[6] Ibid.

Shortly after, the poem's lens shifts to the uncle's creation itself which comes to life through pathetic fallacies. The uncle felt the block of wood's "knotted hurts" and "his hands could feel / how it had swelled and shivered, breathing air."[8] Brathwaite's use of anthropomorphism underscores the intimacy the uncle feels towards his work as he handles the block of wood as if it were an injured animal. By the end of the poem, the uncle has carefully carved life into the block of wood, giving it a face with human characteristics and emotions:

> Sunday shop, the wood took shape: dry shuttered
>
> eyes, slack anciently everted lips, flat
> ruined face, eaten by pox, ravaged by rat
>
> and woodworm, dry cistern mouth, cracked
> gullet crying for the desert, the heavy black
>
> enduring jaw; lost pain, lost iron;
> emerging woodwork image of his anger.[9]

To say that this pathetic fallacy grows into an extended metaphor for the uncle's silent and internalized pain does not feel right because it is not clear as to whether the carved block of wood represents the uncle or vice versa. Instead, the uncle and the humanized block of wood exist as a single entity as they both project onto each other. Gradually, the uncle and the block of wood merge into one being. Brathwaite lessens the distance between the creator and the created, leaving the reader wondering, similarly to Goodison's poem, at what point the character changed, or if they just became a manifestation of what they were from the very beginning.

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[7] Kamau Brathwaite, "Ogun," in *The Norton Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Poetry* ed. Jahan Ramazani, et al., (New York: Norton, 2003), 549.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid.

Brathwaite takes the Afro-Caribbean creator-god of iron, Ogun, from the Yoruba religion and uses it as the poem's framework. In the folk tale "Iron is Received from Ogun," Ogun is betrayed by his community for his knowledge of iron, which allowed people to make weapons and become better warriors.[10] The uncle in the poem becomes mythologized as the product of his wooden block simultaneously becomes humanized.

The uncle seems possessed as he carves, which makes him feel like a prophetic figure speaking for the anger and resentment of Caribbean people: "More than any other Caribbean artist, he [Brathwaite] is possessed by the spirit and spirits of Africa and consciously attempts to make connections with an African experience that would explain and give validity and meaning to a Caribbean identity… Such a perception, based upon a denial of the African experience, reinforces the position that the black person in the Caribbean is without history and ancestral roots. Realizing this, Brathwaite places Africa where it legitimately belongs, at the center of the aesthetic principles and cultural mythology he is developing."[11] Brathwaite attempts to reconcile the idea that a different culture is at the core and heart of his own, however this does not mean that his Caribbean culture does not belong to him; it just means that both cultures are his. When the reader is left with the uncle staring at his wooden reflection, we do not feel a tension between Caribbean and African cultures, but rather between the colonized and the colonizers who have betrayed him and robbed him of his business. Brathwaite carves the uncle into an Afro-Caribbean mythological figure who carves his anger into a block of wood, but this is unsatisfying because his frustrations still seem to be screaming into a void by the end. Thus, the poem leaves the reader questioning what, if anything, will be done with the discovery of his own anger, and who, if anyone, will hear his cry.

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[10] Harold Courlander, *Tales of Yoruba Gods and Heroes.* (New York: Crown Publishers, 1973), 33.

[11] June D. Bobb, *Beating a Restless Drum* (New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1998), 60-61.

Goodison's mermaid is inherently a hybrid of cultures like Goodison herself. While mermaids are thought to have originated in British folklore, they also found their way into Jamaican folklore in the form of a "River Mumma" or "Pond Mother." Additionally, Ashanti and other African tribes attributed deities to water.[12] Goodison uses a character whose story is altered across time and cultures, a mystical creature who is never fully understood because she inhabits a different realm. Goodison reminds readers that our identities are a lot closer to us than we think; while we possess the biological history of our ancestors who come from various geographical locations, we are the ones who ultimately give birth to ourselves: "All these light images I place in relief to dark historical facts or hold them up as talismans against the sense of hopelessness and despair which can overwhelm us as human beings."[13] This is not to say that we have agency over our identities, as the mermaid herself does not, but instead claims that we are endowed with the responsibility of nourishing a comprehensive identity that uses its traumatic parts to strengthen it. After thinking about dying, the speaker is reborn into a mermaid, and after thinking about drowning, the speaker is risen and buoyed. Goodison explores how people who have had their history hijacked can still give birth to and raise themselves.

Both Goodison's and Brathwaite's poems are uniquely ekphrastic not only in the sense that they both rewrite traditional folktales, but that they also use visual art as a mode to explore and excavate their buried and annihilated history. Goodison once said, "I used to be able to draw and paint quite well and I got great satisfaction from doing pencil and charcoal sketches, so the technique of chiaroscuro is what I hope I transfer to my poems."[14] Goodison accomplishes this through a series of juxtapositions such as that of the surface and the depth of the water and the opening and closing of the character's body. Brathwaite's poem is ekphrastic in the sense that it is about the intimacy the uncle feels with his craft, but also in the way it portrays art as a mode of self-discovery, a second skin we did not know we had, and the importance of the role art plays in identifying oneself. Goodison and Brathwaite are both concerned with the processes of *becoming* and *rebirthing*, a creation myth of the self. We read these poems not to find the product at the end, but to witness the magical, shapeshifting, and malleable process of metamorphosing into something both new and old. These poems are loud, unapologetic resurrections and recreations of the self. Neither of the poems begin in an explicit search for identity, but rather their deep dive into introspection leads them to the realization that they possess what they felt they were missing; the true challenge lies in figuring out how to think of and rebirth oneself as a unified whole and not as a series of antithetical parts.

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[12] Martha Warren Beckwith, *Black Roadways: A Study of Jamaican Folk Life.* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1929).

[13] Michela Calderaro, "An Interview with Lorna Goodison," *Calabash: A Journal of Caribbean Arts and Letters* 4, no. 1 (Spring-Summer 2006): 1.

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[14] Ibid.

Works Cited

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