



HAL
open science

”When Breath Becomes Subversive”: The Performance Poetry of John Agard

Kathie Birat

► **To cite this version:**

Kathie Birat. ”When Breath Becomes Subversive”: The Performance Poetry of John Agard. Claudine Armand. Voix et silence dans les arts: passages, poïèsis et performativité, Presses Universitaires de Nancy - Éditions universitaires de Lorraine, pp.41-53, 2019, 978-2-8143-0531-1. hal-02940090

HAL Id: hal-02940090

<https://hal.univ-lorraine.fr/hal-02940090v1>

Submitted on 16 Sep 2020

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L’archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d’enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

“When Breath Becomes Subversive” : The Performance Poetry of John Agard

Kathie Birat

Université de Lorraine

Cet article étudie la “performance poetry” de l’ écrivain John Agard dans la perspective de son utilisation du rapport entre voix et silence. Par une pratique de la poésie qui reflète les traditions orales de la Caraïbe, John Agard explore et dramatise les différentes formes de silence qui sous-tendent les relations entre races et cultures dans la Grande Bretagne contemporaine. En regardant ses poèmes dans la perspective de l’ étude de la voix proposée par Mladen Dolar dans *A Voice and Nothing More*, on peut mieux comprendre la façon dont Agard utilise le son de sa voix pour révéler les silences qui hantent un langage qui a partie liée avec les silences du passé colonial.

Performance poetry, as it is practiced by poets from the Caribbean, makes use of the voice in ways that affirm a cultural identity which is closely linked to an oral tradition. As Janet Neigh explains in her essay “Orality, Creoles, and Postcolonial Poetry in Performance,” “performance poetry differs from the conventional poetry reading, in which a poet recites without adding much dramatic emphasis. Performance poets explicitly engage language’ s theatricality in their compositions” (168). In other words, the performing of the poetry does not simply add sound to verse that would normally be read in the silence of the mind. It demonstrates a theatricality that uses sound, language and the body in ways that reflect defining features of the culture which produces the poetry. In explaining the idea of “nation language,” (in opposition to “dialect, which he sees as having “pejorative overtones),” the Barbadian poet Kamau Edward Brathwaite discusses the use of nation language in poetry in the following terms:

Now I’d like to describe for you some of the characteristics of our nation language. First of all, it is from, as I’ve said, an oral tradition. The poetry, the culture itself, exists not in a dictionary but in the tradition of the spoken word. It is based as much on sound as it is on song. That is to say, the noise that it makes is part of the meaning, and if you ignore the noise (or what you would *think* of as a noise, shall I say) then you lose part of the meaning. (17)

If performance poetry can be seen as “performing” a Caribbean identity then it is also a response to the silence which is an integral part of the history of the African diaspora. It is not simply an expression of an identity experienced in the present; it carries within it a response to the numerous forms of silence which have shaped the past. The Guyanese-born poet John Agard, who has spent his career performing his poetry, talked about the importance of this silence in an interview with *Prospect Magazine* in connection with one of his most recent performances, a one-man show entitled “Roll Over Atlantic” performed as

part of the Southbank Centre's London Literature Festival, in which he re-enacts Christopher Columbus' s discovery of the New World.¹ He mentioned that like many children in the Caribbean, he had been told that West Indian history began with Columbus in 1492 and added, "You can't turn back the wheel of history, but maybe you can change the direction of the wheel, in the sense that those who weren't given a voice, their story can be told." (Felicity Capon, Interview with John Agard, n.p.) The article mentions that

the most arresting voice throughout the performance is that of the Atlantic Ocean. It is Agard's voice, yet it has been pre-recorded and digitally altered so that it sounds far deeper, and echoes around the room, forcing Columbus to reflect on his actions as he falls out of favour with Queen Isabella due to his tyranny, brutality and incompetence. [...] The final lines of the show belong to the Atlantic: 'I demand of my winds a minute's silence for the unmourned,' leaving the audience cast into a moment's reflection. (Interview with John Agard)

As this example demonstrates, the untold stories to which Agard refers can only be made audible by being dramatized as an integral part of the performance, making them a part of the audience's experience. I would argue that Agard's performances use silence in ways that reflect the complexity of the relation between sound and silence in a postcolonial context.

This dimension of John Agard's performances can be analyzed theoretically through an understanding of the voice as a phenomenon which relates sound to meaning. Just as the distinction between orality and writing is not a purely binary one, the relation between sound and meaning covered by the word "voice" involves areas of overlapping and ambiguity which offer clues to an understanding of how the sound of the voice can be used to explore psychological, social and cultural silences. In *A Voice and Nothing More*, Mladen Dolar studies the notion of voice from a Lacanian perspective in ways that make it possible to understand why the "noise" of Caribbean speech evoked by Brathwaite cannot in itself compensate for the silences of history through a purely binary relation of sound and silence. In the chapter entitled "The Metaphysics of Voice," he explains why the voice can be perceived, in a metaphysical perspective, as both the source of meaning and an obstacle to its expression:

There is a history of the voice receiving a metaphysical vote of no confidence. Not just writing, but also the voice can appear as a menace to metaphysical consistency, and can be seen as disruptive of presence and sense. Lacan did not have to invent the ambiguity of voice and its perilous reverse side; metaphysics has been well aware of it all along. (43)

¹ John Agard was born in British Guiana (now Guyana) in 1949 and moved to Great Britain in 1977. He is the author of many poetry collections, including *From the Devil's Pulpit* (1997), *Weblines* (2000), *We Brits* (2006), *Alternative Anthem: Selected Poems* (2009), *Clever Backbone* (2009) and *Travel Light Travel Dark* (2013). He has also written numerous books for children.

Dolar evokes Plato's attitude toward music, quoting his prescription that "the music and the rhythm must follow speech (quoted in Dolar 45) and explaining that, for Plato, "the core of the danger is the voice that sets itself loose from the word, the voice beyond logos, the lawless voice" (45). This paradoxical relation of sound to sense finds an echo in linguistics through the "silence" of the differential system which makes language, in the Saussurian sense, possible. As Dolar explains:

Silence seems to be something extremely simple, where there is nothing to understand or interpret. Yet it never appears as such, it always functions as the negative of the voice, its shadow, its reverse, and thus something which can evoke the voice in its pure form.

For Dolar, what he calls "symbolic silence" is what "ultimately defines the symbolic as such" (152):

If all elements are differential, then the zero-point of difference is the difference between something and its absence, so the absence is part of the structure, manifesting the negative nature of the signifier. We have to hear silence, for example, as the absence of a phoneme, in order to get the meaning, so symbolic silence represents the symbolic order as such, its structuring principle. (152-153)

In Dolar's perspective, which is psychoanalytic, it is the silence of the analyst that becomes the equivalent of the symbolic silence underlying language as a system, making it possible for the analyst to use the "erratic and unpredictable" logic of "sounds and voices", which are "purely contingent" as a way of dispossessing the subject under analysis of the social and public voice which he uses to express: "self-presence and auto-affection" :

[...] in the midst of the universe of speech there is a break introduced by silence, by this deaf voice, which dispossesses all other voices and disrupts the universe of sense. (Dolar 159)

While Dolar's approach may seem very far from the use that a performance poet makes of language and sound, it can provide clues to the ways in which a performer uses the "purely contingent" nature of sounds to "disrupt the universe of sense," thus revealing the cultural and historical silences that underlie social situations. The situation of performance is an integral part of this disruption and not simply an occasion for expressing thematic dimensions of social and historical silence.

Many of Agard's poems rely on humour as a way of revealing the misunderstandings that become manifest in intercultural situations of communication. The poem "Talking to Plants" (*Alternative Anthem* 12) is a good illustration of this technique.

Always talk to your plants.
Sit back and watch them flourish.
Good advice. Of course we presume
that all plants speak English.

Speak slowly, watch them bloom.
If necessary shout each syllable.

Their little ears are ready vessels
for a shower of the Queen's vowels.

Never mind if it's a China rose
Or an African violet.
Better yet, recite a bit of English Lit.
See abundance spring at your fingertip. [...]

From a postcolonial point of view, this poem satirizes the imposing of the English language on colonial subjects. However, beyond this thematic dimension, the performance, in making the silent plants stand in for the Caribbean immigrant in England, dramatizes the performative dimension of language, its capacity to make things happen. The performance, in its satirical dimension, gives audible form to the unspoken conventions which prevent the colonial subject from seeing his desires fulfilled. The final stanza makes this connection explicit:

O plants, what is it that makes you grow?
I watch my immigrant neighbour's patio
with a sense of distant envy.
Tell me, plants, must I address you in Punjabi? (12)

By including the names of common flowers, the "China rose" and the "African violet," the poet makes their names part of the dramatic moment by exposing the situation of domination that is hidden in the names. Furthermore, by highlighting the social exclusion produced by language codes, he is activating one of the essential dimensions of an oral culture and that Walter Ong has called "agonistic" :

Many, if not all, oral or residually oral cultures strike literates as extraordinarily agonistic in their verbal performance and indeed in their lifestyle. [...] By keeping knowledge embedded in the human lifeworld, orality situates knowledge within a context of struggle. (43)

In his performance of the poem, Agard exposes its agonistic dimension, obliging the spectator to enter into the contact zone in which the speaker is attempting to make himself heard.

By performing his poems, John Agard exploits the "logic of sounds and voices" to express what is silenced by ordinary uses of language as a code relying on difference and resemblance. The spectator is invited to pay attention to what is silenced by the functioning of the system, a silence which often has social implications. The poem "Encounter" illustrates this:

What makes you you
and me me ?

What makes us us
and them them?

Is it the anthem
that rouses to attention? [...] (26)

In his performance of the poem, Agard pauses between the pronouns, emphasizing the distance that separates each word from the reality that it designates and the difficulty of making them correspond completely. The repetition of the pattern for each of the pronouns exposes the artificial nature of the social separation between “them” and “us.” He pronounces “And them” in a way that highlights the similarity with “anthem” in the following stanza. The homonymy between the two expressions produces the type of disturbance mentioned by Dolar, drawing the listener’s attention to a possible relation between the “anthem” and the collective identity associated with “them” and suggesting that the singing of national anthems constitutes a performance of national identity that generates the distinction between “them” and “us.”

Jonathan Culler, in his discussion of puns, talks about the way in which puns trouble the distinction between signifiers in Saussure’s systematic view of language by making it difficult to separate “the inside of the system from the outside of practice” (12):

Although linguistic tradition and its assumptions about language that we have made our own maintain that the structure of French or English is not affected by the potential suggestiveness or punning resemblances of signifiers, we should ask whether in fact the language one speaks or writes is not always exposed to the contamination of arbitrary signs by punning links—between the desire to write and to get it right, between the sound of music and a sound argument. (12)

In his poetic performances, John Agard exploits the “outside of practice” in ways that not only reveal the underlying codes of verbal exchange, but that also demonstrate the implication of the body in the pleasures of language as performance. Many of his poems rely on a parody of nursery rhymes or on uses of language that give priority to sound in a way similar to nursery rhymes. Beyond the humour and enjoyment involved, these poems demonstrate the way in which the body participates in the pleasure of language, giving priority to sound over sense and circumventing meaning, reducing it to the silence evoked by Dolar.² This type of poetry can also be seen as a way of exploring the role of the body in dealing with the silences imposed by slavery. When Agard invites the audience to participate in the repetition of the poem “Alternative

² Dolar discusses the relation of sound and sense in relation to Jakobson’s essay “Six leçons sur le son et le sens.” He says: “Language is never just about making sense, but on the way to making sense it always produces more than the sense catered for, its sounds exceed its sense” (146).

Anthem,” which is a parody of the song “Polly put the Kettle on,” he is, without saying so explicitly, leading them to reproduce, in the very pleasure of sound, the silencing of local forms of culture implied in the learning of English nursery rhymes by children in the Caribbean.

In her study of performance poetry by women from the Caribbean, Denise deCaires Narain talks about the excess that is often associated with Caribbean forms of poetic and musical expression:

Creole is often characterized as a language of *excess*: excess in the sense that repetition and hyperbolic imagery are frequent features of the discourse but also in the sense of the expansive body language and physical presence which are a feature of performing Creole. (90)

From a theoretical point of view, the connection between Creole forms of expression and the treatment and silencing of the body during the period of slavery has been carefully explored. In *Caribbean Discourse*, Edouard Glissant establishes an explicit link between the alienation of the body of the slave and the forms of expression that developed in the Caribbean.³ For Glissant, both the use of orality and the “noise” produced by Creole speech can be seen as reactions to this silencing of the body:

The oral [...] is inseparable from the movement of the body. There the spoken is inscribed not only in the posture of the body that makes it possible [...] but also in the almost semaphoric signals through which the body implies or emphasizes what is said. (122)

In his poetic performances, as well as in interviews, John Agard has talked extensively about the role of music and dance in Caribbean culture. In one interview he said, “We forget in this modern life that poetry was integrally related to dance” (“John Agard in Conversation”). In a humorous extension of this idea he added a comment on sign language: “When you see a person doing sign language, they are discussing economics. [...] It’ s poetry in motion. [...] Poetry is not divorced from dance.” (“John Agard in Conversation”) His recorded performances show how he integrates this awareness not only through explanations concerning the relativity of cultural practices throughout the world, but through demonstrations of the way in which sound reflects a physical enjoyment of the world. While all of his wordplay is an expression of this idea, the poem “English Girl Eats Her First Mango” makes the encounter between two cultures an occasion to twist the tongue in a way that makes the silence of physical pleasure triumph over the adverse effects of colonization through language. The speaker in this poem is going to

³ [...] the alienated body of the slave, in the time of slavery, is in fact deprived, in an attempt at complete dispossession, of speech. [...] Even in his reproductive function, the slave is not in control of himself. He reproduces, but it is for the master. All pleasure is silent: that is thwarted, deformed, denied. In such a situation, expression is cautious, reticent, whispered, spun thread by thread in the dark” (*Caribbean Discourse* 122-23).

teach the girl that the tongue is not always a tool for speaking, thus introducing her to the silent pleasures of eating.

If I did tell she
hold this gold
of sundizzy
tonguelicking juicy
mouthwater flow
ripe with love
from the tropics

she woulda tell me
trust you to be
mellowdramatic

so I just say
taste this mango [...] (21)

The performing of the poem as an imagined dialogue allows Agard to play on the intercultural misunderstandings reflected in the dialogue by emphasizing words like “mellowdramatic,” through which the imagined English girl links sensuality to the Caribbean man. The performance also emphasizes the sensuality of the language itself:

and squeeze
till the flesh
turn syrup
nibble a hole
then suck the gold
like bubbly
in child mouth
squeeze and tease out
every drop of spice (22)

To which the girl replies, “sounds nice,” thus participating orally in the pleasure implied by spice.

In addition to being a celebration of the sensual pleasure of language, this poem provides an amusing illustration of Deleuze and Guattari’s theory of the deterritorialization of the tongue:

The original territoriality of the mouth, the tongue and the teeth is food. By being devoted to the articulation of sounds, the mouth, the tongue and the teeth are deterritorialized. So there is a disjunction between eating and speaking [...] (Deleuze and Guattari, qtd in Dolar 186).

According to Dolar, the deterritorialization of the tongue allows Deleuze and Guattari to talk about the way in which the voice is “seized by the signifier” and diverted from its natural function by what Freud would have called the drive, how it is made to “circle around the eternally elusive object” (Dolar 187), which is the signifier. By teaching the English girl how to use her tongue to eat rather than speak, Agard’s

speaker is demonstrating how the tongue can be returned to its original function and how silence can come to represent enjoyment rather than domination. He reduces the English girl to silence through an imagined exchange that he defines as “colonization in reverse.”

In his book *Du Silence*, the anthropologist David LeBreton examines the cultural variability of the uses of silence and speech in society.⁴ Underlying John Agard’s poetic performances is a desire to demonstrate the functioning of cultures like those of the Caribbean in which the distribution of speech and silence is different from those which place performer and spectator on opposite sides of an invisible line. In one of his performances, he mentions Plato’s banning of the flute from the republic and refers to a Scottish proverb which says, “When breath becomes subversive, hold your breath to cool your porridge.” Like Glissant, Agard is aware of the ways in which silence can be used as a strategy, just as the “blast of sound” by which Glissant defines Creole can also be a way of subverting the verbal domination of the master. However, as the explanations he provides during his performances show, he is really interested in opening up a dialogue with his audience, not simply by showing off or performing a packaged, sanitized version of an oral culture, but by explaining the functioning of that culture to the audience. In a video that can be found on You-tube entitled “A Guide to Liming with John Agard,” he talks about the tradition of liming, which comes from the term “limey,” used by people in Trinidad to designate British soldiers, and which later came to mean “a collective sharing of jokes, recollections of folk characters.” He adds that “the whole spoken word experience is presented in an atmosphere of commonality.” His invitations to his audience to participate in the representation of certain poems, as in the performance of “Alternative Anthem,” are a practical demonstration of this approach.

In his performances, John Agard makes the creation of “commonality” seem very simple and spontaneous. However, as the explanations included in his performances and the numerous references to other poets found in his collections of poetry show, this spontaneity reflects a scholarly awareness of the issues surrounding interracial and intercultural silence and their applicability across a wide spectrum of

⁴ He discusses this in particular in chapter one « Les silences de la conversation ».

experiences. His collection *Alternative Anthem* includes a poem entitled “ ‘Love calls us back from simplification.’ ” The poem is dedicated to the Irish poet Eavan Boland, “who made this comment during a poetry reading at the Voice Box, Royal Festival Hall, April 1992.” While Boland’s concerns are not exactly the same as Agard’s, and her public readings less spectacular than Agard’s performances, she shares with him an awareness of the ways in which poetry both expresses and goes beyond questions of national, gender or racial identity, as well as a sensitivity to the role of orality.⁵

In the final lines of the poem Agard says:

But love calls us back from simplification.
Tonight in a room above a river above a city
a poet is sharing the bread of her words

And we walking out blessed with resonance. (129)

In the final line, the absence of “were” gives a Caribbean inflection to the verb, showing how poetry can express difference, in this case a grammatical silence, without sacrificing the sharing that oral performance makes possible.

Works cited

Agard, John. *Alternative Anthem*. Selected Poems with John Agard Live (DVD). London: Bloodaxe Books, 2009.

“A Guide to Liming with John Agard.” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_tC8Hh0RxWo. Consulted 27 May 2017.

Brathwaite, Edward Kamau. *History of the Voice: The Development of Nation Language in Anglophone Caribbean Poetry*. London: Beacon Books, 1984.

Capon, Felicity. “Interview: John Agard— “those who weren’t given a voice, their story can be told.” *Prospect* 19 October 2016: n.p. <https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/arts-and-books/interview-john-agard-those-who-werent-given-a-voice-their-story-can-be-told>. Consulted 27 May 2017.

Conversation: Poet Eavan Boland. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1rKtiojEHWg>. Consulted 2 February 2018.

Culler, Jonathan. *On Puns: The Foundation of Letters*. London: Blackwell, 1988.

⁵ In an interview with Jeffrey Brown on PBS, Boland commented on the difference between American and Irish poetry as being related to the high literacy rate in the United States, even in the nineteenth century, whereas the lower literacy rate in Ireland explained the oral dimension of poetry “that was handed on as a memorial tradition.”

Dolar, Mladen. *A Voice and Nothing More*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006.

Glissant, Edouard. *Caribbean Discourse*. Trans J. Michael Dash. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1989.

"John Agard in Conversation" – Conflux Showcase Day. <https://www.mixcloud.com/BHLibraries/john-agard-in-conversation-conflux-showcase-day/>. Consulted 15 May 2017.

Le Breton, David. *Du Silence*. Paris: Editions Métailié, 1997.

Narain, Denise deCaires. *Contemporary Caribbean Women's Poetry: Making Style*. London: Routledge, 2002.

Neigh, Janet. "Orality, Creoles and Postcolonial Poetry in Performance." *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Poetry*. Ed. Jahan Ramazani. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017. 167-179.

Ong, Walter. *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. 1982. London: Routledge, 2005.