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*“Dis poem is vex bout apartheid”*

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# ***“Dis poem is vex bout apartheid’: Representations of South Africa in Three West Indian Poems”***

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## ***Abstract***

This article examines the ways in which three West Indian poems written between 1979 and 1992 – “Soweto” by Kamau Brathwaite, “Bedspread” by Lorna Goodison and “We Are Formed from Volcanoes” by Opal Palmer Adisa – engage the history of South Africa under apartheid. I argue that while Africa as a place with its own historical destiny is rarely encountered in West Indian literature, the texts that I probe constitute a minor yet important exception to this rule. At the same time, however, it is clear that the three poets and others who have written or sung about Africa and South Africa have done so in ways that reveal their own preoccupations, desires and anxieties as West Indians. That is, the representation of “South Africa” as a “real elsewhere” is always already bound up with its representation as an imagined or invented land, one that has been idealized or in some way essentialized.

## ***Keywords***

Brathwaite, Goodison, Adisa, West Indian poetry, South Africa, West Indian representations of Africa

## **Introduction: Caribbean Culture against Apartheid**

“Dis poem is vex bout apartheid, racism, fascism”  
(Mutabaruka, “Dis Poem”)

“Caribbea truly native to more than the islands them in her water: she hinternational too” (Andrew Salkey, “Anti-Apartness Anancy”)

“Anti-apartness Anancy” is a short story by the Jamaican author Andrew Salkey in which Anancy the Spider, a traditional Akan folk-figure that migrated to the Antilles during the Middle Passage returns to Africa, not in search of lost origins but rather in the service of a forward-looking contemporary cause, the liberation of South Africa from apartheid.<sup>1</sup> Armed with a “clench fist of high cunny”, this “proper African New World spider” (p. 182) traverses the Atlantic to “help out the township folk in South Africa” (p. 181) in their resilient struggle against “apartness”. After talking with a “leader-woman” (p. 182) (named “Nomzamo” in the story, an allusion to Winnie Mandela), Anancy spends an exhilarating evening plotting revolution with comrades from “the Black, Green, and Gold” (i.e., the African National Congress, to which Winnie Mandela and her husband Nelson belonged [p.183]). He then falls into an exhausted sleep during which he envisions an apocalypse over the country’s most emblematic landscape feature, the flat-topped mountain behind Cape Town:

Fire into every space he seeing. Fire on the land. Fire in water. Fire in the sky. Even fire was into shadow. He glimpse Table Mountain, and it have fire all around it and on top, too. Plenty crick-crack coming from heaps and heaps of run-an-stan-up-fire. (pp. 184–5)

When Anancy wakes up, the fiery scenario of his dread dream is replaced by another omen, a hurricane that flings him across the Atlantic and deposits him “like a spider-star straight back into Caribbea sea water” (p. 188). Just before he is whisked across the ocean, however, Anancy manages to pull off one final act of solidarity by leaving behind a manifesto that will “tribute a little something to the way apartness going to vanish total from the *bassskap* world” (p. 189).

In a study of the ways in which South African and other cultures have influenced one another, Rob Nixon has observed that that “foreigners have reconceived the idea of apartheid and its overthrow under the transforming pressures of their own dreads and dreams”.<sup>2</sup> Nixon further notes that one of the lynch-pins of the struggle against apartheid was the creation of an international activist network whose character was pre-eminently cultural. To be more precise, it was a network in which political work often found cultural expression and in which West Indian creative energies, political desires and cultural practices (e.g., reggae, calypso, cricket) figured prominently.<sup>3</sup> Among these practices, literary writing played a modest but notable role, as Salkey’s ebullient story and the terse declamation by Jamaican dub poet Mutabaruka, from which this article’s title is borrowed, both illustrate.<sup>4</sup>

Anti-apartheid animus among West Indian writers can be regarded as a subset of a broader and abiding literary engagement with the continent as a whole. Laurence Breiner has usefully summarized the various purposes for which Africa has been invoked in West Indian literature, among which he distinguishes the following:

- (1) “Africa” as historical past, (2) “Africa” as ideal elsewhere (an alternative world), (3) “Africa” as real elsewhere (a separate place with its own history), and (4) “Africa-in-the-Caribbean”, an assemblage of cultural survivals and affinities.<sup>5</sup>

In sharply contrasting ways, the three texts on which I focus in this essay, Kamau Brathwaite’s “Soweto” (1979), Lorna Goodison’s “Bedsread” (1986), and Opal Palmer Adisa’s “We Are Formed from Volcanoes” (1992) all invoke “Africa” as “real elsewhere”, at least inasmuch as “real” means “actual”.<sup>6</sup> Specifically, they chiefly invoke the contemporaneous present of an identifiable country, South Africa, during a precise historical period, that of the last two decades of apartheid.

The number of literary texts that thematize or allude to the struggle against apartheid is small (I have not been able to discover more than a handful) and therefore not sufficient to warrant an article on the South African presence in Caribbean literature along the lines of Kamau Brathwaite’s landmark essay, “The African Presence in Caribbean literature”.<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, the three poems that I examine here do betoken an awareness of South Africa that seems worth investigating, partly because two of them have been penned by two of the Caribbean’s most important poets, and partly precisely because all three of them turn their attention to a place that has not often entered the purview of West Indian writers, who typically set their works either in the islands themselves or in one of the countries to which large numbers of islanders have emigrated (in the case of Anglophone writers chiefly Britain, the United States and Canada). Furthermore, there are both parallels and differences between the racial, colonial and post-colonial history of South Africa and the Caribbean, parallels and differences that the poems I examine both point up and efface.

In this article I probe the ways in which the poems by Brathwaite and Goodison “reconceived the idea of apartheid and its overthrow under the transforming pressures of their own dreads and dreams”, to quote Rob Nixon once again. In assessing all three poems, I also explore what is gained and what is lost by evoking South Africa as a “real elsewhere” which is also bound up with South Africa as an “ideal elsewhere”, in the case of the first two poems, and which in the case of the third poem is further conceived of as a curious counterpoint to “Africa-in-the-Caribbean”.

### **Black Lightning over Soweto: Kamau Brathwaite's Praise-Poem to the Mandelas**

Kamau Brathwaite's hallucinatory collage of word-image and sound, "Soweto", is motivated in part by a Pan-Africanist vision of continental and diasporic emancipation from the bane of colonialism and neo-colonialism. Although not of the order of the very long poems that comprise *The Arrivants* or *Ancestors*, the version of "Soweto" that I analyse here (in the first collection that Brathwaite published with an American publisher) is at 180 lines quite substantial in length. Moreover, it is visually and aurally arresting, experimenting as it does with various emphases of texture and pitch, such as clusters of lines that vary notably in length and markedly contrasting typefaces. Furthermore, "Soweto" underwent several substantial revisions during the course of thirteen years, revisions that indicate the poem's abiding importance to its author. Several of the fourteen poems in the same 120-page volume, *Middle Passages*, allude to Africa. "Soweto" is the only one among them that focuses primarily on a specific part of the continent.<sup>8</sup>

"Soweto" was first written in 1979, the year in which Michael Manley's experiment with state-led reformist and non-aligned socialism in Jamaica ended and three years after high-school students in South Africa led a revolt that triggered a revival of anti-apartheid struggle both inside and outside the country. One of the turning-points in the dialectic of repression and resistance that marked South Africa's history under colonialism and apartheid, the Soweto uprising resonated around the globe. Brathwaite's brooding hymn to this African rebellion irrupts upon the page in a stampede of signifiers. What links together the various elements of the tumultuous scenario that the poem conjures up is a collage "Africa" of big game and hot climates, of slavery and sand, of savannah and cities, a continent enduring the aftermath of physical conquest and epistemic violence. One symptom of that violence is signified here by the allusion to the Hollywood "Africa" of Tarzan films. Shunning the self-serving stereotypes of African "primitiveness" propagated by such spectacles, "Soweto" performs a praise-song in honour of African resistance to colonial misrule. Whereas in a poem like "New World A-Comin'" (in *The Arrivants*) the slave-ships of the Middle Passage serve as the figure by which Western intervention in Africa is evoked, in "Soweto" colonialism is metonymically represented by that other notorious site of confinement and exploitation: the segregation-spawned South African "location", of which Soweto (originally a bureaucratic acronym for "South Western Township") was the most formidable example.<sup>9</sup>

Just as *The Arrivants* harnesses a historical memory of the Middle Passage to the cause of contemporary transformation, so does "Soweto" poetically transfigure a vitiated geographical site. Out of the "dust"

invoked in the first section, “they are coming”, “they” being the mighty liberators from across the continent who will cleanse its soil of the pollution of apartheid. In a kaleidoscopic swirl of images, the poem renders the sundering and disarray imposed upon black South Africans by the unholy trinity of British imperialism (“acid rhodes”), liberal South African capitalism (“the diamond of oppenheimer”) and Afrikaner oppression (“malan malan malam malan”). Through repetition (“and the night fell howl/on soweto, the night fell howl/on soweto”) and by means of irregular line breaks and other devices, the poem’s visual form and sound-scape evoke the fragmentation, destruction, and brokenness to which it refers. Here are the names of young political leaders murdered and violated – Patrice Lumumba shot, Dedan Kimathi castrated – memories of the German genocide against the Herero, blood-curdling images of violence wrought by “the veldts gun metals wings” against which the speaker hurls acid Calibanisms: “boerwreck”, “boertrek”, “voortresshers”.

“Soweto” does not, however, limit itself to denunciation. Couched in the idiom of a righteous Rastaman, a voice of dread prophecy announces the redemption of this continent-scape of blood, metal, and cries. Summoning a Rastafarian vision of “mabrak”, “Soweto” intones an incandescent portrait of purification by fire.<sup>10</sup> Suddenly, the poem’s dense and claustrophobic blocks of words – with their buzzing, turbulent evocation of traumas past and present – give way to a visually spacious and aurally sonorous coda, as Creole intonations harmonize with Zulu and Xhosa incantations to enunciate an emergent eschatology. In the poem’s final sequence, the abrupt turns, the numerous allusions and the haunting repetitions and ellipses that characterize the earlier sequences are succeeded by a sequence of short, clear lines that move the poem inexorably towards a resounding and ostensibly reassuring resolution.

Repeated five times in successively larger type and comprising by itself five of the poem’s last seven lines, the echoic word “Bruggudung” – Creole for a loud explosive sound – merges here with the poem’s thematic dénouement to enact a catharsis of volcanic character.<sup>11</sup> “Bruggudung” thus provides a climactic conclusion to the poem’s litany of “de-humanization and re-humanization”, in Gordon Rohlehr’s words, its depiction of a history of hurt and of healing, one which ends not with a whimper, but an eruption. Like Bob Marley’s moving anthem, “Redemption Song”, “Soweto” brims with the promise of transcendence: “an de/dread/come/an de/ wreck/age soon/ done”. It is from the transcendent thrust of Brathwaite’s own “song of freedom” that the poem’s ethical force derives. One could also argue, however, that the poem’s intimation of salvation is also a symptom of its secular limitations.

The portentous rhetoric in which much of “Soweto” is couched provides us with a basis upon which to evaluate the poem’s political vision. With its apocalyptic atmosphere, its evocation of spiritual desolation and its

vision of regeneration at the hands of a mythical Rastafarian, “Soweto” is pervaded by a chiliastic tone.<sup>12</sup> The poem evidently belongs to the great wave of subversive art that broke upon all of colonialism’s shores in the era of decolonization. As such, “Soweto” stands poised between the two main currents underlying that enormous groundswell of cultural production, the nationalist/nativist and the anti-imperialist/liberationist. Broadly speaking, and following Edward Said’s explication of these currents, we can say that Nativists have often reacted to colonialism by seeking to recuperate a pristine (and imagined) past and sometimes by consolidating (or inventing) retrograde elements in their cultures.<sup>13</sup> Liberationists, by contrast, have attempted to transcend their ties of filiation and have sought to envision a post-colonial future located beyond the constraints of both colonialist burdens and autochthonous ballast.

Politically, “Soweto” could be found wanting for the way in which it creates an imagined psycho-geographical territory and an ahistorical image of Africa as a terrain of undifferentiated, univocal unity. Moreover, we could say that even as it proclaims a post-apartheid future, “Soweto” freeze-frames Africa’s plural and shifting panoramas of progress and retrogression, contradiction and resolution, domination and contestation in the service of a sweeping millenarian vision. Furthermore, the poem’s climax suggests that the continent’s liberation from oppressive forces will be operated from outside its geography and history, indeed from outside of time itself, by means of a diasporic *deus ex machina*: a Rastaman who returns to the Motherland in a sequence that invokes and blurs together peoples, languages and landscapes of Eastern, Central, and Southern Africa.<sup>14</sup> Finally, even though the poem features the voices of women, and alludes to the seventeenth-century Congolese Queen, Nzinga, it also portends a patriarchal politics of salvation. It is “the Bongo Man”, successor to those autocratic patriarchs, “shaka zulu” and “kenyatta the shatt/erer”, who will deliver Africa from the bane and bondage of white supremacy.<sup>15</sup> In other words, we have in these stanzas and elsewhere in the poem an efflorescence of the kind of essentialist ideas and images about Africa that Ali Mazrui once dubbed “romantic gloriana”.<sup>16</sup>

The foregoing commentary is not meant to belittle the moral force of Brathwaite’s visionary embrace of liberation on the African continent, or his profound and ongoing efforts to transcend “mental boundaries, those imposed by island chauvinism, and then by colonial divisions”, as Bridget Jones has put it.<sup>17</sup> Rather, I wish to draw attention to the tension that structures his vision, at least as it is articulated in “Soweto”, the tension between a liberationist ethos, on the one hand, and a nativist thrust on the other, a tension that structures the very fabric of the poem, with its scintillating and restless melodic line, as it were overlying a bass beat of occasionally stock images (“antient as sheba, wise as the pharaohs”). Moreover, the twin figures of the rising volcano and mushroom cloud

seem to belie the poem’s twice-invoked words of reassurance (“soon/soon/soon/ Soweto”) by suggesting that perhaps only natural cataclysms and human catastrophes – only epochal forms of violence in other words – can bring about a cleansing break with an oppressive past.

How best to signal the limitations of “Soweto” while honouring its intended emancipationist vision? In thinking through the poem’s contradictory character and charge, I have found invaluable Stuart Hall’s careful and generous discussion of the politics of Caribbean self-representation:

Everyone in the Caribbean, of whatever ethnic background, must sooner or later come to terms with [the] African presence. Black, brown, mulatto, white – all must look *Presence Africaine* in the face, speak its name. But whether it is, in this sense, an *origin* of our identities, unchanged by four hundred years of displacement, dismemberment, transportation, to which we could in any final or literal sense return, is more open to doubt. The original “Africa” is no longer there. It too has been transformed... Africa must at last be reckoned with by Caribbean people, but it cannot in any simple sense be recovered.<sup>18</sup>

Or, we might add, represented. Naturally, I am not suggesting that “Soweto” attempts to recover Africa in solely a simple way. For the most part, the poem is as powerful and inventive as any in Brathwaite’s oeuvre. My argument, rather, is that the complexity of “Soweto” as aesthetic artefact is in tension with one dimension of its ostensible political vision, just as the performative force and visual energy of Bongo Jerry’s “Mabarak”, is belied by the vague immobile stance of its concluding lines: “somewhere under/ ITYOPIA rainbow/AFRICA WAITING FOR I”.<sup>19</sup>

In his notes to the version of “Soweto” that appears in *X-Self*, Brathwaite describes his poem as a “lament for the hundreds of Soweto children slaughtered and wounded by the S. African security forces, and the thousands of *herero* massacred in Namibia at the turn of the century”.<sup>20</sup> “Soweto” is in effect a dirge, and in that regard it achieves its intended purpose in a haunting and memorable manner. Also haunting, although in a strikingly different way, is the second major poem I wish to focus on, Lorna Goodison’s “Bedspread”. In turning from “Soweto” to “Bedspread”, we leave behind a universe of past heroes and apocalyptic clashes, and enter a quieter world of contemporary subjects and worldly power relations.

### **“Azania in our children’s names”: South Africa in the Poetry of Lorna Goodison**

Lorna Goodison’s poetry partakes of the communion between the West Indies and “the spiritual heartland” that Brathwaite’s 1970 essay on Africa in the Caribbean simultaneously heralded and enacted. Poems such as



“Guinea Woman” and “Africa on the Mind Today”, among several others, reveal a deep and ongoing engagement with Africa and its peoples as theme, motif and animating presence across all of Goodison’s *oeuvre*.<sup>21</sup> As Frank Birbalsingh accurately notes, however, Goodison’s poetry has been especially attuned to the realities of South Africa.<sup>22</sup> An early instance of this engagement with South Africa occurs in her second collection of poems, *I am becoming my Mother*,<sup>23</sup> published at a time when the internal opposition to apartheid faced fierce repression as it became increasingly organized and militant.

While it is motivated by a sense of Pan-African solidarity, similar to that in Brathwaite’s “Soweto”, and while it is much shorter than the latter, Lorna Goodison’s portrait-poem of Winnie and Nelson Mandela, “Bedspread”, bespeaks a more complex engagement with South Africa. The poem portrays Winnie Mandela addressing her imprisoned husband while she is enduring her own incarceration in a house that the extra-textual Winnie once acerbically described as “three cells combined together”.<sup>24</sup> Eight anonymous lines introduce the poem and frame the oppressive physical setting. In these lines, the generic tribulation often evoked in anti-apartheid protest poems has given way to a quite specific suffering; that of a historically identifiable subject held prisoner in her own sweltering “matchbox” home and enduring the precise pain of “memories crowded/ hot and hopeless against/ her brow”. Refusing to accept the stasis of bounded space and stifling heat, Winnie Mandela seeks relief by turning to the cool and comforting bedspread that serves to transport her to a utopian place beyond her husband’s and her own imprisonment.

The hush induced by the alliteration and assonance of the poem’s first eight lines (“sometimes” and “still”, “hot” and “hopeless”, “seek” and “signal”, “cool colours”) might be expected to generate a weighty gravitas. But the poem does not assume a sombre stance. Nor does it succumb to a sense of quiescent mourning. Instead, it moves assuredly from the distress of separation and seclusion to an affirmation of solidarity and steadfastness. Moreover, after the eight introductory lines the poem proceeds in the imagined voice of Winnie Mandela mentally and intimately summoning her physically absent husband. In addition to its reassuring physical qualities and its ability to make its user dream of an intimacy and love that can overcome, however provisionally, the crushing power of prison bars and unjust laws, the bedspread connects the couple to a wider and sustaining context of resistance, that of weaving women living in a time of conflict who bind wounds and close the eyes of dead children.

Halfway through the poem Mandela asks her husband whether they should lie down wrapped in the bedspread woven in the colours of

their freed land. The historical answer to that imagined question is well known. Winnie Mandela waited stoically yet defiantly while her husband remained in custody. In the poem itself, the response to her question is two-fold. The first answer is that she and her husband will not be able to lie down on this particular bedspread because it has been arrested, just as “they” are trying to “arrest” the “dreams” of those fighting for emancipation.<sup>25</sup> The second answer, however, belies the seeming finality of the first and denies victory to those who would imprison not just people but the cultural symbols of their struggle. Imaginatively transcending a stifling site of forced confinement, the poem concludes by invoking the yearned-for name of the new South African nation, “Azania”, a name whose open vowels move us beyond the heavy mutes of the preceding lines, and by returning to the image of the women who are weaving “cloths still brighter” in preparation for the arrival of the new dispensation.<sup>26</sup>

Eschewing either a facile denunciation of oppression or a perfunctory affirmation of struggle, “*Bedspread*” praises the resilience and courage of the most visible icons of the anti-apartheid movement. Moreover, “*Bedspread*” celebrates an everyday form of resistance – the weaving of a bedspread in the colours of a proscribed organization – and empathetically imagines the intimate, quotidian and vulnerable thoughts of very public heroes. Conjoining seemingly small and private gestures – lying down on a bed, contemplating a beloved object, remembering a loved one – with a larger context of action and significance, “*Bedspread*” also enacts a feminist practice of resistance, rather than simply declaiming it.

In its affirmation of affinities between “Azania” and the Antilles, “*Bedspread*” embodies the kind of mutually sustaining and multi-faceted “structures of feeling” across the Atlantic that Paul Gilroy has invoked in his meditations on diasporic cultural politics. Writing about a version of the Impressions’ hit “I’m so proud”, which under the new title “Proud of Mandela” topped the British reggae charts in 1990, Gilroy notes:

... It brings Africa, America, Europe, and the Caribbean seamlessly together. It was produced in Britain by the children of Caribbean and African settlers from raw materials supplied by black Chicago but filtered through Kingstonian sensibility in order to pay tribute to a black hero whose global significance lies beyond the limits of his partial South African citizenship. The very least which this music and its history can offer us today is an analogy for comprehending the lines of affiliation and association which take the idea of the diaspora beyond its symbolic status as the fragmentary opposite of some imputed racial essence.<sup>27</sup>

It is “lines of affiliation and association” of the kind Gilroy valorizes that Goodison’s “*Bedspread*” weaves together across the variegated quilt of Black Atlantic culture. Those lines, however, are sometimes tangled and ensnared, for despite the strength of the affiliative ties that bind

the Caribbean and South Africa, the relationship between the two is marked not just by difference but by contradiction. This is also the case with Goodison's own poem. Despite its feminist rejection of appendage politics and its sympathetic portrayal of a woman who often laboured in the shadow of her husband, "Bedspread" comes close to flirting with the politics of Messianism that often characterized the reception of the Mandelas in the Diaspora and which in Goodison's poem finds expression in lines that compare Nelson Mandela to the hardest metals and purest minerals mined in his country.<sup>28</sup> Furthermore, while the poem places the famous couple upon a stage large enough to accommodate other actors, the other South Africans mentioned in "Bedspread" are in effect reduced to props and backdrop: they remain voiceless, faceless and nameless. Thus, although "Bedspread" avoids the arena of spectacular confrontation and suffering that frames "Soweto", it is predicated on the kind of iconizing politics that also animate Brathwaite's poem.

Perhaps it is not surprising that in the 1980s, a decade during which the hope of a post-apartheid future sometimes seemed more like a yearned-for millenarian dream than an achievable secular goal, the Mandelas should have been lionized by poets and others. Perhaps, too, the collapse in 1984 of the Grenadian Revolution, along with the concomitant ascendancy of US-sponsored neo-liberalism throughout much of the region, led some Caribbean intellectuals to embrace the cause of South African liberation with even greater urgency than had hitherto been the case. Notoriously, after the emancipationist post-independence hopes of the 1960s and 1970s had petered out, it became clear that old problems had persisted, sometimes clothed in new guises, among them: insularity and fragmentation, inter-island rivalry and hostility, uneven development within and between states, dependence on external economic forces, elite corruption and continued divisions between rich and poor. Some of these troubling realities have loomed especially large in the post-independence trajectory of Jamaica, from which Lorna Goodison and Opal Palmer Adisa hail, and with which Brathwaite was long associated.<sup>29</sup> In an arresting move, Palmer Adisa's "We Are Formed from Volcanoes", to which I now turn, jarringly yokes together post-independence Jamaica and pre-liberation South Africa.

### **The Politics and Poetics of Dis-Identification: "We Are Formed from Volcanoes"**

While "Soweto" and "Bedspread" are markedly different in texture and tone they share several underlying similarities, among them the ready assumption of a commonality of purpose between anti-apartheid South Africans and progressive West Indians. In contrast, "We Are Formed from Volcanoes" calls into question such presumptions of positive

closeness by drawing attention to other, less appealing parallels between the West Indies and South Africa. Although “We Are Formed from Volcanoes” also invokes South Africa, it does so neither to honour the anti-apartheid struggle nor to denounce racial supremacy in that country. Rather, it is a poem that sets up South Africa as foil in order to dramatize – in a consistently deadpan and deliberately “unpoetic” manner – the disillusionment of what South African critic Neil Lazarus has dubbed “the mourning after”, the failure of independence in former colonies to live up to its emancipationist promise.<sup>30</sup>

The first stanza of Adisa’s fifty-six-line poem supports the seemingly obvious contention that there is a marked difference between the post-colonial politics of Jamaica – and by extension the West Indies – on the one hand, and of apartheid South Africa on the other. Until the 1980s, the racial and class divide created by apartheid often seemed absolute, Manichean, black and white. (That, at any rate, was the ubiquitous image of South Africa abroad.) By contrast, the first stanza seems to suggest, post-independence Jamaica enjoys a race- and class-bridging social proximity among its inhabitants. The second stanza, however, introduces a disquieting image. It seems to evoke a quintessentially apartheid scene. Yet the man tending the rich family’s pool and garden is Jamaican, not South African. He and the boy whom he is “forbidden to join” are “both black”. This observation is followed by a repetition of the opening lines of the poem, “jamaica/is not south africa”. But a contrast that seemed truistic at the poem’s outset now strikes a discordant note.

In the next stanza, the dissonance mounts, since the poem seems to evoke an unmistakably South African situation: a black maid working inordinately long hours to keep a white woman’s children comfortable, while her own children grow up in her absence. But in this instance the worker and her employer are both black. At this point, the poem’s refrain is jarring, and its terse rhetoric increasingly discomfiting. This stanza starts by seeming to evoke once again the opulent consumption enjoyed by many white South Africans under apartheid. But the proximity of the shack and the million-dollar home reminds us that we are now in the Caribbean, as does the Creole in which the elite Jamaican speaker expresses his or her contemptuous attitude vis-à-vis the poor: “dem lazy/dem lack ambition”. These words suggest the colonial topos of the idle native, which ironically echoes the attitude of those who supported and benefited from apartheid.<sup>31</sup>

The concluding stanza is sardonic and flat, the seeming obviousness of the poem’s refrain by now subversively undermined:

jamaica is not south africa  
independence  
is celebrated  
every august 6th (pp. 5–6)

Offering a clipped and arresting counterpoint to positive identifications with South Africa's struggles (most of its lines are between two and four words long), and in marked contrast to the expansive sprawl of Brathwaite's "Soweto", "We Are Formed from Volcanoes" delivers a mordant critique of the limitations of a nationalistic, race-only analysis of domination, such as Frantz Fanon presciently warned against in *The Wretched of the Earth*.<sup>32</sup> Palmer Adisa's poem emphasizes the ubiquity and persistence of class domination, however it may be inflected by "race" and other factors. Moreover, the poem manages both to undermine the frequently held assumption that apartheid South Africa was entirely "a land apart" and call in question a complacent contemplation of the road travelled since independence in "the cricket-playing Caribbean".<sup>33</sup> At the same time, however, "We Are Formed from Volcanoes" invokes South Africa not as a changing and complex social formation but as a static signifier for colonial and post-colonial wrongs. Whereas "Soweto" and "Bedspreed" try to imagine themselves into the realities of South African life, however problematically, "We Are Formed from Volcanoes" eschews any such engagement and is in any case an altogether less aesthetically formidable poem than the other two. Instead, it contributes, if only by default, to a fixed image of South Africa as a byword for oppression.

### **Conclusion: "What is Africa to me?"**

In his analysis of the relationship between West Indian poetry and Africa, Laurence Breiner notes that "Africa as a place in the world with its own historical destiny, interesting to a West Indian in the way that China or Lapland might be, appears in West Indian poetry about as rarely as China or Lapland."<sup>34</sup> While Breiner's observation is undoubtedly and perhaps even quantifiably accurate, it is nonetheless also true that "Africa" plays a role in West Indian writing that is qualitatively significant, as Brathwaite memorably argued. And while it is incontestably the case that "Africa" as a "real elsewhere" is infrequently encountered in the Anglophone literature of the Caribbean, the texts that I have probed in this essay constitute a minor yet important exception to this rule. At the same time, however, it is clear that Brathwaite, Goodison, Palmer Adisa and other West Indians who have written or sung about South Africa have done so in response to their own preoccupations, desires and anxieties as denizens of the West Indies, which is another way of saying that the representation of "South Africa" as a "real elsewhere" is always already bound up with its representation as an imagined or invented land, one that is frequently idealized and thus in some fashion misrepresented.

In contrasting ways, then, the various texts examined here attempt to come to grips with some of the multiple meanings of "Africa" and the "African Diaspora". The authors of these texts have responded to the still

haunting question that Countee Cullen posed in his poem “Heritage”, “What is Africa to me?” by attempting an engagement with a specific region and history. In so doing, they have gone some way towards giving a capacious notion like “the Black Atlantic” a specific content. Nevertheless, they also point up the polyvalent, mutable and sometimes dissonant nature of trans-Atlantic identifications, despite their common grounding in what the British-West Indian poet Linton Kwesi Johnson, who has exerted an enormous influence among South African dub poets, once dubbed a “bass history”.<sup>35</sup>

### NOTES

- 1 Andrew Salkey, “Anti-apartheid Anancy”, in *The Faber Book of Contemporary Caribbean Short Stories*, ed. Mervyn Morris, London, Faber and Faber, 1990, pp. 181–9. Subsequent references are to this edition and will be cited in the text. “Apartheid” is referred to in the story by means of Salkey’s neologisms, “apartness” and “baasskap”. “Baasskap” is Salkey’s abbreviation for the Afrikaans phrase “Baasskapsapartheid”, which translates literally as “Boss-rule apartheid”, i.e., white-boss rule over blacks.
- 2 Rob Nixon, *Homelands, Harlem, and Hollywood: South African Culture and the World Beyond*. New York: Routledge, 1994, p. 3.
- 3 Of the many musical forms that reverberate back and forth between the sound-scapes of the West Indies and South Africa, reggae is especially well travelled. South African audiences have been particularly receptive to reggae’s roots referents and rhythmic allure. While in the 1980s reggae giants Peter Tosh, Burning Spear and Mutabaruka all chanted down the Babylon of apartheid, during the same decade the *riddims* of Trenchtown were appropriated and indigenized to such a degree by township dwellers that in 1991 South African Rastaman Lucky Dube could cross the Atlantic and perform to acclaim at the Sunsplash festival in Jamaica itself.
- 4 It should be noted that South African-West Indian relations have had a dark side, such as the sanctions-violating trade in diamonds between Vic Bird’s government in Antigua and P.W. Botha’s apartheid regime during the 1980s.
- 5 Laurence A. Breiner, *An Introduction to West Indian Poetry*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998, p. 156.
- 6 Kamau Brathwaite, “Soweto”, *Middle Passages*, New York: New Directions, 1993, pp. 73–84; Lorna Goodison, “Bedspreed”, in *Hinterland: Caribbean Poetry from the West Indies and Britain*, ed. E.J. Markham. Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1990, pp. 244–5; Opal Palmer Adisa, “We Are Formed from Volcanoes”, in *Sisters of Caliban: Contemporary Women Poets of the Caribbean*, ed. M.J. Fenwick, Falls Church, VA: Azul Editions, 1996, pp. 4–6. Subsequent references are to these editions and will be cited in the text.
- 7 Kamau Brathwaite, “The African Presence in Caribbean Literature”, in Brathwaite, *Roots*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993, 190–258.
- 8 “Soweto” exists in at least four English-language print versions. The first was published by the Savacou cooperative in Jamaica in 1979. It is 500 lines long and features the following dedication: “Urzu/Erzulie/and for Tsietsi Mashinini/AFRICAN LIBERATION DAY/1979/80”. Under the new name of “Nam”, the poem was then

published in *X-Self* (1987), the third volume in Brathwaite's second trilogy, and this time the poem was dedicated to "Nomtuse Bata Mbere of Azania/Botswana". The poem then reappeared under its original name, with revisions, in a collection entitled *MiddlePassages*, published in Britain in 1992 by Bloodaxe Books. That version was re-published in the United States by New Directions in 1993 and the US edition bears a different dedication than the 1979 and 1987 versions: "To Nelson and Winnie Mandela". Finally, the poem disappears from the revised version of *X-Self* that appears in *Ancestors* (2001). With each successive version the poem's diction, orthography, typography and linear/stanzaic arrangement have undergone important revisions. The poem has also conceivably undergone other (improvised?) transformations during Brathwaite's live readings. The version that I am working from is the one that appears in the New Directions edition of *MiddlePassages*, which includes Zulu and Xhosa phrases not found in the original.

- 9 Edward [Kamau] Brathwaite, "New World A-Comin", *The Arrivants: A New World Trilogy*, Oxford, OUP, 1973, pp. 9–21. See A.J. Christopher, *The Atlas of Apartheid*, New York: Routledge, 1994, pp. 34–9, for an account of the origins and development of the "locations", which were situated outside of towns and cities that were intended to be reserved for exclusively white residents.
- 10 In her notes to Bongo Jerry's "Mabrak", Paula Burnett writes that the title-word means "black lightning" in Rastataalk, that is, "black revelation", to be contrasted with "the culturally dominant associations of light with whiteness and truth and blackness with obscurity and evil". See Paula Burnett, ed., *The Penguin Book of Caribbean Verse in English*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986, p. 387.
- 11 The *Oxford Dictionary of Caribbean English Usage* defines "bruggudung" as "representing "a crashing fall or a loud explosive sound". Gordon Rohlehr notes that "Soweto's" conclusion takes the form of "a poem/icon that is part volcano, part mushroom cloud", "The Rehumanization of History: Regeneration of Spirit: Apocalypse and Revolution in Brathwaite's *The Arrivants* and *X/Self*", in *The Art of Kamau Brathwaite*, ed. Stewart Brown, Seren: Bridgend, Glamorgan, 1995, 163–207, p. 194.
- 12 Rohlehr, *ibid.*, p. 172, refers to the poem's "millenarian faith", which finds clearest expression in a passage adapted from the New Testament Book of Revelation. The image of apocalypse structures much of Brathwaite's work, such as the "Wings of the Dove" sequence in *The Arrivants* and the visual image of volcano/mushroom cloud evoked by the arrangement of the lines in the concluding sequence of "Soweto" is also redolent of doomsday.
- 13 Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, New York: Knopf, 1993, *passim*, but especially pp. 220–38.
- 14 Of course, if according to universalizing notions of African identity, all peoples of African descent are essentially one, it matters little that the Bongo Man is from the Caribbean!
- 15 Shaka Zulu is a contested figure in South African historiography and culture. His resistance to the British has led some to claim him for a progressive cause, while his military exploits and violent creation of the Zulu nation has led contemporary and exclusionary Zulu ethno-nationalists to adopt him as a precursor. See Nixon, *Homelands, Harlem, and Hollywood*, pp. 249–51 for a discussion of the "patriarchal ethno-history" (p. 251) that such ethnic nationalism seeks to invent or recuperate.

As for Jomo Kenyatta, his rule was denounced as despotic by numerous Kenyans, prominent among them Ngugi wa Thiong’o.

- 16 See Ali A. Mazrui, *The Africans: A Triple Heritage*, London: BBC Publications, 1996, pp. 72–6. Mazrui notes that, “romantic gloriana, in its very admiration of kings, emperors and eminent scholars of the past, is predicated on a respect for hierarchy and stratification, with its capacity to produce historical achievements” (p. 75). See also Bridget Jones, “‘The Unity is Submarine’: Aspects of a Pan-Caribbean Consciousness in the Work of Kamau Brathwaite”, in *The Art of Kamau Brathwaite*, ed. Stewart Brown, pp. 86–100, for a discussion of how Brathwaite’s Pan-Africanism informs his “Pan-Caribbean consciousness.” Quoting Brathwaite, Jones notes that in the poet’s work “Africa is the ‘submerged mother of the Creole system,’ the major force for unity, the vital source” (p. 87).
- 17 *ibid.*, p. 88. Brathwaite’s vision is trans-geographical and it is hard to think of a Caribbean poet who has embodied the supra-national ethos of “The Black Atlantic” as consummately. Despite his Barbadian origins, and notwithstanding his temporary British, Ghanaian, Jamaican and, more recently, North American affiliations, Brathwaite’s poetry cannot be claimed by or confined to a single nation-state, national tradition, or ethnic aesthetic. It is keyed on a plurality of sources and is a thoroughly creolized art. Nonetheless, underlying Brathwaite’s Black Atlantic-ness is an insistence on unitariness and a penchant for anachronistic, trans-historical allusion that creates a difference-effacing and unchanging image of Africa.
- 18 Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora”, in Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, eds, *Colonial Discourse and Post-colonial Theory: A Reader*, New York, Columbia UP, 1994, pp. 398–9.
- 19 In *The Penguin Book of Caribbean Verse*, ed. Paula Burnett, p. 71.
- 20 *X-Self*, Oxford, OUP, 1987, p. 126.
- 21 See Lorna Goodison, *Guinea Woman: New and Selected Poems*, Manchester: Carcanet, 2000, pp. 23–4 and p. 102.
- 22 Frank Birbalsingh, “Lorna Goodison: Heartease”, in Frank Birbalsingh, ed., *Frontiers of Caribbean Literatures in English*. New York: St. Martin’s, 1996, pp. 152–66.
- 23 Goodison, *I am becoming my Mother*, London: New Beacon Books, 1986.
- 24 Aside from being arrested, placed under surveillance, imprisoned, tried and tortured, Winnie Mandela was for many years “banned” by apartheid governments while her husband served a life-sentence on Robben Island. Under the terms of her frequently renewed banning order, she lived under virtual house arrest and could not address public gatherings or meet with more than one person at a time, among many other restrictions on her liberty. Furthermore, she could not be publicly quoted in South Africa. This concerted attempt to silence a leading figure in the struggle against apartheid was ultimately unsuccessful, however. In 1984, a testimony by Winnie Mandela was published in Germany and the following year it appeared in English translation as *Part of My Soul Went With Him*, New York: W.W. Norton, 1985, the title of which unfortunately resorts to the kind of appendage politics that the book’s content itself eloquently belies.
- 25 The incident upon which this poem is based took place in the small rural town of Brandfort, located in the heart of Afrikaner country in the former province of the Orange Free State. At the time of her banishment to Brandfort, the town’s other dubious distinction was its having been the childhood home of Hendrik Verwoerd,



- “the architect of Apartheid”. In a comment on the origins of her poem, Goodison notes the absurdity of the proscription that motivated her to write “Bedsread”: “The South African police had done the ultimate – they had arrested a bedsread for daring to be in the colors of the African National Congress”, Birbalsingh, *Frontiers*, p. 155.
- 26 Goodison has commented on the personal significance for her of the name “Azania”: “I think that to repeat something has great power. And I want to say that the place is called Azania, not South Africa. The more times people say ‘Azania’, the more Azania will come into being eventually. You first envision something, and then you speak it, and then it will *be*, you know”, Birbalsingh, *Frontiers*, p. 155.
- 27 Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1993, p. 95.
- 28 See Nixon, *Homelands, Harlem, and Hollywood*, Chapter 7, “Mandela, Messianism, and the Media”, pp. 175–92, for an analysis of “the limitations of redemptive politics”(p.176) in the Diaspora.
- 29 Following Gordon Rohlehr’s analysis of “X-Self”, we can argue that Brathwaite has gone from praising the Pan-African bonds between South Africa and the Caribbean to declaiming against their neo-colonial similarities:  
 Neo-colonial politicians, white, brown, or black, speak in the accents of an auto-cracy and cultural imperialism learned from Europe. A South African “aparthathe” voice justifying the destruction of African nations and customs reveals a startling affinity with a neo-colonial Black elitist voice. Both have a vested interest in maintaining structures based on economic privilege for a small ruling oligarchy, and dehumanization of labour. Thus the South African voice declaring: “soon I will be asked to ask them to forget forgive/their savage homelands/ their dark and dung & kraal & Bantustans...” fades into the neo-colonialist voice justifying its betrayal of democratic ideals and maintenance of “the status crow.” (Rohlehr, “Rehumanization”, p.190)
- 30 Neil Lazarus, *Resistance in Postcolonial African Fiction*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1990, p. i.
- 31 Rohlehr comments that in “X-Self” the “ruling-class Jamaican voice echoes that of the white South African or North American”, “Rehumanization”, p. 191.
- 32 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*. New York: Grove Press, 1965.
- 33 This calling in question of complacency by a Caribbean writer has a parallel in the post-apartheid South African context. Since Apartheid’s formal demise in 1994, the thrice-elected African National Congress government has openly embraced neo-liberalism as its guiding economic philosophy and practice, a turn emblemized by the phenomenon of so-called “struggle millionaires”, former anti-apartheid socialists who have profited enormously from the ANC’s embrace of the neo-liberal market. Left-wing critics charge that the ANC has replaced old-style apartheid based on race with a new-style apartheid based on class and on crony-capitalism. See, for instance, Patrick Bond, *Walk Left, Talk Right: South Africa’s Frustrated Global Reforms*, Scottsville: University of Kwazulu-Natal Press, 2004.
- 34 Breiner, *An Introduction to West Indian Poetry*, p. 159.
- 35 “Bass History is a movin’, is a hurtin’ black story”, Linton Kwesi Johnson, “Reggae Sounds”, *Bass Culture*, London: Island Records, 1980.