

**Kamau Brathwaite's Environmental Sensibilities: An Ecocritical Reading of *Born to Slow Horses***

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**Abstract**

Postcolonial writers have taken time to explore the consequences of imperial expansion and colonialism on the environmental conditions of the erstwhile colonies. Impacts of postcolonial destruction are felt mostly in all the Caribbean Islands, which were built on plantation and land exploitation. These make Caribbean ecologies become area of interest to creative writers and critics from the region. While writers like Harris and Walcott have attracted praises for concentrating on Caribbean ecologies, little or no interest has been paid to Brathwaite's works in this direction. The pertinent question is that: it is possible for a writer of Brathwaite's knowledge of Caribbean history to omit such an important theme in his works as the history of this region is hardly separable from its environment? This paper is an ecocritical reading of selected poetry from Brathwaite's collection *Born to Slow Horses* (2005). Three poems in the collection, "The Master of Mary Jones", "Guanahani", "Namsetura" and "9/11" were purposively sampled and examined. The poems were subjected to context analysis with the intent to foreground the poet's concerns with nature and the environment. Braithwaite internationalizes his vision and treat the damaging effects of colonial and imperial activities around the world in continents far away from his Caribbean. The study reveals that Brathwaite's vision is internationalised and the damaging effects of human interactions with environment become a global concern. This paper concludes that Brathwaite, like other Caribbean poets focuses on Caribbean and world ecology in his works. It is therefore recommended that other

Brathwaite's poetry is open to ecological themes and requires to be explored further in this wise other than those examined in this study and critics should therefore concentrate more on this theme while appreciating these works.

**Keywords:** Environment, Postcolonialism, Ecocriticism, Caribbean and Landscapes.

## Introduction

Since the 1990s, scholars of postcolonial preoccupation have focused on the destructive effects of colonial and imperialist incursion into the erstwhile postcolonial territories. The engagement with effects of colonialism on postcolonial landscapes informs Harris' description of Caribbean landscape as "a landscape saturated by traumas of conquest" (Harris, 1992). The postcolonial critic traces the consequences of colonialism on the colonised states' vegetations and environments. Though Buell kicks against such radical adventurism, there is every likelihood that the consequences of colonialism are felt beyond the human psyche and in narrating the human history of colonialism, the consequences on the places where the events took place are not left out (Buell, 1995). This is evident in the imperial expansion drives which came with industrialisation and race for land acquisition in Africa and the Caribbean. The human history in Caribbean is intertwined with the natural environment history as Deloughery opines that the "Caribbean is one of the most important areas for an ecocritical discourse because the region's history does not allow for a facile division between humans and nature, an opposition that often determines the dominant ecocritical production of North America" (Glofelty, 1996, xviii)

While poetry by other prominent Caribbean writers like Glissant, Harris and Walcott have received critical attention as ecocritical works, there is dearth of works dedicated to Brathwaite's preoccupation with Caribbean and African ecocriticism. The dearth of works on Brathwaite's ecocriticism may have been due to the loud appeal to Brathwaite's obsession with cultural and historical themes to criticism. This paper is a study of the ecocritical features of Kamau Brathwaite's poetry *Born to Slow Horses*. Four poems from the collection, "The Master of Mary Jones", "Guanahani", "Namesetura" and "9/11" were chosen for this purpose.

There has been a continuous competition between anthropocentrism and anthropomorphism debate in ecocritical studies. While the former advocates the superiority of humans over other environmental elements, the latter advocates equal treatment of these elements as interdependent ecological variables. Considering Brathwaite's approach in the four poems under study, this paper adopts Heise's (2016) multispecies justice as a theoretical framework. The theory proposes a holistic sense of ecological survival where both human and nonhuman forms enjoy equal rights for survival and can thrive without one causing harms to the other. Brathwaite has advocated collective survival of all environmental elements through his poetry.

## Conceptual Clarifications

The word 'ecocriticism' was created from a combination of two words 'eco' and 'criticism' both of which are derivatives of the Greek words 'Oikos' and 'Kritis' which all together mean "house judge". 'Oikos' refers to nature/environment while 'Kritis' is a peacemaker who wants the house kept in good shape. Ecocriticism then connotes the study of the earth/universe. Buell (1995) defines ecocriticism as "the environmentally-oriented study of literature and (less often) the arts more generally, "the study of the relation between literature and environment conducted in a spirit of

commitment to environmentalist praxis” (p. 430). In another study, Buell, Heise and Thomber (2011) identify two phases in the study of ecocriticism. According to them, the first phase, which they call first wave ecocriticism, focused on such genres as “nature writing, nature poetry and wilderness fiction”. The second phase which they tag second phase criticism inclines towards environmental justice issue and degraded landscapes just as seriously as “natured landscapes” (419). This classification portrays the multiplicity that resonates in the field. In his previous work, Buell identifies aspects of literary ecocriticism to include environmental criticism, literary-environmental studies, literary ecology, literary environmentalism or green cultural studies, ecopoetics and environmental literary criticism.

Buell, in the same study, states that ecocriticism has three duties: the scientific study of nature; the scholarly analysis of cultural representations; and the political struggle for more sustainable ways of inhabiting the natural world (Buell 1995). Some of the ingredients that might be considered in an ecocritical texts, in his view, include:

- the presentation of the nonhuman environment not merely as a framing device but as a presence that begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history;
- extension of interest to elements other than human;
- human accountability to the environment;’ and
- \* some sense of the environment as a process rather than as a constant or a given is at least implicit in the text (Buell, 1995).

The term ecocriticism according to Glotfelty (1996), is the “study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (xviii). He also comes up with list of some of the pertinent issues that ecocritics or ecotheorists might address when approaching a work of literature. They include:

- the role the physical setting plays in the plot of literature;
- how metaphor of the land in a work of literature influences the way it is treated;
- should in addition to place whether or not race, and gender become a new critical category; and
- ways and to what extent the environmental crisis is seeping into contemporary literature and popular culture.

Larsen (2007) in a similar vein defines ecocriticism as a discipline that “deals with the way literature contributes to the articulation, interpretation and transformation of boundary between nature, culture or, events broader, between the non-human and human” (p. xviii). While nature remains the centerpiece of ecocriticism, it is noticeable that humans have received more attention than other natural elements. This stance has prompted Iheka (2018) to crave for a balanced ecocritical explorations, that would pay equal attention to both anthropocene and anthromorpheme elements.

### **Ecocriticism and Caribbean Literature**

The importance of Caribbean ecology in the region’s literature has been widely acknowledged in history from the dawn of Columbus’ voyage but interest in the Caribbean landscape did not begin until in the 90s. The lateness in awareness to ecocriticism in Caribbean literature, according to (Deloughery, 2011), is not a result of lack of concern about environment by her writers but rather a rise in ecological thinking as a methodology in the 1990. The history of the Caribbean points to European and American greed for land grab and exploitation of both human and natural resources. Hence, ecocriticism is a non-negligible subject in the history of the region. A reassessment exploring effects

of colonialism and imperialism revealed a lot of damages on the flora, fauna, human and nonhuman and nature in this region. Nature in Caribbean history is not trivialised because nature and the region's histories are intricately intertwined.

Glissant opines that “in the Caribbean, an engagement with the environment means an entanglement with the history of empire and postcolonial nation building. This history of empires, diaspora, and resettlement necessarily foregrounds the ways in which the violence of plantation societies ruptured continuous human relationship to place” (quoted in Deloughrey 265). The history of imperialism, colonialism, migration and indenture is important for the region's people's identity formation. So exploring ecocriticism in Caribbean literature is deeper than we realise and it is complex ecologies. Harris (1992) warns that “this matter of landscape is far more important than we realise. And it is essential to see how far reaching this is, because unfortunately in the humanities it is taken for granted that landscape is passive” (quoted in Deloughrey 266). These critics' assertion all confirms Mitchell's (1994) warning that the idea of landscape should “not be reduced to an object to be seen or a text to be read, but as a process by which social and subjective identities are formed” (1).

A study of first poetry collection, *The Arrivants*, is necessary to foreground Brathwaite's ecocritical vision in his poetry as a whole. Ecocritical elements are present in *The Arrivants* as Brathwaite deploys nature-related words displayed in images of sea, lands and plants in Africa and Caribbean environments. An instance of this is displayed in the extract below:

It will be a long long time before we see  
this land again, these trees  
again, drifting inland with the sound  
of surf, smoke rising  
It will be a long long time before we see  
these farms again, soft wet slow green  
again: Aburi, Akwamu,  
mist rising (*The Arrivants* 11).

He mourns the rich African vegetation that the “Arrivants” are leaving behind as they are forcibly removed to the new world. Added to these are several references to sea and other littoral images that also point to the ecocritical essence of the poem. He describes Caribbean landscape in the first poem of *Mother Poem* as a coral island with an underground water supply, filtered through the porous limestone coral rock:

The ancient water sources of my island  
echo of river, trickle, worn stone,  
the sunken voice of glitter inching its pattern to the sea,  
memory of form, fossil, erased beaches high above the eaten  
boulders of St. Phillip.  
my mother is a pool. (*Mother Poem* 3)

Above all, Brathwaite's theory of tidalectics reveals the importance of the sea as ecocritical imagery in his poetry. DeLoughrey (2007) has described tidalectics as a “geopoetic model of history” and a “methodological tool that foregrounds how a dynamic model of geography can elucidate island history and cultural production, providing the framework for exploring the complex and shifting entanglement between sea and land, diaspora and indigeneity, and routes and roots” (2). Furthermore, “tidalectics” engages what

Brathwaite calls an ‘alter/native’ historiography to linear models of colonial progress. This ‘tidal dialectic’ resists the synthesising telos of Hegel’s dialectic by drawing from a cyclical model, invoking the continual movement and rhythm of the ocean. Tidalectics also foregrounds alter/native epistemologies to western colonialism and its linear and materialist biases” (2). Reekin (2003) provides a helpfully simple definition of tidalectics by describing it as a ‘trans-oceanic movement-in-stasis’ to which five core characteristics are attributed (2).

## Ecocriticism in *Born to Slow Horses*

Brathwaite published *Born to Slow Horses* a decade after the publication of his *X/Self*. At the end of *Born to Slow Horses*, Brathwaite explicitly defines the new phase of his writing as a continuation of his “post-catastrophe” poetry, referring to the work he completed in the years following three major traumatic events in his personal life – his wife’s death from cancer, Hurricane Gilbert’s destruction, and the experience of being assaulted and robbed in his own home – all of which he documents in *Shar* (1990), *The Zea Mexican Diary* (1993), and *Trench Town Rock* (1999). Brathwaite names this period of intense personal traumatising his “Time of Salt,” which he clarifies “as the years 1986-1990 which witnessed in rapid catastrophic succession, the death of his wife Zea Mexican (1986), the destruction by hurricane of their home & archives at Irish Town in the high hills outside Kingston (1988) and his own near death at the hands of brigand gunmen in his Kingston apartment in 1990, all chronicled in his groundbreaking ‘postcatastrophe’ work” (*BTSH* 142).

“1986-1900” is not a mistake here; it appears that way in the collection, possibly testifying to the way Brathwaite manipulates time and causation in these recent poems. At the same time, in this short third-person autobiographical passage, Brathwaite gives the reader the impression that his body of work has progressed in a somewhat linear sense, explaining that his “post-catastrophe” work here has given way to a new phase which, he explains, “should be read in the context of KB’s post-Arrivants, postAncestors, postSalt work ”(*BTSH*, 142). A reference is made to this period in ‘Kumina’ when the poet’s persona (his wife) says:

on the nineteenth day afta my husbann gone  
A seem so long it seem  
wifatha now altho / nvrknw no fatha  
- My husbann gone back  
To the States to finish up im work  
-few insights ago he try to touch me. wake me up yu know  
As to comfort?Det would help  
...  
*ah well, ... he had his 10 years of salt already an he went through hell  
and now he marred me the poor man like he have to wear my hell  
he never rush me. dough ..e mean he mean me well*

(BTSH 80 emphasis mine).

While the emphasis on the centrality of catastrophe to Caribbean literature or loss suggests some sense of continued, unresolved loss, the admitted transition from his “post-catastrophe” work to his “postSalt” phase itself indicates some process of working through those events which shaped and continue to shape his poetics. However, it takes place through an expansion into what Brathwaite calls “a significant transboundary development” that draws even the regionally focused poems out of their regional boundaries. As he explains, “*Born to Slow Horses* is the first major appearance in this country of this new (?4<sup>th</sup> phase) of Brathwait(e)’s poetry; a work which in a sense, surveys or makes natural reference to the entire tidalectics, but at the same time marking, even with the most remarkable of his ‘Caribbean’ poems here, a significant transboundary development” (BTSH 143). McSweeney gives the following remarks in his review of the text:

Brathwaite’s new book, *Born to Slow Horses* (Wesleyan University Press), represents a redoubling of all these energies. It’s a composite text, including prophecy and anecdote, drum songs and jazz riffs, unconventional forms working personal, national, and international events into the mother matter of history and memory. The book also recounts a visionary incident in which the specter of an ancestral slave woman, called Namsetoura, appeared to Brathwaite at his home in CowPastor, Barbados. An angry Namsetoura revealed the spot to be a sacred gravesite and charged Brathwaite not to leave his land, which had been expropriated by the government of Barbados for an airport road. This life-changing visitation has recharged Brathwaite’s style and sense of purpose and also locked him in a battle with his government which is stretching towards its tenth year.

Indeed, *Born to Slow Horses* is one of Brathwaite texts that form and project his vision about Caribbean as a region and the world at large. It touches many aspects of interactions between humans, nonhumans, landscapes and several concerns. Its cornerstone is catastrophe which reverberates in all ramifications of the text.

Brathwaite describes the Caribbean ecological formation as a violent of slavery, indenture and colonialism. The cornerstone of *Born to Slow Horses* is catastrophes and therefore it seems absolutely impossible that such a text would be far from the histories of trauma that focus on the interaction between environment and human. In fact, one of his major concerns in the text is the after-effect of colonial and imperial expansion which brought with it modernisation that destroys the natural habitats (Abegunde 2021).

### **The Master of Mary Jones**

This is the first poem in the collection. “The Master of Mary Jones” The poem laments the industrial killing of sharks prompted by the urge to cater for the hospitality industries, a direct consequence of colonialism, that has become a booming business in the Caribbean. As his usual practices in his other collections, Brathwaite tries to bring both the victims and perpetrators together thus making the stories more real and poignant. The encounter between the fisherman and a fish clearly portrays this fact. In this poem, Brathwaite tries to bring in human (the fisherman), the sea and the fish together giving the defective nature of colonialism which instituted tourist attractions – a major factor for economic expansion and ecological damages. As the industry pays handsomely, the human actors, who themselves are part of the eco-system is not bothered about the effects of their fishing activity. Instead, the fisherman is desperate to make his income. He could not sleep throughout the night of his expedition:



For what have he watch in the fish  
Cold night, sewing the leviathans into his eyes .  
For what have e wish in his deep fishing dream for the white  
reed hair of hugging bottomless tides?  
he have sail so long and have sea-  
saw sea-watch, silently sit, waiting the green  
bach fathomless fish to cross his traps with its tail (BTSH 3)

Brathwaite's preoccupation with the sea is traceable to his first trilogy *The Arrivants*. He perceives the sea in both negative and positive light. He sees it as a harbinger of slavery and the misfortune made possible through the contact between Africa and European colonisers. Brathwaite contrasts the sea with the land by placing the fisherman 'deep in the heart of the sea'. Again, the sea in this poem is the contact zone between the fisherman and the fish. The last stanza expresses the fisherman's joy when he succeeds in trapping the fish. His joy knows no bound as he would

... drag his wish from the sea  
tachle the moon and cut down green  
leaf sun . blue boy again in the fan tail  
day of his dream come true in the fathomless fish  
catch in his all night eyes .  
At last he cd turn in the rain blue white  
Of his foam joy haul and bird sail home on the tides (BTSH 6)

The sea, which loses one of its inhabitants, is disturbed throughout the night. The poet conveys this notion by referring to the sea as 'tides' most of times. The sea that is important for the common good now becomes the 'lonely fisherman's'.

Braithwaite deploys colour imagery to demonstrate his preoccupation with ecocritical elements like sea, plants and even times and seasons. All these elements are, in one way or the other, disturbed by the fisherman's ambition (ref to the first stanza quoted above). Phrases like 'green back cloths'; 'black cloth dark' (dark night); 'green back fathomless fish' (fish), 'green star' (planet), 'fain blue white'. All these colours are linked to planets or environment: green is to vegetation, blue to sea, rainbow itself is of greater importance for its connection to the ecosystem.

"Guanahani" is a compendium on the world's landscape with each section dedicated to different countries and topographies. Crucially, his journey by air, from the poet's perspective, took place on 12th October, 1492, balancing it against Columbus' expedition that changed the world history and ecology. The timing and the medium adopted in this poem afford the poet a means of critically

reassessing consequences of Columbus' voyage. Columbus in this context stands as symbol of colonialism, imperialism and their European expansion agenda. By using the airplane flight, the altitude and speed of the plane Braithwaite evokes a particular ease of passage between boundaries and at the same time provides a telescopically penetrating insights into the landscapes and people of the continents – all through the flight of imagination. In all sections of this poem, Braithwaite's consciousness of the times, the seas, the land, the plants and even the humans inhabiting these places are foregrounded.

The first two sections of the poem tell us its major subject-matter which is a description of physical properties of the environments over which the personae travels:

**(1)**

**How come**

**Along the East Coast of North America.**

**Almost to noon . the thin white line of the long beach**

**the clouds coming right down on the water like ice flows**

**like thousands of tiny floating highlands in an orange tint of water**

***what makes me say Soufriere at the beginning of the world***

**(2)**

**The midday now extracts the colour from its genesis**

**so that there is this dark blue . deep-smoke almost indigo**

**a total absence of mango . illava of the land**

**lakes make mirrors . wriggles of silver rivers**

**spots spots spots of bright islands in the dead landscapes**

**turning away from the Atlantic at 11:34 on this Friday October 12 (BTSH 7).**

Braithwaite expertly crafted the poem in a way that each section focuses on a particular geographical landscape dealing with the historical features, vegetation and the people that inhabit such places and memories commemorating ruins, rubbles and dissipation of loss into "landscape and memory" which allows him to cover both animate and inanimate habitants of the environment.

By historicising the landscapes and the seas, Braithwaite is able to bring together the past events in this region with the present events. In section 8, he brings together England 78 vibes with situations in central Asia lamenting man's inhumanity to man in Guantanamo, a prison facility where hardened terrorists are broods on the ephemerality of history:



**And i realize that i have been thinking of them all morning from this high**

**Freeling air. Watching the clouds changing shade into the fate**

**of their future . into landscape and memory**

**into the bleak beautiful meaning of reality**

**plummeting towards my own horse of ruins**

**& dreams . of how they too will be forgotten in time (BTSH 11-12)**

The history the poet tries to revive will also suffer a similar fate just like the landscapes have been damaged, destroyed and forgotten. This portrays Brathwaite's melancholic stance which he maintains throughout in *Born to Slow Horses* - he sees everything in ruins and hopelessness. The so-called modern man is not different from the man in the Columbus generation.

Section 10 looks back at the destruction of the Arawaks and the other tribesmen who were first dwellers of the islands in Guanaahani. The place had been thrown into darkness since its invasion by Colombus and his crew followed by slave trade, indenture and colonialism. The section is not silent on the destructive effects of human activities on all other environmental elements like land, sea, ice and vegetations:

**(10)**

**At 12:50 pm**

**Lucaya Abacos Andros & now Eleuthera comes into view**

**coral necklaces writing on the water**

**cosmograms of fish and the halls of sunken ships**

**hieroglyphs of the beginnings of blue**

**and now it begins to get very green**

**like the first ever light which will be Guanaani. a light**

**you have nvr seen before. like at the back yr eye**

**in its private room**

**like at the bottom of the ocean beyond sunset & dawn**

beyond angels & borealis. come

from the depths of the sea. continent

of dead ice. From the land (BTSH 12)

The section 11 is a continuation of the themes in section 10. It begins with ‘odales’, a neologic word formed from the combination of ‘oh’ and ‘dales’ (meaning valley) but it marks a return to his own land. This section is full of words with etymological background in nature. For instance, we encounter words like “thunder lightening, landscape, mountain, sky” all pointing to the poem as ecocritical. They, in one way or the other, relate to weather, physical environment and so on.

More than other poems in this collection, Namsetoura remains the most discussed by Braithwaite not only because it addresses the consequences of slavery and its attendant brutality of migrants but also because it addresses the central problem of modernisation and its damaging effects on the Caribbean ecology. Some years before he wrote *Born to Slow Horses*, the government of Barbados handed him a quit notice to vacate his house at ‘CowPastor’ on a flimsy unethical excuse...” (McSweeney, 2005 np). The land had been expropriated by the government for an airport road. As he questions the authority of the government, he encountered the ghost of the slave woman whose corpse had been thrown into the forest without proper burial rites. The ghost implores Braithwaite to intervene and stop the government’s proposed desecration of her rest place.

the grave

hidden w/in the slump of prickly man

-peaba. red cordes trees

& countless clammachery leaves

the spider warn me of her entry

trie to prevent my photograph

ruin three lenses brek down the hi-tec pentax

*Camaraderie*

I click de pic

-ture w/ a simple borrow k-

dax

(BTSH 118)

In the above extract, Braithwaite describes his encounter with the ghost. Braithwaite strives to capture her image with his camera but failed. All he was able to capture is a faint one-eyed image of Namsetoura after three lenses were damaged. he narrates this encounter with the ghost in another interview he granted in 2005:

What had happened was that when I was told that I would have to leave CowPastor, I began to photograph everything I could on the pasture, and the pasture itself is about two miles long, and my little area, which is on a ridge between the sea and the hill, is only two acres. And I decided that I would try to photograph everything I could as a kind of memory bank for what I assumed I was going to leave. And on this afternoon when the sun was at two o'clock, three o'clock, when my wife and I were in this little clump of bush which was just behind the house, what you call the garden, and the sun suddenly illuminated this magnificent spider's web, with a spider at the very center of it. So naturally I went to photograph it. I could see the spider perfectly clearly through my naked eye, but as soon as I looked through the view finder of the lens there was no spider, there was no web, there was nothing! And this happened, of course, two or three times. Each time I went to take the picture there was no evidence of reality. So finally I decided to take the picture anyway. And as soon as I did that the lens split right across its equator (McSweeney np).

Therefore, the ghost earns the privilege of eternal rest. The phrase 'coral spine' valorises this assertion. The phrase signifies that the Namesetoura's bones had already become part of the land and therefore the land should be defended against the government takeover. Namesetoura, like other deceased slaves, laments the brutality she suffered in the hands of the slave masters and thereafter her dead body thrown away in Cow Pastor without proper burial rites. She calls on Brathwaite to defend the land, which serves as the final rest place for her and other dead slaves, against the government's order. The call is for the protection of not just the graves but also the Caribbean ecology.

And what she tells me is two things: first of all, she's been here for three hundred years, and no one has ever thought of looking for her, no one has ever thought of a burial, no one has ever thought of respect, so her soul is in a kind of limbo or perturbation. And, secondly, that here I am now to disturb her peace, on the grounds that I am a Caribbean, Barbadian poet, but that as far as she's concerned, I'm like all the other people through the last three hundred years, don't know a damn about her, about her condition—her life here on the plantation as a woman, her life as an uprooted African princess or priestess or whatever she was.... And the third thing she did was, she implied that if want to really write a poem, having discovered her burial ground, and that if I was to be a man, she said, using 'man' in a very sexual manner—if I was to be a man, I would have to have the balls to be able to defend her pasture. That was her indictment to me, her declaration to me that afternoon. And it so happens that soon after that I began to think no longer of leaving Cow Pastor as we'd intended to do, but I decided, why not stay here and try to defend the situation (McSweeney np)

This encounter further energises his determination to protest against the government and explore more what constitutes the Caribbean slaves' past. The encounter also confirms Deloughery's position that Caribbean ecology is intertwined with the Caribbean human history.

Brathwaite has consistently emphasised his works' close affinity to history and catastrophe. By recounting this encounter, he pointedly made it known that the 'Namesetoura' has become part of the ecology. The text as a poems collection is grounded in disasters and catastrophes. This allows Brathwaite to project more his ecocritical vision. He keeps on emphasizing the necessity of arts to dwell on these phenomena as they often shape human relationships with their history and environments.

From his preoccupation with the Middle Passage in *The Arrivants*, he takes on the global environment in *Born to Slow Horses*.

One way Brathwaite reflects on these themes is in his word associations and repetitions. The language of “9/11” flows based on this free association of sounds and meaning of words that evokes words for other disasters discussed in the collection. Brathwaite goes back to reintroduce a Jazz performance that took place in 1967 to conjure the images of the twin towers – “haunted by twins” (BTSH 92). “voices of falling wires. crumbol /-ing towers long before his time here flare. ing future” (BTSH 92). At its height, the snare-drum sounding “ashes ashes ashes” of the poem lends a strange prophetic element to its images of falling towers which form a “smouldering wound” on the cityscape:

the body body body bodies pouring  
from this dark Manhattan stromboli  
into dim catacombs of disappearing  
love     & grace & pain & smouldering wound  
[...]  
altho we know it coming even while we count  
the deed the dead the cruel lame the gnash the cost  
the small the blind the debris falling from the air of shar  
& lashes lashes lashes. such lash. erations of the hurt  
& herd. the blunted flash & flint of oriole  
& warp & timbrel flesh upon the manacle  
flesh become salt. salt become  
char & ruell achar ashes ashes ashes  
upn the lips upon my lids until this now curlin  
cowl of howl & tears. (BTSH 97-8)

For instance, later in the poem we are shifted along by “o hero scream . Hiroshima . au quelle dommage / which Agent Ornage kora” (BTSH, 98). Here, the “hero scream” of the fireman in one of the towers sonically prompts the invocation of Hiroshima; the found phrase “au quelle dommage” [*sic*] is then linked to a deliberately misspelled Agent Orange, whose “Or-“ syllable flows into the kora, a West African string instrument made from a calabash which, in turn, brings the reader’s focus back to the musical riffs and tropes of the poem. This one line, which through sonic associations links the events of September 11, 2001 with World War II and the Vietnam War also problematically strings together the “hero” victim of 9/11 with two events in which the United States perpetrated massive human and environmental damage – the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and the dispensing of herbicides over rural Vietnam.

Later in the poem, the image of “so so so so so many” people fleeing lower Manhattan over the Brooklyn Bridge evokes countless other disasters on which the speaker “looks back”:

our souls sometimes far out ahead already of our surfaces  
 and our life looking back  
 salt. as in Bhuj. in Grenada. Guernica. Amritsar. Tajikistan  
 the sulphur-stricken cities of the plains of Aetna  
 the young window-widow baby-mothers of the prostitutes .  
 looking back looking back as in Bosnia. the Sudan. Chernobyl  
 Oaxaca terremoto incomprehende. al’fata el Jenin. the Bhopal  
 babies sucking toxic milk. (BTSH 100-101)

Listed like this, natural disasters like the volcanic eruptions of Martinique’s Mount Pelée in 1902 and Indonesia’s Krakatoa in 1883 are undifferentiated from colonial violence like the Jallianwala Bagh massacre in Amritsar, which is in turn undifferentiated from the civil wars in Bosnia and the Sudan. The post-apocalyptic volcanic landscapes of “the sulphur-stricken cities of the plains of “Aetna. Pelée. Ab Napoli & Krakatoa” are made comparable to the landscapes of industrial disasters like those in Chernobyl and Bhopal, and other massacres and conflicts that have punctuated recent history. Significantly, the speaker’s comment, “*i had not thought death / had undone so many*” (p. 100) produces a tone of depressive recognition. This style is made possible by Brathwaite’s choice of words. According to Sara (2009)

All this movement of language(s) creates syncopated rhythms, and we should not forget that the musicality of Brathwaite’s language derives also from blues and jazz, so much that the entire text seems to be a score read on his poetic notion of tidalectics, in which echoes and repetitions reproduce the ebbs and flows of the sea, the notes appear and disappear as horses’ tracks on the beach. To support this osmotic exchange between music and poetry the title “9/11 Hawk” dominates, to remember the ‘big jazz saxophonist Coleman ‘Hawk’ Hawkins, whose Body and Soul was the audio background to Brathwaite’s public lecture of this poetry (103).

## Conclusion

This paper has revealed that Kamau Brathwaite valorises the relationship between literature and physical environment, thus emphasising the inevitable interactions between the human and the non-human, and applying ecological concepts and precepts to literary forms and studies. Throughout his poetry, Brathwaite never neglects the role environmental elements play in shaping his regions’ (Africa and Caribbean) history from the precolonial to the modern era. He pays attention to the natural elements, a subject that constantly permeates his texts as he establishes a great affinity between nature and human history. He advocates an environment where humans do not constitute threats to existence of nonhuman forms and stresses the integration of the elements of the entire ecosphere, and that everything in the universe is closely related to everything else. He makes use of his senses in interacting and integrating with all the elements of the ecosystem. The collection, *Born to Slow Horses* is a demonstration of that vision.

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