

**Cellular Scansion:
Creolization as Poetic Practice in Brathwaite's *Rights of Passage***

BEN ETHERINGTON

In this essay I would like to experiment with changing the basic unit of rhythmic analysis. In place of the 'foot', I will work out from the 'cell'. I will conduct what might be called a *cellular scansion* of Edward Brathwaite's *Rights of Passage* (1968). This has not been motivated by a desire to develop a generalizable scansion, but an approach which suggested itself in the course of tuning into the particular strategies of rhythmic organization employed in this collection. In extrapolating from this particular investigation, it strikes me that it is an approach that might present one type of answer to Gordon Rohlehr's yet unfulfilled challenge that 'the problems of prosody haven't begun to be solved in the West Indies'.¹

There could hardly be a more accustomed analogy for the basic unit of a dynamic system, particularly in the age of the genome: the cell as the container of self-repeating DNA; the organism as determined by, or at least latent in its every 'building block'. It will become clear that I will not quite be using the analogy in this sense. Indeed, it is not really called on to suggest the perpetually self-repeating cell of living tissue, such as we find in the following comments:

The metrical line is the compositional cell of the long poem, before it becomes 'the long poem'; the possibility of recomposition-in-performance, essential to all

¹ 'Literature and the Folk' (1971), in *My Strangled City and Other Essays* (Port-of-Spain: Longman Trinidad, 1992), pp. 52-85 (p. 81).

long poems before they are corralled first into orally standardized and quasi-identically recapitulated, then into written, and finally into printed texts, depends for its possibility upon the formula, a unit which is at once metrical and syntactic and semantic.²

The observation is being made that in non-print culture ‘content’ necessarily takes the shape of its mnemonics, and so it would be pointless conceptually to separate metric formula from the language matter it organizes. The possibility of separation only arises when meter’s mnemonic function is rendered technologically unnecessary by print.

Does this mean that the metrical cell inevitably becomes superfluous? Not according to our commentator, who maintains that ‘a print culture of poetical texts is always also at the same time an oral culture of verse rhythms’.³ Only if speech itself were flattened of all intonational qualities to become pure grammar could the syntax and semantics of the word be detached from rhythmicity. He insists that in printed poetry: ‘The line [...] is still the cell. It does not merely contain ideas that the poet thought of earlier. It generates ideas, suggests them; the old formula colonises and creates new thoughts.’⁴ This is not the same as claiming that meter automatically generates new thoughts. If there is no ‘cooperative antagonism’ of rhetorical design and metrical line, verse’s thinking falls limp.

The ‘cell’ analogy in the essay under discussion is not only metric, but meter is presented as essential to that which makes the cell of the long poem ‘ever-exploding, ever-generating’ (609). Scansion, here, would not be a pseudo-lepidoptery that expects to pin down meter, but the attempt to articulate that limit which enables a cell’s prodigality. To be successful, scansion’s concepts would need to be as alive as verse practice. ‘Cellular scansion’ would therefore be a proposal for a *historicized* scansion; a scansion attuned to the specifics of any given metrical practice in the terms of the historical condition of the materials of verse being employed, and which seeks to give an account of how a particular poem’s line-cell is able to multiply *and* flourish.

² Simon Jarvis, ‘The Melodics of Long Poems’, *Textual Practice* 24 (2010), 607-21 (p. 609).

³ Jarvis, p. 608.

⁴ Jarvis, p. 610.

This is not quite the cellular scansion to be pursued here. The notion is introduced in order to tune into the historicity of rhythmic practice in a location in which the antagonism between meter and design is not necessarily deemed to be fecund. Simon Jarvis employs militaristic and colonialist analogies to characterize print's 'dialectic of melodics': the *murderous* disposition (610) of line and design is a *war to life*, lest the printed body become *sclerotic* (617), metrical formula *colonizes* and *creates* new thoughts (610). The rhetoric is and is not hyperbolic. Meter, an instrument of a reason prior to instrumental reason, must fight for life in enlightenment's internal war. Yet there is a playfulness, mocking at certain melodramatic free verse polemics, which must characterize meter as oppressive in order to recommend their own liberty. 'And each in the cell of himself is almost convinced of his freedom.'

It seems unlikely that Jarvis would have much patience for the following comment on rhythm in Louise Bennett's ballads:

Prosodic achievement here had to be confined to the tension created through the counterpoint of Jamaica Creole speech rhythms and the fixed metric cage of the stanza.⁵

He might perceive the same flaw in another comment on Bennett:

The tyranny of the pentametre can be seen/heard quite clearly here, although Miss Lou erodes and transforms this with the sound of her language. Its riddim sets up a counterpoint *against* the pentametre: 'River flood but water scarce/yaw'; 'Yuh noh se/Cyar an truck *backa me*'.⁶

It seems there are two rhythms, that of Bennett's language and that of the meter. Neither commentator sees their antagonism as cooperative, but the victory of one in spite of the other. The cell analogy calls up another of its resonances, the prison, and the voice's objective becomes escape.

⁵ Gordon Rohlehr, 'Introduction' in, *Voiceprint: An Anthology of Oral and Related Poetry from the Caribbean*, eds. Stewart Brown, Mervyn Morris and Rohlehr (London: Longman, 1989), pp. 1-23 (p. 3).

⁶ Edward Kamau Brathwaite, *History of the Voice: The Development of Nation Language in Anglophone Caribbean Poetry* (London: New Beacon Books, 1984), p. 30.

Both comments are made in the course of telling a story about the emergence of a new verse culture in the decolonizing Caribbean, which was said to be restoring poetry to the rhythms of the creole voice and, thereby, reconciling print and oral traditions. The first is from the introduction to an anthology titled *Voiceprint*. According to this story, the region's print culture of poetical texts had in no ways been formed in dialectic with the rhythms of its oral culture, and so prosodic practice had needed to seek out alternative foundations. For both, Bennett's ballads reveal the limits of a metrical practice derived from the English tradition. To persist further would be to encourage a cancer:

MABRAK is righting the wrongs and brain-whitening –
HOW?
Not just by washing out the straightening and wearing
Dashiki t'ing:
MOSTOFTHESTRAIGHTENINGISINTHETONGUE⁷

In this famous line, compounding and majuscule produce a shout that is a visual-verbal enactment of language oppression. To embody this, the line gives up the ghost of its rhythm.

Calling on the vocabulary used by Jarvis to characterize the liberating pretensions of 'so-called free verse', one might contend that the arguments of Gordon Rohlehr and Edward Brathwaite, and the poetics of Bongo Jerry's 'Mabrak' are in thrall to an 'abstract freedom'.⁸ The first two fail to understand that Bennett's voice is *enabled* by the antagonism to the ballad's metrical cell, which is, simply, a feature of all successful metrical practice. Jerry's anti-poetics fights on self-defeating grounds; it is a rejection that entails no concrete content; a freedom from, not a freedom to.

To state the obvious, there is not much that is abstract about the perception that the meters of English verse are inextricable from the history of domination in

⁷ Bongo Jerry, 'Mabrak' in, *The Penguin Book of Caribbean Verse in English*, ed. Paula Burnett (London: Penguin, 1986), pp. 69-71 (p. 70).

⁸ Jarvis, pp. 612 and 619.

the region. Cages, tyranny and brain-whitening pertain in an historical experience for which the analogy of metrical schemes colonizing thoughts could never be playful. (Those unfamiliar with the history of Caribbean poetry should have it in mind that the English metrics were part of a colonial education curriculum as it tried belatedly to ‘civilize’ the speech forms created by the language collisions of the plantations, so we are not discussing an indirect imposition.)⁹ On the other hand, the positions cited above should not be allowed to stand in for the attitudes of all anglophone Caribbean poets. It was by no means agreed that an authentically Caribbean poetics entailed rejecting English metrics; Derek Walcott and Eric Roach presenting the most well-known counter-positions.

These are not even really representative of the positions of Rohlehr or Brathwaite. Despite all his talk about the ‘pentametre’ in *History of the Voice*, we will see that there is skilful use of iambic lines in *Rights of Passage*. In his criticism, Rohlehr repeatedly sought to dissolve oral/print, creole/standard, and folk/middle class binaries. His conception is centred on the notion of a *continuum* between creole and standard speech forms, and between folk and middle-class aesthetics. This presumably includes rhythmic modes too.¹⁰ It is for similar reasons of flexibility across diverse practices that this essay introduces the notion of cellular scansion. There is a spectrum as to what might constitute a cell’s generative basis, and this does not preclude meter. It is hoped this this can help to avoid making a misleading meter/free verse division of the region’s poetics. Bennett’s ballads are more the mother of Mikey Smith’s dub poems (take Bennett’s ‘Candy Seller’ and Smith’s ‘I An I Alone’), than they are the cousins of the Anglo-centric meters of Vivian Virtue. Alliances in the regions’ poetics are much more frequently centred on the language material being used, or even strategies of synthesizing diverse registers. With the cell, our focus is on the principle/s of rhythmic generation, and the way in which such practices are or are not germane for the varieties of

⁹ To see the zombie-prosody that resulted, see Brathwaite’s essay ‘Creative Literature of the British West Indies during the Period of Slavery’, in *Roots* (Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press, 1993), pp. 127-70.

¹⁰ See Rohlehr’s ‘Literature and the Folk’, p. 68, and ‘The Problem of the Problem of Form’, in *The Shape of That Hurt and Other Essays* (Port-of-Spain: Longman Trinidad, 1992), pp. 1-65 (p. 3).

Caribbean speech. This way, we can better understand the processes by which Caribbean poets respond to a shared problematic of poetic craft.

Perhaps immodestly, it is advanced that, for purposes of rhythmic appraisal, a cellular approach can improve on the concept of a continuum. Rohlehr adopts the concept from social linguistics, and is comfortable extending further into that discipline's terminology, such as when he speaks of 'code switching' between linguistic and also aesthetic materials.¹¹ Thus poetics is approached from the standpoint of its raw linguistic material. It can suggest that the raw material (the spoken language in the Caribbean in its 'basilect' through 'mesolect' to 'acrolect' states) holds latent the basis for its prosody. As per Jarvis's historical melodies, cellular scansion calls for the discovery *in each case* of a prosody's enabling limit. This way we avoid mechanistic claims such as that the tetrameter is appropriate to acrolect or dub riddims to mesolect, and spend our efforts tuning into the means by which a given rhythmic practice lives or falters.

* * *

In this essay, we experiment only with Brathwaite's *Rights of Passage*. As mentioned at the outset, the notion of a cell-based scansion suggested itself in the course of reading this collection. For reasons which I will state in concluding, there are good reasons why it should be this collection in particular that opens out to a conception that might have a broader relevance.

Outwardly, *Rights of Passage* presents a great array of rhythmic techniques and textures. Each seems specific to one of the variety of presented episodes in New World black experience from slavery to decolonization. It would seem that historical narrative is the structuring principle and that which is required to render each historical scene the poetic one. Such a view is adopted in Rohlehr's monumental, monograph-length reading of *The Arrivants*:

In *Rights of Passage*, two things seem to be happening simultaneously: we are offered a series of snapshots of the various types of Black people produced by

¹¹ 'The Problem of the Problem', p. 3.

the forced migration from Africa, slavery in the U.S.A. and in the West Indies. This ever-moving picture show is a documentary accompanied by a sound-track of voices singing, chanting, mocking or gossiping, and allusions to related background music, which changes as the scene changes.¹²

Rohlehr later repeats this characterization so it is not a passing analogy. It also corresponds to the division of his reading of *Rights* into two chapters. He first considers the historical scenes of the poem, and only then the techniques required for the soundtrack. We have a *history* of New World black experience rendered by a *medley* of soundscapes.

Rohlehr reads the collection's opening 'Prelude' as a first statement of the principal themes, images and symbols. The words used in the opening stanzas are called 'key-words', which 'acquire fresh accretions of meaning and suggestivity with each usage'.¹³

Drum skin whip
lash, master sun's
cutting edge of
heat, taut
surfaces of things
I sing
I shout
I groan
I dream
about

Dust glass grit
the pebbles of the desert:
Sands shift
across the scorched
world water ceases
to flow.
[...] (4)¹⁴

¹² Rohlehr, *Pathfinder: Black Awakening in The Arrivants of Edward Kaman Brathwaite* (Port-of-Spain: Gordon Rohlehr, 1981), pp. 22-23.

¹³ *Pathfinder*, 64.

¹⁴ Edward Brathwaite, *The Arrivants: A New World Trilogy: Rights of Passage, Islands, Masks* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973). Page numbers are supplied after excerpts.

Even in a first reading, most will likely notice that the elements of the opening stanzas recur frequently throughout the collection, particularly the opening four words, and often in clusters:

in the hot
sun neither
no screams
no whip rope
lash (28)

with whip, with toil,
with memory, with dust; re-
placing them with soil-
(76)

These recurrences are not just as signifiers, but bring with them emphasis and implied syntax which inflect surrounding words. In the first excerpt, the words are directly transposed, in the second, it is extended by the syncopating conjunction. We can also find places where elements reappear not as whole words or morphemes, but as phonemic elements, or close approximations:

curved **stone** **hissed** into reef
[**drum** **skin** **whip**]
wave teeth fanged into clay
white **splash** **flashed** into spray (48)
[**lash** **lash**]

With the parallels of ‘curved stone hissed’ channelling the delivery of the collection’s opening line, I feel my reading of ‘wave teeth fanged’ guided such that emphasis is distributed more evenly and deliberately, and this is confirmed and rewarded in the third line when ‘lash’, separated in the poem’s opening with a line break, occurs twice, the second time with particular onomatopoeic force.

This also takes me back to a moment in earlier in the collection:

See them zoot suits, man? Them black
Texan hats? Watch false teeth

flash; fake friendship makes them mock
your grief (23)

Again, 'flash' is separated by a line break, and recurs here alongside one of the words from the previous excerpt, 'teeth'. Phonemic association is confirmed by the lexical link. So it is not just as 'keywords' that these words travel; they transfer their energy to other words, which acquire their own mnemonic weight. Lexicon is an instrument for the dissemination of melodic and rhythmic energy. As we will see, such connections do not require that the reader or listener register every link. They form a skein (a word I borrow from Rohlehr) that cumulatively produces poetic coherence.

Another clear example is the way in which the syntactic parallels of the final lines of the opening stanza infuse other moments:

I sing
I shout
I groan
I dream (4)

O Lord
O devil
O fire
O flame (9)

Even though first-person simple-present becomes deitic vocatives, the transfer of force is achieved through proximity (five pages separate them), patterns of line break and the single vowel. From here, energy can be distributed through the 'O', whether overtly,

O man
O god
O dawning (14)

or leeching into lines of a quite different character:

But bes' leh we get to rass
o' this place; out o' this
ass hole, out o' the stink o' this
hell. (32)

Further, clipped parallelism fuses with elements linked to the opening line (c.f. citation from p. 76 above):

with **sin**
 [**skin**]
[I **sing**]
with soil
with rock
with iron
toil (28)

Neither the lexical items ‘whip’/‘dust’ nor the single vowels need be present in order to produce resonance.

Such connections permeate the collection. The linkages, modulations, transfers and traces do not present as individual motifs, but as textual and/or auditory cues that guide both performance and its reception. They may perform a motivic role, but this is only one dimension of their elaboration into a poetics. The contention is that this is a cellular expansion: the cell’s component elements generate poetic tissue that, cumulatively, structures our experience. The following commentary assumes that the collection is read from beginning to end as a single poetic experience.

CELL

- (a) Drum skin whip
 lash,

- (b) master sun's
 cutting edge of
 heat, taut
 surfaces of things

- (c) I sing
 I shout
 I groan
 I dream
 about (4)

To describe the proliferation of this cell requires a certain technical vocabulary. If what I am attempting is ‘scansion’, stress analysis is surely the first step. This might look something like this:

```
      /      /      /  
Drum skin whip  
      /      / x      /  
lash, master sun's  
      / x      /      x  
cutting edge of  
      /      /  
heat, taut  
      / x x \      /  
surfaces of things
```

With stress/unstress abstracted as ‘/’s and ‘x’'s, we have a template that can serve as our analytic instrument.

There are two reasons to avoid taking this route. Firstly, as Maureen Warner-Lewis puts it, ‘anglophone Caribbean Creoles distribute pulmonic force more evenly to syllables, thereby modifying the significance of stress for comprehension’.¹⁵ That is, most registers of Jamaican English behave more like syllable-timed languages than stress-timed ones. The language is intonationally closer to West African languages than British or American varieties. A general Australian accent delivers a sharp clipped stress in most trisyllabic nouns, for example:

```
      /  
Ja-may-ka
```

¹⁵ Maureen Warner-Lewis, ‘The Rhythms of Caribbean Vocal and Oral-Based Texts, in *Caribbean Culture: Soundings on Kamau Brathwaite*, ed. Annie Paul (Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 2007), pp. 54-75 (p. 59).

For most Jamaicans the second syllable would be longer, and the delivery would be more gentle and even:

—
Jah—meh—kah

A stress-based scansion easily brings with it a normative SE inner-ear, which would then hear the overt basilectal registers in the poem as deviations, setting up the SE/creole binary that the work is concertedly trying to transcend. Secondly, the mode of analytic abstraction needs to be able to capture the several dimensions by which the cell proliferates. The link is not necessarily emphasis, but can be a phoneme, a rhyme, a semantic link, even a pun. We cannot limit ourselves to rhythmic concepts, but need also to access phonology, syntax and semantics.

Maureen Warner-Lewis has experimented with combining syllabic and stress scansion in order to be able to enter into ‘subterranean prosodic system’ in Caribbean oral forms.¹⁶ This might seem to go a little against the grain of her comment on the distribution of force just cited. If the pulse of Caribbean English moves through length rather than stress, why not turn to the system of notation out of which English modern metrical analysis emerged? That is, classical metrics that works from syllabic length. I imagine this is because Warner-Lewis does not want reactively to present the situation as either/or—the Standard Jamaican English spoken by her and most of her colleagues at the University of the West Indies at Mona is probably closer to the intonation of RP than it is to a deep basilectal Jamaican patois. Her point is that, across the Caribbean continuum, stress must always be balanced with the measure of syllables.

With cellular scansion, I want to be more adventurous still and abstract from what I will identify as the constituent elements of the cell. Again, the impulse is not towards generalizable concepts, but terms specific to the poetics of *Rights of Passage*.

(a) I refer to the kind of emphasis on these first four words as ‘strokes’. Rather than work from the presumption that the words inhere ‘stress’, determined according to whichever voice one presumes to be the normative, the term

¹⁶ Warner-Lewis, 71.

signals the performative gesture suggested by the four consecutive short single-syllables: a deliberated delivery, like the drumming of stretched skin or the lashing of a whip. Each of the first four words is both a noun and verb, and some can serve as modifiers, so each is a syntactic pivot as well. It could be four nouns-images, a series of verbal imperatives (Drum! Skin! Whip! Lash!); two verb/substantive pairs (Drum skin! whip Lash!), or various combinations. Throughout the collection, it is more common to encounter a group of three strokes than four. If there is a fourth stroke, it tends to be cut-off from the group of three, or appears as what we might call a front-stroked multisyllabic word that moves forward into the line.

(b) I refer to the many sequences of abrupt line breaks as ‘broken lines’. So short are most of the lines in the collection, and so frequent is the syntax ‘interrupted’ by a break in line, that the connotations usually associated with the device of the ‘line break’ would be misleading—particularly when it carries the sense of enjambment as disrupting syntactic expectations. A reading tediously attendant to such interruptions would produce a ponderous and stilted performance. ‘Broken lines’ is adapted from the jazz concept of ‘broken time’, particularly prevalent in bebop drumming; a genre favoured by Brathwaite at the time and in which irregularity is courted systematically. Broken lines invite the performer/listener to respond to the interplay of intonation, the line unit and the syntactic momentum when tuning into the rhythmic logic. As broken lines are so prevalent in the collection – one might say that they constitute the ‘house style’—it may stretch credulity to suggest that it spawns from the initial ‘cell’. To an extent this is true. The purpose of cellular scansion is not to show that all possible elements in the poem derive from the cell—the analogy is not really genomic—but to attend to the ways in which our reading is conditioned by the repetition and modulation of elements from the initial moment.

(c) Rather than persist with ‘syntactic parallel’, the final element of the cell can be called ‘incantation sequence’. This proliferates as parallel short gestures usually in the mode of sacred address. These are not limited in the poem to

parallel syntax; so to label this ‘anaphora’ or ‘epiphora’ and then go hunting for similar instances would be to limit our view of evident transpositions, such as with lists. Incantation, suggests not only the rhythm of invocation, but also its tonality. Incantation sequences typically address or simply list sacred or monumental things: gods and tribes, but also major historical figures, countries, cities. This then infuses other rhetorical formations.

It is likely that with selective quotation, some of the cues that I am proposing link the tissue of the poem back to the cell will seem far-fetched. The thesis is not that Brathwaite has systematically constructed all the material in line with the cell, but that he uses the cell conspicuously to generate material, and this conditions our responses such that we attend to connections even when the relation to the cell is faint. This can only be confirmed if other attentive performers, readers and listeners are persuaded this articulates a cohesion in their experience of the collection.

There is not the space for a thorough account of the development of the three cellular elements, (a), (b) and (c), and which is not necessary anyway. As the focus is on scansion, and rhythm is most pronounced in the proliferation of element (a), I will focus on its transpositions and modulations.

1) Direct iterations

Brathwaite ensures that the cell attains a prominence in our consciousness by directly reiterating its shape and even its content at intervals in the collection. Particularly the second ‘Prelude’ (28-29) and ‘Epilogue’ (81). The latter reiterates the cell exactly, adding only to the first line:

So drum skin whip
lash master sun’s [...] (81)

The opening conjunction attaches to the poetics of the line as much as it does the images/actions. It makes explicit that the reiteration is in the service of closing the

poetic argument. Other direct iterations have been discussed above. Although relatively few, these reinforce the contours of the cell in our ears.

2) Extensions and modulations

Groups of three or four consecutive strokes are frequent throughout the poem. Cues of various sorts signal the stroke delivery, most frequently onomatopoeia, phonemic and/or morphemic approximation, and/or alliteration, guiding us to a consistency of emphasis:

cool coal clings (5)

black
birds blink (5)
[skin whip]

Flames burn, scorch, crack (7)
[drum skin lash]

in bright bold
cash (28)
[lash]

like the sick
[whip]
dog kicked from the
[whip]
garbage, the snicked
[whip]
hawk gripped in its tightening circle (31)
[whip]

In the final example, it is not just the consecutive strokes, but also the rhymes or near-rhymes that invoke (a); this produces a horizontal and vertical cellular proliferation.

In the following these strategies overlap, summoning and then poisoning the stroke delivery:

Under the **burnt out green**
of this **small yard's**
tufts of grass
where water was once used
to wash **pots, pans, poes,**
ochre appears. (70)

In my ear, the strokes on ‘pots, pans, poes’, intensified by the two groups of three-strokes before it, create the expectation of a harsh correlate of ‘lash’. Instead, we get the unexpectedly soft ‘ochre’; similar in effect to a ‘passing cadence’ in diatonic classical music. The digraph remains, but its softness intensifies the experience of the revealed colour, creating the sense that the degradations of slave times have passed.

Such are only the more obvious extensions of (a). Brathwaite uses a number of techniques to evoke the stroke delivery, but interspersed with extra syllables or even lines. Here is a passage that combines a number of extensive techniques:

Boss man lacks pride:
so hides his
fear of fear and darkness
in the whip.

Boss man lacks pride:
I am his hide

of darkness. Bide
the black times, Lord, hide
my heart from the lips
that spit

from the hate
that grips
the sweat-
ing flesh

the whips
that rip

so wet, so red,
so fresh. (19)

The initial cellular transfer is through ‘whip’, appearing first in isolation in the first group, later in a sequence of rhymes – ‘lips’, ‘spit’, ‘grips’, ‘rip’. It distributes its

onomatopoeic force this way, mimicking in each the strokes of the whip. Instead of sequence, the stroke-like delivery is summoned by rhyme. The cell also infects elements around it. Substituting for 'skin' we have 'hide', which similarly is exploited for its pivoting syntax. The final group compounds the association: the strokes now syncopated, but clearly linked to 'lash' by the digraph. Again the cell extends horizontally (consecutive strokes) and vertically (rhyming strokes).

3) Infusion of other rhythmic modes

One of the most prominent poetic features of the collection is Brathwaite's mimicking of various musical modes of the Black Atlantic: work songs, blues, various forms of jazz, rock 'n' roll, calypso, reggae. Developing his soundtrack analogy, Rohlehr has minutely gone over the means by which Brathwaite evokes these various musical modes, providing helpful examples for possible musical models. Cellular scansion reveals, further, that such episodes are grounded in the collection's poetics by cellular prompts. A clear instance is 'The Twist':

In a little shanty town
was on a night like this
 [drum skin whip]

girls were sitting down
around the town
like this

some were young
and some were brown
I even found
a miss
who was black and brown
and really did

the twist
watch her move her wrist
and feel your belly twist
feel the hunger thunder
when her hip bones twist

try to hold her, keep her under
while the juke box **hiss**
 [drum skin whip]
twist the music out of hunger

[lash]
on a night like this. (41)

The consecutive strokes on ‘night | like this’ prepare us for the successive stanzas, even where emphasis might be anticipated to be weak, as with ‘found | a miss’ – the alteration in delivery might focus attention on the broken line such as to evoke ‘amiss’ or even ‘miss’ *qua* absence. As the rhythm gathers momentum in the final two groups, the consecutive strokes are more pronounced, particularly ‘juke box hiss’, which then places the final ‘twist’ in the, as it were, ‘lash’ position. As with the examples in the previous section, there is vertical extension of the cell as well, cued by the phonological approximation of ‘whip’ and ‘twist’. This ensures that the evoked rhythms of rock ‘n’ roll do not override the collection’s poetic style, but rise into our ear *through* it. The memory of Chubby Checker’s hit, which will probably be in the ear of many readers,¹⁷ is not a colouration, but is drawn into the stream of the collection’s poetics. Performing it, one might stretch-out the groups of three strokes like Checker does in song, or deliver it in the mode of ‘drum skin whip’, or try to suggest both at the same time.

In the opening group of what Rohlehr persuasively identifies as a ‘Train Blues’ (the second section of ‘Folkways’), Brathwaite uses a vertical extension summoning the strokes with rhymes on ‘-ick’:

So come
quick cattle
train, **lick**
the long
rails: choo-
choo chatanoo-
ga, **pick**
the long

¹⁷ ‘Yeah, you should see my little sis

You should see my, my little sis

She really knows how to rock

She knows how to twist’

(Chubby Checker, ‘The Twist’, my transcription)

trail to town. (33)

The feeling of the stroke is then infused into the poem's accelerating rhythmic onomatopoeia:

Come
come bugle
train
come quick
bugle
train, quick
quick bugle
train (etc.) (33)

We can substitute in words from the first iterations of the cell to perceive the transfer of the stroke feel into the rhythms of the train:

Drum drum
Skin Skin
Whip Whip
Lash lash
Dust Dust
Glass Glass

The reggae rhythms of the third section of 'Wings of a Dove' are not built from groups of consecutive strokes, which would go against the 'skank' syncopations, but the stroke delivery is summoned by 'drum' in the first line:

So beat dem drums
dem, spread

dem wings dem,
watch dem fly

dem, soar dem
high dem, (etc) (44)

Again substituting in words from the cell, we can get a sense of the transfer of energy:

Beat dem **drum** dem
skin dem **whip** dem
lash dem **dust** dem

New World black musical forms are not the only rhythmic models cellularly integrated into the collection's poetics. In spite of his later stridency, there are metrical lines throughout *Rights of Passage*, most notably in 'South' (57-58) and 'Mammon', presenting a particularly interesting problem for cellular scansion. The opening of the latter sounds like Walcott:

So in this tilted alleyway
that rolls in debris to the sea
I keep my way among the wealth
of fish smells, fish bones,
to my father's home. (73)

If the hurricane does not roar in the pentameter, it seems the tetrameter can help to evoke a breezy contemplative mood. The iambs, the term here appears to be justified, lilt with nostalgia, and the fishy sensations of line four move spondeically against them. The question is whether meter is taken up with lyric sincerity, or symbolically as the rhythm of the colonizer. Further into the poem:

The world for us was billy-
goat smell drying on the wall;
was desks and benches regularly scrubbed
and scraped; was rags
wrapped tight to make a cricket ball;
the pain of waiting for the **whip rope**
tamarind **lash**, held by the **thick**
necked sweating God who ruled
our little school. (73)

In middle-class Barbadian (or middle-class St Lucian), each syllable in 'regularly' usually would be articulated, and with roughly equivalent weighting—reg-u-lar-ly—which would stretch the line to pentameter. The plodding rhythm overflows the line with the next line's opening conjunction, embodying directly that reluctant duress of chores. When the figure of the school master is next summoned with a near direct invocation of the cell strokes against the iambic momentum, the

temptation might be for a symbolic reading of the meter. But then the elements do not quite align. Why would the tyrant enforcer of anglocentric education *interrupt* the flow of iambs with the cellular strokes, rather than himself be announced iambically? It might be put that the symbolism does not work by interruption. Rather, the strokes produce a comic yet all-too-serious parallel of the headmaster and slave-driver, and it is this same who drums into the Bajan voice the stress-based rhythms of imposed English metrics. Neither satisfies my reading of this poem. The gentle pulsing of the lines over the course of the poem has a genuine nostalgic force. Yet the poem also makes clear that the transmission of these rhythms into the Caribbean has a history. This not the same as outright rejection.

What seems most significant, whatever judgement might be made concerning symbolism, is that the iteration of the cell reinforces the priority of the cellular strokes in the collection's poetics. It ensures that we perceive that the *meter falls into the contour of a poetics over which it does not preside*. Brathwaite is not involved in a petulant negation of the English tradition that some would accuse him of, as though to fashion a Caribbean prosody by rejecting an English one. His efforts are towards a generative poetics, capable of amplifying the voices and rhythms around him. This is creolization as poetic practice: not merely the employment of dialect/patois/creole/basilect, but a poetics in which Caribbean voices can become the material itself of the poem. Brathwaite's term for this is *nation language*.

4) Cell elements elaborated into the fabric of the poem

The more overt transfers and modulations of the cell entrain responses to the broader fabric of the collection. One example here will suffice. In the celebrated poem 'The Dust', with its as-thought-transcribed conversational mode in a thick creole, our ears might not necessarily be pricked for deliberate rhythmic patterning.

Is true. Bolinjay
spinach, wither-face cabbage,
much Caroline Lee an' the Six weeks, too;
greens swibble up an' the little blue
leafs o' de Red Rock slips getting dry

dry dry (64)

When I came to the repetitions of 'dry', I had only the faintest sense that it could summon the 'stroke' delivery. To make the claim for the transfer seemed gratuitously formalist. Even though three consecutive emphases, it seemed to belong to a different order of rhythm; that of conversational rhetoric. I re-evaluated this decision when I reached these lines in the collection's epilogue:

that **whip rope**
lash, brave
boast
and shout
will **dry**
dry
dry
like the bare
bones: (82)

Again we see Brathwaite deliberately engineering subterranean rhythmic connections. When we turn back to 'The Dust', and find the repetitions 'black black black' (66) and 'dark dark dark' (67), the connection is further confirmed. This poises our ear, so that we attend to such resonances across the fabric of the poem.

* * *

I would like to make two final points: one concerning rhythm in Caribbean poetics as a whole, the other concerning the significance of Brathwaite's attempt to develop new rhythmic methods for the *field* of Caribbean poetry.

As suggested earlier, it would be misleading to use a meter/free verse dichotomy to organize the poetics of the English-speaking Caribbean. Received wisdom would have it that this is largely because the presiding polarities are standard English and Creole and/or scribal and oral. So, for example, in the *Penguin Book of Caribbean Verse in English*, we are encouraged to read Louise Bennett's ballads alongside Calypso, Rastafarian chat, and dub poetry in the 'Oral Tradition', and Edward Baugh, Brathwaite, Walcott, and John Agard together in

the 'Literary Tradition'. The *Voiceprint* anthology attempted to synthesize and so transcend these binaries with the notion of a continuum, demonstrating the dynamic relation between text and voice. What this essay's 'cellular scansion' has attempted to do is to focus on the *generative* basis of a given poetic practice. If we were to look to Bennett's ballads we would not say that she uses a ballad meter and leave it at that. It is a question of the way in which her practice is or is not rhythmically dynamic, and whether her use of the ballad is even metrical. We might then compare her achievements with the practices of other creole balladeers in the region: Edward Cordle in Barbados and Claude McKay in Jamaica at the turn of the twentieth century, Jeannette Layne-Clark in Barbados and Joan Andrea Hutchinson in Jamaica at its end. Similarly, we might look at the rhythmic practices amongst the so-called dub poets, and make more precise judgements about the way reggae-like rhythms are or are not uplifted and sustained through arrangements of language. The 'cell' of any given poem may be metrical or otherwise; it is a question of identifying enabling limits.

This conclusion might appear to make much of the above discussion redundant. Why go to such lengths to establish a more literal application of 'cellular scansion' if its applicability is general and analogical? It is no coincidence that it should be Brathwaite's first collection which throws up an analogy that is able to move across a spectrum of rhythmic practices in Caribbean poetry. It is not that the analogy precedes and organizes a reading of *Rights of Passage*. This collection made it available. Laurence Breiner has written:

A new area is staked out for West Indian writing when poets following Brathwaite's lead demonstrate that nation language can provide not only linguistic objects to be enshrined in a poem, or the means to create a poem of characters, but the material of the poem itself, its own voice, its logos.¹⁸

Breiner is making it clear that simply to employ creole does not a nation language poem make. Nation language inheres in the material of the poem itself; which is to say its poetics.

¹⁸ Laurence Breiner, *An Introduction to West Indian Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 182.